



Thesis  
3692

**Religion and Film in American Culture:**  
*The Birth of a Nation*

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Dedicated to the memory of both  
my father, Bohdan, the first movie buff I ever knew,  
and  
my grandmother, Zinaida,  
who showed me the power of faith and the meaning of history.

# Contents

<b>Abstract</b>	iv
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	v
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	1
<i>Thesis Outline</i>	7

## PART I

### Religion and Film in American Culture: The Scholarly Context

#### CHAPTER ONE

<b>Researching Religion, Media, and Culture: An Evolving Paradigm</b>	10
<b>Existing Research into Media and Religion</b>	12
<i>Religion as the Blindspot of Media Theory</i>	12
<i>Media Blindness in Religious Studies</i>	14
<i>'Religion' and the Modern World</i>	16
<i>Researching Media and Religion: Initial Trends</i>	18
<b>Religion, Media, Culture: An Evolving Paradigm of Research</b>	20
<i>'Religion and the Media'</i>	21
<i>'Religion and Mass Media'</i>	22
<i>'Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture'</i>	25
<i>'Selling God': Religion, America, and Commodification</i>	37
<i>Recent Developments in the Evolving Paradigm</i>	38
<b>Conclusion</b>	43

#### CHAPTER TWO

<b>Approaching Religion and Film in American Culture</b>	46
<b>Film Studies and Religion</b>	47
<i>The Biblical Epic</i>	51
<i>Hollywood as 'Melting Pot': Issues of Ethnicity and Race</i>	55
<i>Catholicism, Censorship, and the American Film Industry</i>	60
<i>Religion and the History of American Cinema</i>	67
<i>Religion in the History of Early and Silent Cinema</i>	69
<b>Religious Film Writing</b>	81
<i>Theology at the Movies</i>	81
<i>Developments in Religious Film Writing</i>	88
<b>Conclusion</b>	97

## CHAPTER THREE

<b>America Redeptor: Religion, Culture, and National Identity</b>	100
<b>Religion by Other Means? Culture, Power, and National Identity</b>	102
<i>Theorizing National Identity</i>	102
<i>Culture and Hegemony</i>	105
<i>Culture and Modernity</i>	109
<b>The Category of Religion</b>	113
<i>Religion and Social Theory: Marx, Durkheim, and Weber</i>	115
<i>Religion and Legitimation: ‘The Sacred Canopy’</i>	121
<i>Geertz and Asad: ‘Religion as a Cultural System’?</i>	123
<b>Religion in America</b>	130
<i>Tocqueville: Religion as the Base of Civil Society</i>	131
<i>Religion and US National Identity: Bellah and the American Civil Religion</i>	132
<i>‘Like a City Upon a Hill’: The Puritan Legacy</i>	138
<i>Civil Religion and its Discontents</i>	142
<i>National Identity and Religious Difference</i>	146
<b>Conclusion</b>	150

## PART II

### Religion and Film in American Culture: *The Birth of a Nation*

## CHAPTER FOUR

<b>‘An Uneasy Presence’: Revisiting <i>The Birth of a Nation</i></b>	153
<b>‘Like Writing History with Lightning’:</b>	
<b>A Beginner’s Guide to <i>The Birth of a Nation</i></b>	156
<i>‘The Birth of a Nation’: A Brief Description</i>	158
<i>‘The Birth of a Nation’ as Cultural Event</i>	161
<i>Assessing the Political Impact of ‘The Birth of a Nation’</i>	166
<b>Critical Perspectives on <i>The Birth of a Nation</i></b>	171
<i>A Racist Masterpiece?</i>	174
<i>Racist Content, Racist Form?</i>	180
<i>Literary and Cultural Influences</i>	190
<i>The Dark Soul of White America</i>	194
<i>Blinded by the Light?</i>	200
<b>Conclusion: <i>The Birth of a Nation</i> and the Evolving Paradigm</b>	203

