

# Introduction

## *Media and the Political Forms of Religion*

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**Charles Hirschkind and Brian Larkin**

The increasing presence of religion in public life has provoked an ambivalent response from contemporary scholars trying to understand what the nature of religion is, what its proper role should be, and what its efflorescence means for our understanding of the nature of politics and society. This has especially been the case for scholars on the left, particularly in the West, where it had long been assumed that religion would continue its gradual withdrawal into a realm of private experience and leave behind its unwarranted and dangerous forays into public life. One result of this assumed separation has been that, when religion does appear outside the personal and private, it often gets read as a sign for something else: an idiom through which marginal groups express political demands; a salve in times of crisis; a vehicle of social mobilization and solidarity; an instrument by which cynical leaders manipulate their supporters. A chief fear in this regard is that religious movements and the forms of violence that sometimes accompany them further what are “really” barely disguised political projects lurking under the name of religion. Christian fundamentalists in the United States, the rise of Hindutva in India, or Islamists in Turkey are all frequently invoked as a confirmation of this suspicion. The progressive response has often been to shore up some notion of the secular as a space of neutrality unsullied by such religious ambitions, from which they may be judged and within which a progressive politics may be nurtured and maintained. Whatever the value of this endeavor, it has tended to give support to the intellectual habit of not taking religion seriously: of not having to pay attention to the specificity of its discursive forms and bodily practices, to the theologies that animate it, to the forms

of reasoning and discipline that enable its claims, to the methods of historical and genealogical analysis essential to its knowledges.

For some ears, this might ring as a call to focus more attention on the “properly religious,” that field of inquiry that has traditionally served to define the discipline of religious studies, and to put aside our preoccupation with the overtly political dimensions of religious phenomena. This is not at all our point. Indeed, we start with the assumption that secular political practice itself has been, and continues to be, complexly configured by religious sensibilities, concepts, and histories and should be analyzed in light of these. Religion, as well—both in our view and as a term invoked in the diverse contributions to this volume—is not an anthropological universal, sometimes extending into the political, sometimes returning to itself, but a category continuously produced, defined, and put to work toward determinate ends, both analytical and political. In this regard, we draw inspiration from the work of anthropologist and postcolonial theorist Talal Asad, the historians of religion Tomoko Masuzawa and Jonathan Z. Smith, and the philosopher Charles Taylor, among others, who have inaugurated an interrogation of the entwined categories of religion and secularity as they emerged in Western thought and practice.<sup>1</sup> Religion, in this work, is not simply a “thing” that all societies have but, rather like the related terms of *culture* and *society*, a category both necessary to and generated by modern secular governance. From this perspective, rather than asking how one thing, “religion,” has become mixed with another thing, “secular politics,” in this context or that, it is more useful to investigate how these categories are produced and positioned in relation to each other in different social contexts and with different effects.

To understand how religion operates in the world, we examine the work of mediation in creating the technological forms and modes of practice whereby religion, politics, and aesthetics are folded into one another. Religions are constituted through an architecture of circulation and representation that in turn creates the pragmatic contexts for modes of practice and worship. Hent de Vries has called for an analysis of these processes of mediation “without and outside of which no religion would be able to manifest itself in the first place.”<sup>2</sup> How is religion enfolded with the political through the circulation of aesthetic and ritual forms? Raising this question is not just an issue of content but also one of form and returns to an older tradition in media theory that examines how the materiality of media creates the technical infrastructure for the possibility of thought and experience, what the media theorist Friedrich Kittler would see as media technologies’ role in constituting the historical a priori of religion, politics, and experience.<sup>3</sup>

Marshall McLuhan famously argued that the influence of media lay not in the messages they circulate but in their technical effects on the

