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# Academic Approaches to Communication, Media, and Religion

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## Introduction

Today's interdisciplinary research at the intersection of communication, media, and religion draws on several academic fields and traditions. In this chapter we trace the ways that scholars have addressed themselves to foundational questions in this subfield, including: What is religion? What is communication? What is (or are) media, and how are we to understand the processes of mediation? We explore scholarship that has given shape to this interdisciplinary subfield, considering how scholars have grappled with what has been termed *the material turn* and later *the epistemological* and *axiological turns*. We conclude by considering how a dialogue with new perspectives has given rise to new areas of inquiry. We note the particular urgency with which some in the field are now turning to religious, existential, and value-centered questions of communication, media, and technology, in response to the toxicity of the social as well as the physical and material realms. This emergent approach suggests that critical scholarship in this area may be viewed as a crucial foundation for the social and cultural change that is considered necessary for the future of the earth and for humanity itself.

## Background to the Field

The story of scholarly inquiry into the fields of communication, media, and religion might be dated to one of the earliest works in the tradition of Western philosophy: that of Titus Lucretius, who, a century before the Common Era, authored an epic poem titled, *De Rerum Natura*: On the Nature of Things. The 7200-line poem, admired by the ancient Roman writers Virgil and Cicero, takes as its focus the explanation of life, the sensations, and the natural world. It develops these explanations through the lens of Epicureanism, a materialist philosophy that favored what today would be termed scientific explanations over supernatural ones. Explanations are at the heart of studies in communication, media, and religion, and over the centuries as these have evolved, so have human understandings of the sciences and the supernatural. In Lucretius's day, although

*The Handbook on Religion and Communication,* First Edition. Edited by Yoel Cohen and Paul A. Soukup.

divine intervention and references to the gods, Fates, or souls formed the basis for explanations, Lucretius instead emphasized the role of empirical observation, advocating for the gathering of evidence in the development of knowledge and understanding. He also spoke to a concern that remains particularly relevant: the question of how to conceptualize the relationship between human beings and their technologies, understood as materials and tools. Today, scholarship into religion, communication, and media continues to reflect on the relationships between human beings, technological tools, and causal explanations of the cosmos. Lucretius's work thus offers an interesting starting point for the traditions of Western and Eastern scholarship from which today's interdisciplinary studies have grown.

What Lucretius does not address, of course, are the fundamental categories and assumptions that today structure inquiry in this interdisciplinary field. We therefore begin the chapter with a set of definitions, raising the questions of: What is religion? What is communication? What is (or are) media, and how are we to understand the processes of mediation? In order to set the context for the rest of this volume, we describe the debates that currently shape inquiry into each of these areas, noting what is at stake now in complementary fields of inquiry and then considering the questions that are foregrounded through these approaches within the interdisciplinary field of religion, communication, and media.

## What Is Religion?

The concept of religion seems to emerge in late antiquity Rome, beginning around the third century CE, approximately 400 years after the origins of Lucretius's writings. The Latin word *religio* did not have a counterpart in other (i.e. non-European) languages. In Hebrew, equivalent concepts refer to ethnicity, religion, or nation. In Southeast Asian cultures, the word *dharma* is a key concept with multiple meanings that have references to the ordering of the universe, cosmic law and order, personal conduct, and proper religious practice. The "three teachings" of Confucianism, Taoism, and later Buddhism are understood as nonexclusive and intertwined with the popular or folk religions related to ancestor rituals that most Chinese citizens practice, even as the government of China officially endorses state atheism. And Ibn Sina's philosophical accounts of God, reality, and Being dominated intellectual thought in the medieval Islamic world, separating the Islamic religious sciences from what were understood as the medicine and rational sciences of the Ancients.

Whereas philosophical systems of thought such as Confucianism, Vedic philosophy, Taoism, Buddhism, Judaism, Platonism, Stoicism, and Zoroastrianism developed long before the Common Era, religion as a particular field of study is generally viewed as a European development related to the specific cultural experience of Christianity and to the consolidation of political and religious authority in the Roman Catholic Church. Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in 380 CE, with religious leaders establishing precepts or laws of the Church. By the fifth century CE, the Christian biblical canons of the Old and New Testaments and select religious practices, laws, and beliefs had been codified and standardized as the laws of the land. In the medieval era, religion, philosophy, and knowledge also came to warrant cultural exchange. During the era characterized as the Islamic Golden Age between the eighth to the fourteenth century CE, scholars from various parts of the Islamic world gathered and translated ancient knowledge into Syriac and Arabic, and translations from Arabic into Latin then informed the philosophies of the medieval Latin world. In that latter context of the Roman Empire, studies of the practices, moral tenets, and scriptures that differed from those of the Christian canon came to be understood as studies of other religions. Today these earliest studies of "other" religions

are viewed as reflective of Europe worldviews. Interlocking systems of Christianity, colonialism, and power in Europe, North and South America, and elsewhere in the early Modern world further deepened the Othering of differing cultures, with the ideals of Christianity thus understood as providing justification for conquest, conversion, exploitation, and land theft. In the context of domination by non-Muslim imperial powers, Muslim reform took place in locations such as Indonesia and Malaya as a means of embracing modernism in response to transportation, social mobility, and technological change. These critiques of the roots of religious and specifically of Christian colonialist thought and its relation to systems of power in modernity form the foundation for the current epistemological and axiological turns in studies of media and religion described further later in the chapter.