<b>CHAPTER FIVE</b>	
<b><i>The Birth of a Nation: An Event in American Religious History</i></b>	206
<b>Modernization, Morals, and Motion Pictures:</b>	
<b>Progressive America and the Growth of Cinema</b>	208
<i>American Protestantism in Crisis</i>	209
<i>The Quest for Order: 'Disestablishment', Revival, and the Progressive Babel</i>	214
<i>Progressivism as Accommodation to Change</i>	217
<i>'Democracy's Theater': Progressive America and the Movies</i>	220
<i>Pictures, Profits, and Social Change</i>	221
<i>The 'Nickel Madness'</i>	224
<i>Cinema, Class, and Culture: The Struggle for Respectability</i>	225
<i>Uplifting the Movies</i>	232
<i>The American Cinema: An Alternative Public Sphere?</i>	234
<b>Redeeming the Movies: Griffith and the Lost Cause</b>	237
<i>D.W. Griffith: Methodism, Modernity, and the Movies</i>	238
<i>Redeeming the South</i>	246
<i>The Lost Cause: A Southern Civil Religion</i>	249
<b>Blood Sacrifice: <i>The Birth of a Nation</i> and American Civil Religion</b>	258
<i>Race in Progressive America</i>	259
<i>Violence and the Sacred</i>	261
<i>Violence, Rape, and Civil Religion</i>	263
<i>Violence, Sacrifice, and Civil Religion in <i>The Birth of a Nation</i></i>	266
<b>Conclusion: Rethinking <i>The Birth of a Nation</i></b>	274
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	278
<i>Suggestions for Future Research</i>	280
<b>Bibliography</b>	282
<b>Filmography</b>	308
<b>Appendix - <i>The Birth of a Nation</i>: A Thin Description</b>	309

## Abstract

This research addresses an emerging scholarship examining relations between media, religion, and culture in contemporary society. Whilst it acknowledges the value of this growing body of work, the study is based on a recognition that an overwhelming concern with the contemporary scene has resulted in a neglect of the history responsible for the conditions of the present. Given the prominence of America as both a source and an object of this scholarship, moreover, the particular national context in which the institutions and practices of the US media have developed has been taken for granted somewhat. Oriented towards these perceived lacunae, this thesis examines the interaction between religion and film as an influence upon the development of American culture in the twentieth-century.

The dissertation is divided into two main parts. The first of these is devoted to an extended discussion of the scholarly background to the research, and argues that the historical dimension of the interrelationship between religion and film in America is worthy of more attention than it has hitherto received. In particular, it stresses the fundamental importance of religion within the discourse of national identity in the United States, and posits the notion of a non-denominational American civil religion as a useful theoretical tool with which to examine Hollywood as a distinctively 'American' form of cinema.

Part Two develops this position through a case study of *The Birth of a Nation*, directed by D.W. Griffith, and one of the most famous films of all time. Discussing the picture as a response to a crisis in American Protestantism, the study argues that the race controversy prompted by its Southern viewpoint was, to some extent, a function of Griffith's ambitions to revive the traditional religious bases of U.S. national identity via the medium of film. Furthermore, it suggests that the impact of *Birth* helped enact a broader transformation of American culture, wherein the cinema became instrumental in sustaining the belief that the United States was a nation uniquely favoured by Providence.

# Acknowledgements

Prior to its submission here, some of the research for this study has already begun to appear elsewhere. The origins of Chapter One can be found in book reviews for the *Scottish Journal of Religious Studies* (Spring 1997) and *Media, Culture, and Society* (July 1998), whilst elements of Part II, and Chapter Five in particular, have been previously used as the basis for a number of conference papers. One of these has been revised for a forthcoming article in *Culture and Religion*.

This dissertation is, in truth, a little overdue, and apologies are due to all family, friends, and colleagues affected by my profligacy in this regard. Because the fact that it even came close to completion is due in large measure to the encouragement, advice and support I have received from them and others, I welcome the opportunity to express my humble thanks.

While the fateful decision to further my undergraduate interests and begin a research degree was mine, I was encouraged to do so by a number of people at the University of Stirling, several of whom gave fine advice on drafting my initial proposals, most notably, Nancy Morris, John Izod, and Brian McNair, all then in the Department of Film and Media Studies, along with Richard King and the Reverend Mary Maaga, now both departed from the Department of Religious Studies. The practical support I have received from the staff of the School of Arts office began at this early stage also.

It would have been impossible to pursue my research, however, without the generous full-time financial support, over four years, of the Humanities Research Board of the British Academy. Receipt of funds from such a prestigious source was not only a material benefit but gave me confidence in my own potential as a scholar.

