# Religion, Media, and Cultural Studies

Richard Fox
Assistant Professor of the History of Religions
University of Chicago Divinity School

Scholars and pundits alike insist we live in a new age, one variously described as 'the age of information,' 'the age of interaction,' 'the network age,' 'the media age,' and even 'the second media age.' It is, we are told, the age of 'postmodernity,' 'globalization,' 'late capitalism,' 'multiculturalism,' 'hyperreality,' and so on. The style of commentary associated with these terms may often seem bombastic or simply confused, when not outright obfuscatory. But, beneath the verbal effluence, lie two related ideas: everything has changed, and media have something to do with it. It is with a critical eye to these ideas that I would like to consider why—and precisely how—attention to media might prove important for an account of religion in the contemporary world.

In pursuing an answer to this question, my point of departure will be the simple observation that any attempt to account for religion will, by necessity, make certain assumptions regarding media, how they work and why they matter. As we shall see, this observation is as applicable to nineteenth-century philology as to present-day analyses of television and the Internet. The larger point to be taken is that a critical awareness of media theory—broadly construed—is important not only for those interested in new media, but equally so for students and established scholars working with more traditional media, such as scripture, music and poetry.

It is with this point in mind that I shall turn first to consider briefly the rise of 'religion and media' as a new field of scholarly inquiry and reflect on its relationship to earlier approaches to the academic study of religion. I will then examine some of the ways in which this new field has drawn on the legacy of British cultural studies, particularly in theorizing mass mediated communication. I would like to suggest that, on closer inspection, we will find that—in addition to providing a conceptual framework for new research on 'religion and media'—this approach reiterates several key assumptions traditionally associated with earlier approaches to theology and religious studies. For this reason, we may wish to reconsider both its claim to novelty as well as its critical viability.

## Religion and Media

'Religion and media' has gained visibility as a new field in the academic study of religions through a growing number of publications, research centers, and thematically focused conferences and workshops. In addition to single-authored monographs[1] and a regularly-issued professional periodical,[2] recent years have seen several edited volumes published on the subject.[3] Scholars working in this new field have tended to represent its rise to prominence within the academy as a response to broader developments in contemporary society, as exemplified by a series of events covered extensively in the Euro-American press. The latter predictably include the attacks of September 11, 2001, but also *inter alia* the ensuing 'war on terror,' the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States' presidential election of 2004, and debates on legislation pertaining to reproductive and marriage rights. Taken together, these developments are thought at once to mark a rupture with the past ('everything has changed') and at the same time to underwrite the urgency of research on religion and media ('media have something to do with it'). One finds, for example, Stewart Hoover's recently published monograph (2006), *Religion in the Media Age*, beginning with the following observation: '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.'[4] The mission statement for the NYU Center for Religion and Media opens on a similar note, suggesting that 'In the 21st century, religion is difficult to imagine

---

[1] See, e.g., Marie Gillespie, *Television, Ethnicity, and Cultural Change* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995); Lynn Schofield Clark, *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2005); and Stewart M. Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).

[2] *The Journal of Media and Religion*, first published in 2002.

[3] See, e.g., Chris Arthur, *Religion and the Media: An Introductory Reader* (Cardiff, Wales: University of Wales Press, Published on behalf of the World Association for Christian Communication, 1993); S.M. Hoover and Knut Lundby, eds., *Rethinking Media, Religion and Culture* (Thousand Oaks, London and New Delhi: Sage, 1997); Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber, eds., *Religion and Media* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); David Morgan and Sally M. Promey, eds., *The Visual Culture of American Religions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Jolyon P. Mitchell and Sophia Marriage, eds., *Mediating Religion* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2003); S.M. Hoover, L.S. Clark, and Diane F. Alters, *Media, Home, and Family* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004); Claire Badaracco, *Quoting God: How Media Shape Ideas about Religion and Culture* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2005); Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors, eds. *Religion, Media, and the Public Sphere* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006); and L.S. Clark, ed., *Religion, Media, and the Marketplace* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2007).

[4] Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age*, p. 1.

detached from the dizzying array of media that amplify and circulate its ideas and practices.'[5] The referent for the term 'media' is often left unspecified in such accounts, allowing for a great deal of slippage between different usages, on which more in a moment. Yet, whether emphasizing the idea of 'the media' as a social institution (Hoover) or 'media' as a form of technology (NYU), the central presupposition generally remains much the same. This is namely that, although the realms of religion and media—however understood—were once readily distinguishable, these days the boundaries between them are becoming increasingly blurred.