Several late-nineteenth-century European scholars of religion can be considered particularly foundational in contemporary studies at the intersection of communication, media, and religion. Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, and William James were each less interested in the comparative studies of religion dominant in the travelogs and writings of the time than in how organizational commitments such as those of religion reinforced social cohesion, providing a foundation for studies of the role of media in relation to religious organizations that continues today. In the mid-twentieth century, the work of Mircea Eliade brought together the comparative with concerns of the sacred and profane, introducing scholarship on religion and myth that informed later scholarship on media and myth. And in the shadow of scientific and technological advances, sociologist Peter Berger and others argued that religion and the sacred would wane as the result of a general "disenchantment of the world," an approach that informed religion and media scholarship focused on the role of media in processes of secularization and sacralization. Late-twentieth- and early twenty-first-century scholars such as Jonathan Z. Smith, Talal Asad, Jose Casanova, and Tomoko Masuzawa critiqued much twentieth-century scholarship on religion for its Western academic assumptions, further sowing the seeds for the epistemological and axiological turn in media and religion that we discuss later in the chapter.

Also in the last decades of the twentieth century, the concept of lived religion emerged as feminist scholarship and ethnographic methodologies came to the fore in studies of religion. This strand of scholarship became particularly influential in contemporary discussions of communication, media, and religion in the 1990s and beyond, following the material turn that was taking place across various scholarly fields described later. Often challenging dichotomous categories of the sacred and profane and critiquing the earlier focus on organized religion at the expense of studying the practices of individuals and groups affiliating with religions, the lived religion approach as developed by scholars such as Nancy Ammerman, Robert Orsi, David D. Hall, and Meredith McGuire grounded work in the practices, perspectives, visual cultures, material objects, cultural histories, and lived experiences of those studied.

Debates about the nature and definition of religion remain robust in the field of religious studies. Some scholarship on communication, media, and religion takes established religious organizations and affiliations as a starting point for analysis and some continues to theorize the role of media in social change in relation to processes of secularization and sacralization. Other scholarship considers the relationships between religions and societal myths and political ideologies, and still other scholarship centers on common practices, worldviews, ethics, and geopolitical commitments of individuals or groups who affiliate with religion. Since the turn of the new millennium, scholars interested in religion increasingly have also grappled with critiques of the legacies of colonialism and questions of societal ethics emerging in the wake of heightened environmental disasters, thus also informing a new strand of existential media scholarship related to the epistemological and axiological turn.

Whereas differing strands of thought in the studies of religion were developing particularly in the United States and Europe throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many conversations among those in positions of Christian religious leadership at the time focused on concerns about the "secular" nature of popular media. This concern, drawn upon by mid-twentieth-century communication and media scholars, informed some of the earliest studies in the interdisciplinary area of religion, communication, and media as we will see.

## What Is Communication?

The field of communication studies itself claims roots in the ancient Greek and Roman traditions of rhetoric and persuasion, as deliberative communication was understood as an essential component of the democratic polis. In the European Middle Ages, drawing on ancient Hebrew and Christian traditions, communication became central to ideas of connection and communion between humans and the divine. Grammar, rhetoric, and logic were foundational for European education during the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries, as was Christianity, and thus a long tradition exists that links studies of rhetoric with homiletics – the study of writing and preaching sermons. In the Islamic world, communication was linked with the concept of *da'wah*, which refers to the preaching of Islam and the call to submit to Allah as well as to the desire to pursue respectful dialogue.

