

EDITED BY

YOEL COHEN | PAUL A. SOUKUP



GLOBAL HANDBOOKS IN  
MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION  
RESEARCH

**The Handbook  
on Religion  
and Communication**

# **The Handbook on Religion and Communication**

# **Global Handbooks in Media and Communication Research**

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# **The Handbook on Religion and Communication**

Edited by

**Yoel Cohen  
Paul A. Soukup**

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# Contents

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| Contributors  | ix        |
| Introduction  | 1         |
| <b>Part I Theoretical Background</b>  | <b>5</b>  |
| 1 Academic Approaches to Communication, Media, and Religion<br><i>Lynn Schofield Clark and Heidi Ippolito</i> | 7         |
| 2 Communication, Media, and Religion Research: Theoretical Roots<br><i>Stephen Garner</i>                     | 23        |
| 3 Theology and Communication<br><i>Paul A. Soukup S.J.</i>  | 39        |
| 4 Religious Traditions and Ethics in Communication<br><i>Robert S. Fortner</i>                                | 55        |
| <b>Part II Theological Perspectives</b>   | <b>69</b> |
| 5 Christianity and the Mass Media<br><i>Mary Catherine Kennedy</i>  | 71        |
| 6 Communication in Judaism and Islam<br><i>Yoel Cohen and Hadi Enayat</i>                                     | 83        |
| 7 Religious Communication in Asia<br><i>Anthony Le Duc and Kaval J. Kumar</i>                                 | 99        |
| 8 African Religions and Communication<br><i>Joseph Muyangata and Mark Fackler</i>                             | 117       |
| 9 Atheism and the Media<br><i>Teemu Taira</i>   | 131       |

|   |            |
|---|------------|
| <b>Part III Religions as Actors</b>   | <b>145</b> |
| 10 Religious Broadcasting: An Overview, 2000–2021<br><i>Jim McDonnell</i>   | 147        |
| 11 Religious Personalities and Televangelism<br><i>Paul A. Soukup S.J.</i>  | 165        |
| 12 Public Relations and Advertising<br><i>Carlo Nardella</i>  | 181        |
| 13 “Survival and Salvation”: Religious Situational Crisis Communication Strategies<br><i>Gregory P. Perreault, Mildred. F. Perreault, and Monica Crawford</i> | 197        |
| 14 Web Presence<br><i>Amanda Sturgill</i>   | 213        |
| <b>Part IV Individual Religious Communication</b>   | <b>229</b> |
| 15 Pastoral Ministry and Communication<br><i>Daniella Zsupan-Jerome</i>   | 231        |
| 16 Piety, Religious Identity, and the Media<br><i>Damian Guzek and Piotr S. Bobkowski</i>   | 241        |
| 17 Youth, Education, and Media<br><i>Mary E. Hess</i>   | 257        |
| <b>Part V Media Institutions</b>  | <b>271</b> |
| 18 Mediatization<br><i>Knut Lundby</i>  | 273        |
| 19 Reporting Religion News<br><i>Yoel Cohen</i>   | 287        |
| 20 Entertainment<br><i>Allan Novaes</i>   | 301        |
| 21 Religion and Film<br><i>Joel Mayward</i>   | 315        |
| 22 Documentary Film and Religious Faith in Historical Perspective<br><i>John P. Ferré</i>   | 337        |
| <b>Part VI Functional Perspectives</b>  | <b>351</b> |
| 23 The Role of Media in Creating Communities of Religious Belief and Identity<br><i>Myna German</i>   | 353        |
| 24 Religion and Meaning<br><i>Johannes Ehrat</i>  | 365        |