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# INTRODUCTION

The Hollywood film now rules the entertainment culture of our planet, and seems well on the way to becoming a universal secular religion, the first to offer its devotees anything they want and ask for nothing in return, other than the admission price of their tickets. Night after night, its congregations gather in their neighbourhood cineplexes, eager to worship the harsh gods of violence, sensation and spectacle.

(Ballard, 1998: 14)

To borrow a phrase used by Keith Whitelam (1996: 2), this study 'is an attempt to articulate an idea': that there exists a symbiosis between American religion and American film. Arising out of interests developed at undergraduate level as to the nature of relations between religion and the modern mass media, it began as an effort to understand the religious aspects of American cinema. In general, and despite the manifest and widespread mobilization of religious ideas, imagery, motifs, and stories across the whole spectrum of American commercial film production, by directors as famous and influential as, for example, D.W. Griffith, Cecil B. DeMille, John Ford, King Vidor, Michael Curtiz, Frank Capra, Alfred Hitchcock, Francis Ford Coppola, and Martin Scorsese, scholars of film have been peculiarly disinterested in pursuing the 'religious' dimension as a line of enquiry, especially as it might relate to the broader social context. Nor was there much evidence of curiosity from students of religion with regard to the impact upon their field of interest of the most important and influential medium of the first half of the twentieth century. A desire to address the perceived neglect of what seemed to be a self-evidently important strand of meaning within American movies provided the initial impetus and motivation for the study presented below.

As work progressed, however, it became increasingly clear that the visibility of the religious in American films was but one consequence of the widespread

significance of religion as both a symbolic and practical resource within the broad cultural processes of US national life. Writing in 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville (1966: 269) observed that in spite of the formal constitutional separation of religion and the American state, 'religion...should...be considered as the first of their political institutions.' Religion, he argued, was fundamental to the life of the national community. The United States may have changed somewhat over the last one hundred and sixty six years, but the Tocquevillean perspective has remained a relevant and influential one. Moreover, a persistent religious presence has been one of the distinctive hallmarks of the modern mass media as they have developed in America. So much so in fact, that it leads one to suggest that the establishment and development of the America nation as an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1991) has, in its particulars, been profoundly influenced by the relationship between religion and the media. In continuing to pursue American film as an object of study, therefore, the research presented herein begins to explore the nature and extent of that influence upon the national community.

Originally, the project was to have taken the form of an historical survey which would have examined religious themes in a range of films from the silent era to the present day. Such a broad conception proved to be unmanageable; not least, because there was no pre-existing theoretical framework from which one might move to examine relations between religion, film and the national culture. This state of affairs prompted a reorientation of the research, away from the films themselves towards an exploration of theories and methods which might lend themselves to the study of religion and film in American culture. The idea was to indicate the potential value of this hitherto neglected area to other researchers, and suggest ways of going about such work. Nevertheless, the interdisciplinary (and interdepartmental) character of the project posed an even more fundamental problem which needed to be addressed if the study was to develop in a coherent way: who, exactly, was the intended audience for the research? Was this to be a discussion of film for scholars of religion who, like most people, were likely to have an interest, albeit non-

academic, in movies? Or was it an attempt, possibly futile, to remind media scholars of a set of cultural activities and resources they had, in the main, learnt to ignore? For a researcher, the question of to whom their work is being addressed is an important one as it determines not only the aims and objectives of one's work but also the kind of arguments which might develop out of it.

Thankfully, any confusion regarding the intended audience for this study began to dissolve with the discovery of an emergent interdisciplinary scholarship similarly interested in relations between media, religion and culture. As Chapter One elaborates in more detail, this work has begun to move beyond bipolar conceptions of religion and culture, media and culture, and/or media and religion, to suggest instead that 'media, religion, and culture should be thought of as an interrelated web within society' (Hoover and Lundby, 1996: 3). Challenging the assumption that secularization represents the inevitable death of religion, this broad triangulation of theory and research offers rich possibilities for those seeking a greater and more sophisticated understanding of the cultural dynamics at play in contemporary society. As one might expect, moreover, much of this work focuses upon the United States. The process of 'rethinking' relations between media, religion, and culture cannot help but be informed by a recognition of America's current global hegemony in matters of politics, economics, and culture (Hoover, 1996). At this still early stage of development, however, the overwhelming concern with the contemporary scene, whilst understandable, has resulted in a neglect of the history behind the conditions of the present. Indeed, despite the prominence of the American example, the particular national context in which the institutions and practices of the US media developed, as well as the theoretical issues raised by questions of national identity, have all been taken for granted somewhat. Reflecting these twin lacunae, the development of motion pictures in America, both as an industry and a cultural institution, has received scant attention from within the 'evolving paradigm' (Hoover, 1996) of work 'at the intersection of media, culture, and religion' (Clark and Hoover, 1996). This study addresses that gap.