Given the emphasis on 'the twenty-first century,' one might be forgiven for thinking that media are a new problem for students of religion. Yet, here, it is important to bear in mind that it is actually quite difficult to discuss religion at all—during any historical period—*without* reference to media. One finds, for example, that new media were crucial in various ways for the rise and development of movements as disparate as the Buddhist Mahāyāna (c. first century CE), the Protestant Reformation (sixteenth century CE) and Indian Hindu Nationalism (twentieth century CE). That is to say, for the Mahāyāna, it is likely the use of written texts that helped new teachings—e.g., the ideal of the *bodhisattva*—to be preserved and disseminated without the direct involvement of the monastically-based institutions traditionally responsible for the oral transmission of the Buddha's discourses and discipline.[6] Similarly, the invention of the printing press facilitated the rise of a vernacular readership and the related decline of a clerical monopoly on scriptural interpretation in early modern Europe. As a result, for many Christians, a 'direct' engagement with Scripture came to replace the Latin liturgy as a primary interface with God.[7] Lastly, in late twentieth-century India, the epic Ramāyāṇa was serialized and broadcast on state television as part of a broader campaign to generate popular support for a religiously defined nationalism. Represented as an ancient pan-Indian tradition, the story and images of the divine king Ram were used in the late 1980's and early 1990's to articulate a new 'Hindu' political

---

[5] New York University Mission Statement for The Center for Religion and Media. http://www.nyu.edu/fas/center/religionandmedia/?menu=aboutUs&sub=missionStatement. Accessed on September 4, 2008.

[6] See Richard Gombrich, 'How the Mahayana Began' *Journal of Pali and Buddhist Studies* 1 (1988): 29-46.

[7] See Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin, *The Coming of the Book; The Impact of Printing, 1450-1800* (London: New Left Books, 1976).

solidarity across divisions of ethnicity, sectarian affiliation, gender, language and class.[8]

Without wishing to oversimplify unduly, new forms of religiosity and community were in each case related to the rise of a new medium. But, what precisely does it mean to interpret the written word, the printing press, or television *as media*? Should the medium be understood primarily in technological terms, as a conduit for the transmission of religious ideology? Or perhaps institutionally, as a structured complex of social relations? Or, again, pragmatically, as constituted by the practices through which it becomes intelligible as an object of historical inquiry? Any one of these approaches might have something to contribute to an account of why a particular medium has mattered for an understanding of religion in a given historical context. But it must be emphasized that each of these approaches constitutes 'media' differently as an object of knowledge; and there is no self-evident reason to assume commensurability between them. For reasons that will become apparent, it is my contention that one's assumptions regarding the nature and theoretical significance of media will determine in important ways one's interpretation of a given religious configuration and its history. As an initial step toward understanding why this is the case, I would like briefly to consider the media-related assumptions of a prominent scholar of religion working in the latter half of the 19th century. The selection of this particular example is meant to counter the prevailing tendency to associate problems of media exclusively with developments in present-day society, as well as to lay the foundations for my subsequent analysis of more recent work on religion and media and its theoretical dependence on a particular strain of British cultural studies.

## Müller's media

In February and March of 1870, the recently appointed Oxford Professor of Comparative Philology, Friedrich Max Müller (1823-1900), delivered a series of four lectures on 'the science of religion' at The Royal Institution in London. Originally collected and published in 1873, and reprinted several times, these lectures have been interpreted retrospectively as a charter for what would later be called comparative religion, or religious studies.[9] In an oft-cited passage, Müller declared,

---

[8] See Arvind Rajagopal, *Politics After Television; Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[9] See Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History,* Second Edition (London: Duckworth, 1986).

> It becomes … the duty of those who have devoted their life to the study of the principle religions of the world in their original documents, and who value religion and reverence it in whatever form it may present itself, to take possession of this new territory in the name of true science, and thus to protect its sacred precincts from the inroads of those who think that they have a right to speak on the ancient religions of mankind, whether those of the Brahmans, the Zoroastrians, or Buddhists, or those of the Jews and Christians, without ever having taken the trouble of learning the languages in which their sacred books are written.[10]

This brief excerpt brings together several of the central principles underpinning Müller's approach to the study of religion. We have an emphasis on language and textual sources; an ideal of science as characterized by discovery, possession, and custodianship; and an implicit distinction between religion as such and the various forms in which it may present itself. By examining these ideas more closely, we will discover that they are linked at various levels to a general theory of media that is evident, among other places, in his understanding of text, language, and even religion itself.

