The Spaces of Media and Religion

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The program of this event confirms that we've passed a milestone. The breadth and substance of the material here is impressive. But what to call us? Are we a conversation, a discourse, a field, or a discipline? For the purpose of this address, I am going to call us a field. We certainly are one in Bourdieu's sense, and we probably are also one in the sense normally meant in the academy. We've grown from a network of colleagues engaging in infrequent but intense conversations to a meeting point between disciplines that takes physical form in these meetings and in online and other publication venues. We've made it, in a certain sense, and we all deserve to take some credit and draw some satisfaction from that fact.

So, what should the first Presidential Address in the organization's history be about? This was quite a challenge for me. I think I speak for many of us when I say that these conferences, and now this Society, emerged for rather personal reasons. We wanted to have a conference to attend where the central premise of our work needs no justification. It is simply assumed. That is still such a luxury. But this will not be a self-absorbed memoir or a review of the field.

We have made some important conceptual turns. We've moved from an instrumentalist view of religion and media, focusing on the "effects" of one upon the other, to more sophisticated understandings of such things as practice and materiality and what is produced through mediations of "the religious." We've benefitted from the breathtaking interdisciplinarity of scholarly interest in media and religion.

We've made it and yet we are still a work in progress.

With that in mind, I would like to use this time to present a challenge. For all of the breadth and depth that we have seen here at Canterbury and in the amazing record of publication that has accumulated through all of your efforts, there is still more to be done. As a field, we are catching up. It is a sad fact of our history that the various disciplines out of which we have come were all late to take this field of scholarship seriously, and as a result, we have missed years, even decades, of effort that should have been put to establishing a scholarly record. If I allow myself to think about it, I can find it somewhat demoralizing that we lack even the most rudimentary histories of religious mediation across a wide range of contexts and domains of practice.

I'll give a couple of concrete examples of this in a moment, but the central theme I want to pursue is that as a field, lacking such deep foundations, we will need continually to push ourselves to place our work in larger conceptual and scholarly contexts. The mediation of religion is not just about how particular forms of "the religious" are formed or shaped by particular mediations. There are larger meanings and larger implications, not least the way we have problematized definitions of both "the religious" and "the mediatic."

I am saying that the story is a larger story than might rest on any of the areas of research represented at this meeting, or that might be addressed by resolving whether it is "mediation" or "mediatization" that we are talking about. So, how do we go about constructing larger narratives? Each of our home disciplines has resources to offer, of course.

But, that is not all I am talking about. This field must be greater than the sum of its "parts" in the prior disciplines. I am convinced that we have much to offer back to those disciplines by focusing on the object of the cultural mediation of religion. There are of course many ways to accomplish this, but I

want to suggest a particular way that can substantially deepen, broaden, and enrich our discourses. I want to challenge us to a greater sense of historicism in our work.

I of course use this term advisedly, understandi*ng* both the critiques of Popper and the limitations of certain particular historicisms such as the Hegelian dialectic.

I intend to use the term in a more generic sense, applying it to the craft of our scholarship, and exploring the ways that careful attention to contexts, practices, cultures, and histories can both deepen and broaden the significance of our work. This might be most evident in the way we think and talk about one of our primary objects: "religion." We struggle against the too-easy essentialism of treating religion as culturally and socially hermetic—in the sense of "complete and impervious to change." It is a given, and assumed, in public discourse and in the received scholarly discourses to which we are unfortunately subject. I am arguing that careful historicism can help us unpack both "religion" and "media" to the benefit of our work both conceptually and empirically.

We are subject to a broad, diffuse grand narrative of religion that is a legacy of the Enlightenment in the North Atlantic West. This grand narrative aspires to account for religion in modernity (modernity of course understood "emically" within these narratives). It is instantiated in education, in public discourses and in lay and journalistic understandings. We scholars are challenged to confront and deconstruct this narrative at the same time we find ourselves subject to it. Of course, it is not a single narrative but "narratives," but there are some common features to the way public and particularly media and journalistic discourses think about religion: the ambiguities between "modern" and "traditional," issues of authenticity, commodification, the threat or challenge of "modern" technology, and so on. Under these is always the idea that there is something purely "religious" that is threatened by modernity and this is either a good or a bad thing, depending on one's perspective.

