

MEDIA AND RELIGION STUDIES: CHALLENGES OF NEW MILLENIUM

ИССЛЕДОВАНИЯ РЕЛИГИИ И СМИ: ВЫЗОВЫ НОВОГО ТЫСЯЧЕЛЕТИЯ

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This paper examines existing paradigms and approaches in media and religious studies while analyzing new trends in this field of research both in Russia and abroad. The author suggests that searching for a common approach and framework – as universal as possible – is an important challenge for the international community of scholars in the new millennium.

Key words: *media; religion; research paradigms; trends.*

В статье рассматриваются основные подходы в исследованиях отношений религии и СМИ и описываются новые тенденции в этой области в России и за рубежом. Автор полагает, что поиск общего подхода – как можно более универсального и приемлемого для исследователей из разных стран, – является важной задачей для международного научного сообщества в начале нового тысячелетия.

Ключевые слова: *СМИ; религия; исследовательские парадигмы; тенденции.*

The milestone book “*Culture Matters. How Values Shape Human Progress*”, published at the beginning of the new millennium (Culture Matters. How Values Shape Human Progress, 2000), marked an essential shift in academic discourse with respect to culture. Addressed mostly to economists and politicians who tended to think in the paradigm of universally applied determinant factors of development and progress, the book called on them to take culture into serious consideration.

Reminding readers that “for many economists, it is axiomatic that appropriate economic policy effectively implemented will produce the same results without reference to culture”, the book’s editor Lawrence E. Harrison writes: “The role of cultural values and attitudes as *obstacles to or facilitators of* progress has been largely ignored by governments and aid agencies. Integrating value and attitude change into development policies, planning and programming is, I believe, a promising way to assure that, in the next fifty years, the world does not relive the poverty and injustice that most poor countries, and underachieving ethnic groups, have been mired in during the past half century” (ibid, xxiv).

After examining the link between values and progress, the relationship between culture and institutions, and various aspects of cultural change, these scholars came to the conclusion that culture really matters.

May we suggest the same regarding religion in the context of media? Does religion really matter for media and the public sphere in the beginning of the new millennium? And, furthermore, what are the consequences of this impact for media and communication studies?

“Yet culture, in the sense of the inner values and attitudes that guide a population, frightens scholars”, stated David Landes (Landes, 2000: 2). Following his observation, we have to state that religion as a subject of research and an essential actor in media systems is still underexposed.

The influence of religion on different sub-systems of society during the last decade has attracted with increasing frequency the attention of prominent philosophers. The book “*The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*”, published in 2011 in New York, brought together the reflections of Jurgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, Judith Butler and Cornel West

resulting in a live dialogue on a vibrant subject (Butler, Habermas, Taylor, West, 2011).

Rethinking traditional approaches, these scholars evidently show that many ideas about religion and public life are myths still rooted not only in mass consciousness, but also in academia, among researchers and faculty members. Critically warning against a “polarized” framing of the subject, the book reminds readers that religion is neither totally private nor totally irrational, and that the public sphere is not necessarily the place for radical deliberation on religion if the analysis is to be deep and objective.

Calling for a “radical redefinition of secularism”, Charles Taylor proposes the revision of the “mantra-type formulae like ‘the separation of church and state’ or the necessity of removing religion from public space” (Taylor, 2011: 34).

Recently printed books, mentioned above, have had success convincing both the academy and media managers that religion does matter while also inspiring scholars to reflect more deeply.

Having started with the “culture matters” suggestion, we have to remind ourselves that in many societies culture is rooted in religion, and despite secularization, is still fed and inspired by religion as its core and basic structural element.

In the context of this paper we use a widely accepted definition of religion: religion is a system of beliefs and common practices relative to superhuman beings. World religions have sets of symbols, concepts and rituals with the connection to a transcendent beyond the natural order.

“Religion is threatening, inspiring, consoling, and provocative, a matter of reassuring routine or calls to put one’s life on the line. It is a way to make peace and a reason to make war”, emphasized Craig Calhoun (Calhoun, 2011: 118). “Religion is an amazing phenomenon that plays contradictory roles in peoples lives. It can destroy or revitalize, put to sleep or awaken, enslave or emancipate, teach docility or teach revolt”, stresses Iranian sociologist Ali Sharyati (Hazleton, 2009: 19).

