

Implications of the Sacred in (Post)Modern Media

Editors: Johanna Sumiala-Seppänen,
Knut Lundby & Raimo Salokangas

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& Raimo Salokangas (eds.)

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ISBN 91-89471-34-2

Published by:
Nordicom
Göteborg University
Box 713
SE 405 30 GÖTEBORG
Sweden

Cover by: Roger Palmqvist
Printed by: Livréna AB, Kungälv, Sweden, 2006
Environmental certification according to ISO 14001

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Foreword

The objective of this volume is to offer new and fresh perspectives on the discussion on the media, the sacred and religion. The topic is approached from different points of view, linking one academic discipline with another, applying substantial as well as functional definitions of the sacred and religion, studying the relationship between institutional religions and the media, and the sacred functions of (post)modern media.

The book gives a special voice to the “Nordic perspective”, which means that the empirical materials that it focuses on (films, web sites, media history) somehow have a “Nordic flavour”. It also means that most of the contributors to the book come from four of the Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden) and are engaged in research based on empirical materials that in many cases are selected within the Nordic context. However, it is certainly not the intention of this book to promote academic parochialism. Therefore, we have also invited contributions from scholars in the United States and the United Kingdom, which we hope will broaden and enrich the book. All three of these scholars have also close connections with Nordic academic institutions and colleagues. A common feature of all the authors is that they share a special interest in the relationship between the media and the sacred and/or religion, and that they approach the field from multidisciplinary perspectives.

The idea for this book was conceived and developed in discussions with several Nordic and other scholars during the past few years. Although there had been some initial work on the relation between media and religion, the historical roots of the academic interest related to the concept of “Media, Religion and Culture” can be traced back to the year 1993, when the so-called Uppsala Group was established in conjunction with the first conference under this heading at Uppsala University, Sweden. The first concrete initiative for this book was taken at the international Sacred Media conference, held in the summer of 2003 in Jyväskylä, Finland, and organised by the Department of Communication of the University of Jyväskylä and the Department of Comparative Religion of the University of Helsinki. The idea was developed

further in the 2004 conference on Media, Religion and Culture in Louisville, Kentucky, where many of the Nordic scholars in the field got together and made a decision to network more closely. There it was also decided that the next major academic event in the field would take place in Sigtuna next to Uppsala in the summer of 2006.

In terms of substance, a major motivation behind this volume is to bring more voices and nuances to the international discussion in this field of study. It is recognised in many academic circles that there is a quite strong Anglo-American influence, or even bias, in the field. The theories, the research methods, not to mention the core research questions asked concerning the media and religion have all sprung from a soil that is very different from the historical and cultural environment of the Nordic countries. One purpose of this book is therefore to attempt to re-contextualize the research more in the landscape of the Nordic countries, where such institutions as national churches and public broadcasting systems have quite distinctively shaped the understanding of the sacred in the historical context of the construction of the welfare society.

At the same time, we would like to stress that it is not just the empirical research conducted in the Nordic context that we wish to emphasize but also the richness and variety of voices represented by the Nordic research community in the field of the media and the sacred. This book also attempts to bridge gaps between disciplinary borders and intellectual micro-cultures and to create a platform for a genuinely multidimensional and cross-disciplinary discussion on the subject of the media and the sacred.

We thank Dr. Gerard McAlester for revising the language, and Nordicom for publishing the book.

Helsinki, Oslo and Jyväskylä, February 2006

Johanna Sumiala-Seppänen Knut Lundby Raimo Salokangas

I

STUDYING MEDIA AND THE SACRED

Implications of the Sacred in Media Studies

Johanna Sumiala-Seppänen

“What is the sacred?” Goethe asked. And he answered, “That which unites souls.”

– Hollier, Foreword to the College of Sociology 1937-39

“But for the present age, which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, representation to reality, appearance to essence. . . truth is considered *profane*, and only *illusion* is *sacred*. Sacredness is in fact held to be enhanced in proportion as truth decreases and illusion increases, so that the highest degree of illusion comes to be the highest degree of sacredness.”
– Feuerbach, Preface to the second edition of *The Essence of Christianity*¹

Setting the agenda

This book discusses the sacred in the context of (post)modern media. The prefix “post” is in parentheses for two reasons. Firstly, because the scope of the book has not been restricted to any certain narrowly limited period, even though most of the articles in the book focus on the media of contemporary era, the late twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first. Secondly, through this graphological device, this book wants to remind the reader that the concept of “post-modern” is under constant negotiation as a category and an object of study. This reflects the constructionist orientation in the social sciences. In short, the use of the form “(post)modern” in the title reflects the book’s reflective orientation towards the “post” element of the cultural era. Drawing on Zygmunt Bauman (1996), it is a kind of reflective gaze on the *modern*.

But if the concept of post-modern is a social construction, so is the concept of the sacred. One of the most classical ways of approaching the sacred is to study it in relation to the profane – in sharp distinction from it. In other words, the sacred is set apart from the profane. Consequently, one of the major

themes of this book is an enquiry into how this setting apart is taking place in different mediated contexts. The dialogical approach also raises the question of definition: Which phenomenon belongs to which category? What is the time/space relation in the process of categorization and setting apart? How is definition related to changes in the social settings such as the media sphere? Or, to put it another way, how does “mediatization” – the process through which, according to Stig Hjarvard (2004: 47-50), core elements of a social and cultural activity assume media form – affect the categories and the process of setting apart?²

The articles in this volume are devoted to an exploration of the sacred in the specific context of the media. However, it is not just the technical form and context constituted by the media that matter. In this book the focus is, on one hand, on the *cultural landscape of the media* and, on the other hand, on *the mediated communication* taking place in that landscape. In this framework, media culture is understood as a form of social life with its own power structure, dynamics, codes and forms of communication. It consists of different systems of media. It is an industrial, commercial, high-tech culture, emphasizing image over word and sound. And it aims at a large audience. Douglas Kellner (1995) describes contemporary media culture in a following way:

... Media culture helps shape the prevalent view of the world and deepest values: it defines what is considered good or bad, positive or negative, moral or evil. Media stories and images provide the symbols, myths, and resources which help constitute a common culture for the majority of individuals in many parts of the world today. Media culture provides the materials to create identities whereby individuals insert themselves into contemporary techno-capitalist societies and which is producing a new form a global culture. (Kellner, 1995: 1.)

In order to understand better the complex dynamics of the relationship between the sacred and contemporary media culture, it is necessary to start with a “tour” of the historical and intellectual development of the study of the sacred. This first chapter is intended to give a broad overview of the history of the study of the sacred especially in the social sciences.³ The Durkheimian sociology of religion is given a special emphasis because of its enormous influence in the field of the sociology of culture and media studies, even though the book is not limited only to the Durkheimian view of the sacred. This means that the historical overview is by no means comprehensive but aims at offering a conceptual framework within which the theme of the book can be approached and at introducing the most permanent features of the field. It also aims at offering a conceptual and terminological map for developing further the dialogue between the different approaches to the sacred in social and media studies represented in the book. In other words, it is intended to help to set the agenda for bridging the gap between the realms of sacred studies and media studies.

The Durkheimian tradition

The interest in the concept of the sacred has a long tradition in the field of the social sciences. As a matter of fact, it was one of the most important concepts in French sociology at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th. Especially the work of Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) has been fundamentally important in understanding the nature and functions of the sacred in different social and cultural settings.⁴ In his masterpiece, originally titled *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (1912), Durkheim formulates his theory of the sacred and religion. As Karen Fields puts it in her introduction to the English translation of *Formes*, sacredness for Durkheim “is not a quality inherent in certain objects, nor is it available to the unaided senses of just any individual human observer. It is a quality that objects acquire when they are set apart and forbidden. They are made sacred by groups of people who set them apart and keep them bounded by specific actions and they remain sacred only so long as groups continue to do this.” (Fields, 1995: xlv-xlvi.)

In this framework, the sacred is approached as a *quality* that objects can have when they are *set apart* from the *profane* and when there is a *prohibition* protecting the sacred from the contaminating influence of the profane. The essential nature of this social process is that it is collective. No individual can have this power in him-/herself. It is humans acting collectively within some *moral community*, as Durkheim called it, that make and remake the quality of sacredness. However as Fields notes, sacredness for Durkheim is not just a set of peculiar relationships between people and objects. It is also about the process itself – of setting apart and forbidding. Fields states: “The very act that constitutes those peculiar relationships also relates a designated group of people to one another and sets them apart from others to whom they are not bound and who do not have the same relationship to designated physical objects.” (Fields, 1995: xlvi) To describe this mental achievement, Durkheim uses the concept of *conscience collective*. It is the collective conscience that transfigures the real (physical) world into a shared (social) world (Durkheim, 1995 [1912]: 232-234). For Durkheim, the sacred was thus not just any collective *représentation* but THE symbol of the collective entity – collective *représentation par excellence* (Pickering, 1984: 132). Thus in the classical Durkheimian tradition, to study the sacred is to study how objects or things which are not necessarily physical acquire the quality of sacredness by the collective action of being set apart and forbidden.⁵

At the turn of the century, Durkheim founded what has been called the “*École française de sociologie*” to continue and develop the work around the sacred and religion. In practice, it was a group of scholars gathered around a journal *Année sociologique*. One of the most important figures of the group was Marcel Mauss, Durkheim’s colleague and nephew, who was in charge of the section of the journal that dealt with issues around the sociology of religion. (Arppe, 1992: 14.)

After Émile Durkheim's death in 1917, interest in the field waned for a while, but it rose again in France in the 1930s, when Georges Bataille, Roger Caillois and Michel Leiris founded the *Collège de sociologie*. It was a group of French intellectuals who were interested in developing what was known as "Sacred Sociology" based on Durkheim's intellectual heritage.⁶ The two main differences between Durkheim and the members of the *Collège* was that the sacred was no longer approached as an anthropological and ethnological concept to the same extent that it was in Durkheim's times but rather from the perspective of cultural and social theory on a more general level. Secondly, the sacred was analysed less as a positive power constituting the cohesion of the society than was the case in the classical Durkheimian approach but, especially through the influence of Georges Bataille and the journal *Acéphale*,⁷ as a left-over or "cursed" power of society. In the *Collège de sociologie*, issues of death and the sacred, the magical-religious foundation of power and the tragic totality of existence became of major interest. (Arppe, 1992: 13-14, 2000: 6-17.)

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the influence of the *Collège* waned. The discussion about the sacred among continental intellectuals and interest almost faded away until it started to rise again in the 1970s and 1980s. Such scholars as René Girard raised the question of violence at the heart of the community, and Jean Baudrillard wrote about the ritualisation of everyday life. In the 1990s, Michel Maffesoli's ideas concerning the sacred and images were also influential. According to Tiina Arppe, a characteristic of this era was the fact that the discussion concerning the sacred became more interdisciplinary. The conceptual basis of the discussion was broadened, which made it more inconsistent and ambiguous. In short, the theoretical and operational definition of the concept of the sacred was again under reconsideration (Arppe, 1992: 14-15).

Mircea Eliade on the sacred

Alongside the history of Durkheimian tradition, there is another intellectual path worth mentioning in discussing the intellectual history of the study of the sacred. The work of Romanian scholar of religion Mircea Eliade (1907-1986) has been of major importance. Eliade's interest lies in analyzing how the sacred manifests itself. In his book *Sacred and Profane* (originally published in 1957), Eliade uses the concept of "hierophany" to describe a thing, idea or phenomenon in which this revealing takes place (Eliade, 2003: 33). For Eliade, hierophany is a concrete sign or symbol (cross, stone, statue, etc.) of a more abstract way of experiencing and perceiving the world in religious terms. (see for ex. Laitila, 2003: 11.)

The major difference between the Durkheimian and Eliadian approaches is that Eliade's is more inductive and descriptive in its formulation of the

sacred.⁸ It can be also called the “transcendental” approach to the sacred in comparison to the “sociological” approach. This means that it emphasizes the otherworldliness of the sacred.⁹ Within this framework, the sacred is approachable only via its manifestations in religious experiences. Nevertheless, Eliade’s understanding of the sacred has been said to come close to the definitions of Durkheim and Roger Caillois (one of the architects of Sacred Sociology) (Laitila, 2003: 11, 33). For Eliade too, the main characteristic of the sacred is that it is the opposite of the profane. But where Durkheim and Caillois argue that the sacred and the profane are two different absolutes, as Caillois explains in his book *The Man and the Sacred*:

These two worlds, the sacred and the profane, are rigorously defined only in relation to each other. They are mutually exclusive and contradictory. It is useless to try eliminating this contradiction. (Caillois, 1959: 19-20.)

And later

‘The two categories’, writes Durkheim, ‘cannot be brought together without thereby losing their unique characteristics.’ On the other hand, they are both necessary for the evolution of life – one, as the environment within which life unfolds; the other, as the inexhaustible source that creates, sustains, and renews it. (Caillois, 1959: 22.)

Eliade perceives the sacred and the profane primarily as different ways of perceiving the world. In Eliade’s interpretation, the sacred and the profane can be brought together. In other words, the sacred manifests itself through the profane. But even so, the two entities still remain separate. It is religious or spiritual sensibility that enables one to experience the sacred in the profane, for example, in a wooden cross, stone or statue, argues Eliade (2003: 33). The theoretical focus is thus fixed on the reception of the sacred – or on the gaze of the viewer, as the scholar of religious visual culture, David Morgan (2005), would put it.

Towards a middle-range theory of the sacred

In the Anglo-American world, and especially in the United States, the renaissance of the study of religion and the sacred has risen in tandem with the interest in “culture” as one of the most popular and important areas in sociology. According to Philip Smith, the editor of the anthology *The New American Cultural Sociology* (1998), in the United States in the 1980s there began a strong shift from the cultural sociology of Talcott Parsons, which had enjoyed a hegemonic status in the field ever since the 1960s, towards what he calls “European cultural theory”. Smith argues that the attraction of the European theorists such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Mary Douglas, Jean Baudrillard, Jean-

François Lyotard and Pierre Bourdieu has been not so much their methodological rigour, (which is often considered deficient in the American context), or their contribution to understanding on-going sociological debates about substantive empirical issues (which are often understood as marginal because of a European preference for philosophical abstraction), but their creative thinking and the tools that they have provided for a dynamic new style of cultural analysis, especially in decoding culture itself. (Smith, 1998: 4-5.)

The study of the sacred and religion as part of culture benefited greatly from this shift in interest and orientation. Jeffrey Alexander and Robert Wuthnow in particular have produced extensive bodies of work in this field (see Alexander, 1988, 1998; Wuthnow, 1989, 1992). Alexander's work has focused on re-reading Durkheim from the point of view of the theory of symbolic classification. Alexander's Durkheimian orientation has been characterised by 1) the location of the tension between the sacred and the profane at the centre of society 2) an emphasis on the ritualistic nature of social processes and 3) a focus on the dynamics of the construction and destruction of social solidarities. In the introduction of the book *Durkheimian Sociology: Cultural Studies* Alexander states:

Durkheim came to believe indeed that theories of secular social processes have to be modelled upon the workings of the sacred world. This turn to religion, he emphasized, was not because of an interest in churchly things. It was because he wanted to give cultural processes more theoretical autonomy. In religion he had discovered a model of how symbolic processes work in their own terms. (Alexander, 1988: 2.)

According to Alexander, Émile Durkheim thus developed “a theory of secular society that emphasized the independent causal importance of symbolic classification, the pivotal role of the symbolic division between sacred and profane, the social significance of ritual behaviour, and the close interrelation between symbolic classifications, ritual processes and the formation of social solidarities.” (Alexander, 1988: 2.)¹⁰

Another widely influential scholar in developing the approach of the new sociology of culture in the Anglo-American context is Robert Wuthnow. In his book *Rediscovering the Sacred* (1992), Wuthnow approaches the sacred in everyday life of contemporary society by focusing on “the symbolic” realm of culture and society. But where Alexander emphasizes the causal importance of symbolic classification in constituting the sacred, Wuthnow's interest lies more in analysing *the relation* between the sacred and social interaction. Wuthnow bases his argumentation on Peter Berger's theory of religion as presented in the latter's book *The Sacred Canopy* (1967).

According to Wuthnow, the sacred is the constitutive part of the symbolic universe of religion for Berger. It occupies a prominent place in Berger's conceptual framework. For Berger, “symbolic universes” are “bodies of theoretical tradition that integrate different provinces of meaning and encompass

the institutional order in a symbolic totality” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966: 5). The sacred then is the core element of the system of religious symbols that imposes order and thereby holds chaos at bay. It shelters the individual from a reality that seems to make no sense by giving explanations; it integrates the individual’s biography by providing an overarching frame of reference; it provides mechanisms for containing potentially disruptive experiences; and finally it legitimates social institutions by bestowing upon them a valid ontological status by locating them within the ultimate sacred frame of reference. To sum up, Wuthnow argues that for Berger the sacred is a reality that draws on cultural materials, and it is filtered through the symbolically constructed reality of personal experience. (Wuthnow, 1992: 18-19.)

According to Wuthnow, Berger then articulates the dialectical interplay between the sacred and social interaction which allows one to view the sacred from several different angles. It can be studied as a practice and discourse through which the individual experiences convictions that he/she calls sacred. It can be analyzed as a formalized cultural system or subsystem that can be examined to some extent independently of the individuals who believe in it. And lastly it can be studied as the beliefs, sentiments, and experiences of the individual. (Wuthnow, 1992: 20.)

Both Wuthnow and Berger acknowledge that characteristic of the contemporary, pluralistic era is the fact that there are several different symbolic universes that compete with each other in their ability to participate in the social construction of shared everyday reality. And that any symbolic system remains plausible only as long as individuals articulate it in their conversation and dramatize it in their social interaction.

Despite some differences in orientation towards the sacred in contemporary culture, the common feature of the approaches of Alexander and Wuthnow (both related more or less closely to the tradition of the New American Cultural Sociology) is the fact that they share a preference for empirically grounded, middle-range research, where such phenomena as “culture” and “the sacred” tend to be conceptualized in terms of their concrete interplay with institutions, organizations, and specific historical sequences. (see Smith, 1998: 10.) This empirically embedded “middle-range” orientation also distinguishes the new cultural sociology from the French tradition of the Sacred Sociology or *Collège de sociologie*, which has leant in its intellectual orientation more towards constructing a (grand) theory of society by analyzing the sacred in it.¹¹

Building bridges – the Uppsala group

From the point of view of this book it is important to note that the interest in the study of the sacred and religion in social and media studies has not occurred only in the academic circles of Central Europe or the United States. These issues have also been of special importance to a group of Nordic

scholars of religion and the media who together with some colleagues from other countries founded what has been called the “Uppsala Group” in conjunction with a conference in Uppsala, Sweden in 1993.¹² It consisted of an international network of academics and was founded to encourage and carry out research at the intersection of media studies, religious studies, and cultural studies. As one of the first outcomes of the international networking, the group published a book titled *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture* (1997), edited by Stewart M. Hoover and Knut Lundby. In the introduction of the book, Hoover and Lundby set the agenda for research into media and religion in the following way:

The intersection of media and religion must be studied through the processes and patterns of culture, and we begin our project of rethinking with contrasting sketches of media and religion within overall cultural context of modernity. Media, as embedded in broader social and cultural settings, can be said to be related to religion in a number of ways. First, the media are commonly thought to have potential as successful or unsuccessful purveyors of religious “messages.” This conception is obviously most consistent with a *substantive* view of religion and a concern for its historical and doctrinal institutions. However, the media can also be seen to be providing the raw material for the intended or unintended construction of religious meanings among people in various contexts, as would be understood from a more *functional* perspective. Thus, the media open up to religion both in the symbolic production processes – that is, in the symbols provided in media texts – and in the consumption and interpretation processes. (Hoover & Lundby, 1997: 5-6.)

One of the major contributions of the group has been the ability to recognize the fruitfulness of the interdisciplinary nature of studying religion and/or the sacred in society and culture and its effect in bringing about a rapprochement between scholars of religion and the media. Secondly, as stated in its manifesto, the group has striven to emphasize an interactive approach in studying religion and the sacred, media and culture. In other words, the religious or sacred realm is not just one substantial element in the media (even though it can be that too); rather, the media and religion should be seen as affecting each other. Moreover, it is important to note that the dynamics of the interplay takes always place in a certain societal and cultural setting. The third impact of the group has been to encourage intellectual discussion between proponents of different definitions of religion and the sacred by bringing the substantive view into dialogue with the functional perspective. The difference between the two views can be explained by using the analytical distinction made by Timothy Fitzgerald (2000), who states that “for scholars with a fundamentally theological agenda, things, people, places, and time are sacred because they are symbols for, or manifestations of, or somehow related to God or the transcendent.” This is the substantive view of the sacred (and religion). From the functional perspective: “Things are considered sacred by specific

communities because those people value them in a fundamental way, or because they symbolize the values of the community, or because they provide fundamental ways of thinking about the world.” (Fitzgerald, 2000: 18-19.) From the perspective of this book both these definitions are relevant.

The sacred and media studies – Couldry’s reflections on Durkheim

Characteristic of the latest turn in studies dealing with the sacred has been a rise of interest in the media as a context of the sacred (ritual and religion). Some of the underlying questions have been: What kinds of implications of the sacred can one find in the contemporary media? How does the sacred function in mediated contexts? How does it construct coherence in society (if it does!)?

One of the leading figures in the field is the British media sociologist Nick Couldry (2000; 2003), who uses a Durkheimian approach to help to explain how the media function in framing our experience of the social and thus defining what “the reality” of our society is. As a starting point Couldry divides Durkheim’s arguments into three stages:¹³

1. At certain key times, we experience ourselves explicitly as social beings, as members of a shared social world
2. What we do in those moments... is focused upon certain objects of attention, such as totems, and certain rituals which confirm the meaning of these ‘sacred’ objects or protect them from all other objects (the ‘profane’)
3. The distinctions around which those moments of shared experience are organized – above all, the distinction between ‘the sacred’ and ‘the profane’ – generate the most important categorizations through which social life is organized. This, in Durkheim’s view, explains the social origin of religion and religious behaviour, and the centrality of the sacred/profane distinction in social life.

Drawing on Durkheim’s basic argument about the distinction between the sacred and the profane realm, Couldry suggests an interesting analogue in the contemporary media society. He argues that the sacred/profane distinction can be used as a useful structural analogue to make an analytical (not a literal!) distinction between “the media world” and “the ordinary world”. In his book *The Place of Media Power*, Couldry (2000: 15) writes:

What matters here is that it is a useful model of how the symbolic division between ‘media world’ and ‘ordinary world’ arises; this division is fundamental to understanding the media’s social impacts. The media/ordinary division underlines, for example, the frequent contrast between ‘media people’ and

'ordinary people'. Like the sacred/profane distinction, it seems effectively absolute, a naturalized division of the way of the world 'is'. Yet it too is socially grounded. Just as the sacred/profane distinction is (according to Durkheim) grounded in the way the social is framed in a sacred context, so too the framing of the social through the media is what grounds a pervasive distinction between 'media world' (everything associated with the media process) and 'ordinary world' (everything outside it).

But there is also a sharp distinction between Durkheim's model and Couldry's approach. For Couldry, the media/ordinary distinction is far from being a "social fact" in the Durkheimian sense. As Couldry (2000: 15) puts it, although the media/ordinary distinction operates *as if* it were absolute and natural, it is constructed:

It cuts across and reshapes social reality, reifying the vast sector of social life outside media production as a so-called 'ordinary' domain. It also masks the complexities of media production processes themselves. And above all, it disguises (and therefore helps naturalize) the inequality of symbolic power which media institutions represent. (Couldry, 2000: 15-16.)

Couldry's conclusion is then that in order to use the Durkheimian model one needs to extend it to be able to analyze further the issues of power and inequality inherent in centralised (media) institutions of representation. But in an extended form the model has a great explanatory capability to make sense of how we have come to accept the concentration of symbolic power in media institutions as natural. (Couldry, 2000: 16.)

In his book *Media Rituals. A critical approach* (2003), Couldry continues to map Durkheim into media studies. According to Couldry, Durkheimian media studies can be divided into two categories: a neo-Durkheimian and a post-Durkheimian way of interpreting Durkheim. The underlying difference between the two is that the first approach emphasizes more symbolical patterns as a positive force in the construction of social life and the creation of a sense of social cohesion, whereas the post-Durkheimian reading emphasizes more the processes of social *construction* of the sense of belonging together *as if* there were such a thing as a socially coherent entity. The second reading thus raises the issue of power in the process of the social construction of the myth of the centre, as Couldry calls it. (Couldry, 2003: 5-10.)

Elaborating the argument further, Couldry divides neo-Durkheimian and post-Durkheimian studies into two categories. The first category of neo-Durkheimian studies is based on the analysis of *media events*, which are special times when members of contemporary societies come together through the media and become aware of each other as social wholes. The book *Media Events* by Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz (1992) is a classical example of this kind of approach. The second version of the neo-Durkheimian argument, according to Couldry, has been formulated by Roger Silverstone (1994), and

it looks at the media's role in the organization of social life as a whole. Couldry finds this approach more satisfactory because it does not make such a strong separation between the function of the media in everyday media consumption and special media events. "But the two versions are sides of the same coin: the exceptional sense of togetherness we may feel in media events is just a more explicit (ritualized) concentration of togetherness, which, in a routine way, we act out when we switch on the television or radio, or check a news Website, to find on 'what is going on'," states Couldry (2003: 7).

The fruitfulness of the neo-Durkheimian approach is that it takes seriously the sense that "much more" is at stake in the relationship between the viewer and the media than just a form of image consumption. It addresses the "excessive" dimension of the media's social impact. Couldry's main criticism is thus directed against "essentialist thinking about the society" and a model of interpretation which he regards as an effort to "return" to an earlier form of social convention, which was called by Durkheim (1984) a mechanical form of solidarity. (Couldry, 2003: 6-9.)

Last but not least, the post-Durkheimian approach to the media's impact on social life can also be divided into two subcategories. One reading stresses "the foundational importance of collective emotions". For example, Michel Maffesoli (1993; 1996) has argued that in the era of post- or late modern society bonding between individuals is based on collectively (often virtually) shared emotions. This kind of bonding is activated through collective *affective contagions*, as Maffesoli calls them, and it is contextualized in different mediated and visual settings. This positive view of the emotionalisation of society is challenged, however, by another post-Durkheimian scholar, Stjepan Meštrović (1997), who argues that instead of collective bonding through *authentically* experienced emotions we are experiencing a development of what Meštrović calls the loss of authenticity in relation to emotions or the "McDonaldization" of emotions. (Meštrović, 1997: xi.) For Couldry, a more useful re-reading of Durkheim is one that emphasizes the role of knowledge in constituting a sense of belonging. This type of reading focuses on cognitive processes and categorisations on which our knowledge of the social world is based. Couldry draws here on Pierre Bourdieu's (1991) and Mary Douglas' (1984) models of interpretation. According to Couldry, only a cognitive reading, by its reference to everyday practices of categorization, is capable of capturing the pervasiveness of the structural links between media rituals (constructing the myth of the centre) and social life. (Couldry, 2003: 8.)

Towards a multifaceted analysis

The purpose of this overview has been to help to frame the analysis of the sacred in the context of social and especially media studies. From this perspective, there are two crucial aspects that need to be taken into reconsidera-

tion: the distinction between the sacred and the profane, and the idea of the sacred as a symbol of society as one monolithic entity. The question with regard to the sacred/profane distinction is: How are these categories formulated and constructed as analytical tools in the contemporary setting? The view of Émile Durkheim and some of his followers such as Roger Caillois and to some extent Jeffrey Alexander seems to be that the two categories are fairly stable, absolute opposites of each other. This suggests a rather dualistic view, and it has been challenged by many theorists of the late or post-modern society, such as Maffesoli (1996), Hoover and Venturelli (1996) as well as by Lundby (1997) and Rothenbuhler (1998) elsewhere and in this book.

Lundby draws from Pickering (1984), one of the most distinguished Durkheim scholars, and argues that the strict sacred/profane dichotomy is problematic because it is linked to the idea of one coherent society (nation) as the one sacred entity. However the idea of the society cannot be limited to one single collectivity. Especially in the (post)modern media society “people move in and out of various groups and belong to shifting and overlapping collectivities, each developing their sacred references,” argues Lundby (1997: 160). What Lundby calls for then is a theory of “fugitive communities”, a concept taken from Gitlin (1995), communities – often weak, changing and mediated by nature – that still make up potential sacred centres *because* they also are supported by collective representations of that community or collectivity. In a fugitive community, Lundby suggests, the sacred should then be analyzed not as a firm category of absolute otherness from the profane but rather as a *variable* ranging from the substantive realm to the functional realm. (Lundby, 1997: 160-161.) This shifts the research interest to the analysis of the *process* of setting apart.

Lundby’s idea is to shift the idea of collectivity from one single entity to several different (and fugitive) entities in order to describe better the nature of the “social” or “collective” when analyzing the sacred in the context of (post)modern media. Nick Couldry also seems to share Lundby’s view about the complex nature of contemporary social togetherness when he criticises the neo-Durkheimian for about its tendency to oversimplify the gatherings of the late or (post)modern media society. Couldry asks:

Can we interpret a social gathering, such as an annual music festival as the *source* of wider social categorizations, in the way that Durkheim imagined for gatherings in ‘primitive societies’? Look around any such gathering, and you will quickly find in people’s clothes, bodily style, language and so on, traces of countless other spaces and histories, all quite independent from that gathering and not specifically intended to be expressed there. Any simple ‘representative’ notion of place contradicts the insights of cultural geography that at every place many *incompatible* histories intersect (Massey 1994). So there is no contemporary parallel for the Durkheimian totemic ritual in the desert where all society’s central meanings and values are at stake. (Couldry, 2003: 9.)

Another attempt to define the sacred in the context of (post)modern media society is by Eric Rothenbuhler. In his book *Ritual Communication* (1998) Rothenbuhler argues:

When the sacred is defined by reference to human activity rather than divinity, ultimate power, or some other transcendence, it is taken to be a matter of human experience, the experience of seriousness. 'The serious life' is the phrase coined by Durkheim to identify those features of the social world united in their attention to such things. The serious life is a phenomenological category, its boundaries and substance shifting with the human experience of which it is a part. Formally, it is that enduring and ubiquitous recognition that some things are more important than others, and that some ideas, symbols, and activities are so important that they deserve to be set aside and protected. (Rothenbuhler, 1998: 24.)

Rothenbuhler's definition is based on a functional approach to the sacred. The sharp distinction between the sacred and the profane realm is absent; instead Rothenbuhler uses the "phenomenological category" of "the serious life" to grasp the idea of "something important". This type of conceptualization gives space to the human individual experience of the sacred. But it is not solely an individual matter. According to Rothenbuhler, the way to approach it is to focus on *things*, *symbols*, *ideas* and *activities* that are in at least some collective manner set apart or aside and protected. This links the sacred closely with the ritual, which Rothenbuhler (1998: 27) defines as: "the voluntary performance of appropriately patterned behaviour to symbolically effect or participate in the *serious life*."⁴

Couldry's approach to the sacred differs from Lundby's and Rothenbuhler's in two distinctive ways. First of all Couldry, although refusing to consider the sacred and the profane as social facts as Durkheim did, retains a clear idea of the sacred/profane distinction. For Couldry, the distinction is a useful analogy to analytically separate "the media world" and "the everyday world" by deconstructing these categories as socially constructed entities. The second distinctive aspect is Couldry's emphasis on power. For Couldry (2003: 9), the Durkheimian account is especially useful because it can help to "grasp contemporary *rhetorics* of social togetherness" and the role of the media in constituting it. In this sense, Couldry clearly distinguishes between sociological media studies that emphasize the social engagement aspect and make explicit the existing social inequalities related to issues of the sacred and the media on the one hand and the studies of (media) culture that are more concerned with analyzing the sacred as a symbolical power constituting the coherence of the (media) society without explicit ideological connotations on the other (see Alexander, 1988; Smith, 1988: 6-7). This also reflects at some level Couldry's division between the neo-Durkheimian and the post-Durkheimian approaches to media.

