

# Media and Religious Diversity

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## Keywords

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## Abstract

This review addresses recent work on media practices in situations of religious diversity. I hereby distinguish three approaches in this literature: the media politics of diversity, religious diversity and the public sphere, and the diversity of religious mediations. Whereas the first focuses on the control of representations of religious diversity and difference, the second strand of research looks at the interaction of religious difference and the public circulation of discourse and images. The third approach takes built-in links between media and religious practices as a starting point to investigate the diversity of modes of interaction between religious practitioners and religious otherworlds and the consequences these modes have for sociocultural life. This article argues that a perspective mindful of the intrinsic relationships of religion and media is best positioned to do justice to the questions provoked by the intersection of media practices and religious difference.

## INTRODUCTION

In current anthropological debates, few concepts are more troublesome than the notion of “religion.” Several scholars have questioned religion as a comparative, universally applicable concept, arguing that it is an outcome of modern forms of governance (Asad 2003) and carries with it a heavy Christian, specifically Protestant, baggage. Others have traced the universalization of Protestant understandings of religion in the context of European imperial expansion, where the confrontation with religious others gave shape to a specifically modern understanding of “world religions” centered on a limited corpus of sacred texts and core beliefs (Masuzawa 2005, van der Veer 2001) that continues to inform contemporary frames of religious pluralism (Klassen & Bender 2010). Indeed, much of the critique of comparative notions of religion has focused on the privileging of belief as a key constituent of religion, and the sidelining of collective embodied practice in public, a point especially emphasized by anthropologists of Islam (Asad 2003, Hirschkind 2006). Nevertheless, as de Vries (2008a) recently noted, “paradoxically, the more pressure one applies to ‘religion,’ to its concept(s), referent(s), and requisite(s), the more resilient these categories tend to become” (p. 9).

In this review, I engage with religion in a somewhat different fashion by privileging the problematic of mediation on several dimensions. The topic of religion and media draws attention to religion as traditions of communication and interaction with a religious otherworld, however conceived, carried out through embodied and technological practices of mediation, and the institutions sustaining them. Because religion involves uses of media technology with their material and formal dimensions, the issue of religious diversity and difference needs to be understood through the lens of media practices involving print, including mass reproduction of images, sound reproduction, and audiovisual media, as well as the field of contemporary digital media (Coleman 2010). Within such a framework

the discussion moves between these practical and substantive dimensions of religious life and the larger theme of mediation as the in-between providing links across spatial, temporal, or qualitative gaps. I hereby distinguish three broad approaches in the literature on media and religious diversity: the media politics of diversity, religious diversity and the public sphere, and diversity of religious mediation. Whereas the first is concerned with the issues of control and contestation of media representations related to religion and religious difference, the second investigates the circulation of religious discourse and images in public spheres, including the question of how such public discourse and images come to be regarded as “religious” to begin with. And last, the third looks at religious traditions as diverse in terms of the kinds of interactions with a religious otherworld they privilege and the kind of media practices and technologies that enable such processes of communication. Taking as a starting point an intrinsic link between media and religion grounded in the technological dimensions of bringing about the presence of the divine (de Vries 2001, p. 28; Stolorow 2005), scholars have uncovered the great range of diversity such media practices exhibit. The “media turn” in the study of religion (Engelke 2010) thus requires paying attention to mediations between religious practitioners and a religious otherworld (Bräunlein 2008), as well as to the kind of mediations that build, sustain, and transform relations within religious communities and those involving religious practitioners within wider public spheres.

## REPRESENTATION AND CONTROL: THE MEDIA POLITICS OF RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

The first strand of research on media and religious diversity is less concerned with the question of religious mediation, but takes media as technologies for the dissemination of images and discourse that contain representations of religious traditions and religious

difference. Religious diversity is not simply reflected in such media representations. Media and media practices are a generative force in producing diversity and its particular shapes, and more generally, “cultural diversity in this particular historical juncture must be seen as mediated, that is, traversing processes of the production, circulation, representation, and reception/consumption of meaning” (Siapera 2010, p. 75). In particular, the representations of religious traditions and groups through contemporary mass media have emerged as a large field of study. Of crucial importance are questions of hegemony and control over representations of religious diversity and difference. The marked imbalances and entrenched biases in such representations are related to issues of control of and access to media production. As Hackett (2006) has put it in her investigation of disputes about radio and television airtime between religious groups in South Africa, “Conflict between religious groups is commonly linked to rights of access to the national media. Because of the asymmetry of resources, some religious organizations find themselves at the head of the media table while others may not even enjoy the crumbs from underneath it. These patterns of exclusion and inclusion, coupled with issues of fair representation, have been exacerbated by the processes of democratization and liberalization” (p. 168). Much research is concerned with the reproduction of negative stereotypes about religious others, as well as the historical contexts of shifts in their dominant representations. Here, the literature on the representation of Muslims in Western publics is especially relevant, exploring how, for example, in mass media in the United States, Muslims and Islam have been overwhelmingly portrayed according to a few, negative, and narrow scripts (Allen 2010, Esposito & Kalin 2011, Said 1981). Comparable situations can also be found elsewhere (Poole 2002, Yavari-d’Hellencourt 2000, Yilmaz 2007) and contrast markedly with equally narrowly scripted but positive media portrayals of other religious traditions, such as Buddhism (Koné-el-adjji 2000, Moore 2008). Although these dominant frames

