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Responding Critically to Media Texts: Lessons from Jewish and Other Religious Reading Practices

Abstract

The article deals with media's presentation of religions and later responses to it. The author stresses in particular three modes of religious stance towards media, namely, resistance, imitation and participation. Finally, the article offers a critical religious engagement with media with emphasis on Jewish religious tradition.

Presentation

It would be a mistake to see the insecurity and instability we find in today's world as a purely recent phenomenon. Values, ideologies and cultures have always been subject to change and revision; looking back to an imagined, simpler, golden age of clarity and security is inaccurate. Nonetheless, it is hard to deny that, in modernity, the pace of social, political, cultural, economic and technological change has speeded up considerably. In the post-war era this pace has further accelerated to the degree that, so it seems, it is extremely difficult to find any stability in what Zygmunt Bauman has called a 'liquid' modernity³. This liquidity means we are living in a world in which almost any idea, practice or culture is subject to fundamental challenge.

The development of a globalized mass media in the post-war period is one of the key factors in creating this liquidity. Facilitated by technological changes, media outlets have not only proliferated worldwide, they have also penetrated deep into what was once 'private' life. The internet, social media and mobile technology mean that there are few spaces left in the world that are not 'mediated' to some degree.

The effects of this mass mediatisation are paradoxical. On the one hand, the world becomes 'smaller' as once insurmountable barriers to global communication fall away. This can make the world seem for optimists like a single 'global village' in Marshall McLuhan's memorable phrase⁴. Pessimists point to, amongst other things, the 'cultural imperialism' of the west that can challenge global diversity. Yet on the other hand, the mediatisation of the world also has the power to increase the visibility of what were once highly marginal groups and cultures. We can point here to the prominence in 'the west' of, for example, yoga, Bollywood movies and Korean K-Pop music. So the globalized media can paradoxically increase both global homogeneity and global diversity.

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³ Bauman, Zygmunt. 2000. *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

⁴ McLuhan, Marshall. 2003. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. McGraw-Hill.

What the globalized media certainly does do is to relativise. What I mean by that is that it renders any religion, culture, community or practice as just one of many. It has become increasingly difficult to maintain the fiction that there can only be one ‘natural’ way to live one’s life. The media makes boundaries between groups unstable and permeable. However one chooses to live, other options are constantly being publicized. Again, the effects of this are paradoxical. On the one hand, individuals and groups are subject to a constant insecurity as they can never guarantee that the foundations of their world will not crumble. On the other hand, the proliferation of options and resources in the world can be a source of empowerment and revitalization as old, engrained practices are challenged.

How then, should we evaluate the impact of globalized media on religion? And how should those committed to religions respond to the media?

It is important here to recognize that there is no one single picture. The diversity of the media, means that we cannot see its impact as homogeneous. Further, research into media has shown that the consumption of media is an active rather than passive process. We cannot necessarily assume that the media texts that an individual consumes will necessarily result in a particular outcome. In fact, the same media texts can be interpreted in radically different ways according to context. One famous example is the 1980s study of the American soap opera ‘Dallas’, demonstrated that viewers in different countries were essentially watching a different drama according to their context.⁵

So in evaluating the impact of the media on religion, it is better to look at how religious groups have responded to the media rather than making assumptions of what a particular kind of media text will do to religious people. In particular, we need to look closely at how the engagement of religions with the media responds to its diversity and its relativism. In other words, the media represents a challenge to religion – a challenge that has been met in a plurality of ways.

Religious Engagement with Media

I want to highlight three broad modes of religious engagement with media, before going on to highlight – and recommend – a possible fourth way.

Resistance

One way in which religions respond to the media is to treat it as a threat that needs to be resisted as far as possible. Through restricting the access to the mass media, some religious groups hope to be able to prevent the erosion of their boundaries and the infiltration of ‘alien’ ideas. Attempts to do this range from simply encouraging members to restrict their media consumption to ‘approved’ outlets, to more thoroughgoing attempts to prevent them from having a choice in the matter.