human sensorium and society at large: “The effects of media do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance.”<sup>4</sup> In this technicist tradition, media form the infrastructure that shapes and conditions our sensory experiences, creating the material preconditions for our understanding of ideas of time, space, and personhood. Viewed in this light, it might be argued that there is an elective affinity between media forms and the domain of religion as conceived within social theory. For scholars such as Émile Durkheim, for instance, religion was the structuring precondition for the basic categories of thought that comprise the human sensorium.<sup>5</sup> A deep tradition in technicist media theory has largely conceived of the rise of media as a secular phenomenon necessarily involving the demise of the sacred, which it supplants. The formative reference points for this tradition include Walter Benjamin’s description of the “shattering” of tradition brought about by technologies of mass reproduction; McLuhan’s claim that, in replacing the primacy of the ear with that of the eye, literacy and print brought about the end of “resonating word magic and the web of kinship”; and Benedict Anderson’s argument (one indebted to both Benjamin and McLuhan) that print capitalism was instrumental in producing the “empty homogenous time” necessary for the horizontal comradeship of nationalism and destructive of the vertical, hierarchical relations of sacred religious communities.<sup>6</sup> The reason this lineage of thought sees media from print onward as destructive of religion (though ambivalently so, in the case of Benjamin) is that media take on the power of religion to both destroy and remake individual sensibilities and create anew the grounds for communal belonging. Recent scholarship on religion and media has bifurcated between the need, on the one hand, to study how religious movements use media as part of religious practice, and, on the other, to understand how media operate *as* religious entities, taking on religion’s power to shape and order society and the individual.<sup>7</sup> Given that we live in a manifold world where media, the political, and the religious cannot be seen as distinct phenomena but, rather, as mutually constitutive, and where the homogenous empty time of nationalism creates the possibility of renewal for forms of vertical belonging, we need to understand how this articulation takes place.

The articles in this special issue explore the formation of religious communities, subjects, practices, and arguments, as structured and enabled by processes of conflict and contestation and by situations of marginality and war. Our belief is that to understand how this takes place necessitates a close analysis of the forms and processes of circulation by which religion, media, and politics are brought into being. In different ways, each article highlights the constitutive role played by technologies and practices of mediation in giving shape to diverse forms of religiosity and politics. The

question of religion and media has been subject to considerable public and scholarly debate, highlighting the new possibilities for religions to articulate themselves in public and assume a political role as a result of the easy accessibility of electronic mass media. Another body of writing has emphasized how religious groups, as they become ever more dependent on commodified media forms, must increasingly fashion themselves in accord with the protocols and norms of self-presentation of the consumerist market.<sup>8</sup> By contrast, the question of how the availability of such new media, with their particular forms of circulation and use, impinges on practices of religious mediation, knowledge, pedagogy, and discipline, and thereby shapes the making of religious subjects, has received less attention. How do the functional possibilities and discursive standards of diverse media affect the disciplinary formation of modern religious subjects and the forms of political praxis that such techniques of discipline make possible? We approach this issue in two ways.

First, we examine media practices in their relation to the sensory configuration of religious subjects. Here our concern is with the different kinds of media deployments by which religious adherents cultivate and refine the passional attributes—sensibilities, affects, capacities of embodied responsiveness—that make conformity with normative models of knowledge and moral action possible. To approach this issue requires attention to the sensory epistemologies—hierarchies of sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste—that inform such contexts of mediation and that find expression in the interpretive conventions and protocols of style and use that structure acts of viewing and listening. Such an approach also fosters a concern for how the technological and structural dimensions of mass media become a condition for emergent repertoires of religious knowledge and practice. Maria José A. de Abreu's essay on Catholic charismatics in Brazil, for example, explores how breathing exercises practiced by church adepts are founded on a structural homology between the operations of audio media technology and the physiological functioning of the body. For those who hone this skill, breathing becomes both a technological accomplishment—a ritual recapitulating an audio recording—and, in a unique way, a natural one, inasmuch as one's breath, framed within the constructed climate of the church sanctuary, is but one tiny node of the vast respiratory action of the Amazon rainforest. Building on the insights of Marcel Mauss, for whom the human body was to be conceived of as "Man's first technical instrument," de Abreu's thoughtful reading of this religious movement problematizes the opposition between the technological and the natural that has long informed analyses of religion. The Catholic charismatic priest she describes unites a media empire with medieval prayer techniques designed to regulate the breath and through that bring the Holy Spirit into being.