of representation have been increasingly well studied, some researchers have also examined the possibility for media producers from negatively stereotyped minorities to destabilize and subvert such powerful representations (Angeles 2010, Echchaibi 2012, Spielhaus 2010). Finally, the comparative perspective on such representations is becoming increasingly important, especially the question of how the stigmatizing portrayal of Muslims as religious others so widespread in contemporary Western mediascapes compares with negative and prejudicing representations of other religious groups with their long histories, such in anti-Semitism (Bunzl 2005, Frojmovic 2002, Silverstein 2010).

Furthermore, representations of religious difference have frequently been credited with actively shaping situations of conflict between groups set off from each other by religious boundaries, often intensifying the othering conducted along such lines and so exacerbating conflict, including its violent dimensions (Brosius 2005, Farmer 1996, Hackett 2003), while also being subject to significant long-term changes in particular situations of conflict and coexistence (Manuel 1996). Although much of the motivation behind this strand of research is the assumption that such widely disseminated representations and images of religious difference have enormous impact, the work of anthropologists and researchers in the field of cultural studies is often informed by an awareness of the complexity of reception processes among diverse audiences. Media anthropologists have investigated representations of religious difference accordingly, showing that the meanings media audiences derive from such representations can vary considerably depending on social and cultural contexts and that such meanings often conflict with the intentions of media producers. In other words, such research treats media reception of religious traditions and religious difference as a social practice and pays particular attention to the minute details of ethnographic contexts and the great significance they have on processes of accepting, rejecting, or transforming representations

of religious difference through mass media (Abu-Lughod 2005, Hoover 2006, Mankekar 1999). An important part of representations of religious difference are also normative and desirable forms of religious diversity and conviviality that often rely on stock tropes and images, such as the Sufi tomb-shrine in South Asia (Bigelow 2010). In South Asia, widely circulated audio recordings of musical genres connected to such religious conviviality can also play similar roles, such as in the growing popularity of *qawwali* music in postindependence India exhibiting “a thematic shift toward a heterodox Sufism addressing Indian saints and embracing a general humanism that extols all religions” (Qureshi 1995, p. 149; see also Kapchan 2008). The analysis of stereotyping and essentializing portrayals of religious diversity and difference plays a key role in this strand of research. For example, the Hindi cinema has long been known for its preference of normative representations of religious diversity, such as in the classic 1977 film *Amar, Akbar, Anthony*, the story of three brothers separated and subsequently adopted by Hindu, Muslim, and Christian families, respectively, and who then reunite and confront the villain that was responsible for the family’s (and in a larger sense, the nation’s) separation (Siapera 2010, p. 152; Viridi 2003). The key role of nation building built on particular understandings and images of religious diversity within the nation is very salient in these cinematic representations, as well as an emphasis on their affective and pleasurable dimensions (Dirks 2001, Vasudevan 2001).

The ethnographic question then remains not just one of hegemony over audiences, in which large degrees of control over media representations of religious groups and religious difference do not always imply their acceptance among the diversity of media consumers, but also of their complex links with processes of media production. A newer trend in this literature is a sensorial and affective turn in the analysis of media representations of religious difference and audiences’ engagements with them. The affective reactions of audiences and their expe-

riences of pleasure or repulsion have emerged as a crucial component of ideological dimensions. Few other strands of research on religious diversity and media have made this point as clearly as recent research on censorship. On one hand, censorship is not merely about silencing and repression of particular representations of religious values and difference, but also productive of normative discourses and images of religious diversity and should therefore be better understood as a more comprehensive form of “cultural regulation” (Mazzarella & Kaur 2009). South Asia with its long colonial history of state-sponsored censorship of media provides instructive examples, as religion and religious difference have constituted among the most sensitive subjects from the beginnings of colonial censorship until today. Regarding the issue of blasphemy in Pakistani media, Ahmed has gauged the implications this form of regulation has on interreligious relationships and shown how measures taken against perceived blasphemy reinforce mainstream Islamic orthodoxies as the normative frame of representations of the religious and for managing religious diversity, including the marked diversity among Islamic traditions (Ahmed 2009). At the same time, as Mazzarella and Kaur point out, the prohibitions institutionalized by censorship are part of a complex “libidinal” economy that helps to sustain the centrality of knowledge and affects that everyone is aware of but that may not be legitimately expressed. The intersection of gender, sexuality, and religion is a good illustration of this, as in the partial censorship of the film *Bombay*, which portrays a relationship between a Hindu man and a Muslim woman in the context of intercommunal (largely anti-Muslim) violence in 1990s Mumbai (Vasudevan 2001). Struggles over the regulation of representations of religious difference that are frequently inseparable from projects of nation building often center on the regulation of affects that sustain such difference. These studies show that affect is not just a key element of religious practice and discipline but also a decisive component of normative visions of religious diversity and the

nation-building projects of which they are a part.

## RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY IN PUBLIC SPHERES

The observation that highly visible forms of religious activism in the contemporary world rely on techniques of mobilization common to modern public spheres opens a different perspective on the question of religious diversity and media. An important starting point of this strand of investigation has been the critique of a Habermasian notion of the secular public sphere that traces its origins to the struggles of European bourgeoisie to emancipate themselves from the churches and the courts (Habermas 1989) and where the secular is understood largely in terms of a privatization of religion, leaving a nonreligious public sphere, such as in the form of a reading public for political opinion formation and nation building. In line with this critique and stressing the importance of modern techniques of public mobilization for religious life today, anthropologists have demonstrated the blurred boundaries between religion, advertisement, and entertainment in contemporary publics.

Much of the literature on modern publics has focused on how the circulation of discourse and images has generated a plurality of new communities through stranger sociability and voluntaristic association. The media practices enabling these processes are often shared across the boundaries of such communities and have also been central to the mobilization of religious publics (Buehler 1998, Larkin 2008). But media practices can also constitute important markers of religious difference. For example, in contemporary Senegal, the production of videocassette and DVD recordings of pilgrimages and their collective viewing are visual practices that not only approach Murid adepts to the centers and personalities of authority of their Sufi tradition, but also distinguish them from their Sunni counterparts (Buggenhagen 2010). In some cases, the spread of a new medium has enabled the expansion of a

particular religious tradition at the expense of other traditions, such as the conversion of Hmong in Vietnam from Shamanism to Evangelical Christianity through radio broadcasts (Ngo 2009). Elsewhere, the pronounced rejection of an established media technology bridging the gap to the divine may set off a religious community from others, as with the Friday Masowe apostolics in Zimbabwe, who reject the Bible in favor of a more “live and direct” access to God (Engelke 2007, p. 3). In other contexts, a new medium perceived as fraught with dangers may not be rejected but subject to substantial domestication and adjustment as in the development of a kosher cell phone for ultraorthodox Jews in Israel (Campbell 2010, pp. 162–78). But the question of the perceived links between religious and media technological differences also raises the issue of the dominance of a few mediatically powerful religious traditions in global public spheres, notably Christianity, whose dominant position in mediascapes then compels others to conform to the media practices, genres, and forms of representation they favor. In his reflections on television, the Pope, and the Catholic church, Derrida (2001) has referred to this process as “globalatinization,” opening up larger questions about the role of media as one of the key infrastructures of globalization for religious diversity. Here the issue is not the wholesale exclusion of religious others in changed public spheres. Instead, ethnographers have reported a complex interplay of imposition and emulation of certain terms of participation and generic framing imbricated by Christianity in media practices, for example by followers of traditional African religions in Ghana (de Witte 2009) or in Muslim adoptions of televangelism (Echchaibi 2011b, Larkin 2008, Moll 2010).

### Public Dichotomies

Much research on public spheres has been organized around key dichotomies that have also informed work on questions of religious diversity. The first of these is the tension between access and exclusion, often connected to the question of whether a plural *demos* is possible.

Ethnographers have investigated the changing conditions of participating in the public circulation of discourse and images brought about by newer media practices that problematize sharp distinctions between media producers and consumers. One important strand in the literature suggests that widespread use of newer “small” media has pluralized and democratized access to publics for many, bypassing established institutionalized media producers. The point has been made forcefully in the literature on media and Islam, where some argue that the availability of audiocassettes, audio and video CDs, and the Internet has undercut the authority of established interpreters of Islam, opening up new opportunities for members of the educated middle classes to intervene in Islamic debates (Echchaibi 2011a, Eickelman 2005, Eickelman & Anderson 1999, but see Clarke 2010). For some scholars, the Protestant historical connotations of this process of a greater individualization and democratization of religious authority accompanied by a major transformation in media practices have acquired paradigmatic character, such as in asserting the emergence of a “Protestant Buddhism” in Sri Lanka (Gombrich & Obeyeskere 1988).

A guiding question in the study of publics related to the question of the modalities of access is the relationship between the dialogic and disciplinary dimensions of public circulation of discourse and images. Quite often, these terms are treated as a further guiding dichotomy in the study of public spheres, given the strong normative emphasis on dialogic deliberation in Habermas’ conception of the public sphere. Furthermore, the notion of dialogue, prominent in hermeneutics, has been taken to be one of the hallmarks of pluralism with its calls for interreligious dialogue (de Feijter 2007). Dialogue, however, turns out to be a complex term once seen from a Bakhtinian perspective, yielding a conflictual and nonhumanistic understanding of dialogue that does not necessarily imply the equal recognition of the other (Bakhtin 1981). The popular videos of the India-born South African Islamic missionary and polemicist Ahmed Deedat are a