A turn to historicism can help us deconstruct these narratives, allowing us to stand outside them and understand their sources and motivations—the cultural work that is accomplished through them—hoping thereby to reveal deeper understandings of the social, cultural, and historical forces involved. I'd like to illustrate my point more concretely by describing a turn to historicism using two examples. One of these is of general interest to the field and the second comes from my own current research and writing.

First, the item of general interest: what we do about "the American case."

Throughout the history of this field, American models of religion and of the mediation of religion have played a complicated and ambiguous role. The American experience with religious broadcasting, for example, has been treated as the generic form against which other models should be judged. American terminology—the term "Fundamentalism" comes to mind—has also found its way into the languages of public discourse and of scholarship. This has of course been encouraged by the political economy of scholarship and by the hegemony of English as a language of scholarship. It has been convenient for us to talk about "Muslim televangelism," or "Hindu Fundamentalism." At the same time, critical scholarship has contested and problematized this situation, rightly identifying the hegemonic sources and implications of this scholarly legacy.

Resistive discourses have emerged. Compelling and provocative work has looked at various regional and national locations on their own terms, reflexively resisting the suzerainty of "the American." As an American scholar myself, I've of course benefitted from this scholarly economy at the same time that I've come to an enriched understanding of the field through my exposure to work that does not treat the American case as generic.

The historicism I am calling for would turn the question around, carefully deconstructing and unpacking the American case. This approach could help us find new spaces for analysis. The American

model has been influential in part due to the broader political and cultural economies of the global media sphere. American companies, networks, productions, and systems of distribution have dominated the world (a situation that is happily beginning—but only beginning—to change). Understanding that American influence in the forms of religious mediation is rooted in a broader dominance in commercial media helps broaden and deepen our understandings and helps unpack the received hermeticist narrative that the American form of broadcast or digital media or of music promotion and distribution is the generic or normative form.

Here are some of the spaces this historicism might visit. The American model of the mediation of religion is deeply rooted in the experience of American Protestantism. We could start with the ambiguous, even contradictory, relationship between the Protestant Establishment and the public mediation of religion. On the one hand these leaders wished their power to be invisible and tacit, at the same time, they wished to intervene directly in the moral culture of the nation but were uneasy about popular forms of mediation. Evangelicals had no such qualms, and their contribution is of course another thing we would need to account for. Protestant popular practices of objects, images, experiences, of the whole material culture of popular religion, are part of the picture as well. So are the ways that popular practice has resisted theological authority, which has sought to suppress it.

Another aspect of the American case, what Nathan Hatch has called "the democratization of American religion" has been a source of this resistance. Hatch has argued that 19th- Century historical forces resulted in a religious zeitgeist of individualism and autonomy supported by the public-cultural assumption that religion is, after all, a "marketplace." Protestantism has also been open to commerce and has embraced technologies as efficacious carriers of religious truth—represented here by a 19th Century Wesley circuit-rider. There has been good and substantive scholarship done on much of this.

What I am suggesting is that we need to then understand these sources of the particularly American mediations of religion that seem so influential. Their roots are as much social and historical and material as they are theological, but yet so much of popular, lay, and even scholarly discourse (outside this field of course) treats contemporary practices of religious mediation as organically rooted in the generic project of religion and made inevitable by the power of technology.

The value of historicism is even more obvious when we look at the ways the American model has been realized in contexts outside its geography of origin. Our historicism would look then at the histories and practices of missional groups, and the political and cultural economies of missions over the past two Centuries. But it would not be enough to investigate only the missional impulse or the effectivity of the texts or their reception, as important as those are. We would want to look at the layered and contentious diffusion of Protestant media--from tracts to digital--in various national and local contexts. David Morgan's work on tracts and other missional media stands out here, as does any work that would critically engage these texts in context, de-stabilizing the instrumental narrative that only looks at them in terms of their intended aspirations or meta-narratives.