In nineteenth-century European and colonial North and South American writings, communication also was understood largely in relation to human interaction. It was not until World War II that the study of communication coalesced as a field, – and one that at the time was rooted in examinations of the then relatively new broadcast medium of radio. In the shadow of concerns regarding Hitler's use of radio, sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld and political scientist Harold Lasswell conducted influential studies of propaganda, with Lasswell coining the first model that shaped understandings of communication when he raised the question, "Who says what to whom in what channel to what effect?" Lazarsfeld developed a large research program and oversaw the production of a series of publications that became influential in the field, including his *Personal Influence* (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955), which was foundational for what was to become known as the media effects tradition. Communication was thus defined in the early to mid-century United States in relation to information exchange, persuasion, media effects, and public opinion; research that is today considered foundational to the Western field of communication studies as it is traditionally concerned with the relationship between information and the functioning of Western democratic society. State-run or government- and self-censored communication media outlets remain the norm in many countries around the world, including in North Korea, Eritrea, Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia, Azerbaijan, Vietnam, Iran, Myanmar, Cuba, and Russia. In such contexts, studies of communication and media have been tightly related to state aims. Approaching communication as a potential tool for political, social, and economic development, therefore, has been an idea exported from the West to places throughout Latin America, Africa, and Asia, along with technologies, capitalism, democracy, and ideas of progress. Such work would come to be critiqued in the neo-Marxist scholarship of the 1960s,1970s, and 1980s, as formerly colonized nations fought for independence from asymmetrical power relations. In the 1980s, 1990s, and early in the new millennium, communication scholars began to reject the dichotomous assumptions of cultural imperialism, favoring instead terms such as globalization and cultural hybridity. In the West, ideas of hegemony and consent came to the fore in communication and cultural studies beginning in the 1960s, and concepts of propaganda gave way to concerns with spaces for resistance and spaces of dominance.

By the 1960s, in part due to specialization of research in US university and institutional settings, the study of interpersonal communication emerged as a field separate from the study of what was then known as mass communication. Drawing on earlier work in persuasion and on humanistic approaches within the field of psychology, scholars primarily in the United States, Europe, and Australia began studying relationships, social interaction, and the human desire for uncertainty reduction. When feminist standpoint theory developed in the 1980s, with its claim that the social groups with which people are affiliated significantly shape knowledge and understanding, it significantly shaped the field of communication studies. With its attention to a Marxist critique of patriarchal theories and of systemic oppressions that devalue women's ways of knowing, this approach further informed developments in related interdisciplinary areas of critical race and queer theory, which in turn added critiques to performance studies and intercultural communication, each of which is recognized as a subfield in communication studies.

Whereas much of mainstream communication studies had focused on development and democracy at the mid-century with the utilization of social scientific methods, the subfield of interpersonal communication studies followed a humanistic path, described by communication scholar John Durham Peters (2001) as the project of reconciling self and other. Yet Peters also argued provocatively that the study of interpersonal communication was not different from that of mass communication in that in both instances there may be invisible, absent, or misunderstood audiences. Peters and other communication scholars have suggested that communication scholarship must continue to navigate the blurred lines between public and private, self and other, digital and analog, virtual and material, machine and human, even if the dust never settles on where these lines are drawn.

## What Is Media?

In the US context, concerns with the technologies of communication had first arisen in relation to desires for heightened efficiencies. Seeking to assist US engineers in performing their jobs at the Bell Telephone company, mathematician Claude Shannon and scientist Warren Weaver in 1948 proposed that human communication can be broken into six components: sender, encoder, channel, noise, decoder, and receiver – an approach that remains influential in some fields but is critiqued as failing to take the contexts of communication into consideration.

As Shannon and Weaver's information exchange model of communication flourished in the mid-twentieth-century United States and defined media as a term largely interchangeable with the electronic communication technologies of radio and then television, different traditions were developing elsewhere. In Europe, a group of scholars and dissidents who came to be known as the Frankfurt School had been working in the shadow of the emergent capitalist, fascist, and socialist systems of the 1930s. Due to their sense that social theory and social scientific approaches were inadequate for the moment, they explored semiotic, socio-cultural, and critical traditions. With their studies of commercial culture and the culture industries, as Theodor Adorno termed them, these scholars, including Max Horkheimer, Ernst Bloch, Erich Fromm, Walter Benjamin, and Herbert Marcuse, offered scathing critiques of the relationships between antisemitism, authoritarianism, and capitalism. In contrast to the US tendency to understand media as technologies responsible for transporting messages, European and Latin American scholars approached media and technologies as welded to capitalist and dominant ideological systems. Their critiques of dominant capitalist culture were taken up by the European, Latin American, and US New Left in the 1960s and 1970s, as scholars and activists supported civil and political rights, feminism and gay rights, and protested the Vietnam War. In the East, however, scholars of the 1980s and 1990s began to develop the Islamicization of communication theory, centering ideas of *da'wah* and

embracing a "prophetic science" that sought to uphold the relationships between humans and Allah while also foregrounding ethical concerns related to media effects and specifically to Western imperialism and commercialization. Islamic communication theories, and Asian communication theories as well, have been particularly concerned with countering the dominance of Western media systems while also seeking to reclaim the philosophical heritage of Eastern and Islamic thinking that has given shape to Western scientific and intellectual traditions.