good example: Deedat not only closely engaged with and extensively quoted from the Bible while seeking to prove the superiority of Islam, but also very successfully adopted the mediatic formats and genres of televangelism for Islamic missionizing (Larkin 2008, Westerlund 2003). Others, however, have highlighted the interdependence of deliberation and dialogue with the disciplinary character of the public circulation of religious discourse and images. Influenced by Asad’s work on religion as traditions of disciplinary practice (Asad 2003), Hirschkind has investigated how the careful listening to cassette sermons among Muslims in Cairo operates as a technique of the self, supporting a striving for greater piety and orthopraxy while also constituting a sphere of deliberation and dialogue (Hirschkind 2006). Those attentive to the religiously disciplinary aspects of contemporary publics have also expanded their critique of Habermas’s theory of the secular public sphere to the latter’s exclusive focus on deliberative dimensions and its disregard for the embodied qualities of virtues. Whereas some researchers focus on the deliberative modes of religious diversity, such as in internal debates within religious traditions and their interventions in broader public spheres on questions of the common good (LeVine & Salvatore 2005, Salvatore & Eickelman 2004), others have highlighted the visceral and embodied aspects of religious publics (de Abreu 2009, Hirschkind 2006, Meyer 2008, Oosterbaan 2009), posing “a challenge to the hierarchy of the senses underpinning post-Kantian visions of the public sphere” (Cody 2011, p. 42). Without turning the deliberative and the affective into a further dichotomy in research on religious publics, it is important to realize that the complex interplay of both dimensions shapes situations of religious diversity and coexistence.

### **Religious Markets and Media**

The faster circulation of religious discourse and images in contemporary public spheres is also inextricably linked with the commodification of religion. Here, researchers have posited a

“religious marketplace” that provides further evidence of the blurring between religion and modern techniques of advertising and entertainment (Clark 2007, Moore 1994). On one hand, research has documented how market pressures privilege mainstream religious preferences in mediascapes, as demonstrated for example by the prominence of Hindu religious themes in the Hindi cinema from its very beginnings (Derné 1995). On the other hand, scholars have also focused on what they portray as postmodern religious consumers, who choose between a broad range of religious options appealingly packaged through marketing strategies and instantly available through digital media technologies (Feng & Chen 2009). The notion of a religious marketplace thus also points to highly individualized and also relatively privatized religious orientations such as New Age, which also includes New Edge, a recent form of millennial expectations connected to new media practices popular on the west coast of the United States (Zandbergen 2010). A main focus is the aptitude of particular religious entrepreneurs to retail their religious traditions successfully in a highly competitive market of religious possibilities using expert media strategies (Stolow 2006, Ukah 2003), such as in the case of televangelism and its imitators in other religious traditions (Echchaibi 2011b). An extreme contemporary example is the efforts of the Mormon Church (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints) at “Search Engine Optimization,” a proactive corporate marketing strategy aimed at directing Web searches to the church’s Web sites (Chen 2011). The visible presence of religious entrepreneurs in a public sphere in which religion and advertisement blend has also prompted atheists and secular humanists to adopt comparable media strategies (Cimino & Smith 2011).

Fundamental to the guiding metaphor of the religious marketplace is the notion of religion as an option, evoking Taylor’s “immanent frame” (Taylor 2010, pp. 306–7) as a secular ground of being in the world today, which includes intense religiosity but does not necessarily require religion to explain it, not to experience it as

meaningful. The problematic of religious diversity then gains a new mediatized dimension in which a commodifying circulation through audiovisual media and the Internet links diversity to the principles of capitalist competition and consumer choice. Whereas some have stressed the Protestant genealogy of casting religion as a matter of “choice” (Mahmood 2009), a related approach is the branding of religion, which some have observed as one of the main religious forces in Europe and the United States. Here, a mediatized packaging of religion centered on key personalities and events aims to gain competitive advantage. Especially in Western Europe, it is deployed as a strategy to stir interest in a public where active participation in institutionalized religious contexts has been declining for decades (Engelke 2011). For example, the 2005 World Youth Day of the Catholic Church held in Germany has been described in detail as featuring a “branding religion” strategy centered around the media personality of the Pope (Hepp & Krönert 2009).

In some instances, the market-driven preponderance of some religious discourses and images over others can enter into conflict with state-sanctioned regimes of religious diversity, such as in post-Apartheid South Africa, where “ownership and commercial interests of media institutions increasingly trump respect for national diversity” (Hackett 2006, p. 168), an observation Hackett also makes about Nigeria, where deregulation and the need for revenue have worked against balanced representations of religious difference and have projected locally perceived religious fault lines onto wider national and even international contexts (Hackett 2003). Mazzarella & Kaur (2009) have noted for the South Asian post-1980s market liberalization context that “one of the defining features of this period, as many have noted, was the increasing televisual interpenetration of devotional viewing, political propaganda, and consumer goods advertising,” which in turn has resulted in a “laboratory for new experiments of cultural regulation” (p. 17) such as new forms of sponsorship, censorship, and normative insistence on particular

representations of national religious diversity. In India, the liberalization of broadcasting that has brought about a massive entry of private-sector programming since the 1990s has challenged older established forms of censorship by the state: “What is striking is the rapidity with which an obsession with secrecy and rigid supervision of programming content—all justified by a developmental mission—has given way to an apparently exclusive focus on revenue”; however, “market competition generates its own forms of censorship, clearly, in ways that are harder to detect because they are self-imposed” (Rajagopal 2009a, pp. 24, 23).