For example, my colleague Leonildo Campos at the UMESP in Sao Paulo has deconstructed the reception of the missional image *os Dos Caminos*, or "the two paths" a visual narrative of the "straight and narrow" path on the left and the path to perdition on the right. Like the praying hands or the Sallman Head of Christ in other contexts, this image has achieved a near iconic status in Brazilian Protestantism, where, as Leonildo has shown, it has become a kind of *tabula rasa* onto which Protestant moral and economic imaginaries have been inscribed by succeeding generations of Brazilian theologians and clergy. Our historicist lens here would inquire as to how this image, not well-known or particularly prominent in its countries of origin, came to achieve such prominence in a country of its reception. And, the story of its reception would integrate the origin case as well, as readers and audiences understand

this object as a product of the North, and attribute influence to it or resist it, depending on still further contexts and conditions. The point is that it is not about the image or the text or the missional intention alone. And it is not about the assault on the "purely religious" by "the popular." It is about all of these things and more.

Our project might look as well at the practices of publicity and promotion that emerge out of the interactions between the North Atlantic West and the Global South, on their own terms. One can clearly see the complex and layered history of relations between North American Protestantism, American media, Ghanaian Protestantism and African Traditional Spriituality in an image like this one advertising the ministry of a Pentecostal Prophetess on the roadside in Ghana. The Protestant impulse to publicity is present, as is a layered reference to American popular media and particularly American Protestant versions of masculinity. But, this is not a product of the American project alone, it is an embrication of history, image, practice and imagined spheres of action. It can't be understood as a text alone, and it is certainly not merely the product of mission imperialism.

But, the influence of instantiated practices of Protestant religious publicity can also be seen here. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu and I are in the process of writing up a study of this new and emergent type of image. African Traditional Religion has historically been suppressed, particularly in the Ghanaian public sphere. Missional as well as neo-Pentecostal religious authorities regularly invoke moral panics about ATR. And yet, practitioners such as this one have begun to advertise. They have come to occupy the form of religious publicity, a channel of public presence that was pioneered by Protestant publicity. But, in the age of modern mediation, the curators of this channel—commercial sign artists—are more and more willing to take on ATR clients, and so ATR is finding representation in the mediated religious public sphere of the Ghanaian roadside. As in the prior case, one can also see in these images an embrication of popular culture, yet another layer of complexity. The master narrative of "the religious"

reels a bit at this one. What does the use of these modern media of publicity by these ATR practitioners mean for their supposed "authenticity?" Does this impulse make them more "Protestant" as they now see themselves occupying a "marketplace of choice?"

Our project would also look at resistances to the American model as well as new instantiations of it, places where the received version of religious mediation finds itself in negotiation with particular contexts. Karina Belotti's work on the history of missional projects of North American churches such as the Adventists in Brazil is illustrative. The mediations of religion distributed from the north became reconceived and remediated in the active, even politicized religious culture of mid-Century Brazil. The Adventists and the Assemblies of God both experienced periods of struggle between the indigenous and the exogenous, struggles that continue today. What Paul Freston calls the "third wave" of mediatic Pentecostalism in Brazil demonstrates even more complexity, as its leaders are self-educated students of American Pentecostalism who aspire to—and largely accomplish—uniquely Brazilian forms of the models of American religious mediation and televangelism, and do so without the direct involvement of North American sources or institutions. Ironically, many of them now engage in mission, evangelism, and institution-building projects in the U.S. and in Europe.

Part of what has made the American case so influential is the larger issue I began with: the master or guiding narratives of "the religious" rooted in Enlightenment categories that continue to condition discourse in the North Atlantic West and beyond. A second project for our historicism could then be a deconstruction of the sources of these narratives. This could reveal what we should have known all along—that these narratives are themselves constructions produced by material mediations in specific contexts at specific points in time.