The last analytical distinction that deserves some further reflection is Couldry's idea of separating a cognitive reading from an emotional reading

of the media's impact on social life. If the idea of "the serious life" is accepted as a useful formulation for grasping the essential nature of the sacred in the contemporary mediated setting, then to study that idea in its symbolized forms either from the point of view of cognitive reading or from emotional reading becomes inadequate. To be a conceptual category of sufficient analytical substance, "the seriousness of life" should by definition be something that is acknowledged both on an individual and on a collective level, (even though the idea of collectivity should not be understood as a sole collective entity). And in this social construction of togetherness both emotional and cognitive realms should be included in the analysis. One might suggest that in the context of the (post)modern media society it is the *interplay* between socially constructed, collectively shared affective contagions and (also socially constructed) cognitive categorizations that constitute the idea of being together. This also reflects the Durkheimian view of collective representations (in and by which the idea of togetherness is activated and celebrated) as both a cognitive category and as an affective power.¹⁵

The idea of setting apart in order to express "the serious life" is *the* underlying theme of all the articles included in this book. The book is divided into three sections. The focus of the first section, **Studying Media and the Sacred**, is on the Durkheimian approach. The theoretical framework of Eric Rothenbuhler and Knut Lundby is strongly neo-Durkheimian, and the functional aspect of the sacred is present in both articles. In his article, titled *The Self as a Sacred Object in Media*, Eric Rothenbuhler examines the construction of the self as the sacred object of (post)modern media culture. According to Rothenbuhler, in the contemporary world it is the individual that is at the centre of the mediated serious life. The celebration of the cult of the individual is acted out in different mediated settings, which then function in Durkheimian terms as the *church* of that cult. Knut Lundby focuses on the process of the *mediation/mediatization* of the sacred by analyzing the nomination of a Norwegian bishop. The contribution of Lundby is to broaden the analysis of the sacred in the media towards a multifaceted approach, where the mediated sacred is analyzed not only from the point of view of production and text, but also by taking into consideration the role of the audience. The article of Titus Hjelm raises another important dimension of the study of the sacred and the media. It challenges the role of the sacred as a positive cohesive power in society and analyzes the mediated processes of constructing the sacred – or unholy as Hjelm calls it – as a social problem by applying Durkheim's concept of *boundary maintenance* in the analysis. The idea of setting apart is strongly present in Hjelm's article as well – even though in a reversed form.

The section **Implications of the Sacred in History and News** approaches the topic by exploring the sacred as a form of serious life in the context of history, journalistic practices and the news media. The section starts with Lars Qvortrup, who broadens the theoretical scope of the book by introducing a Luchmanian approach to the study of religion and the media.

Qvortrup also discusses the relationship between religion and the mass media by analyzing the discursive modes of two natural disasters in Danish printed media, one in Lisbon in 1755 and one in Southeast Asia in 2004. The second article presents an historical sketch of the changes in the dynamics of the public sphere in Finnish media history. Special focus is given to the role of the national Church and to its changing positions in the public sphere. In this article by Raimo Salokangas and Johanna Sumiala-Seppänen, the power struggle over the position of the church in public discourse is located in the public sphere, which can be interpreted as one of the crucial platforms where the formation of the serious life takes place. Tim Jensen's article contributes to the discussion of the construction of religion in Danish newsrooms. The empirical focus of the article is on the practices of journalism and their relations to editorial policies. Jensen's article addresses the importance of broadening the scope of the study from textual analysis to the actual processes of producing the cultural texts. The last article of the section by Lars Lundsten and Matteo Stocchetti analyzes the coverage of the Iraq war and the use of the "crusade" metaphor in it. The article introduces the idea of narrative intelligibility and argues for its ability to identify culture-specific narrative patterns and metaphors supporting them. Those narrative strategies can also be interpreted as contributing to the process of setting apart and thus constituting the realm of the sacred in different textual practices.

The last section, **The Sacred and (Post)Modern Media Culture**, shifts the interest to popular culture and its relation to the sacred and religion. One of the themes of the section is to explore the sacred in new mediated environments such as the Internet. Especially the first article by Larry Friedlander and the last by Mia Lövheim open up new scenarios in the relationship between the sacred and the media in a digitalized context, which challenges the concept of space in a new way. Friedlander discusses the new design environments as a space of a new form of interactive communication, and his use of narrativity offers an interesting comparison with Lundsten's and Stocchetti's way of using the concept in a different kind of theoretical setting. There is also a possibility to create a stimulating dialogue between Friedlander's and Lövheim's texts. The focus of both articles is on the *culture of use* in the new context, a space set apart from the everyday non-digital environment. But where Friedlander's interest lies in analyzing the textual dynamics of the space and the sacred in it, Lövheim has based her analysis on interviews and participant observation, dealing with issues such as how the digital environment as a space set apart functions in the construction of young people's religious identities. She asks, for example, how these young people use the Internet to discuss issues concerning the sacred and religion, and how the Internet environment affects these discussions?

Another media context explored in this section is film. Both Anita Hammer and Jolyon Mitchell approach popular film as a context of religious aspirations, but in very different ways. Anita Hammer explores the topic by analyzing the Swedish film *Så som i himmelen* (As It Is in Heaven) as a

Dionysian ritual. Hammer's reading of the film is based on theatre and ritual studies, and she approaches the film as a 21st century mediated Dionysian ritual dealing with female sexuality. This also links Hammer's essay with Friedlander, who likewise approaches digitalized media spaces through ancient mythical narratives and rituals. Jolyon Mitchell's topic is the conditions on which the film can be considered sacred. The richness of Mitchell's essay lies in its ability to approach the topic not only from the perspective of textual analysis but also in its focus on the role of production (or of the author) and reception. The empirical examples of the article vary from Nordic to African films. The last two articles focus on the role of religion as a frame of reference for interpreting cultural texts and thus participate in the reorganization of the sacred/profane distinction in the culture. Andreas Häger's article offers a critical discussion of the interpretive tendency to "Christianize" popular culture, using such examples as the rock lyrics of Bruce Springsteen. Jeanette Sky's article examines the same theme by focusing on different readings of the Harry Potter books and formulating an interesting dialogue between "the secular" and different kinds of "religious" readings of the books.

All the articles of this volume are devoted to an exploration of implications of the sacred in mediated settings, but in very different ways. The scope of the book is wide in many respects: it embraces different scholarly traditions, and it is multi- and cross-disciplinary in its approach. The cultural dynamic of setting something apart to make it part of the serious life constitutes the lowest common denominator of the articles. The forms and contexts of this process vary from different symbolic representations to different media contexts, and so does the substance of "*la vie sérieuse*" from the ritualism of choir practice in a film to editorial policies framing the religious reporting in a newspaper. Sometimes the implications of the sacred are seen to be linked to an institutional religion, such as Christianity, as a substantial element, sometimes they are analyzed primarily as social functions serving an ideological purpose or the goal of social integration. Some articles relate to the concept of the sacred in more subtle ways by addressing issues related to the sacred such as religion and ritual or mythical forms of communication. The sacred reveals itself rarely as a self contained entity¹⁶. Instead, as Lundby concludes in his article:

The sacred is to be found at the intersection of mediation processes, between the constructed representations of the potentially sacred, and the actual devotion of the audience. The sacred, then, is rooted in continuing communication within a specific context. Mediation of the sacred requires the production of icons or symbols with the potential to become 'set apart' and held in awe by the users of these representations. Hence, there is no mediation of the sacred without the reception of those representations.

Notes

1. Cf. Debord, 1983 underlining original.
2. On the concept of mediatization see e.g. Lundby in this book.
3. It is well acknowledged that there are other disciplinary areas such as theology and especially the phenomenology of religion that have a long and rich history in studying the sacred. The focus of this article is, however, strongly on the history of the social theory of the sacred.
4. It has been claimed that Durkheim was indebted to the ideas of W. Robertson Smith (1846-1894), a Scottish scholar of religion who was the first to argue that religion should be approached as a relationship between the members of a society and the collective power dynamics of that society. For Smith, it is this power that creates the cohesion of society and protects its law and order. (See e.g. Anttonen, 1996.)
5. It is worth noting that in the classical Durkheimian tradition the sacred is not just a self-contained entity. The interest in the sacred is closely related to Durkheim's broader ambition to formulate a theory of religion. The relationship between the concepts of religion and the sacred is explicated in Durkheim's definition of religion as "*a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church all those who adhere to them*". (Durkheim, 1995: 44.)
6. This does not mean that the relationship was simple; it was very complex and full of tensions concerning different views about the relationship to Durkheim's intellectual heritage.
7. It was also a secret society.
8. This is the basis of the main criticism of Eliadian thinking. Eliade's critics consider his theorizing over the sacred conceptually weak and under-structured. Eliade's followers, on the other hand, admire his empirically and descriptively rich scope, which they claim gives space to the different variations of the implications of the sacred..
9. This analytical dichotomy has been proposed by a Finnish scholar of comparative religion, Veikko Anttonen (1996: 210-211).
10. Alexander's views are supported by Stewart Hoover and Shalini Venturelli, who argue along the same lines in their article *The Category of the Religious: The Blindspot of Contemporary Media Theory* (1996) that: 1) Durkheim perceived religion as an elemental social phenomenon and was primarily concerned with the definition of, or more precisely the exact separation of, the "sacred" and "profane" spheres. This means that the distinction between the sacred and the profane is the beginning of the logic which gives rise to all subsequent forms of social life. It is a distinction which is continually inscribed in all social divisions; 2) According to Durkheim, religion was at the core of the knowledge of society as a separate, communal entity. Thus religion is an essential aspect of social life as such, and it follows that all commonly practised activities or rituals may qualify as sacred; 3) Thirdly Durkheim saw the sacred as a symbolic representation of social relations. Through its various ritualistic modes, the sacred becomes a kind of shorthand for the totality of human society in relation to individual consciousness.
11. As declared in the foundation of the Collège, the purpose of Sacred Sociology was to study "all manifestations of social existence" where the active presence of the sacred was clear and in this way to establish "the points of coincidence between the fundamental obsessive tendencies of individual psychology" and the "principal structures" that governed "social organization" (Hollier, 1988: 5).
12. Especially Knut Lundby from the University of Oslo and Alf Linderman from the University of Uppsala have been key figures in the promoting interest around Nordic scholars in the research field of religion and the media.
13. See the parallel with Alexander above in this article.
14. Italics added.

15. On Couldry's attitude to the binary opposition between the two, see Couldry (2003: 8, 145). For more on Durkheim and collective representations, see e.g. Arppe (2000: 6-10) and Meštrović (1997: 104-109).
16. See e.g. Anttonen, 1996: 213.

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The Self as a Sacred Object in Media¹

Eric W. Rothenbuhler

The individual self is one of the sacred objects of modern culture. It is also a symbolic construct, existing only in its representations. Selves, as centers of will and ego, experientially distinct from bodies, cannot be observed or interacted with outside of communication. There is systematic pressure, then, to turn the communicative resources of modern society toward the construction, display, celebration, edification, and discipline of selves. Indeed, content trends in commercial media, marketing trends in consumer goods, and the rise of a consumer-ideal in politics can be seen to reflect this pressure to devote attention to the self as a sacred object. Here I examine some characteristic program forms of commercial broadcasting for their role in supporting the cult of the individual. This contributes to an argument that contemporary media function as the church of the cult of the individual while the self is one of the sacred objects of media content.

The Self as a sacred object in media

This is an essay in theoretical exploration. I will start with the conclusion of another recent piece on the same topic.

Modern life is built on the cult of the individual. It is the religion that dare not speak its name; nevertheless, our communication practices; our cultural choices; our industries of information, entertainment, and consumption; our politics; our educational institutions; and, increasingly, our churches are built around the construction, display, critique, and improvement of selves. The self is the holy object of the society carried by the medium of the individual. It can only exist in communicative interaction and therefore its churches must be communicative structures. Thus the media and their productions, distribution systems, and audiences grow ever larger. Manufacturing industries devote more and more to consumer design, becoming more and more communication

industries also. The economies of industrial powers evolve toward service industries, with everything revolving around the individual consumer. Politics becomes (is) marketing. All of the institutional spheres differentiated in the evolution of modernity become more like communication industries. No one is in favor of it, and yet all participate. How else to explain it except as due to the inexorable, arational pull of religious faith. We must be our self and our self must be served. Attention to the self spreads, contagious and attractive as a religious ecstasy. (Rothenbuhler, 2005a: 99.)

The individual self is a sacred object of modern culture. No one is allowed not to have a self. Parents, education, counseling, popular advice, and marketing all advocate that we act our selves, be our selves, reward our selves, actualize our selves, live up to our selves, and more. The self is a highly valued project. Not only is it necessary that we each have a self, but that we work on it and that we show it, that the self and our self-work be subject to public display and evaluation.

Selves are experientially distinct from the bodies in which we expect them to be. On the one side, from the actor's point of view (Parsons, 1968 [1937]), the self is a center of will and ego that experiences its body as a resource or constraint on its capacity to act. From the point of view of others, alters and observers in a social situation, the self is an unknown, perhaps a meaning or intention, that gives off signs of its being and doing via the behavior of bodies. People's bodies operate in time, space, and organic continua, their selves in phenomenological, semiotic, and hermeneutic ones.

Selves, then, as necessary objects and self-work as a valued activity cannot be observed, displayed, evaluated, or even conducted outside of communication. They exist only as signs given and given off in communicative activities. This, then, makes communicative activities necessary to the conduct and display of the self. If in 20th century and contemporary societies the self has been growing in importance, then so too should we expect its associated communicative activities to be growing in social and cultural size, ubiquity, and importance.

The attention to the self and the high value placed on self-centered phenomena in modernity are not isolated phenomena; they are parts of a broad social orientation that gives meaningful organization to many disparate elements of society, culture, economy, and polity, and that can be called the Cult of the Individual (e.g. Durkheim, 1994 [1898], 1995 [1912]; Pickering, 1984). This cultic activity around individuals and individuality constitutes a religious orientation in modern life and is an analog, hypothetically a continuation, of the functions of religion in the lives of all known societies (Durkheim, 1995 [1912]). Social life in general is constituted on a quasi-religious foundation of ritual, symbol, collective activity, and faith. The cult of the individual is the religious orientation of modernity, with the self as its sacred object – or at least that is the theory, and it is one rich in implications for communication scholars.

If there is a cult of the individual and it is necessary to modern societies and participation in it can only be via communication, then there would be systematic and ubiquitous pressure on all communicative and cultural activities toward that end. There would be systematic and ubiquitous pressure to turn communicative resources, of all types, toward the construction, display, celebration, edification, and discipline of selves, of the ideas and values of individuality, and of individuals selected for their laudable or condemnable, heroic or demonic performance of selves (see Rothenbuhler, 2005b, for a case study). Indeed, the trends in commercial media, popular culture, marketing, consumer design, service businesses, education, and politics can be seen to reflect this pressure to devote attention to the self as a sacred object.

Cult of the individual

The idea of the cult of the individual originates with Durkheim; “the religion of the individual is a social institution like all known religions. It is society which assigns us this ideal as the sole common end which is today capable of providing a focus for men’s [and women’s] wills” (1994: 70). Pickering (1984: 476–499 esp.) pulls together the relevant passages and fleshes out the idea in relation to the rest of Durkheim’s (1995; Pickering, 1994) theory of religion and society. Hypothetically the cult operates as a new religion fit to the needs of modernity. It expresses the unity of individual, society, and sacred principles, and should be expected to be useful in people’s lives. The individual is its chief sacred object and individualism is its sacred value system. Like all religions, the cult of the individual needs periodic gatherings and other ritual forms for the expression, promulgation, and reinforcement of its principles.

We can extend these ideas toward the analysis of communication and media. All religious practices, and in Durkheim’s sociology, all communities and societies too, require periodic gatherings and ritual forms for the expression, celebration, and reinforcement of the ideas, values, meanings, and emotions central to the social group. Change of individual social status or group membership, or change in ideas and forms of expression are also handled via ritual activities in groups. As the central ideas and values are expressed in ritualistic form and the emotions of the group activity get attached to these forms as the outward and visible expression of the group and the center of its attention, the symbols and rituals become sacred objects.

Further analysis shows that the periodic group gatherings and ritual activities so central to Durkheim’s theory are communication activities, structures, and media, even though he never discussed them explicitly as such (Rothenbuhler, 1988, 1993, 1998). Goffman (e.g. 1959, 1967), for example, has shown that interpersonal interactions are conducted according to ritual rules consistent with Durkheim’s (1995) analysis of religious ritual, on the one hand,

and on the other hand, his proposal that the person is a sacred object. The analysis of media events (Dayan and Katz, 1992) shows that the live broadcasting communication system can serve as a functional equivalent of a crowd at a ceremonial gathering (Rothenbuhler, 1988, 1995). This essay and its companion papers (Rothenbuhler, 2005a, 2005b) explore the idea that in addition to their ritual role in special events, the media also function in a routine, everyday way as an adjunct to the interpersonal system, providing the religious education necessary to good performance of the cult of the individual.

Moralities of consumption

Assimilating Durkheimian sociology and consumer culture draws attention to the existence of moralities of consumption (cf. Williams, 1982). Consumer behavior may often be mundane, but it is not unimportant. The choice of a soap product may be trivial, but it is not frivolous. Leisure may be play, but it is not without rule of reason. Consumption may not always and necessarily be so, but it can be a part of the serious life. There are right and wrong, good and bad, beautiful and ugly ways to do it. These moralities of consumption exist because consumption is symbolic behavior that articulates self and social order.

This conclusion is also based on larger historical developments that have been examined from other important points of view. The history of play and leisure illustrates their origins in the serious life, becoming importantly distinct realms of optional behavior only with the rise of industrialization (Huizinga, 1955 [1955]). Turner (1982) develops this theme in his important distinction of liminoid from liminal, liminoid being the more individuated, optional form, characteristic of ritual in modern, industrial societies. Following another line Gadamer (1975 [1960]) elucidates the essential role in the modern vision of culture of the idea of cultivating oneself. With the rise of modernity culture was tied to education, its appreciation and production were seen as learned capacities, and it was valued for its meliorative effects on individuals. So precisely as leisure and play became distinct social realms of optionality, culture was imbued with a vision by which the right choices in leisure could be self-improving. The necessary correlate of this proposition is that the wrong choices would be self-wasting, from which grew the study of deviance and disorder. To this day commentary and study of mass communication and popular culture are wracked by differences in taste, value debates, and presumptions about the positive or negative character of effects. The cultural items produced and selected, the ideas and images expressed and enjoyed, and their social effects, are presumed to be the business of academics, public intellectuals, and politicians. It could not be that the public presumed to have a voice about other people's choices in such matters, unless on the background of a morality of consumption.

These connections demonstrate the serious, self-defining and socially-freighted importance of communicative and cultural choices in the domain of consumption behavior and leisure activities. These are communicative activities in which we can observe some of the invisible social forces to which Durkheim devoted his career. They are activities of the cult of the individual.

Goffman on the cult of the individual

Goffman's work on interpersonal ritual is the only example we have of sustained empirical work following Durkheim's idea of the cult of the individual (see e.g. Goffman 1959, 1967). He showed that interpersonal interactions are structured as if to deal with the circumstances that the self is a sacred object that, on the one hand, can only be known in interaction with others, while simultaneously it is most likely to be damaged in interaction with others. The others in interaction have the same dilemma. Interpersonal interactions, therefore, are structured as rituals of approach and avoidance in which selves are simultaneously presented and protected. Since both parties can benefit from success and either can be hurt by failure, the normal result is a cooperative ceremony. Surrounding this norm is an elaborate structure of rules for handling special cases and incompetent or uncooperative people.

In *Gender Advertisements* Goffman (1976) addressed media representations, and advertising photography in particular. His important conclusion deserves to be generalized beyond the case materials he analyzed. Much of media content functions as a form of hyper-ritualization in which the normal rules of personal presentation are exaggerated, the normal stereotypes are more so, the distribution of types tends to the extremes, and so on. In the media presentation of personal roles and performances – in advertising pictures, dramas, song lyrics, and talk – the range of realistic possibilities tends to be reduced to iconographic representations of selected, and thereby preferred, types. Secondly in being presented in the media these types are given greater public presence and social authority. They become especially prominent examples of how to conduct oneself in the company of others. They become displays in the world that provide orientation (instruction) for how to display one's orientation to others in the world, good examples of how to be a good example (Rothenbuhler, 1998).

Media as the church of the cult of the individual

If the media routinely display hyper-ritualizations of selves, and can also be seen to be producing a kind of communicative crowd, then they are a kind of gathering place, a center of public attention for the edification and cele-

bration of selves. This function is not only ubiquitous; it is the growth industry of consumer culture. We should look, though, for historical affinities. Broadcasting is the most characteristic communication system of the commercialized, industrialized, urbanized, mass societies of the 20th century, the very time, place, and circumstances of the rise of the cult of the individual. The communicative and cultural forms developed for 20th century commercial broadcasting should also be adapted to the functions of the cult of the individual.

As a communication and cultural system commercial broadcasting has produced a short list of innovations, for better or worse, its own unique contributions to culture and society and each can be shown to have affinity with the cult of the individual. Among these are the media personality, the media event and its mass audience, the situation comedy, the soap opera, and the 30-second drama form of advertising. This makes, in most regards, a heterogeneous list. The items have in common, though, that they were essentially unprecedented, more or less invented in broadcasting and remain closely associated with it, and they each have one other important thing in common: Each provides a focus of attention to modern individuality. They each tend to explore, explain, celebrate, pathologize, analyze, demonize, or worship the person. They can each be seen as contributing to the role of the media as the church of the cult of the individual.

The media personalities include talk-show hosts and most of their guests, DJs, announcers, interviewers, journalists, pundits, and more – characters “whose existence is a function of the media themselves. These personalities, usually, are not prominent in any of the social spheres beyond the media. They exist for their audiences only in the para-social relation,” that is, the “seeming face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer” (Horton and Wohl, [1956] 2004: 374, order rearranged). Professional media personae appear as themselves, playing themselves, while their selves are, in fact, media texts, characters in a drama that presents itself as simple portrayal of actual interaction.

A much-played commercial on American TV a few years ago used an actor who apparently played a doctor on a television show to recommend a medicine. The irony gave the advertisement a special appeal. Appearing as himself but dressed as a doctor, the actor announced that I am not a doctor, but I play one on TV, and then proceeded to dispense what sounded like medical advice. The same phenomenon is true of media personalities, but without irony. It is true, though peculiar, that the American late-night TV talk show host David Letterman is not a real David Letterman, but he plays one on TV.

Horton and Wohl (2004) emphasize the ways in which the work of media personalities imitates the familiar structure of interpersonal interaction and relationship, thus giving rise to a sense of para-social interaction and relationship. Members of the media audience for the personality’s work have a familiar and intimate view of what appears to be normal conversational give

and take. That conversation may be directed to others on the set, to the studio audience, or to the home audience in relatively equivalent ways. The personality is available in a regular pattern of recurrence and is of reliable character and mood. Pleasant sociality is paramount. There is no "fourth wall" of the drama and there is no suspension of disbelief; it is not a play performed in front of an audience, it is an apparent reality performed with the audience. No one is asked to imaginatively enter an aesthetic, narrative construction; rather they are expected to simply observe the social interaction displayed before them as the reality it appears to be.

Let's state some obvious facts. These media personae are professional personalities; they are professional selves performed in public in ways designed to maximize their visibility. The shows that feature these personalities are a ubiquitous and historically growing form of media content. They are unique communicative structures, not drama, fiction, special events, ceremonies, or games, not everyday life nor really an imitation of it. These are unique communicative forms that appear as if constructed for the display of some of the skills of everyday life, specifically the skills of personality and sociability. These facts point toward the hypothesized explanation: the media personality and the broadcast mass communication system in which it flourishes are crucial components of the cult of the individual, which is, in turn, a crucial component of modernity in industrialized, urbanized, mass societies.

Media events (Dayan and Katz, 1992) are another communicative and cultural form essentially unique to broadcasting. These live broadcasts, interrupting the normal programming schedule, for pre-planned events of heightened social importance can be contests, conquests, or coronations, pilgrimages, rites of denigration, disaster marathons, and other generic forms (Carey, 1998; Dayan, 2005; Dayan and Katz, 1992; Liebes 1998; Liebes and Blondheim, 2005). They can be conflictful or consensual, mostly breaking news or mostly planned ceremony. Media events commonly, though, focus on individuals and their achievements. They most often feature the celebration, or more rarely the denigration, of selected individuals. Even when not designed as celebrations of a hero, the logic of the genre and the conventions of television tend toward the personalization of power, as can be seen as a result of the televised masses of Pope John Paul II (Dayan and Katz, 1992). Most often designed as a celebration of individualism, the media event tends to be received that way even when it is not so designed, and thus is another important activity of the church of the cult of the individual.

The serial situation comedy so characteristic of television is a unique dramatic genre. Built around the display and interaction of characters and personalities, the dramatic tension comes from the situation, not the growth or change of the person. This is quite different from the novel and the plays and movies produced under its influence (Marc, 1989). The characters of the ensemble cast of the serial situation comedy must be stable; they cannot learn from their situations. They have to exhibit the same ratios of foolish-

ness and wisdom, volatility and stability in next week's episode, so that the same dramatic tensions can be generated by similar situations.

On the one hand, the combination of stable characters and shifting situations is a simple device for generating dramatic tension in a series of episodes. It solves a script-writing problem. On the other hand, from the spectator's point of view, it renders the characters reliable, just like the media personae analyzed by Horton and Wohl (2004). As they point out, the talk show host, the quiz master, and the DJ are always there at the appointed time, always the same. Reliability encourages relationship; their pleasant and predictable appearance mimics that of a trustworthy and marvellously undemanding friend. Are the fictional characters of situation comedies like this? In part, yes, while in most other ways they are conventional characters in conventional dramatic form. They do not violate dramatic rules as talk show hosts do, breaking the fourth wall, interacting with the audience, and talking about current events or real locations; they do not perform a claim to be real, as talk show hosts do. Situation comedy characters do, though, appear reliably, in predictable form, as a distinctive character, a personality on display – not growing or changing, but working their personality within a situation, relearning the same lesson week after week. It must be an important one.

Soap operas represent an extreme of narrative stasis built around character and personality differences and conflict. Herzog's ([1941] 2004: 140) interviewees understood the formula 65 years ago and it has not changed much: "getting into trouble and out again." The personality, personality conflict, and dramas of character are the center and most of the content of soap operas. As Allen (1987 [1983]) points out, while very little appears to happen across the timeline of a typical soap opera episode, very much significance can be found in the vertical, paradigmatic aspects of the story, in the system of correspondences and differences. The dynamic of soap opera stories, from this point of view, derives more from comparisons, analogies, similarities, and differences among the portrayals of character, relationships, interpersonal activities, and life events within a story than in the flow of events and activities (see also Brunsdon, 2000). Soap operas, in other words, interpreted for our purposes here, are about the varieties of self and self-work. Something of this soap opera logic can be seen to be growing, spreading to other program types and growing in prevalence in the schedule. Wittebols (2004) argues that the soap opera style and structure are also increasingly frequent in sports, news, reality television, and other programming. Van Zoonen (2005) identifies it in politics, which I hasten to point out, are conducted for the media and thus within the church of the cult of the individual.

Final on our short list of communicative and cultural forms is the 30-second advertising drama. With the rise of the commercial broadcasting network system, dramatic portrayal of scenarios involving the advertised product became normal and then raised to a high art (Esslin 1987 [1979]). Nowhere else are such resources of talent, finances, technology, and organization focused on a successful 30-second drama. It has produced lists of new

conventions and devices for condensed characterization and narrative. Given the distribution of one to two to three dozen of these tiny narratives per hour per channel, it has cultivated widespread, taken-for-granted skills in audio-visual interpretation. Flying razor blades, athletic beers, dancing vacuums, and men and women swooning for soap are not chaotic, random signifiers, but elements of sensible narratives.

Given the resources invested we should hope that the 30-second narratives of radio and television advertising and their expressive devices are growing in diversity and complexity. From the beginning, though, a type of therapeutic discourse and a kind of getting into trouble and, with the aid of the advertised product, out again narrative form has been dominant (Marchand, 1985). The audience member's attention is thereby focused on individuality, individual action, character, and personality as they are ventured into the world, meeting with success or failure, forwarding or retarding the social position of the person, via the use of selected products – another lesson in the morality of consumption from the church school of the cult of the individual.

It is no accident that these communicative forms – the media personality, the media event, the situation comedy, the soap opera, and the advertising drama – should appear with broadcasting in the 20th century, more so in the more commercialized, industrialized, urbanized nations. It is because they contribute to the cult of the individual, the religion of modernity, in the times and places of its greatest growth, and thereby continue the ancient and primitive function of all media: to support the religious foundations of society. The most commercial media in the most secularized societies yet perform a most sacred function (cf. Thomas, 2005).

Note

1. This essay extends my work in "The Church of the Cult of the Individual," in Eric W. Rothenbuhler and Mihai Coman (eds.) *Media Anthropology*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications: 91-100. A few paragraphs are reproduced and a few others are adapted, with permission of Sage Publications, Inc.

I would like to thank Knut Lundby for suggestions and encouragement as well as his stimulating response to the earlier essay. I also thank Johanna Sumiala-Seppänen for the invitation and helpful comments.

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Contested Communication

Mediating the Sacred

Knut Lundby

I was in Edinburgh¹ when the government of Norway appointed the new Bishop of Oslo on 11 March 2005. The Cabinet was split over the case. I followed the announcement by the Minister of Church Affairs in the press conference, which was covered live on the air as well as on the Internet by the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK). I stayed in touch with key informers by SMS messages and cell phone calls. I checked the debate in the Internet editions of Norwegian newspapers. The debate had been long and heated. The nine leading papers carried approximately 1500 entries on the case² during the one-year-long process from the time candidates for the new bishop were first put forward until the appointment. The national media had involved themselves in the issue. The case was a top story on NRK evening news for several days when the contested issue blew up and entered the wider public sphere.³ The outgoing as well as the incoming bishop were invited to the main Friday night television talk show.⁴ The change of bishop was thus a contested and highly publicised i.e. mediated affair.

Why all the fuss – even in the post-modern context of the capital? That is what I will try to analyze in this article. I will look upon the bishop as a symbol. This symbolic role carries the bishop into the realm of the sacred, I will argue. The article is basically a theoretical discussion, making the sacred into a question of communication. It will become apparent how the sacred depends on production and reception in communication. So I ask, what happens to the sacred when it is publicised in (post)modern media? I will use the case of the treatment of the appointment of a new Bishop of Oslo in 2005 to substantiate my argument.

The case

First, some background might be of help for readers who are not familiar with the context: in Norway, the main church is Lutheran, and 85 percent of

the population belong to it. This high membership percentage does not mean that most people actually go to church. Fewer than ten per cent of the population participate actively in Sunday services and other church activities on a regular basis. However, most Norwegians feel a sense of belonging to the church. The Church of Norway is still a state church. The King is formally the head, although this is a relationship of mutual legitimation with the state church help legitimising the monarchy, and the King legitimising the state church. A new bishop is formally appointed by the King. However, the actual decision is taken by the Cabinet after a nomination and election process within the Church. This time, a new procedure was applied in this process; which due to the unclear rules of the game turned out to be long, and partly contested.

A more substantially contested issue, however, was over the right of gays to be ordained in the Church of Norway. Debates, both public and interpersonal, became polarised. In a poll taken in the three municipalities of the diocese a week before the appointment, 40 percent said the profile of the new bishop was an important question for them, and as many as 70 percent found the candidates' views on gay ministers important.⁵

One of the candidates, already bishop in a neighbouring diocese, Ole Christian Kvarme, made it clear that he would not ordain gay men or lesbians. This caused outcries in the media and public discourse. The Mayor of Oslo inveighed against Kvarme. Other politicians also became involved. The three other candidates accepted gay clergy, which had also been the policy of the departing bishop, Gunnar Stålsett. Here Stålsett had been in conflict with the majority of his fellow bishops and with the General Synod of the Church. Stålsett had been a popular bishop within the wider urban community and in the general public sphere, although he was to some extent controversial among the clergy and within the Church organisation.

The Diocese of Oslo is different from sees in other parts of the country. Serving the capital, it is more affected by urban and multicultural dynamics. There is a rapidly growing immigrant population, with a large proportion of Muslims in Oslo. While the Church of Norway is still the church of a large majority in other parts of the country, this is no longer the case in the capital. Fewer than half of the newborn children in Oslo are now being christened into the Church of Norway, where membership is normally conferred by child baptism. The pluralist context in Oslo arguably creates additional challenges for the Bishop of Oslo in the communication of the sacred.