### **Perceptibility and Obscurity: The Propriety of Public Sphere Interactions**

The market epistemology of easy availability and visibility of religious discourse and images as it converges with the theme of openness and transparency in Habermasian understandings of publics as spheres of relatively unrestricted dialogue and deliberation conflicts with understandings of intellectual cultural property found in some religious contexts. Visibility and openness enhanced through the public circulation of discourse and images may be met with disapproval, as in Brazilian Candomblé, where the widespread use of video technology as part of religious practice is now also countered by a renewed emphasis on a “performance of secrecy” (van de Port 2009, p. 43). Although such emphasis on obscurity, silence, and secrecy is in many ways deeply grounded in this religious tradition, it is also part and parcel of its more recent audio-visually mediated staging in public (compare also van der Veer 2004). Quite a few indigenous groups have made avid use of audiovisual media technologies not just to document their religious practices for internal use, but also to circulate them much more widely to forge alliances and solidarities with both members of mainstream national publics and people of other indigenous groups (Faulhaber & Forline 2008, Ginsburg 2008, Turner 2002). However, among some

other indigenous groups certain religious knowledge, discourses, and images are not to be circulated widely at all but are subject to carefully graduated degrees of access within the groups concerned and largely shielded from the gaze of outsiders. In Australian aboriginal engagements with media, such concerns have been widely documented because “knowledge is governed by strict rules concerning the right to make representations” (Christie 2008, p. 272). This practice sometimes requires complex processes of negotiation and editing to determine what can be shown to whom, by for example making use of digital tools to block images of deceased persons who must not be shown in television and video productions in several Australian aboriginal contexts (Ginsburg 2006, pp. 195–97). Concerns about the cosmologically creative power of sacred speech among some Native American groups in the southwest United States have even led to general skepticism or downright refusal of new media technologies in language revitalization projects because of their potential to circulate discourse far beyond the control of the indigenous group (Brandt 1981, Hill 2002). Accordingly, the relatively unrestricted circulation of such sacred discourse not only violates in-group prohibitions but also brings about cosmic dangers. The ethos of unimpeded access to public spheres for marginal and minority groups, which has been central to the critique of the Habermasian notion of the public sphere and has also motivated much enthusiasm for the use of new digital media technology, may therefore be profoundly incompatible with the mediated religious practices of some of these groups marginal to national publics. The various degrees of acceptance and rejection of the egalitarian and equal-access ideal of modern public spheres therefore represent an important dimension of religious diversity in the field of media practices.

More generally, the question of what constitutes acceptable interaction and discourse in publics raises the issues of linguistic ideologies, extextualization, agency, and participant roles that have been central to linguistic



anthropological research since the 1980s. Linguistic anthropologists have investigated the role of linguistic ideology in constituting public spheres (Gal & Woolard 2001), but they have also investigated entextualization, the turning of discourse into replicable and transportable chunks of text that circulate as they are subject to potentially endless de- and recontextualizations (Briggs & Bauman 1992). Religious practices and beliefs are doubly mediated by linguistic forms and practices, first by linguistic forms that make them available as something shared and transmittable, and second, by the continuous reinterpretations of these linguistic forms in particular social and historical contexts (Keane 2004, p. 444). Media practices, in turn, profoundly intervene in both these processes of linguistic mediation of the religious, depending on the particular theologies and ideologies of media that come into play. As media practices enable forms of discourse circulation and discourse storage, they also play a crucial part in how practitioners align themselves with the religious authority made manifest through discourse, resulting in particular forms of agency and intentionality. Also, as particular modes of entextualization in religious speech events constitute agency and participation roles, the authority of religious practitioners can be supported or undermined by media practices. For example, uses of sound-reproduction technologies can enhance the authenticity of recited texts in some Islamic contexts where the authority of certain texts is reckoned through tracing its transmission through a chain of reliable interlocutors. On the other hand, the same technologies can also have a deauthenticating effect because of their perceived proximity to commercial musical entertainment in the eyes of others (Eisenlohr 2006). Furthermore, the threatening aspects of particular media practices enabling the public circulation of discourse are sometimes evaluated through religious categories. Giriama elders in Kenya consider the linguistically hybrid cell phone text-messaging performances, which play important roles in the lives of the younger generation as forms of witchcraft in which

“flying” and mixed language evoke a scenario of sociocultural dissolution (Mcintosh 2010).