For our purposes, it is instructive to begin with the idea of 'original documents' and 'sacred books' as comprising a scholar's primary point of access to 'the principle religions of the world.' This emphasis on textual sources drove much of Müller's work, from his critical edition of the Ṛg Veda to his substantive contributions and editorship of the historic fifty-volume translation series, *The Sacred Books of the East*. These editions and translations were not produced as an end in their own right, but were rather meant to provide a textual foundation for the comparative study of 'the principle religions of the world'.[11]

In pursuing such textually based comparison, Müller was drawing on a broader European philological tradition that grew up around the study of classical antiquity and the Bible, to later include the historical linguistics—or 'comparative philology'—associated with figures such as Karl Wilhelm Friedrich von Schlegel (1772-1829) and Franz Bopp (1791-1867). The procedural principle driving this tradition of inquiry may be described in its barest form as the recovery of an originary moment (e.g., a word, text, or language) through the comparative analysis of its various transformations through space and time. It was on this basis, for

---

[10] Friedrich Max Müller, *Introduction to the Science of Religion; Four Lectures Delivered at the Royal Institution in February and May, 1870* (London: Longmans, Green, 1893), pp. 26-7.

[11] See, F.M. Müller, trans., *The Upanishads*. The Sacred Books of the East. Translated and edited by various oriental scholars. Vol. I (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879), pp. xi-xii.

example, that William Jones (1746-1794) first proposed the idea of a common Indo-European linguistic ancestor for Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin. As he put it, 'no philologer could examine them all three without believing them to have sprung from *some common source,* which perhaps no longer exists'.[12] Following Jones's lead, historical linguists refined the comparisons in pursuit of a conjectural proto-Indo-European language from which were descended the various members of a linguistic family stretching from northern India through much of Europe and into western Asia. In short, the idea was that one could work back to the originary form by discerning and eliminating the changes that had occurred in its transmission.

This general principle played out at several levels within Müller's work on the Ṛg Veda, the oldest stratum of what he called 'the sacred books of the Brahmans.' We have first, at a most rudimentary level, the basic philological framework defined by 'the text' and 'its manuscripts.' Prefacing his presentation of one of the Vedic commentaries, Müller noted that, 'If it were possible to recover the original manuscript of a work, as written by the author himself, there would be no need of criticism'.[13] Unfortunately, this was rarely the case, as 'generally our manuscripts are much later than the composition of the works which they contain, and, if compared with one another, they are found to differ from each other, partly in mistakes and omissions, partly in corrections and additions, arising, in the course of centuries, from the hands or heads of ignorant or learned transcribers.'[14] Here, through the metaphor of container/content, the author's work was represented as a subtle substance transmitted—that is to say, quite literally sent across (Latin, *trans- + mittĕre*) space and time—through the medium of its manuscripts. However, as Müller remarked in a related connection, this originary substance was 'always … distorted by the medium through which it had to pass'.[15] Faced with such a predicament, the comparative procedures of textual criticism were deployed 'to restore from the manuscripts a readable and authentic text' by reversing the process of 'distortion.'[16]  As Müller explained,

---

[12] William Jones, *The Works of Sir William Jones; With the Life of the Author by Lord Teignmouth*, Volume II (London: John Stockdale and John Walker, 1807 [1788]) p. 268; emphasis in original.

[13] F.M. Müller, *Rig-Veda-Sa*mitâ: *The Sacred Hymns of the Brâmans; Together with Commentary of Sâya*nâ*kârya*, Volume I, Second edition (London: Oxford University Press, 1890[1849]), p. xvi. NB: The preface to the first edition is dated 1849.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Müller , *Introduction to the Science of Religion*, p. 53.