|   |   |            |
|---|---|------------|
| 25  | Religious Rituals, Pilgrimages, Festivals, and Media: Exploring the Interface<br><i>Gnana Patrick</i> | 383        |
| 26  | Death, Spirituality, and Digital Afterlife<br><i>Johanna Sumiala</i>                                  | 399        |
| <b>Part VII Cultural Perspectives</b>           |   | <b>415</b> |
| 27  | Incipient Diversity: Gender and Race in Media and Religion Research<br><i>Chiung Hwang Chen</i>       | 417        |
| 28  | Material Religion<br><i>Felicia Katz-Harris</i>   | 433        |
| 29  | The Sex–Religion Matrix<br><i>Ruth Tsuria and Jason Bartashius</i>                                    | 453        |
| 30  | Authority, Religion, and Media<br><i>Miriam Díez Bosch and Alba Sabaté Gauxachs</i>                   | 469        |
| 31  | Religion and Development Communication<br><i>Robert A. White</i>                                      | 487        |
| <b>Part VIII Approaches in New Technologies</b> |   | <b>503</b> |
| 32  | Internet, Mobile Technology, and Religion<br><i>Miriam Díez Bosch and Josep Lluís Micó</i>            | 505        |
| 33  | Online Religion<br><i>Rohit Chopra</i>  | 521        |
|   | Index   | 537        |



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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.

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

- reality of religious event, 289
- religion journalism and new media, future of, 297–298
- religious elites, 290
- religious knowledge and background of journalists, 292–294, 298
- role of news agencies, 288
- source–media relations, 292, 294–295
- religion–technology relationship, 505–506
- religiosity, 242–243
- religious-social shaping of technology, 27, 28–29, 35
- religious aesthetics (autonomy), 316–317
- religious authority, 470–471
  - in digital age, 476–478
  - media role in, 471–474, 478–479
- religious broadcasting, 147–148
  - in Africa, 149–150, 153
  - in Americas, 152–153
  - in Asia-Pacific, 150, 153–154
  - in Europe, 148–149, 152
  - future trends in, 155–156
  - international broadcasting, 151
  - in Latin America, 148
  - in Middle East, 149–150
  - models of, 151–152
  - in North America, 148
- religious audiences and programs, 154–155
- religious communication, 99, 199
  - Buddhism, 99–103
  - Confucianism, 103–106
  - Hinduism, 106–109
  - Indian religions and mass media, 109–110
  - Indian religions online, 111
  - interreligious conflict and media in India, 111–112
  - Jainism, 107–108
  - public theology as, 29–32
  - radio, music, and television in India, 110–111
  - Sikhism and, 107–108
- religious communities
  - facing agency issues, 263–265
  - facing authenticity issues, 260–263
  - facing authority issues, 258–260
- Religious Digital Creatives (RDCs), 477, 514
- religious discrimination (heteronomy), 316
- religious fundamentalism, Internet and, 527–528
- religious humanism (theonomy), 316
- religious meaning, 365, 366, 378–379
  - form of, 370–372
  - genre of, 370–372
  - practice of, 370–372
  - Semiotic adds, 368–369
  - Semiotic grid of religious practices, 374–378
  - Sign classes, 372–374
  - as Sign system, 366–368
- religious media, 273
  - and gender, 419–420
  - and race/ethnicity, 423
- Religious Possibilities of the Motion Picture, *The* (film), 337, 347
- religious/religion, 8–10, 19, 32, 275
  - acts, 371–372
  - apps, 511–513
  - audiences and programs, 154–155
  - branding, 185, 186
  - celebrities role in crisis communication, 203–205
  - challenges and perspectives, 310–311
  - communicational functions of, 377–378
  - computer-mediated communication research, 507
  - conversion in Judaism, 87
  - creativity, 372
  - decolonization, 16–18
  - dialogue, 316
  - in digital age, 474–476
  - education, 257
  - elites, 290
  - essentialism, 383–384
    - and film, 315–317
  - fundamentalism, 473
  - identity, 241–243, 264, 355–357, 361–362
  - in India, 498
  - institutions, 182
  - interpretation of authority in, 258–260
  - intersection with popular culture, 2
  - journalism, 297–298
  - leadership, 488
  - marketing, 187
    - and material turn, 15–16
  - new wave films, 328–329
  - online, 111, 387, 506, 508–509
  - organization system in China, 522–523
  - in pop culture, 307–308
  - pop culture as, 309–310
  - pop culture in, 308–309
  - “questers”, 354–355
  - rituals, 383, 395, 521
  - role in rural people development, 490
    - and social community, 353–355
  - social functions of, 388
  - and socioeconomic development, 487, 490–493
  - sociology of, 470
  - studies of, 1, 7–8, 13–15
  - surfers, 522
  - symbols, 375
  - temporality, 369
  - truth, 192
  - vernacular, 434–435
  - visibility, 316
- Religious Social Shaping of Technology (RSST), 280
- religious traditions and ethics, 55, 64–65, 283, 490
  - ethical values espoused in communication, 63
  - principles governing use of ethical communication, 60–63
  - purpose of communication, 56–59
  - theistic/idealistic theory and nontheistic theory relationships, 64
- Religulous* (film), 338
- repentance revolution, 174

