

The inconvenient problem of the media “object”:

a response to “Religion, Media, and Cultural Studies” by Richard Fox

Richard Fox presents a thoughtful and challenging review of scholarly efforts directed at the ways media and religion interact in modernity. Such critiques cannot help but improve scholarship by prompting reflection and re-examination, and that is my burden here. Fox’s work recognizes a set of efforts that have been underway for several decades but which have received a new impetus as the result of recent events, as he notes.

Rather than the unified and coherent scholarly field Richard Fox contemplates, I would instead describe the efforts he critiques as a cross-disciplinary discourse about the intersections and interactions between media and religion in modernity. But to the extent this discourse exists and is characterized by a common set of conversations and literatures, I will attempt to respond to his critique, first in summary, then in some more detail.

In the first instance, Fox accuses those who work on media and religion of essentialism around the objects “religion” and “media.” Specifically, he seems to want to read these literatures as sharing a fixation on an instrumentalist connection between religious authority and religious text. Second, continuing with this line of argument, he criticizes this work for what he sees as its roots in British Cultural Studies, assuming that the burden of all media and religion scholarship revolves around questions of the power, influence, or efficacy of textual mediations of religion. He then goes on to a broader critique of what he sees to be the insularity and Eurocentrism of this work.

The problem is that he can’t have read the works he critiques very carefully and not noticed that they do not share a common intellectual source or tradition, but cut across a number of disciplines and literatures. There are multiple sources and roots. Only a narrow range of them (those that trace their roots to media studies) explicitly refer to the British Cultural Studies tradition, and closer attention there should have revealed a very different reading of this “culturalism” than the one he suggests. A close reading would have revealed a radically non-essentialized approach to religion, as well.

As an anthropologist of religion, Fox must recognize that what many of the works he cites share in common is a displacement of both “religion” and “media” as essential categories and in their place a focus on the logics of *practice* and how these practices reposition what both “religion” and “media” mean. The research “object” of mediated religion as it exists in Western modernity and (more importantly) in Western modernist *discourse*, does tend to essentialize both “media” and “religion” and assumes a contiguity between “religion” and “mediation.” The most representative work historicizes and problematizes this, reflexively engaging its own position in relation to these received discourses. This is the major underlying logic of the efforts of both Morgan and Hoover, which he cites. Fox seems not to appreciate that work on this in the West thus necessarily must name and confront these essentialisms, and he appears therefore to have been lured into a conceptual rabbit hole. He apparently does not like work on religion in Europe and North America very much. He is right that an approach that learns from the context of the “not-West” does confront the easy essentialisms of the received discourses. In fact, among those

who would identify themselves as media and religion scholars one finds important and substantive works clearly located outside the Euro-American context that have contributed a great deal to our understanding of these questions. This makes his claim of mindless Euro-centrism particularly baffling, as many of these appear (apparently presented with approval) in his own footnotes.

In essence, Fox suggests that media and religion scholarship suffers from a kind of incompetence. He criticizes what he sees as a lack of engagement with relevant debates in other fields (anthropology, history, postcolonial studies, queer theory) and a "...lack of familiarity with the genealogy of their own ideas," noting in particular "media theory, hermeneutics, and theology." Space here prevents a detailed response, but I think this might be beside the point, anyway, as we would not be discussing the same scholarly turf. Fox rightly deplores the technological determinism in much thinking about media. At the same time, his own reading of sources in the field of media studies seems not to have included current (or even recent) work. He presents Adorno, McLuhan, Habermas, Baudrillard, Shannon, and Hall, as "diverse in critical and political orientation."

They may be, but most of them share in common a remarkably consistent, high modernist (even technologically determinist) understanding of media and mediation. The exceptions, of course, might be (depending on the specific question under consideration) Baudrillard and Hall, but this is hardly a diverse field in relation to received discourses of what "media" and "mediation" mean. Further, few media scholars today treat Hall and the larger British Cultural Studies tradition as anything other than one particularly influential source. And most carefully historicize its own sources in the ideological atmosphere of Thatcher's Britain. In that historical context, its concerns about the relationship between texts and meanings make some sense. But that is not the way most media scholars read British Cultural Studies. Instead, its influence is more commonly felt in the way it confronted the prior, more scientific-positivist readings of mediation-as-determination. In fact, Fox's description of British Cultural Studies might better fit the prior, Frankfurt-School "mass society" theory, which it sought to nuance and complexify. This might have resulted from his seeming unfamiliarity with Hall's more recent work. In any case, Birmingham scholars saw—and contemporary culturalist media scholars see—the object as "culture," not as "media" *per se*. It is not about the nature of the text and the process of decoding that text. It is about the whole range of cultural practices that surround the media "object" in all its forms. Of the two works in the media and religion tradition he cites, only one—Hoover—explicitly invokes the Birmingham school of thought, and then in a very different way than Fox claims.