[16] Müller, *Rig-Veda-Sa*mitâ, p. ix.

if there are, for instance, certain manuscripts which omit a certain number of passages that have been preserved in others, we may safely conclude that the manuscripts which coincide in omitting these passages flow from the same original source. But out of the number of manuscripts which thus coincide in omitting certain sentences, some may again differ in other characteristic passages, and thus form new classes and subdivisions. By carefully collecting a large number of such characteristic passages, all the manuscripts of an author arrange themselves spontaneously, and form at last a kind of genealogical series, where each has its proper place, and commands … its proper share of authority.[17]

This procedure mirrors precisely the logic at work in the pursuit of a 'common source' for Sanskrit, Greek and Latin. One restores the original moment by discerning and removing the omissions, additions and other transformations that characterize its appearance—however distorted—in the various manuscripts (or languages) to which the scholar has access on the contemporary scene. It is worth emphasizing the circularity entailed in such an endeavor. Simply put, a foreknowledge of the original text is implicitly required to recognize its manuscripts as such (i.e., as manuscripts *of that text*); while the manuscripts themselves are the sole avenue to a knowledge of the text.[18] Put another way, while scientific comparison was thought to enable a return to origins, one could only enter the interpretive circle through a leap of faith. As European philology and hermeneutics emerged out of the tradition of biblical criticism,[19] it should perhaps come as little surprise to discover a theological foundation undergirding Müller's theory of text.

The more general principle of recovering an originary moment by way of comparison was also evident on a larger scale in Müller's assessment of the Veda itself. Noting that 'the mythology of the Veda is to comparative mythology what Sanskrit has been to comparative grammar," he explained, 'nowhere is the wide distance which separates the ancient poems of India from the most ancient literature of Greece more clearly felt than when we compare the growing myths of the Veda with the full-grown and decayed myths on which the poetry of Homer is founded. The Veda is the real Theogony of the Aryan races, while that of Hesiod is a

---

[17] Ibid., pp. xvi-xvii.

[18] This, of course, is merely another permutation of the problematic theorized elsewhere in terms of the hermeneutic circle.

[19] See, e.g., Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969).

distorted caricature of the original image.'[20]  As with the more narrowly philological framework defined by the text and its manuscripts, here we encounter the trope of 'distortion' writ large. The 'original image' of the early Veda is constituted as a subtle substance that suffers distortion in the process of its transmission through 'the wide distance' of space and time.

Working this figure through yet several more permutations, Müller continued, 'If we want to know whither the human mind, though endowed with the natural consciousness of a divine power, is driven necessarily and inevitably by the irresistible force of language as applied to supernatural and abstract ideas, we must read the Veda; and if we want to tell the Hindus what they are worshipping, – mere names of natural phenomena, gradually obscured, personified, and deified, – we must make them read the Veda.'[21]  On this account, Homer and Hesiod, as well as contemporary Hindus, possess but the distorted image of their Vedic past. As with his model of text, such distortion emerges as an ineluctable consequence of the process of mediation. Müller often referred to this degeneration as a 'disease of language,' whereby a primitive apprehension of 'the Infinite'—as intuited in Nature —would necessarily give way to elaborate mythologies that 'gradually obscured, personified, and deified' what had originally been 'mere names of natural phenomena.' Although for Müller this 'irresistible force of language' was universal, he also thought it reversible. For, 'much of what seems to us, and seemed to the best among the ancients, irrational and irreverent in the mythologies of India, Greece, and Italy, can … be removed,' thereby revealing 'the most ancient, the most original intention of sacred traditions.'[22] It was to this end, in the passage cited above, that Müller called for the comparative study of religion 'in whatever form it may present itself.' The idea was that, by comparing 'the principle religions of the world,' we might work our way back to the one 'true religion.' For, 'though each religion has its own peculiar growth, the seed from which they spring is everywhere the same. That seed is the perception of the Infinite.'[23]

Müller's science was premised on the possibility of approaching the primordial apprehension of 'the Infinite' through a comparison of its variously distorted instantiations in 'the principle religions of the world.' The character of this

---

[20] F.M. Müller 'Comparative Mythology,' in *Chips from a German Workshop*, Vol. II. (London: Longmans, Green, 1867 [1856]), pp. 75-6.

[21] Ibid.

[22] F.M. Müller, 'The Science of Religion: Lecture I,' in Jon R. Stone, ed. *The Essential Max Müller: On Language, Mythology, and Religion*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002[1870]), p. 120.

