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The Handbook on Religion and Communication

Edited by

Yoel Cohen
Paul A. Soukup

WILEY Blackwell
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Introduction

Academics have studied communication and religion for some 40 years, but the area only slowly received recognition in the wider area of mass media studies. Media studies grew from the social sciences and like all social sciences initially emphasized empirical or even scientific methods and a secular orientation. Not surprisingly, it took time to incorporate elements like belief and spirituality into the schema of social scientists, who had little interest in studying religious doctrine or theology. However, they did pay attention to religious institutions and more so now to the place of religion in popular culture and to the rise of online religion.

If empty church pews in Western Europe and emptying ones in North America suggest a decline in organized religious activity, religion has not disappeared but has changed. Indeed, many factors have combined to raise the profile of religion in communication circles. The twentieth century witnessed considerable developments in religiosity: shifting allegiances to the historical Christian Churches, rising membership in Evangelical Christianity, the growth of public Islam, the decline of Church authority in traditionally Catholic countries, religious scandals touching on sexuality or on finances, and a globalization of non-Western religions. The place of religion vis-à-vis traditional media sources like the press, radio, television, and film has changed with traditional media expressing more critical views and giving less “soft” coverage of religion and religious groups, and with governments and media companies offering less free access to broadcasting. In the more recent past, new media offer new means to communicate and portray religion, with literally thousands of websites and Twitter feeds devoted to religion.

Religious groups have undergone a kind of communication conversion. In almost all the areas that media and religion scholars investigate, religious groups themselves have taken to communication media and communication practices, including advertising and public relations. Religious groups have also accepted that the digital media can communicate religious experience, using media in which voice and individuals converge with text, in a two-way process. Thus, the new media have a role in creating religious identity. Parallel to this has been a shift toward religious themes about spirituality and values and away from religious institutions. Those religious groups with recognised or official teachers – the Vatican Pontifical Council on Social Communication, the US National Council of [Christian] Churches, Islamic imams, synagogue organizations in Judaism, and so on – have recognized this phenomenon and offered a variety of instructions on media use. Communication studies have taken note.

Acts of terrorist violence carried out in the name of religion provide another development that has raised scholarly interest in religion and communication. While the attacks of 9/11 may remain the most visual act, satellite communications going back to the 1970s have enabled religion-related violence to reach a global audience. Digital media also enable religious hate speech to spread widely, whether such speech targets Christians, Muslims, Jews, or religious minorities. This phenomenon, too, merits scholarly attention.
Introduction

On the positive side, the same technologies that allow instant access to religious violence also allow religious leaders to reach out with messages of peace, as have the Pope, the Dalai Lama, and the Chief Rabbis or Chief Imams of different countries. Interreligious meetings promoting harmony, such as meetings of different religious heads, receive wide media attention.

But the digital era threatens religious authority. If in the past, a person’s religious beliefs were regarded as a private matter and one directed by religious teachers – priests, rabbis, imams, pastors, gurus, etc. – this has changed radically by the beginning of the twenty-first century. Audiences frankly discuss their religious beliefs on social networks; people seek religious advice or counsel online; the most eloquent (or demanding) voices become authoritative ones. Religious controversies become public controversies.

Yet it would be wrong to look at contemporary intersections between religion and popular culture only or primarily through the prism of new media and digital media. Even in today’s digital age, old media, interpersonal communication, and material religion (to name just a few kinds of communication) still play important roles. Against the background of these developments, the Handbook of Religion and Communication aspires to map out the wider interactions of communication, religious identity, and behavior.

Given the international orientation of the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR), the Handbook of Religion and Communication aims to go beyond a Western locus, which has characterized research on media and religion in the past, to embrace faith traditions in other regions like Asia and Africa. The international approach also finds expression in the contributors to the Handbook, who include past and present members of the IAMCR’s Religion and Communication working group as well as younger scholars new to the IAMCR.

