RELIGION
in the Media Age

STEWARD M. HOOVER
Looking at the everyday interaction of religion and media in our cultural lives, Religion in the Media Age is an exciting new assessment of the state of modern religiosity. Recent years have produced a marked turn away from institutionalized religions toward more autonomous, individual forms of the search for spiritual meaning. Film, television, the music industry, and the Internet are central to this process, cutting through the monolithic assertions of world religions and giving access to more diverse and fragmented ideals. While the volume and variety of information traveling through global media changes modes of religious thought and commitment, the human desire for spirituality also invigorates popular culture itself, recreating commodities – film blockbusters, world sport, popular music – as contexts for religious meaning.

Drawing on fascinating research into household media consumption Stewart M. Hoover charts the way in which media and religion intermingle and collide in the cultural experience of media audiences. The result will be essential reading for everyone interested in how today’s mass media relate to contemporary religious and spiritual life.

Stewart M. Hoover is Professor of Media Studies in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication, at the University of Colorado, Boulder, where he directs the Center for Media, Religion and Culture. He is a leading authority on media and religion, and has authored, co-authored and co-edited several books, including Media, Home and Family (2004), Practising Religion in the Age of Media (2002), Religion in the News (1998), Rethinking Media, Religion and Culture (1997) and Mass Media Religion (1989).
Religion, Media and Culture

Edited by Stewart M. Hoover, Jolyon Mitchell and David Morgan

*Religion, Media and Culture* is an exciting series which analyses the role of media in the history of contemporary practice of religious belief. Books in this series explore the importance of a variety of media in religious practice and highlight the significance of the culture, social and religious setting of such media.

Religion in the Media Age
*Stewart M. Hoover*
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Media, Religion, and Culture is a series of interdisciplinary volumes which analyse the role of media in the history and contemporary practice of religious belief. Books in this series scrutinise the importance of a variety of media in religious practice: from lithographs and film to television and the internet. Studies from all over the world highlight the significance of the cultural, social and religious setting of such media.

Rather than thinking of media purely as instruments for information delivery, volumes in this series contribute in various ways to a new paradigm of understanding media as an integral part of lived religion. Employing a variety of methods authors investigate how practices of belief take shape in the production, distribution, and reception of mediated communication.

Stewart Hoover, University of Colorado
Jolyon Mitchell, University of Edinburgh
David Morgan, Valparaiso University
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No project like this is possible without the support of many people. This is particularly so here both because it is based in a collaborative project and because it has stretched across a longer period than is often the case. While it was underway, I was called upon to serve two terms as Interim Dean of the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Colorado. This experience reinforced my appreciation of the commitment of our university’s leadership to scholarship on our campus.

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This book is among the first in a new series on Media and Religion, and I wish to thank my series co-editors, David Morgan and Jolyon Mitchell, for their efforts in that series and their helpful reviews of this project. In addition, I want to acknowledge Roger Thorp, the Routledge editor who first envisioned the series and a role for this book in it, and of course our current series editor, Lesley Riddle.

Finally, one’s family always has a particular role to play in projects like this one. In an earlier book, I noted that my father, Wilbur R. Hoover (who died while this one was in progress), deserves credit for igniting my interest in media through his own interest in the news, my interest in scholarship through his own scholarly sensibilities, and my interest in religion through his role as my pastor and religious mentor. To my mother, siblings, in-laws, and nieces and nephews, I give my thanks for their eager consumption of the things I write and say. It is good to have those closest to you appreciate what you do. Finally, my wife, Karen, remains my hiking, skiing, and traveling companion, soulmate and partner. Her support throughout this project was essential.

Stewart M. Hoover
Arapaho Ranch, Colorado
Religion and the media seem to be ever more connected as we move further into the twenty-first century. It is through the media that much of contemporary religion and spirituality is known. Notable events and icons seem to emerge with increasing frequency. In recent years alone we’ve seen the mediated events of the September 11, 2001 and July 7, 2005 terror attacks, widely covered scandals in the US and European Catholic Churches, public struggles within religious groups over social values such as gay rights, US political campaigns dominated by mediated discourses of religion, the re-emergence of religion in European political and social life, Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* and William Arntz’s *What the Bleep Do We Know?*, Tom Cruise joining John Travolta as entertainment industry icons of Scientology, Madonna playing the same role in relation to Kabbalah, an increasing number of popular television and film portrayals of gothic, horror, science fiction, magical, mysterious, and conventional religion and spirituality, and controversies over the very presence of religion – of various kinds – in “the media.” The realms of “religion” and “media” can no longer be easily separated, and it is the purpose of this book to begin to chart the ways that media and religion intermingle and collide in the cultural experience of media audiences.

It has been easy for us to think of relations between religion and the media in institutional terms. We have thought of religion as a set of traditions, dogmas, practices, and institutions that exist in an autonomous position vis-à-vis “the culture.” We have thought of culture as merely making communication, interaction, memory, and history possible within social relations by providing the languages and contexts of interaction. In this “received” view, society is the more fixed and hard set of categories within which human beings must learn to function. It provides the structures and boundaries within which things like “culture” and “religion” do their work. And, individual identity is somehow a result of these other factors, conditioned – even mostly determined – by them.