Again, this is speculative and very preliminary, but let me set the outlines of one of my own current lines of research—into the ways that the imagination of religion in the North Atlantic West

emerged as an essential project of the European "Age of Discovery" of the 15th through 18th Centuries. This imagination of religion was thus itself involved in the constitution of the intellectual legacy of the enlightenment and the emergent academy. Contrary to our secondary-school history lessons, this did not occur as an autonomous process of state action. It involved a complex interplay of political, economic, and religious forces. It took place in the context of an emergent mediated public sphere where emergent reading publics were cultivated and engaged—through the circulation of accounts of the discoveries—in a broad process of world-making and world-ordering. The legitimacy of the instruments of the enlightenment—in particular, the academy—was made thereby plausible to broader networks of interest (admittedly only barely emergent at the beginning of the Age) that became more and more prominent through the Early Modern period, and which we today think of as the public discourses that tacitly assume such things as these master narratives of religion.

The world that Europe knew before the discoveries was defined by the Mediterranean. It is difficult to imagine today the kind of barrier that the pillars of Hercules represented to the fifteenth Century mind. The history of explorations beyond them in the years prior was very sparse. Prince Henry's ambitious program, which included the design and commissioning of entirely new kinds of ships, the creation of the first European academic institution devoted to the sciences—his navigation school at Sagres—the creation of entirely new forms of navigation, and more importantly of chart-making, and his edicts requiring disciplined record- and log-keeping, was like the Space Program of its time and it was directed at a similarly ominous prospect—sailing out into a vast unknown of unknown size.

The world beyond Gibralter and Ceuta had to be imagined, and then culturally constructed, as the explorations moved further and further beyond. As one contemporary Portuguese cultural scholar has put it, the Atlantic itself had to be "constructed." Our project in a new historicisim of the mediation of religion begins at this point in the story. The European imagination of the world beyond was the

product of legend and superstition, of course, but it had other sources as well—the accounts of

travelers. There was exploration before the Age of Exploration: the Chinese sent vast armadas under

the command of the Muslim eunuch Cheng He on exploratory voyages as far West as East Africa in the

early fifteenth Century. This image depicts the giraffe they delivered to the Emperor at Court in Bejing.

In the Century before, there had been Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta.

Long before that, there was Hanno, the Cathaginian explorer of the 5th Century BCE, who

provided what was arguably the most authoritative description of sub-Saharan Africa available to

Europe until Henry's friend Gil Eannes finally—1900 years later, sailed past Cape Bojador and down the

coast toward where the oldest European building now stands—the Slave Castle at Elmina, Ghana.

Hanno's *"Periplus"* from two millennia earlier was his travelogue of his journey, and its account of his

experience of Africa became widely-circulated across Europe and was a singular source of the European

imagination of Africa beyond the Arabs for nearly 2,000 years. As they circulated, these accounts

became amplified and more and more phantasmal, and led to a widespread assumption that demons,

death and unthinkable horrors awaited any explorers venturing South.

One piece of our historicist puzzle, a media form represented by Hanno's *Periplus*, is thus in

place. Accounts of travels, travelogues, emerged early, responding both to commercial pressures and to

the natural human curiosity about the world outside. And, travelers such as Hanno, Polo, and Battuta

felt compelled as well to "presence" their work in the social media of the time. In Hanno's case, that

meant posting his *Periplus* in the form of a stone tablet (yes the original was probably less than 2,000

words long) in the most public place he had access to, the temple of Kronos, where it was seen centuries

later by Pliny and other Roman historians. It is actually through their remediations of it that we know its

contents.

Now, a second piece of the puzzle: religion. Religion actually played an important role in Henry's project. He'd convinced his father, the King, of the commercial value of voyages past the Sahara by capturing the port of Ceuta on the south coast of the Mediterranean and thus securing for Portugal a piece of the trans-Saharan trade in ivory, slaves, and other commodities. The strategic importance made sense, too, given Portugal's struggles with Spain. But Henry also needed cultural authority to carry out such a daunting task, so he turned to the Pope with a compelling argument. Explorations down the west coast, following Hanno nearly two millennia later, could connect Christianity in Europe with the legendary southern Christian Kingdom of Prester John. This would constitute a kind of pincer maneuver against Muslim-Arab North Africa. Henry's voyages carried priests only for the crews. Salvation of native populations was not the religious objective. Instead, it was at its origins this larger, more world-defining and world-ordering project.

