

Religion in a Media Age

Media and Theology Project Public Lectures

Professor Stewart Hoover, 1997



I would like to contemplate with you the possibility that the question this afternoon might not only be "what is the status of religion in a media age," but "what is the emerging religion of the media age?"

I am saying, therefore, that we need to move beyond the traditional way we have thought about relations between religion and media. We have tended to consider them as autonomous, bounded, realities, and their relations as that of transmission. Thus, the questions have been about 1) Religious use of the media (such as in the electronic church or televangelism) and 2) media use of religion, such as in the case of religion journalism.

Our studies of these phenomena have shown us that it is not a simple matter of message transmission, or instrumentalism, however. In the case of televangelism, my own studies and those of colleagues have shown that this is a more profound and nuanced cultural reality than was once thought. There are cultural differences between televangelists. My colleague at Colorado, Janice Peck, argues convincingly that some of these programs are in fact examples of religion adapted to television, while others are examples of television actually adapted to religion.

In our studies of religion journalism as well, we have seen that to understand the way the press deal with religion, we need to understand the larger cultural questions of the location of religion in public discourse, and the role of the media, as guarantors of that discourse, in supporting, shaping or challenging it.

To resolve these questions and issues for ourselves, I would argue that it is necessary to look more closely at the actual site of reception of these messages. That is, what do we know about what people actually do with the symbols, values, and ideas that come to them through the media--religious and secular?

Our current work involves in-depth research at the household level on "media, meaning and the lifecourse," where we engage families in guided life narratives intended to reveal the extent to which the popular media contribute meaningful symbols to life. Implied by this research is the extent to which the traditional sources of symbolic input--the church, the schools, the extended family, the community, the reference group--are now complemented by, integrated into, or even outpaced by, symbols, ideas, and values derived from the media sphere.

A further set of questions has to do with the actual practices of media consumption. How do media--from books, to periodicals, to telephones, to television, to CD-Interactive games--condition and shape our lives? How do generations raised in an era dominated by the "visual" media relate to the "linear" or "print"-based texts through which the religious, cultural and social heritage has traditionally been conveyed?

These are big questions and we are just beginning to investigate them. So, "more later..." on that.

Raising these larger questions does, however, provide some insight into the issues under consideration here today, and I'd like to share some of this thinking with you.

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There is, in fact, a great deal of evidence that religion and the media are coming together to occupy some of the same spaces in contemporary life. They are converging. This will never be a total convergence, of course, but their common point seems to be meaning.

Let's look at the general outlines of this convergence. Let me say first that you will note that I am using rather broad definitions of both "media" and "religion." It is, however, such definitional shifting which is at the heart of social and cultural change, and I think it is hard to deny that change is underway.

Let's start with the larger world of the media. As you all know, diversification is the order of the day. At the same time that media ownership is becoming concentrated, a great plethora of media services and sources is emerging. The once-regnant daily press and broadcasting services now have to share the media stage with cable and satellite channels (both analog and digital), homevideo, CD-Interactive Games, an explosion in specialty magazines and focused book publishing, and--of course--the Internet and World Wide Web.

The best thinking in the commercial media has come to recognize that the future of information services in this environment is in a shift away from "push marketing" and toward "pull marketing." That is, in a time when the individual home has access to such great variety, they will play more and more of a role in gatekeeping their own media diets, and the commercial marketplace will have to adapt. The model contemporary marketing environment is not the television advert, or even the television info-mercial, but the business telephone listings, where--as a producer--the market comes to you, you don't go to the market.

And "marketplace" is the key term, one that you will find me repeating again later. The media today are much more like a bazaar or a flea market than they are like The High Street or a department store. Barriers to access have changed, and today a wide variety of very different media symbols and services come into the home. And, a wide range of these symbols and services are either manifestly or latently "religious."

Think for a moment of a few examples. One of the most popular recordings last year was Joan Osborne's "One of Us," which asked the question "What if God were one of us, just a slob like one of us...?" Its very interesting video has proven to be a powerful provocation for conversations with young people about religious identity and meaning in one part of our current research. Then there are the new CD-Interactive program "Charlton Heston's Voyage Through the Bible," being produced by Jones Digital Century Corporation, and the "New Media Bible" projects of the American Bible Society (and in which the ABS is trying to interest the United Bible Societies, as well)

that were shown and discussed at our conference on media, religion and culture in Boulder last year.