[23] F.M. Müller, 'The Perception of the Infinite,' in Stone, *The Essential Max Müller*, p. 188.

project was determined by a specific set of presuppositions that we have seen consistently at work in his account of several media, from text and language to religion itself. In each case, a subtle substance—the author's original work, the real Theogony of the Aryan races, and the apprehension of the Infinite—was distorted 'by the medium through which it had to pass' as it moved through time and space. It must be emphasized that, from this perspective, the unity of 'media' was not to be found in a particular technology or social institution, but rather in the presuppositions underpinning a range of practices, from textual criticism to Müller's uniquely religio-philosophical anthropology. In each case, the same fundamental presuppositions underwrote a deployment of the comparative method to trace a path from distorted transmissions to their common point of origin. The very recognition of distortion—e.g., 'when religion is not any more what it ought to be'[24]—already presupposed precisely this model. And in this regard we may say, as we may say for us all, that Müller's assumptions regarding media determined in important ways his understanding of religion.

## Cultural Studies: Heading Back to the Future?

One might expect that some one-hundred years later Müller's understanding of religion and media would appear rather dated. Among other developments, the intervening years have seen new approaches to media from figures as diverse in critical and political orientation as Theodor Adorno and Marshall McLuhan, Jürgen Habermas and Jean Baudrillard, Claude E. Shannon and Stuart Hall. Similarly, for nearly half a century, the viability of 'religion' as a critical category has been questioned through the work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Talal Asad, Jonathan Z. Smith and others. In contrast to Müller's nineteenth-century approach, which sought to reverse the effects of mediation and reduce the apparent multiplicity of 'religions' through recourse to a universal foundation ('true religion' as 'the apprehension of the Infinite'), more recent scholarship in the human sciences has—at least in principle—tended to work in the opposite direction. That is to say, for many, the recognition of difference has motivated a radical reassessment of the claim to universality for European and American ways of understanding and being in the world. This reassessment has often entailed acknowledging the possibility of an irreducible disjuncture between scholarly categories (e.g., religion, race, gender,

---

[24] F.M Müller 'Buddhist Nihilism,' in Stone, *The Essential Max Müller,* p. 85.

culture) and the lives of those they purport to represent.[25] Unfortunately, scholars working on 'religion and media' have tended to shy away from the problems raised by this potential disjuncture, instead cleaving to one or another universalizing definition of 'religion.'

In his analysis of 'religious visual culture,' for example, David Morgan has drawn on the work of Catherine Albanese to offer a 'working definition of religion' as 'configurations of social relatedness and cultural ordering that appeal to powers that assist humans in organizing their collective and individual lives.'[26] With somewhat different emphasis, Hoover has offered a definition of religion as 'rooted in individual consciousness,' a position he supported through reference to Clifford Geertz's frequently cited model of 'religion as a cultural system'.[27] The point here is not simply to take issue with one or other of these definitions, but, rather, to question the very grounds on which definition itself is pursued as an intellectual practice. As Asad argued in his critique of Geertz, 'there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes.'[28]

There are several possible reasons why this critique has failed to register with scholars of 'religion and media.' In the first instance, the field is generally characterized by a lack of engagement with pertinent debates long underway in related fields (e.g., anthropology, history, postcolonial studies, queer theory), combined with an apparent lack of familiarity with the genealogy of their own ideas (e.g., the historical relationship between media theory, hermeneutics, and theology). Secondly, with notable exceptions, the vast majority of research on 'religion and media' is conducted in Anglophone North America and Western Europe. Taken together, these tendencies have shielded scholars of 'religion and media' from the challenges that might be posed by a more cosmopolitan approach,

---

[25] On 'religion,' see Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Disciplines and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993). Compare, for example, on 'gender,' Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Tenth Anniversary Edition (New York and London: Routledge, 1999 [1990]); on 'culture,' Mark Hobart, *After Culture: Ethnography as Radical Metaphysical Critique* (Denpasar, Indonesia: Duta Wacana University Press, 2000); and, on 'race,' Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

[26] Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, p. 52.

[27] Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age*, pp. 11, 23; Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (USA: Harper Collins, 1973).

[28] Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, p. 29.

their provincialism abetted by a theory of mass-mediated communication adopted—or perhaps adapted—from British cultural studies. For, as we shall see, this account of media is structurally analogous to the model we have already discussed in relation to Müller's account of text, language, and religion—and, as such, it engenders all the circularity and presumption to universality that we discerned there.