Providing historical analysis of mutual relations and influences between media and religion, American scholar Stewart M. Hoover writes: “In fact, religion and media have been closely linked since at least the Reformation, and it is axiomatic that modes of communication we might also call ‘media,’ such as oral performance, ritual, and dress, are fundamental to our understanding of pre-Reformation religion as well. Thus, when we contemplate questions of the fate of religion in an age dominated by the media we should start with the realization, that as a system of meaning and signification, religion has always been inextricably linked to modes of communication” (Hoover, 2002: 26).

Media and religion as social institutions of civil society may find themselves in conditions of competition and conflict, as both claim to be value-based referees in public life. If religion and media are expanded from a narrower notion of social institutions to a wider concept of domains, they sustain tensions as the domains of evaluating, labeling, measuring, praising and condemning.

The “dualistic” approach to media and religion still dominates academic discourse, where both sub-systems are described as “independent and potentially acting independently upon one another” (Hoover, 2006: 8). The “dualistic” approach of competitive institutions is based on functional analysis, because media and religion, according to Stewart M. Hoover, “occupy the same spaces, serve many of the same purposes, and invigorate the same practices in modernity” (Hoover, 2006: 9). Moreover, they are producing and distributing “normativity” – descriptions and patterns of what is good and what is bad – and also monitoring whether social life fits into the normative models they promote.

At the same time, media, as well as some other influent actors (mostly of the political domain), are intended to “press out” the religion from public life in situations of conflict and relocate it to “the private walls of bourgeois domesticity, or the interior, silent universe of individual readers” (Stolow, 2005: 120).

Historically, the communication of religious content presumes “face-to-face exchange” within interpersonal communication (liturgy, confession, sacraments in Christianity). Technically mediated forms

of sacred knowledge transfer and coverage of religious subjects provide additional threats to the content (even the rewriting of Holy Scriptures in medieval monasteries caused a lot of mistakes and misunderstandings). Referring to accuracy in communicating the sacred, Norwegian researcher Knut Lundby reminds us that, “however, distortions and non-communication are perfectly possible in close situations as well as when large media are involved” (Lundby, 2006).

Recent media technology innovations and the convergence in processes of religious perspective are summarized in two newly published books, both written by Catholics and mostly focused on Catholic reflections and experience. One was published in the USA (Vøgt, 2011), the other was printed in Poland (Internet i Kościół, 2011). I am sure that there will be more religious “compendiums” on new media.

Research paradigms

Professor Liesbet van Zoonen of the Loughborough University (UK) has summarized the literature on media and religion over the past thirty years and notes the renewal of an interest in the research of the relationships between media and religion. She outlines four key approaches – some of them overlapping – of study in this field, namely: (1) *articulation*; (2) *mediatization*; (3) *similarity and* (4) *distinction* (Zoonen, 2011).

Articulation paradigm. In the context of religion and media, the notion “articulation” refers to the approach which locates the analysis “radically in the experience of lived religious or spiritual lives as they encounter their social and cultural lives, of which the media play an ever more important part” (Hoover, 2006: 55). The starting point for “articulation-oriented” research are the people themselves and their media experience in connection with religious experience, considering also the circumstances, the environment and the time. This approach acknowledges the possibilities of similarity and separation between media and religion, or mediatized religion. The methodology of articulation paradigm studies often uses in-depth interviews, focus groups and observation methods.

There are many good examples of an approach focused primarily on articulation (Clark, 2003; Meyer and Moors, 2005; Zoonen, Vis and Mihelj, 2010).

Mediatization paradigm. The study of the mechanisms of influence on active media coverage of various social, cultural, political and economic events has developed a new notion in the social sciences and humanities, called “mediatization”. Scandinavian scholar Stig Hjarvard suggested that religion can no longer be studied separately from the media, because a) media are for most people the primary source of their religious knowledge and religious imagination; b) some social functions of religion are now primarily the functions of media and c) religious institutions use media logic and media framing for their actions (Hjarvard, 2008). The mediatization paradigm presumes that media are the main actors in the context of religious activity in the public sphere; therefore research design is based on quantitative and qualitative methods, content, text and image analyses, and also on so-called cybermetric methods for Internet content research.

