

## Communication

*Titus Hjelm\* [titus.hjelm@helsinki.fi]*

### Abstract

Religion, as a collective phenomenon, cannot be conceived of without taking communication into account. Nevertheless, the sense of the communicative element in religion has been mostly implicit or completely lacking in religious studies. This paper explores some of the recent openings in the study of religion and communication, focusing on religion and the media in the modern world. The paper closes by delineating some future prospects for the field.

### Resumo

É necessário levar em conta a comunicação quando tratamos da religião como fenômeno coletivo. Na maior parte dos estudos acadêmicos da religião, porém, o elemento comunicativo é tratado de forma implícita ou, então, falta por completo. Este artigo explora algumas aberturas recentes no estudo de religião e comunicação, concentrando-se nas relações entre a religião e os meios de comunicação no mundo moderno. Ele é concluído com o delineamento de algumas perspectivas futuras do campo.

---

From a sociological perspective, religion is inherently intertwined with communication. Although religious experience is personal, the symbols and language used to interpret it are socially determined (Luckmann, 1967, 44-45; McGuire, 1992, 8). Thus, on a very foundational level, it could be said that communication is always present in the study of religion and culture. For example, as Hoover and Lundby (1997, 10) put it (referring to Max Weber's famous formulation): "how was the exchange between the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism possible without accounting for the communication of these ideas?" This remark notwithstanding, the sense of the communicative element in religion has been mostly implicit or completely lacking in religious studies (White, 1997, 44-45).

---

\* TITUS HJELM is a researcher in the Department of Comparative Religion at the University of Helsinki, Finland. He is currently working on a book on social constructionism for Routledge.

If and when communication is taken as an all-encompassing element of religion, it becomes clear that there are numerous ways of approaching the phenomenon. For the purposes of this paper, and because communication in the modern world has become overwhelmingly mediated, I will focus on approaches to religion and mediated communication.<sup>1</sup> I have grouped these approaches into two categories: the "substantive paradigm" and the "functional paradigm." Although few studies fall neatly in just one of these categories, an ongoing shift from a more instrumentalist view to a more cultural reading has been made explicit in many recent reflections on the study of religion and media (Clark & Hoover, 1997; Hoover, 2002; Clark 2002; Hoover, 2003; Horsfield, 2004; Clark, 2003). First I will discuss approaches that have focused on the content of religious media and the role of religion in the news. Then I will consider approaches where the media itself is seen as a site for meaning-making.

### **Religion in the Media: The Substantive Paradigm**

Before the 1970s, academic studies of religion and media were few and far between. Even before the media age, churches and religious movements were naturally interested in the most efficient transmission of their message (e.g. Chang, 2003, 128; Williams, 2003, 326-327), but the emergence of televangelism can be considered as a turning point in the academic study of mediated religion (Clark & Hoover, 1997).

The interest in televangelism arose not only because of the strictly conservative message of the preachers who were the most prominent advocates of the "electronic church," but also because, in the United States, the evangelical-fundamentalist movement gained nationwide visibility, independent of the major broadcasting companies (Albanese, 1999, 374-375). The intimate link between religion and politics in the evangelical movement also attracted researchers studying the place of religion in the public sphere. Many scholars saw the advent of televangelism as a new chapter in the contested issue of religion in public life (e.g. Hadden & Shupe, 1988; Bruce, 1990). Beginning in the United States in the late 1970s, televangelism has since become a global phenomenon (perhaps most notably, in Brazilian media culture).<sup>2</sup>

1 Regrettably, my discussion is limited to North American and European contexts. Examples of studies of media and religion (Christianity) in African, Asian, and Latin American contexts can be found in P. HORSFIELD ET AL., Eds, *Belief In Media*.

2 For an example of the impact of televangelism in Brazil, see J.P. FERRÉ, *The Media of Popular Piety*. In: *Mediating Religion*, pp. 83-92.

The televangelism discussion also created a body of literature questioning the authenticity of mediated religion. This "religious media criticism" was firmly rooted in the wider tradition of media criticism and, in addition to questioning the authenticity of "TV religion", extended the criticism to perceived bias in news reporting on religion (see Clark & Hoover, 1997, 20-21; Hoover, 1998; Silk, 1995).