Now a warning: I have been part of this process. The local congregations elected me to the Diocesan Council. Hence, I have been involved in the nomination of episcopal candidates and had a formal role when the Diocesan Council advised the government about whom to select. It was not my candidate who was finally appointed. In analyzing this case as a researcher, I shall try to be impartial and to maintain scientific standards.

In the end, the government appointed Ole Christian Kvarme as Bishop of Oslo on the basis of a large majority vote within the Church. However, this

was to a great extent in conflict with the opinion of local congregations and the clergy in Oslo, and against the advice of the Diocesan Council. As a result, the contested communication continues. However, I regard the debate over gay ministers to be just a manifestation of some deeper attitudes and relations to the Church and to the sacred that it cultivates.

The bishop as a symbol

A bishop is a symbol. This is true in all denominations throughout the world. He – or in these days possibly also she – is usually appointed to the post after passing through an intense and spectacular rite of transition. Other bishops take part, and the King and other important authorities as well. A bishop has a key liturgical role and a position enabling him or her to sound a moral voice in society. A bishop is a symbol for all those who relate to him or her in one way or another. However, a bishop may be a contested symbol.

In a media-saturated society where the Church still matters, a bishop becomes a symbol in the mediascape as well as within the Church and the social circles he or she inhabits. The mediascape is the combination of the variety of media and their complex repertoires of images and narratives available to people in a specific area (Appadurai, 1990: 299; Appadurai, 1996: 35).

How a bishop is portrayed in the mediascape becomes rather important for his or her chances of being heard. In a mobile and urban setting, like Oslo, where people rely heavily on the media for their communication, the visibility of the bishop in the mediascape may matter more to most members of the Church of Norway than the local minister, since the majority of the members rarely go to worship and may meet the local minister only on special occasions, if ever.

On a very general level, symbols are mediating figures, as Niklas Luhmann has pointed out. The “symbol” as a mediating figure had to be invented in the course of the social development of mankind. With symbols, people learn to represent the unfamiliar by something familiar. This definitely applies to the realm of religion. The divinity does not appear as such, “but rather is *in it* [i.e. the symbol]” (Luhmann, 2001: 556-557).

All symbols are cultural constructions. This also applies to a bishop. A bishop’s authority is built over the generations with the support of weighty institutions. In modern and post-modern settings, this authority, the meaning of the bishop as a symbol, may erode in the eyes of many. The authority of the bishop in such a setting may depend less on formal position or tradition and more on charisma (Weber, 1978) and on the narration of his or her image in the mediascape. A bishop may still attract great attention, as in the case of Oslo, but maybe less because of the position than because of what he says and does. The institution gives a platform, windows for opportunity, but people are no longer obliged to listen to a bishop.

A bishop is a symbol, set apart from the ordinary. Even so, a person set apart may become close through radio and television as well as in interpersonal relations. Face-to-face or mediated by the big media, the bishop must be regarded a symbol of the sacred if he is able to communicate the sacred. But is the bishop himself a sacred figure?

A sacred figure?

To a scholar of religious studies like James L. Cox of the University of Edinburgh, a bishop in a majority Christian church is a “sacred practitioner” among shaman-priests, prophets and holy persons. In some cases, the practitioner may be regarded by the believers as being sacred in and of himself. In general, the believers do not perceive the sacred itself but manifestations of the sacred, Cox holds, and such a manifestation “becomes an appearance of the sacred only for the faithful, who then express their faith through the phenomena”. Faith is “the organ for perception, the lens whereby the believer ‘sees’ the sacred” (Cox, 1992: 92, 133-137).

A bishop in a religious institution like the Church of Norway is not a sacred person him- or herself. However, the person who is acting in the role of bishop carries liturgical and representational tasks that involve manifestations of the sacred. A bishop, as a “sacred practitioner” in a prominent position, has the potential to show people something sacred. But whether it is regarded as sacred by people depends on the way they receive what the bishop as a sacred practitioner offers.

In Norway, the Bishop of Oslo performs some very visible liturgical and representational duties on behalf of the whole nation. The Church of Norway has no archbishop, and the Bishop of Oslo is no longer *primus inter pares*, presiding over the bishops synods. However, the bishop of the capital has specific functions in relation to the parliament, *Stortinget*, and the royal family. When a dead king is buried or a newborn heir to the throne is baptised, it is the Bishop of Oslo who performs the ceremony. This national role of the Bishop of Oslo is one reason why the case of the appointment aroused so much interest throughout the country.

Double mediation

What each type of sacred practitioner holds in common is role of mediator, James L. Cox points out. “The shaman-priest, by his entering into sacred realms, represents the people before the sacred. The prophet receives and communicates a sacred message the people must hear and respond to if they are to avoid calamity and achieve some form of salvation.” Last comes the

“holy person”; by being in his presence the people are in contact with the sacred (Cox, 1992: 97).

The role of the Bishop of Oslo, even at the beginning of the 21st century, has a certain potential for representing the sacred to people, assuming a prophetic voice, and maybe even bringing people into touch with the sacred. Gunnar Stålsett, for many, seems to have performed in all these capacities as bishop: In the royal marriage in 2001, he was able to communicate God's grace to the new crown princess as well as to “ordinary” people who were watching in a way which surprised many who are at odds with church practices. He led the main demonstration and protest against the war in Iraq in 2003, an action perceived by many as a kind of prophetic leadership. Many found that his preaching and actions opened up the church, i.e. the way to the sacred.

The bishop can be regarded a gatekeeper to the realm of the sacred. A person who is a bishop can perform this gate-keeping role in different ways: he can make the gate wide or narrow. In any case, the bishop has a mediating role, with the power to enable the sacred to manifest itself to the people and to enable people to respond appropriately to that manifestation.

However, this first order mediation, as I call it, cannot be performed on a broad scale in a modern context unless it is also supported and passed on through the media. This second order mediation interplays with the first order mediation.

The Bishop of Oslo is close to the main media of the country. NRK, the other radio and television companies and the main newspapers all have their bases in Oslo. A vocal bishop can be heard, as Bishop Stålsett was, when mediating the sacred.

The definition of the “sacred”?

Whether a Bishop of Oslo mediates the sacred or not is an empirical question, but there is also the question of how this sacred is to be identified. We need a definition of “sacred” that can be related to the mediation and communication processes in society. We need a sociological definition, not a theological one. “For scholars with a fundamentally theological agenda, things, people, places, and time are sacred because they are symbols for, or manifestations of, or somehow related to, God or the transcendent.” In non-theological usage, “things are considered sacred by specific communities because those people value them in a fundamental way, or because they symbolise the values of the community, or because they provide fundamental ways of thinking about the world” (Fitzgerald, 2000: 18-19). The task of the researcher, then, is to try to understand those collective values in the context of their actual location in society

This brings us to Émile Durkheim's classic definition of the “sacred” in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912). In relation to the long and

more recent discourse on the concept of the sacred in religious studies (Berger, 1967: 190, notes 34-35), Fitzgerald finds a fundamental difference between the works of, say Eliade, and the works of Durkheim. For the latter, religion “tends to dissolve into other, more powerful analytical categories, such as ritual, myth, and systems of classification, and where the whole enterprise is historical and sociological” (Fitzgerald, 2000: 14).

The sacred, ritual and religion

Durkheim mixed religion, ritual and the sacred. I regard “religion” and “ritual” as broader concepts than the “sacred”. Ritual could be defined as “the voluntary performance of appropriately patterned behavior to symbolically effect or participate in the serious life”, which need not be regarded sacred (Rothenbuhler, 1998: 26-27). Religion is not “limited to what happens in a ‘sacred’ realm, traditionally conceived, but is that part of culture which persuasively presents a plausible myth of the ordering of existence” (Clark, 1997: 17). This definition of religion, however, has to make space for the sacred when it appears, as it does.

Again, the question of whether religion and the sacred should be understood through the functions they perform or by the substance they embody needs to be clarified. This is an ongoing challenge for the sociology of religion (Berger, 1974). I propose elsewhere that the sacred may be understood as a variable ranging from the substantial to the functional. There are substantive sacred elements as well as sacred functions operating simultaneously, alongside each other (Lundby, 1997: 159-161).

In relation to the bishop’s case, this may be demonstrated as follows: the Church of Norway, like all religious institutions, offers a substantive core of sacred texts and practices. Bishops represent and mediate this. Believers adopt this substance of their religious tradition to varying extents. They may be doubtful or redefine the meanings offered by the church, but they still relate to something substantively sacred. Non-believers, however, may not regard as sacred things that the church claims has this substance.

On a societal level, practices and interpretations given by the bishop and the church will pertain to certain functions. However, the field of faith is highly contested in a cultural context where people choose freely from a variety of sacred traditions and offerings what they consume and adopt. Such choices may function as sacred for those who make them, even if they do not strictly conform to the definition of the sacred given by the church.

Neither those representing the sacred nor those adopting it through various ways of reception, necessarily use the word “sacred” themselves. Nevertheless, in both categories this is about deep meanings, which could be termed “sacred” in the present analysis.

The appearance of the sacred, then, has to be analysed from the substance of sacred objects and texts as well as through their functions in society. Émile Durkheim's analysis of the sacred in society has this double aspect.

"Set apart and forbidden"

Durkheim defines the "sacred" as something "set apart and forbidden". The sacred is the key to his understanding of religion. In fact, Durkheim gives a prior place to the sacred even over religion itself (Pickering, 1984: 115), which he defines as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church all those who adhere to them" (Durkheim, [1912] 1995: 44). I do not find this a satisfactory definition of religion or church (religious community or institution) in contemporary society. However, Durkheim's understanding of the sacred is relevant as an analytical tool.

In an early work, Durkheim proposed that "ritual is the totality of practices concerned with *sacred things*." Such "things" are not necessarily physical or material. By "things" Durkheim meant "social facts", which one, according to his positivistic methodology, could identify for sociological analysis (Durkheim, 1982). "Sacred things" make up "a group of phenomena which are irreducible to any other group of phenomena," he stated. Sacred things can appear as *représentations* or as their corresponding sacred objects, which he exemplifies as "temples, ritual objects, presiding priests, etc." (Durkheim, [1899] 1994: 84-89). "A *représentation* is an idea or concept: it is a way of thinking about an object" in society (Pickering, 1984: 131).

Hence the collective understanding in that society of the role and the performance of a bishop is related to the sacred that he or she represents. These *représentations* are manifestations of the sacred. So is the bishop him- or herself. The bishop is to be regarded a "sacred object" not because he or she is sacred or holy but because the "virtues and powers" of representing and connecting to the sacred are attributed to him or her.

Anything can be sacred if these "virtues and powers" are attributed to them, Durkheim stated: "a rock, a tree, a spring, a pebble, a piece of wood, a house", along with gods, spirits and persons (Durkheim, 1995: 34-35). This of course also applies to the golden cross that has been carried by the Bishop of Oslo for generations. This is the way symbols work, as objects invested with certain meanings. However, in these cases, the meanings attributed are loaded with references to something ultimate or holy, hence "set apart" as sacred.

Durkheim defines sacred things in opposition to profane things. The sharp dichotomy of sacred *versus* profane is problematic (Pickering, 1984: 115-299). However, it is just this opposition that sets the sacred things apart and makes them "sacred". It is for Durkheim a "relationship of conflict", "one of total

opposition". A question that arises is whether this conflict really exists empirically, and much evidence suggests that it does not (Pickering, 1984: 148).

Sacred things are "forbidden", while profane things are not. As far as I can see, Durkheim does not explain what he means by "forbidden" in this sense. Neither does Pickering explicitly in his work on *Durkheim's Sociology of Religion*. It simply seems to point to the binary system of sacred *versus* profane, "each is opposed to the other – one forbids the other" (Pickering, 1984: 127). That a sacred thing is set apart in a way that makes it "forbidden" demonstrates the seriousness of the matter. The sacred is to be approached with awe. The focus then could be on the sacred as "set apart" from the everyday, the mundane, the ordinary.

A bishop's position is "set apart" but built into the institutional structure. Those who respect this role in society and the way it is performed will take the bishop seriously. This is certainly the case with those who admit that the bishop is a gatekeeper of the sacred.

Durkheim focuses on a meaning of "sacred" which is common to Latin, French and English – that which is consecrated or holy (Pickering, 1984: 126). The appointed is consecrated, at the culmination of the *rite de passage*, into her or his role as bishop. Durkheim also holds that sacred things are "invested with a particular dignity that raises them above our empirical individuality" (Pickering, 1984: 126). This may apply to the role of bishop in this case of the Church of Norway, which has such a broad base in society.

Sacred space as contested space

The sacred is related to society as a collective: "Sacred things are those whose *représentation* society itself has fashioned; it includes all sorts of collective states, common traditions and emotions, feelings which have a relationship to objects of general interest" (Durkheim, 1994: 95). In the case of appointing a new Bishop of Oslo to follow Gunnar Stålsett, such representations, collective states, traditions, emotions and feelings were brought to the surface in the public sphere.

A sacred space is a site of orientation. However, a sacred space is also a contested space, "a site of negotiated contests over the legitimate ownership of sacred symbols" (Chidester, 1995: 9-15; Landres, 2002: 95). In media-saturated societies the contested communication takes place in the media. The media also feed people's talk and deliberation about the matter.

Bishop Stålsett did invoke a sense of sacredness – in a Durkheimian sense – among the wider population. The debate over who to succeed him as Bishop of Oslo may be read as an indication that many were afraid that his successor would not carry on this open and inviting representation of the sacred.

Varieties of the sacred

The sacred varies. There is no end to the list of what could be regarded as sacred symbols. There are degrees of sacredness, and the sacred may vary over time as well as in space. The analysis of the sacred in society will also vary according to whether one stresses the substance or the functions of the sacred. The production of sacred symbols varies as well. Durkheim made clear that “the circle of sacred objects” – and hence of sacred *représentations* – “cannot be determined once and for all.” What is sacred varies “infinitely” according to different religions, he held (Durkheim, 1995: 35).

Durkheim also stressed that there are many degrees of sacred things. Their intensity in relation to people varies. There are some degrees of sacred things “with which man feels relatively at ease,” he wrote (Durkheim, 1995: 35). Consequently, there are also degrees of the sacred that people may *not* feel at ease with. Whatever the degree of sacredness, if something is to be regarded as sacred at all, it has to as “set apart” by people in a serious way. It emerges that the extent or degree to which “things” are regarded as sacred, depends heavily upon the members of society, upon the users of the *représentations* displayed to them. What is sacred is not just a question of the production of symbols but also of their reception.

The sacred changes with time: “What was sacred yesterday may be less sacred today, and tomorrow totally desacralised” (Pickering, 1984: 132). There may be “sacred times” which are experienced in certain intense periods of collective or individual life. The sacred varies in space as well, *within* societies. Sacred symbols probably appear good to those who adopt them, even if they are contested or frightening. However, what is evil for some may be good for others. In that sense, even evil may be sacred. In short: what is sacred varies with the context.

Dependence on context

What is “set apart” depends on the where and when. The religious-cultural as well as the societal-political context of the case of the Bishop of Oslo is important in this analysis.

“Sacredness is not a quality inherent in certain objects, nor is it available to the unaided senses of just any individual human observer. ... They are made sacred by groups of people who set them apart and keep them bounded by specific actions; they remain sacred so long as groups continue to do this” (Fields, 1995: xlv-xlvi).

“What is sacred is related to community: The problem is that the substance of the sacred varies wildly from community to community, culture to culture, historical setting to historical setting. ... In any given cultural community, the sacred is whatever is treated as unquestionable, ‘beyond interdiction’ as

Durkheim puts it, as of the outmost seriousness by the members of that community. ... The criterion of sacredness is the pattern of activity of the members of the community" (Rothenbuhler, 1998: 23-25).

The conclusion from this is that what is to be regarded as "sacred" needs to be cultivated, catered for by an interacting group of people. The sacred becomes dynamic, but also fluid and changeable. What a group of people together "set apart" becomes "sacred".

In media-saturated societies, these processes of social interaction and cultivation usually involve mediation by a variety of technical media. In (post)modern societies most communication and interaction within groups and different parts of society are mediated by a growing repertoire of media.

Society-specific

For Durkheim, every society "is based on collective *représentations*, and the sacred is not just *a* collective *représentation*, the sacred is the symbol of the collective entity. Society itself is summarized in the sacred. ... The sacred is the collective *représentation par excellence*." However, it already occurred to Durkheim that what is regarded as sacred is specific to a given society. What constitutes the sacred varies from society to society (Pickering, 1984: 130–132).

Contemporary complex societies are highly differentiated social systems, as pointed out by Niklas Luhmann and others. As culturally dependant, symbols carry meaning within the sub-systems of society. Consequently, the sacred may have to be discovered within the various segments or sub-systems of society.

In highly differentiated societies, the overall "sacred canopy" – as Peter Berger (1967) calls the overall symbolic environment – may be loose and not able to give directions for social interaction. The social fabric may rather work through differentiated canopies with limited "plausibility structures", another of his key terms. Peter Berger points out that one of the important weaknesses of Durkheim's sociological theory of religion is the difficulty of interpreting within its framework religious phenomena that are not society-wide, i.e. those with sub-societal plausibility structures (Berger, 1967: 193, note 22).

Norway is a small but highly differentiated society in terms of its social structure and economy. However, due to the size of its population of less than five million, social networks are tight. Cultural differentiation is growing, but Norway is still a relatively homogeneous society. The broad membership of the population in the Church of Norway is an indication of this homogeneity, although it makes for no more than a weak sacred canopy over Norwegian society. People belong to the church, but they do not go there. Identification is not followed by interaction. Hence, the plausibility structure of the sacred as defined by the Church of Norway is easily weakened as the differentiation of society erodes common structures.

In the capital Oslo, the differentiation and cultural diversity is more complex than elsewhere in the country. This is where the bishop of the capital has to work. Bishop Stålsett seems in a rare way to have managed to link references to the overall Norwegian sacred canopy with urban life in the differentiated diversity of Oslo. Many people in this capital area, leading politicians as well as “the man on the street”, academics and business people, clergy and lay people, expressed anxiety over the possible appointment of a new bishop who would change this openness into a more inward-looking church strategy.

This is about codes of the sacred. Luhmann links the changing status of the sacred to changes in the use of codes in communication. His time frame is a long one; “At the ‘origins of religion’, even before the mediating figure of the ‘symbol’ had been invented”, the sacred was coded as secret. “The essential knowledge of society, knowledge worthy of being preserved – namely, that of sacred things” needed to be “protected from communication, because it is produced through this protection”. “Otherwise,” Luhmann adds, “one would, of course, quickly find out that sacred bones are just bones”. However, because social systems need to communicate, this leads to a dead end in their development and differentiation. The alternative solution in this long journey of mankind, “a functional equivalent to prohibitions on communication secured by awe and dread, lies in the invention of the *symbolic* presentation of the unity of the visible and the invisible, of the present and the absent” (Luhmann, 2001: 555-558).

The former Bishop of Oslo handled this symbolic communication with groups of the population that had not been vocal members of the church. He was widely listened to, even in post-modern sectors of society. How was this so?

“Set apart” in (post)modern contexts

In the modern and post-modern context, there are both trends of desecralisation and processes of secularisation that affect institutional religion. However, there may also be various new, more fluid expressions of religiosity and spirituality in the mediascape and among people. In contemporary (post)modern contexts, sacred times may be no more than sacralised moments in mega-spectacular events (Lundby, 1997: 161) or good vibrations in private homes. However, there are still persistent collective structures behind the individualised expressions. There are processes of desecularisation (Berger, 1999). The sacred has been “rediscovered” by prominent scholars (Wuthnow, 1992). The sacred is not necessarily diminishing, but it may be changing its shape. “Things” are still “set apart”.

Durkheim at the very end of the 19th century pointed out that the sacred was taking shape as the cult of the individual (Durkheim, 1994). This observation appears sporadically through his works, but the instances make up a coherent line of argument. Durkheim regarded this cult of the individual as

a religious practice and a necessary characteristic of modern society (Rothenbuhler, 2005; this volume; Pickering, 1984: 476-479). The cult of the individual is made a collective foundation, ideologically and in practice, of Western society.

In this new, modern religion, the individual is sacred, and individualism is a sacred value system, Rothenbuhler reminds us. In this cult of the individual, the person, the self, is the sacred object. The sacred, therefore, has definitely not diminished. Consumption and leisure time pursuits are among the activities of the cult of the individual (Rothenbuhler, 2005; this volume). These patterns are becoming even more visible in post-modern expressions of modern Western life.

Can we find reasons for Bishop Stålsett's popularity in his ability to link the contemporary cult of the individual to a relationship with the national church and the tradition it carries? In this case, Stålsett may have linked the two concepts of the sacred, that of the self and the individual with that which exists in the collective expressions of the Church of Norway, to which most Norwegians still feel that they belong. If so, this blend of the sacred was possible in the space and at the time Stålsett was bishop. His followers may have felt at home in both meanings of the sacred but still experienced them as being in conflict with one another. However, Bishop Stålsett reconciled them for people.

This is not necessarily to be interpreted as a case of de-secularisation (Berger, 1999). Rather, Bishop Stålsett's ability to communicate the sacred to a wider public demonstrated that people's membership in the majority church implies a sense of belonging or a relationship that can be nurtured and given space. It is hardly the case that Bishop Stålsett reversed secularisation. He rather understood how to approach people living under the demands of modernity. He managed to preach God's grace and practise moral leadership in an urban and (post)modern context. He activated a slumbering plausibility structure, still there but in danger of shrinking.

It is difficult to single out the more specific sacred elements within culture. We are left with degrees of sacredness, as part of the symbolism in "the culturally meaningful belief systems" (Clark, 1997: 17). In the (post)modern condition, people move in and out of various groups and belong to shifting and overlapping collectivities, each developing their specific sacred references (Lundby, 1997: 160). However, Bishop Stålsett in the Oslo case may have been able to bridge these "worlds", or sub-canopies, for many people.

The bishop as a celebrity

Given the cult of the individual, Eric Rothenbuhler (2005; this volume) sees *the media* as the "church" – in the Durkheimian sense – of this cult. His proposal is "that the media system of consumer culture and celebrity has grown as a church of the cult of the individual." Celebrity constitutes a major

feature of the media as the site of the cult of the individual. Celebrities, the stars of the mediascape, are “set apart”. The celebration of celebrity personalities is the key to this cult, Rothenbuhler points out.

Bishop Stålsett was feted as a celebrity in the Norwegian mainstream media. Most of the media took a positive and favourable stand towards him. The exceptions were the so-called “Christian” dailies, which found him too liberal in relation to the sacred tradition of the Church of Norway as they define it. Durkheim noted that any new religion in expanding modernity “would have to admit freedom of thought, the right of criticism and of individual initiative” (Pickering, 1984: 477). But as the “church” of the cult of the individual “exists in communication and not in the organization of material bodies and resources, its structures and processes must exist in discourse, text, and artefact. Its structures must be semiotic and its processes hermeneutic,” Rothenbuhler (2005) holds. Bishop Stålsett matched this cult of the individual and its discursive requirements.

Gunnar Stålsett was invited to the main Friday talk show on NRK national television a few days before his departure as bishop. He was relaxed and handled the interview in the studio well. Two weeks later, on the day of his appointment, the new bishop, Ole Christian Kvarme, was invited to the same talk show. He appeared uncertain on those topics about which he was challenged.

“In providing the discourse environment for the cult of the individual, one of the media’s most important activities is the production of saints and heroes, devils and ghosts, choirs, preachers, mullahs, gurus, and bishops” (Rothenbuhler, 2005). Bishop Stålsett was given such a status. His successor may not be given the same lasting focus. For a while, when the comparison to Stålsett is fresh in people’s minds, he may even be considered a kind of villain. On the other hand, he may manage on his own terms as well. But more it is likely, as time goes by, that he will be forgotten and ignored if he does not function as a celebrity in the eyes of the media and their public.

Bishop Stålsett was at certain times accused by fellow clergy and church leaders of striving after media attention. However, it worked within the greater public sphere, and he earned a reputation for himself. Bishop Kvarme is a respected man among those who know him personally; however, it remains to be seen if he will be able to present himself to the main media and hence gain a reputation among those who do not know him from face-to-face situations.

Ole Christian Kvarme met huge public criticism in the media when he opposed the dominant view on homosexual rights in the wider public discourse during the appointment campaign. It will be hard for Kvarme to overcome this by gaining attention and coverage in the media and obtaining a reputation through this attention. As the new Bishop of Oslo, he now represents the sacred realm of the church in the capital. Will he be able to share the sacred with a wider public? That depends heavily on the mediation of the sacred that he represents.

Bishop Stålsett broke out of the compartmentalisation in which the Church of Norway remains into an institutional framework fitting those who are committed and socialised into the life of the Church. He played with the cult of the individual to the extent that he communicated the sacred to a wider public without banalising the sacred in the church's tradition. However, conservative groups in the Church of Norway may claim that just what he did was banalise and compromise the tradition of the church. They got their own candidate elected to follow Stålsett as Bishop of Oslo. If Kvarme retreats into the segmented interpretation of the church's tradition, he may cut the channels of communication with large segments of the population who interpret their lives not only through their sense of belonging to the church but also through the cult of the individual.

Mediation-specific

Durkheim spoke of the character of the sacred as having something added or superimposed on it: "quite simply one might say, stamped upon it." But who does the stamping? "There can only be one answer – society" (Pickering, 1984: 131). This stamping is performed in communication. In media-rich societies, the mediation processes of television, radio, newspapers, magazines, etc. as well as new digital networks strongly influence the stamping of the sacred.

I suggest that what is to be regarded as "sacred" in (post)modern contexts varies with the forms and contexts of such mediation. What is "set apart" and held in awe in the symbolic mediation in a society or part of society depends to a large extent on the mediation systems. What is regarded as "sacred space" in society also varies with the validity of the mediating symbols. This claim needs more than one case to be thoroughly investigated. However, the different conceptions of the sacred among the wider public in this case show that varieties in mediation matters.

This is not about friendly or unfriendly coverage and editorials in the press towards the bishop. Neither is it a question of which media channels are more efficient in conveying the messages of the bishop. It is not about conveying or transmitting the sacred, but about the sacred in ritual communication; as James Carey puts it, the interplay between those performing the message and those receiving and appropriating it (Carey, 1989: 16-18).

Nick Couldry takes a sharper, critical stand on media rituals. He argues against the Durkheimian and neo-Durkheimian understanding of society as a coherent whole constituted through public rituals and other processes of social cohesion. He proposes a post-Durkheimian reading, in which the ritual work of mediation in society is seen in terms of power and hegemony. The mediation processes are constitutive to the ongoing construction of society. Couldry defines "media rituals" as formalised actions organised around media-

related categories, whose performance frames wider media-related values in society in general (Couldry, 2003: 29). Through such media rituals, myths about the centre of society and the media's role in sustaining this centre are legitimised and re-created over and over again. Society on all levels is constructed. Mediation processes play a key role in these constructions through the categories for understanding the world that the media introduce and reinforce.

The contested communication over the new Bishop of Oslo is related to the different categorisations of the sacred that are mediated as much by the media in their involvement with the various groups and constituencies who are involved or wish to be involved with the church as by the bishops and the candidate bishops themselves. The mediation of the sacred is, then, about distinctions (Bourdieu), reflexivity (Giddens) and power (Foucault) in the public sphere (Habermas).

At the centre of society

The bishop of the capital of Norway appointed by the state is by definition in the centre of society. Nick Couldry criticises this "idea of the centre" of society and of "the media" within that centre. They should both be exposed as myths, because behind these ideas of "the centre" are the meticulous construction processes of power and mediation (Couldry, 2003). This, of course, also happens with the Bishop of Oslo.

Gunnar Stålsett used his position, close to the national media as well as to institutions of power in government and politics, the diplomatic corps, business and cultural life, to construct spaces for mediation: He created new "forums" of discussion between representatives from various walks of the power structure, and he used Oslo Cathedral as a place on which to appear on major occasions of crisis or commemoration. All his speeches were immediately made available in press releases and on the web.

Some opportunities he made himself, others, like the royal wedding in 2001, were presented to him. On that occasion he managed to create a liturgical and discursive frame of his own within the defined media event. Bishop Stålsett's actions as a bishop were very deliberate. He knew how to play the power game to construct his mediation. However, he also touched many people in this communication. It seems he "constructed" the sacred in the eyes of people who did not usually go to church. He mediated the sacred on the street as well as within the cathedral.

It remains to be seen how his successor, Bishop Kvarme, will handle this task of public appearance. Even if his position as bishop of the capital provides opportunities, we learn from Couldry that attention at the heart of the wider public sphere is not given but has to be taken, constructed and deliberately mediated.

In mediating the sacred as a bishop, different persons may experience more or less resonance. Michael Schudson's concept of "resonance" is from his article "How culture works". Pointing to mediation in radio and television, he looks for the broadcast's capacity to *resonate* with its intended audience, its capacity to provoke responses (Schudson, 1989). Resonance is a very elusive notion, because it is almost entirely dependent on the context of reception. The outcome or impact is often one the speaker did not really look for (Lundby, 1999: 411).

The sacred in communication

Communication does not have to succeed. The ideal of pure communication throughout history has been a face-to-face exchange, which we think does not fail when compared to technically mediated forms. However, distortions and non-communication are perfectly possible in close situations as well as when large media are involved (Peters, 1999). This, of course, also applies to mediation of the sacred.

Independently of how the sacred is defined, it is always an outcome of mediation in communication. This coincides with the general phenomenological perspective on religion, where faith is distinguished from the more organised beliefs that define what a tradition thinks about the sacred. "Faith represents the human apprehension of the sacred which is able to recognize its manifestations. ... The manifestations become an appearance of the sacred only for the faithful" (Cox, 1992: 133). Faith then, is the reception of the sacred. Faith does not necessarily perceive the sacred itself, but the manifestations of the sacred, Cox maintains. This is a communicative perspective on the sacred. As with symbols, the sacred meanings of "sacred objects" become accessible through interpretations in faith.

In the communication of the sacred, the production, reproduction or cultivation of the potentially sacred material by the "sender" is just one element. The reception and interpretations made by those answering the call of this material is just as important. The living sacred is shaped in the interplay between presentation and reception, as is the case with all working symbols. No wonder then that this can end up in contested communication. However, contested communication may be of more interest than no communication or failed communication: A "sacred" text that is not read will become a "dead" text. A "sacred" object that is not recognised becomes a statue. However, even in such cases, the sacred may not be dead for all.

For a bishop today, the circle of his or her cultural impact is limited to the "public" of the faithful who are listening. The mediation of the sacred is limited accordingly. People's response may be given through talk in social interaction or picked up and even shaped by the media. These days, informal conversations are mediated through digital media, for instance in SMS mes-

sages and in various media formats on the Internet, just as I myself was able to talk about the appointment of the new Bishop of Oslo as it took place while absent in Edinburgh.

In the contested case of the Bishop of Oslo, Gunnar Stålsett got positive feedback from the wider public, while Ole Christian Kvarme received criticism. He may be able to change this. However, there is also the danger that he will find himself the focus of less and less attention. When the vocal protest is over, people who do not feel they fit in with his stricter definitions may simply silently withdraw from the Church. Hence the living sacred as related to the Church of Norway will shrink, although some may find the fact that the sacred has been kept “pure” in this more limited communication a cause for celebration.

However, the challenge for any Norwegian bishop in the urban culture of (post)modern society is to relate the Church of Norway to the “church” of the cult of the individual. Ironically, in order to be able to pass on the tradition of the church to people in an urban setting, a bishop must communicate with the cult of the individual. The road to the Church then goes through the media as the “church of the cult of the individual”, to cite Eric Rothenbuhler once again.

Mediation or mediatization

In the (post)modern media environment, the mediation processes take the character of mediatization. This concept, Hjarvard holds, “denotes that the media influence social institutions in ways that exceed the simple fact that all institutions rely increasingly on mediated information and communication”. He regards this as a process through which core elements of a social or cultural activity assume media form (Hjarvard, 2004: 47-50).

The communication activities by and around the bishop as a symbolic figure can easily assume media form, as we see in this case from Oslo. When the bishop becomes a celebrity – or is turned into a villain by the media – his role takes on media form. In a mass urban culture, he has to rely on coverage in the mediascape of newspapers, radio and television for people to know him at all. The bishop acts and communicates on mediated premises.

I have been using the more general term “mediation”. However, it also has these implications of mediatization. Nick Couldry (2003) applies the term “mediation” in a similar way in his analysis of “media rituals”. He refutes the idea or myth of society’s “mediated” or “sacred” centre, by pointing to the mediatization processes inherent in “media rituals”.