De Abreu is interested in tracing how contemporary technologies become the grounds for the reawakening of the sacred rather than its destroyer. This is about bringing God into presence, transforming sound and image so they are no longer referents pointing to a meaning lying elsewhere, but eruptions of the sacred in the signifier itself. De Abreu is centrally concerned with what Christopher Pinney would term “corporetics”: the ways aesthetic forms demand a full corporeal engagement with the viewer and listener, acting on the body itself to produce intense affective states.<sup>9</sup> Questions about the boundaries of the technological and the natural also emerge in Charles Hirschkind’s essay. Focusing on contemporary intersections of eschatology and bioethics, Hirschkind explores how two divergent conceptions of death—one informed by a liberal ethics, the other by Islamic discourses on human mortality—shape the way the dying body becomes an object of medical concern and ethical practice. The discourse on death and dying that Hirschkind explores in the Egyptian context circulates via a media form used within exercises of ethical self-fashioning—the cassette-recorded sermon, an extremely popular form among Muslims in Egypt today. The discourse, in other words, not only describes problems in relation to the administering of care to the terminally ill in Egyptian hospitals, but, through repeated acts of listening, also enables the cultivation of the sensibilities and affects that accompany and instruct the provision of requisite care. Although the theme of mediation is not foregrounded in this essay to the extent found in de Abreu’s, both speak to the complex articulations of the technical and technological within contemporary forms of religious embodiment.

De Abreu and Hirschkind are concerned with forms of religious practice and theology that in the West we can easily recognize as inhabiting the domain of the “religious.” For Westerners, trained as we are to separate out the political from the religious, there are other domains of the religious use of media less obviously ritually or theologically based that nonetheless are crucial to the establishing of religious communities. A second line of inquiry pursued by the contributors to this volume focuses on the circulatory forms through which religious publics constitute themselves and their members, often in relation to, or in opposition to, competing forms of identity.<sup>10</sup> These modes of circulation are less about the complex cultivation of pious sensibilities—the fashioning of individual religious subjectivities—and more about the constitution of religious identity within broader public arenas. In his definition of the *public*, Michael Warner argues that a public is a collectivity that constitutes itself by projecting a space of discursive circulation through which strangers are tied to each other and come to recognize commonalities. He argues that it is precisely the circulation of discursive forms that has decisive power on forming the conceptual infrastructure of movements and creating modes of authority

and power that are manifest in the relation of dominant publics to various types of marginal “counterpublics.” Let us emphasize here that this shift from the rubric of “religious subjectivity” to that of publics is not a move from religion to politics. Rather, our focus on circulatory modes, public forms, and relational identities aims to flesh out some of the conditions that shape the possibilities of religious subjectivity and action but that don’t take the form of the exercises of self-cultivation mentioned above. These conditions are political, but no more so than those we identified as pertaining to the fashioning and organization of sensory experience.

Patricia Spyer and Martijn Oosterbaan pay particular attention to the relations articulated between media, built space, and the production of religious identity. Spyer, in her analysis of murals of Jesus Christ thrown up on the walls and billboards of the religiously split region of Ambon, Indonesia, examines how media—in her case visual media—operate on several scales simultaneously. The murals proliferated in Ambon after several years of intense religious violence between Muslims and Christians, with the destruction of whole areas of the region as inhabitants were forced to flee the violence. In her nuanced interrogation of these new forms of Ambonese visual expression, Spyer highlights both the ongoing threat of interconfessional violence and the Indonesian state’s withdrawal of direct institutional support for religious communities following its national program of decentralization. It is in light of the anxiety and instability produced by these conditions, she argues, that the multiplication of new modalities of the visual in Christian Ambon must be understood. The movement of the murals from inside of Christian homes out into public space (and by a sect bearing strong commitments to Protestant iconoclasm, at that!) functions not only to demarcate a Christian domain and ward off Muslim others but also, and most important, to manifest and presence God, as the sole power capable of constituting the people in a moment when they are faced with possible dissolution.

Oosterbaan’s analysis of the soundscape of a favela in Rio de Janeiro takes as its starting point the materiality of sound and its elusive, contaminatory qualities. There, in the overcrowded and sometimes violent neighborhood of the favela, Pentecostal music competes with the secular world of samba, the perceived degenerate qualities of the latter remaining a continual threat to the former’s own claim to purity and distinction. But just as residents live on top of each other in the crowded streets and houses, so sounds infiltrate, cohabit, and overcode one another. The boundaries between a godly life, and a profane one, as articulated by *evangélicas*, turn out to be in constant need of scrutiny and maintenance, as proximity and constant copresence threaten to undermine the differences that allow for distinction. In Oosterbaan’s rich account of this often tense social arena, music from CD- and tape-players constitutes the acoustic architecture of a

heterogeneous moral and political space, materially defining the boundaries and shapes of the built environment as much as do walls, streets, and buildings.