A second area of incompetence (in Fox's view) is in the Americo- and Euro-centrism of this work. He observes that the fact that the majority of work on media and religion has been conducted in Anglophone North America and in Western Europe has shielded it from challenges that might be posed by a more cosmopolitan approach. The same holds, in his view, for the range of scholarly discourses from anthropology and history to queer theory, which he claims have been ignored by media and religion researchers. In fact, a number of efforts that one might identify with media and religion scholarship (and some of which Fox himself cites, as I have said) have in fact moved beyond received boundaries. Is this myopia—in his view—a provincialism born of the roots in British Cultural Studies, or is it something else? Other than what might be read as an unfortunate tendency to underplay the value of work on religion in the

industrialized West, there is not a lot of help here understanding exactly what scholarships he is talking about. Media and religion research has benefited from substantial contributions by both anthropologists and historians, and these other “ignored” disciplines are increasingly represented, too.

But there is a larger problem in the way that Fox himself essentializes both media and religion. This is curious given his own criticism that media and religion scholarship has been entrapped by its universalist definitions. Is the preferred project of media and religion research the perfection of the mediation of “...the apprehension of the Infinite...” as he suggests? Most certainly not. Media and religion scholarship recognizes that that is far too narrow a view of what “religion” is or might be. There are playful, metaphoric, subjunctive, iterative, ironic, resistive, quotidian, gendered, culturally-nuanced, trivial, and contradictory mediations of the “religious,” “near religious,” and “religious-by-exclusion.” Each of these could be prone to—and perhaps result from—different textures and registers of mediation.

Fox seems to want to say that we do know and understand what religion is and religions are and that these known “objects” can be assumed to have known—and knowable—relations to their mediation, formally-defined. This is, in fact, one register within which we might contemplate these things, but it is certainly not the only one. Far be it from me to suggest the extent to which the meaning of religion is nuanced, layered, and textured today in practice, discourse, and scholarship, but I do want to suggest some things about the ways media and religion scholars (again, with caveats about the extent to which it is, in fact, a coherent tradition) have tended to think about media in relation to religion.

Early on Fox presents three different—seemingly exclusive—definitions of media-as-technology in relation to religion: as a conduit of religious ideology; as constituted by practice; or as complex of social relations. We must recognize that “media” are all of these things—and more. He seems to assume that mediation is somehow coterminous with authoritative religious text, when media and religion analysts (and culturalist media scholars in general) make a distinction between these.

The inconvenient problem of the “media object” thus is a challenge to Fox’s analysis. He seems to assume that any analysis or definition of any “medium” must apply to all “media.” But there are fundamental differences between media and between the scholarships devoted to media. By “media” does he mean “mediation” (or “mediatization”—an emergent media scholarship that has made significant claims about the nature of contemporary religion) or the industries and institutions of the media as cultural forces, or Athusser’s “ideological state apparatus” or as economic or political forces, or the media as cultural practices, either on large, whole-culture scales (as in the emergent “media ritual” literatures) or on smaller scales (such as in “fandom,” the “social media,” or gaming)?

Fox is quite right in pointing to what might be learned from attention to questions of media and religion in relation to the global south. One of the primary learnings from non-Western contexts relates to this question of the definition of “media” and “mediation.” Media, mediation, and “the media” are differently and multiply articulated into practices of reception and consumption in any local or regional context. However, this is—at least in part—a problem of institutional, structural, and economic analysis. Thus, it is not just a question of the hermetic religious

cultures of the global peripheries and their particular ways of imagining “the religious.” And, even on a “cultural” (as opposed to a socio-structural) level these peripheries are linked, through what Anthony Giddens would call reflexive modernity, into a global discourse which connects religion and media. Likewise, in the Western context(s) one can’t escape looking at media in terms of ideology, or at least its aspirations to ideological influence. So, yes, it is indeed the case that what Fox wishes to call “...a more cosmopolitan approach...” is in order. But it seems that this is a much more complex, layered, and nuanced challenge than he suggests.

I would not argue that no scholarship focused on media and religion has evidenced the lacunae Fox identifies. I can think of examples. What I am arguing is that the kinds of issues he has raised have already been anticipated and addressed by many working this turf, and that those are among the most basic issues that must be addressed. I am certain that the scholarly dialogue that he seeks can develop further—and helpfully so—for all involved in the study of these important phenomena.

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