With television as the dominant medium of concern at mid-century, studies of the media had come to be structured in relation to three categories: media texts, media producers, and media audiences. In the 1970s and 1980s, theorists began unpacking the relations between these categories, again focusing on media as interlocking processes of culture rather than as distinct contexts. In the UK, cultural theorists and historians Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, and Stuart Hall theorized the relationship between culture, power, and the elite, fascinated with the idea of popular culture as a site of struggle and of negotiation. Their work gave rise to the tradition known as cultural studies that explores the ways that political, economic, and social forces converge, are given shape, and are interpreted in relation to technologies, practices, and messages of the media. Stuart Hall credited feminist scholarship with a key shift in cultural studies, moving studies toward a closer examination of the everyday. This initiated a rethinking of how power functioned, encouraging scholars to examine the connections between what happened in the private and public realms.

In Latin America, Jesús Martín-Barbero (1992) focused on the ways some media audiences gave voice to their own local concerns, challenging the power of the international media industries. Criticizing Latin American universities for their adoption of the development assumptions of the North and West, Martín-Barbero argued for a shift in media studies from a focus on the technologies of the media to social processes: from the media to *mediations*, as the subtitle of his most renowned book phrases it. In Latin America, and also in Europe, mediation came to refer to the processes through which social production and reproduction occur, and directed scholarly attention to the networks of technologies, social actors, and technological protocols that served as the interface for these processes. An approach of mediation encouraged communication scholars to consider communication processes in relation to social movements, meanings, and collective cultural practices.

In Canada, the 1960s and 1970s saw the rise of a different tradition that challenged the information model of communication. Marshall McLuhan (1964) famously argued that the medium is the message, drawing attention to the ways that the technologies do not transparently transmit messages, but rather mediate, or give shape to and transform them. Although McLuhan's ideas achieved popular success and were quite influential in the field of education, they did not find much resonance outside the scholarly contexts of North American communication and media studies, as they were viewed as apolitical. By the first decade of the twenty-first century, however, the media landscape was undergoing drastic changes, both with the emergence of Google, Facebook, Apple, Amazon, and Netflix as primary distributors of media content (including user-generated content), and the US relaxed regulation environment that had led to the explosion of talk radio and the consolidation of radio and television interests along increasingly polarized lines. At that time, questions of immersion in a media ecology, drawing upon McLuhan, Neil Postman (1985), and others, gained traction once again. As the term "media" no longer served as a proxy for broadcast television and radio, new debates arose around whether or not the rise of mass forms of communication in conjunction with modernity had changed societies via processes of what European scholars Fredrich Krotz, Andrea Hepp (2012), Knut Lundby (2014), and Stig Hjarvard (2013) had theorized as *mediatization*. Studies of mediation have focused on the ways in which meaning is mediated, sometimes, but not only, via technologies. In contrast, studies of mediatization focus on the ways that the logics and prerogatives of differing (but particularly the broadcast) media industries have become entwined with and influence other institutions of society.

## Media and the Digital Turn

By the first decade of the second millennium, the social media platforms of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and later Instagram and TikTok, had become vital sites for the rise of user-generated content. Whereas early writings on social media and the Internet, such as the influential scholarly work of Manuel Castells and the popular works of Clay Shirky and Howard Rheingold, were sometimes utopian in tone and celebrated the plurality of expressions present online, others in media studies, with its long tradition of analyzing the media industries and their relation to other societal systems of power, began to question the extent to which new platforms ushered in new power relations. Jose van Dijck's (2013) historical analysis of Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, YouTube, and Wikipedia revealed the ways that the owners of these platforms purported to embrace free expression and democratic values while their business practices instead favored profits and diminished transparency. Other works on "platformization" explore the ways that new platforms increasingly broker distribution and thereby change relationships of work, leisure, time, and the flow of commerce. Studies by Amanda Lotz (2018, 2022) and Mareike Jenner (2018) focus on the rising popularity and influence of entertainment-based streaming services like Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Hulu, noting that whereas once content distribution was dictated by structured time slots and advertising incentives, television has shifted to an unstructured format, shedding traditional legacy practices and embracing streaming service platforms. Likewise, the film industry has had to shift attention to include digital downloads alongside theatrical box office numbers. Meanwhile, YouTube and TikTok have emerged as dominant distribution channels of user-generated content, particularly among younger audiences.

In these new spaces, content finds new audiences, and cultural storytelling shifts from the dominant lowest-common-denominator approach to niche-style delivery. Those in media studies observed that just as virtual spaces cater to individual users, the stories that gain popularity on Netflix are able to reach both wide and niche audiences. Moreover, content now travels across a variety of platforms, garnering audiences, and generating profits as part of what scholar Henry Jenkins (2006) refers to as *convergence culture*.