The study of religion in the news was partly inspired by the abovementioned media criticism. While it is at best difficult to analyze the quality of religion news coverage objectively, scientifically oriented criticism based its claims on the quantitative lack of news on religion (Hoover, 1998, 11-12). While content analyses of news coverage of particular religions are still common, research emphasis is increasingly on the more cultural analysis of the interaction between the news content, the production processes of news media, and wider cultural frameworks (Silk 1995; Hoover 1998; McCloud 2004; Hjelm 2002; 2005).

The problem with both approaches described above is that they often focus on recognizably religious media content. While important in their own right, studies like this fail to grasp the wider implications of media use and meaning-making in the modern world. Recent openings in the study of religion and media have turned the focus from the content and reception (understood in the sense of "transporting" messages) of religious messages to the processes where images of popular culture, for example, are interpreted as religious and where meaning and identity is constructed.

### **The Media and Meaning-Making: The Functional Paradigm**

In sociological jargon, the difference between substantive and functional definitions of religion is that "substantive definitions try to establish what religion *is*; functional definitions describe what religion *does*" (McGuire, 1992, 10; see Hoover & Lundby, 1997, 5-6). While the substantive approaches described above focus on explicitly religious content in the media, the functionally-oriented paradigm diverges in that it takes as its object of study the expressions of religiousness in the interpretations of media. According to this approach, the link between religion and media can also be found in the mainstream media, which is generally considered as overwhelmingly secular. As Stewart Hoover puts it: "[A]udience practices of reception are subverting the bright line that we once thought existed between 'religion' and 'the media'" (Hoover, 2003, 10). Consistent with the contemporary discussions

of the "spiritual marketplace" (Roof, 1999; Wuthnow, 1998) in which contemporary religion and religiousness is characterized by individuality and reflexivity, the media is seen as an arena where meaning and identity are constructed, providing "voluble" symbols to the continuous project of identity-construction (Hoover, 2003, 11).<sup>3</sup>

This difference between substantive and functional views is nicely illustrated in the distinction between "religion online" and "online religion," now commonly used in the study of religion and media (Helland, 2000; Hoover and Park, 2005). Stewart Hoover and Jin Kyu Park summarize the taxonomy as follows:

Simply put, *religion online* is the self-conscious use of the online context by religion organizations or movements for purposes of publicity, education, outreach, proselytization, and so on. *Online religion*, by contrast, is the far more interesting issue of the online context becoming or being used as a locus of religious, spiritual (or other similar) practice. (Hoover & Park, 2005, 248)

The functional approach, although deemed "far more interesting" in the above quote, is not without its problems. In my opinion, and contrary to Peter Berger's (1974) lament that functional definitions reify a secularized world view, the premises of this approach make it possible that religious meanings are read into the uses of the media even when the empirical data is inconclusive. This approach works well for individual case studies where the process of meaning making can be verified. However, it remains to be seen if it is possible to build a general theory of religion and media within the functional framework.

A second strand in the functional approach is the increasingly popular study of media rituals. From this perspective the so-called media events, such as princess Diana's death, the Olympic games etc., can become "celebrations of social solidarity" (Rothenbuhler, 1998, 81; Lundby, 1997). This is a distinctively Durkheimian approach which emphasizes the conservative and norm-enforcing functions of the media (cf. Rothenbuhler, 1993). Other scholars, however, have used Victor Turner (1974; 1986) as an example of a perspective that views rituals also as a site of creativity (Dayan & Katz, 1992; Clark & Hoover, 1997; Alexander, 1997). In addition, and similar to the meaning making approach described above, the study of media rituals has not concentrated on explicitly religious media, but rather on everyday life and the ritualization process where social activities are distinguished from each

3 A recent tour de force of this ethnographical approach is L.S. CLARK, *From Angels to Aliens*.

other on the sacred/profane-trajectory (Bell, 1992; Clark & Hoover, 1997).<sup>4</sup> This approach converges with the idea of continual identity-formation and the media as a site of meaning making where traditional conceptions of religion and religiosity are also constantly reformulated (cf. Clark, 2003, 194-197).

