

Religion and the Media in the 21st Century¹

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The relationship between pop music and the urban space gives rise to a dialectic which affects both the definition of music genres and the social concept of the spatiality of major cities. In this article we examine the representation of different places in Madrid in different video clips, analyzing their discursive meaning and their articulation of identity, related to the values associated with certain artists and repertoires; that is to say, the configuration of the urban ethos through its representation in musical production.

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It is increasingly clear that to understand religion in the 21st Century, we must also understand media and the ways that religions are being remade through their interaction with modern media. Until the mid-20th Century, media and religion seemed to have achieved a kind of stability, with a few dominant media and a relatively small number of religions at the center of public life. It was also common to think of religion in terms of what we now know to be a too simplistic definition of “secularization”. Religion was not only seen to be in decline within its own boundaries, its influence in other areas including politics, the economy, and the workplace was seen also to be in decline.

This picture began to change later in the 20th Century, with two particularly notable developments. The first of these was the Islamic Revolution in Iran, where a once-secular majority Muslim state—a bullwark of the West (and the US in particular) in the Middle East—, fell to a revolution based in religion, resulting in a theocracy. This was especially notable because it was so unexpected. The Western world was caught by surprise. Neither our journalists nor our foreign-affairs experts anticipated that religion could play such a role.

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The other notable development was the emergence, first in the US, and later spreading elsewhere in the world—even into Europe— of the movements we now call “neo-Evangelicalism and neo-Pentecostalism”. Prior to the 1970s, conservative Protestantism had been in decline, identified with the fundamentalism of the early 20th Century. Evangelicalism in the US became grown its influence on politics, something that was entirely new. Evangelical leaders intended to reform society and politics and to reclaim lost ground in the public sphere. Pentecostalism also rose to prominence for its spread and influence and its easy incorporation of media and commercialism into its worship and other practices.

In the Twenty-First Century dawned with the 9/11 attacks in New York and the Bali, Madrid, and London Bombings. These forever changed the profile of religion in national and international relations, and introduced entirely new potential faces of religion—and of religious reaction— into our global discourse. Long-standing social realities, such as immigration and ethnic diversity in Europe and North America, are now seen in new ways. Unfortunately some of these new ways are based more in suspicion and ignorance than they are in knowledge, and it often seems that the media cannot resist showing more and more religion as religion becomes more and more controversial.

The Framing of Religion by the Media

These and other changes in the world of religion have made it obvious that religion is not going away anytime soon. But religion is changing and religions are changing, and much of this change can be attributed to the media, something I'll get to in more detail in a moment. This challenges the traditional ways that the media do their work. The media are the frame or the window through which we see and understand religions: both those from "nearby" and those from far away. This framing of religion by the media can be seen in two large categories, both of which should be of concern to my colleagues here at the new Blanquerna Observatory of Communication, Religion, and Culture. The first of these categories is the category of news and journalism. The second is the category of the non-journalistic or entertainment and artistic media, including the new digital and social media.

Journalism has always found religion to be a difficult thing to cover. Most journalists are not trained in religion, and there is fear among reporters, publishers, and editors that religion is always going to be controversial. Religion defies some basic assumptions, including the idea that journalistic objectivity comes from covering the various "sides" of controversies. Religions do not fit easily into "sides" in quite the same way politics does. Religion is also a problem because it is about inspiration, and transcendence, and the afterlife, while journalists are expected to stay in the material, tangible and "here and now." Religion is complicated. There are many religions and they are not strictly comparable. Journalists find it difficult to sort and classify them.

Journalists cover religion according to certain shared assumptions (some call them "biases", but I do not). We need to remember that what makes something "news" for journalists is that it is new and different, something unexpected. So, religions make news when they do things that contradict our assumptions about them. Stories of religious hypocrisy thus make news. Stories of moral failures by religious leaders make news. Stories of the entanglement of religion with politics make news. Stories of religious conflicts and violence make news. Stories of religious "good works" do not make news. Much of the recent news of religion here in Catalonia is news because new forms of religion are emerging here. Journalists struggle to cover such things, and when they do, they tend to do so according to their assumptions about religion and about the ways that religion might be scandalous. Often this means that journalism misses the true meaning of things as it looks

for what it expects religion to do or to be. And it unfortunately often means journalism uses religious conflict, and the potential for conflict, as a way of attracting viewers and selling newspapers.

But religion in media is not limited to journalism. There is a great deal of religion in other media as well. Entertainment media such as *telenovelas* include a lot of religion (though it is often not the sort of religion that religious leaders would like) —and it is often what sociologists call “implicit” religion—. The same is true of other forms of television, film, and popular music. All forms of entertainment media today have more and more religion in them, and this is, I think, the most important development, one that is largely missed by journalism as it looks at religion.