The latter is only really possible when religious groups try and limit not just media consumption but any kind of interaction outside the group. Such is the case

⁵ Liebes, Tamar, and Elihu Katz. 1990. *The Export of Meaning: Cross-Cultural Readings of Dalls*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

with most strains of Haredi (ultra-orthodox) Judaism. In the post-war period the Haredim have attempted to enclose their communities through limiting their member's secular education and involvement in the job market. Preventing access to the media has become an increasingly important part of what Haredim see as protecting the survival of traditional Jewish life. Pronouncements and campaigns led by Haredi leaders have warned their communities against television, the internet and smartphones. In some cases, access to schools and other community resources has been restricted to those who comply with these restrictions. At the same time, the Haredim have their own media, including newspapers that carefully censor and frame news according to Haredi perspectives.

Leaving aside questions of personal freedom, such strategies may well turn out to be more ineffective and self-defeating. Given the growing ubiquity of online services, it may well prove to be impossible in the medium to long term to interact with the state and the economy without access to the internet. Further, in information-driven economies, restricting sources of information also restricts economic competitiveness. But in any case, bans on the internet and smartphones are widely flouted in Haredi communities. By refusing to engage with such media, the more conservative Haredi leaders risk being outflanked by their followers.

The Haredi example shows how refusal of the media is of limited effectiveness in the medium to long term. Indeed, examples from some of the most repressive countries on earth show that censorship today is a much more difficult proposition than it ever was. In North Korea, for example, there is a large underground trade in media that is officially prohibited, circulated through cheap usb sticks and computers.

Imitation

Another option for religious groups that seek to restrict what they see as the threat of the media, is to create a media of one's own so that members will not need or be tempted to 'go outside'. To some extent even those groups that practice the first strategy do this too – there is, as I pointed out, a Haredi media. However, what I am referring to here is a much more thoroughgoing attempt to 'compete' with the wider media by creating an analogue of it. This is a colossal enterprise that can only be attempted by large and determined religious communities.

The strategy of imitation can be found in a number of world religions, but it is perhaps most highly developed within sections of evangelical and conservative Christianity in the US. Christians have invested heavily in a vast complex of online news sources, publishing houses, TV and radio stations, film studios and record labels. All the elements of a broad modern media diet are available in specifically Christian forms. What is striking about much (although not all) of the output of the contemporary Christian media is how far it is predicated on imitation of the wider media, rather than drawing on pre-existing Christian tradition.

This is perhaps most apparent in Contemporary Christian Music, which has developed since the 1960s as a response to contemporary rock and pop music.⁶ For the most part it does not innovate musically, but follows and creates analogues of developing secular popular music genres. Essentially it strips out the problematic lyrical content and replaces it with Christian lyrics, accompanied by a competent simulacra of secular music.

There is considerable debate within evangelical and conservative Christian conservative circles as to whether this strategy is an appropriate one. There are those who argue that secular popular music cannot be rehabilitated in this way and should therefore be resisted – as in the strategy I outlined previously. But whether popular music is resisted or imitated, there is tacit agreement that, on its own, secular popular music is at the very least something that Christians should find problematic.

One of the problems with this strategy of imitation is that it usually – but not always – avoids pursuing aesthetics as an end in itself. Rather, aesthetics is an instrumental means to an end;⁷ as a way of preventing people from straying from the fold or as a tool for evangelism. It fails to develop a specifically Christian form of culture that is not parasitic on secular culture. As such, it is not only a departure from the 2000 year tradition of Christian art, it can rarely act as anything other than a pail imitation of something else. In this way, imitation betrays a lack of confidence in religion's ability to provide alternatives to secular culture.

Participation

Whereas the strategies of resistance and imitation try to reduce participation in the wider mediated world as far as possible, other religious groups and individuals have opted for a thorough participation in the media. This strategy is predicated on a recognition that not only does the ubiquity of media mean that it is almost impossible not to engage in it, doing so can actually bring advantages to religious groups. As such, to participate fully in the media is to tacitly accept – with varying degrees of enthusiasm – that it acts as a kind of giant marketplace, and that one's own point of view will become just one more item on the relativist menu. The media therefore offers unprecedented opportunities, as well as risks.

Of course, to pragmatically accept the reality of relativism is not the same as embracing relativism per se. There are many religious groups that participate in the media as a tool in proselytization and propaganda. The Islamic State, for example, is known for the sophistication of its media engagement and output, particular on social media. It does seem to have achieved some degree of success in gaining recruits through online activity. Yet there is no sense in which a free media is accepted by Islamic State as a principle; in the areas it controls it does not allow open media access. While they are an extreme case, it is common for conservative

⁶ Howard, Jay R., and John M. Streck. 1999. *Apostles of Rock: The Splintered World of Contemporary Christian Music*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.