Lynch (2005) identifies three different ways in which popular culture, including communication, interacts with religion: first, popular cultural texts and practices have shaped the beliefs, structures, and practices of religious groups; second, religion is represented in the wider culture; and third, religious groups interact with wider popular culture. Following that general schema, the Handbook discusses themes such as religion and evangelism in public culture and the ways that a media culture has begun to shape religious practice, evidenced in the styles of televangelists or in online religion. Second, it asks how religion is itself represented in wider culture, in film (fiction and documentary), in entertainment, and in media coverage of religion news. Finally, exploring how religious groups interact with wider popular culture, the book addresses issues such as religious authority and challenges from media, notably the new media. Not infrequently, the three ways in which popular culture interact with religion overlap, particularly in how far religions have taken on the trappings of commercialism in their own communication practices (pp. 20–42).

More specifically, the Handbook of Religion and Communication divides the material into eight parts. It opens with theoretical material on how scholars have approached the study of communication and religion; the theoretical and theological grounding for religious uses of communication; and overviews of doctrinal discussions of how the major faiths of the world view mass media and, in particular, ethical media conduct. The second part presents reviews of how major religious traditions, including Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, traditional African religions, Jainism, and Confucianism, view communication media. The third part shifts the focus to the different kinds of religious communication sponsored by religious groups: broadcasting, televangelism, public relations, crisis communication, and web-based media. Part IV highlights how religious groups also use other media in their pastoral ministry, expressions of piety, and religious education.

The last four parts of the Handbook focus more on media. The essays in Part V look at media institutions facing religion: the mediatization of religion; news coverage of religion; and the
views of religion in entertainment media, in film, and in documentary cinema. Part VI offers functional perspectives on the ways in which religious communication serves various religious functions, whether in fostering the social functions of religious belief, creating meaning, celebrating rituals, or marking death. Part VII presents different cultural perspectives, with essays examining religious communication as it interacts with gender and race, material religion, sexuality, authority, and community development. Finally, Part VIII looks at how new media have influenced religious communication.

The process of preparing this Handbook suggests a few things about the state of the study of communication and religion. The attempt to include non-Western religions as well as countries in the Global South revealed a general lack of scholarly material. While there are some publications, these have not received the same attention as those addressing other areas of the world. Similarly, much of the published work addresses the Abrahamic faiths – a bias to the West still remains.

Second, the impact of mediatization appears uneven – very strong in the West and in some non-Western countries as Chapter 18 demonstrates, but less so in the periphery or in villages where traditional religions seem untouched by media and depend on face-to-face contact. This indicates some room for continued research and theoretical development.

Third, because the research only reports what appears in the media, we scholars may miss a good deal of activity in communication and religion. If some of the branches of Abrahamic faiths, for example, discourage media use, how do they engage any kind of media and religion? How do nonmediated forms of communication shape these religious communities and individuals? Here Chapter 28 on material religion can offer some guidance.

Finally, we must acknowledge that we remain heirs of the social science tradition in media studies, which still seems hesitant to engage religion unless religion “looks like” material for the social sciences. The area of religion and communication remains comfortable with a sociology of religion perspective, which provides valuable insights and resources for study, but has it missed other approaches to religion? Similarly, our communication heritage has not shaken its origins in Western studies, with US and European perspectives present from the beginning and still exerting powerful influences.

This makes for a promising future since neither communication nor religion will likely disappear. If digital media are any indication, religious institutions and individuals will likely invent new ways to appropriate both old and new communication techniques.

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Part I

Theoretical Background
1

Academic Approaches to Communication, Media, and Religion

Lynn Schofield Clark and Heidi Ippolito

Introduction

Today’s interdisciplinary research at the intersection of communication, media, and religion draws on several academic fields and traditions. In this chapter we trace the ways that scholars have addressed themselves to foundational questions in this subfield, including: What is religion? What is communication? What is (or are) media, and how are we to understand the processes of mediation? We explore scholarship that has given shape to this interdisciplinary subfield, considering how scholars have grappled with what has been termed the material turn and later the epistemological and axiological turns. We conclude by considering how a dialogue with new perspectives has given rise to new areas of inquiry. We note the particular urgency with which some in the field are now turning to religious, existential, and value-centered questions of communication, media, and technology, in response to the toxicity of the social as well as the physical and material realms. This emergent approach suggests that critical scholarship in this area may be viewed as a crucial foundation for the social and cultural change that is considered necessary for the future of the earth and for humanity itself.