Our inquiries might then move to how these forms of circulation, represented by the Periplus, expanded in breadth and reach as the explorations continued. Accounts of the explorers became widely circulated as voyages returned, aided by the emergence of both reading publics among the emergent mercantile classes as well as in the growing universities, and by the development of new means for the circulation of such materials through more and more efficient processes of reproduction and distribution. Travel literature was one if the first categories after religious literature to find markets in the early print era in Europe.

And, I hope to argue, religion, and more importantly, the imagination of religion, rapidly became a prominent theme in these literatures. These accounts were both narrative and descriptive. They recounted the stories of encounter, and in the case of missional accounts, of successes in subduing and converting. But the descriptive accounts are more important to our project here, I think. Jesuits among the explorers are particularly known for their more disciplined descriptions of the religions encountered,

but all accounts conveyed some sense of the religious "other" to the waiting publics in Europe. Religion was then—as it continues to be today—a primary dimension of cultural description and cultural ordering. We know the world in part by its religious geography, and this is of more than practical value. It has a moral and conceptual value in the building of cultural identities in a period where new political forms are emerging. As Robert Redfield suggested a half-Century ago, we know ourselves culturally by constructing an understanding of who we are not. Classification and difference are fundamental projects of human cultures.

From the very earliest days, then, religious differentiation became an important project and consequence of the discoveries, and then of the Enlightenment. And, need I say in this conference that this project was a product of mediation. Mediation through travel, through language, through narrative and story, and through the recording and circulation and consumption of narratives and stories. Thus, the imagination of religion, and the capacities of practices of mediation to engage religion by capturing and defining and circulating it, is wound deeply into the fabric of the intellectual legacy of the Enlightenment in the North Atlantic West. And, it goes without saying that a further complex historicism can help us account for the ways that these grand narratives of "the religious" have become further determinative through their circulation in the global cultural economy of academic imperialism. But that is a project for another day.

This mediation of the imagination of religion has another implication as well, and that is in the very term "imagination." These narratives of religion constructed conceptual and discursive resources by which to think of religion in a way beyond its materiality. What was constructed was a global imaginary of religion whose significance rests in part in our capacities of imagination to create perfect and ideal forms. It was thus an idealized Islam and an idealized Shamanism that was encountered and circulated. We can recognize today the ways that mediations of religion can and do support this sort of

perfection-by-imaginary. This "triumph of the image" is itself a legacy of the processes I am talking about.

Another implication is that if religion is to play this role in "world ordering," it is important that religion remain fixed and unchanging. Religions cannot evolve. This may be an important explanation for the persistence of the grand narratives of "the religious." They are clear, comparable, and can fit neatly into taxonomies such as this one from a nineteenth-Century popular account of the errors and defects of the World's religions (outside Christianity of course). This necessity is probably one source of the essentialism that we find in the received narratives.

This is work in progress and you can expect to hear more about this from me as time goes on. Each of these two examples, the problem of the American case and this latter exploration of the age of exploration, I hoped to use to make my broader call for a more historicist sensibility in our work. Beyond the evidence I've presented of what we might accomplish, it seems to me that there are three larger benefits we can expect. First, historicism can help correct a tendency that the historians amongst us have long lamented—the tendency for discourse in media and religion to be too "*presentist*." It has tended to be too focused on received narratives of modernity and of innovation and of contemporary technology. They are right about that and the approach I am suggesting would, *oxalla*, address that issue. Second, more historicism will necessarily enrich our own narratives of our work and will, more importantly, help us deconstruct and critique the various received narratives that aspire to define the extents and limits of the field. And third, it cannot help but broaden and enrich the range of phenomena we might contemplate as we attempt to understand and build knowledge about the mediation of "the religious."

It might also help us address what has been an enticing prospect since the earliest days of this field: the extent to which religion is a unique cultural and social phenomenon. That uniqueness is

something that must be established materially and historically, not confessionally or theologically. The nature of the religion "object" is the question, not its legitimacy, other than to the extent that good scholarship can deconstruct the terms of its legitimation in various places and various ways.