Conclusions

So, what happens to the sacred in mediation (or mediatization)? My analysis has to some extent been speculative but hopefully it has evoked some of the undercurrents that are actually at work when the sacred is mediated in (post)modern media. The case of the appointment of the new Bishop of Oslo demonstrates how the scope and character of the sacred depend on communication and hence on processes of mediation.

The bishop himself is just a symbol of an institutional carrier of sacred history. However, the present position of this sacred past is shaped by the media performance of the bishop – as well as by the reception of those listening, interpreting and responding. The responses can be negative or positive, withdrawal or participation. A living sacred requires an affirmative “audience”. In this sense, the sacred has to be reconstructed in communication, over and over again, and hence has to be re-formulated. The interaction between people and the bishop is dynamic. The shaping and the validity of the sacred depend on the outcome of this exchange.

The local case analysed here took on a global resonance when Pope John Paul II died the evening before Ole Christian Kvarme was installed as Bishop of Oslo. The mediation of this event as well as of the election of the new pope, told similar stories, although the latter was on a larger scale.

The sacred is to be found at the intersection of mediation processes, between the constructed representations of the potentially sacred, and the actual devotion of the audience. The sacred, then, is rooted in continuing communication within a specific context. Mediation of the sacred requires the production of icons or symbols with the potential to become “set apart” and held in awe by the users of these representations. Hence, there is no mediation of the sacred without the reception of those representations.

Notes

1. I am grateful to The School of Divinity, New College, University of Edinburgh for inviting me as a Visiting Fellow. My host, Dr. Jolyon Mitchell contributed to this chapter through the stimulating discussions I had with him. So did Dr. James L. Cox. I thank my home university, the University of Oslo, for research leave opportunities. I also benefited from comments on this text by colleagues during discussions of “Mediatization of religion and culture” in the Nordic Media Researcher’s Conference in Aalborg in August 2005.
2. Eight dailies and one national news agency covered in Atekst [now Mediaarkivet.no AS, part of Retriever] 1 Feb 2004 – 12 Mar 2005.
3. Especially 21 – 24 Dec 2004.
4. “Først & sist”, NRK1, 25 Feb and 11 Mar 2005.
5. *Aftenposten* 10 Mar 2005, the combined figure of those who replied “very important” and “fairly important” to these two questions.

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News of the Unholy

Constructing Religion as a Social Problem in the News Media

Titus Hjelm

[D]ebates about the advent of postindustrial or late-capitalist society suggest that religion may be undergoing changes that will make it an increasingly important medium for defining and responding to social problems. At the same time, religion may become more of a social problem in its own right. (Beckford, 1990: 1.)

These valuable insights were voiced by James Beckford in his 1989 presidential address presented at the meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion (ASR). As the European political scene was in the process of transformation at the time, Beckford was probably unaware how much his words would ring true in the following decades, especially with regard to the latter part of the quotation above. The developments after September 11 have shown that the so-called world religions are also increasingly regarded as the *source* of social problems (Juergensmayer, 2001; 2004; Lincoln, 2003), a perspective already familiar to students of new religious movements (Robbins, 1988: 201-202).

Speaking of “moral panics” – a term used by some scholars of social problems¹ – Chas Critcher (2003: 131) concludes that “[M]odern moral panics are unthinkable without the media.” Whether we think of the media as an active claimsmaker or as a conduit through which claims are made (Critcher, 2003: 131-132), it is evident that in modern societies much of what we “know” about the world outside our immediate sphere of experience comes from the news media – especially so in our understanding of deviance and the “other” (Thompson, 1995: 213-214). Thus, the construction of religion, religions, or religious practices as deviant and problematic also increasingly takes place in mass mediated settings.

The aims of this article are threefold: First, I will situate news about religion within a wider framework of the constructionist study of social problems and present a process model of problems construction, highlighting the role of the media in it. Second, I will present a typology of discourses used for labeling religion as deviant or problematic. Third, I will link these models to

the discussion on boundary maintenance. With this schema in mind, my endeavor will be to answer *what* discourses are used to construct “bad religion” in the news, *how* those discourses achieve a hegemonic status, and finally, *why* certain kinds of belief or practice are labeled as “unholy.” The gist of the article is therefore theoretical, but throughout the analytical sections I will illuminate the argument with examples from Finnish religion news coverage.

It should be stressed at this point that while my use of the term “unholy” alludes to a phenomenologically oriented tradition of the study of religion (e.g. Otto, 1958), in this context it is simply used to denote anything that represents undesirable, bad, and evil things in the eyes of a particular community or society (cf. Durkheim, 1995: 412-417; Douglas, 1989: 20). While this understanding of the “negative sacred” is familiar from Durkheim’s sociology of religion, I am inclined to think of contemporary news representations of “bad religion” in terms of another Durkheimian concept, namely that of *boundary maintenance* (Erikson, 1966: 9-13; cf. Durkheim, 1982: 98-103; Durkheim, 1984: 31-43). In this sense, the concept of “unholy” is less about the *Mysterium Tremendum* (Otto, 1958: 12-40) than an immanent understanding of the proper modes of being in society. I will return to this discussion later in the article.

Social problems as social movements

What is a social problem? In my approach I am following American sociologists such as Howard Becker (1997 [1963]), Herbert Blumer (1971), Armand Mauss (1975), and Malcolm Spector and John Kitsuse (2001 [1977]). Their idea, shortly, was that social problems are a kind of social movement. That is, social problems do not exist *per se*, independent of the perceptions of the people in a community or in the larger society. Their groundbreaking suggestion was that, to understand social problems, we must turn our gaze to the process of how people come to define an act or a condition as deviant and, therefore, as a social problem. Thus, as Spector and Kitsuse (the most often cited proponents of this view) define them, social problems are “the activities of individuals or groups making assertions of grievances or claims with respect to some putative conditions” (Spector & Kitsuse, 2001: 75).

In his influential paper “Social Problems as Collective Action,” Herbert Blumer outlined a five-stage model of social problems construction. While based on earlier work done especially by the “Chicago School” of sociology (Park, 1939; Fuller & Myers, 1941; Becker, 1963; see also Lemert, 1967: 31-39), Blumer’s model became the most cited example of the so-called “natural history” model of social problems. Blumer’s five stages are as follows:

1. The emergence of a social problem
2. The legitimation of a social problem

3. The mobilization of action with regard to the problem
4. The formation of an official plan of action
5. The transformation of the official plan in its empirical implementation

Spector and Kitsuse (2001: 142) added some qualifications to Blumer's model, which can be summarized as the following stages:

6. Dissatisfaction with the established procedures
7. Development of activities to create alternative responses to the problem.

Although similar natural history models had been formulated before, Blumer (1971) emphasized the highly problematic nature of moving from one stage to another (cf. Becker, 1963). And ever since his work, students of social problems have emphasized the role that the mass media, news media in particular, have in bridging the gaps between the different stages (Stallings, 1990). We can readily see that the role of the media is emphasized especially during stages 1 and 2 and again during stages 6 and 7. If we take the "cult controversies" (Beckford, 1985) as an example, we can see how the model works.

The cult controversies emerged when some disgruntled parents, worried about their children joining unconventional religious groups, started lobbying against the new religions. Thus, an anti-cult movement was born (Bromley & Shupe, 1981). But it is doubtful whether this movement would have gained the recognition it did without the widely publicized cases of Charles Manson, Jim Jones and the People's Temple, and later, the Waco incident, and the Heaven's Gate suicides. Of course, my purpose is not to justify the actions of the individuals and groups mentioned, but the effect was that, at least from the People's Temple onward, *all* unconventional religion came under fire (cf. Melton, 1986; Hicks, 1991). In consequence of this, dubious actions like so-called "deprogramming" were implemented by the anti-cult movement. However, opposition rose even among the parents of the "brainwashed" children to the harsh methods the deprogrammers used. Combined with scientific refutations of the brainwashing theory and critical media exposure – or perhaps media silence would be a better term – the anti-cult movement had to resort to other strategies (Melton, 1999). Although the cult controversies are by no means dead and gone, the initial impetus that created and sustained the anti-cult movement has been diluted (Hjelm, 2005b).

Looking at the natural history model above, it seems that the course of this particular social problem corresponds with Blumer's ideas. Naturally, models like these are highly idealized descriptions of social problems dynamics, and there have been attempts to formulate more elaborate versions of the natural history model (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988). Nevertheless, in the context of this article, the above model will suffice to highlight the nature of social problems as social movements (Mauss, 1975).

Bad religion in the news: a typology of discourses

The news media is crucial in disseminating claims about religions and their practices to the wider public. From the constructionist perspective outlined above, the researcher's aim is not primarily to ascertain whether the news give an accurate picture of the tension between religious groups and the wider society (cf. Stark, 1996). Instead the task of analysis is to assess how the news represents a religion or a religious practice as being in tension with society, and how these constructions contribute to the public understanding of these religions and practices.

In this section I will present a typology of the discourses² used in labeling religion or a religious practice as deviant and, consequently, as a social problem. I have named the discourses *ethics*, *healthiness*, *heresy*, *rationality*, and *pseudo-religion*. These comprise the different standpoints from which the deviant religions and practices are evaluated. These are also the key components in the emergence and legitimation of a religion as a social problem. The typology and the examples are drawn from Finnish news media accounts, and as such represent one possible typification. However, although contextual considerations are essential for the analysis of news discourse (Fairclough, 1995), I believe that the typology represents a fairly extensive sample of news accounts of "bad religion." What is contextually dependent is the priority of the different discourses. For example, in the USA a small rural newspaper might be more prone to report fundamentalist Christian views as expert testimony of "satanic cults" engaging in criminal activities – the credibility of the claim from a law enforcement perspective notwithstanding. The relative silence of national newspapers on occult issues, on the other hand, most likely reflects a less shared sense of "us," a context where explicitly fundamentalist Christian claims might be considered offensive, trivial, or absurd. (Lowe & Cavender, 1991; Hicks, 1991; Shupe & Bromley, 1980.) Although the objectives (implicit or explicit) of the news claims might be the same, the context shapes the form of the claims.

Ethics

The discourse on the (un)ethicity of a religion or its practices is almost self-evident, since all claims of deviance are eventually moral claims (Loseke, 1999: 55). To claim that a religion is deviant and that its practices constitute a social problem is to say that what it does is wrong, and that it should be restricted or even prohibited. Interestingly, this type of discourse is most in contrast with the professed neutrality and objectivity of the news media. Although it has become standard for journalists to acknowledge the influence of subjective biases in news production, the audiences still often regard the news as factual, objective reporting (cf. Hoover, 1998: 62; Van Dijk, 1985: 7).

The recognition of subjective bias notwithstanding, the mainstream media tend to present news as neutral communication, and in this genre explicit moral claims are often eschewed. Therefore, significant variation exists according to whether a moral claim is made explicitly or implicitly. The old “journalist as a moralist” (cf. Einstadter, 1994; Buddenbaum, 1998: 91-92; Buddenbaum & Mason, 2000: xix) has in most cases given way to the silent “compiler of facts.” This view, however, obscures the media’s role as a “gate-keeper” (Buddenbaum, 1998) in at least two senses.

First, journalists and editors are responsible for sustaining a single hegemonic view (Fairclough, 1995). Although not necessarily “false,” this has the effect of producing a sense of the *only* truth. Denis McQuail’s (1992: 162-163) comment summarizes the problem of this kind of reporting: “[T]he degree of correspondence between the diversity of the society and the diversity of media content is the key to assessing [...] whether or not the media give a biased or a true reflection of society.”

Second, journalists and editors act as gatekeepers in the choice of the experts they choose as commentators (Buddenbaum, 1998: 160-165). Although academic expertise – not that it is by definition free of bias – is often sought, other, less objective views may also be quoted. By fading his or her own voice into the background, the journalist can still have recourse to explicitly moral reporting through the comments of experts.

In the Finnish news media, the ethics discourse is evident in two examples: the controversy over ritual slaughter and the issue of Muslim women’s rights, especially in the case of veiling, or the use of the headscarf (Sarlin, 2000; Palonen, 2000). Both of these are significant in the sense that although the legitimacy of neither Islam nor Judaism has ever been questioned, some practices that are central to them have been regarded as incompatible with Finnish culture.

The ritual slaughter issue surfaced at a time when the number of refugees from Somalia rose sharply in the beginning of the 1990s. In a sense, it was a reaction to the rising number of Muslims in Finland, but it rather missed its mark since at that time there were no official Halal butchers in Finland, and the Muslims bought their meat from Jewish butchers. Individual cases where the slaughtering was carried out without supervision aroused some discussion (e.g. *Ilta-Sanomat* 10.9.1998), as did the appointment of a committee for assessing the morality and legality of ritual slaughter (e.g. Keskisuomalainen 15.11.1995). This created an interesting situation which united the ranks of Muslims and Jews in a common cause.

Ritual slaughter became a political issue for a short time, and Finnish laws against cruelty to animals still prohibit it unless the animal is stunned before the blood is let – which is a controversial issue in itself. The public discussion over women’s wearing of veil or a headscarf, on the other hand, never became as heated as in France, for example. The main reason for this was that no political decisions have been taken on the issue. In Finland, the news stories, which have discussed veiling have often been interviews of Finnish

women converts or immigrant women. Although there is no law or statute preventing the use of any kind of dress – and considering that a headscarf was a very common garment for Finnish women until the 1960s – the basic assumption that many of the stories make is that the women have given up their rights as women by adopting the Islamic dress code (*Itä-Savo* 24.7.1994; *Helsingin Sanomat* 24.7.1999; *Iltalehti* 24.4.1999). In this respect, these are classic examples of Islam as the “other” (Said 1981), even in cases where the religion, or conversion to it, is depicted in positive terms.

Healthiness

In their groundbreaking book *Deviance and Medicalization: From Badness to Sickness*, Peter Conrad and Joseph Schneider (1980) coined the very influential term *medicalization*. In short, medicalization refers to the transformation in which “deviant behaviors that were once defined as immoral, sinful, or criminal have been given medical meanings” (Conrad & Schneider, 1980: 1). In news about religion, this process is manifested in a significant change from explicitly moral language to an appreciation of religion and religious practices according to their healthiness or unhealthiness. The argument first surfaced in the reporting surrounding the so-called cult controversies, especially the debate concerning alleged “brainwashing” (Bromley & Shupe, 1981; Beckford, 1985; Robbins, 1988; cf. Zablocki & Robbins, 2001). Later, it has become increasingly prominent in describing religion and religious practice of all kinds. Its appeal lies in the scientific aura it emanates and the sense of objectivity it conveys. In this respect, medicalized arguments are much more difficult to challenge than explicitly moral ones. Through medicalization, deviant religious practices become *technical* problems which can be technically solved – by suggesting the removal of the practice without taking into account the possible moral problems involved in dismissing tradition and orthodox belief and practice (cf. Gusfield, 1980: vii). This is in line with what Gusfield calls the *depoliticization* of social problems: “[T]he medicalization of social problems depoliticizes them and diminishes the recognition of differences in moral choices that they represent” (Gusfield, 1980: viii).

Circumcision on religious grounds has been a subject of a heated debate during the last ten years in Finland. The circumcision of girls, which has been widely condemned, was a central issue in the early days of the “wave” of Somali immigration. Many Muslim spokesmen hastened to emphasize that it is a tradition in the Somali culture, not Islam as such, and when there was no evidence that such a tradition was practiced in Finland the issue waned in the media. However, another debate arose later concerning the circumcision of boys.

In the Finnish welfare state, all public medical services are basically free and paid by taxpayers. A controversy arose when some young Somali boys were brought to a hospital suffering from severe genital infection. It later

turned out that the infections were the consequence of a failed circumcision performed in the families' homes. The media publicized this event widely (e.g. *Helsingin Sanomat* 21.-24.8.2001; see also 2.7.2004), and it started a discussion about whether circumcisions on religious grounds should be performed in public hospitals. Although the Jewish community again sided with the Muslims, the debate did not actually concern them, since they have their own hospital and the funds to perform the operation in private hospitals. Here again, the ethics and health spheres overlap: the explicit discourse cried out that, if medically unnecessary, the painful operation should not be performed. But in the background there was the implicit assumption that taxpayers should not be made to pay for circumcisions on religious grounds.

Heresy

For a long time arguments against other religions, especially the evil "cults," were made on explicitly religious grounds (Jenkins, 2000: 10-12; McCloud, 2004). Religions other than whatever was considered "good religion" in a given context were condemned on the basis of their deviance from the prevailing religious culture, i.e. as heresy. Since the advent of multiculturalism and religious pluralism in the West, this type of discourse has become increasingly rare in mainstream news.

The decrease or disappearance of religious discourse – religious polemic especially – from public discourse is naturally connected to the secularization and privatization of religion in most Western societies. However, at certain times and in certain contexts, the religious discourse re-emerges in the public sphere even in these more or less secular societies. I have termed this phenomenon *crisis religion* (Hjelm, 2005c). Crisis religion is the process where religious discourse achieves a hegemonic status in explaining certain social phenomena that are perceived as problematic and threatening. Unlike the crisis religion of the past, which manifested itself in revivalist movements and grassroots demands for social action, the crisis religion of today manifests itself in mass communication.³

The Finnish Satanism scare of the 1990s and early 21st century is a good example of crisis religion in practice (Hjelm, 2005c). From 1993 to 2002, the Finnish news media reported on cemetery vandalism, deviant youth culture, and even murder allegedly committed in the name of Satan (cf. Lowe & Cavender, 1991). For the most part, Satanism was presented as criminal activity (cemetery vandalism being a case in point), following the conventions of crime news reporting (Chermak, 1998; Fishman 1998). What distinguished news about Satanism from ordinary crime reports was, of course, the alleged religious motivation behind the crime. But where did the news media get this idea?

As expert commentators the media recruited mainly people with an evangelical Christian background: youth evangelists, ministers, and self-appointed

experts on Satanism. The outcome of this was that Satanism was presented as a religiously motivated attack against “our” religion and way of life. Although there are good grounds to doubt that any kind of religious cult (in the social scientific meaning of the word) was behind the sporadic vandalization of cemeteries for example, the experts used by the media represented the phenomenon in this light. Put shortly and somewhat simplistically, the message was not only that Satanism is real and a threat to society, but also that *Satan* is real. And the cure proposed was for people to come back to the fold of the church and embrace Christian values. This is important considering that only very rarely could an ideological link between the youth caught in the cemeteries and Satanism be established by the police. In this way the actual events became *religionized* (Hjelm 2005d) by the experts through the media. Approached from this perspective, the Satanism scare tells us more about the worldview of the evangelicals than actual Satanism. The heresy combated was not only a hypothetical cult, but the whole of secularized modern society. Satanism merely provided the pretext for religious moralizing.

The news representations of Satanism are not perhaps the best example. Many much more empirically accessible alternative religions have triggered same kind of crisis religion reaction (Beckford 1995). At a time when the resurgence of religion in the public sphere is a globally noted phenomenon (Casanova 1994; Berger 1999), the boundaries of tolerance *between* religions are also increasingly drawn in religious discourse mediated by the news.

Rationality

One type of discourse, which falls somewhat outside the circle of moral claims is the rationality discourse. It is of course a good question whether religion can (or should) ever be portrayed as rational, but this type of discourse explicitly trivializes religious beliefs and practices by presenting them as irrational and thus funny, foolish or as a waste of time. In Finland, the most vocal critics of any religion are the atheist Freethinkers. Their argument is that all religious belief is irrational and thus folly, with mainstream Lutheranism often as their main target. However, it is interesting to note that this kind of discourse very rarely surfaces in the media. Instead, less well-known religions have proven an easier and more acceptable target.

The Wiccans had a fair amount of publicity in the Finnish media when they applied for the status of a registered religious community (see Hjelm 2006). They were denied the status by the Ministry of Education, which under the old law handled the registration. The Wiccans however took the case to an appeal court, which drew the attention of the media. Finland’s largest newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* published an article (2.4.2002) on the Wiccans and their ritual, but the treatment turned out to be very different from that which the Wiccans themselves would have liked. Coinciding with the world-

wide Harry Potter boom, the Wiccans were more or less presented as a sort of a real-life enactment of the life of the teenage wizard in J.K. Rowling's books. The Wiccan ritual was portrayed as a gathering of unemployed young adults playing with daggers and sacrificing biscuits to an obscure goddess. Although in the case of Wicca this discourse overlaps with the pseudo-religion discourse, the arrangement of the news stories often emphasizes the magical – and thus “irrational” – aspects of Wicca, downplaying its role as a religious tradition.

Pseudo-religion

The last type of discourse in my typology concerns the defining of religion. How do the media construct the public image of groups that are not fully established as religions? In the Finnish case, this has a lot to do with the process of registration that is required of all groups who want to obtain the official status of a religion in Finland. Unlike more established ethnic traditions, like Islam, new religious movements like Scientology and Wicca have to legitimate themselves in the eyes of the wider society (Melton 2003, 80). So far these two movements have also been the only ones that have been denied religion status in Finland.

The Church of Scientology applied for the status of a religion in 1995, but after failing to submit the requested further clarifications concerning the activities of the church, it was denied the status in 1998. At the same time, Scientologists were receiving a lot of bad press all around Europe, especially in Germany, and also in Finland (*Helsingin Sanomat*, 22.9.1997; 11.11.1997; 23.12.1998). The effect of this media coverage on the decision is not certain, but it was certainly very one-sided. At least one state official was caught making a disparaging comment about Scientology.

It is also noteworthy that when the Wiccans faced the same situation a few years later, they were quick to disassociate themselves from the Scientologists. Both applications failed for legal reasons because they failed to satisfy the requirements of Finnish law (Sjöblom 2005; Hjelm 2006). However, the news represented Scientology in terms of economic exploitation in the guise of religion, and Wicca as juvenile playing with magic. Sincere religious commitment from the viewpoint of the practitioners was rarely, if ever, discussed. Therefore, it is fair to claim that the media attention these cases received did far more damage to the public image of these movements than the actual rejection of the applications for status as religions. My study of Finnish Wiccans (Hjelm, 2006) shows that even though the Wicca community did not unanimously support the idea of registration, there is a strong shared feeling of misrepresentation by the news media.

Religion, media, and the re-drawing of boundaries

At the center of Émile Durkheim's influential theory of mechanical and organic solidarity is the creation and maintenance of social bonds in a society characterized by the division of labor (Töttö 1996, 180). In a Durkheim-inspired statement, Kai T. Erikson neatly summarizes one way of creating and maintaining social bonds:

One of the surest ways to confirm an identity, for communities as well as for individuals, is to find some way of measuring what one is *not*. (Erikson, 1966: 64. Emphasis in the original.)

It is impossible within the limits of this article to engage with the debate surrounding Durkheim's conception of solidarity. However, the important amendment that Erikson made was to point out that the boundaries maintained in enactments of public morality (such as executions, public trials, etc.) were not static but were created anew on every occasion where a particular kind of deviance was brought to public attention (Erikson, 1966: 12-13; Bergesen, 1984: 8).

From a constructionist perspective, the news media function as the most important vehicle for bringing social problems to public attention. Interestingly enough, Erikson (1966: 12) suggests that, historically, the public punishment of offenders declined in tandem with the development of newspapers as a medium of mass information. As explained above in the discussion on Blumer's model of the "natural history" of social problems, the media are crucial in the emergence and legitimation of social problems. The boundaries between good and bad, desired and abhorrent are created and recreated in the news (Stallings, 1990). With the much-discussed resurgence of religion in the public sphere (e.g. Casanova, 1994), the boundaries between good and bad religion are also increasingly drawn in media discourse. In other words: through the construction of the "unholy," or the negative sacred, the media reflects the positive sacred – whether the construction is implicit or explicit.

The Durkheimian overtones of this perspective notwithstanding, I am inclined to agree with some of the criticism leveled against neo-Durkheimian interpretations in the discussion about media rituals (Couldry, 2003). The boundary-maintaining function of news discourse seems obvious, but it is harder, and often impossible, to point to a particular "centre" (Couldry, 2003) which the boundaries represent. The discussion of "crisis religion" above is a good example of a situation where strict boundaries are drawn even when no shared value base can be shown to exist.⁴ In increasingly pluralistic settings (discussed below), the news discourse on religion is not so much about strengthening allegedly existing boundaries (for example by reaffirming Finnish Lutheranism through negative reporting of other religions) as about the continual re-drawing of those boundaries.

Conclusion and afterthought: religious pluralism and the “unholy” in the news

The media constructions of religion as a social problem touch upon many issues in the study of media, religion, and culture. The media constitute an arena in which the boundaries of religious pluralism and religion itself are defined and redefined. Bruce Lincoln's (2003) discussion about the definition of religion can be used to draw together some of the insights presented above and to link these to the broader discussion about religious pluralism.

In his attempt to tackle the question of the definition of religion, Lincoln offers a fresh perspective for understanding different “models of the religious.” The first type, which Lincoln dubs *maximalist*, regards religion as “permeat[ing] all aspects of social, indeed human existence.” The other type, a child of the Enlightenment and Kantian philosophy, Lincoln calls *minimalist* religion. In this sense, religion is confined to a limited time, space, and role (Lincoln, 2003: 4-5). The maximalist understanding of religion can be found in both Christian and Islamic conservatism, for example, while the minimalist type is apparent in most contemporary liberal and constitutionally secular Western societies. It is important to note that very rarely are religions by definition maximalist or minimalist, but rather have both currents within their folds – especially in the case of so-called world religions. In the Western context, the clash between these two conceptions of religion has taken place both within particular societies, in the form of conservative religious movements vs. liberal governments, and globally, in the current discourse on religiously motivated terrorism (cf. An-Naim 1999; Harris 2004).

But turning back to the media constructions of religion, Lincoln's definition cannot tell us specifically which religions in each particular context end up being labeled problematic. In addition to the *scope* of religion, the question of the *legitimacy* of a religion must be taken into account (Melton, 2003; Hjelm, 2005a; Lewis, 2003). From this perspective, two types of the “unholy” emerge: substantive and functional. For example, as a religious tradition Islam is considered legitimate in most, if not all, Western societies, whereas modern witchcraft has yet to prove itself. Thus, from a substantive perspective, Islam is a legitimate religious tradition, and in pluralistic societies is also portrayed as such in the news media. However, functionally the case is different: although the legitimacy of a religious tradition is acknowledged, the practices might not be, as in the case of the veiling and ritual slaughter controversies surrounding Islam in various Western countries. In contemporary Western societies, where religion is defined minimalistically, practices like these are often condemned in the mass media, the substantive legitimacy of a religion notwithstanding.

It should be remembered, however, that these boundaries are constantly shifting and the news media is increasingly the arena where the definitional struggles are fought. The news constructions of religion as a social problem tell us a great deal not only about what is considered “unholy” in a particu-

lar context, but also what is “good religion.” In Clifford’s (1986: 23) words: “It has become clear that every version of an ‘other,’ wherever found, is also a construction of the ‘self.’” At a time when most walks of life are saturated with mass-mediated information, the news media play a crucial role in differentiating between good and bad religion and, consequently, in drawing the boundaries of religious pluralism.

Notes

1. The theory of moral panics is similar to constructionist models of social problems (cf. Spector & Kitsuse 2001; Goode & Ben-Yehuda 1994). The major difference between the two is that moral panic theorists claim that a moral panic happens when the amount of concern expressed is disproportional to the “objective harm” that an issue represents. Social problems scholars, especially those called “strict constructionists,” are not necessarily even interested in the objective conditions (see Critcher 2003: 23-26; Best 1994).
2. In this context I understand discourse as an “element of social practices, which constitutes other elements as well as being shaped by them” (Chouliaraki & Fairclough 1999, 1). In the news media this refers mostly to language, but also to visual imagery. This definition comes close to the concept of *claims* in the American sociology of social problems, although some differences remain (cf. Spector & Kitsuse 2001, 78). The essential similarity is the *contextualizing* function of discourse/claims-making.
3. This does not exclude similar religious revivalist and grassroots action in modern society. The difference is, however, that in a monocultural situation religious revival and discourse might be considered a legitimate answer and solution to a crisis situation, whereas nowadays the legitimacy of religious discourse is achieved through representation in the (“objective”) news media.
4. Couldry’s discussion does not actually concern the “myth of the centre” as a myth of a shared morality, but “the myth of the mediated centre.” However, for the purposes of the argument presented here I have quoted his work as an example of the criticism of the static nature of some neo-Durkheimian interpretations.

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II

IMPLICATION OF THE SACRED IN HISTORY AND NEWS

The Tsunami of the Media

The Structural Coupling between Mass Media and Religion

Lars Qvortrup

What is the relationship – or, more specifically, the structural coupling – between mass media and religion? This question can be answered empirically but also theoretically – for the simple reason that every empirical answer presupposes a theoretical framework. It is not possible simply to view reality “as such”. We necessarily view reality through a particular optics, which for the researcher means a mode of perception that is based on theory.

In this article, I analyse two examples of natural disasters reported by the media. One is the formatting¹ by the media of the tidal-wave disaster in Lisbon on 1 November 1755, which can justifiably be called the first global (which at that time meant: European) natural disaster reported by the media. The second example is the formatting by the media of the tsunami in Southeast Asia on 27 December 2004. Using these two cases as my point of departure, I wish to formulate the following leading question: In 1755, religion was apparently a primary supplier of thematic material to the mass-media account of natural disasters. Is this still the case, 250 years later – or has the relationship between the media and religion changed?

In particular, I intend to discuss the secularisation theory, which also includes the media system, and which not only predicts that religion will play an increasingly less important role in society but also views the relation between religion and society in causal terms, i.e. sees religious phenomena as the creations of society. I will compare this theory with what can be called the theory of functional differentiation of and structural coupling between societal functional systems, including those of religion and the mass media. This theory views societal functional systems as being operatively closed and therefore self-generating systems that only influence each other indirectly, namely by means of structural couplings. This theory does not support the expectation that the function of religion in society will be reduced; rather it predicts that its functional contribution will change in the course of time.

The earthquake in Lisbon

On 1 November 1755, European culture was exposed to one of the losses of meaning that takes place when an apparently stable and matter-of-course social order is challenged. Loss of meaning thus depends not only on the extent of a disaster or social upheaval but also on its degree of unexpectedness.

The disaster of 1 November 1755 was the earthquake in Lisbon. In the space of six minutes, 30 000 people died. And thirty minutes after the disaster, when the tremors had died down and many survivors had taken to the sea to avoid the ensuing conflagration, a tidal wave, a tsunami, engulfed the coast. The Lisbon that was destroyed was the most modern city anywhere in Europe.

News of the earthquake – measured by the yardstick of the age – spread at lightning speed, i.e. in the course of days, across Europe. It was possible, for example, to read of the disaster in the Copenhagen newspaper *Kjøbenhavns Post-Rytter* after a delay of about one month. And an anonymous publication *Lissabons Ødelæggelse* (The Destruction of Lisbon) saw the light of day before the year was out. Images took longer. What is thought to be the first series of etchings of the ruins, with accounts of the devastation in English, appeared in London in 1757. The pictures show the beginnings of new vegetation growing on the ruined houses, so not only was the news delayed – there was no pretence of reporting an event that was still topical.

Even though news of the 1755 disaster spread more slowly than today, the ideological effect was considerable: The earthquake formed the basis of a comprehensive ideological discussion of the relation between religion and society, between transcendence and immanence.

Reactions to the ideological attempts to re-ascribe meaning to what was meaningless can be divided into two groups: the secular and the religious.

Secular reactions had their roots in the rapidly expanding belief in rationalism. In 1755, when news of the earthquake spread across Europe, Immanuel Kant was 31 years old and Jean Jacques Rousseau was 43. The immense project of the Enlightenment, Diderot and d'Alembert's 35-volume encyclopaedia, which was to summarise all the knowledge of the world and make it accessible to the public, had been embarked on four years previously. Leibniz had admittedly been dead for almost 40 years, but his ideas concerning the best of all possible worlds were still highly topical. These ideas, however, were becoming increasingly detached from the theodicy issue and instead directly related to the general progress being made by society: How can man, with the aid of technology, science, enlightenment and new democratic social organisations – and without any aid from some transcendental entity – create the best imaginable society? In Copenhagen, barely two decades had passed since the recently deceased Dano-Norwegian man of the Enlightenment, Ludvig Holberg (1684-1754), had published his two-volume history of the church with its mildly critical view that the church should restrict itself to dealing with *its own* matters so that politics could search for

what Kant later defined as the principles of practical reason. After "...the clergy had begun to acquire a taste for prosperity and good times, religion had to adapt to this, so that practically every second article of faith [...] often had secular aspects," Holberg wrote in his introduction, thereby indicating his ironically critical approach to the subject. Prosperity increased, globalisation began to be a phenomenon that could be experienced in everyday life in the form of coffee-drinking, spiced food and Chinese porcelain. And, as mentioned, Lisbon was the symbol above all others that man, by dint of his own efforts, was able to create the best of all worlds.