As Oosterbaan's essay usefully suggests, religious modes of attachment rarely stand in a simple oppositional relation to other modes of social and political belonging but, rather, are often complexly entwined—both discursively and nondiscursively—with competing formations. These complex interdependencies and linkages, we argue, must be analyzed in relation to the modes of circulation and technological infrastructures of globalized media forms. This has considerable implications for how we understand what a religious tradition is and the kinds of discursive coherence (or incoherence) it entails. A forceful demonstration of this point is found in Brian Larkin's essay on the iconoclastic Muslim preacher Ahmed Deedat. Deedat rose to prominence in the Muslim world by seemingly besting the televangelists at their own game—exhibiting a mastery of biblical hermeneutics through which he “proved” the fact that the Bible was riddled with errors and could never be the word of God. Larkin's interest is in interrogating the complex form of Deedat's “evangelism,” which mobilizes historicist, secular critique and evangelical biblical hermeneutics in order to ridicule both. By staging lecture tours, by participating in public debates with Christian missionaries, and by circulating pamphlets and audio- and videocassettes, Deedat mobilizes the logic of the public sphere and of the Christian mission evangelist in order to turn them into signs of themselves.

Like Spyer, Oosterbaan, and Jonathan Sterne, Larkin analyzes modes of religious practice predicated on the encounter between opposed and sometimes warring forces. Such analysis reminds us that the constitution of religion is often other oriented, with adherents forced into complex kinds of engagements whereby they borrow from each other as well as define themselves against one another; it is about tactical mobilization as much as deeply held belief. Sterne's contribution to this special issue examines the mutual opposition and engagement of religions through the circulation of the voice of two highly mediatic bodies—the recorded voices of Osama bin Laden and, to a lesser extent, George W. Bush. A reflection on the status of the voice within American political culture, Sterne's essay notes how, rather than the discursive content of bin Laden's communiqués, it was the qualities of his taped voice that animated the tapes' political assessment and reception. Substituting for his missing body, this recorded voice, Sterne argues, became a central point of reference for a field of political speculation and commentary. Unlike de Abreu, who examines how sound can be used to regulate breath and awaken ecstatic states, Sterne is interested in the very different form of charisma brought about by the media circulation of bin Laden, which makes him part religious leader, part revolution-



ary hero, part media celebrity. It reminds us that “religion” isn’t always articulated in the register usually reserved for the “religious” but migrates into realms of politics and media seemingly far from the sacred, per se. These are distinctions often not recognized by other religious traditions and increasingly unsustainable within contemporary forms of Christianity, but which nevertheless form the taken-for-granted grounds on which our analyses of media, religion, and politics have to be fashioned.

If the scholarship on religion and politics has seen through the religious in order to reveal political motivations that lie underneath, the aim of this issue is to say that the only way we can understand the political use of religion is by paying attention to the materialities and aesthetics of religious practices. It is through this analysis, one which unites the study of media with those forms of ritual and theology that combine to fashion religious identities and extend religious movements through space and time, that religion is actualized in practice and religious subjects produced. By showing how the religious and the political are folded into material media forms—microphones, breath, murals, sound, videos, the body—we aim to open up new theoretical and methodological ways to think about the political forms of religious life.

## Notes

1. Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Disciplines and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993) and *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003); Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions; or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Name of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007).

2. Hent de Vries, “In Media Res: Global Religions, Public Spheres, and the Task of Contemporary Comparative Religious Studies,” in *Religion and Media*, ed. Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 28.

3. Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

4. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, critical ed. (1964; Corte Madera, CA: Gingko, 1994), 31.

5. Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (1912; New York: Free Press, 1995).

6. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1978); McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 120; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

7. See, for instance, Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber, *Religion and Media* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001); Birgit Meyer and Annalies Moors, *Religion, Media, and the Public Sphere* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).



8. See Armando Salvatore, ed., *Muslim Traditions and Modern Techniques of Power* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2001).

9. Christopher Pinney, *Photos of the Gods: The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India* (London: Reaktion, 2004).

10. These ideas of *public* are taken from Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone, 2005); and Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

