# Is religion being mediatized?

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One of the perspectives that has emerged in the past decade in theorizing the interaction of religion and media is the concept of "mediatisation." Drawing on earlier arguments about a wider mediatisation of society, the concept was applied to religion by the Danish media scholar, Stig Hjarvard. **PP**

In several of his writings, Hjarvard argues that in the period of high modernity, media have become such a powerful, integrated social institution with a logic of its own, that they are reshaping religion according to its own institutional and technological logics.[1]

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[1] Hjarvard, S. (2008). The mediatization of religion: a theory of the media as agents of religious change. The mediatization of religion: enchantment, media and popular culture. S. Hjarvard. Bristol, Intellect: 9-26.

"Through the processes of mediatization, religion is increasingly being subsumed under **the logic of the media**, both in terms of institutional regulation, symbolic content and individual practices."[2]

Hjarvard sees the process of mediatisation as different from that of mediation, which has been the other common term and framework used in recent years to explore from a cultural perspective the interrelationship of religion and media.

In the mediation of religion, as Hjarvard sees it, religion is influenced by the affordances of any particular medium it uses, but the religious institutions remain in control of their messages. In mediatisation, however, media do more than simply mediate. They have become such a powerful bloc and independent institution that they have the power to shape, even determine, everyday practices, social relations and institutions by intruding their technological demands and organisational logics onto institutional practice.

Hjarvard sees mediatization as part of the gradual process of secularization in which media have taken over many of the social functions that religion once used to provide. Most of the representations of religious issues in society no longer originate from religious institutions, but from media sources and are distributed through media genres such as news, documentaries, drama, comedy, and entertainment.

"(Mediatization) may be considered a part of a gradual secularization: it is the historical process in which the media have

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[2] Stig Hjarvard, "The mediatization of religion," Northern Lights, Vol 6, 2008.

**taken over many of the social functions** that used to be performed by religious institutions."[3]

In the processes of mediatisation, he argues, religion has become banal, by which he means it reflects earlier, more undeveloped or superstitious religious ideas that circulate independently of larger religious texts or institutions. [4]

"The increasing role of media in society seems to make room for more of the **banal religious representations** . . . (consisting) of elements usually associated with folk religion, like trolls, vampires and black cats crossing the street; and items taken from institutionalized religion, like crosses, prayers and cowls . . . "

Hjarvard's thesis has sparked significant debate, particularly in Scandinavian media studies. It falls within that long-running, wider discussion about how one thinks about and theorises media influence on society, which has oscillated back and forth between a media determinism on the one hand, and a benign cultural studies indifference on the other. In the study of media and religion, it falls within a spectrum of a normative view of religion and concerns about what is happening to that normative religion in increasingly technologised societies, and a more aesthetic, non-judgmental, descriptive approach that is concerned more with how social religion is constructed and the factors contributing to that construction. It has also been subject to a good deal of criticism.

From a social perspective, one can argue that the phenomenon of displacement that he alludes to is not a particularly modern phenomenon, and may reflect a particular Scandinavian view of religious function. The social functions that religion fulfills change constantly as social needs and service providers change, and media are simply part of the whole social matrix.

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[3] Ibid

[4] p.15.

From a media perspective, mediatisation has been criticised for an excessive media determinism, its attribution of a singular logic to what are diverse media institutions and practices, its view of audiences as rather passive, and a particular view of religion that sees it as a definable social entity or institution that can be identified separate from the cultural contexts in which it operates.

It is also criticised for its lack of historical perspective, seeing media as a shaping influence on religion as a phenomenon only of high modern societies.

It is in this area of historical perspective that my interest particularly lies. I have recently completed an extensive study of media in Christian history, beginning with the interactions of media and religion in the context and practices of Jesus, and tracing them through the major developments and transformations of Christianity to the present time. Coming out of that study, a number of insights can be drawn of relevance to the mediatisation debate. Though the findings are specifically Christian reference, I think they may be relevant to most religions.

One is that media and Christianity are symbiotic phenomena. It's necessary to state this explicitly, as there are tendencies to ignore this symbiosis.

Many Christian groups and scholars see Christian faith as something unique in its cultural formation, with unique origins, distinctive logics, and particular sources of belief and truth that dictate its identity. Likewise in the discipline of media studies, where if Christianity is considered at all, it is generally considered stereotypically as a bounded cultural phenomenon, separate from the secular, and studied largely in terms of how it uses media or how media are challenging it.

A historical analysis shows that Christianity and media are symbiotic. Christianity was conceived, born, developed, married and had children within particular environments of mediated social communication. And like any social organism, in the process it drew on, interacted with and took on characteristics of those environments. The matrix of mediation within which Christianity has taken shape at any

time is integral to its character, not foreign to it. The proposition, therefore, that Christianity has been a discreet, self-defining cultural phenomenon that is now being contaminated by media outside itself is a historically unsupportable proposition.