Then perhaps more to the fringe, there is Dionne Warwick's Psychic Friend's Network, a toll-telephone chat-line focused on spiritual and astrological concerns. And, on public television in the United States there are Deepak Chopra, and re-runs of John Bradshaw (who is a slightly less-successful and less Asian precursor of Chopra's). Public television (which would have been predicted by secularization theory to be a context inimical to the non-rational sphere) is actually quite a source of this material--from Robert Bly--a new men's consciousness guru--to programs, tapes, booklets and chat-shows about the history and tradition of "the Goddess." On commercial television, there is a current series called Touched by an Angel, long-standing religious themes in the program Northern Exposure the new film Michael, and of course Star Trek Inc., which has now issued a Bible translation into Klingon. Then there are the various "cyberchurches" that have sprung up on the internet and world wide web. The list of media commodities that invoke the religious can quickly become a long one. But what is the status of these things? Aren't they only "entertainment?" Are they really substantive, or trivial? These questions can be answered by looking at the second context, that of trends in contemporary religion. The overall theme there is that, at least in the American context, traditional movements (including traditional churches and denominations, communions or "denominational families") are becoming a smaller and smaller factor in contemporary religious practice.

There are a number of social and cultural reasons for this. Immigration has resulted in the importation of so-called "new religions" at an ever-increasing pace. There has been a decline in the authority and legitimacy of all institutions and religion is not immune. Along with these comes the most important phenomenon, the rise of the individual and individual autonomy in matters of faith. The distinguished sociologist Wade Clark Roof has called this the "transitional religion of the (post-war) Baby-Boom generation," and that description is apt. Roof's work likes in a lengthening stream of studies just now being undertaken on the social and cultural trends of the post-war generations.

The age cohort of the Baby Boom has established a link between the religious climate of the past and the religion of the future, which no longer looks to tradition, history, doctrine or institution for its symbols and values to as great an extent. What has sometimes been called "cafeteria Catholicism" has become "religion a la carte" to quote the Canadian scholar Reginald Bibby. I am not denying that there are substantial residual centers of conservative and traditional religious practice, but the signs point to even those centers coming gradually under the sway of this "transitional" religion.

This kind of practice conceives of religion, then, as a "marketplace" of symbols and values, at the same time that religion itself has become more and more of a commodity. I'll only raise four examples of this, and without going into a great deal of detail. The Christian Bookseller's Association annual convention each year introduces thousands of new book titles, cassette series, video programs, childrens' games, clothing, household goods, and other paraphernalia. Anyone who has attended this meeting has been exposed to this commodification in some of its most extreme and

crass forms. Christian music is a major element of the religious marketplace as well. The American phenomenon of the "seeker", or "megan-churches" such as the Willow Creek Community Church near Chicago is also an example of religion accommodating itself to this new mode of religiosity. Moving to the more progressive side of the religious landscape, there are the various movements and practices that have been pushed under the umbrella of the "New Age" (the dominant religion of my home town of Boulder, Colorado).

The point is that in contemporary life, the ways of being religious have moved out of the protected sphere of religious institution and tradition, and into the open ground of the symbolic marketplace.

What this means is that religion now more than ever exists in the media sphere. The Bosnian war, religious scandals, the global spread of fundamentalism, even this week's controversies in the Church of England--all are media phenomena as well as "religious" phenomena. Religion in public used to be a property of the whole culture. Certainly this used to be the case with the state church arrangements here and in Europe. In America, this was realized through the evolution of a "civil religion" or "civic piety." Ronald Reagan could pray at the Republican National Convention. Dwight Eisenhower's famous statement on religion "...I believe every American should have a religious faith and I don't care what it is..." revealed both a tolerance and a marginalization of a generalized religious faith and practice.