One of the first to react to the earthquake was the 61-year-old French writer and philosopher of the Enlightenment François Voltaire (1694-1778), who in a letter to M. Tronchin de Lyons of 24 November 1755, wrote, with an indirect reference to Leibniz: "This is a merciless piece of natural philosophy. We shall find it hard to fathom how the laws of motion function in such terrible disasters in the best of all possible worlds..." He continued his letter by writing that there were not only thousands of people killed there but that families throughout Europe would also be reduced to beggary because fortunes had been lost in the ruins of Lisbon. With a sideswipe at the Christian church, which he had always criticised in the name of enlightenment, he asked: "What a lottery human life is! What will the clergy say – especially if the Palace of the Inquisition has not been destroyed?" The rumour – which was incidentally unjustified but none the less persistent for all that in popular circles – was that this most hated symptom of religious suppression had survived the catastrophe. In his novel *Candide, or Optimism* of 1759, Voltaire subjected this new European belief in progress, the advance of enlightenment and technology, a belief that he himself had been an exponent of, to an examination. For him, the earthquake was first and foremost an opportunity to deride Leibniz's attempts to solve the theodicy problem. In his *Essais de Theodicée* of 1710, Leibniz had made an attempt to do so with the argument that the world is perhaps not free of evil, but even so the best imaginable world. Therefore, it is not irrational to claim that a good God created the world.² But as Voltaire – having learned the lesson of the disaster in Lisbon – demonstrates in a satirical way in *Candide*, this argument can be used *in absurdum*: Even the greatest disasters can in this way be reconciled to a belief in an almighty God. The novel, besides arguing against the belief in a creating and presiding God, also supplies a contribution to the assessment of emergent modernity. Even though it had been demonstrated that progress was more tenuous than the most hard-core optimists had believed, this was no justification for a retreat but rather for a reflective optimism, one that does not induce resignation but insists on enlightenment and progress taking place as a reflective, practical project without wasting time on devious theodicy constructions. Voltaire's proposal thereby represents an early and concise appeal for a reflection on progress that is both critical of religion and self-critical.

What was the *religious* reaction to the loss of meaning caused by the Lisbon earthquake? One example is supplied by the then Bishop of the Ribe Diocese, Hans Adolph Brorson, who was born in the same year as Voltaire and thus 61 years old. In 1756, he published in Copenhagen a gigantic poem of 380 alexandrines, *Lissabons ynkelige Undergang ved Jordskiælv den 1. November 1755* ("The Pitiful Destruction of Lisbon by Earthquake on 1 November 1755", cf. Walther, 1998). According to Brorson, the earthquake was to be seen as God's punishment for progress.

People have angered God, deserved a wrath eternal,
His messenger he sends, a cause of fervent prayer,
[...]
When God gets nought but stench, and no one will obey,
What wonder: Earth did sink, as did the skies as well!

The moral is that we should mend out ways before it is too late:

Take note and wisdom learn, you Christians of the North!³

With Voltaire at one end of the spectrum and Brorson at the other, we have depicted the range of possible interpretations (which also appeared in the regular press as well as in occasional illustrated and non-illustrated publications) to which the disaster gave rise. Some people, following Voltaire, interpreted the event as proof of the fact that no one capable of reason could claim that a good God had anything to do with the actual events. God admittedly existed, no one would contest that, but he remained in the background. This section of the press represented a deistic point of view, that God had admittedly created the world but subsequently left it to its own devices, and it thereby indirectly criticised the dominant theistic view that God was not only the creator of the world but also pulled the strings of actual events (the difference between deism and theism is described i.a. by Grønkjær, 2005). For Voltaire, it was a discussion between secularised modernity and religious tradition, and his conclusion – and thus his contribution to public opinion – was a defence of reflective modernity, i.e. of the progress that always also makes itself the object of critical assessment and that is practical and avoids devious fantasies concerning the relation between God and practical life on (and interacting with) earth.

Others retained the traditional theistic conception of God as one who directly intervenes. The question this gives rise to is the well-known one: Why did God let this happen? The conclusion drawn was that God is not only a good God but also can be an avenging God. It was this conception that was articulated most clearly in Denmark by Brorson. For Brorson, as for Voltaire, the theme was modernity versus tradition; for Brorson, however, the point was the opposite, that progress had gone too far and therefore had been punished by God. His pietistic conclusion in his great occasional poem

was that the earthquake in Lisbon was self-inflicted, something he noted with a – considering the circumstances – surprising satisfaction.

"Folk strut about on earth so cock-sure and so bold,
As if there were no doom and God in heaven above
[...]
They only take his Word if it should suit their wants,
As if they owned themselves alone all land and sea.
[...]
So God must needs descend and make his presence known,
And such defiance cast like Babel to the ground."

The tsunami in the Indian Ocean

On 27 December 2004, not only European but global culture was exposed to a loss of meaning that can be compared to the catastrophe in Lisbon in 1755. The catastrophe that I am referring to is the tsunami in the Indian Ocean that engulfed the coasts of Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Thailand, India and other countries in the area and killed between 220 000 and 300 000 people.

This time news of the tidal wave spread not in the course of days, weeks and months, but within hours or even minutes across the world. Typically, the first news was received via mobile phones and car radios and soon after transmitted by most television channels in the well-known 24 hours-per-day format.

Unlike the earthquake in Lisbon, the tsunami in the Indian Ocean was not perceived as "their", but as "our" catastrophe. Victims did not come only from the countries directly hit by the tidal wave. They were also tourists from the rest of the world.

Like the earthquake in Lisbon, and like any other public event, the public knowledge of the tsunami was based on the formatting of the events by the mass media. Most of us only experienced what happened through mass media reports, and similarly the public opinion about the catastrophe was formed by mass media reactions and reflections. All over the world, and thus of course also in Denmark, which constitutes the object of the present analysis, we did not experience the tsunami as such, but the tsunami of the media. For us the reality of the tsunami was the reality of the media.

It was firstly so in the way that a story was told, the structure and narrative sequence of which were created by the media. Broadly speaking, the sequence of events was as follows: The first days registered the chaos. Next, the basic tone and attitude to the catastrophe was found. The third phase was therapeutic. Finally, there came an evaluating phase.

It was secondly so in the way that prioritisation of the journalistic efforts was based on those of the observers, i.e. the journalists, media system and

readers, and not on what actually happened, i.e. the prioritisation of the disaster. The priorities for coverage were quite clearly based on the needs and expectations of the recipients, i.e. the readers and the media, and not on the true extent of the disaster. Thailand got by far the most column space, even though the number of victims here was lowest. Midway came Sri Lanka. But the country that got least mention was Indonesia, which had the most victims. For who in Denmark has ever been there?

It was thirdly so in the way in which one medium – daily newspapers – told one story, while another medium – illustrated weeklies – told another story. There exist a number of medium-specific matrices, i.e. written and/or unwritten rules regarding which story the individual newspaper and individual weekly can tell.

It was fourthly so in the way the media not only contributed to telling what happened but also got involved in what one could pompously call Danish grief work. The media have a therapeutic function, and the story that was told was also formed on that basis.

And it was fifthly so in the way the media not only put the disaster on the national daily agenda. They also removed it again. They implicitly decided that the story was now over. The media handle knowledge by informing – and by *omitting* or *ceasing* to inform. If the sluices of information were simply left open to the outside world, all of us would be swamped with far too much knowledge. The media therefore help us by weeding out information. The function of the media is not to help us to “know” everything, but rather to focus on one thing and to omit others. The function is to go from one agenda to the following. The media are a machine for forgetting.

The contribution of religion to the formatting by the mass-media system of the tsunami

The mass media can see something that others do not see. They can see the “news” in something that other functional systems do not feel command public interest, or that the other functional systems feel we are best served by not having exposed. On the other hand, there are also things that the mass-media players cannot see. And there are things that they are unable to see that they cannot see, namely their own blindness and obstinacy. When one is absorbed in solving a news assignment, one cannot at the same time see that the way in which it is being done is meaningless or could be done quite differently. This systematic blindness is, however, contested in special circumstances, as for example the tsunami of 27 December 2004. In such circumstances, journalists can be affected by what are referred to as “scruples”. They can make moral, existential or other types of statements. During the tsunami, it became clear to many journalists that it was not enough to describe the world on the basis of the distinction between the actually true and the not actually

true, and that the so-called “truth” of the tsunami catastrophe could only be communicated by thematising the events in a different way from that prescribed by everyday journalistic routines. Here it was evident that there was a need to thematise also what was *not* immediately accessible and describable. In other words, here was where religion could play a role.

In this section, I will provide some examples of what contributions the religious system made – and how they were used by the mass media.

According to a functional analysis, in a modern society religion’s most important function is to make an incomprehensible world comprehensible. One way of doing this is to transform a phenomenon from an incomprehensible to a comprehensible domain, i.e. one accessible to experience. Another is to introduce a cause that makes the phenomenon accessible to causal reasoning.

The best-known example of this is death. Death as a phenomenon is inaccessible to human experience, and thus in principle incomprehensible unless it is transformed into another domain that is accessible to normal experience. One way of doing this is to translate death into non-life, for example by transforming the life/death distinction into life/eternal life. Death is incomprehensible. “Eternal life” has a semantic plausibility. Similarly, one can give inexplicable death – death due to an accident, for example, or death that is statistically unexpected – a metaphysical cause: “It was God’s will”, or “God took this person to Himself” are the sort of things people say (with a return to a theistic conception of God), which makes it possible to treat this death as causally plausible. Conversely, inexplicable positive events – the recovery of people who are mortally ill, or the survival of people who are involved in accidents – can also be interpreted in a metaphysical way, namely as miracles.

There are many examples of this communicative trick in the media’s formatting of the tsunami in the first days after the disaster. One “miracle” after another is described. A characteristic example is the fate of the nationally known actor Kurt Ravn, described in both of the largest Danish weeklies *Billedbladet* and *Se og Hør* on 6 January 2005. Both magazines inform readers that Kurt Ravn, along with his wife, was hit by the tidal wave and that their survival was “miraculous”. “A miracle we’re still alive” is the headline in *Se og Hør*. “My own Miracle” is the front-page banner in *Billedbladet*.⁴

In *Se og Hør* the story is linked to major coverage of the commemorative service in Copenhagen Cathedral on 2 January. It is not clear if Kurt Ravn actually made use of this occasion to thank God. It would probably also be too far removed from the deism that prevails nowadays. But he is quoted as saying that “...it was a very beautiful and moving service” and that “...it feels so right to be here” because we need “the peace and quiet” that the church can provide. The church is thus the supplier of an interpretation and a plausibility.

In *Billedbladet* Kurt Ravn hopes that “...his experience of being close to death may be a small consolation for those mourning the loss of one of their

loved ones”, just as he hopes that he himself has become “a better person”. Here the mechanism is that when the life/death distinction is made clear, it also draws attention to the entity that makes this distinction. Naturally, it cannot be a consolation for those that have lost friends or family that others survived. But the mere fact of bringing the distinction close to experience can have a therapeutic function, or it can be an indirect consolation to show that the decision to go beyond this distinction does not lie in the hands of the individual human being. In other words, in both cases use is made of a religious semantics.

At least two remarks can be added to this example. Firstly, in the material I have examined there are no examples of anyone justifying or explaining the disaster *as a whole* religiously. There are no examples of the tsunami being made into “God’s work” or being seen as an expression of God’s will. Such a collective theism no longer seems to be plausible. God has apparently mellowed since 1755.

Secondly, the religious semantics seems to a certain extent to have broken away from its divine origins. There is much talk of miracles. But nowhere in the material is there any reference to God as the instigator of miracles. Nor do the players involved seem to feel there is any reason to thank the One responsible for the miracles.

In the above-mentioned article from 29/12/2004, *Ekstra Bladet* tells how a Dane called Tommy Enoch not only survived the disaster but also re-found his wife, who had been swept away by the tidal wave. “For two days, the Dane lay at an evacuation centre in Khao Lak”, the newspaper tells readers, “joined his hands and dreamt of the miracle he had just experienced the day before.” When we join our hands nowadays, we do not apparently *pray* for miracles – we *dream* of them. Prayer is no longer a communication with God but a communication via God, with God as a named or (in this example unnamed) medium. “Miracles” and other metaphysical phenomena have, so to speak, emancipated themselves. The religious language is used, as are the religious concepts, but without relating them to an explicitly religious universe or to an ontological God.

The function of religion is also to make the non-communicable communicable. This paradoxical service can be provided by practising unusual communication strategies.

A communicative act is distinguished from other acts by the fact that the informative content can be separated from the form of the communication. But in order to communicate that which cannot be communicated, this separation of information from the form of communication can be suspended. This can happen in ritual, which communicates via the form of communication, i.e. without any concretely referential function. Here one says that which cannot be said by drawing attention to its inexpressibility. The church interior, the religious symbols, the robes, the carefully planned liturgy, the music, etc. all communicate the non-communicable. The same goal can be achieved by using silence as communication, which is a communication strategy made

use of in all ages by religious institutions (Luhmann and Fuchs, 1989). A variant of the same strategy is religious ecstasy, where the separation between information and the form of communication is suspended for the person actually speaking but where it is implicitly understood that another person is speaking through the one who is in a state of ecstasy.

In the coverage of the tsunami by the newspapers one can see many examples of these religiously based communication strategies being used – both generally in the form of a ritualisation of the journalistic language and effects, and by the use of religious symbols. To take just one example, the dominating front-page colour photo on 29/12/2004 of the national daily *Berlingske Tidende* shows the burial of a tidal-wave victim in Sri Lanka, the obvious implicit idea being that this picture of a religious ceremony can say more than thousands of words. Similarly, there are many photos in the days following the disaster of ceremonial activities such as burials, praying and collective expressions of grief.

Furthermore, the mass media make use of the ritual and paradox-semantic resources of the church by including statements by members of the clergy, by referring to commemorative services held in all the Nordic countries on 1/1/2005, and by transmitting the commemorative service held in Copenhagen Cathedral on 2/1/2005 and supplying full summaries of it in the next day's newspapers (cf., for example *Politiken* 3/1/2005). A deeper scrutiny of this service once again reveals how far the conception of God has changed since the 1755 disaster. In 2005, no avenging God was invoked. On the contrary, we see instead what might be called a negative encircling of the distinction between good and evil, immanence and transcendence – with a therapeutic addition into the bargain: "We get no answer as to why this evil could happen," the daily newspaper *Politiken* quotes from the commemorative speech given by the Bishop of Copenhagen, Erik Normann Svendsen. "Nor any explanation that provides meaning in all this meaninglessness. But we are given the promise that nothing can separate us from the love of God."

It is obvious that the church played an important role in what could be called public grief work. Both the clergy and crisis psychologists were interviewed in the Danish media in the days after the tsunami – and with almost identical interpretations. The similarity between the two is that they both reflect on the distinction between what is evident, but hard to understand and accept, and what may lie behind it. The difference between the crisis-psychological and the religious strategy would seem to be that the psychologists find this distinction inside the individual, whereas the clergy find it in the realm of the transcendental.

There can be no doubt that the many ritual manifestations contributed to the collective, therapeutic work taking place, but there are also references to a whole host of single examples. Perhaps the most striking example of this function is a major interview in *Politiken* on 3/1/2005 with a Danish minister to seamen in Singapore, Hans Vestergaard Jensen, who travelled to Thailand the day after the disaster. He describes a reaction familiar from other

situations: that the survivors feel guilty about those who perished. For this reason, he sees his task, religion-based, as being a therapeutic one: "The most important thing is to talk about this feeling of guilt and to deal with it," *Politiken* cites him as saying.

The same interview also demonstrates how discreet and "service-minded" the church has become. "Belief in God is something he is willing to talk about when going through the unhappy experiences Danes have had in Phuket. But only if they raise the issue themselves. 'I wouldn't force it on them,' the 56-year-old minister states." (*Politiken* 3/1/2005)

As already mentioned, it would seem to be a deistic view of God the media subscribe to in their coverage of the tsunami during the last days of 2004 and the beginning of 2005. Nowhere is there any mention of an intervening, let alone an avenging, God – as was the case in 1755.

The coverage by the media of the natural disaster in 2004-05 also differs in another way from that of the Lisbon disaster two hundred and fifty years earlier: The tsunami did not give rise to any ideological or religious debate. Religion apparently works very well the way it does – in its "unobtrusive", deistic and interpretative position.

A characteristic example is to be found in a full article in the daily newspaper *Politiken* on 29/12/2004 and 3/1/2005 by the well-known and much-read author Ib Michael, who was on Patong beach in Phuket when the disaster struck. One might almost feel tempted to compare Brorson's mammoth poem in 1756 with Ib Michael's equally prolix reports in 2004-05. "Patong is the Sodom and Gomorrah of Phuket," Ib Michael writes – then adding, however: "I hate the biblical overtones of such views, with the Flood an obvious comparison. They are simply not my cup of tea." Even though the sentence does not cohere, and the report has obviously been written in a great hurry, it is clear that the conception of an avenging God, unlike in the case of Brorson in 1756, produces neither contestations nor any comprehensive counter-argumentation. These conceptions are apparently just not a modern man's "cup of tea".

Secularisation or functional differentiation?

In 1755, religion played a large role in the coverage by the media of the earthquake in Lisbon, which could be called the world's first internationally reported natural disaster to be disseminated by the mass media. Indeed, the disaster triggered off a comprehensive public debate between what were later construed as anti-religious supporters of the Enlightenment and tradition-oriented supporters of religion, but who should rather be understood as supporters of deistic and theistic conceptions of God.

Why did religion play such a central role in the interpretation of the earthquake in Lisbon? Why was the traditional theistic reading challenged by the rational interpretation of the philosophers of the Enlightenment? And why, one

usually adds with an implicit assertion, has the Enlightenment view subsequently prevailed and practically ousted the traditional religious interpretations?

The dominant explanation to this has been supplied by the so-called secularisation theory, which claims that modern society, through knowledge and enlightenment, has to an increasing extent liberated itself from the influence of religion. In the so-called “old” days, everything was interpreted religiously, but by virtue of, and keeping pace with, the European Enlightenment, religious readings have been pushed into the background in favour of scientifically based, rational explanations, this theory says. Knowledge has ousted belief, which is understood as superstition. Modern, enlightened man is autonomous. The power of the state is based on the will of the people and not that of the church. The institutions of society act according to their own principles and do not operate as guardians of religious functions: science exists to carry out not a religious function, but to produce new, true knowledge. Art exists to strive for the beautiful, not the divine. The courts exist to judge according to general legal principles, not to administer a religious code of behaviour. Companies exist to earn money, not to serve God. Everywhere, religions and their institutional representatives, the churches, are pushed into the background and lose influence and importance. Society becomes self-governing. According to this theory, theism is gradually being replaced by atheism. For the theory of religion, this means a schism between theology and the science of religion, with the consequence for the latter that the relation between religion and society is turned upside-down: its basic assumption is that the conception of “God” is a product of society, no matter if it is an intentional product of oppressive rulers or a structural product of the blind way institutions function.

The theory of functional differentiation offers a different way of looking at this development. It does not claim that religion disappears, but that alongside a growing political and social centralisation a functional differentiation takes place in society. One of the consequences of this is that religion acquires a different societal position and function. Whereas most societal functions (the economy, politics, law, art, science, etc.) had formerly been formatted by the religious functional systems, the trend is now towards not a secularisation of those systems but towards a looser form of structural connection between those systems and the religious system. The consequence, in other words, for society’s functional systems is what one might call a “functional atheism”, but also and at the same time what could be called a development from “interpretive theism” to “interpretive deism”, that is from theism (the doctrine of the existence of a divine being that has created the world and continues to pull the strings) to deism (the doctrine of a God who may or may not have created the world, but subsequently has retired from the scene and allows the world to regulate itself, thus only functioning as an interpretive instance).

From an earlier state of centre-periphery differentiation society has gradually developed into a whole series of functionally differentiated systems –

the economic system, the political system, the legal system, the science system, the art system, etc. – each functioning according to its own operational principle, but loosely interconnected in a number of output-based relations: the economic system supplies material welfare, the political system produces collectively binding agreements, the science system produces new, true knowledge, etc., etc. The evolutionary advantage of such a network of functionally differentiated systems is that it does not operate according to a binary principle of differentiation (us/them, upper class/lower class) but according to a logic of an, in principle, infinite number of interconnected functional systems. This results in a greater degree of flexible robustness, because the societal division of labour creates a high degree of mutual dependence, thereby ensuring a high degree of cohesion.⁵ At the same time, the consequence is a higher degree of social irritability,⁶ because overall societal development depends on the interaction between the self-dynamics and self-interests of the functional systems. There is no organising, stabilising “master-mind”. It is perhaps this state, combined with an explosive development of the communicative range, that we call globalisation.

Religion was differentiated as one of the very first functions. Religion did not “originally” stand at the centre of society because it was operatively integrated. No, it acquired its central function and position precisely because it was functionally differentiated early on and was therefore able to specialise its output and organise itself according to its own principles. It was because this was not concurrently the case with other social functions (the production of welfare, science, art, legal regulation, political organisation, etc.) that religion had such a strong formatting effect on these other functional areas.

Why, though, was it precisely the religious function that became differentiated so early on? The explanation is that religion, unlike all other societal functions, can fulfil the task of interpreting the total world of experience, by opposing it to its opposite, the transcendental world, and ascribing meaning to it in the light of this. Religion ascribes meaning to what, from all other viewpoints, is meaningless. For precisely that reason, a very early differentiation of religion took place in the form of a priesthood and religious institutions, whose specialised function was to interpret what was present – life, death, all observable phenomena in their totality – via the code of observation and communication: immanence/transcendence. The only social function with a comparable ambition – a function that therefore appeared to be closely related to religion – was art. The theory of secularisation is also well known with regard to the relation between the media and religion. Its assertion is that knowledge and material progress displace the religious system to an increasing extent and make it superfluous. Business life is solely use-oriented. Politics shields itself from belief. The legal system has nothing to do with religious ethics. Art, at any rate the art that can justifiably lay claim to calling itself modern, is non-religious. And in the instances where this is not the case, it is an expression of the fact that the companies, politicians, lawyers and artists in question are backward and “not-yet-modern”.

But is this true? Is the American president, George Bush, pre-modern? Are religious artists merely artists who have not kept abreast of developments? Are companies run according to religious principles and where the employees say prayers primitive? Are professed Christian, Jewish or Muslim schools behind the times? Are mass media that are based on religious attitudes or that make use of religiously inspired frameworks of understanding old-fashioned?

There is much to suggest that this is not the case. Much would suggest that modern politics, company management, art, teaching and law function in close interaction with religion – not with a religious *basis*, it should be noted, but with a strong linkage to religion. The fathers of modern science – Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, Newton – did not, as a result of their new scientific insights, become atheists but remained believers. The relation between the Enlightenment and the church was far more complex than the normal presentation of it as a confrontation would suggest (cf. Kjærgaard, 2005, who in turn builds on i.a. Brooke and Cantor, 1998). There is very little to suggest that enlightenment and welfare leave religion behind or make belief in God redundant.

For that reason, the theory of secularisation does not seem to me to be a fruitful one. This does not mean, however, that politics, art, teaching, etc. have an underlying religious basis. Politics should not be derived from the Koran or the Bible. Art should not agitate in favour of religious views. Teaching should not preach creationism and reject Darwin's theory of evolution. The point is that even though all these functional systems operate according to their separate forms of logic, they have not "broken away from" the religious system. Religion has not been banished from modern politics, art or teaching. Politics or art do not qualify as being modern because they advocate an atheistic or agnostic view of life. In this, both secularisation theory and what one calls the "strong" theory of functional differentiation have been mistaken.

Modern politics, art, teaching, etc. do not, then, operate on a religious basis. But all these functional systems are apparently structurally linked with religion to a greater extent than has commonly been assumed. In order to investigate whether this conception is true, and to see what it can tell us about the relation between religion and other societal functions – especially, of course, that between religion and the mass media – I intend in the following to look in more detail at the theory of functional differentiation. Before investigating the relation between the media and religion, I must, however, first present some of the central concepts of the differentiation theory more adequately.

Functional differentiation, operative closure and structural coupling

“For an initial, broad orientation two concepts that can be used for highly different system formations are sufficient, namely (1) operative closure and (2) structural coupling.” This is what the German systems theorist Niklas Luhmann wrote in the introduction to his book on the education system *Das Erziehungssystem der Gesellschaft* (Luhmann, 2002: 22; my translation).

The same approach can be used if one wishes to understand the relationship between the media and religion. The basic assumption, as already mentioned, is that modern society is divided into a number of mutually closed functional systems: The economic system, the political system, the legal system, the scientific system, etc. All these systems are characterised by operating on the basis of a particular binary code that is reflected via the “program” of the system in question. The economic system operates on the basis of the code profit/deficit, its program being accounts and budgets that help the system create profit and avoid deficit. The code of the political system is power, expressed by the code majority/minority, its program being party or government policies that are used to create majorities, e.g. in connection with elections or the forming of coalitions, and/or to handle majority or minority situations. The scientific system operates according to the code true/not-true, its program being methods and theories that help create true and avoid false knowledge.

Correspondingly, these systems also have different functions. The economic system contributes to the reduction of scarcity. The political system’s function is to make collectively binding agreements possible. The scientific system creates new knowledge.

The consequence of these systems operating according to separate codes and with separate functions is that they view the world, including each other, according to different criteria. These systems are, then, operatively closed, which means that in their form of operation they each function according to their separate principles.

How then is it at all possible to talk about a “society”, i.e. a cohesive social system? The answer, according to Luhmann, is: structural couplings.⁷ One system uses the output of another system as resources for itself, although naturally viewed through the particular optics of the system involved.

However, structural couplings can also result in irritation – a concept that should not be understood psychologically but as an expression for the fact that the operative conditions of one system may be limited by the other system. For instance, our consciousness is limited by the potentials of our neurological system, which are structurally coupled. One cannot see what one cannot neurologically perceive. On the other hand, we “see” through our consciousness. Our conscious representation of the world is not the result of millions of neuron operations.

How are these structural couplings established? In the co-operation of functional systems in society they must be made possible via communica-

tion – a communication which, however, is always fraught with difficulties, because it takes place between systems that view the world through separate optics and that communicate using separate binary codes. Structural couplings can, then, be characterised as translation communication.

Structural irritation also makes itself felt in the communicative mediation of structural couplings. The problem is resolved – or perhaps one should say “dealt with” – in many different ways. The simplest and most frequently used way I have already exemplified – one carries out “translation communication”: one system’s players communicate with another one by attempting to place themselves in the position of the other system’s players, or by developing a communication code that is designed to be objectively defined and capable of being understood by both parties, cf. examination certificates, which are supposed to establish a structural coupling between the educational system and the economic system. But the problem can also be dealt with in terms of organisation, for example by creating buffer zones, i.e. delimited spaces in which communication takes place using procedures that make unlikely communication between the systems less unlikely, whilst ensuring via the delimitation that these special procedures do not influence the functional systems that are to be linked. Sometimes, these buffer zones or translation bodies can be created by a third party. The point is that a third party can contribute to structural couplings between two other functional systems.

Lastly, the code of one system can also be a resource for a second system. This second system then uses supplementary codifications but, it should be noted, in order to thereby strengthen the potential of its own observation and communication code. Systems “borrow” codes from other systems in order to be better able to observe the operations of foreign systems and to be better able to communicate with the players of the foreign systems.

To sum up, it could be said that the individual systems operate according to their separate forms of logic, and that they are interconnected via structural couplings, through which one system is able to view another both as a potential resource and a potential irritation. The scientific system hopes that the political system can procure increasing public funding. Conversely, it is irritated that the political system interferes by imposing what are felt to be inappropriate control measures. But first and foremost they use each other’s codes as resources to strengthen their own operations.

The mass media and religion as functional systems

It is possible to view the mass media and religion in a corresponding way, i.e. as structurally coupled functional systems in society. According to Luhmann, the mass-media system operates via the code information/non-information (cf. Luhmann, 1996). What contains information, and what does not? If one works within news journalism, a piece of information stating

“Postman bites dog” contains more information than one that states the converse. If one works in the entertainment industry, one must be able to distinguish between good and bad entertainment.

To be able to distinguish between information and non-information, the mass-media system has criteria for what has informational plus value and minus value: What deserves to be on the front page? What type of entertainment is best? These reflection systems are created by the mass-media system itself via journalistic criteria for what has high and low news value, entertainment value or advertising value. This can take place via programmes of journalistic training, and it takes place via the daily editorial process, where on the basis of more or less explicit criteria it is decided which stories are to be followed up and which are to be on the front page.

The function of the mass-media system is to shape the way in which society observes itself as society, that is, to create a common world for society: “The function of the mass media lies [...] in the directing of self-observation of the social system...” (Luhmann, 1996: 173; English translation 2000: 97). It brings about a common memory and a common set of references, or, to use a related concept, it makes a common agenda. Within news journalism, this can be a common news world assessed on the criterion of news relevance. This does not mean – in a grossly constructivist fashion – that the mass media “create” the world, but that, as Luhmann writes, they “direct” the self-observation of society. Elsewhere (Qvortrup, 2002), I have proposed the concept of *formatting* – the idea that the mass media format a common world for society.

“Religion” also constitutes a functional system – the religious system of society. The code of the religious system can, according to Luhmann (2000), be defined as the relation between immanence and transcendence, and its program is, among other things, the sacred writings of the religion.⁸ The question “How can reading the Bible help us to interpret the world in the light of the transcendental?” can, for example, be asked by the Christian religious system.

When Luhmann claims that the code of the religious system is immanence/transcendence – and not the opposite, i.e. transcendence/immanence – this is because the religious system is interested in the world in the light of the transcendental, i.e. the here-and-now in the light of the divine. Every functional system operates in this way. The media system describes the world on the basis of what is “new”, i.e. with a continuous deselection of the non-new. The scientific system focuses on what qualifies as being true, new knowledge and observes the world on the basis of this.

Nevertheless, the religious system operates in a different way from the other systems, because it does not undertake a deselection between the plus and minus value of the code, but uses it for what Luhmann refers to as “the duplication of reality” (Luhmann, 2000: 58). The world is looked at in the light of what it is not – the here-and-now is looked at in the light of the beyond. Via religion one can “see” something in the world that others are

unable to perceive. This is something that journalists have to set aside, because, expressed in the time dimension, it belongs to the world of eternity and not the here and now and therefore cannot be measured in terms of news criteria.

The analysis of this difference between the communication of the religious system and other functional systems can, however, be made more stringent, as Inger Lundager Knudsen has done in her PhD thesis *Trinitarisk kommunikation. Folkekirke og teologi i mediesamfundet systemteoretisk belyst* (Lundager Knudsen, 2005).

The religious system looks at the world *via* transcendence. So it does not attach importance to the *difference* between, and the *separation* of, the obverse and reverse sides of the distinction but on the *interconnection* between the two.

According to the distinction theory, the phenomenon of observation can be described as a designation: something is observed by being designated and thereby being distinguished from everything that is not marked. Science is interested in what is true, but does not spend time on the diversity of everything that is not true (unless it serves to strengthen the system's own truth operations. In that case it is possible to refute superstition, criticise myths, deconstruct ideological conceptions, etc., etc.). Newspapers are full of news and deselect – or attempt to deselect – non-news. And when this is not possible (presumably mainly because many of the regular journalists are on holiday, not because “nothing happens”), this period is regretfully referred to as “the silly season”.⁹

In order to make a designation, i.e. to distinguish between the marked and the non-marked, it is necessary, however, to “draw a distinction”, as the English logician George Spencer Brown has put it (cf. Spencer Brown, 1971), for every observation presupposes that a distinction is made, a cut through the world, a wound in the “unmarked space”. (cf. Luhmann, 2001: 224). Normally, functional systems are not interested in the distinction on which observation is based and which it presupposes – they “just do it”, as Nike says in a celebration of un-reflexivity.