### **Counterpublics and State Regulation of Religion**

The problematic of access and exclusion as one of the earliest points of contention in debates about Habermas’s concept of the public sphere has long raised the question of counterpublics. Counterpublics have also emerged as a significant theme in the study of religious mobilizations and media. In political theory, the debate on counterpublics has centered on the question of whether empirical exclusions of marginal groups from publics are temporary obstacles that can be overcome through liberal democratic politics, as Habermas has long claimed, or whether publics are fundamentally constituted through mechanisms of exclusion. Warner has eloquently argued for the latter position, pointing out that even counterpublics that arise as a consequence of exclusions from mainstream publics, such as feminist or other publics of marginalized or minority groups who are dissatisfied with their terms of participation in mainstream publics, exhibit some of the same forms of arbitrary closure as do the mainstream publics to which they are opposed (Warner 2002). The fact that publics always address their participants as inhabiting particular social locations also has implications for the study of religious counterpublics. The latter are sometimes tied to the use of an alternative media technology largely evading the control of the state or dominant religious institutions, as the Islamic counterpublics described for the Iranian revolution (Sreberny-Muhammadi & Muhammadi 1994) and Egypt (Hirschkind 2006) based on the circulation of audiocassettes or the publics addressed by religious pirate radio stations in Israel (Lehmann & Siebzehner 2006). Because many of these publics are transnational (Allievi 2003, Kosnick 2004, Yavuz 1999), they also become the focus of concerns about security and nation building by state authorities (Kosnick 2007). Nevertheless, there are important differences in the roles

contemporary media practices play in sustaining both religious counterpublics and transnational religious movements. For example, the Islamic missionary movement Tablighi Jama'at, which counts among the largest religious movements in the world today, is well known for its distance from contemporary audiovisual media and the Internet (van der Veer 2002). Instead of stressing stranger sociability and maximum involvement in such media practices as many might expect from a worldwide movement with millions of followers, Tablighis periodically leave for tours where they, above all, engage in door-to-door missionizing and face-to-face persuasion, relying on themselves as personified examples of Islamic piety.

Governance of religion and religious diversity, however, along with its normative models of religious diversity remains supremely important for shaping the circulation of religious images and discourse. States regulate access of religious actors and organizations to parts of the mass-mediated dimensions of the public sphere (Abu Lughod 2005, Messner 2000, Young 2004), whereas at times state censorship efforts are joined by changing middle-class moralities in suppressing "obscenity," as for example in the regulation of representations of Hindu traditions in nineteenth-century colonial India (Gupta 2009). Stressing the importance of state-sponsored and normative models of religious diversity, the Brazilian Pentecostalist Universal Church of the Kingdom of Christ's highly mediatized campaigns against Afro-Brazilian religions and the Catholic Church drew sharp criticism in its "war against the demonic forces of evil pursued by the churches rooted in the popular sectors" (Birman 2006, p. 55), which the country's elite perceived as an attack against religious tolerance and syncretism conceived as Brazilian national values.

Often, such efforts of regulation begin with the question of who and what counts as representing a religion. Not just legal aspects but also the aesthetics and sensibilities resulting from such encounters of the public circulation of religious discourse and images with state regimes of regulation of religion determine

what count as religious discourses, images, and experiences to begin with. For example, the broadcasting of Alevi ritual hymns on state-controlled Turkish radio in the 1970s framed these performances as national "folklore" rather than a "religious" genre, making them acceptable in a vision of Turkish nation building suspicious of religious difference, a contextualization that some Turkish Alevi have now begun to challenge (Tambar 2010, p. 666). Research on media and religious diversity thus demonstrates that the boundary between the secular and the religious often depends on the modalities of public circulation and perceptibility rather than on any preexisting doctrines or beliefs pointing to a religious otherworld. Furthermore, in those contexts in which forms of secularism inform ideals of religious diversity within nation-states, the shifting boundary between the religious and the nonreligious is not just a matter of access and exclusion to and from public spheres, but also shaped through the aesthetics of what count as legitimate interventions in public debate.

## DIVERSITY OF RELIGIOUS MEDIATIONS

A further direction of research on media and religious diversity takes an intrinsic link between media and religion as a starting point. Approaching religious traditions as institutionalized forms of interaction with a religious otherworld, scholars have noted the different media technologies and embedded understandings of what media are and do in the process of making such a world present to religious practitioners. From such a perspective, the connection between religious practice and uses of media technology has two main implications for the issue of religious diversity.

First, religious practices are grounded in particular theologies of mediation that contain assumptions about media technologies and their operation in interacting with the divine, often including ideas about the interplay of different media and their relative preferability. This is a matter not just of distinguishing major

religious traditions by their media histories, but also of paying attention to the internal diversity of religious traditions regarding media practices and media ideologies, including the religious sensations they authorize (Meyer 2008), and also of being mindful of deep ambivalences about certain media in particular religious traditions (Khan 2011). In the recent history of Buddhism in Thailand, different strands of the tradition can be distinguished by their inner links to different media technologies, such as audio and audiovisual technologies versus writing: “One might say, then, that [spirit] mediumship of the 1960s and 1970s was to the *sangha* (Buddhist clergy and institutions) what phonography was to writing” (Morris 2002, p. 392). Second, the diversity of religious mediations is closely linked to scenarios of religious diversity because the former often influence media practices in wider public spheres (Meyer 2004). Background assumptions about media in religious contexts have important consequences for public spheres in which scenarios of religious diversity are often negotiated and disputed. This is especially the case when claims to authority and authenticity accompany claims of a more “direct” connection to divinity by virtue of new or alternative media practices (Eisenlohr 2011).