## **Religion and Communication Studies: Future Prospects**

The central role of communication and media for understanding religions and religion as a phenomenon cannot be overemphasized. Yet the field of study is still in its infancy - or at best taking its first steps. By way of conclusion, I sketch some future directions for the study of religion and media. Similar, more elaborate schemes have been published (Mitchell, 2003; White, 2004) and I will confine myself to the major issues in the field.

First, the news media continues to be the major source of information on religion, especially the "stranger's religion" (Lännström, 2004, cf. Thompson, 1995, 213-214). The analysis of the content, production, and cultural context of news discourse and its reception continues to be vitally important if we are to understand the perceptions of religion and religions in the modern world. Contrary to some "postmodern" ruminations, boundaries between religion and other differentiated spheres of society, and between religions, continue to characterize the contemporary global society (Beyer, 2003). The news media are integral in forming and reforming these boundaries. The study of news combined with a Durkheimian approach to media rituals provides a powerful tool for interpreting the images and values represented in the public media sphere.

Second, the role of popular culture and popular media has become increasingly important to the study of religion in recent years. Identity-formation (religious or not) seems to happen outside the traditional arenas of worldview construction, and this process is increasingly portrayed as individualistic (e.g. Wuthnow, 1998; Roof, 1999). As many studies show, popular culture has become a reservoir for the construction of multifaceted identities in many ways. On the one hand, popular culture may attract people to actual religions - as in the case of Wicca and the recent "witchcraft boom" in TV and movies (Hjelm, 2006; Clark, 2003, 226-227). On the other hand, popular culture offers models for the construction of eclectic and individualistic religious worldviews (e.g. Clark 2003).

---

4 For a critique and a reformulation of the media rituals approach, see N. COULDRY, *Media Rituals*.

Third, although news and popular TV reception hasn't been considered a one-way communication process for some time, the new media technologies offer unparalleled opportunities for virtual interaction and community formation (e.g. Campbell, 2003). So far the virtual faith communities have not supplanted their real-life equivalents (Campbell, 2003). However, if the role of institutionalized religion becomes more and more precarious, as sociologists of religion predict, stable virtual communities may emerge which are central to the meaning making process of individuals. All in all, whatever role religion has in contemporary society and culture, the influence of the media cannot be bypassed.

## Bibliography

- ALBANESE, C. *America: Religions and Religion*. Third Edition. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1999.
- ALEXANDER, B.C., Televangelism: Redressive Ritual Within a Larger Social Drama. In: S.M. Hoover and K. Lundby, Eds., *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1997, pp. 194-208.
- BELL, C. *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- BERGER, P.L., Some Second Thoughts on Substantive versus Functional Definitions of Religion. In: *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 13, 2 (1974): 125-133.
- BEYER, P. Social Forms of Religion and Religions in Contemporary Global Society. In: M. Dillon, Ed., *Handbook of Sociology of Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 45-60.
- BRUCE, S. *Pray TV: Televangelism in America*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1990.
- CAMPBELL, H. Approaches to Religious Research in Computer-Mediated Communication. In: Jo. Mitchell and S. Marriage, Eds., *Mediating Religion: Conversations in Media, Religion and Culture*. London: T&T Clark, 2003, pp. 213-228.
- CHANG, P.M.Y., Escaping the Procrustean Bed: A Critical Analysis of Religious Organizations, 1930-2001. In: M. Dillon, Ed., *Handbook of Sociology of Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 123-136.
- CLARK, L.S., Overview: The "Protestantization" of Research into Media, Religion, and Culture. In: S.M. Hoover and L.S. Clark, Eds., *Practicing Religion in the Age of the Media*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002, pp. 7-33.