We may begin by noting that much of the current scholarship on 'religion and media' is organized around the analysis of 'media reception' and 'meaning-making.' Studies have focused, for example, on 'the contribution of religious frameworks to meaning making in relation to the media,'[29] 'the meaning-making that believers undertake in the visual practices of daily life,'[30] 'how local values and conditions mediate the reception and uses of media technology,'[31] and the 'ways in which situated media reception occurs according to the logic of individual receivers and audiences.'[32] This emphasis on 'meaning making' may be read as a distinctly American—and perhaps even generationally specific (i.e., 'baby boomer,' following Roof[33])—extrapolation from David Morley's ethnographic work with audiences,[34] which itself drew heavily on Geertz's (1973) model of interpretive anthropology. However, more generally speaking, the interest in 'individual receivers and audiences' tends to be represented by scholars of 'religion and media' as a corrective both to statistically driven studies of 'consumption' (associated particularly with the field of Mass Communications) and more textually oriented analyses of media 'products' (associated with various strands of cultural studies and 'discourse analysis'). While the former has been judged inadequately sensitive to local contexts of media use, the latter has been deemed similarly incapable of grasping the importance of media as they affect 'everyday lived experience.' The question is whether such a corrective emphasis on 'reception' is capable of producing its desired effect. To understand what is at issue, we must have a closer look at the underlying theory of media on which it is based.

---

[29] Hoover et al., *Media, Home, and Family*, p. 13.

[30] Morgan and Promey, *The Visual Culture of American Religions*, p. 17.

[31] Rosalind Hackett, 'Managing or Manipulating Religious Conflict in the Nigerian Media,' in Mitchell and Marriage, eds. *Mediating Religion*, pp. 49, 52.

[32] S.M. Hoover, 'The Culturalist Turn in Scholarship on Media and Religion' *Journal of Media and Religion* 1:1 (2002): 29.

[33] Wade C. Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

[34] E.g., David Morley, *Television, Audiences, and Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge 1992).

As Clark and Hoover noted in an early bibliographic essay,[35] students of religion and media have tended to follow the lead of British cultural studies in their accounts of mass-mediated communication. These accounts—beginning with Stuart Hall's oft-cited essay on 'encoding/decoding,'[36] and subsequently including the work of John Fiske, John Hartley, David Morley and others—more or less agree on the fundamentals of communication. In short, an encoded message is transmitted from a sender to a receiver, who then decodes the message—or, as it is sometimes called, the 'media text'—with varying degrees of fidelity to its original form. The distortion or changes that are detected in the message as it occurs at the site of reception (e.g., in interviews with 'audience members') are generally attributed to an incongruity—deliberate or otherwise—between the encoding and decoding of the sender and receiver respectively. Various factors are invoked in explanation for what appear to be non-mimetic decodings, ranging from the inherent polysemy of the message to a deliberately aberrant or oppositional posture taken up by the audience.[37]

This account of mass-mediated communication emerged out of a broader series of developments in the analysis of class and ideology in post-War Britain. The latter were associated most prominently with figures including Richard Hoggart, E.P. Thompson, Raymond Williams, and later Stuart Hall and the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. The work of the Centre was explicitly political from the outset, with its emphasis on the analysis of media premised on the idea that 'any society/culture tends, with varying degrees of closure, to impose its classifications of the social and cultural and political world.'[38] Following a broadly Marxian trajectory—and drawing more specifically (if selectively) on the work of the Italian political philosopher and activist, Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) —this was thought to comprise a 'process whereby the subordinate are led to

---

[35] L.S. Clark and S. Hoover, 'At the Intersection of Media, Culture, and Religion: A Bibliographic Essay,' in Hoover and Lundby, *Rethinking Media, Religion and Culture*.

[36] Stuart Hall, 'Encoding/decoding,' in *Culture, Media, Language; Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-1979*, eds. S. Hall, et al. (London: Hutchison, 1980). This article is listed as an edited extract from Hall, 'Encoding and Decoding in Television Discourse' CCCS Stencilled Paper no. 7 (1973).

[37] This tripartite model of mass-mediated communication—and its notion of 'the audience'— naturalizes an industry model associated with the practices of producers. See, e.g., John Hartley, *Teleology: Studies in Television*.(London and New York: Routledge, 1992); and Ien Ang, *Desperately Seeking the Audience* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991).

[38] Hall, 'Encoding/decoding,' p. 134.

consent to the system that subordinates them.'[39] Media figured in this account as the primary means toward such imposition, while the imposition itself was cast as the outcome of uncritical media decoding on the part of the audience—i.e., the consenting acceptance of the 'dominant' or 'preferred meaning' that has been encoded in the 'media text.' So, how is this 'decoding' thought to work? And under what conditions does it become accessible as an object of scholarly inquiry?