The Protestant dichotomy between an authentic inner spirit or inner self and an outer material apparatus of institutions and objects problematically constraining it provides a powerful critique of alternative religious traditions that from a Protestant point of view hinder a more direct access to both divinity and an authentic inner self (Keane 2007). As anthropologists of religion have noted, such Protestant media ideologies do conflict with those found in other religious traditions. Whereas the hierarchical dichotomy between inner spirit and a lacking material world of external mediations can also be found elsewhere, such as for example in Sufi traditions of Islam (Eisenlohr 2009), the contrast is absent in other religious contexts. Whereas for some the problematic of mediation remains tied to a Protestant theological concern revolving

around an inner-outer dichotomy and its attempts to universalize itself as the model of religion per se (Hirschkind 2011), evidence indicates that desires to bring about the presence of the divine strongly focus on technologies of mediation in a broad range of religious settings. This suggests that the issue of presence remains inextricably tied to mediation, including its technological aspects. For example, in Hindu traditions of visually engaging with divine images in highly intense ways (*darsan*), the material image is not external to divinity and the religious interaction does not unfold according to an opposition of inner values or spirit and a problematic external mediating apparatus. This, however, does not eliminate the circumstance that divine presence is taken to be problematic, and mass-reproduced images have now taken a key role in enhancing the presence of Hindu deities in everyday lived environments (Jain 2007, Pinney 2002). A similar point can be made about Catholic Marianism, where photography (Wojcik 1996) and the Internet (Apolito 2005) are now central to bringing about miraculous apparitions of the Virgin Mary. In such contexts, the theme of crisis is often salient. As noted for a situation of political tension and corruption in the Philippines in 2004 in which the mass-mediated bleeding of a statue of Mary came to play a central role, “in this milieu of deteriorating conditions . . . the desire for immediacy that we saw in the televised prayer to God has taken another form: the demand for transparency” (de la Cruz 2009, pp. 479–80). Here, yearnings for resolving political and moral crises result in the projection of wishes for more visually direct forms of divine presence on audiovisual technologies.

The theme of fighting the corrupt and obscure can also be linked to the mingling of different mediatic regimes and become an important force in processes of religious conversion and contestation. As Meyer has documented for Protestant missionizing in West Africa, the mainline Protestant churches who headed much of the original efforts of conversion to Christianity in Ghana were hesitant to allow for more dramatic visual

practices such as having visions, trance, and interpreting dreams, stressing the importance of scripture instead. This led to the emergence of independent African Pentecostal-Charismatic churches privileging such visibility as a central part of their practices, which more recently also involve extensive use of the latest audiovisual media technologies. Pentecostal-Charismatic Christians now also turn their desire to visually discern the divine and to unmask the demonic with the support of audiovisual media practices against the adherents of traditional African religions, whom they accuse of favoring the obscure and demonic, leading to suspicions about hidden forces of witchcraft. Here, a media-sustained sense of visual transparency becomes a semiotic ideology deployed against religious others and a claim of superiority in the highly competitive religious landscape of West Africa. (Meyer 2006). This is an example of how religious practitioners position themselves in a position of superiority vis-à-vis others through claims of more immediate access to the divine. Such claims demonstrating the dialectical relation between mediation and immediacy are deeply paradoxical because they illustrate a widespread tendency to seek more immediate relations to religious otherworlds by deploying ever more complex media technologies.

The screening of the Ramyana epos in 78 episodes by state-controlled *doordarsban* television in late 1980s India is another example of how new religious media practices can stir hopes of bypassing established mediating institutions, here the postcolonial Indian state and its model of secularism and state-sponsored development widely regarded to be in crisis. Not only the political theology of Ram Rajya, the perfectly just rule of the Hindu deity Ram promoted by the televised serial appeared to be a better political and moral alternative for Hindu nationalist sensibilities. The televised serial format itself was highly successful in creating this political-religious vision because it not only allowed itself to become part of the viewers' daily rhythms and routines of daily life, but also favored more immediate, affective visual engagements of viewers with the

divine characters of the epos, in many ways reinforcing the established tradition of *darshan* as a highly intense "physical relationship of visual intermingling" (Pinney 2001, p. 168). For example, the serial featured very frequent and long close-up facial shots underlined with melodramatic music that played into this tradition of Hindu worship, involving the viewer in a more direct and highly affective way with the divine protagonists and their idealized actions (Lutgendorf 1995; Rajagopal 2001, p. 100). This perceived intensification of identification with divine characters and their worlds enhanced by television played a key role in the rise of Hindu nationalism in India at the time and helped create a sense of Hindutva moral community antagonistic to religious others in India.