- CLARK, L.S. *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- CLARK, L.S. and S.M. HOOVER, At the Intersection of Media, Culture, and Religion: A Bibliographic Essay. In: S.M. Hoover and K. Lundby, Eds., *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1997, pp. 15-36.
- COULDRY, N. *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach*. London and New York: Routledge, 2003.
- DAYAN, D. and E. KATZ. *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992.
- FERRÉ, J. P., The Media of Popular Piety. In: J. Mitchell and S. Marriage, Eds., *Mediating Religion: Conversations in Media, Religion and Culture*. London: T&T Clark, 2003, pp. 83-92.
- HELLAND, C., Online religion/religion online and virtual communitas. In J.K. Hadden and D.E. Cowan, Eds., *Religion and the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises*. New York: JAI Press, 2000.
- HADDEN, J.K. and A.D. Shupe. *Televangelism: Power and Politics on God's Frontier*. New York: Henry Holt, 1988.
- HJELM, T., Driven by the Devil: Popular Constructions of Adolescent Satanist Careers. In: *Syzygy: Journal of Alternative Religion and Culture*, 11 (2002).
- HJELM, T., Religionizing Crime: Ethos and Action in the Construction of the Finnish Satanism Scare. In: G. Lundskow, Ed., *Religious Innovation in a Global Age*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2005.
- HJELM, T., Between Satan and Harry Potter: Legitimizing Wicca in Finland. In: *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 21, 1 (2006): 33-48.
- HOOVER, S.M. *Religion in the News: Faith and Journalism in American Public Discourse*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1998.
- HOOVER, S.M., Introduction: The Cultural Construction of Religion in the Media Age. In: S.M. Hoover and L.S. Clark, Eds., *Practicing Religion in the Age of the Media*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002, pp. 1-6.
- HOOVER, S.M., Religion, Media, and Identity. In: J. Mitchell and S. Marriage, Eds., *Mediating Religion: Conversations in Media, Religion and Culture*. London: T&T Clark, 2003, pp. 9-19.

- HOOVER, S.M. and K. Lundby, Introduction: Setting the Agenda. In: S.M. Hoover and K. Lundby, Eds., *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1997, pp. 3-14.
- HOOVER, S.M. and J.K. Park, The Anthropology of Religious Meaning Making in the Digital Age. In: E.W. Rothenbuhler and M. Coman, Eds., *Media Anthropology*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2005.
- HORSFIELD, P., Theology, Church and Media - Contours in a Changing Cultural Terrain. In: P. Horsfield, M.E. Hess and A.M. Medrano, Eds., *Belief in Media: Cultural Perspectives on Media and Christianity*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004, pp. 23-32.
- HORSFIELD, P., M.E. HESS and A.M. MEDRANO (Eds), *Belief In Media: Cultural perspectives on Media and Christianity*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004.
- LUCKMANN, T. *The Invisible Religion*. London: Macmillan, 1967.
- LUNDBY, K., The Web of Collective Representations. In: S.M. Hoover and K. Lundby, Eds., *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture*. Thousand Oaks, Sage, 1997, pp. 146-164.
- LÄNNSTRÖM, A. Introduction. In: A. Lännström, Ed., *The Stranger's Religion: Fascination and Fear*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004.
- MCCLOUD, S. *Making of the American Religious Fringe: Exotics, Subversives, & Journalists, 1955-1993*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004.
- MCGUIRE, M.B., *Religion: The Social Context*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1992.
- MITCHELL, J. Emerging Conversations in the Study of Religion, Media and Culture. In: J. Mitchell and S. Marriage, Eds., *Mediating Religion: Conversations in Media, Religion and Culture*. London: T&T Clark, 2003, pp. 337-350.
- ROOF, W.C. *Spiritual Marketplace*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999.
- ROTHENBUHLER, E.W., Argument for a Durkheimian Theory of the Communicative. In: *Journal of Communication* 43, 3 (1993): 158-162.
- ROTHENBUHLER, E.W., *Ritual Communication: From Everyday Conversation to Mediated Ceremony*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998.
- SILK, M. *Unsecular Media: Making News of Religion in the News*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995.
- THOMPSON, John B., *The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media*. Cambridge, Polity Press, 1995.

- TURNER, V. *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974.
- TURNER, V. *The Anthropology of Performance*. New York: PAJ Publications, 1986.
- WHITE, R.A., Religion and Media in the Construction of Cultures. In: S.M. Hoover and K. Lundby, Eds., *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1997, pp. 37-64.
- WHITE, R.A., Major Issues in the Study of Religion, Media and Culture. In: P.Horsfield, M.E. Hess & Ad.M. Medrano, Eds., *Belief in Media: Cultural Perspectives on Media and Christianity*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004, pp. 197-217.
- WILLIAMS, R.H., Religious Social Movements in the Public Sphere: Organization, Ideology, and Activism. In: M. Dillon, Ed., *Handbook of Sociology of Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 315-330.
- WUTHNOW, R. *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998.