Similarity paradigm. Religion is itself considered as medium-like as a channel between the self and God or other supernatural subjects. Texts, symbols and icons are the language of religion as a medium. According to Dutch researcher Hent de Vries, without mediating practices and discourses, religion would not be able to manifest itself at all (De Vries, 2001). Vice versa, media themselves with religious features look similar to religion. They are ritualized and widely use religious instruments to be more suggestive. Some theories of media and communication also have religious roots and precedents (Peters, 1999). Methodologically similarity paradigm research is based on cultural critiques with some empirical research.

Distinction paradigm. Researchers promoting this paradigm are convinced that there are deep differences between religion and media, and consider this distinction to be the most essential part of their relationship; they consider religion and media to be two separate fields and try to describe and interpret their mutual influence. All kinds of concerns of religious institutions and of individuals regarding the rise

of the modern mass media, as well as warnings against media dangers, are subjects of this study. On analyzing the impact of TV on young audiences, some researchers came to the conclusion that enormous exposure to paranormal and supernatural subjects (like a Medium, a Ghost Whisperer, etc.) has transformed the religious imagination of youth (Petersen, 2010). In some cases, media are interpreted as channels of evil, predominantly negative in content, therefore censorship and co-regulation are demanded. Dutch Catholic bishops in the middle of the 20th century did not recommend that Catholics listen to non-Catholic radio, and more recently parents in some schools demanded that books about Harry Potter be withdrawn from school libraries. Such conflicts between religion and media emphasized the opposition between the two social institutions (see, for example: Starker, 1989). At the same time Churches and other religious institutions tried to spread their message by all possible means, therefore they were among the pioneers of all kinds of media - from early printing to ultramodern Internet-based technologies. Another perspective, active religious presence in media, the so-called “clericalization”, and the pressure of religious institutions on what is liberally understood as the public sphere of media are also subjects of this research interest. As far as methodologies and methods are concerned in this paradigm, in addition to the descriptive approach, scholars utilize survey research, psychological experimental methods, in-depth interviews and focus groups.

In sharing the “four paradigms” research landscape proposed by Liesbet van Zoonen, we would like to draw attention to at least two influent and rapidly developing “shifts” in this field. The first: towards a more general and wider context of culture – the “*culturological turn*” (Hoover, 2002), and the second: towards the individual experience of a person – “*anthropological turn*” (Media Anthropology, 2005). Both of these shifts reflect the need for an integral approach, taking into consideration more carefully both social and personal contexts of media and religious events, relations, effects etc. This integral approach has yet to be worked out.

Russian context

In order to understand more precisely the context of this field in Russia, it seems to be reasonable to ask why religion matters in the Russian media and public sphere.

Outstanding attempts of philosophical comprehension by internationally recognized scholars – Sergey Averintsev, Vladimir Bibikhin, Sergey Horujy (Averintsev, 2004; Bibikhin, 2003; Horujy, 2011) and others – do not encourage their Russian colleagues to focus on religious matters as these are still ‘ad marginem’ of humanities and social sciences in the country.

The research domain of journalism and communication follows the mainstream and does not pay much attention to religion in media in the context of the wider public sphere.

The few existing books, dissertations and papers fit into four mainstream categories of research:

a) *content oriented studies* (coverage of, attention to, accents, proportions, overexposure and marginalization, etc.) (Religia v informacionnom pole rossijskih SMI, 2002; Kashinskaja, 2008; Khroul, 2009);

b) *institutional oriented studies* (Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Jewish, etc. media) studies (Luchenko, 2008; Khroul, 2010b);

c) *channel oriented studies* (press, radio, TV, Internet, mobile networks) (Luchenko, 2008; Khroul, 2008) ;

d) *media policy oriented studies* (media co-regulation, ethical issues, profanation of sacrum, scandals, dysfunctions causing conflicts, etc.) (Khroul, 2010a).

Findings of this research that has been conducted, which are sometimes quite important, have minimal effect on information policy and structural changes of media.