This question comes to mind because of a few recent experiences, which I think are themselves testament to the maturation of our field. I'd like to close by reflecting on them. As you know (and as David has recently pointed out in his fine essay) the field of media studies has traditionally been resistant to work on religion. This seems to be changing, but there is a long and complex legacy there that must be overcome. Knut Lundby and I scored a major victory in that struggle several years ago by securing time at the International Communication Association for a panel assessing the field. One of the respondents, a well-known media historian not connected with this field, closed with a lament, suggesting that the field of media and religion continues to fail to address the central issue: the nature of religion *qua* religion, not all this practice and materiality and ritual stuff. She was clearly calling for what she saw to be the logical objective of our work, to unpack the communicational sources of "pure" essential religious meaning and "pure" essential religious experience.

As our field has grown in prominence in media and mass communication studies, I've had more of those kinds of interactions. It used to be that colleagues in mass communication or media studies would merely want to begin with my definition of religion, something that religion scholars know better than to ask, as it pretty much halts scholarly discourse in its tracks. Now, even if they accept that there is a place for religion in media scholarship then it must be an essentialist form of "the religious." At the fine ICA pre-conference organized this year by Heidi Campbell and Günter Thomas, the same thing happened. Two very prominent figures in the field of media studies—who shall remain nameless to protect their legacies here—wanted, at the end of the day, for us all to address the question of "real religion," that which goes on somewhere in the interior and which is after all the real stuff that religion

and spirituality are about. Several of us tried to suggest that we'd first like to talk about the theoretical

complexities involved—symbolic interactionism and constructivism were mentioned—but to no avail.

Stig Hjarvard raised the objection that even if we were to accept the theoretical substance of such a

model of religion as central to our field, that would in turn raise questions about the nature of the field

and its aspirations and responsibilities. They were still not satisfied, and I do think that theirs is a

question we must now anticipate, though it will need to be formed in more helpful and incisive ways as

it is developed.

But, what about religion? We were privileged this year that Jin Park chose to spend his

sabbatical as a fellow of our Center. At our farewell lunch Jin, who I am proud to say was one of my

students, took the opportunity to get his mentor reflecting a bit. He asked me how it was I was able to

keep my interest and energy engaged in this discourse. I hadn't thought about that, but my response

was an answer that I am still quite happy with. I said that this field combines something I'm passionate

about with something I am fascinated by. I am passionate about media, and I am fascinated by religion.

I did say as well that I didn't think it worked quite as well as scholarship if one was passionate about

religion and merely fascinated by media. I am a child of the Enlightenment in the North Atlantic West. I

understand the limitations and conditions that imposes on me. But, at the same time, I do believe in the

intellectual enterprise, and in the ability of the academy—if we can keep it—to help us stand outside

received narratives and iron cages, and to conceive pathways for human self-determination, autonomy,

liberation, and freedom. But it is not an easy thing and it must struggle against a variety of received

narratives, maps that we must learn to pick up and turn over and contemplate and re-draw as we learn

more and know more.

But, what about religion? This year, the great theologian, public intellectual, friend of Timothy

Leary and Alan Ginsburg and leader of Jewish renewal Reb Zallman Schacter-Shalomi died in Boulder.

Among the circulations around his passing I found this recent reflection from him on the nature of "the religious." Looking across his years of cross- and multi-faith coalition building, he said,

"I realized that all forms of religion are masks that the divine wears to communicate with us. Behind all religions, there's a reality, and this reality wears whatever clothes it needs to speak to a particular people."

Religion, then, can be seen as communication, and as constituted in interactions and out of the productive activities of communities of shared reference and circulation. It is also about inspiration and revelation and transcendence. We know that from our scholarship. But we also know that religion, as a contemporary social and cultural force, is more than this, much more.

What we are about here is knowledge and a project of knowledge production. So, tonight I am personally celebrating. I have been involved in this process and this organization for over twenty years. As I said earlier, my motivation—as with others—was to create an academic space where I could talk about my work and listen and learn from colleagues, and not have to begin with labored justifications for my interests. I celebrate, then, all of you and what you have done in your careers and what you have done here. And, I celebrate that I can now get what I wanted. Starting next time, I'll be able to attend that conference I wanted and I look forward to being able to participate as one among a community of scholars engaged in common conversations. I can hardly wait.

See you in Seoul!