In this respect, however, religion differs radically from the other functional systems. For the religious system the distinction itself is the main issue. For the religious system, what is crucial is not that the world is as it is but the transcendental operations in the light of which it is as it is. Religion is not interested in life and death, happiness and unhappiness, but in the *meaning* of life and death, happiness and unhappiness. As previously mentioned, it observes the world *via* transcendence. Religion does not operate in a binary way, as other functional systems do, but in a ternary – or, one might say, in a “trinitary” way. It does not focus on the face of things, the world, but on the world *in the light of* the beyond. It focuses on the interrelationship between the one, the world, and the other, transcendence. It observes the one in relation to the other via the third.

As Lundager Knudsen points out, this ternary – or, as I call it, trinitary – property is not expressed in other functional systems, only in the religious system – for example, in Christianity’s concept of the trinity. The obverse face of the distinction is represented by the real figure of Jesus. Its reverse is the Father. The distinction itself is called “The Holy Spirit”.

But, as George Spencer Brown has pointed out, there is a fourth entity involved, for it is certainly so that a world is created by a difference being made. But, as he says, this drawing of a distinction between the one and the other via the third presupposes that there is a “space” to be split. In trinitarian terms, as, for example, in the Athanasian persuasion, it is expressed as follows: “We honour one God in three persons and three persons in unity” (here quoted from Grane, 1993). That the crux for Christianity is the interrelationship between the elements of a trinitary distinction is expressed in other words by saying that Father, Son and Holy Ghost are one and the same entity divided into three “persons” or “aspects”. This unifying entity is called God.

The world, i.e. what is designated, can be directly expressed. What the designation distinguishes from can be expressed as absence, i.e. as non-designated. The actual distinction, the prerequisite for the operation of designation, can at least be expressed indirectly, namely as the relation between the designated and non-designated. But the space that is the prerequisite for the operation of observation cannot, in itself, be designated. “Das Ding an sich” must exist, but it cannot be designated, Immanuel Kant said. Images cannot be made of God. Even so, there is a natural aspiration to express this thing which cannot be designated. One can say of phenomena that cannot be directly explained that there are more things between heaven and earth. One can equip holy figures with what Luhmann calls a special circle of reference, normally called an aura. One can take things as portents and omens. One can interpret events in the empirical world as “miracles”, i.e. as signs of something inaccessible.

The function of religion is to make the world *as such* definable or accessible, Luhmann wrote in 1977 (Luhmann, 1977: 79). When the world is opposed to the non-world, i.e. immanence is opposed to transcendence, and when God is substituted for transcendence so as to give the distinction form, the resulting function is that the world as such acquires an antipole and thereby becomes definable as such (cf. Lundager Knudsen, 2005: 141). This means that religion makes the world accessible. It can also be expressed negatively: “What happens when the world breaks away from God? It transforms itself into a paradox and thereby becomes inaccessible: a world that does not have any other causes than itself, and that therefore becomes a paradoxical world.” (Qvortrup, 2002a: 165.)

Structural couplings between the mass media and religion

With reference to Luhmann, I have now clarified how the mass media and religion respectively function as operatively closed systems. My next question is: How do structural couplings arise between the mass-media system and the religious system? As already demonstrated, they do so in two different ways and with different effects, depending on which of the systems these couplings are viewed from.¹⁰

Before I sum up these two ways systematically, I must emphasise the general aspect of the structural coupling between the two systems – what represents the coupling potential and the corresponding difficulty, namely that the trinitary mode of distinction adopted by Christianity (and perhaps by the religious system in general) differs considerably from the binary distinctions of the mass media. (Here I have been greatly influenced by Lundager Knudsen's brilliant analysis, cf. Lundager Knudsen, 2005: 310ff and elsewhere).

The religious system and the mass-media system resemble each other in that both produce a common world for society. The basic function of the mass media, as Luhmann laconically writes, is to create a transcendental illusion of a common world. The basic function of religion is to make the world accessible in its totality, i.e. to ascribe meaning to it.

But the two systems do this in widely differing ways. The mass media do so in a binary way, i.e. based on the observation position of a first order. They supply, they present "facts". They spend a lot of time distinguishing between facts, opinions and fiction. Only exceptionally do they suggest a second-order observation, e.g. when they say that "this was what we chose to include", thereby indicating the contingency of mass-media communication.

Religion does so in a ternary (trinitary) fashion, or at any rate with a strong underscoring of the idea that if the world is as it is, it is so by virtue of a distinction that could also have been otherwise. It may well be that the world is definable (and it is precisely religion's special contribution to make it so), but religion is interested in precisely the transcendental operations that give the world the form it has. TV is interested in the world (and to a lesser extent in the programme presenter); religion is interested in the programme presenter (Our Lord), or more precisely it is interested in the world in the form that results from being seen through God. Religion is not interested in traffic accidents, natural disasters, political events or sports presentations, but in their *meaning*. As already mentioned, the religious system observes the world *via* transcendence.

Using this fundamental similarity and difference between religion and the mass media, we can now present a systematic outline of the relationship between the two systems – as potential resources and irritations in the reciprocal structural couplings.

How are these couplings made in terms of mediation? Firstly, direct communication may occur between the systems: the media institutions can communicate with the religious institutions and *vice versa*. Formerly, i.e. prior to

a comprehensive functional differentiation, this was common: Printers sent manuscripts to religious institutions in order to have the content of the coming publications approved. Conversely, representatives of media institutions could ask for the church's blessing on their activities. This religious communication was, in other words, assigned a direct and specific function.

Nowadays, this direct, output-oriented communication between functional systems takes place only to a limited extent. Churches sometimes send out press releases to media institutions in order to gain communicative access to the public, and it is interesting to see how these press releases represent an – often inept – attempt to practise the above-mentioned translation communication. Conversely, it is quite feasible that media institutions may ask for a religiously based lecture or for advice so as to strengthen their moral self-observation.

There are presumably not many examples of organisational buffer zones between the religious system and the mass-media system. One could, though, mention religious mass-media associations, such as Christian listener and viewer associations in Denmark, for example. Such associations represent a buffer zone via which representatives of the religious system, by forming an association, seek to achieve a legitimate influence on the operations of the mass-media system.

Similarly, many Christian communities have their own press or information sections. Here, the mass media's way of operating is implanted into the religious system by encapsulating it in terms of organisation.

It is however as mutual resources and/or irritations that the structural coupling between the religious and the mass-media systems plays the most important role. The mass media "borrow" the codification of the religious system in order to strengthen their own observation and communication operations. Conversely, the religious system uses the mass-media's mode of operation in order to strengthen the way in which the religious institutions operate. Therefore, in the following I shall attempt to clarify this aspect of the structural coupling between the two systems.

If one views the structural coupling between religion and the mass media from the standpoint of the *mass-media system*, religion appears on the one hand to be a resource and on the other an irritation. The religious system functions as a *resource* in two ways: partly as a supplier of thematisation and partly as a supplier of content.

As a supplier of *thematization*, the religious system can help by thematising unusual events. It can make improbable communication less improbable, i.e. more plausible. This applies not least to such natural disasters as the earthquake in Lisbon or the tsunami disaster. Here it is not possible, not immediately at least, to point to a human cause of the event, and what does not have human causes is – to a modern person – irrational. This is where religion comes in, and is able to supply themes that point towards a "higher meaning", or ascribe meaning to what is apparently meaningless.

This also explains, by the way, why man-made disasters (cf. the recent terror bombings in Madrid in 2004 and London in 2005) call for a religious thematisation not as collective phenomena but only in relation to the individual processing of grief. Here, social causes can be identified. Only the individual death seems to be irrational: why should the individual person with no relation to the act of terror be involved?

A reservation must, however, be made here. Perhaps it is the degree of unusualness, i.e. the level of surprise, that topicalises religious communication, because its contribution is to make the incomprehensible – i.e. the unexpected – comprehensible. This explains why the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001 gave rise to religious interpretations.

As a *supplier of content*, the religious system can firstly contribute with impressive (and therefore unusual) and predictable events such as papal funerals, Christmas services, recurring ceremonies, etc. In addition, it can contribute with unusual (and therefore journalistically relevant) events, namely those that acquire journalistic relevance from being opposed to the self-presentation of the religious system. In this context, I am thinking for example of sex scandals, financial mismanagement or organisational power-struggles. These will usually be presented on the basis of the pious/non-pious distinction. News value arises because the church exceeds the horizon of expectation it has created for itself as an institution. This is why stories about paedophilia are good as church material.

When the religious system *irritates* the mass media, it is for the same reason that it makes itself attractive. Journalists will be irritated when the clergy expresses itself unclearly. The explanation is that there is an insurmountable barrier between the media's binary communication and the Christian church's ternary communication. The media constantly seek to decide what is the case or not the case, while the church insists on the fact that every binary difference can be seen in its total Trinitarian synthesis (cf. Lundager Knudsen, 2005: 310), i.e. there is an "outside" entity that conditions the distinction between what is the case and not the case. The mass media will be interested in whether the tsunami cost 250 000 or 300 000 victims. Religion will be interested in what can be the meaning of something so apparently meaningless, thus changing seemingly hard journalistic facts into matters of contingency interpretation.

If the structural coupling between religion and the mass media is viewed from the standpoint of *the religious system*, the same system of analysis can be adopted: What is on the one hand the potential of the mass media, and on the other hand what are their limitations?

Concerning the *resource aspect*, the mass media appear to be first and foremost a resource in relation to the preaching imperative: that the Christian church at least has the self-imposed task to make all peoples its disciples. It is obvious that a mass-media system with a global communicative range must seem attractive in this connection. North and South American TV missions are good examples of this potential.

In addition, the mass-media system is a supplier of both method and content for the religious system. The mass media are content suppliers because it is the mass media in modern society that – as already mentioned – create our common world, i.e. the total sum of events we can refer to and which make us a community. The mass media are therefore often used in spreading the church's message. Every Sunday, Danish clergy refer in their sermons to what the newspapers have written and what has been broadcast on TV. The tsunami, the media-formatted and media-communicated natural disaster, doubtless provided material for hundreds of sermons.

The mass media are also method suppliers, however, because they inspire the clergy to “modernise” their communication. Church newsletters are given a more updated layout, and almost every Danish parish church has its own website. Church services are pepped up, and instead of refusing the congregation permission to take photos and video shots, special “photo opportunities” are arranged in order to regulate the use of cameras. The vicar stands by the font alongside the parents, godparents and the christened child and repeats the ceremony in honour of the photographers – like politicians shaking hands in front of the press.

There is nevertheless considerable irritation potential. One source of irritation is that the mass media communicate on their own premises, i.e. based on the criterion of what is news-relevant, i.e. is unusual communication. Why, the church asks itself, are the media interested in sex scandals, organisational disputes or political disagreements when the church happens to consider the spreading of the gospel as much more important?

Moreover, the mass media expect precision, while the contribution of religion is the attribution of meaning. If the vicar is unaware of the systematic relationship between religion and the media, he or she will either despair at a personal lack of clarity or be irritated at the journalist's perceived superficiality and lack of understanding.

Lastly, the mass media are also a recurring theme in the negative, irrational sense. Precisely because the media communicate in a binary way, focusing on the topical and the unusual and not on the eternal and that which creates meaning, they are perceived by the clergy, who communicate in a ternary way, as superficial and cursory. Many Sunday sermons are saved by delivering a well-known, even trivial critique of the superficiality of the media. The criticism of the media by the clergy thus expresses an unwillingness or inability to place itself in the position of the other players.

Conclusion

If one compares the role played by religion in the formatting by the mass media of the natural disaster in Lisbon in 1755 with that played in the formatting by the mass media of the tsunami in Southeast Asia in the last days

of 2004, and if one compares the contributions made to an understanding of these cases by the secularisation theory and that of functional differentiation respectively, the conclusions are the following:

There is a big difference between the way religion is used in the two cases. In 1755-56, a theistic conception of God predominated, according to which God is a still-active causal motor. This results in the main question of why God allowed the disaster to take place, and how this act of divine vengeance is to be interpreted. In 2004-05, a deistic conception of God was dominant, according to which God may or may not have created the world at some point, but in the present situation he does not play any causal role, only one of interpretation; the natural disaster is the "fault" of nature, although it leaves behind an interpretative vacuum. The more we know about the causes of the disaster, the more we know that we do not know – and this non-knowledge is something religion helps us deal with.

There is a marked difference in the public religious debate triggered by the disasters of 1755 and 2004 respectively. In 1755, the philosophy of the Enlightenment was in the ascendant, and the debate between the supporters of modernity and tradition was at its peak. This debate was topicalised by the earthquake in Lisbon, which was used by the Enlightenment philosophers as proof that their position was the correct one. The 2004 disaster, on the other hand – at least in the European public eye – did not give rise to any "major" ideological discussion, and certainly not to any discussion in principle of the role of religion or the existence of God.

On the other hand, the two cases do not indicate that religion plays a "lesser" or "greater" role, even though it is naturally difficult to quantify the reactions to the two disasters and the societal context they are a part of, which differ in countless ways. In both cases, religion functions as a resource for the handling of non-knowledge, i.e. as an individual and collective resource for interpretation and reflection.

What a comparison of the two cases makes clear, in my opinion, is that the secularisation theory has confused the theism/deism distinction with the religion/non-religion distinction. The error committed by the secularisation theory is that it believed that the gradual replacement of a concept of God by another one should be interpreted as meaning that religion was superfluous. It seems clear to me that there is still just as great a need to handle non-knowledge; that this need is topicalised to a particular degree by natural disasters such as those exemplified; and that religion, with its trinitary optics, offers a possible interpretation that cannot be bypassed, irrespective of whether God constitutes the totality of the created/creator distinction or the immanence/transcendence distinction. The secularisation theory, then, is erroneous. Religion as a supplier of meaning has not disappeared, but the interpretative contribution has changed – from theism to deism.

This means, finally, that the theory of functional differentiation and structural coupling are better able to explain the two cases than a theory – for example the Marxist theory – of a causal relationship between society and

religion. There is simply too little expressive power and subtlety in claiming that religion is a product of society, or that it is a cultural ritual on a par with other cultural phenomena. Religion cannot be “derived” from society, just as the so-called societal superstructure cannot be derived from the economic basis of society. There is far more expressive power and subtlety in saying that religion can be understood as a functionally differentiated social system, which, because of its operative closure, has specialised in certain functions and services that it alone is able to place at the disposal of society as a whole or of other functional systems or individual players. It would also seem to be more plausible to say that these functions and services are not simply causally injected into other systems but that they are absorbed by these other systems according to their own operative premises, i.e. either as resources that the system in question can utilise to strengthen its own operations, or as irritations that hamper the operations of the system in question.

Notes

1. I will return to the concept of formatting, but can also refer to Qvortrup, 2002.
2. I would refer to the extremely thorough analysis of Bayle's and Leibniz's discussion of the theodicy problem in Leif Nedergaard-Hansen's dissertation of 1965.
3. Translated by the author, Thanks to John Irons for invaluable assistance,
4. All quotations from Danish newspapers and illustrated weeklies have been translated by the author.
5. This argument can already be found in Georg Simmel's analysis of social differentiation in 1890, and in Émile Durkheim's analysis of the division of labour in 1893.
6. The sociological meaning of “irritation” will be made clear later in the article.
7. Strictly speaking one should make a distinction between “structural” and “operative” couplings. Structural couplings are couplings between systems operating in different operative modes, for instance social systems versus consciousness, while operative couplings are couplings between differentiated systems operating in the same operative mode, for instance functionally differentiated systems in society. In this article this distinction is not made.
8. I stated earlier that Luhmann's theory of functional differentiation is inspired by Georg Simmel and Émile Durkheim, among others. Similarly, one can compare Luhmann's distinction between immanence/transcendence with Durkheim's distinction between the sacred and the profane. However, there are at least two major differences. First, Luhmann does not use the distinction as one between the religious institutions and their environment, but as an observation and communication code of religion as a functional system in society. Second, as I shall argue, it is important for Luhmann to make “immanence” the plus value and “transcendence” the reflection value of the religious code.
9. In Danish it is called ‘agurketid’, that is ‘cucumber time’, because newspapers used to write about cucumber competitions and similar silly news.
10. Here I am critical of Luhmann, who in my opinion underplays the phenomenon of structural coupling in favour of his emphasis on the operative closure of the systems – a priority that is presumably based on theoretical and historical grounds. I am also critical of Lundager Knudsen (cf. Lundager Knudsen, 2005). She admittedly mentions the concept of structural coupling (p. 57f), but does not expand on the concept and does not use it in her analysis of the relation between religion and the mass media. Here, she is broadly speaking exclusively interested in how institutional and individual players in the religious system

can make use of the mass media: How can religious institutions, the clergy and other representatives of the church use and handle the media? Thus one lacks a systematic presentation of the relation between religion and the mass media based on the system-theoretical approach the thesis otherwise so excellently presents.

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God, Crown and Mammon

The Public Sphere and Transforming Alliances and Balances of Power

Raimo Salokangas & Johanna Sumiala-Seppänen

In recent years the Finnish tabloids and their street ads have carried bold headlines about, for example, a drunken clergyman starting a fistfight and being taken into custody; a minister being suspended and sentenced for beating his wife ("Minister Hits Wife With Bible", cried one of the ads); another vicar being sentenced for drunken driving for the second time; a religious community ("The Luther Foundation") denying a bishop the access to communion; And in the very weeks when this article was being drafted, a bishop resigning after filing for divorce and admitting marital infidelity. All this in addition to the "normal" and usually favourable daily publicity that bishops get in the national media and local clergy in the regional papers regarding their statements.

Our argument is that contemporary media act the way they do – not because they are "supposed" to do so, but rather because that is the logic of commercial media. What the church and its representatives do, or experience, is material for the media, often providing public entertainment and occasionally arousing public discussion. According to the same logic, the ability of the church to enter into the public sphere of the media and participate in the public discussion depends on its capacity to adapt to the dynamics of the contemporary media culture. However, this has not always been the case.

The basic question of this study¹ is, then what if the church(es) and religion(s) "always" get the amount and quality of publicity that is possible within certain limits in different time and space contexts? By means of a historical analysis we try to outline a theory about why the church and religion in one context dominated publicity, while in another this dominance waned.²

In this article, the perspective is on the power struggle within the historically changing dynamics of the public sphere. On the one hand, the question is of relations of power in terms of communication structures (or hegemony) – on the other hand, of "the social history of media and communication", in the latter the point of departure being that of the public. But the

power struggle over what? From our perspective, over the power to participate in the process of setting the sacred apart from the profane, whether the question is about values, norms or cultural codes to build a realm of “serious life” – a sphere of togetherness that constitutes the core of society. (see e.g. Rothenbuhler, 1998.)

Two approaches to the public sphere

On the theoretical level, the article approaches the concept of the public sphere by drawing from two different traditions. They are labelled here as Habermasian and Fiskean. Both traditions are used as conceptual constructions or ideal types in Weberian terms. This means that these models are used as tools to help to explain the dynamics of the public sphere as a complex network of relationships between the institutional public sphere and the individual private sphere in different historical contexts. It is important to emphasize that they make no claim to “correspond to reality” as such, beyond this explanatory use (Turner, 2000: 10).

In saying this, we agree with Douglas Kellner that theories of media and culture are “best developed through specific studies of concrete phenomena contextualized within the vicissitudes of contemporary society and history”. The Habermasian and Fiskean research traditions too, tend to bear the stamp of their own times. As Kellner has pointed out, theories of media culture appear one-sided. The older ones assumed that the media were “all-powerful forces of social control and that they imposed a monolithic dominant ideology on their victims”, while many of the more recent theories have emphasized “the power of audiences to resist media manipulation, to create their own meanings and uses, and to empower themselves with materials from their culture”. Kellner writes that these “should give way to more comprehensive and multidimensional critical approaches which theorize the contradictory effects of media culture”. (Kellner, 1995: 3.)

The core of Habermas’ theory of the public sphere is the idea of a *liberal model of the bourgeois public sphere* – private (bourgeois) people coming together as a public (Habermas, 1989: xvii-xviii; Habermas, 2004: 62-79). As a concrete example, Habermas analyses the eighteenth-century coffee house. It is a place, an ideal one, where newspapers were read and discussed. During that era, the media for the first time became an integral agent in forming a public sphere of this kind. It was independent of church and state and, in principle, it was open to all. However, according to Habermas, when commodified through mass distribution and advertising targeted at mass audiences, the media distanced itself from its role as a democratic public sphere. (Boyd-Barrett, 2003: 230.)

It is often emphasized in (post)modern readings of Habermas that in his tradition this development of the media is regarded as a corruptive and

degenerative process. In other words, Habermas accuses the commercial media of lacking the capability of functioning as a public platform for political discussion. This strongly normative statement is based on Habermas's understanding of the public as a collective rational actor. The role of the individual in the Habermasian civic society is to carry out the democratic responsibility of participation. By this logic, the function of the media as the public sphere is to offer a public platform for discussion and rational argumentation. (See e.g. Koivunen & Lehtonen, 2005: 4.)

The Habermasian theory of the public sphere is undoubtedly one of the most influential theories of the historical construction of the public. But at the same time it has been criticised for being too élitist and exclusive in its theoretical framing and orientation. In his article *Conceptualizing the public sphere*, Oliver Boyd-Barrett points out that Habermas's theory has been criticised for idealising and even romanticizing the élite male world (those who had enough leisure time to sit around talking in coffee houses and enough connections to be influential). It has been said that it overlooks the public sphere of the lower classes – a plebeian publicity developing alongside and partially within hegemonic (bourgeois) public sphere – and that it is over-pessimistic in its assessment of the rise of the modern commercial mass media.³

From our point of view, the richness of Habermasian approach lies in its capability of offering theoretical and conceptual tools to analyse the historical and socio-political construction of the public sphere, and of making it possible to get a hold on the dynamics of power and the struggle between the institutional public and the individual private. But at the same time, we acknowledge the problem of over-simplification in conceptualizing understanding of the public sphere as first and foremost political publicity.

The most influential antithesis of the Habermasian theory in terms of its sharp distinction between “high” and “low” culture has been formulated in British cultural studies.⁴ The name of John Fiske (e.g. Fiske, 1989) has been often mentioned in this context. Where the Habermasian tradition analyses media culture as an arena where economic and bureaucratic interests are assumed to disturb and restrict the rational social and collective meaning-making process of the public, the Fiskean tradition celebrates the potentialities and possibilities of the individual consumer to keep the meaning-making process going even in restrictive and biased media contexts. In this tradition, individuals are seen primarily as consumers, not as citizens. (Koivunen & Lehtonen, 2005: 4-5.)

This change in positioning immediately affects the issue of power. In this frame, the case of the commercial media selling “religion news” about a “cheating bishop” might not at all function as an example of the degeneration of the public sphere or an example of hegemonic power of Mammon. In the Fiskean frame, this kind of publicity could function for example as a form of public and popular therapy helping individuals in the construction of their identity.⁵ This is to say that the changes in the theoretical conceptuali-

zation of the dynamics of the public sphere radically affect the interpretation of the power dynamics between the public and the private, the institutional and the individual.

The balance of power: three phases

In this article, the instrument we use in order to explore our question, is to analyse the structures of power and communication in Finland (and Sweden) from the Middle Ages to the 21st century.⁶ The brief historical analysis also makes a frame for this book by sketching out the process in which explicit and strong institutional religion was transformed into the mediatized “implications of the sacred” discernible here and there in present-day (post)modern media.

The idea may be visualized as a quadrangle, the corners of which are labelled “God” (church and religion), “Crown” (worldly power), “the People” (society and its structure), and “Mammon” (the economy) – with in the middle “Relations of communication” (the interactions of the corners and their outcomes).

The history of Finland (and Sweden) is here roughly divided into three periods, all of which actually contain several sub-periods. We are aware that the periods and their descriptions in the table are liable to criticism, but we emphasize that they are only intended to be ideal-typical compressions. We further simplify the model in order to increase its explanatory power by labelling the periods “Monarchy and Church”, “Nation State” and “Market”, and by adding the dimension of temporal change, the figure is transformed into the following table. “Monarchy and Church” are combined because in Sweden the Lutheran faith and church were an instrument of the state although they also had considerable power of their own. “Nation State” refers to the emergence of nationalism and a national civic society, and “the Market” serves as a label for a market-driven or commercial society.

In the table, the “actors” represented as columns are the religious and secular sides of authority on the one hand, and those under the authority (in many ways in interaction with authority – being part of it, legitimating to it, opposing it) on the other hand. One column attempts to condense the essential points in the economic dimension, while the column on the right is intended to do the same in the dimension of communication.

In his thought-provoking study of the national and political self-image in Sweden circa 1660-1772, Jonas Nordin (2000) takes advantage of the models of social structure created by Ernest Gellner and Anthony Smith. Gellner’s model of the overall structure of the traditional agrarian society is extremely simple: it is based on three higher “consuming” estates (nobility, clergy, bourgeoisie), and the vast majority of the “producing” estate (peasantry)⁷. For Gellner the strata are rather autonomous and hierarchic, and there is little solidarity across class distinctions within one country, while Smith assumes

	Religious system	Central power	The people	Economy and production	(Relations of) communication
The Age of the Monarchy and the Church: The Middle Ages to early 19 th century	The Medieval Catholic church; the church impoverished by the Reformation, and subordinated to the Crown; Lutheran orthodoxy, a union of the Crown and the state church	From electoral kingdom and alliances of families to strong central administration and accountability to the Crown	From power of the nobility to a strong monarchy, and domination of the estates by means of the Diet; the first parties in the Diet; the people in the position of subjects	Land-owning peasantry the "producing" and "food-providing" class; gets wealthier in 18 th century; growing eminence of the merchant bourgeoisie	From subordination and protection by the church to the growing eminence of the printing press, bringing literacy in addition to oral culture; theocracy, but intensification of popular education by church; Bible and other literature in national languages; growth of the secular (bourgeois) public sphere
The Age of the Nation State: the mid-19 th century to the late 20 th century	The Church subordinates itself to secular authority; first opposes revivalist movements, which then take over from within; strong structure, shrinking nucleus, defensive basic attitude	Nation building in the autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland, democratic representation, parliamentary republic	From rule of administration to a four-estate Diet, modernised legislation, emergence of a civic society, democracy; the people in the position of becoming citizens	Emergence and expansion of capitalism; agriculture and industry, late but rapid structural change to industry and services	From limitations to freedom of the press; "ideological" and "commercial" print publicity; politicisation and diversification of publishing; publicity of citizens as political subjects
The Age of the Market: the late 20 th and early 21 st centuries	The Church one among many, but privileged; adaptation to the "market" of ideas	Political democracy, integration, globalisation	From political subjects to consumer citizens within a democracy	Rapid changes in the structures of the population and economy	Publicity markets for consumers

the possibility of vertical "national" solidarity and a wider national "we" even before the nationalism of the 19th century.

From the viewpoint of this study, the theoretical justification of the said social structure in real-life Sweden, and the other Nordic Lutheran countries, is interesting. The principle of the three estates (*treståndsläran*) was used to legitimise and confirm the structure of society from the age of the Reformation to the 18th century and was effectively made familiar to the common people not only through sermons but also in print in the catechism, and it was accepted by them as the natural state of affairs. In Bourdieu's terms, the doctrine was an instrument of "symbolic violence", a term used for indirect forms of domination without formal compulsion or violence enabling authority to control its subjects.⁸ The basic idea of the society of the estates was that each estate had its own natural position and its own duties for the common good (or *salus populi*). In principle, according to Gellner's model

in particular, each estate lived a life of its own, and circulation between the estates was not encouraged as it was thought to undermine the very foundations of the system. (Nordin, 2000: 27-30, 138-141.)

According to the principle (or even doctrine, which it is also sometimes called), God had organised society on three levels that together made an organic entity. The task of the teaching estate (ecclesiasticus) was to preach the Gospel, deliver the sacraments and perform the gate-keeping function. The political estate (politicus) kept order and ruled, while the family, representing people's daily life, was "the housekeeper" (oeconomicus). The Crown provided protection, the Church provided the proper truths, and the ordinary people provided the material resources for the other two. According to the principle of the three estates, society was based on religion, and thus authority too was based on religion; in other words, the principle legitimised the use of the church and religion as an instrument of rule. In Lutheran Sweden, the sharp distinction between the worldly and the spiritual regiments signified that God was not supposed to rule through the clergy, but that the King had received his powers from God and was King by the grace of God. (Laasonen, 1991: 204-205; Nordin, 2000: 28.)

In the Middle Ages, the Catholic church was very powerful even in Sweden. Christians lived their lives under the influence of the sacraments – the visible manifestations of invisible gifts of mercy – issued by the church. As the church historian Kauko Pirinen puts it, "the strength given by the sacraments followed the Christian from birth to grave and helped him/her to fight sin." The power of the church was based on its authority to issue punishments, even to depose kings. In the late Middle Ages, papal authority declined, and the more so the further away from Rome and the Latin inheritance the Christians in question were. Consequently, the authority of the Crown and the secular nobility increased. The Swedish church fell back on the principle of its liberty: the claim that the church had its own realm of authority. It was not only spiritual but also included the property, sources of income and privileges of the clergy. Canon law protected the church, but its problem was the lack of executive power – something that the Crown possessed. The privileged position of the church in medieval Sweden was basically due to its being part of the society of the estates. (Pirinen, 1991: 171, 266.)

Thus the Catholic church was an influential part of Swedish society, and formed an interconnected network of power together with the nobility and the king. In Finland (the Diocese of Turku), for instance, the medieval bishops usually came from the most influential noble families. The most important mass medium was naturally the church service.

The Reformation fundamentally changed the pecking order, and showed that the balance of power had already been shifting for a long time. The new king Gustav Vasa was in need of money to pay the war debts of the Crown and, as a collateral result of the Reformation, confiscated the properties of the church. Simultaneously, a new kind of centralised administration and taxation system was established, making the tax collectors or bailiffs

accountable to the king. The power structure was formalised with the principle of the three estates. However, it is noteworthy that the transition, labelled by historians “the Reformation period”, took about 70 years, and that popular resistance to the new practices was evidence of successful religious communication in the Catholic era.

The next quarter of a millennium in Sweden was characterised by a union of Crown and Church, the former being the dominant party. As a consequence, the teachings from the pulpit were strictly in accordance with the will of the Crown. The Church was very much an instrument of Bourdieu’s symbolic violence for keeping the common people in line. The traditional media: the church service and the sermon, spoke by and large with the same voice as the Crown, but at the same time the church provided for the possibility of diversification from below by teaching people, in principle everybody, to read and by offering them material to read.

Luther’s words about the printing press as “God’s highest and extremest act of grace, whereby the business of the Gospel is driven forward” have been often quoted (here from Eisenstein, 1979: 304). Lutheranism and the printing press resulted in translations of the Bible or the New Testament into vernaculars, e.g. Swedish (1541) and Finnish (1548), and as everyone should be able to read the word of God, church took itself the task of popular education. (In Finnish parishes primary education provided by church was still important even in the 1920s or 1930s, that is, until a network of municipal elementary schools covered the whole country.) With the simultaneous increase in active literacy and the growing supply of books and other print – albeit mostly religious – the proportional role of the church diminished, and in Sweden “the theocracy” of the 17th and early 18th centuries became impossible. The mediated public sphere started slowly to widen in terms of actors and substance.

The outcome of various cultural and economic forces that took place in Europe in the 18th century is called the Enlightenment, but in Sweden (Finland included) it is customary also to refer to it as “the Utilitarian Age”. In the late 18th century it was not rare to hear long sermons from the pulpit in which biblical metaphors were used primarily to promote economic enterprise. Again, this was manifested over a long transitory period, from the late 18th to the late 19th century. The expansion of a wealthy landowning peasant class (instead of the peasants being mainly uniformly poor) and the growth of an urban mercantile bourgeoisie and a new industrial bourgeoisie provided a reading public, indeed several publics, of active recipients for a more divergent and increasingly secular publicity based on print. This also signified that there existed the preconditions for a Habermasian “bourgeois” (and urban) public sphere. However, the rural “public sphere” has attracted less interest among scholars.⁹

In 1809 Finland ceased to be part of the Swedish realm and became a Grand Duchy under Russia, but the Swedish constitutions and legislation were preserved. Thus, the Finnish Lutheran church remained the state church –

though under a Russian Orthodox emperor – and cautiously subordinated itself also to the new temporal authority. Revivalist movements had already challenged the formal and official church in the 18th century, and the challenges intensified in the 19th. Their revolutionary novelty was the demand for a personal faith, a personal relation to God, not necessarily mediated by the structures of the official church. By the end of the 19th century, the revivalist movements had effectively conquered the church from the inside; the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran church developed into an umbrella for different revivalist movements as well as for “ordinary”, more or less secularized church Christians. In other words, the church and religion turned towards spirituality and harboured many parallel versions of faith. Or from another angle: the revivalist movements turned inwards and were not so interested in “the world” as the state church had previously been. The formal remains of 17th-century rule by religion were gradually abolished in a period dating from the 1869 Church Law to the 1923 Freedom of Faith Act.