Media and Religion converge

I want to argue that it is no longer possible to think of religion and media as separate spheres. The two are now converging on one another. This convergence is being brought about by important changes in “religion” and in “media”. The question is more complex than only how the media frame religion or how religions and religious people use media.

Religion First. Since the middle of the 20th Century, we have seen a change in the power and authority of religious institutions. Public confidence in religion and in clerical authority continues to decline. Participation in religion, at least in the large established religious institutions, continues to decline throughout the West. At the same time, sociologists of religion have seen a marked trend toward individualized and personalized religious and spiritual practice. This new approach to faith, variously called “seeking” or “questing”, is highly individualistic. People today, particularly younger people, actively make a particular or specialized faith for themselves directed at their own needs and tastes. What is sometimes called “new age religion” is an example of this kind of religion. The fact that many people today say that they have spiritual but not religious is also evidence of what I am talking about.

This kind of faith is fluid and evolving, and seeks out new resources, symbols, and experiences to bring into a kind of “syncretism of individual experience”. Sociologists tell us that at this point in history, individuals feel they must take responsibility for their own selves and their own identities, and that they do so with a sense of autonomy. They are suspicious of imposed or

received authority from outside. This is particularly true of younger people. This results in a kind of “cafeteria religion” or a religious buffet that trusts the self and its own judgments more than it trusts clerics or doctrines. Religious traditions are not ignored in this. In fact, in some ways they are more important than ever, because as individuals seek to make up their own theologies, among the resources they turn to are those that seem to them to be the most “authentic”. Traditional religions, from the Abrahamic faiths to Asian religions, to native religions, to aboriginal traditions, to animism, and on and on, are all potential resources. The world of religion, and its various languages, symbols, and frames, becomes like one large buffet. The point is that this is centered around the individual and his or her selection (we might even say “consumption”) of these things. And, it is significant that some religions —such as Evangelicalism and Pentecostalism in Christianity and Sufism in Islam— benefit from this approach to religion more than others do. Other, more authoritative religions such as Islam and Catholicism may suffer as individuals take authority into their own hands. Again, this is particularly true of younger people.

This reveals an important change in the way we think about religion in the new Century. We now see two faces of religion: religion as belief and religion as politics. And by “politics” I mean both on a personal and on a public level.

At the same time that religion has been changing, so have the media. The most important changes there have been technological. New developments in the production, transmission, and reception of media have led to an explosion in channels and sources of media from the “old media” of television, publishing, and film, to the “new media” of the internet, world wide web, and the “digital” and “social” media. These changes have also led to an increasing globalization of media. This has had three important implications. First, the proliferation of channels has broken down the traditional authority of a relatively small number of publishers and broadcasters. Up until the 1960s (and later in some places in the West) there were only a few openings through which religions could find their way into media circulation. With the proliferation of channels that has changed, barriers have been lowered, terms of access have been eased, and costs have plummeted.

This introduces the second major implication of media change: a proliferation of channels means that more and more specialized media content can now find its way into circulation. It was once only the “broad truths”, the common and shared religious concep-

tions and values, that could find their way to air. Now, a dizzying array of religious, spiritual, quasi-religious, implicitly religious, and near-religious claims, productions, symbols, networks, and movements can find their voices in the media marketplace.

The third major implication of changes in media is the increasing openness on the part of once “secular” media to accommodate sectarian, religious, and spiritual content. We experience this as a “commodification” or “popularization” of religion. It is a simple result of the forces of the marketplace. As barriers to access to media have been lowered, and more and more sources and channels compete for audiences, the tastes and interests of those audiences become more important. The seeking and questing of the audience stimulates a growing supply of religious and spiritual material. And, new producers emerge with those audiences in mind. This process is accelerated even further with digital media: the internet, Web 2.0, and the new “social media”.

There is an impact of all this on religious institutions and authorities.

First, religions increasingly lose control over their own symbols. The media and its celebrity culture can now define the meanings of religious signs, symbols, and languages. Traditional teachings are contested by popular teachings. For example, the American popular music star Madonna has for over two decades made a career of appropriating, re-appropriating, and resisting the symbols of the Catholic faith of her youth. She is therefore involved in challenging and re-defining the symbols and languages whereby her audiences understand Christianity.

Second, in this contest between religion and the media, some religions will “win” and some will “lose” The fundamental fact is that to exist today, institutions that wish to be active in the public sphere must exist in the media. Some religions and religious traditions are better at this than others. Evangelicals and Pentecostals have eagerly embraced each new medium to emerge, from radio to film to television, and now the internet. Other religions, particularly those with greater concern for structure and authority, have been slower to adopt these modern media.