The upshot of the considerations outlined above is a thesis organized around a critical, interpretive, historical, sociological, and cultural, case study of D.W. Griffith's epochal motion picture, *The Birth of a Nation*. Released for the first time in 1915, *The Birth of a Nation* is probably the single most important, influential, and widely discussed movie ever made. Exerting an influence and fascination extending into the present, and still screened to this day, the film remains one of the great landmarks of world cinema. Crucially though, it was also the first American motion picture to have a genuinely national impact; something, the study argues, which the film itself prefigured in explicitly religious terms. An enquiry as to the nature of the film's appeal to national sentiment and notions of 'Americanness' provides the focus for this research. That is not to say, however, that this thesis is about Griffith's picture or even the extensive literature engendered by that movie's release eighty-six years ago. Rather, *The Birth of a Nation's* legacy as a multi-faceted but self-evidently important 'event' in the cultural history of the United States, 'the incontestable keystone movie in the history of American cinema' as Phillip French has described it (quoted in Robinson, 1993), suggests it to be an obvious point of departure for research seeking to explore the history of the complex relations between media, religion, and culture in America.

Although the intended audience for this research is, in the first instance at least, the emerging scholarship into media, religion, and culture, the project cannot help but address concerns which will be familiar to students of American cinema. This constituency has hitherto displayed little interest in the relationship between religion and the movies. To them, the salience of *The Birth of a Nation* might appear to make Griffith's picture a less than inspiring choice around which to organize a doctoral thesis. Much, too much perhaps, has been written about *Birth* in the last eighty-six years. The emergence at some time in the future of any major new factual information about the film is unlikely, and there is little discussion of the film itself within this study which is not based upon existing critical and historical writing about it. Nevertheless, the movie's importance, both as a cultural event and an object of

critical debate, makes it a logical choice for this project given the overall aims of the research.

In broad theoretical and methodological terms, then, this study aims to move beyond existing understandings of *The Birth of a Nation* by reconsidering that truly remarkable motion picture, from a vantage based in the evolving paradigm of scholarship rethinking media, religion, and culture. Indeed, it is a basic contention of this thesis that our understanding of the movies and their significance within (and beyond) the culture of the United States would be substantially enriched by a serious discussion of religion in the life of the nation. The extensive literature on American religion, a wide-ranging body of work predicated on the recognition of how important religion has been in shaping the attitudes and actions of Americans throughout their history, is all but unread within film studies. Hence, the key difference between the case study around which this thesis is organized and previous work on *The Birth of a Nation* is that, here, religion is taken seriously; as something integral to notions of American national identity and the narratives of chosenness, righteousness, transformation, and redemptive violence around which Hollywood came to represent 'the land of the free and the home of the brave'.

Previous writing on the picture has tended to revolve around two main issues. The first is *Birth's* status as a landmark in the history of the medium. Whilst not really an example of what has become known as the classical Hollywood cinema (e.g. Bordwell *et al*, 1985), Griffith's movie was an important precursor of what was to come. Crystallizing many of the developments which had taken place within the American film industry in the previous years, the success of *The Birth of a Nation* helped lay foundations for the emergence of one of the most powerful cultural institutions of the twentieth century. The other main point of debate, is the picture's racism. Representing African-Americans in a derogatory and inflammatory way, the film spawned a fierce debate which continues to this day. In recent decades, scholars have come to treat these two issues as rather more closely connected than was previously thought. This study follows that trend. However, it seeks to do this

by relating such issues to the broader processes associated with modernization, and the concomitant transformation of American religion.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, immigration, industrialization, urbanization, and the rising intellectual authority of the scientific worldview undermined the cultural hegemony hitherto enjoyed by American Protestantism. One of the key aims of this study is to relate *The Birth of a Nation*, and, by extension, the development of the US film industry, to this religious crisis. Within film studies, the particular national context of the American cinema, whilst not ignored, has in many accounts been overshadowed by the portrayal of Hollywood as a 'global' phenomenon. Moreover, scholars of American film have, in the main, predicated their work upon an implicit assumption of secularization. But for a few instances, the question of religion has simply not figured in their deliberations. Yet, as the politically significant resurgence of conservative Protestantism in post-Vietnam America demonstrates, religion as a social force within national life may have changed but it never really went away. This recognition undergirds the thesis presented below. Furthermore, as global a phenomenon as Hollywood rapidly became, the considerations, largely commercial, which have shaped the American film industry have always been firmly rooted in the national context.