A significant process of change in the relations of power between the corners of the quadrangle referred to in the beginning, occurred in the latter half of the 19th century. “The Crown” changed its primary partner: “God” was still an essential factor in maintaining continuity, “the faith of our fathers”, but the church and religion were no more the most important instrument of authority. Little by little, “Mammon” took its place in the form of capitalism (or industrialisation, although in Finland the industrialisation process was relatively slow). Social issues in connection with the rapid growth of the population and the subsequent emergence of a large agrarian proletariat, as well as of an industrial working class, resulted in a labour movement, which in 1907, when its support was measured in the first democratic parliamentary election, proved to be one of the strongest in Europe. The antagonism between the church and the labour movement had its roots on both sides. From the labour viewpoint, the church had always been an extension of the ruling classes, and for the church “godless socialism” appeared a dangerous heresy. Or as the Finnish words of the International express the relationship: “No other ruler nor creator / than the people almighty!”

The most essential common denominator of civic society in late-19th-century Finland, however, was a language-based nationalism, which at a later stage was to have close relations with the church, and especially with the clergy. As an outcome of the often heated debate of late 19th century, the Finnish nation emerged as a platform of two “nations” when the Swedish-speaking Finns also started to identify themselves as a separate Swedish nation within Finland. For decades the public sphere was more or less dominated by a discourse of language-based nation building. (See e.g. Klinge, 1993: 149-173 and Anderson, 1991.) The Crown’s subjects were being transformed into active citizens, and in their “nation-building” activities, they were, if not actually taking over the state, increasingly gaining influence in the Crown’s affairs. The Church and religion were not exactly sidelined, but it was secular politics that mattered in making things better in this life.

The emerging civic society from the late 19th century onwards and political democracy after 1907 signified a radical re-division of publicity resources. A literate, socially and politically active population, and a rapidly developing and reasonably well functioning infrastructure constituted a combination that brought about a new structure of the public sphere. There was a political press system (see further in e.g. Salokangas, 1999) that was common to all the Nordic countries, and the parallel party-based subsystems expanded each in its own segment. The subsystems simultaneously answered the needs of their target groups and articulated the latter's interests into public opinion. At the same time, the print media, from books to magazines and newspapers, came to have an essential function of entertaining the public. In other words, the relative abundance of supply gave the public more power – also as emerging consumers –, as they could make choices within their own frames of reference. On the one hand, the publicity was “serious” and political, on the other it was “light” and entertaining – and of course often instructive and enlightening.

In the 20th century, with film, radio and television, and finally the digital media, the mediated public arena got so crowded that total dominance by any group or any medium became impossible. This era can be characterized as an era of fragmentation. But the dynamics of fragmentation vary. Typical of the period is the division into almost global, or at least trans-national, mediated public spheres that reach people of the same specific interests, and spatially defined local public spheres. This development is usually assumed to multiculturalize and multidimensionalize publicity. But publicity may equally well become more polarized and hierarchized. (See e.g. Koivunen & Lehtonen, 2005.) The least we can say is that the structural changes in the (post)modern mediated public sphere are closely linked to substantial and thematic changes in the nature and essence of publicity.

This has already affected the dynamics of religion in the mediated public sphere. Even though the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland is still the most dominant of the institutional religious actors in the context of Finnish media publicity, it has lost its hegemonic position as a gatekeeper for religion, especially in commercial broadcast media but also to some extent in the press (Lehikoinen, 2003: 196-198). In other words, in the era of Mammon the religious public sphere has become more fragmented and substantially more diverse. In the Finnish (post)modern mainstream media sphere, religious issues have not faded away, but they have had to adjust to the logic of commercial media. (See also Sumiala-Seppänen, 2001.) This has also affected the internal dynamics of different religious groups. As Taisto Lehikoinen (2003) argues, Christian groups that have been able to adapt their strategies to the new competitive environment have been able to increase the amount of publicity they receive while more traditionally oriented groups have lost visibility.

Conclusions

When analysed within the framework of Habermasian and Fiskean theories of the public sphere, there are two special aspects to take into consideration. The first one is the change in the role of the *institution* as an actor in the public sphere in relation to the role of the *individuals*. As long as the church and religion were the Crown's principal allies in keeping the people at bay, and as long as – on the one hand – the quantity of public communication¹⁰ remained low, and – on the other hand – the capacity of common people to even nurture ambitions of becoming active subjects or citizens was meagre, the church as the principal institutional actor of the age had almost a monopoly of public communication in the public sphere, naturally within limits set by the Crown. Then a “bourgeois public sphere” emerged as the economic and cultural conditions came into existence. Also the peasantry became more affluent, and consequently wanted more influence. In other words, there was a new demand for publicity that was not religious. Meanwhile in the sphere of religion, revivalist movements, with their demand for a personal faith, turned the sphere more inwards, and they created mediated publicity of their own such as religious newspapers. Of course, it is also true that the church and the movements explicitly opposed many secular developments and currents of the new age.¹¹

Until the late 20th century, and most strikingly in the first half of the century, the church and religion in Finland were a segment of public life somehow comparable with political parties and their ideologies. In many respects, it transcended the borders of different segments, but generally it had to compete with many other actors in public life for its visibility in the public sphere and for its position in people's minds. The commercialisation of the public sphere had already started in the 19th century, and in late 20th century it reached a new stage. The active public citizen was turned into a consumer who makes (skilfully directed) choices in the media market.

The second, namely Habermasian, question is about the historical changes in the degree of democracy in the public sphere. Of our three periods, “the Age of the Monarchy and the Church” is definitely furthest from democracy – the ideal function of the public sphere in Habermasian terms. But the question remains of whether “the Age of the Nation State” with its active political citizens is more “democratic” than “the Age of the Market”, where the individual is no more a member of an active public but a consumer who makes choices in the market (although s/he is heavily indoctrinated by the media). Habermas would probably be inclined to support “the Age of the Nation State” since in his analysis commercialism contaminates the public sphere of citizens and thus degenerates its ability to serve as a platform for the collective rational argumentation that is crucial for democracy.

In the Habermasian tradition, the focus is on the active and rational political citizen who wants to change the world, but for Fiskean research the study object is popular culture – by definition commercial, industrialised and

market-oriented. It follows that Fiske strongly emphasizes the idea that the core is not “consumption” but “culture”, an active process of generating and circulating meanings and pleasures within a social system, developed only from within and not imposed from without or above (Fiske, 1989: 23).

In addition to what has been said above, the Habermasian and the Fiskean traditions may be read as descriptive analyses of their own times – Fiske goes as far as to define the scope of “capitalist societies” already on the second line of the preface. We are not saying that they legitimise the state of affairs – the Habermasian tradition in particular is emancipatory in the sense of “revealing” hegemonic structures and trying to empower people to participate in order to improve their situation. On the other hand, the Fiskean tradition contributes to the empowering of individuals by demonstrating that individuals as consumers are *active, capable of counter-readings* in their meaning-making and not just passively submitting to the hegemonic ideological order offered to them (Fiske, 1996: 148-149, 241-244). However they both do articulate a normative bias that is in accordance with the hegemonic intellectual thinking of their eras. In the decades after the Second World War, “democracy” was the slogan in the Western world, and in many cases (not least in the Scandinavian countries) the building of a welfare state was connected with it. Towards the end of the 20th century, commercial values gained ground, and the media were no exception – and for media scholars a proper description of the study object was to see it as an affluent market where consumers make their choices for their own satisfaction. But what the two traditions largely leave out is an empirically based theory on pre- or early modern publicity in all its diversity. This is an area that would definitely need further research.¹²

When we look at this development by focusing on institutions and structures and using the metaphors of “God”, “Crown” and “Mammon”, the central actor is the Crown, as it has an institutional monopoly on real violence, not only symbolic. As long as Mammon was weak, the Crown’s principal ally was God, and in return God got extensive privileges to publicity. But as Mammon got stronger, the Crown turned away – it did not turn its back on God but pushed Him aside and established an alliance with Mammon. From the viewpoint of the mediated public sphere this meant a slow but consequent process during which (most of) the media became commercial institutions like any others, and in that market “God” is just one of the players.

But what about the role of the individual member of the People – the Subject/Citizen/Consumer? The Subject evidently had to pay, obey and believe. Of course there was popular disobedience, which left its traces in court records and official correspondence, but in the end it was the union of Crown and Church that ruled. The Citizen is by definition the active builder of a civic society and in a political democracy the source and base of power; the organisations of the civic society themselves also had a considerable amount of negotiation power. In relation to the church and religion the Citizen, and the organisations of civic society established by Citizens, were in a considerably longer leash than the Subject, and it is important that publicity be-

came increasingly pluralistic. If the Citizen wanted freedom and even got more of it, the Consumer already seems to feel free, to believe that emancipation has taken place and he/she is free to play with it. The freedom is to pick one's choices from the divergent market, be it 357 brands of corn flakes or a smörgåsbord of pieces of religions, and to use them as objects of self-construction as Fiske would argue.

One may finally ask whether Mammon now has about the same privileges with regard to publicity as God still had in the 18th century. Possibly, but evidently there is also a crucial difference: the Crown was still able to give those privileges to God, or take them away, but that is not the case with Mammon today. So, our answer to our question is: Yes, in Finland (and Sweden) from the Middle Ages to the 21st century, the church and religion "always" has received the amount and quality of publicity that fits with the historical balance of power.

In the early 21st century every actor plays in a crowded field under the rules set by a complicated interplay of forces. The power struggle over the public sphere continues, but its inner dynamics have changed. Typical of the era is the enormous gap – the famous digital division – between those with the resources to access and influence the globalised public sphere – these are the groups that are privileged to set apart the sacred from the profane in order to construct the "the serious life" of the era – and those without that possibility – regardless of whether they are religious, secular institutional or individual actors.

Notes

1. This article was written in connection with Projects nrs 7106128 (RS) and 7212990 (JSS) financed by the Academy of Finland. We also thank Knut Lundby for his valuable comments on the manuscript.
2. In secularized (post)modern Scandinavian societies the dominant Lutheran churches are one actor among many – with the essential distinction that unlike most other actors, the church has "a glorious past", which gives it a not inconsiderable advantage even today; in Finland about 84 % of the population still belong to the Evangelical Lutheran church and pay a church tax. Their religious conviction is quite another matter.
3. Boyd-Barrett, 2003: 230. In the new foreword of *Strukturwandel* in 1990, Habermas admits that in 1962 he had made too straightforward a diagnosis of the development from political activity to privatisation, from "a public in cultural discourse to an audience consuming culture". He agrees that he underestimated the power of resistance and critical resources of the pluralistic and differentiated mass audience that was breaking the class-related chains of its cultural habits. The revision of his assessment was enhanced by the fact that the wall between "low" and "high" culture had become permeable, and that there was also a new "proximity of culture and politics" which was more than just an amalgamation of entertainment and information. (Habermas, 2004: 377.)
4. On the Frankfurt school's intellectual influence to the Birmingham school see e.g. Kellner, 1995.
5. On the relationship between identity construction and therapeutic culture see e.g. White, 1992; Furedi, 2004.

6. What was to become Finland was gradually integrated into Sweden in the Middle Ages and was part of that kingdom until 1809, when it became an autonomous Grand Duchy in the Russian Empire – but its Swedish constitution and legislation survived. During the period of autonomy under Russia (1809-1917), a Finnish nation state with its own institutions emerged, and in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution it declared itself independent in December 1917.
7. In Swedish, the relation can be expressed pertinently as one between the “närande och tärande” (supplying and consuming) classes.
8. Bourdieu, 1977. On the use of symbolic violence in the mediated public sphere see e.g. Couldry, 2003: 38-41.
9. An interesting piece of research is Reuterswärd 2001, “Ett massmedium för folket”, a study of the functions of public announcements in 18th-century Sweden.
10. This refers to official public communication. We acknowledge the long and rich tradition of “unofficial” public communication in forms of folklore tales, poems and gossip, just to mention a few genres.
11. However it is worth noting that revivalist movements contributed greatly to the process of individualization by creating a fertile soil for a new self-conscious mentality focused on the self as a spiritual being and by offering common people spiritual tools to oppose the legitimate interpretations offered by the church on specific religious issues such as baptism and salvation. See e.g. Sulkunen, 1983; Siltala, 1992.
12. See e.g. Hunt, 1989.

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Religion in the Newsrooms

Policies and Attitudes of Danish Editors and Journalists

Tim Jensen

During the last 15 years, religion has taken up more and more space in the Danish media, be they newspapers, radio, television, or weekly magazines. Religion¹ is dealt with in the news, in informative articles, editorials, op-eds, and in letters to the editor. It is dealt with *per se* in special sections and columns (e.g. “The Religious Room”, “Faith and Existence”), and it is treated and discussed “*in relation*” to international and national politics, ethics, human rights, and the politics of identities, including, not least, debates on Danish and European politics of integration of immigrants and refugees, especially those with a Muslim background.

Due to the attention paid to Islam and Muslims, even long before 9/11, analyses of the representation of Islam and Muslims in the media have been conducted and published.² Besides a few papers, mostly written by students at the various university departments for the study of religions, no thorough quantitative and qualitative research of a) the development leading to more religion in the media, and b) the discourses in the media on religion(s) in general have been conducted.

This paper does not fill this gap in our knowledge of religion in the media. To do so would require quantitative and qualitative analyses of the thousands of articles (not to mention religion on the radio and television) dealing with religion over the period from, say, 1979 till today.

What I present is much more modest, namely some of the findings of a limited research project on the way editors and journalists at some Danish newspapers think of, talk about, and relate to religion as a topic and as a personal matter – when asked to do so and confronted with a series of questions about it. It is, then, an analysis of religion in the newsrooms more than an analysis of religion in the newspapers.³

Research design and questionnaire

Four national dailies (*Berlingske Tidende*, *Information*, *Jyllands-Posten*, and *Politiken*), one national weekly (*Weekendavisen*), two local dailies (*Fyens Stiftstidende*, *Jydske Vestkysten*), and the one and only national *Christian* daily (*Kristeligt Dagblad*) were selected for the purpose.⁴

Articles and editorials dealing with religion during Easter 2002 were identified. The articles were, however, used mainly to pave the way for the interviews, and this was stated explicitly in a letter of introduction mailed together with the articles to authors and members of the editorial staff (the editor-in-chief, opinion and op-ed editors, editors of book reviews, and others who write editorials), and to “ordinary” journalists who sometimes write about religion.

The letter clearly expressed the starting point for the research project as well as for the interviews, stating as a matter of fact that developments in the world at large as well as in Denmark have led to a significant increase in the number of articles implicitly and explicitly dealing with religion as a “social fact” that matters, internationally and nationally. Included in the introductory letter was a semi-structured questionnaire:

1. Has the way of dealing with religion been discussed by the editorial staff? If “yes”, what was the reason?
 - Was it due to a general estimate of an increased interest in the topic among readers?
 - To a more specific opinion about the nature of the supposed interest (is it a *religious* interest in religion, and/or a wish to be well informed about what is happening in the world and in society, including in regard to religion)?
 - Did it have to do with 9/11?
 - With the debates on immigrants and refugees?

If “yes”, did the discussion result in any kind of policy regarding the topic?
2. Do you/the newspaper – top-level discussions or not – have a general policy regarding religion (in general as well as with regard to specific religions, Islam, the Danish National Church, new religions, New Age) as a topic?
3. Do you think that your newspaper has a specific role to play in regard to (public discussions about) Islam and Muslims, relationships between religions, between religion and politics, between the Danish National Church and the state, between the Danish National Church and Danish culture, or in regard to religion as contrasted to (the ideals of) secularization and Enlightenment?
4. Have you considered assigning a specific journalist to this subject area?

5. Have you discussed the use of experts on this topic (e.g. the use of theologians and other representatives from the various religions vs. the use of scholars of religions)?
6. Have you discussed whether to deal as critically with the Danish National Church as with other religions, e.g. Islam and new religions?
7. Have you discussed whether you should continue the tradition of writing special articles and editorials in connection with Christian festivals and holidays (especially Easter and Christmas), – with some of these articles and editorials indirectly as well as directly supporting Christianity and the Danish National Church?
8. Do you have a special policy regarding contributions on religion from readers (op-eds, letters, feature articles) in general or in relation to the Christian holidays?
9. Does the handling of the topic of religion reflect the newspaper's policy on the public debate on immigrants and integration?
10. Are you a member of a faith community?
Do you see yourself as religious or not, irrespective of membership and religious activities like churchgoing?
What is your personal attitude to religion in general? To specific religions?
Do you think that your personal attitudes (to religion) influence your professional attitude to the topic?
Has 9/11 changed your attitude to religion?

It was the intention to “triangulate” the research scheme by interviewing writing and non-writing editors as well as “generalist” journalists who (occasionally) write on religion.⁵

Due to practical problems, however, this plan could not be realized with all of the newspapers. Furthermore, the number of persons interviewed at *Berlingske Tidende* and *Information* respectively was only one, a fact which makes it difficult to draw broader conclusions concerning those two dailies.

The fact that some of the interviews were carried out in the autumn of 2002, others in the spring of 2003, also causes problems since occurrences in the world (e.g. the Iraq war) and in the public debate (e.g. on immigrants and Islam) in the meantime may have changed the climate regarding religion.

All interviews were conducted by Margit Shabanzadeh and Kristoffer Meinert, at that time students at the Department of Journalism, University of Southern Denmark, who divided the interviews between them. Except for two carried out over the phone, all interviews were conducted face to face with the respondents in their offices at the newspapers. 20 persons were interviewed.⁶

Below I present some of the findings, relating them chiefly to the newspapers *en bloc*, and only sometimes to a named newspaper and a specific IP.⁷ Because of the special status of the *Kristeligt Dagblad*, the findings from that daily are excluded from this presentation.

Findings

Questions 1-3,6

In line with my own observations, all respondents (IPs), perhaps with the exception of those from the two local newspapers, *Jydske Vestkysten* and *Fyens Stiftstidende*⁸, agree that they and their dailies pay more attention to religion and to more and various kinds and aspects of religion today than five to ten to 15 years before. And, they all consider this fact highly interesting and significant. One could say, with the exception mentioned, that they all agree that religion is no longer only “soft news” but “hard news”.

Likewise, everybody is of the opinion that the increased attention paid to religion reflects an increased interest in religion among readers as well as an increase in the influence exercised by religion(s) in international and national politics, society, and culture.

The picture, however, is a little less clear than this. Two IPs, though for differing reasons, say that religion *always* was an important and interesting topic to them and their daily. One is a professed Christian and editor at *Jydske Vestkysten*, with a declared interest in and obligation to promote and safeguard the religion of the Danish National Church, and with a long tradition for having a team of clergymen write a daily column called “Reflections” and a weekly Sunday “sermon”, as well as a standing tradition for holiday editorials based on the sacred texts of the Christian religion. Religion in this context, then, equals Christianity, and the interest from the perspective of the IP (and her readers) is a Christian-religious one.⁹ The other IP in question is one of the editing journalists from *Weekendavisen*, who – as a well-educated intellectual – considers (aspects of) religion, including Christianity, and religious life-philosophies to possess such an important part in history, culture, and art that consequently any educated and cultured journalist and reader ought always to be interested in them.

The answers reveal that most IPs tend to think of religion as something with two sides, an inner, individual, existential and “spiritual” side as opposed to an outer, institutional, political and social side, *and* most IPs likewise consider the “inner dimension” the most “religious” dimension of religion. I shall come back to this later.

At the same time, the majority of the IPs express the view that it is the renewed social (political, cultural) dimensions and expressions of religion(s), especially Islam and – in opposition to Islam in the shape of immigrants – the Danish National Church, which is responsible for the increased interest in

religion as a topic of interest to the dailies and their readerships. 9/11, naturally, is also mentioned as an important factor in this connection: Journalists as well as readers, it is said, became more interested in acquiring information about religion, Islam, and – combined with debates on (Muslim) immigrants, “Danish culture”, “us” and “them” – about the relationship between the religion of the Danish National Church and Danish values and culture.

But many IPs too are aware that readers, just like themselves, may also be interested in the “inner”, “spiritual” or “philosophical” dimensions, and that coverage of religion implies that side also. It is, nevertheless, perhaps also due to the nature of the questions asked, the other, more political, sides of the religion beat that dominate in the discussions and responses.

The overall tendency to consider the religion beat a more and more important one is probably most clearly expressed by the IPs at *Politiken*, *Jyllands-Posten*, and *Information*. It is noteworthy that it is the editorial staff at the traditionally most a-, not to say, anti-religious, daily, *Politiken*, which expresses the greatest awareness of and interest in the topic – and it may be added that this is also evident from reading the actual coverage of the topic in *Politiken*. It is a declared atheist who – in the light of the revival of religion in the Western world and the fact that *Politiken*, as he puts it, is a spokesperson for secularist readers – introduced a Sunday column called “The Religious Room” with representatives from Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, together with an a-religious scholar of religion¹⁰ commenting upon things religious. Moreover, at the same time, *Politiken* launched a column with reviews of sermons. More in line maybe with the Enlightenment tradition than the abovementioned, *Politiken* also recently made Islam the theme of a specific section and Christianity at large a special two-week Easter theme. In addition, *Politiken* has arranged and covered several public hearings on various issues pertaining to religion.

Two of the IPs there describe the development as follows: Years ago religion popped up from time to time in articles pertaining to international politics. As a topic in its own right, it was conceived of as primarily a “church beat”, dealing mostly with the Danish National Church, and the issue of whether the daily ought to have one journalist cover this topic at least part-time was discussed. Now religion has become a beat in its own right as well as a matter of interest in all the sections of the daily.

Responses of the IPs at *Jyllands-Posten*, most of whom, like the IPs at *Politiken*, have increasingly been engaged in writing about religion, point in the same direction. While *Jyllands-Posten*, in contrast to *Politiken*, is a newspaper explicitly in favour of the Danish National Church and has a sermon-like Sunday column (“The Pulpit”), it has, like *Politiken*, thematized religion in various ways in recent years: Islam and the Pilgrimage to Mecca, discussions about Islam as opposed to Danish and Christian values, Darwinism and science as opposed to creationism. In addition, one of the journalists has written extensively about the daily lives of Danes adhering to Indre Mission, a wing within the Danish National Church traditionally character-

ized as “fundamentalist”. Ten years ago one journalist covered the “church beat” part-time. Today no fewer than three journalists have been allowed to write more and more about religion in general.

Though the IP at *Information* stresses that *Information* has not carved out a special column for religion, he also says that *Information* may be the newspaper writing the most about Islam and Muslims in Denmark, simply because it deals with issues that matter and are discussed in today’s world, including Denmark. Like many others, this IP naturally also emphasizes the fact that since many a conflict involves religion (especially so-called fundamentalist versions of religions), religion must simply be part of the news and of the debates which take place in the newspaper.

This change in regard to the religion beat does not, however, mean that all of the newspapers have had more or less formal top-level discussions about policies concerning religion, and none of those who *have* discussed the matter (*Politiken*, *Jyllands-Posten*) and who – like the IPs from *Politiken* – say that they discuss the line of the newspaper in this regard regularly, have decided upon a formal set of guidelines or some sort of official policy.

Although IPs from *Politiken* as well as from *Jyllands-Posten* state that an initiative to thematize religion may occasionally be taken by the editors, most IPs say that it is normally the individual journalist who takes the initiative. The IPs at *Fyens Stiftstidende* deviate somewhat from the rest in this respect, stressing that the main or only reason to deal with religion, besides a stipulated local interest in matters related to the local churches and parishes, is the criterion of “topicality”. This criterion is of course the main one employed by the rest of the IPs, but they seem to be of the opinion that it can be applied to the religion beat almost every day!

Everyone stresses the freedom of the individual journalist vis-à-vis any top-level “agenda”. Some underscore the difference between on the one hand the more or less “official” attitude to religion (and to the Danish National Church) as expressed, for example, in editorials, and on the other, the attitude to religion as expressed in other types of articles written by various journalists.

No matter how the topic of religion is valued in relation to other topics, all IPs stress that the journalistic approach to religion is and must be the same as to any other subject, and that a story about religion will be printed and evaluated according to the same criteria as any other story. Consequently, quite a few emphasize that religion must be dealt with impartially, critically, without prejudice, and with the general aim of engaging and informing the reader, i.e., creating space for an informed public debate.

Everyone considers it crucial to the public debate and political climate to write in a nuanced and balanced, though critical, manner about Islam, and some admit that (in the past) they may have contributed to a stereotypical public opinion of Islam. One IP at *Jyllands-Posten* thinks that Islam has been paid too much attention in proportion to the number of Muslims in Denmark.¹¹

Some IPs (at *Politiken*, *Weekendavisen*, and *Information*) underscore an obligation to criticize (even in editorials) the constitutional bond between

the Danish National Church and the state. Others emphasize the obligation of the newspaper (due to the mission statement and/or personal conviction on the part of the editor-in-chief) to support a continued tight relationship between state and church, though they, too, are ready to discuss the issue of separation. In order to respect the freedom of religion and because of the fact that there are today other, though minor, religions in Denmark.

All the IPs agree that a secular (but *not* secularistic!) society with freedom, if not equality, of religion, and separation of religion and politics is ultimately the best. And this is what they want to support in their writings about religion.

All of the respondents say that they have the same critical approach to the Danish National Church as to any other religion, but one of them concedes that in reality, one is most probably more critical and sceptical towards e.g. Scientology than towards the Danish National Church. Likewise, some concede that due to the impact of the Christian religion on Danish culture and society, it may be difficult to deal with the (other) religions in an absolutely fair and unbiased way.

Despite an acknowledgement that Christianity has proved to be of importance to many Danes, vis-à-vis Islam and Muslims, responses to several of the questions show that many IPs agree that readers, and Danes in general, are highly secularized and non-practicing Christians with a vague knowledge, if any, of the Christian religion and church to which they adhere. Consequently, some of the IPs think that one of the functions of writing editorials and thematic articles in connection with e.g. Easter and Christmas is to inform readers about their own religion.

Questions 4-5

Responses show that many of the IPs have not understood the questions as they were intended, and /or that the questions have not been put in a sufficiently clear language. Consequently, question 4 was sometimes understood as concerning the possibility of hiring a person who in addition to being educated in journalism is also educated in religion studies. It was, however, a question about the possibility of assigning a *generalist* journalist to cover the religion beat, as a consequence of the increased focus upon this subject matter.

With regard to this question as well as to question 5, it is also evident that some IPs cannot (or will not) see the difference between someone with the expertise and knowledge of an insider (typically a Christian theologian) and someone with the expertise and knowledge of an outsider (typically a scholar of religion).

This being said, one IP at *Politiken* and one at *Jyllands-Posten* enthusiastically embraced the possibility of hiring a person with special qualifications within the religion studies, and two IPs at *Jyllands-Posten* underscore the advantages of having an Arabic-speaking person with knowledge about the Arab and Muslim world affiliated with the newspaper during the Iraq-war.

One IP vehemently rejects the idea, considering it equal to hiring a homosexual to write about homosexuality.¹² At the same time, he and the other IPs at the same daily remark that in matters pertaining to the church they do have some journalists who – they say – have some sort of daily contact with the local churches and parishes. The IPs at another daily simply answer that the newspaper already has several people (some educated as journalists, others as historians, literary critics, anthropologists, theologians and scholars of religion) who write on religion as well as review books on religion. Other IPs again stress that during the last few years several journalists who normally work with other matters have become more and more permanently engaged in writing about religion, and that this has forced them to acquire more knowledge about things religious.

All in all there is a tendency to emphasize that the newspaper as well as readers are best served if this subject matter, like any other subject matter, is dealt with by journalists with ordinary generalist qualifications and the capability of acquiring supplementary knowledge in the area.

Likewise, most of them find it optimal that “religion in relation”, i.e. religion as it comes up in relation to political, social, and cultural matters, is handled exactly in that relation and context – and by those who normally write about these matters. At the same time, it is evident that most, if not all, admit that there is a limit to the qualifications of generalist journalists when it comes to religion, and that the recent developments have paved the way for some kind of specialization as regards the issue/topic of religion.¹³

Regarding the use of experts, most IPs stress that they are aware of the risk of using the same experts too often. As mentioned above, some do not distinguish experts and academics from insiders, be they theologians or Muslims, clergymen or imams, and this goes for the use of experts as commentators as well as book reviewers. Some even stress that this is not a coincidence but part of a policy and effort to see things from more than one perspective. The editor-in-chief at *Jydske Vestkysten* refers to the standing team of clergymen and to the local bishops as experts, while differentiating between these and what she calls “experts in the ordinary sense of the word”, whom – she says – they use regularly.

Questions 7-9

Except for *Information*, all the IPs confirm that their dailies traditionally write more about religion, in casu Christianity, and the Danish National Church in connection with Easter and Christmas. *Berlingske Tidende*, *Politiken*, *Jyllands-Posten*, *Fyens Stiftstidende*, and of course *Jydske Vestkysten* always have an editorial commenting upon the occasion, for the Christian holidays.¹⁴

While this may not come as a surprise as regards the dailies with a pro-Christian attitude written into the mission statement, it is perhaps more surprising in regard to other dailies, such as *Politiken*. True, the editorials here

as in other less pro-Christian dailies may have a critical edge to them; nevertheless, they are almost always there, and they almost always focus upon something about the festival and the religious “message” judged to be of a positive value to the individual as well as to society.

Confronted with an additional question about the reason why a daily like *Politiken*, supposed to be outspokenly secular, writes Easter and Christmas editorials, the editor-in-chief and the journalistic editor reply that in this matter they react more than act, i.e. they act as a mirror of society. Another IP at *Politiken* refers in much the same way to the fact that the whole society, the calendar, and the culture is influenced by Christianity.

The one IP at *Weekendavisen* says that there is no tradition there for regular holiday editorials but that they do write about faith, Christianity and religion on those occasions. The other IP says they do not support the Danish National Church but the Christian faith and normally do an interview with a clergyman at Easter time.

At *Fyens Stiftstidende* the fact is explained with reference to the “topicality” criterion, and one IP, contradicting the overall tendency to consider religion “hard news”, adds that the holidays are especially suited for more “soft news” since they are usually devoid of more hard news. This opinion is aired by one of the IPs at *Jyllands-Posten*, too.

Both IPs at *Fyens Stiftstidende* remark that the editorials in question are intended to inform the Christian readers about that very same Christianity to which they (the readers) adhere, but about which they do not know much.

As regards policies for accepting op-eds, feature articles, and letters to the editor, most IPs say that the main criteria are the usual ones, i.e. those of the topicality and quality of the proposed article. At *Fyens Stiftstidende* the editor in charge of the feature articles relates that he receives articles on Christmas-related topics months before Christmas. A look at the other dailies reveals that they actually quite often have feature articles dealing with the contents of the holidays in question.

Question 10

11 of the 17¹⁵ IPs are members of the Danish National Church, one is a member of the Roman Catholic Church, while five are not members of any religious community.

The question whether the IP considers him- or herself religious, irrespective of membership and activity, naturally breeds some confusion since the term “religious” here as elsewhere has several different connotations:

One of those who affirm membership in a “faith community” adds “that is, if the Danish National Church can be considered as such”. Another, equally characteristically, says “No, I am not religious but Christian...”, and another one answers, “A believer, if not, I would not be a member of the Danish National Church”.

One says, "I believe, but I am passive", another, "I am religious but passive", and yet another, "I am passive and not religious" – adding that he has an existentialist attitude to life. Another one is more explicit, saying, "I am passive, and I do not believe in God in that way. I have a broader definition of it", and then adds, "Personally I am not religious, and I am against any kind of fundamentalism. Therefore, I do not like 'fundamentalist atheism' either, because I cannot deny that life has a religious dimension".