Background to the Field

The story of scholarly inquiry into the fields of communication, media, and religion might be dated to one of the earliest works in the tradition of Western philosophy: that of Titus Lucretius, who, a century before the Common Era, authored an epic poem titled, De Rerum Natura: On the Nature of Things. The 7200-line poem, admired by the ancient Roman writers Virgil and Cicero, takes as its focus the explanation of life, the sensations, and the natural world. It develops these explanations through the lens of Epicureanism, a materialist philosophy that favored what today would be termed scientific explanations over supernatural ones. Explanations are at the heart of studies in communication, media, and religion, and over the centuries as these have evolved, so have human understandings of the sciences and the supernatural. In Lucretius’s day, although
divine intervention and references to the gods, Fates, or souls formed the basis for explanations, Lucretius instead emphasized the role of empirical observation, advocating for the gathering of evidence in the development of knowledge and understanding. He also spoke to a concern that remains particularly relevant: the question of how to conceptualize the relationship between human beings and their technologies, understood as materials and tools. Today, scholarship into religion, communication, and media continues to reflect on the relationships between human beings, technological tools, and causal explanations of the cosmos. Lucretius’s work thus offers an interesting starting point for the traditions of Western and Eastern scholarship from which today’s interdisciplinary studies have grown.

What Lucretius does not address, of course, are the fundamental categories and assumptions that today structure inquiry in this interdisciplinary field. We therefore begin the chapter with a set of definitions, raising the questions of: What is religion? What is communication? What is (or are) media, and how are we to understand the processes of mediation? In order to set the context for the rest of this volume, we describe the debates that currently shape inquiry into each of these areas, noting what is at stake now in complementary fields of inquiry and then considering the questions that are foregrounded through these approaches within the interdisciplinary field of religion, communication, and media.

**What Is Religion?**

The concept of religion seems to emerge in late antiquity Rome, beginning around the third century CE, approximately 400 years after the origins of Lucretius’s writings. The Latin word *religio* did not have a counterpart in other (i.e. non-European) languages. In Hebrew, equivalent concepts refer to ethnicity, religion, or nation. In Southeast Asian cultures, the word *dharma* is a key concept with multiple meanings that have references to the ordering of the universe, cosmic law and order, personal conduct, and proper religious practice. The “three teachings” of Confucianism, Taoism, and later Buddhism are understood as nonexclusive and intertwined with the popular or folk religions related to ancestor rituals that most Chinese citizens practice, even as the government of China officially endorses state atheism. And Ibn Sina’s philosophical accounts of God, reality, and Being dominated intellectual thought in the medieval Islamic world, separating the Islamic religious sciences from what were understood as the medicine and rational sciences of the Ancients.

Whereas philosophical systems of thought such as Confucianism, Vedic philosophy, Taoism, Buddhism, Judaism, Platonism, Stoicism, and Zoroastrianism developed long before the Common Era, religion as a particular field of study is generally viewed as a European development related to the specific cultural experience of Christianity and to the consolidation of political and religious authority in the Roman Catholic Church. Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in 380 CE, with religious leaders establishing precepts or laws of the Church. By the fifth century CE, the Christian biblical canons of the Old and New Testaments and select religious practices, laws, and beliefs had been codified and standardized as the laws of the Church. In the medieval era, religion, philosophy, and knowledge also came to warrant cultural exchange. During the era characterized as the Islamic Golden Age between the eighth to the fourteenth century CE, scholars from various parts of the Islamic world gathered and translated ancient knowledge into Syriac and Arabic, and translations from Arabic into Latin then informed the philosophies of the medieval Latin world. In that latter context of the Roman Empire, studies of the practices, moral tenets, and scriptures that differed from those of the Christian canon came to be understood as studies of other religions. Today these earliest studies of “other” religions
are viewed as reflective of Europe worldviews. Interlocking systems of Christianity, colonialism, and power in Europe, North and South America, and elsewhere in the early Modern world further deepened the Othering of differing cultures, with the ideals of Christianity thus understood as providing justification for conquest, conversion, exploitation, and land theft. In the context of domination by non-Muslim imperial powers, Muslim reform took place in locations such as Indonesia and Malaya as a means of embracing modernism in response to transportation, social mobility, and technological change. These critiques of the roots of religious and specifically of Christian colonialist thought and its relation to systems of power in modernity form the foundation for the current epistemological and axiological turns in studies of media and religion described further later in the chapter.