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**Introduction**

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This social-theoretical syllogism is being undermined by trends in contemporary social and political life, and by media evolution and change. Media and entertainment figures rival traditional social institutions and
their leaders for attention and influence. The marketplace today assumes a
determinative role in social and cultural life. Shared, mediated experiences
come to define the terms and outlines of social and political discourse.
Through such trends, *culture* increasingly functions with a kind of
autonomy that is in many ways unprecedented. At the same time, practices
of religion are changing, with *individuals* assuming more responsibility for
the direction of their own spiritual quests. Through their “seeking,” the
influence and legitimacy of formal religions of all kinds has increasingly
come into question. The *power of legitimation* is more and more in the
hands of the seeker as she looks to a wider and wider range of sources and
contexts – beyond the traditional ones – for religious or spiritual insight.
This has all served to center the media in these trends and in our under-
standing of them.

A range of observers have contemplated the evolving relations between
religion and media. Some have lamented the seeming influence of the
media on the more “traditional” and “authentic” forms of religious
expression and practice. Others have decried the seeming influence of reli-
gious interests in and through the media. Still others have criticized what
they see as the “anti-religion bias” of the media. Meanwhile, religion is
more and more an object of journalistic scrutiny as religious interests,
movements, and individuals have gained a higher profile in contemporary
political and social life.

What has been missing from most of the public discourse\(^2\) has been a
focus on the role of the reception and meaning-making by media audiences
in these trends. Among those who have reflected on the intersection
between media and religion is the Korean American video artist Nam June
Paik, who has produced several iterations of works that introduce a statue
of the Buddha into a conversation about visualization, representation, and
reception. In two of these, a Buddha contemplates a video camera and a
monitor that displays the image seen by the camera – the Buddha himself\(^3\).
The circularity of the metaphor can be seen either as “closed” or as “open.”
A “closed” interpretation would center the solipsism of “a religion”
focusing on itself through the allure of technology. An “open” interpreta-
tion would center on the sense that the dharma – the “teaching” – is
idealized and re-presented via the technology, opening the question of
which is more “real,” the teaching or the image, and the question of whether
the representation of the teaching is more or less authentic than the
teaching itself. Inserting technology into religion, as Paik’s work represents,
raises for us a fascinating set of questions about whether representing and
receiving tradition in this way somehow fundamentally alters the nature of
religion and religious practice. Paik could be read as pointing out that the
technology in fact focuses the issue on the fundamental level of the act of
seeing, and the way that seeing is the authentic act, not the representation.
Thus, rather than threatening tradition by “technologizing” it, or turning
tradition’s gaze on itself, the argument might be that the fundamental truths, claims, and quests of religion remain in the media age, but in new forms and with a new emphasis.

Paik’s rendering thus centers the context and act of reception as the critical point of entry for analysis. To break into the potential circularity of relations between religion and media, we must stand somewhere and take account of ways by which mediated religion is realized in contemporary life. What people do with religious and spiritual resources is the central question, and a standpoint from which to look at the larger contexts of the creation, circulation, and consumption of religious and spiritual resources in an era where such “cultural” practices are fundamentally the province of the media.

To engage in an account of these processes in a deliberate and systematic way involves a certain approach to a set of contexts and trends. These include: the role of culture as an autonomous force, rooted in commodities and markets; the recovery and invigoration of “popular culture” as a valuable context for religious meaning and exploration; the turn to the individual and the individual quest for the self and identity as a central religious project; the redefinition of religion in more anachronistic terms, including “faith,” “meaning,” and “spirituality”; and the central momentum of media reception becoming a quest for meaning and meaningful cultural and narrative sources.

This view of course runs counter to what one might expect in an exploration of religion in the media age. There is an extent to which “religion” and “the media” exist as institutional forces in the public sphere. Religion is increasingly on the losing side of any struggles that ensue, as the media more and more determine the rules and procedures whereby institutions such as religion find their way into public discourse. There is a long and interesting history there. However, I will contend that looking at such questions ignores the more fundamental social and cultural reality that, on a quite different level, the level of practices of cultural consumption and exchange, individuals and groups have long ago abandoned the larger institutional map. Media and commodity culture are now integrated into practices of meaning and identity in profound and irreversible ways. This book will explore those ways, based on ongoing field research where media households are engaged in discussions about meaning, religion, values, and identity in the media age.

In so doing, we will be pursuing a research direction envisioned in 1988 in a reflection on “next steps” for research in religion and media in the wake of that era’s focus on the then-new phenomenon of Televangelism:

I see the need for a “middle level” of analysis, one that understands and builds on what can be known about the aggregate content of the medium and that accepts the reality that the process is not instrumental,
but rather devolves from the establishment of meaning by an audience in its encounter with mediated texts through which a variety of readings are possible. My middle level of analysis would begin with the simple proposition that not all viewers are the same in social or cultural terms. Not only are there sociocultural dimensions of the audience that can be said to be systematic, and thus (ultimately) quantitatively verifiable, there are also – and this is the critical point – dimensions that help define the cultural meaning they derive from television texts.