⁷ Kahn-Harris, Keith, and Marcus Moberg. 2012. "Religious Popular Music: Between the Instrumental, Transcendent and Transgressive." *Temenos: Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion* 48 (1): 87–106.

religious groups to engage in the free media as a tool in outreach when the ultimate goal of that outreach is to restrict access to media. In this sense there is a cleavage between the outward and inward-facing media strategies of some religious groups.

More liberal religious groups would seem to have a more consistent strategy – embracing the free media both pragmatically and ideologically. Even here though, participation in the media can lead to dilemmas and compromises. How far should one make one's message easily consumable in a media age? Liberal religions are often reliant on complex and nuanced arguments that can be difficult to communicate in ways that cut through modern media noise. It is often more conservative voices with a simpler message who are able to communicate effectively. Participation in the media means losing control. Anyone who has ever published an article online knows that the risk of being misinterpreted is great. There is an inevitable pressure towards unambiguous messages in a world of ambiguous media.

Towards a Critical Religious Engagement with Media

Religious groups have good reason to be concerned about the globalized mass media. Not only do the media undermine the boundaries of religion – even within those groups that resist the media – it also presents difficult dilemmas as to how to engage productively with an ubiquitous, complex and diverse media landscape. One might think that those, such as myself, who advocate liberal forms of religion might welcome these developments as positive ones. Certainly, it is tempting to point to, for example, those within Haredi Jewish communities who have used the internet to challenge the elites of those communities on issues such as sexual abuse, and view the media as a liberating force. And it can be. But at the same time, as I suggested previously, not only have some very dangerous groups used the media as a recruiting tool, liberal religious groups have found navigating the mass mediated world difficult too.

Rather than seeing the media as inherently reactionary or liberating force – it is both – a more productive approach would see the media as presenting an inescapable challenge that cannot be avoided. How we navigate the overwhelming torrent of information and the insecurity this causes is a challenge common to both religious and non-religious. The three strategies previously outlined – resisting, imitating and participating – in the media, have in common a kind of implicit surrender to the perceived omnipotence of the media. This capitulation essentially assumes that religious traditions cannot offer a way of surviving and thriving in the mass mediated world.

I would suggest though, that religious traditions do have something valuable to offer that can underpin a critical approach to media. By 'critical' I mean a questioning form of engagement that participates in media without accepting that it is out of our control. The crucial element here is the centrality of text in some religions. I am not talking about texts as sources of unquestioning dogma, but texts as sources of wonder, mystery and complexity – an approach that sees them as the focus of a lifetime of religious engagement. The insecurity provoked by the chaotic

nature of the media is too often met by a defensive emphasis on simple truths, embodied in dogmatic approaches to religious texts. Indeed, one of the paradoxical effects of modernity has been the emergence of fundamentalist religions that meet the complexity of modern life with a denial of that complexity. There are other ways of reading religious texts – often ones that are older and more deep-rooted than modern fundamentalist ones - that can undergird an approach to the complexity of modernity in which complexity is met by complexity. In other words, religious textual traditions can offer profound ways of engaging with media that do not erase the complexity and challenge that either represent.

I want to discuss here the possibilities that the Jewish textual tradition offers, as this is the tradition that I know best. That does not mean that this is the only or even the ‘best’ tradition. However it is distinctive in certain ways just as other traditions offer distinctive contributions to the development of a critical engagement with media. Three elements of the tradition seem particularly important here:

First, the Jewish tradition encourages an active process of reading. Rather than passively consuming texts, the ideal reader is one who explores, struggles with and even contests them. As Ben Bag Bag says of Torah in the Mishnah:⁸ ‘Turn it, and turn it, for everything is in it. Reflect on it and grow old and grey with it. Don’t turn from it, for nothing is better than it.’ The practice of study is an intensely social and visceral one: in traditional Jewish learning the study hall is a noisy place, in which students struggle with Jewish texts in conversation with each other. Jewish tradition is not simply a fixed message to be communicated, it is a living tradition with which each generation must engage.

Second, Jewish tradition sees sacred texts as multi-layered. In biblical hermeneutics the surface meaning – the ‘Peshat’ – is just one level, ultimately giving way to deeper meanings until the ‘Sod’ or secret meaning is reached. Simplicity is not a virtue here. The text is more than simply a conveyor of straightforward meanings. A training in Jewish texts has no endpoint as the text itself is the object of an endless quest.