## Religion, Communication, and Media Studies

It was in the 1970s that both US and European scholars in communication first began to identify studies of communication, media, and religion as a subfield, with some drawing connections between their work and the nineteenth-century scholars who had studied religion and society before them. Also in the 1970s and 1980s in the United States and Europe, several scholars within Christian traditions were taking up the challenge of exploring the role of media, and specifically television, on Christianity and on Christian faith communities. At the time, Christian religious leaders were voicing concerns that echoed those of secularization and profane culture, sometimes placing concerns in the then widely accepted framework of media effects. In the mid-1960s, French philosopher Jacques Ellul had argued that modern communication technologies created a threat to both religion and to human freedom. In 1971, the Catholic Church issued its first pastoral instruction that centered on social communication. Titled *Communio et Progressio: On the means of social communication* and written by the order of the Second Vatican Council, the document set out to delineate the proper use of communication in a manner that would support "the unity and brotherhood of man," proposing that the incarnation – a term that refers to the belief that God sent his son Jesus to earth – should be understood as God's *communication* with humans.

The document speaks of access to information – to inform and to be informed – as a human right. Drawing on these ideas, French Catholic religious educator Pierre Babin (1978) placed Catholic religious formation in dialogue with McLuhan's work, seeking to leverage what he termed the audiovisual language in his efforts to make the catechism relevant for young people (Babin & McLuhan, 1978). Walter Ong (1982), a student of McLuhan's and also a Catholic, explored the transition from orality to literacy and the effect of this on human consciousness while also considering the various effects of technology on the Christian Church. United Methodist minister and professor of theology William Fore (1970), also responding to both Ellul's and McLuhan's thought, wrote an early history of religion on television in the late 1970s. Whereas he offered critiques of television's violent and sexual content, art historian Gregor Goethals (1981, 1990) offered her visual analyses suggesting that television was largely at odds with Christianity, themes later picked up in the work of Christian scholars William Romanowski (1996, 2002) and Quentin Schultze (1991, 2003).

The work of US communication scholar James Carey (1989) was to become particularly influential for scholars working in communication, media, and religion who sought to challenge the dominant paradigms of McLuhan's sweeping view, Ellul's pessimism, and the behavioral focus within the school of media effects. Carey's interest in the mythic dimensions of media had led him in the late 1970s to synthesize the work of religious scholar Mircea Eliade, anthropologist Clifford Geertz, and German philosopher Ernst Cassirer, who had argued that humans are *animal symbolicum*, or symbol-creators. UK scholar Roger Silverstone (1981) also drew upon Eliade's observations regarding myths in the late 1970s and 1980s, noting that myths have always been communicated through dramatic storytelling, which is the primary form for film and television, and thus, television and film inevitably communicate mythic themes. In the 1990s, theologians Frances Ford Plude and Mary Hess, among others, built on these themes as a means of developing what Plude termed a *communication theology* and what Hess integrated into innovations in Christian education.

As noted earlier, the emergence of feminist theory as well as queer and critical race theories had shaped studies of both media and religion beginning in the 1960s and 1970s. Feminism's influence in religious studies led to an examination of bodies, material practices, and intersectionalities in identity, much as feminism did in media studies. Yet at the time, many scholars in communication and media studies embraced critiques of religion as patriarchal. Following Freud, Althusser, and the Frankfurt School theorists, such scholars understood religion as regressive and inherently conservative. This contributed to a marked scholarly indifference toward religion, which was almost universally equated by these scholars with Christianity.

Nevertheless, in the 1980s and 1990s, several scholars drew upon critical media traditions to examine the phenomena of televangelism. Australian Peter Horsfield and American scholars Stewart Hoover and Quentin Schultze each wrote early and influential studies of the commercial, religious, and political roles of these cultural phenomena, situating them in relation to debates of secularization. Hoover, following other American media scholars such as Judith Buddenbaum, also focused on coverage of religion in the US news media and, building on the insights of Geertz and Carey, explored the ways that media industries inadvertently challenged religious authority in the definition of meaning and myth for religious adherents. Disputing both the universalizing approach to religion and the secularization hypothesis, Hoover (1984, 2006), along with Horsfield (1984, 2015) in Australia, Knut Lundby (1987, 2021) in Norway, and Alf Linderman (1997) in Sweden, worked across the fields of religious studies and media studies to bring the fields into conversation with one another in the late 1980s through the early 2000s (see also Hoover & Lundby, 1997). Others were also working in this new interdisciplinary space at the intersection of media studies, religious studies, and cultural studies, notably media and cultural studies scholar Marie Gillespie (1995) in her work on the reception of Hindi television