- representamen, 379  
 Representing Religions in World Cinema (film), 346–347  
 republicization, progressive, 241  
 Rerum Novarum, 490–491  
 research orientations on ritual–media interface, 386
  - analytical orientation, 388
  - descriptive orientation, 387–388
  - functional orientation, 388–389
  - ideological orientation, 390
  - media as rituals, 387
  - methodological orientation, 389–390
 Reuters, 288  
 Rhetic–Iconic–Qualisign Triad, 374  
 Richard Dawkins Foundation for Science and Reason, 139  
 right to know in Judaism, 84–87  
 right to privacy in Judaism, 84–87  
 ritualization, 390  
 ritual–media interface, 383–384
  - dynamics of, 390–391
  - festivals, 394–395
  - pilgrimages, 392–394
  - research orientations on, 386–390
  - scholars exploring, 384–386
 ritual(s), 438–439
  - media as, 387
  - and museum exhibitions, 445–447
  - objects, 383
  - online, 387
  - political, 389
  - spatial theory of, 390
  - transfers, 388
 riy, 248  
 robotics, 505, 514  
 Rocky Horror Picture Show, The (film), 325  
 Roman Catholic Church, 294–295
  - crisis communication in, 198
  - tradition of theological reflection, 42
  - web presence, 217
 Roman Catholicism, 58, 74–76, 295, 309  
 Roman games, 400–401  
 Romanticism, 62  
 Room, The (film), 325  
 Rosemary's Baby (film), 457  
 Routledge Companion to Religion and Film, The, 338  
 Russian Orthodox Church, 77  
  
 Sabbath in Judaism, 41, 87  
 sacralization, 9  
 “Sacred Realm: Blessings & Good Fortune across Asia”, 445  
 sacrifice, 407–408  
 Sahih Muslim, 522  
 Salafist Sunni tradition, 279  
 Salesman (film), 343, 344  
 Salvation Army Parade in Indian Village (film), 339  
 Salvation Army Printing Works (film), 339  
 Sanskritization *see* Hindutva—ideologization  
 Saranam site, 523  
 Satanic culture jamming, 137  
 Satanic philanthropy, 137  
 satellite broadcasting, 169–170  
 Scent of Green Papaya, The (film), 106  
 Schütz' egology, 366  
 Second Correlates, 372–373  
 Second Epistle of Clement, 372  
 secularism/secularization, 9, 132, 182, 241, 251
  - faces of, 243
  - media forcing, 243–246
  - progressive, 241
 secular sacred, 246  
 self-categorization, religious, 355  
 self-definition, 355  
 semiological communication studies, 379  
 Semiotic/Semiosis, 366–367, 373
  - adds, 368–369
  - grid of religious practices, 374–378
  - pragmatism, 365–366
  - Sign classification, 373–374
 Settlers, The (film), 346  
 sex–religion matrix, 453–454
  - ensorship of sexuality in media, 454–456
  - conserving force, Internet as, 462–464
  - filmography as agents for female sexuality and homosexuality, 457–459
  - liberating force, Internet as, 459–462
 sexual abuse complaints against preachers, 95, 197, 200, 201, 224, 459  
 sexuality *see also* female sexuality
  - ensorship in media, 454–456
  - in religious traditions, 453–454
 sexual liberation movement, 464  
 shalom, 125  
 Sharia law, 378  
 Shia Muslim tradition, 44, 55, 57, 170, 279  
 Shiites, 63  
 Shikoku pilgrimage, 394  
 Shintoism, 287  
 Shoah (film), 345  
 “shramanas”, 107  
 Sight and Sound (Roddick), 324  
 Sign system, religious meaning as, 366–368, 379
  - conception-guided (Sign-Interpreting) Conduct, 368
  - religion as specific meaning, 366
  - Sign as conduct, 366–367
  - Sign classes, 372–374
  - Signs as living stimulate religious-meaning communication, 367
 Sikhism, 2
  - in India, 522
  - mediatization in Punjab, 276–277
  - and religious communication, 107–108
 silent actualities, 338–340  
 “singing-priests”, 282  
 Sinner in Mecca, A (film), 346  
 Sinosphere (Sadao), 376–377  
 situational crisis communication theory (SCCT), 198–199, 200, 202–203, 207  
 “small is beautiful” philosophy, 493