This book is a major milestone on that research journey, though by no means the last word. The distance from that idea to this reality has been a long and complex one, for significant reasons. The idea of a “middle level” recognized the emergence of a “culturalist” approach to media studies and a turn toward qualitative and ethnographic approaches to media reception. Much progress has been made along those lines and an increasing, substantive literature is developing. Another development critical to this project has been the emerging discourse of a growing network of scholars who have made the intersection between media and religion their primary area of scholarly work. Many of them are credited in these pages for their contributions to this study and to other efforts that are moving our knowledge of these issues ahead.

In order to actually bring about the kind of analysis called for, however, it has been necessary to take on board some critical questions and challenges in theory and methodology. This book addresses the theoretical debates and attempts a way through them. In the process, full justice is not done to their depth, breadth, and complexity. Such an account would have been a book in itself. In the same way, the methodological challenges and turns that have been encountered along the way cannot be fully explored, either. There is an attempt here to describe these in some detail, but reference to the larger project of which this study is a part will be necessary for readers who are primarily interested in method.

The theoretical and methodological roots have received less attention here in part because the intent of this book is to look closely at the experiences and practices of audiences, and decisions have had to be made about how best to move to that level of inquiry, description, and analysis. As will be seen in greater detail in the pages that follow, these studies are rooted in, and result from, the collaborative work of a team of researchers. A good deal of the thinking results from that collective enterprise, and, while I will try to give credit along the way, I cannot fully represent the extent to which interaction and collaboration with colleagues have made this “middle level” of analysis possible. This work would not have been possible as a solo effort. It results from a number of collaborative decisions
along the way. In order to look at audience practice it was necessary to go to where that practice is taking place – the domestic sphere of the household and the context of the various types and kinds of families that exist there. In order to understand those practices in their context, it was necessary to make the point of the research interventions a kind of collaboration between researcher and interviewee that did not assume a determinative role for any one element, but assumed interactions between elements in context.

This work also cannot stand completely alone, because it emerges from a larger set of collaborative research efforts focused on meaning-making in the media age. In the process of these inquiries, it became clear that, in order to lay the groundwork for a study such as this one focused on questions of religion and spirituality, it would be necessary first to make a more basic and general account of the processes and practices of media experience in domestic, household, and family life. A previous book, *Media, Home, and Family,* addressed this background, and is referred to at key points in these pages. Beginning with a more general account was necessitated in part by a major learning from the early stages of this research. Alongside the expressed realization that qualitative and interpretive methods were most appropriate to the questions under study stands the realization that the processes and practices whereby people express, represent, and take account of their media experiences are complex and nuanced. In particular, that book lays out a description of the way that expressed “levels of engagement” with media are an important dimension of the meanings made.

Some readers will find that this book does not move in directions they expect. I attempt in the first chapter to describe why this might be the case and the way that this book differs from others. What is most significant about this project is its focus on practices and outcomes of media consumption, and its attempt to bring social theory and analysis to bear on those issues. This focus has determined both the research approach and the range of questions and issues that could be addressed. As will be seen, this study does provide an important set of understandings about the nature of religiously and spiritually inflected media practice, and about the capacities of the media (and of religion and spirituality, too, for that matter) to support certain kinds of meanings and actions. The last chapter of this book draws together some of the larger implications of this work and projects how these learnings might help in other important questions and directions. A book like this simply cannot address all questions. It is a focused piece of social science research that attempts to bring to bear critical and focused theoretical and methodological resources on the central locations of relations between media and religion – the places where people actually interact with, and use, media resources in religious and spiritual ways.
Some momentous events occurred during the course of these studies. It is one of the values of qualitative and interpretive approaches that they are flexible enough to adapt themselves to such historical circumstances. Two of these events – the terrorist attacks of September 2001 and the general elections of 2004 – are specifically addressed in Chapter 9, which attempts to reflect both specific field research related to the events in question, and to reflect the nuanced understandings growing out of this research in analysis of their meanings and potential implications.

So, what the reader will see here is a book that intends to be focused, but that will nonetheless portray a good deal of complexity and breadth. In many ways, it is only a beginning, not a “last word.” It stands as a study that is unique for its comprehensive view of media behaviors in the domestic sphere, and its commitment to look at these issues in general terms. This generality is intended, in part, to be generative in that it should serve to support the development of a variety of inquiries and reflections on themes, locations, outcomes, and implications. At least that is the intention.

As we move further and further into this century, media and religion will continue to interact and evolve. More than was the case in 1988 we now can see that the interaction between religion and media raises a critical set of public issues and challenges. The implications of this interaction will only grow in importance. A whole new field of inquiry into their relationship is emerging, and should serve to help us understand how best to respond to these developments as scholars, as citizens, as parents, and as people responsible for the spheres of media and of religion. It is my intention that this book serve as a waypoint in that evolving discourse. There already is much more that can be said and that is being said. The ongoing process of scholarly and informed lay inquiry continues and should be the point of efforts such as this. The service of this book in speaking to those discourses and inquiries will be its measure of success.
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