The adaptations that Christianity is making today in redefining itself to the characteristics of modern media cultures are no more and no less than the adaptations it has made throughout its history: from being a dominantly illiterate oral religious movement to a blended imperial literate one, from feudal institutions held together by manuscript production and written letters to bourgeois institutions heavily dependent on printing, and revival movements packaging Christian conversion into marketable emotional experiences.

A second observation from a historical study of media and Christianity is that Christianity is an immensely diverse phenomenon.

It is necessary to say this, because there have been constant contests within Christianity itself to narrow that diversity to construct a coherence and to serve particular power ends. That diversity involves not just differences, but also inner contradictions.

The prospect that Christianity can be mediatised in some singular way by some external, alternative institutional logic can only be done by essentialising Christianity into one particular sociological entity, and ignoring its diversity.

The mediatisation thesis, that under the impact of modern media Christianity, for example, is becoming banalised, can be easily rejected by pointing out the numerous expressions of Christianity that have existed historically, that easily fall within his definition of banal religion. One could point to 4th C practices of sleeping with the Gospel of John under your pillow to get rid of headaches, random selection of bible verses to divine God's will, the early trade or stealing of martyr's body parts thought to perform miracles, self-castration or flagellation to enhance holiness, or the historically perpetuating sexual abuse of children under the guise of communicating the love of God. Christianity has many elevating features, but in its diversity it didn't need modern media's help to be banal as well.

A third finding from a historical perspective is that contests about media, what media should be used, how they should be used, who should use them, and what are the implications of their use, have been persistent themes throughout Christian history. It is not just a modern issue nor a concern of high modern societies.

It is interesting to note, for example, that in the late second century, there was significant disagreement and debate about whether Christian teachings should be written down, and the effect this would have on the character of the faith. The illiterate in particular were concerned about this, and Christianity at that stage was 90-95% illiterate, were arguing that writing down Christian teachings would change the character of Christianity. Not only would it de-personalise Christianity, it would disenfranchise those who were illiterate by shutting them out of leadership – which, by the way, turned out to be true.

Numerous examples of similar contests over media throughout the history of Christianity can be cited. If something has been a characteristic of Christianity since its beginnings, conceptualising what is happening now as a unique phenomenon needs reconsideration.

A fourth finding from history, pertinent to current thinking about mediatisation and Christianity, is that new media technologies and practices generally occur as part of a wider matrix of social and cultural changes that also have to be reckoned with, along with the media.

The challenge that new media practices bring to most religions, whether those new practices emerge from within the religion or from outside, is not just learning new ways of communicating. They also require evaluating the implications of the new economic conditions, political arrangements, structures of authority, and intellectual practices that are part of the convergence that has produced the changes in media as well.

Significant attention is given to the place of the printing press in the Lutheran Reformation, for example. But the printing press was invented and had been operating in Europe for 60 years before the Lutheran Reformation began. Changed political, intellectual, linguistic, cultural and economic conditions had to develop to enable the distinctive affordances of printing to be utilised, and a specific individual to emerge

with the character to utilise them. Even then, Luther did not invent a new type of Christianity, but drew on historical sources and precedents within Christianity in what he did.

Against the mediatisation thesis, therefore, I would argue that what tends to happen in the interaction of Christianity and media, is not that new media mediatise Christianity with a foreign logic and make it something it isn't. Rather, new media conditions call forth from Christianity, most commonly through energetic, creative, or obsessive individuals, aspects of Christianity that have been dormant because the conditions weren't right for them to flourish, or even suppressed because they lacked the cultural support to challenge the existing Christian order.

If it's true that religion today is being mediatised and becoming banal, and I don't think it is, the reason isn't that media is making Christianity into something it isn't. Media change is creating conditions in which particular aspects of Christianity are becoming culturally relevant again, including those that in some people's judgment are banal. But that is not a mediatisation of Christianity – it is a reworking of Christianity for new conditions, something that has been happening in Christianity since its beginnings.

My historical perspectives support the critical analysis of the contemporary situation of Mia Lövheim, from Uppsala University: that more is to be achieved not by looking in a uni-directional way at how media transform religion, but in an interactive way, at how religions form and transform in interaction with media.

> *"Using an understanding of religion that also brings in dimensions of social relations and communication means that what we will be analysing when studying the mediatisation of religion would not be so much as to how religion is transformed through the media, but how religions transform in the modern world in interaction with the media."[5]*

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[5] Lövheim, M. (2011). "Mediatisation of religion: a critical appraisal." Culture and Religion: An Interdisciplinary Journal **12**(2): 153-166.

I would go one step further, and say that religion only takes shape in interaction with media in the process of being communicated.

From that perspective, I think Christianity can be better understood, not as a coherent religious movement – there is too much diversity and too many contradictions for such a coherence - but as a diverse and rich repository of symbolic media resources, that are continually being drawn from and reworked in the construction of new religious meaning for constantly changing circumstances.