- Smithsonian Museum of Natural History, 444
- smṛti, 48
- Snapchat, 94, 530
- social cohesion, 388
- social community, religion and, 353–355
- social conflict, 388
- social construction of reality, 274
- social domination/hegemony, 388
- social empowerment, 388
- social functions of religion, 388–389
- social gossip by consent, 85
- social identity theory, 355
- social institutions, 275
- Social Life of Things, The (Appadurai), 442
- social media, 176, 402
  - digital religion on, 509–511
    - Facebook, 12–13, 18, 94, 127, 261, 394, 404, 498, 510, 523, 529, 530
  - impact in Islam, 94–96
  - Instagram, 13, 76, 94, 205–206, 247, 279, 404, 408, 510, 530
  - photography in, 404
  - platforms, 529, 530
  - reinforcing religious orthodoxy, 247
  - TikTok, 13, 76, 80, 176, 325
  - Twitter, 13, 18, 76, 94, 127, 404, 408, 498, 529, 530
- social repair (*tikkun olam*), 85
- socio-cultural pluralism, 181
- socioeconomic development
  - Buddhist religious tradition and, 492–493, 497–498
  - Christianity and, 490–492
  - commitment by religious groups, 489–490
  - Hinduism and, 493
  - in India, 498
  - Islamic religious tradition and, 492
  - meanings of, 488–489
  - religions and, 487
- sociology of religion, 470
- soft authority, 472
- solidarity as agonistic, 407
- Song of Ceylon (film), 341
- Soul on a String (film), 323
- Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), 197, 204
- spatial theory of rituals, 390
- Spirited Away (film), 322
- spirit houses, 435–436
- Spiritual Abuse website, 224
- spirituality, 242–243
- śruti, 48
- Star Wars* films, 326–327
- Stoicism, 8
- Story of Kindness or How to Behave, The (documentary), 338
- structural distortions, 124
- structural functionalism, 441
- structural secularization, 181
- subjectivity, 366, 369, 377
- subject–object agency in material religion, 439–440
- Sufis, 55, 57
- Sunday Express, 110
- Sunni Islam, 44, 55, 57, 63, 92, 170
- Sunrise for the Mono (film), 340
- Superman* (film), 306
- “superspreader” events, 531
- symbolic analysis, 442
- Symbol/symbolism, 367–368, 371
- Synagogue Websites, 219
- Syrian refugee crisis, 203
- tabbayun, 47
- Taoism, 8
- taqqiya* (expedient dissimulation), 91
- techno-animism, 513
- televangelists/televangelism, 165
  - in Buddhism, 173
  - in Christianity, 72–73, 167–170, 175–176
  - in Hinduism, 172–173
  - historical background of, 165–167
  - impact in global religious practice, 176–177
  - in Islam, 93–94, 170–172
  - in Judaism, 173–174
  - program types, 175
  - religious tradition influencing, 176
- television in India, 110–111
- Temple Mount, 523
- Temple of Jedi Order, 223
- tensions, 306, 308
- textual analysis, 442
  - in cultural/media products, 418–419
  - on race or ethnic minorities/cultures, 422
- Thai Global Buddhist Network, 174
- theistic/idealistic theory, 64
- theologoumena, 370
- theology and communication, 32, 39, 232–234 *see also*
  - communication media; community formation,
  - communication media role in; development
  - communication
    - Christianity, 41–44
    - Hinduism, 47–50
    - Islam, 44–47
    - Judaism, 39, 40–41
  - “theory-free method-driven” research, 365
- Therevada Buddhist monks, 446, 447
- The Satanic Temple (TST), 136–137
- Thick Description (Geertz), 367
- Third Correlates, 372–374
- Thor* film series, 325
- thought leaders, 478
- “three point sermon” outline, 173
- thrownness, 17
- Tibetan Buddhist movement, 454
- TikTok, 13, 76, 80, 176, 325
- Timbuktu* (film), 318
- Time for Burning, A (film), 343
- Tlingit tribe of Alaska, 444
- traditional Christian conservatism, 44