The issue of nationhood suggests another potential audience for this research; scholars of American religion. As has already been mentioned, much has been written with regard to religion in America and its significance within the life of the nation. Despite the constitutional separation of church and state, and its position as the most modern and powerful nation on Earth, America is still characterized by a popular religiosity of considerable variety and vitality. For all the economic benefits deriving from the application of a scientific worldview, and a political tradition based in Enlightenment rationalism, many of the distinctive features of American culture continue to be shaped by a widespread belief in the supernatural and active expressions of faith. This apparent paradox is one of the key issues in the study of American religion. Yet although this has prompted a substantial discussion of US

national identity in terms of 'civil religion' (e.g. Bellah, 1967), little effort has been made to examine the media's use and inevitable transformation of those (religious) ideas, images, and stories through which American national identity is articulated. Along with its other aims, therefore, the case study of *The Birth of a Nation* presented below addresses that neglect also. Whilst it leaves open the question of how far the medium of film can be thought of as being properly 'religious', it argues that Griffith's picture was quite explicit about staking a claim on behalf of the film industry for those aspects of the national imagination which had hitherto been the preserve of historians, political orators, and the Protestant churches. Indeed, the unprecedented success of *Birth* was a sign that, in practical terms, the narratives via which Americans continued to understand their significance as a 'chosen people' or 'New Israel' would derive less from the pulpit and the Bible, and ever more from the 'stories in picture' produced in the studios of Hollywood.

### *Thesis Outline*

In terms of its structure, the thesis is presented in two parts. The first of these offers an extended discussion, over three chapters, of the scholarly context(s) within which this research is located. Elaborating some of the concerns already indicated, Chapter One offers a critical overview of existing writing on religion, media, and culture. Indicating the value and potential of this emerging body of work, it nonetheless highlights a somewhat ahistorical neglect of the cinema and its crucial role in shaping American culture in the twentieth century. This provides a point of departure for Chapter Two's review of the existing writing on film and religion in American culture. Whilst there is some evidence which suggests a complex interrelationship between religion and the movies in America, mainstream film scholarship has shown very little interest in this area. Where writing on film and religion exists, moreover, it has most often been prompted by concerns rooted in theology and hermeneutics. It has thus tended to ignore the social and historical (e.g. national) contexts, in which film production and consumption takes place.



Responding to this perceived neglect, Chapter Three establishes some of the key theoretical bases for the rest of the study by discussing the role of religion in shaping American culture and national identity. Whilst it acknowledges some of the problems associated with the concept, it posits the notion of an American civil religion as a useful tool with which to explore the ways in which the idea of the nation has been invoked within the American cinema.

Part II takes up the issues raised in the first three chapters through an in-depth examination of *The Birth of a Nation*, over two chapters. The first of these serves as a re-introduction to the film and the vast literature prompted by it. Whilst highlighting those aspects of the picture, its production, and reception suggestive of a deeper connection with the traditions of American religion, it argues that these aspects to the film remain largely unexplored. Building on this, Chapter Five, discusses the film as an event in American religious history. Locating the picture in relation to the religious bases of American national identity, it argues that Griffith's highly problematic representation of African-Americans should be understood as something more than just a powerful expression of white supremacy, and that the picture's legacy needs to be rethought accordingly. In particular, it stresses how the southern viewpoint of the film not only reflected the director's own cultural background, but also suited his ambitions for the cinema as a vehicle of moral reform. Despite, or perhaps even because of, the controversy prompted by *Birth*, moreover, the impact of the film helped enact a transformation of the ways and means in which Americans thought of themselves as members of a national community uniquely favoured by Providence.