among South Asians in London, and American religious historians David Morgan (1997, 2005) in his work on popular religious imagery and Colleen McDannell (1995) on lived religion and popular domestic culture. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, several European and North American anthropologists and scholars adopting anthropological methods also focused attention on the intersections of lived religion, narrative, and commercial media. In the field of anthropology, Faye Ginsburg (1998) explored the coverage of religion and the abortion debate in the United States, while Birgit Meyer (2009) focused on film, modernity, and popular religious belief in Ghana; Arvind Rajagopal (2001) explored television and Hindu nationalism; and Lila Abu-Lughod (1997) analyzed Egyptian women and politics in relation to television and religious and cultural practices. In communication and media studies, Rosalind Hackett (1998) considered media and new religious movements in Nigeria; Lynn Schofield Clark (2003) focused on popular culture and the formation of religious and non-religious identity among US adolescents; Mia Lovheim (2011) explored young people, nascent digital media practices, and belief in Sweden; Mara Einstein (2008) considered the relationships between religious groups and brand culture; and Purnima Mankekar (1999) analyzed television, womanhood, and postcolonial India. In the sociology of religion, Wade Clark Roof (2001), Robert Wuthnow (1996), Nancy Ammerman (2014), and Robert Bellah (1967) gave attention to the role of media and narrative in religious and national identity or civil religion. And in religious studies, Gordon Lynch (2005), Johanna Sumiala (2006), Christopher Partridge (2006), and others challenged ideas of Western society as secular, developing theories that grappled with the roles that technologies played in processes of sacralization while exploring emergent rituals and rites associated with human life and with death.

## Religion, Communication, and Media: The Material Turn

The influence of anthropological attention to the everyday across a variety of fields was thus in alignment with a broader *material turn* in the humanities and social sciences away from postmodernism's crisis of representation and toward an enhanced interest in the role of objects, and by extension the role of popular culture, in signification and in everyday life. This turn invited further understanding across various religious traditions as well as deeper connections between religions and how they are created, practiced, communicated (mediated), and re-mediated. Scholars noted earlier as well as S. Brent Plate, Manuel Vásquez, Jessica Moberg, and others teased out the material dimension of religions, exploring how beliefs intermingle with rituals, objects, senses, spaces, and bodily experiences. Challenging an understanding of material bodies, technological tools, and other modes of mediation as *separate from* or merely *used by* religious practitioners, these material aspects of life came to be seen as *co-creators* with religion. In this sense, concepts earlier associated with media studies, including the concept of mediation, came to have influence in a rethinking of religions and religious practices. According to Meyer's (2009) theory of mediation, people encounter the transcendental through technologically mediated sensational forms. In other words, particular forms of media change over time, but the experiential dimension of religious phenomena remains constant. Similarly, Plate's (2014) book *History of Religion in 5 ½ Objects* traces religious history and definitions through seemingly everyday objects, teasing out the agentive relationship between objects and those who make, use, possess, caress, and taste them. Human bodies also become sites for defining religion, with scholars such as Angela Zito (1997) pointing to Chinese traditions of the body as medium for sacrifice and performance and others working through affect theory, new materialism, and tattoo and body modification studies.

In the 1970s, scholar of religion Jonathan Z. Smith (1975) first linked the material and technological aspects of canonization with industrial modes of production, calling attention to the corporate and industrial aspects of religious material mediation. This is echoed by historians of religion at the end of the millennium who turned attention to the emergence of the book as a material object and the role of religion in the rise of both the commercial press and of literacy. In religious studies, Manuel Vásquez (1998, 2010) in El Salvador and David Chidester (2005) in South Africa, and, in the United States, Diane Winston (2000, 2009), Thomas Tweed (1997), Robert Orsi (2010), S. Brent Plate (2005, 2017), Sarah Pike (2001), and Jane Iwamura (2011) considered the roles of popular culture and popular religion in collective religious identities and practices. The material turn incorporates conversations about individuals, industries, belief, materiality, and changes in technology. With the material turn, as well as the turn toward the digital in media studies, the question of "How are audiences using media and practicing religion?" was adjusted to become "How do the material aspects of media affect their use?" Heidi Campbell's (2005) formative work on the use of communication technologies among differing religious communities led to her analysis of the religio-social shaping of technology, while Gary Bunt's (2003, 2009) analyses of online fatwas and E-Jihad and Chris Helland's (2000) categorizations of "online religion" and "religion online" each laid the groundwork for others to consider how religious institutions and individual practitioners translated rituals and fostered community online. Video games and later social media became central to studies of digital Hinduism and digital Buddhism, with work by Kerstin Radde-Antweiler and Xenia Zeller (2018) as well as Dheepa Sundaram (2019) providing insights. Jeremy Stolow's (2019) historical contextualization of how technologies have been understood in relation to varied religious practices brought media and material history studies into conversation with one another, while scholars in North and South America, northern and southern Europe, Australia, South America, the Middle East, Africa and Asia explored social media practices in relation to ideas of religious identity, community, and authority.