Several late-nineteenth-century European scholars of religion can be considered particularly foundational in contemporary studies at the intersection of communication, media, and religion. Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, and William James were each less interested in the comparative studies of religion dominant in the travelogs and writings of the time than in how organizational commitments such as those of religion reinforced social cohesion, providing a foundation for studies of the role of media in relation to religious organizations that continues today. In the mid-twentieth century, the work of Mircea Eliade brought together the comparative with concerns of the sacred and profane, introducing scholarship on religion and myth that informed later scholarship on media and myth. And in the shadow of scientific and technological advances, sociologist Peter Berger and others argued that religion and the sacred would wane as the result of a general “disenchantment of the world,” an approach that informed religion and media scholarship focused on the role of media in processes of secularization and sacralization. Late-twentieth- and early twenty-first-century scholars such as Jonathan Z. Smith, Talal Asad, Jose Casanova, and Tomoko Masuzawa critiqued much twentieth-century scholarship on religion for its Western academic assumptions, further sowing the seeds for the epistemological and axiological turn in media and religion that we discuss later in the chapter.

Also in the last decades of the twentieth century, the concept of lived religion emerged as feminist scholarship and ethnographic methodologies came to the fore in studies of religion. This strand of scholarship became particularly influential in contemporary discussions of communication, media, and religion in the 1990s and beyond, following the material turn that was taking place across various scholarly fields described later. Often challenging dichotomous categories of the sacred and profane and critiquing the earlier focus on organized religion at the expense of studying the practices of individuals and groups affiliating with religions, the lived religion approach as developed by scholars such as Nancy Ammerman, Robert Orsi, David D. Hall, and Meredith McGuire grounded work in the practices, perspectives, visual cultures, material objects, cultural histories, and lived experiences of those studied.

Debates about the nature and definition of religion remain robust in the field of religious studies. Some scholarship on communication, media, and religion takes established religious organizations and affiliations as a starting point for analysis and some continues to theorize the role of media in social change in relation to processes of secularization and sacralization. Other scholarship considers the relationships between religions and societal myths and political ideologies, and still other scholarship centers on common practices, worldviews, ethics, and geopolitical commitments of individuals or groups who affiliate with religion. Since the turn of the new millennium, scholars interested in religion increasingly have also grappled with critiques of the legacies of colonialism and questions of societal ethics emerging in the wake of heightened environmental disasters, thus also informing a new strand of existential media scholarship related to the epistemological and axiological turn.
Whereas differing strands of thought in the studies of religion were developing particularly in the United States and Europe throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many conversations among those in positions of Christian religious leadership at the time focused on concerns about the “secular” nature of popular media. This concern, drawn upon by mid-twentieth-century communication and media scholars, informed some of the earliest studies in the interdisciplinary area of religion, communication, and media as we will see.

What Is Communication?

The field of communication studies itself claims roots in the ancient Greek and Roman traditions of rhetoric and persuasion, as deliberative communication was understood as an essential component of the democratic polis. In the European Middle Ages, drawing on ancient Hebrew and Christian traditions, communication became central to ideas of connection and communion between humans and the divine. Grammar, rhetoric, and logic were foundational for European education during the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries, as was Christianity, and thus a long tradition exists that links studies of rhetoric with homiletics – the study of writing and preaching sermons. In the Islamic world, communication was linked with the concept of da’wah, which refers to the preaching of Islam and the call to submit to Allah as well as to the desire to pursue respectful dialogue.