Third, these trends increasingly “relativize” religious authority. This is probably the most profound and far-reaching implication of these trends. As the media interpose themselves in the production and circulation of religious symbols and values, and as the marketplace of mediated religious “supply” continues to evolve, individual religious voices and authorities become less important. More importantly, perhaps, they also become more “horizontal-

zed” in that the once pre-eminent histories and institutions (the traditional faiths) exist in the media marketplace alongside a wide range of other voices from which consumers simply pick and choose. That is not to say the Vatican or the influential schools of Islamic scholarship have disappeared or lost their distinctiveness, it is to say that the rules have been radically changed. Fourth, this means that traditional religions today must exist alongside a marketplace of religion and spirituality that is no longer concerned with form, doctrine, tradition and history. Instead, what religion scholars call “implicit” or “banal” or “informal” religion flourishes. Whether this flourishing is at the expense of traditional religion is a matter for study and debate. I expect my colleagues here to contribute a great deal to our understanding of these questions in the years ahead.

Globalization

We live in an increasingly “globalized” world, not only in economic, but also in cultural terms. In the area of media and religion, there are several important implications and learnings in this age of globalization.

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First, it is no longer possible to have a “private conversation”. Where once it was possible to think of national, regional, ethnic, and religious communities and institutions as bounded entities, today all is open to view. The Danish Cartoon Controversy of 2005 happened in part because the actions of a newspaper in Denmark, focused on the situation with Muslims living in Denmark, found their way onto the global stage, with consequences well beyond what the editors expected. The sex-abuse scandals in the Catholic Church can’t be confined to a specific national context or a diocese, or indeed be held within the Church. They become public issues, open to public scrutiny and public debate worldwide.

Second, in the global context, religious institutions are even less able to control their own symbols or their own languages outside the transmissions and framings of the media. It is nearly impossible for religious voices to talk to particular audiences when all is open to scrutiny and when the media will always frame and condition the nature of those messages.

Third, globalization means that religion and religions are increasingly transnationalized. We see this in the way that media make it possible for immigrant communities worldwide to maintain close ties with home, but also in the emergence of truly trans-

national religious voices and movements. In Christianity, the global spread and growth of Pentecostalism is both a function of media and of cultural and economic globalization. Likewise, in Islam, both the conservative forces of Wahhabism and the moderating forces of new Muslim popular cultures emerging in East and West are examples of the transnationalization of religion through globalization with media at its core.

Fourth, the rise of the media marketplace as a global context means that informal and popular expressions of religion can also come to the fore transnationally, adding to the challenges faced by religious institutions and authorities. The most prominent current examples are in Islam, where large and well-funded “televangelistic” broadcasts are available through the new Middle Eastern Satellite broadcasting. Many of the most popular of these programs and figures, such as Amr Kahled and Moez Massoud, are not clerics or even people with formal theological training, but entrepreneurs motivated to reach a global Muslim audience with messages intended to work around the implied conservatism and anti-modernism of the many clerical authorities within Islam. Doing so, they provide something entirely new: a transnational Muslim voice or perspective, outside the control of traditional authorities. Alongside these large, formal broadcasts have emerged a growing array of informal, popular, user-generated websites, broadcasts, listsservs, and other digital projects, linking a global Muslim youth culture in an unprecedented way.

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I should also mention the implications of the Arab Spring uprisings as an example of several of my points here. First, it is an example of my argument that we understand religion today as politics as much as belief. Islam is clearly at the core of these uprisings, but at the same time, Muslims are now thinking differently about the relationship between religion and politics.

Second, the Arab Spring quickly became transnational, and then global. The “Occupy” movement in my own country traces its roots there, as American youth witnessed the effects of activism by youth in North Africa. Third, the new digital media were very much at the core of these developments. While these media did not “cause” these uprisings and they are not necessarily responsible for their success, they did provide new power and influence to the protesters and undermined the power of other authorities, including religiously-based authorities.

These trends and developments are not limited to Christianity and Islam. Similar things can be seen across the religious landscape. There are profound implications of all of this.

Some of these implications seem contradictory. Media reinforce mis-understandings and biases at the same time that there are many examples of journalism that supports religious knowledge and understanding. People —particularly young people— increasingly use media for peace, justice, and individual rights at the same time that the new digital media also isolate and divide.

How we deal with religion is one of the greatest challenges we face in the Twenty-First Century. It is clear that we must understand the role of the media in order to do so. This means that the Observatory we inaugurate today will be doing work that is vital to all of us in the years ahead. I look forward to collaborating with my new colleagues here, and to learning from them as they develop their programs of important research.