Although the 'preferred meaning' is encoded at the site of production, it seems that it is not always received as sent. Rather, we are told that 'the codes of encoding and decoding may not be perfectly symmetrical….What are called 'distortions' or 'misunderstandings' arise precisely from the *lack of equivalence* between the two sides in the communicative exchange.'[40] Noting this potential for incongruity, Morley suggested that the 'effects' of mass mediated communication might be measured by 'the extent to which decodings take place within the limits of the preferred (or dominant) manner in which the message has been initially encoded.'[41] For example, on this approach, the ideological 'effectivity' of an advertisement for an American-made pickup truck might be measured by the extent to which viewers identified with and acted on its articulation of masculinity, authenticity, patriotism, and so on. That is to say, the degree of an audience member's consent to the dominant ideology is deemed measurable by the extent to which she or he receives and decodes the mass-mediated message as sent.[42]

On this account, the analysis of any particular decoding would proceed from (and therefore require) a foreknowledge of the 'preferred meaning' that is thought to inhere in the 'media text.' From there, an ethnographic study of audience commentary might comprise the means of establishing 'the extent to which decodings take place within [its] limits.' Aberrant decoding on the part of the audience—i.e., an interpretive departure from the 'preferred meaning'—would register as something akin to a 'distortion' resulting from a 'lack of equivalence between the two sides in the communicative exchange.' This, however, raises the question of how one might recognize 'distortion' as such.

---

[39] John Fiske, *Television Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1987), p. 40.

[40] Hall, 'Encoding/decoding,' p. 131; italics in original.

[41] Morley, *Television, Audiences, and Cultural Studies*, p. 86.

[42] For a critique of this approach, see Virginia Nightingale, *Studying Audiences: The Shock of the Real* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

Morley noted that 'the text is never available for analysis except in the context of its activations,'[43] and so it would appear that its 'preferred meaning' would have to be sought in a particular 'activation.' Yet, insofar as such an 'activation' would entail decoding—e.g., by the cultural studies analyst—the 'activated' message will be *always already* potentially distorted ('the codes of encoding and decoding may not be perfectly symmetrical'). As we have seen in the previous section with respect to Müller, there is an unavoidable circularity entailed in any such process. On the one hand, the analyst's goal of identifying the 'preferred meaning' in the 'activated' message would ride on the recognition and removal of any distortion brought about in the process of (analytic) decoding. Yet, on the other, the ability to recognize that distortion presupposes a foreknowledge of the undistorted 'preferred meaning.' As with Müller's recovery of the unitary 'apprehension of the Infinite' from its distorted appearance in 'the world's principle religions,' *this mode of inquiry can only reveal something that was already known at the outset*.

It is at least in part for this reason that the study of 'religion and media' has been able to proceed free from the kinds of doubts currently plaguing older and arguably more mature disciplines. By adopting a theory of media that entails such circularity, one presumes they can rest assured that no challenge will be made to the assumptions from which they have begun. As I have already suggested, this orientation has insulated the process of inquiry from the kinds of challenges and uncertainties that would arise from a more cosmopolitan approach. This is not to suggest that, within the fold, there is no one working on 'religion and media' in Asia, Africa, and elsewhere. On the contrary, edited volumes and conference panels frequently incorporate contributions addressing research conducted in other parts of the world. And, to be fair, there is interesting work being done by those with a broader purview.[44] However, for the time being, studies of 'the nonwestern world' seem to amount to little more than what the French philosopher and cultural critic, Roland Barthes, theorized in terms of *inoculation*: 'One immunizes the contents of the collective imagination by means of a small inoculation of acknowledged evil; one thus protects it against the risk of a generalized subversion.'[45] That is to say, we entertain 'the Other' as a variation on what we think we already know, thereby

---

[43] Morley, *Television, Audiences, and Cultural Studies*, p. 179.

[44] See, e.g., contributions to Meyer and Moors, *Religion, Media, and the Public Sphere*; and cp. Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); and Faye Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Brian Larkin, eds., *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2002).

[45] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), p. 150.

reassuring our faith in the universality of our own understanding of the world. This may have been *de rigueur* in the late nineteenth century. It is surely an embarrassment in the so-called 'media age'.

## Acknowledgements