## Decolonizing Religion, Communication, and Media: The Epistemological and Axiological Turns

Questions of what it means to be human closely relate to questions of epistemology, or of how we know what we think we know. The first epistemological turn took place in the seventeenth century as Rene Descartes, Thomas Hobbes, Blaise Pascal, and later Immanuel Kant rejected divine explanations and favored scientific ones, ushering in empirical study and following in the earlier footsteps of Lucretius, as noted at the beginning of this chapter. In the last decades of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, scholars across a range of fields began to grapple with the colonial and imperialist contexts that have shaped the epistemologies of Western rational thought. This in turn has raised axiological concerns, or concerns with both the goodness and worth of human actions and with the evaluation not of how societal arrangements are but of how they ought to be.

Research, as Indigenous scholar of the Maori Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2021) has argued, is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism. This is because, as Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano (2000) and Argentinian semiotician Walter Mignolo (2007) have observed, racism is the only way to explain the justifications given for the economic and political subordination of Indigenous people by Europeans that began with the colonial relations of the sixteenth century, extended through the enslavement of Africans, and continues to exist today. Such relations of subjugation and colonization have long-term negative psychological effects, as French West

Indian political philosopher Frantz Fanon (2008) noted in 1952. Not only were Black people dismissed by whites, Fanon argued, but they also felt themselves inferior, and thus both groups have discounted the knowledge rooted in the Black lived experience. Scholars such as Kenya's Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1992) built on Fanon's work, calling for a decolonizing of the mind, and Fanon is considered a key figure in the legal school of thought known as critical race theory that criticizes all US laws as implicated in maintaining white supremacist systems of power relations.

Inspired by Michelle Alexander's (2010) work comparing our current prison system in the United States with the Jim Crow-Era laws that kept Black Americans subjugated, sociologists and media scholars Safiya Umoja Noble (2018) and Ruha Benjamin (2019) have argued that communication technologies, while appearing neutral, are in actuality deepening, and hiding, racial discrimination and systemic oppression. Biases are coded into algorithms and in fact into all aspects of technology, as evidenced in the ways that search engines, facial recognition software, smart devices, and virtual assistants are imagined and deployed. Discrimination is the default, these and other scholars argue, and thus what poses as technological benevolence must be questioned, and justice must be reimagined.

Thus scholarship at the intersection of communication, media, and religion in the beginning of the third millennium increasingly focused on media and religious systems in relation to power and governance, as exemplified in work such as Andrea Stanton's (2013) analysis of the role of government-sponsored radio in shaping Arab political and social life in the context of British colonialism; Pradip Thomas's (2010) focus on questions of secularism and the limitations to freedom of thought in India; Rianne Subijanto's (2011) studies of media resistance to Dutch East Indies imperialism (now Indonesia) and Merlyna Lim's (2012, 2017) explorations of the more recent rise of hate and nationalism in Indonesia; Mona Abdel-Fadil's (2019) studies of the ways that Muslim and Christian conflicts on Facebook strengthen in-group bonds; Marwan Kraidy's (2017) examination of the Islamic State's image warfare along with Carol Winkler and Kareem El Damanhoury's (2022) examination of the relationships between Jihad magazines and radicalization; and works by Kristin Peterson (2022), Ruth Tsuria (2017), Evelina Lundmark (2017), Giulia Evolvi (2019), and others who have focused on religious-informed activism and resistance in personal and in public spaces. The once-optimistic approaches to communication technologies in the service of democracy and enhanced human understanding have given way to concerns regarding disinformation campaigns that deepen societal distrust and may feed radicalization.

The axiological is also the focus of concern in the work of Kevin Healey and Bob Woods (2020), who have evoked a "prophetic imagination" and "resistance thinking" to critique the rising corporate and technological powers of Silicon Valley that envision themselves as benevolent custodians of a techno-utopic future. Healey and Woods draw upon both Buddhism's focus on personal transformation and the Judeo-Christian concern for social justice, issuing a collective call for civic mindfulness and for the humane design of emerging technologies. Noting that the prophetic language is related to Christian as well as Buddhist frameworks, they look at what it means to have ethical media, particularly in an age when the issue of trust looms large, especially in relation to religious, governmental, and corporate authority.

Amanda Lagerkvist's (2018) edited volume, *Digital Existence: Ontology, Ethics and Transcendence in Digital Culture*, has moved the axiological discussions of ethics forward in additional ways. Tracing the philosophical roots of Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, and Hannah Arendt to frame current existential *conditions*, *experiences*, and *strivings* of digital culture, Lagerkvist asks whether we use and make tools or whether we emerge through and are mutually co-constituted by our tools. Her discussion of *existential experiences* relates digital meaning-making and shared vulnerability to what Heidegger calls "the thrownness" as well as Kierkegaard's description of the groundlessness of our existence. How, she asks, are scholars to think about ethics within virtual realms that alter traditional experiences of time and space into a sensation of "groundlessness"?