- traditional communication, 235  
 transcendence, 199, 258–260, 316  
 transcultural communication, 302  
 transformative politics, 389  
 transformative ritual–media interface, 391  
 transformative third space, 387  
 transhumanism, 514  
 transubstantiation, 367  
 travelogues, 338–340  
 Treasure Chest of Fun and Fact series, 305  
 Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN), 152  
 Trinity in Christianity, 259  
 Triratna Buddhist Community, 221  
 “truthfulness in advertising” formula, 188  
 tsuitachi engi hōshō goma (fire rite), 387  
 Turing Church, 223–224  
 Twilight Saga, *The* (film), 419  
 Twitter, 13, 18, 76, 94, 127, 404, 408, 498, 529, 530
- ultra-Orthodox Jews, 218–219, 280, 528  
 Underground Bunker, 224  
 United Church of Christ, 492  
 United Methodist Committee on Relief, 492  
 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 124  
 United News of India (UNI), 294  
 Universal Church of Reign of God (IURD), 168  
 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), 19  
 unorthodox religious identities and digital world, 249–250  
 US-based Media Research Center, 133  
 USA Today, 287  
 US Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), 200, 201  
 uses and gratifications  
   gratifications theories, 358–359  
   of religion, 359  
 US Federal Communications Act, 166  
 US Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, 441  
 US Presbyterian Mission Agency, 492
- Vanhoozer’s cultural exegesis, 34–35  
 Vedas in Hinduism, 8, 47–48  
 vernacular religion, 434–435  
 vicarious religion, 473, 478  
 Vigilanti Cura, 455  
 Virtual Ethnography (Hine), 389  
 virtual media, 389  
 virtual pilgrimages, 360, 392–394  
 “Virtual Tibet”, 507  
 Vishva Hindu Parishad, 463  
 visual representation of death, 403–404  
 Voice of Prophecy, *The* program, 167–168  
 Voting Rights Act, 343
- wahy* in Islam, 234  
*Walker* (film), 326  
*War Cry, The* (film), 338–339
- Washington Post, 294  
 Wat Buddhamongkolnimit, 445  
 Wear White campaign, 462  
 web-only faith groups, 223–224  
 Web 2.0, 176, 527, 528  
 Weberian concepts, 473  
 web presence for faith communities, 213–214, 224  
   advantages of, 214–215  
   Buddhism, 221  
   Christianity, 215–218  
   Hinduism, 222  
   Islam, 220–221  
   Judaism, 218–220  
   new religious movements, 222–223  
   web-only faith groups, 223–224  
 WeChat app, 523  
 Western Wall in Jerusalem, 523  
 WhatsApp, 127, 248, 251, 498, 523  
 Where in the World Is Osama Bin Laden? (film), 338  
 Wiccans, 521  
 Wikipedia, 13, 167  
 William and Bramwell Booth at a “Field Day” (film), 339  
 witnessing, 400, 407–408  
 women’s resistance to male-dominated religious culture, 420  
 Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory (film), 338  
 World Bank, 490  
 World Communications Day, 75  
 World Council of Churches, 26, 43, 492  
 World Islamic Network (WIN), 172  
 Worlds of Journalism Project, 293, 295  
 World Wide Web, 213, 521  
 worship, practice of, 30, 39, 59, 155, 523  
   Christian, 42  
   Hinduism, 49, 393  
   houses of, 362  
   idol worship, 86  
   online, 41
- Yant* (magic squares), 436  
*Yemanjá: Wisdom from the African Heart of Brazil* (film), 347  
 York Times, 294  
 Young Life (evangelical ministry), 203, 207  
 Young Muslim Women’s Groups, 247  
 youth–education–media interface, 257–258  
   agency issues, 263–265  
   authenticity issues, 260–263  
   authority issues, 258–260  
 YouTube, 13, 18, 94, 127, 325, 395, 404, 498, 510
- Zoroastrianism, 8, 522