For example, the research project “Religion in the information field of the Russian media”, which was conducted in 2002 and focused on quantitative and qualitative comparisons of newspapers and radio stations content, brought interesting results. Professionally analyzed empirical

data gave the opportunity for a deeper and more serious understanding of the dysfunctions of media (in particular, press and radio). But due to the contemporary situation with respect to the coverage of religious topics in the Russian secular media, the findings were not taken seriously.

Besides journalism and communications scholars, religious studies scholars also express a growing interest in media and religious research. For example, many considered as a positive and promising sign the international conference “*Religion & Media*”, held by the Moscow Society for the Study of Religions, Faculty of Philosophy, Moscow State University (Moscow, May 12-15, 2010), which brought together more than 30 experts in this field from Germany, Italy, Belgium, Japan, USA, Canada, Ukraine and Russia.

There are several factors explaining the growing interest in media and religious issues in Russia. From a methodological perspective they can be classified as (1) *quantitative* and (2) *qualitative*.

Among the quantitative factors is the growing number of believers, empirically proven by sociological centers after public opinion polls (Levada, 2012, FOM, 2012), though the methodological question remains “who is the believer?” Do we count all according to self-estimation or just those practicing religion? In August 2012 the first-ever sociological survey and mapping of religious adherents in Russia based on self-identification was published (Arena, 2012). According to its findings 41% of the people identify as Russian Orthodox, 25% “spiritual but not religious” people, 13% atheist and non-religious people, 6,5% as Muslims, 4,1% as unaffiliated Christians, 1,5% adhere to other Orthodox Churches, and 1,2% as Pagans.

A growing proportion of religious people – both in the media and in the audience – impact the whole situation and it is this impact that becomes visible and interesting for researchers.

As a qualitative factor, we can consider the growing awareness of Russian people of “creed”, the subject of the belief, and the “quality of faith”. If it is measurable – even symbolically – it could be considered close to zero during the systematic “atheization” and estimated to be

much higher after 20 years of religious freedom (but still there is a serious problem of the “compatibility” of average beliefs with official doctrine). The research question: “What Russia really believes in?” attracts many scholars (Furman, Kaariainen 2000 and 2006), especially with a focus on the mediatization effects of faith transmitting (Krasikov, 2005).

Besides the quantitative/qualitative dimensions, there are some other attractive aspects for empirical research and theoretical reflection in the media and religion field – such as private/public, religious/secular, institutional/informal, official/oppositional, journalistic/PR, etc.

Signs of hope

The new book series “*Media and Religion*” launched in 2011 by an international team of scholars in the field, with encouraging support by the Faculty of Journalism (Moscow State University), is an attempt to comprehend contemporary trends in media and religious studies (Religion and New Media in the Age of Convergence, 2011). The huge variety of subjects and approaches presented by the contributors to the first volume reflects the complexity of “media and religion” research and also the present level of its comprehension with previously unknown facts and underexposed trends, relevant conclusions and new ideas to inspire future research.

From the perspective of the “*Media, Religion and Culture*” working group of the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR), the number of separate research initiatives and case studies grows day-by-day, but still misses if not a “monolithic theory”, at least “a common denominator”, a “viable framework” for the different approaches.

Discussions in Stockholm (2009), Braga (2010), Istanbul (2011), Durban (2012) and Dublin (2013) showed that there is no clear understanding how communication and journalism relate to religion among involved scholars. As the “*Media, Religion, and Culture*” former chairman Johannes Ehrat from the *Pontifical Gregorian University*

(Rome) suggested, there is still no comprehensive theory of religious communication that precisely and non-controversially describes all levels and sorts of religious practices, since all religions *a) divide the sacred and the profane*, *b) have transcendental immanent objects* (e.g., the Holy of Holies, Sacraments, Mecca's Kaa'ba, Buddha's statue, or similar objects in space); and *c) most religions have holy scriptures and holy persons*. Three imminences of the transcendent – the space, the symbol and the person – are all built into central religious processes of communication.

At the same time, it is almost evident that it will not be easy to find a common approach, a common research angle in the different religions, in different societies and in different media systems with different audiences. Another difficulty is connected to the theological-dominating approach, and to the typically theological argumentation patterns, which are not compatible enough with traditional communication perspectives.

Searching for a common denominator, shared approach and common framework, ideally as universal as possible, is an important challenge for the international community of scholars in the new millennium.

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