Amit Pinchevski's (2019) work on the relationship between media and trauma is equally provocative. He is interested in how both images of trauma and the words used to describe those images such as "flashes" and "burned in" are more than metaphors and figures of speech but rather provide "epistemological scaffolding." This scaffolding, in turn, may provide the keys to unlocking affective responses that lead to healing. Whereas this work may be understood in relation to the axiological turn, other scholarship, such as Gregory Grieve's (2014) work on Buddhist meditation apps and Jin Park's (2016) attention to discourses of healing in Korean television, similarly address a widened sphere of healing as part of the existential experience of what it means to be human.

Such work becomes particularly important in the contemporary context that sees people in various contexts leaving traditional organized religion. As Finnish scholar Teemu Taira (2019) has argued, as stories of such departures become more commonplace in fictional content as well as in personal digital spaces, it becomes easier for the non-religious to find ways to live comfortably in what are in many places still largely religious societies.

At the same time, in the midst of heightened awareness of the effects of climate change, including displacement, forced migration, and continued health crises, future scholarship in the area of religion, communication, and media can be expected to continue to grapple not only with how the field's key terms are understood, but with what those terms imply in the context of a world increasingly focused on questions not of religion's but of humanity's continued existence.

## Conclusion

This chapter opened the conversation of interdisciplinary studies of religion, communication, and media with a discussion of definitions and of questions at the intersection of these fields. In the chapters that follow, scholars explore each of these areas in greater depth in an effort to address the subfield's need for more attention to voices and experiences emerging from outside the Western and Christian contexts that have largely shaped scholarship to date.

Today, debates in the fields of communication and media focus on whether communication might be studied scientifically in relation to message and information exchange and comprehension, and/or how the study of literary and other forms of communication demand an understanding of the ideological and political systems in which they are embedded. Scholarship on communication and media is also concerned with issues of transparency, privacy, memory, and the ownership of information, as well as with debates about the role of narrative and voice in democratic processes and the authenticity of communication messages in the context of an evermore encapsulating commercial culture. Communication and media scholars are interested in issues of difference, conflict, and contestation, particularly as these play out in rational and agonistic publics as well as in authoritarian and nondemocratic settings. This becomes even more crucial as nationalism and fascism continue to rise globally. In the wake of the continued rise of populism around the world, scholarship in media, religion, and culture turned to explorations of religious nationalism, with scholars exploring the intersections of political and religious ideologies and their roles in the rise of misinformation and disinformation circulated for political influence. As local populist factions blossomed into national movements with the help of algorithms and mysterious black box regulations from Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, conspiratorial ideas emerge from niche corners of the Internet and are given acknowledgment and legitimacy by mainstream news outlets. Scholarship in media, religion, and communication is now turning to the ways that fears surrounding immigration, mass shootings, pandemics, masks, and vaccines are inflamed by social media sharing, pushing online conversations into in-person spaces with near-religious fervor.

We conclude this chapter by observing that a key question that promises to shape research in the area of religion, communication, and media is this: Is communication a *human right*? And what does it mean to protect that human right in the contemporary era? Communication is named as a human right in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), first adopted by the United Nations in 1947. The UDHR commits nations to recognizing all humans as "born free and equal in dignity and rights." Article 19 of the UDHR states that everyone "has a right to freedom of opinion and expression," including the right to "seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers." As noted early, the Pontifical Council for Social Communication (1971) similarly affirmed a human right to information. As communication technology evolves, our *access* to these technologies and to technologies that allow muted voices to be heard must also evolve in equitable ways. And as our offline and online lives become more interconnected, hindrances that limit access to information and to the ability to share information become human rights concerns.

The question of communication as a human right, as well as the turn to the material and to the axiological, give rise to new questions: How do we navigate justice and morality amidst increasingly splintered online environments? What is lost as individual opinions and perspectives take the place of the public and the collective? How are communication rights related to other basic human needs that are increasingly threatened in an era of rapid climate change, globalization, and heightened inequities?

Finally, in media studies and in related fields, the material and axiological turns in the contexts of intensified globalization and heightened climate change have led to a focus on the consequences of technological materiality. This in turn has brought attention to aging infrastructures and to the physical impact of commercial excesses, waste, and technological detritus, all of which belie earlier assumptions of "clean" technologies that could be designed for efficiency with little to no cost to humans or nature. As the global Covid-19 pandemic challenged institutions, governments, and businesses to adjust creatively to remote work, it also exposed deep inequities and disconnects in health care, supply chain issues, migration patterns, and the costs of essential work. Such concerns have spurred a renewed interest in the relationships between technological tools and what it means to be human, particularly in the shadow of accelerated artificial intelligence. Now, perhaps more than ever, there is an urgent need for a more holistic account of the interdependence between humans, technologies, and the natural world in which we live.

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