Third, Jewish tradition sees texts as intertextual, as linked to each other. The Talmud is a collation of debates that are surrounded by later debates. Jewish tradition is constantly being written and rewritten as interpretation piles on interpretation. No text is ever ‘complete’; it is studied as much for its mysteries and lacunae than its eternal truth.

Of course, none of this is to say that in the Jewish tradition ‘anything goes.’ The boundaries of this tradition and the degree to which one can re-interpret texts according to new circumstances are heavily contested – this is the root of the profound differences between reform and orthodox Judaisms. Nor are all texts equally important; there are still canons and levels of reverence. It is neither appropriate nor practical to engage with all kinds of texts in the manner with which one engages with sacred texts.

⁸ Pirkei Avot 5:26.

At the very least though, the Jewish textual tradition offers an important model for how we might engage with media texts in a critical yet engaged manner. This is, above all, an empowering tradition, in which those who read the texts are enjoined not to be passive consumers but active ‘writers’, in which the search for complexity and nuance is encouraged, in which one should never be satisfied with one meaning and one text. It is disappointing that, all too often, both reform and orthodox Jews do not have enough faith that the skills this tradition teaches can be transposed from religious texts to media texts. A grounding in the Jewish textual tradition would seem to provide a robust basis from which to engage with the media in a proactive and critical way.

In fact, the best of popular culture already engages with the media in this fashion. There are many scenes and subcultures within which media texts are interpreted, played with and used as the basis for community. To give one example, fans of science fiction TV and fiction have, for decades, created vibrant scenes that are far from spaces of passive consumption.⁹ Such fans refuse to simply accept fictions for what they are, they interpret them in new ways, contest them and use them as the basis for new fictions. Fan-created fiction often engaged with shows such as Star Trek in iconoclastic ways, challenging their portrayal of gender and sexuality. Music scenes such as heavy metal are another example of critical engagement with media products.¹⁰ Rather than simply worship stars, metal scene members create new forms of music, often in highly innovative ways, subverting and challenging the dominance of major acts. The internet has certainly multiplied the possibilities of these kinds of engagement with media, but some of these practices and scenes have been going for decades.

The encounter between religion and the global mass media offers rich possibilities for the creation of innovative cultural practices. Both religion and mass-mediated cultures have rich traditions of critical reading that challenge notions of passive consumption of unambiguous texts. However the dominant tendency in most religious groups has been to be suspicious of the media. Similarly, the more critical forms of media engagement are sometimes buried in the constant onslaught of media products.

I would like to offer one example of a creative form of religious engagement with media texts, in the work of the Jewish rapper Y-Love. Y-Love’s work is particularly striking as he is an African-American convert to Hassidic Judaism. Y-Love began rapping in yeshiva as a way of learning Talmud. He includes Aramaic, Hebrew and Yiddish in his raps, although English is the primary language. On the title track on his 2008 album *This Is Babylon*, he plays with the notion of America as Babylon, tying in a critique of American politics with a diasporic Talmudic identity:

The beast takes many forms

⁹ Jenkins, Henry. 1992. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. London: Routledge.

¹⁰ Kahn-Harris, Keith. 2006. *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge*. Oxford: Berg.

One long night with no signs of dawn

It's been years since Reconstruction and it's still built wrong

That's why I rhyme in Aramaic, this is Babylon!

The connotations of Babylon with enslavement and exile in Rastafari and African-American culture create a connection between Y-Love's black and Jewish identities. Y-Love's work has extended to recording an acapella album called *Count It* (2007) together with the Jewish beatboxer Yuri Lane, for use during the Omer period when instrumental music is traditionally forbidden. Y-Love's work is multi-layered, with rap provides the mechanism to connect a range of identities and practices. He engages with rap as a Jew, not in order to imitate it or 'neuter it' but to treat it as a resource that can open up new possibilities for expressing what it is to be a Jew.

Conclusion

Encouraging critical forms of media engagement should be a priority for religion. Not only would this offer the possibility for creating new religious meanings, it would also provide a specifically religious mode of survival in an insecure age. Given the inescapability of media today, religious attempts to push back against the media are almost always ineffective. It is far better to try shape the media landscape than it is to resist it. The methods for doing so are inherent in religious traditions – they just need to be applied in new ways.