# **PART I**

## **Religion and Film in American Culture: The Scholarly Context**

# CHAPTER ONE

## Researching Religion, Media, and Culture: An Evolving Paradigm

### Introduction

This chapter discusses the condition of existing research into religion, media, and culture. By doing so, it locates the present study in relation to an emerging scholarship interested in the nature and place of religion within mass-mediated, postmodern, western culture.

Like the project to hand, the basic subject matter for much of this work is America; a fact which reflects the background of many scholars working in this field as well as the hegemonic position of the United States within the broader global culture (Hoover, 1996: 290-91). The attention afforded the U.S. can also be explained by what some might hold to be the paradoxical status of religion there: despite being as self-consciously 'modern' in terms of its economy and politics as any nation could be, symbols, stories, and institutions based in traditional notions of religion continue to exert a significant influence throughout American culture. Even with the constitutional separation of church and state, it is by no means entirely fanciful to suggest, for example, that being a woman or black is less hindrance to those who would seek the US presidency than a confession of atheism. In many instances it may indeed be 'less difficult to come out of the closet as homosexual in America today than to declare yourself an atheist or an agnostic' (Ellen Johnson quoted in Reed, 1999: 11). America has proved itself resistant to the once

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widespread assumption of secularization as the inevitable accompaniment to modernization, something often ignored in discussions of the US media.<sup>1</sup>

The chapter begins by examining the broad trends which have, until fairly recently, characterized work on media and religion. This is followed by an account of an 'evolving paradigm' (Hoover, 1996: 285-87) of theory development and research in regard to religion, media, and culture. Whilst the fairly comprehensive triangulation of theory proposed and elaborated by Hoover and Lundby (1996) and others is welcomed, particularly as a basis for addressing contemporary American culture, three main areas of concern are identified. The first is the general lack of attention afforded the historical dimensions of this theoretical triangulation. Related to this, the second area of concern stems from insufficient consideration of the particular national background to what Hoover and Lundby (1996: 10) describe as the 'convergence of religion and media within contemporary culture', and the consequent under-examination of power relations within this convergence. The global hegemony of American media and popular culture is the furthest extension of a national culture which cannot help but bear the marks of tensions and conflicts rooted in issues like economics, gender, race, region, religion, sexuality and social class, all played out amidst the historical transformations and upheavals wrought by modernity. That those attempting to rethink media, religion, and culture in the present appear to have little interest in reconsidering the past is, moreover, reflected in the third area of concern identified below; the lack of attention scholars in this field have afforded the medium of film, especially as an agent for, and product of, the profound social, religious, and cultural changes which transformed America during

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<sup>1</sup> Affirming the commonly held assumption of its apparent inevitability prior to a re-appraisal of the place of the supernatural in modern life in *A Rumour of Angels* (1969), Peter Berger (1967: 107) offers a widely cited definition of 'secularization' as 'the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols'. Challenging such assumptions, however, more recent statistics suggest that as many as '95% of Americans profess belief in God' (Gallup Poll results quoted in Ostling, 1995: 72). For a useful recent discussion of the secularization thesis in relation to contemporary American society see Harper and LeBeau (2000).

the first part of the twentieth century. These three basic issues inform the rest of the study.

## **Existing Research into Media and Religion**

Despite obvious differences in terms of their specific lines of enquiry, it is a relatively simple matter to describe certain basic similarities and common interests between research into the media and academic studies of religion. Both are inter-disciplinary fields examining notions of collective identity and community, the social significance of symbols and stories, structures of power, etc. Both offer insights into the nature and purpose of that quintessential human activity, the generation of *meaning*. Yet, for all that, the relationship between these two broad areas of scholarship has, until fairly recently at least, been characterized by a somewhat surprising lack of communication. Indeed, taking Cultural Studies as the most obvious arena in which Media Studies and Religious Studies might productively overlap, the near total lack of interest afforded religion there contrasts sharply with the more traditional discipline of Anthropology. Clearly, some cultures are more popular than others (Frow, 1998).