In Islamic contexts, technologies of sound reproduction and sound broadcasting have been described as similarly intensifying religious interaction in a tradition in which voice through the paradigm of Qur'anic recitation inhabits a privileged role in making the divine present, the importance of Islamic visual cultures notwithstanding (Moll 2010). Against the backdrop of this theology of mediation such technologies can help render the presence of, for example, a prominent Islamic preacher more "immediate, and heighten the spiritual aura of his voice. As these broadcasting technologies allow a leader's voice to come from everywhere and nowhere, they reinforce a totalizing, seemingly all-encompassing hearing experience that envelops listeners in a soundscape of divine presence" (Schulz 2008, p. 183; compare also Eisenlohr 2009, Hirschkind 2006). As Schulz's findings about the effects of the acousmatic and reproduced voice in a West African Islamic context show, the bodily emplacement and the kinesthetics of the listener crucially intervene to make the technological mediation of voice effective. This cautions against essentializing links between a particular dimension of the sensorium, a media technology catering to it, and a particular religious tradition, as would be the case in ontologizing a link between voice, sound reproduction, and Islam. The complex synesthetic interplay

within sensoria and their contextual shifting cannot be encompassed by a perspective that pays attention to media technologies and media ideologies alone (Engelke 2010, Schulz 2008, Sobchack 2008). Furthermore, such a perspective would also gloss over broad zones of overlap in media practices across different religious traditions. The particular West African Islamic emphasis on close links of sound and tactility described by Schulz exhibits many parallels to what other scholars have analyzed as the blurring of vision and touch in the Hindu practice of *darshan* and its reinforcement and wider dissemination through various visual media (Pinney 2002, Jain 2007). Such an emphasis on investigating the entire auditory field in religious media practices is the counterpart to the study of the broad range of the visual field and the emplacement of religious practitioners therein in its intersections with media practices (Morgan 2005). In this sense, visual media practices also summon entire ranges of sensoria (Mitchell 2005, Morgan 2008).

Contrasting semiotic ideologies and ideas about representation connected to normative models of religion can also be a key issue in conflict along religious lines. A good example is the tension that erupted around the infamous cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad published by the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* in 2005, where such conflicting notions about the nature of religion and representation provided powerful barriers of comprehension and acceptance. A modern Protestant semiotic ideology sharply distinguishing between subjects and objects on one hand as well as between signs such as symbols and icons and the “real” material world on the other hand (Keane 2007) informed the widespread opinion in Western Europe that the highly negative depictions must be tolerated as critical free speech. Accordingly, as mere signs the caricatures would constitute no injury to the actual sacred person of the Prophet nor to individual Muslims’ inner beliefs (Keane 2009). In contrast, many Muslims around the world felt a deep sense of hurt and personal injury when the cartoons were published and circulated owing to a sense of embodied dependency

and filial attachment to the Prophet, which are part of a larger complex of mimetic engagement and emulation of embodied virtues traceable to the example he set for Muslims (Mahmood 2009). As Mahmood has noted, the conflict around the cartoons demonstrates the separating power of semiotic ideologies in media practices along religious lines but also shows how the deep injury many Muslims felt when confronted with the cartoons is not alien at all to Christian sensibilities connected to the portrayal of Jesus or to the long tradition of the veneration of icons. The Danish cartoon example demonstrates both the political efficacy of religiously grounded conflicting semiotic ideologies in mobilizing people along religious boundaries and the analytical pitfalls of squarely identifying particular notions of mediation and representation with one religious tradition to the exclusion of others.

## CONCLUSION

This overview shows that the issue of media and religious diversity raises questions far beyond the representation of religious difference. The topic of religion and media points to the complex entanglement of ideologies of mediation grounded in particular religious traditions, state governance of religious diversity and their histories, the constitution of public spheres, and the commodification of market circulation, as well as the bodily emplacement of religious practitioners. Indeed, only a perspective aware of the intrinsic relationships of religion and media can do justice to the questions provoked by the intersection of media practices and religious difference.

The observation that religion and media appear to be inseparable has led some to assert that the latter’s formats and institutions now shape religion to such an extent that “religion is increasingly subsumed under the logic of media” (Hjarvard 2008, p. 11). This argument recalls long-standing claims in media theory that media technologies with their material and formal dimensions constitute the a priori of sociocultural life, overruling the agency of

human subjects (Kittler 1990, McLuhan 1964). But such a perspective does not take account of the multiple modes of governing religion that strongly affect media practices and representations. Furthermore, as the growing literature on religious difference and media demonstrates, media practices in religious contexts are highly responsive to the diversity of ideologies of mediation inhabiting religious traditions, including their sensorial dimensions. The

anthropological accounts of the plurality of bodily and sensorial engagement tied to specific contexts of religious practice put into doubt the assertion that the material and formal dimensions of media technologies exert an overriding impact on religious experience. The diversity of religious mediation and the mediation of religious diversity are not reducible to one another but must be understood as mutually constitutive.

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## Errata

An online log of corrections to *Annual Review of Anthropology* articles may be found at <http://anthro.annualreviews.org/errata.shtml>