The emergence of "the media" as a singular cultural context means that private religiosity now becomes public. The "seeker" or "marketplace" orientation becomes public religion and becomes public through-- and in-- "the media." Through the functioning of parachurch organizations such as the American Promise Keepers and Focus on the Family on "the right," and new age bookstores, the RE-Imagining Community, Matthew Fox, and Deepak Chopra on "the left," the media become a more central site of religious practice. Not just religious "information" or "seeking," but practice. In fact, this new, transitional mode of religiosity conceives of both information and seeking as practice, a key point to understand. Meaning today is achieved through acquisition and appropriation of symbols into a sense of the self.

This is a mode of religion that is, in some ways, much more American than it is British or European. My colleague at Uppsala, Thorleif Pettersson, likes to say that the major religious difference between Swedes and Americans is that for Swedes, where they belong is more important than what they do, and for Americans it is the reverse. This new kind of religiosity I am talking about is a "doing" religiosity, not a "belonging" one. And, even in Sweden, one can already see the development of new religious movements--not all of them American-based--which are addressing "doing" more directly.

Let me digress for a moment here to talk a little bit about religious practice, because I am sure that, for some of you, little red lights are going on. The question that seems to emerge at this point is some of substance or essence. How is religious practice that is expressed in such places and such ways authentic?

I'd like to address that concern as well as introduce a bit of an argument that even conservative or traditionalist centers of religiosity also bleed into this transitional type of religion.

There is evidence that today's religious seekers seek not only meaning in an ontological or theological sense, but also seek religious practices which have traditionally been repressed, particularly in Protestantism. Transitional religion is, for example, about the body and experience, about objects and about rituals, both traditional--but also to a greater extent--invented.

For my text here, I'd like to give examples of some of these, and of how they already are finding their way into more traditional religious settings. For example, "rituals" and "experience." A recent issue of the journal *Common Boundary* reports that churches, synagogues, and other organizations are recovering and reconstructing practices that incorporate rites of passage into their work in order to help ease young people's journey into adulthood. "Rites of passage currently being conducted include wilderness survival programs; reconstructed African rituals in black churches; revitalized confirmations in Protestant churches and bar and bat mitzvahs in synagogues, and newly created rituals using mythology, guided imagery, art, music, games and other tools in various settings."

Now a very interesting development. The report goes on:

One popular rite-of-passage program called "The Journey" is finding a following among secular groups and mainline Protestants for its use of mythology. Based on Joseph Campbell's book, "The Hero With A Thousand Faces," The Journey uses guided imagery where boys and girls "travel through time or descend into an underworld where they meet beasts and monsters," indirectly teaching them coping skills for dealing with guilt, failure, and low self-esteem.

In some mainline churches, "The Journey" is adapted to involve Biblical characters and scripture in a reconstructed confirmation program. One leader says, "My own orientation has to do with developing a powerful initiation process that [involves] forming a sense of identity (emphasis added).

Let me be explicit. What we have here is an example of both this return of the repressed, and an example of the commodification of religion which has arisen along side these other trends. The Journey carries a trademark. It is adapted under license.

And about "objects." This comes from a speech delivered by Barbara Wheeler of Auburn Theological Seminary in New York to the Religious Research Association in St. Louis in 1995. She is reflecting here on several years' ethnographic observations done in an American Evangelical seminary. As she collates her learnings from this experience, she articulates some important ideas for our consideration here.

Evangelicals turn out stuff: thousands of Christian recordings: even more books -- a new Christian gothic novel, I was told by an avid reader of them, is published every week -- along with almost every other kind of fiction, poetry, Bible translations and paraphrases, advice, celebrity biography, and countless devotional volumes; magazines pamphlets, newspapers, broadsides, leaflets; plaques, poster, greeting

and note cards, bumper stickers, ceramics, jewelry. As various as they are, and as much as they have in common with the rest of American mass material culture, most evangelical artifacts are self-evidently evangelical.... I once suggested in jest that the ultimate evangelical icon would be one of those covers into which evangelicals zip Bibles shut when they take them outside -- I call them Bible cosies. The ultimate one, I proposed, would be made of fabric, which was quilted, flower-sprigged, and Wedgwood blue or dusty rose -- all features of what I had observed is a favorite decorating style in the homes of young evangelicals that I had visited. I had never seen such an object, but those evangelical seminary professors I meet with, who had heard me make this remark, went out and found exactly the object I had described. Evangelicals have a vast and distinctive material culture. Almost anything that you can imagine they make, they probably do.