### *Religion as the Blindspot of Media Theory*

In a bold critique of this state of affairs, Stewart M. Hoover and Shalini S. Venturelli (1996: 251) suggest that ‘the realm of belief, spirituality, ontology and deep meaning conventionally constructed as “the religious”’ represents ‘the blindspot of contemporary media theory’. Re-reading the roots of contemporary social theory in the legacies of Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber, ‘the theorists who have most directly addressed and constructed religion as a legitimate field of inquiry’ (1996: 251), Hoover and Venturelli (1996: 252-58) point out that despite the widespread assumption that secularization would inevitably accompany the rationalizing processes of modernity, and the observable decline in the power, influence and attendance of the formal religious institutions of Europe, ‘non-rational’ beliefs and practices persist as fundamental components of meaning-making in

contemporary western society. Moreover, whilst they acknowledge the privatization and commodification of social and cultural life under capitalism, a supplanting of 'religious consciousness with a world of objects' (1996: 256), Hoover and Venturelli interrogate the traditional analytical distinction between the sacred and the profane, and propose secularization as 'a transformation in religious – not extra-religious – consciousness' (1996: 255), thus radically relocating the category of 'the religious' within the realm of 'the secular', especially the mass media.

Although Hoover's and Venturelli's terse discussion of what is meant by the categories of 'religion' and the 'religious' needs to be unpacked somewhat if it is to be fully exploited, it does indicate how re-examining these terms might provide a useful means of addressing the relationship between religion and media. What is of more immediate concern, however, is that the re-conceptualization of 'the religious' proposed by Hoover and Venturelli carries implications both for media practice and, more crucially here, media research.

For one thing, Venturelli and Hoover highlight the profound tension between the maintenance of political and moral community on the one hand, and life in a modern media-saturated environment on the other:

The "religion of secularism" with its canons of rationalism, practical action, and values constructed as commodities, presents, via the media, a totalizing worldview intended to obscure multivalent ontologies and sensibilities. Only in the private sphere of the self does the possibility of moral feeling unencumbered by the demands of the rational order, persist.  
(1996: 263)

Furthermore, they observe that the uncritical adoption of Enlightenment secularism by media researchers and theorists has led to 'an almost conscious distancing from the realms of deep meaning' (1996: 258). Given the persistence of religious worldviews around the globe, this leaves those involved in Media and Cultural Studies open to the charge of arrogance, hubris even, and calls into question the relevance and meaning of their work. Hence, Hoover and Venturelli (1996: 263)

conclude their essay by calling for 'a new attention to be paid to the category of the religious within the field of media theory and research'.<sup>2</sup>

### *Media Blindness in Religious Studies*

In parallel with Hoover's and Venturelli's notion of a 'blindspot' within media studies, though addressing the academy from the other side of the inter-disciplinary divide, Chris Arthur (1996a&b) has commented on the 'media blindness' (after Masterman, 1985) which afflicts religious studies. Highlighting points drawn from the work of John Hinnells (1990), Gregory Schopen (1991), Margaret Miles (1985), and William Graham (1987), Arthur emphasizes the extent to which 'media-blind' studies of religion tend to privilege the written word at the expense of other forms of expression.<sup>3</sup> The assumption 'that the written word is natural, normative, [and] authoritative' (Arthur 1996b: 4) leads to an unsatisfactory and elitist understanding of religion which plays down the significance of 'the person as the most important medium of all' (1996b: 7). Indeed, Arthur (1996b: 4) acknowledges the parallel between 'media-blindness' and 'gender-blindness' citing June O'Connor's (1995: 48) recognition that 'the epistemological significance of feminist research in religion lies in its asking questions about how we know what we know, what the sources of our knowledge are and why we trust them.'

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2 A similar argument is made by John Frow (1998: 207) who comments on 'the failure of cultural studies—with rare exceptions—to come to terms with, to theorize in any adequate way, what is perhaps the most important set of popular cultural systems in the world, religion in both its organized and disorganized forms'. He suggests that cultural studies needs to move beyond its 'embarrassment' with regard to religion, abandon the secularization thesis and 'take religion seriously in all of its dimensions because of its cultural centrality in the modern world' (1998: 208).

3 JohnHinnells (1990: 257) stresses the importance of examining the arts as a 'major form of religious expression', especially if one is to avoid 'plugging in to a level of religion which most of the practitioners are not, or have not been engaged in'. Schopen (1991) points out how 'Protestant presuppositions' have privileged writing as the locus of 'real' Buddhism in the study of Indian Buddhism. Miles (1985) demonstrates the extent to which it has been 'images rather than words' which have informed the identity and sense of purpose of many millions of historical subjects outwith an atypical and privileged minority of those able to read and write. Graham (1987) discusses the important but often neglected oral aspect of scripture.