In nineteenth-century European and colonial North and South American writings, communication also was understood largely in relation to human interaction. It was not until World War II that the study of communication coalesced as a field, – and one that at the time was rooted in examinations of the then relatively new broadcast medium of radio. In the shadow of concerns regarding Hitler's use of radio, sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld and political scientist Harold Lasswell conducted influential studies of propaganda, with Lasswell coining the first model that shaped understandings of communication when he raised the question, “Who says what to whom in what channel to what effect?” Lazarsfeld developed a large research program and oversaw the production of a series of publications that became influential in the field, including his Personal Influence (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955), which was foundational for what was to become known as the media effects tradition. Communication was thus defined in the early to mid-century United States in relation to information exchange, persuasion, media effects, and public opinion; research that is today considered foundational to the Western field of communication studies as it is traditionally concerned with the relationship between information and the functioning of Western democratic society. State-run or government- and self-censored communication media outlets remain the norm in many countries around the world, including in North Korea, Eritrea, Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia, Azerbaijan, Vietnam, Iran, Myanmar, Cuba, and Russia. In such contexts, studies of communication and media have been tightly related to state aims. Approaching communication as a potential tool for political, social, and economic development, therefore, has been an idea exported from the West to places throughout Latin America, Africa, and Asia, along with technologies, capitalism, democracy, and ideas of progress. Such work would come to be critiqued in the neo-Marxist scholarship of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, as formerly colonized nations fought for independence from asymmetrical power relations. In the 1980s, 1990s, and early in the new millennium, communication scholars began to reject the dichotomous assumptions of cultural imperialism, favoring instead terms such as globalization and cultural hybridity. In the West, ideas of hegemony and consent came to the fore in communication and cultural studies beginning in the 1960s, and concepts of propaganda gave way to concerns with spaces for resistance and spaces of dominance.
By the 1960s, in part due to specialization of research in US university and institutional settings, the study of interpersonal communication emerged as a field separate from the study of what was then known as mass communication. Drawing on earlier work in persuasion and on humanistic approaches within the field of psychology, scholars primarily in the United States, Europe, and Australia began studying relationships, social interaction, and the human desire for uncertainty reduction. When feminist standpoint theory developed in the 1980s, with its claim that the social groups with which people are affiliated significantly shape knowledge and understanding, it significantly shaped the field of communication studies. With its attention to a Marxist critique of patriarchal theories and of systemic oppressions that devalue women’s ways of knowing, this approach further informed developments in related interdisciplinary areas of critical race and queer theory, which in turn added critiques to performance studies and intercultural communication, each of which is recognized as a subfield in communication studies.

Whereas much of mainstream communication studies had focused on development and democracy at the mid-century with the utilization of social scientific methods, the subfield of interpersonal communication studies followed a humanistic path, described by communication scholar John Durham Peters (2001) as the project of reconciling self and other. Yet Peters also argued provocatively that the study of interpersonal communication was not different from that of mass communication in that in both instances there may be invisible, absent, or misunderstood audiences. Peters and other communication scholars have suggested that communication scholarship must continue to navigate the blurred lines between public and private, self and other, digital and analog, virtual and material, machine and human, even if the dust never settles on where these lines are drawn.

What Is Media?

In the US context, concerns with the technologies of communication had first arisen in relation to desires for heightened efficiencies. Seeking to assist US engineers in performing their jobs at the Bell Telephone company, mathematician Claude Shannon and scientist Warren Weaver in 1948 proposed that human communication can be broken into six components: sender, encoder, channel, noise, decoder, and receiver – an approach that remains influential in some fields but is critiqued as failing to take the contexts of communication into consideration.

As Shannon and Weaver’s information exchange model of communication flourished in the mid-twentieth-century United States and defined media as a term largely interchangeable with the electronic communication technologies of radio and then television, different traditions were developing elsewhere. In Europe, a group of scholars and dissidents who came to be known as the Frankfurt School had been working in the shadow of the emergent capitalist, fascist, and socialist systems of the 1930s. Due to their sense that social theory and social scientific approaches were inadequate for the moment, they explored semiotic, socio-cultural, and critical traditions. With their studies of commercial culture and the culture industries, as Theodor Adorno termed them, these scholars, including Max Horkheimer, Ernst Bloch, Erich Fromm, Walter Benjamin, and Herbert Marcuse, offered scathing critiques of the relationships between antisemitism, authoritarianism, and capitalism. In contrast to the US tendency to understand media as technologies responsible for transporting messages, European and Latin American scholars approached media and technologies as welded to capitalist and dominant ideological systems. Their critiques of dominant capitalist culture were taken up by the European, Latin American, and US New Left in the 1960s and 1970s, as scholars and activists supported civil and political rights, feminism and gay rights, and protested the Vietnam War. In the East, however, scholars of the 1980s and 1990s began to develop the Islamicization of communication theory, centering ideas of da’wah and