By contrast, she observes in mainline protestantism:

...mainline protestantism does not have enough of a culture. By comparison with the prolix popular culture of the evangelicals, mainline protestantism's inventory of symbols, manners, iconic leaders, images of leadership, distinctive language, decorations, and sounds is very low indeed.

Without these elements of culture, mainline protestantism cannot create something a religious tradition must have to survive: a piety. By that term I mean to include much more than explicitly religious forms of activity.... I mean piety in the classic protestant sense: a whole way of life -- shared practices, a catalog of virtues, models of Christian adequacy in the church and the world. Mainline protestantism, I now think, is struggling because we have not established among us patterns of life, some of them religious in the conventional sense but many not so, that are fitted to our religious identity.

In fact, mainline protestants do not handle much of anything. I never would have realized this if I had not done research in such a different milieu. What I further gained from the evangelicals and now have to offer my own religious community is the realization that our lack of paraphernalia is a dangerous situation. We do not need the evangelicals' particular dry goods or pious practices, but we, like the evangelicals, are bodied beings, and a religious tradition that has little or nothing to look at, listen to, and touch cannot sustain us very long.

What this means is that the boundaries between the "religious" and the "media" are breaking down. It is no longer relevant to think about religious institutions producing messages to influence a separate "secular" realm. In the media age the secular is sacred and the sacred is secular. Those distinctions don't mean what they used to mean. It also means that contemporary religion is typified by a new kind of institution, one that is more like Focus on the Family or the RE-Imagining Community than it is like a traditional church.

This then lays out an interesting role for religion journalism, for example. In an earlier age, when coverage of institutions could be coverage of religion (a very common way of looking at the beat at an earlier time) religion writers could remain further from the fray. Religion journalism thus at least needs to consider the possibility that its work products are today playing a substantive role in religious understanding. Further,

religion journalism now finds itself working within a wider range of media sources. Time was when religion only appeared in the secular media at certain times and in certain places. In today's religious marketplace, religion can be, and is, everywhere.

It also describes an interesting challenge to conventional churches, and their own efforts in the media sphere. While the major focus of my own work is social and cultural analysis, I'll introduce a few principles that seem to me to flow from this argument. I think it is necessary for the churches to rediscover, revitalize, and possibly re-name an old, time-worn concept: public relations.

First, it is absolutely essential for churches to exist in the media if they are going to exist at all in contemporary discourse. Social dynamics unleashed by Gutenberg have today reach a level of realization where the public sphere is no longer a neutral turf into which any and all institutions and voices have equal access. Visibility is the currency of political and social position and influence, and visibility is a function of media exposure.

Second, if it was ever the case that the church could just project messages into the media for the consumption of passive audiences, that is no longer possible. Public information and public relations are today more subtle, negotiated arts. For one thing audiences today are far from passive, for another, they are more religious than ever--as long as we understand that their religiosity is of this new, transitional kind.

Third, there needs to be recognition that the media efforts of conventional churches must at as a mediator between the public sphere and the institution. Public media efforts could was never really a "mouthpiece"--a passive conduit through which the words of the institution could be directly conveyed to a waiting audience somewhere. But that is less possible today. If anything, the flow must move in the other direction. Churches' public relations efforts need to be about conveying the realities, needs, and interests of the religious-media marketplace to the religious institutions so that whatever symbols or messages are conveyed are relevant, meaningful, and perhaps even effective.

Finally, this religious public relations has a role in the clarification of objectives and strategies. Someone needs to ask "if media publicity is the answer, what is the question?" The media sphere never was the appropriate context for all messages and all symbols. But the days are past when institutions can afford to waste resources on strategies and campaigns that do not fit the realities of the age.

I am, of course, uncomfortable with some of what I am saying. No one wants to cede to the media marketplace control over the symbols of the historic faiths. But there are conditions which exist and which at least must be considered for their broader implications.