The one member of the Roman Catholic Church simply says: "I cannot answer that question", and yet another says, "I doubt, ergo I believe". Only one of the members of the Danish National Church – the respondent with the remark about the Danish National Church as equal to (or different from) a faith community – simply answers "No". The one who said, "No, I am not religious but Christian...", continues that he adheres to the Christian values of charity, good deeds ..., and that one does not have to go to church to be a good Christian, adding "I do not know if I believe in God".

One of the passive members only goes to church at Christmas, and adds that he cannot formulate what he believes in, but it may be that there is some meaning to life and that human beings should care for each other.

Two of the IPs who are not members of any faith community simply answer, "No". One responds, "atheist", and another, "No, I do not believe in God. I guess I am an atheist...".

One IP says, "No, I am an agnostic", adding a long explanation revealing an intellectual interest in religion and a preference for certain non-Danish and non-European ways of being religious, while distancing himself from dogmatic and imperialistic uses of religious beliefs. The same IP differs from the rest by explicitly stating that he finds comfort and confidence, claimed by religious persons to be intimately connected to religious belief, in his non-religious values, family and others.

Concerning the attitudes of the IPs to religion in general as well as to specific religions, the (rather extensive) responses only partially quoted above may be systematized as follows: All respondents – be they members of the Danish National Church, passive or active, believers or non-believers, atheists, or agnostics – agree that religion is, or rather, ought to be, a private matter, distinct from politics.

At the same time, some of the same IPs consider religion part of society and culture in the shape of certain (positive) values, and they also think that religion as a set of shared values benefits society.

Two of the respondents express a more intellectual attitude, saying that they are intellectually, academically and professionally interested in religion, and one says that he takes religion and religious people extremely seriously, trying his very best to understand why they think and feel the way they do.

One of the members of the Danish National Church uses the question to come up with some kind of definition of religion, saying that religion explains, by way of myths, dimensions otherwise unexplained. Another, likewise a member of the Danish National Church, says that religion is a human

invention that serves to make the world more meaningful. Yet another, a declared active and believing Christian, considers religion essential to the human being.

Everybody agrees some religions are better than others, that fanaticism, fundamentalism and what some call sectarianism is bad, and that this is where their respect and tolerance run out.

Several IPs differentiate explicitly between on the one hand good and true religion(s), and on the other bad and false, pointing mainly to Scientology as an example of the last, adding that Scientology is but a money-making scheme.

Many IPs likewise express something close to deference for the so-called world religions (providing, that is, that they meet the criteria for a good religion) but scepticism towards New Age. More than one respondent, agnostic as well as Christian, believer as well as non-believer, expresses the view that science and religion ought to be separate, and that religion has to accept the results and domain of science. Consequently, not only creationists but also e.g. New Age believers operating with physical consequences of beliefs and spiritual powers are not very much liked or tolerated, and people believing in those sorts of things are classified not as believers, but as superstitious.

As to whether 9/11 has changed their attitude to religion, almost everybody says it has not. Many add that the events of 9/11 only served to confirm their notion that religion may be all right, even benevolent, if limited to certain specific areas of the human and social life but with a dangerous potential for transgressing those limits. Everyone agrees that 9/11 has made religion less private, in the sense that it is more discussed in public, and that it has forced many more to reflect upon their own religion and way of being religious.

Concluding remarks

To sum up: In regard to all the national dailies, the interviews leave no doubt. With the exceptions mentioned, the editorial staff as well as the other journalists all agree that religion has become hard news and “good” news, i.e. news that makes good copy. It has been given more room in the dailies simply because it has become evident that religion matters, to individuals as well as to societies, in daily life as well as in world politics, and, of course, in debates pertaining to Muslim immigrants, integration, and the real or postulated Christian identity of so-called Danish culture.

In connection with the religion beat as a “religion in relation” beat, several points may be made: In spite of the mentioned tendency, and, to some extent, conscious policy of assigning generalist journalists to religion as it manifests itself in their general areas, it is, nevertheless, significant that the religion beat has become so important that journalists as well as editorialists also have to upskill themselves (and say they have done so).

Even more significant is the fact that many editors and journalists see a need for assigning one or more journalists to the religion beat, at least part-time, and that some even express the need for a journalist with specific qualifications in the academic, comparative study of religion; and in this regard, they do not confuse the comparative study of religions with theology.

Of interest in connection with “religion in relation” is also the fact that many, if not all, of the respondents, reveal an intellectual interest in and respect for the above mentioned “inner”, “spiritual” or philosophical side of religion, and the ways individuals understand and practice their religion. This is a side which, if we maintain the idea of religion as having outer and inner, private and public, sides, may very well be termed the “soft” side of religion in contrast to the “harder”, political, and public side.

Although the interest in covering this side of religion is, for a good many reasons¹⁶, somewhat downplayed, it is not disregarded. The two journalists from *Jyllands-Posten* in this connection explicitly refer to their own articles on Muslims in Mecca and Danish fundamentalist Christians, and quite a few of the other IPs acknowledge the importance of dealing with this and other sides of religions, not least in order to inform the reader that this or that religion, especially Islam, has more to it than conflict and terror. Moreover, the journalistic interest in this side of religion is said to correspond to the interest of the readers.

At the same time one cannot help but notice how a highly normative (one is tempted to call it “religious”) stance towards religion shows in the relative lack of interest in things religious, no matter how “soft”, which are labelled New Age and new religions. Actually, a so-called new religion like Scientology is conceived of not as “real” religion but as a fake one, a means for cheating people of their money. Nobody seems to think that one could write a good story about the spiritual and daily life of the devotees to this religion. While the “spirituality” of the traditional religions and their adherents (at their best) is met by most with something close to deference, little respect, then, is shown to New Age “spirituality” and practices. These are mostly considered more like superstition than religion, sometimes with explicit reference to their lack of respect for that divide between religion and science which is taken as an indication of a healthy and acceptable religion.

One of the IPs admits that there most probably are readers who want to read about New Age beliefs, and that they therefore have to write something about them. But the overall tendency in this respect is to treat them critically.¹⁷

Also worth noticing is the fact that the religion beat is most definitely no longer equated with a “church beat” with the exception, that is, of the parochial *Jydske Vestkysten* and to a lesser degree *Fyens Stiftstidende*. Some sort of “church” column still exists, but aside from the local dailies, primarily, and to a rather modest degree, in *Jyllands-Posten*.

However, although the church beat has been transformed into a religion beat, and the religion beat is to a high degree a “religion in relation to poli-

tics beat”, the religion beat still has a “church” side to it: In the same way as insiders like clergymen and theologians figure in more traditional church columns (called “Reflections”, “The Pulpit” and the like), so do they also figure in more recent but similar sections, e.g. “The Religious Room” in *Politiken*, though now together with imams, rabbis, philosophers, and various religious opinion makers.

The interviews reveal that most editors and journalists share the notion of many a religious person, namely that religion has to be covered by insiders as well as outsiders, and that the insider view must be represented, especially in order to cover the so-called inner side of religion and in order to ensure that the issue in question is viewed from more than one side. The voices of religious people themselves are, then, far from being repressed by and in the so-called secular print media.

Likewise, the Danish National Church is far from becoming marginal in the religion beat. Whether in support of or against the bond between the Danish state and the Lutheran-Protestant Danish National Church, all the dailies agree that they have to and want to discuss the Danish National Church¹⁸.

Moreover, most of the IPs and all of the dailies (normally considered secular, be they declared so and against the bond between state and church, or be they declared secular, though with an implicit or explicit pro-Christian and pro-church policy) are in one way or another much less secular and “indifferent” in their approach to the church than one might have expected. With one exception, all devotional editorials as well as feature articles draw aspects of the Christian religion associated with the national Christian holidays. None of the respondents, except maybe one, tries to dissociate himself from this tradition. On the contrary, the respondents actively continue and uphold it, even if some of the editorials and articles have their critical edges, and irrespective of the willingness of the respondents to recognize that today there are other religions in Denmark.¹⁹

The answers to the questions pertaining to the personal attitudes of the IPs to religion show that the vast majority are members of the Danish National Church. Only one belongs to the Roman Catholic Church, and only two are declared atheists; none of them, however, in the terms of other respondents, are “fundamentalist atheists”.

Concerning the personal attitudes of the respondents to religion, one may notice that their responses reveal in this regard, too, a remarkable “normality”, not least as regards those who are members of the Danish National Church. If, as it is the case, the editors and journalists opine that the increased interest shown religion in their papers matches the interest (and the increase of it) among the readers, then these interviews show that the ‘religious profile’ of the editors and journalists, according to all of the polls, including those which the dailies themselves more and more frequently finance and publish, match that of the Danes in general.²⁰

The atheists as well as the one professed agnostic, no less than the members of the Danish National Church – believers or non-believers, active or

passive – show a remarkable respect, not to say deference, for what they consider healthy or good religion, i.e. non-fanatic, non-sectarian, non-fundamentalist religion. Almost everybody, with the exception of the agnostic, seems to think that ontologically speaking, there is a so-called religious dimension to life, a dimension which has to do with an “ultimate” or existential meaning of life and death, love for your neighbour, positive societal values, and the like.

Interesting, also, is the fact that the responses to these questions show that there is no clear-cut divide between the editors and journalists from the different dailies. The members of the Danish National Church, whether passive or active, the believers and non-believers, the believers who do not know what to believe, and believers who have their doubts, are all represented in most of the newsrooms, where religion is now recognized as hard news, soft news – and “good” news. And, no matter how “secular” they all consider their approach to religion, it most certainly is neither secularistic, nor anti- or even a-religious.

This, then, leads to my final remarks: All in all, the interviews show that most of the IPs are deeply influenced by a widespread normative notion of (true) religion, a notion very much in line with (or rooted in) a specific mix of Western humanism and Lutheran-Protestant Christianity. The same goes of course for the concept of the respondents of the “secular”, of the separation of state and church, and of religion being a matter of privacy.

Most of the respondents, like many other people, conceive of religion as something “in itself”, something that actually exists beyond and above its social, political, and cultural manifestations. Consequently, most respondents subscribe to some sort of essentialist, existentialist, and idealist notion of religion as essentially, originally, basically or ideally having to do with so-called ultimate reality, the existential questions about life, death, and the meaning of life. This notion, obviously, also accounts for the division of religion into an “outer” and “inner” side as well as to the outspoken opinion of “true and good religion” as something which does not interfere with politics and science.

In this way it may be said that the IPs in regard to the very notion of religion to a large extent disregard the findings of the secular and academic religion studies. They are, so it seems, not quite aware of the degree to which their (rather narrow) notions of (true) religion reflect typical theological, especially Lutheran-Protestant, normative notions.

Though this may be comforting, not only to Lutheran-Protestant Christians but also to other religious people, it may also be seen as a hindrance to the realization of the expressed ideals of a critical and analytical approach to religion in general, not least of course to religions which do not adhere to those common and more or less normative notions which can be found in the newsrooms.

The journalists interviewed, then, somehow may be said to show remarkable little interest in the way their notion(s) of religion, and consequently their writings about religion, reflect and perpetuate a historical and partly

religious notion of religion. The media reflects a dominant public and normal discourse on religion – but they also help create and recreate it.

The issue I consider the most important, and the one entailing most of the other crucial issues when it comes to media coverage of religion, has to do with exactly the basic and very complicated question: What is this “thing” called “religion”?

What, in the world, and in the various countries, in the academia and in the media, gets to count as “religion”? What normative and exclusivistic notions of true and good religion, of real and legitimate religion, do the media draw upon, produce and reproduce, to the exclusion of what is considered false or bad, fake and illegitimate religion?

Where in the “cosmology” of the public discourses, in the media, and in the newsrooms, reflecting and influencing the public discourses, is “religion” located?

What and who, in other words, decides whether a religion or features of religion are taken for “given”, “normal”, and “natural”, and what is not? What religion and what features of religion are being reported as normal, and what is so abnormal that it attracts attention and hit the news?

These questions ought to be acknowledged and discussed intensively amongst media people. Why? Because those definitions of “religion”, be they definitions by outsiders or insiders, “emic” or “etic”, which get the upper hand and becomes the norm, almost unnoticed slip into the public discourse and constitute central elements in the public opinion on religion. And, as e.g. court rulings on various groups often labelled “new religions” or “sects” clearly shows, then definitions of religion are powerful means of inclusion and exclusion.

Recognition as a “religion”, by the state, the courts, or the media, gives a social movement or a social group, its members, ideology and practice, prestige and status, especially if recognized as a “true” religion, not a false religion, “semi-religion”, “superstition”, and the like.

Words are far from innocent: To be named by the media a “new religious movement”, a “cult” or a “sect”, and not “church”, “religion”, and “denomination” is a speech-act with consequences.

In Denmark, the steep rise over the last 10-15 years in media coverage of religion, has, in my opinion, been equivalent to a more nuanced approach to religion. Yet, in spite of this, I do believe that the interviews conducted reveal that the dominant notion of religion as it shows in the newsrooms (and in the news) is a notion which may easily lead to discrimination of other notions, e.g. notions held by people who are not religious or “irreligious Lutherans”.

If true religion belongs to the heart of the individual, if true and mature religion does not show in the clothes you wear or in the food you eat, and if it does not belong to the public nor the political sphere, then people who think otherwise may very well hit the news – or be ridiculed, and silenced. In this way, of course, the media, will contribute to the constant building

and rebuilding of the national “we” over against an “other”. The problem is just that “the other” is to some degree also a part of “us” – and of the readership outside the newsrooms. The problem also is that the acceptance of such a notion of religion is not based upon a rational study of religion, but upon a religious and normative notion of religion.

Given, however, the impact of the inherited, “naturalized”, notion of religion, and the fact that the education of the journalists does not include an obligatory course in comparative religion, one can understand that it is, in a way, difficult to blame the journalists if they, like the majority of the population, cannot, so to speak, see the wood from the trees.

Still, I think the media can do better, and I think that it is of the utmost importance for them, and our societies, and the world, to rethink the (various) dominant notion(s) of religion.

This is, however, as said not an easy task, also because the notion of religion cannot, except with great difficulty, be separated from the overall notion of an orderly society and world. The notion of religion is part of a larger cosmology and classification system, according to which the world and society is and must be divided into neatly separated spheres (the private, the public, the economical, and the political sphere).

It is, then, understandable if the media to a large degree reproduce the inherited and dominant notion of religion, and I find it hard to see how it could be otherwise. I also recognize that the media are and maybe have to be nation-builders, upholders of the imagined community of the nation.

I do, however, also long for the day when more journalists and editors, in and outside the newsrooms, realise, for instance, that the ideology of the “apolitical religion of the heart” is as efficient a political and religious ideology as any other, serving those in power, including the institutionalised majority religion.

Journalists to a larger degree than expressed in the interviews ought to acknowledge that they too have a lot of power, also to change the dominant public discourse on religion. They have to acknowledge that, especially in a country like Denmark, most people get their knowledge about religion only from the media. Religion nowadays, to a large degree, and to a lot of people, is what the media makes (of) it.

Notes

1. “Religion” here primarily refers to what most people, including the journalists and their readers, habitually identify as “religion”, namely the various major and minor religious traditions, i.e. the so-called world religions, New Age and new religious movements, beliefs, practices and related institutions. Therefore, “religion” in the news(rooms) as well as in this paper does not imply “religion-like” phenomena, “invisible religion”, or, for instance, the role of the media in constructing and upholding “religion-like” communities, ideologies, and identities, e.g. a national “we”. That most of the journalists entertain a rather normative notion of religion will be clear from the analysis.
2. Cf. the references.

3. But it is also the first to deal with this, and as a consequence of this, I do not have the possibility to relate my findings to previous ones, as do for example Hoover (1998), and Silk (1998) with regard to the American scene. Therefore, I did not either formulate specific hypotheses. However, the questions asked, did draw upon my interpretations of the many articles on religion read before the interviews were conducted, and in this article, too, I cannot but analyse and interpret the answers in the light of my reading of articles too.
4. Each of the national dailies, naturally, has its own history, political profile, and readership, all of which may, in spite of the freedom of the individual journalist, be of importance in regard to their various attitudes to religion, not least in regard to the Danish National Church (*Folkekirken*), its cultural dominance and close relations to the state. Three of the newspapers, *Berlingske Tidende*, *Jyllands-Posten*, and *Jydske Vestkysten*, have foundational guidelines stating some kind of support for the Danish National Church. The Christian daily, of course, occupies a special position in this regard.
5. Special thanks to Anker Brink Lund, at the time Professor at the Department of Journalism, University of Southern Denmark, for entering the discussions about the design of the research.
6. *Berlingske Tidende* 1, *Information* 1, *Politiken* 4, *Jyllands-Posten* 4, *Weekendavisen* 2, *Fyens Stiftstidende* 3, *Jydske Vestkysten* 2, *Kristeligt Dagblad* 3.
7. IP means Interview Person.
8. One IP at *Fyens Stiftstidende* says that "in the same way as religion does not matter very much to the Danes in their daily life, religion plays no major role in our daily", and there is no explicit mention in the interview of religion playing a bigger role today than before. The other IPs from the same daily express almost the same opinion: In *Fyens Stiftstidende* the religion beat is mainly the same as always, i.e. moderate coverage of the local events within the National Danish Church. Nevertheless, the IP quoted above mentions that after 9/11 several journalists at the daily have taken courses in Islam and key religious concepts, and one of the other IPs clearly recognizes an increase in letters and op-eds from readers regarding especially Islam vis-à-vis Christianity after 9/11. Contrary to the opinion aired by his colleagues (that the Danes in general are not so interested in their religion, Christianity), he notes that he has been surprised to learn how much it matters now that it has been, as he says, confronted with Islam.
9. The same IP recognizes that today there is more than one religion to attend to, and expresses a wish to have representatives from other religions airing their views in the newspaper too. She seems, however, not to have invited such representatives to write, nor to have reserved space for such writings. Talking about letters from readers, she complains that representatives from non-Christian religious communities are not too eager to write.
10. This scholar, however, withdrew from the panel in protest against the pro-religious comments and attacks of the other panelists. He has not been replaced by another a-religious scholar but by one of the bishops of the Danish National Church.
11. A number which he does – wrongly, however – estimate at 5-10% while in reality it is more likely to be no more than 3-4% of the total population.
12. Besides being an expression of a general attitude and professional aspiration of the journalist, this response also reflects a lack of understanding of the intention of the question, as well as a lack of knowledge about the difference between the outsider's expert knowledge about religion and the insider's knowledge.
13. It may be added that *Politiken*, perhaps stimulated by the interviews, in the early spring of 2003 hired a journalist who as her main area was assigned precisely to religion/philosophy of life. As it turns out, however, so far, the very same journalist has primarily covered matters pertaining to the Danish National Church, while matters pertaining to other religions and religion in general have been dealt with by a large number of other journalists, the various editors included.
14. Editing this article during Christmas 2003, I can add that this was also the case that year. Furthermore, several of the Christmas editorials, this year as well as in previous ones, are

- remarkably outspoken in their support for the Christian religion, especially of course in the version of the National Danish Church. Some, actually, can most adequately be characterized as sermons propagating the gospel.
15. The three from *Kristeligt Dagblad* are excluded in this part of the presentation of the findings, too. In view of the limited number of respondents and the widespread notion that religious standing is a matter of privacy, I shall refrain from relating the answers to the individual newspapers.
 16. The nature of the questions asked, the journalistic focus on conflicts and topicality, and the revitalization of precisely the political importance of religion – especially of Islam and Christianity.
 17. This stance towards what may judged a rather popular aspect of today's religion seems to be one way that the dailies differ from e.g. weekly magazines, not to speak of highly popular television shows. In regard to the new religions, and considering the attention paid to them in the late 80's and early 90's, it is indeed remarkable how marginal they are to today's religion beat, though they do of course pop up from time to time, that is, when they or some adherents are "in conflict", with authorities or the general ideas about "good religion". Islam, it may be added, most obviously has taken over the role of "the other", and the "old" religions are involved in so many kinds of conflicts that the conflicts in which the new religions are involved seem insignificant in comparison.
 18. And they do so, and not only when some clergyman drinks too much, some parishioners fight, or when the minister of the Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs gets into conflict with the bishops. A "proof" of this came the past summer of 2003 when hundreds of articles were written on a vicar who said in public that he did not "believe in God". Issues pertaining to the faith and dogma of the church and the clerics as well as to the faith and (lack of) practice of the lay people are of growing interest to the dailies and their readers.
 19. It should, of course, be noticed that there is also a growing number of feature articles and other articles, even sometimes an editorial, in connection with e.g. Ramadan. The propagandistic tones in these are, however, non-existent.
 20. Since the number of polls and articles concerning the religious "state of affairs" among the Danes, especially the approximately 84% who are members of the Danish National Church, is increasing, I cannot but refer to the Danish part of the European Values Survey at www.sociology.ku.dk/vaerdi/ddchome.html for further references. Cf. also the investigations of certain segments of the population, Jensen et al. 2002, Jensen, 2001; Andersen et al. 1999.

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Dangerous Metaphors

The Media Coverage of the American Crusade

Lars Lundsten & Matteo Stocchetti

This article contains the preliminary results of a limited monitoring exercise on transnational broadcasting during the war against Iraq in the early spring of 2003. This monitoring exercise was a part of an ongoing research project on metacultural intelligibility in broadcasting (MIB) at the Department of Media Studies at Arcada University of applied science. The main goal of this research project is to establish theoretically sound bases for high quality intercultural broadcasting – a notion we like to refer to as “ecological broadcasting”.

An important part of this project is the critical monitoring of transnational broadcasting. As suggested by Nordenstreng and others (Nordenstreng & Griffin, 1999; Nordenstreng, 2001; Galtung, 1999; McQuail, 1999), the practical possibility of assessing media performance is a necessary step for whatever notions of public interest and accountability might apply to media communication. We believe that this possibility is particularly important in relation to transnational broadcasting by virtue of its influence (Lundsten & Stocchetti, 2005). To this goal, we will adopt the following operational definition: any broadcasting – be it television or radio – is transnational if it is produced for a general, overseas audience from a general point of view. According to this definition BBC World, al Jazeera, and CNN International are transnational broadcasting companies.

Once the influence of broadcasting is acknowledged, issues of quality in relation to news broadcasting can hardly be distinguishable from issues of ethics. In this respect we believe at least two requirements to be crucial. The first is the journalists' awareness of the social implications of a given narrative model. The second is the capacity to identify and choose a narrative model which is appropriate and non-ambiguous in relation to the point s/he wants to make in covering a given event. Taken together these two requirements seem to be the *conditio sine qua non* for the notion of professional ethics and responsibility to be meaningfully applied to journalism.

This article analyses the role of the crusade metaphor on the narratives patterns used by BBC World and CNN International to cover the war against

Iraq. It is not about the practical dangers of this metaphor in international politics, nor it provide an account of the psychological mechanisms explaining why and how individual reporters are affected by it in their experiencing of the events they cover. What this article is about is the danger that the use of this and other inappropriate metaphors implies for the ethics of professional journalism, and “good” journalism more broadly, in the coverage of international crises and conflicts.

In the first part we illustrate the conceptual framework for an analysis of the crusade metaphor in BBC world and CNN international coverage of the war against Iraq. Here we draw on the narrative analysis of news stories as text to propose an elaboration of Ingarden’s four dimensional analysis applicable to broadcasting. In the second part we describe some of the most salient negative consequences of the crusade-conceptual metaphors on war narratives. Some reflections on the lesson that might be learned in relation to the ethics of transnational broadcasting are presented in the concluding section.

Metaphor and meaning in narrative text

Narrative text

News stories are presumably narrative texts regardless of the technical medium. A TV story is a text construed by means of sound, visual – moving or non-moving – images, and linguistic devices. A newspaper story is a text construed by means of linguistic devices, graphic conventions and non-moving images. According to semiotic theory, a text is a communicative expression that can be analysed in terms of linear and conventional organisation of signs, i.e. symbols.¹

A text is considered a narrative² if it presents a number of **events** (e.g. actions) in a specific **order**, with a specific **purpose** and from a specific **point of view**. A minimal narrative presents at least three events in an order that determines their significance in that specific communicative situation. Take for example the following narrative: “*Hillary yelled at Bill. She had been told about Monica.*” In its proper context, the relevance of this story is what attitude it ascribes to Ms. Clinton’s attitude with regard to her husband’s extra-marital affair. The text presents three events: a yelling, a telling and an event only implicitly referred to through two proper names, i.e. “Bill” and “Monica”. The order in which these events are presented reflects their importance from the relevance point of view. There is a clear temporal order between the events. However, the point of the story would be lost or at least severely weakened if one presented the events in their chronological order. An alternative, temporally ordered story, would make a less pregnant point about Ms. Clinton’s emotional distress: “*Monica and Bill had an affair. Bill told Hillary about it. Hillary yelled at Bill.*” The facts are the same, the point is different.

- *Hypothesis 1:* Narratives usually make points other than purely propositional.³ Especially journalistic narratives usually make a point of the kind “*How awful that*”, or “*We are lucky that there are no [...] in our home town*”, or “*It is immoral that ...*”, or “*it is justified that ...*” etc. The phrase inserted after the word “that” entails a state of affairs or a chain of events. An operator of the kind [be immoral], [be justified] may not be explicitly articulated in the text. Most significantly, such explicit judgments belong to argumentative texts but not to narrative ones. However, a narrative may prove much more successful as a means of expressing a certain judgement than an argumentative one.
- *Hypothesis 2:* Narratives usually are about states of affairs⁴ or chains of events that are not, or at least need not be, actual. Even if the point of a certain narrative is propositional, it does not necessarily follow that such a state of affairs actually obtains. Lying is a communicative act in which you make a propositional point, but the state of affairs referred to must not be true. More frequently, states of affairs referred to in narratives are not even purportedly actual. Jokes, parables, fiction, plans, speculations etc. make sense only if it is an accepted and generally known fact that the states of affairs referred to are not actual but rather optional, possible or in some other way modalised.

Communicative meaning is ontologically subjective and asymmetric although epistemologically objective. By this we mean that any communicative act has at least two distinguishable sources of meaning, i.e. the communicator (addressor, speaker) and the counterpart (addressee, audience). Let us consider the paradigmatic case of a communicative act, a promise: A promises to pay B 100 Euros. To A it means that A engages him- or herself in an obligation towards B. To B this means that B suddenly has a claim on A. Epistemologically, this promise is objective since anybody who happens to be aware of it may understand its meaning. However, only B and A are affected by this promise.

Four dimensions

The meaning of texts – particularly narrative texts – is identified on four dimensions, or levels. This approach is based on Roman Ingarden’s (1893–1971) four-level analysis of literary works of art (cf. Ingarden, 1972 [1931]). Our claim, in opposition to Ingarden’s own view, is that his analysis makes sense not only within the sphere of literary art but also for other narrative texts, linguistic as well as audio-visual.

Our version of Ingarden’s four-levelled analysis goes as follows: There are four dimensions of meaning in a narrative text: the overall point, the structural, the referential and the physical level. A reader (viewer, listener) approaches the text from the physical level, i.e. the physical manifestation

of the text. He uses the conventional code to recognise the (literal) meaning of the text. He consciously or intuitively recognises narrative patterns, metaphors and other structural devices. And finally, he makes sense of the text as a whole, i.e. grasps its overall point.

The author of the text (news producer, film director etc.) approaches the text the other way around. He has a point he wants to make. He finds a model (a narrative pattern, etc.) that he can utilise in order to articulate his story. He picks the particular characters, places and events. Finally, he articulates his text in a certain material form, i.e. dots on a screen, letters on a sheet of paper.

In short:

conceptual	holistic level	the point of the text	conceptual metaphors, sub-text
↑↑	structural level	Structure, text type	narrative patterns, explicit metaphors
↓↓	referential level	Literal meaning	word-world reference, language, code
material	physical level	Articulation	particular signs, material manifestation

Whether a presentation is serious/true/relevant cannot be determined on one level only. The classical journalistic virtues have been focused on referential truth. If you show what there is and do it as truthfully as possible (word-world match) then you are supposed to be a “good” and “objective” reporter.

In practical terms, journalism frequently makes almost automatic use of narrative patterns off the shelf. The David vs. Goliath (cf. Tom & Jerry) pattern is probably the most commonly used. According to this pattern, one ascribes goodness to the weaker party in a conflict and evil to the stronger party. Furthermore, one allows the weaker party to abuse his stronger opponent.

The choice of narrative pattern reflects the conceptual metaphor according to which the whole story is told, and according to which the story makes any point at all. The big question about journalistic truth is related to how you pick your conceptual metaphor and what narrative pattern it allows you to apply to the particular events you are reporting.

Here are two enlightening examples of the difficulty of addressing any relevant problems if one chooses the wrong conceptual metaphor:

1. Before the American attack on Iraq in March 2003, there were many reports about how to avoid a war. However, one of the implicit conceptual metaphors used in making these reports stated, “War is like a tropical typhoon”. This means that this phenomenon is described as

one that is ruled by laws of nature. Accordingly, nobody can effectively change the course of events. You can only take cover or try to minimize the damage. This conceptual metaphor was effectively manifested by BBC World by the way in which that channel presented the war preparations on a big map very similar to those used in weather forecasts.

2. In August 2002 a young girl was killed by a car driver in Helsinki. The press outrage was massive. Still no solution to the problem of how to stop car drivers from killing small girls was proposed. This was due to the fact that all journalists presented traffic as if it were a weather phenomenon. Hence cars are not portrayed as vehicles driven by responsible individuals, they are rather like shock waves or torrential rains. If you do not take cover, they will probably wipe you out of existence. But you can blame only yourself.

The intelligibility of metaphors, regimes of truth and culture

“This crusade, this war on terrorism is going to take a while.” – George W. Bush made this remark on Sunday, September 16, 2001 (Bush 2001). He later apologized and even members of his entourage acknowledged that the use of the c-word was inappropriate. The wave of criticism that followed, however, interpreted a politically unfortunate metaphor as a Freudian lapse: a remark which uncovers hidden and more truthful meanings in the mind of the speaker. By saying what he said, many believe, Bush made explicit what until then was kept implicit in the narratives of the “war on terror” – in itself another metaphor. By this and other statements containing more or less explicit reference to sacred symbols and meaning, he contributed to the enforcement of a rather specific way of experiencing those dramatic events in the media and in the rest of society (military, politician, academic, etc.). The same metaphor had a negative impact on the conceptual – if not technical – quality of the war coverage broadcasting by BBC World and CNN International. Our claim here is that the crusade metaphor was the wrong one to use. As we shall see here, it introduced distortions which impaired the quality of narrative texts through which the war was reported. Furthermore, its impact was magnified by cultural and organizational factors which, coupled with individual unawareness, facilitated the adoption of an uncritical perspective on the events.

Metaphors are a distinctively human way of experiencing and controlling reality (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; see also Rigotti, 1992). In a slightly more technical way, metaphors are necessary conceptual devices supporting concept structures pervading not only our language but also our thought and

actions (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980:3). In this view, metaphors became dangerous when they support concept structures which affect the way we think and act in a detrimental manner. Most people are not aware of the way metaphors affect language, perception and behaviour. It might be argued, however, that this type of awareness should rank high in the list of requirements for “good” professional journalists. Metaphors are necessary for reporting news stories in a meaningful way. Their influence rests upon their capacity to establish the specific narrative patterns through which the news story is told and the overall point made intelligible. The nature of these narrative patterns depends on the type of metaphors through which the reporter – consciously or unconsciously – experiences the events s/he is reporting. This linkage is important because – in our perspective – the overall point or the intelligibility of a given report depends upon the meanings attached to the metaphor inspiring the narrative, notwithstanding the type of information with which the public is actually provided.

The importance of metaphors as both cognitive and communicative devices is enhanced when they are applied to the understanding of dramatic events. In these instances, the issue of intelligibility and accuracy – or truth – gains a particular prominence. When things are happening fast, information cannot be properly checked, and material and immaterial constraints negatively affect the individual’s capacity of actually constructing the news story, metaphors provide rather tempting shortcuts. Narrations inscribed in and compatible with shared metaphors have the great advantage of being easy to produce and, most importantly, easy to understand. In transnational broadcasting, a complex and essentially elusive reality can be presented in relatively simple and compact format to a culturally diverse audience. In this respect, we believe available evidence may support the idea that the crusade metaphor established for BBC World and CNN International media what Foucault called a “regime of truth”, by which he meant

... the types of discourse it [each society] accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances that enable one to distinguish true and false statement; the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (Foucault, 2000: 131.)

Journalists are supposed to be intrinsically committed to the truth – like medical doctors to health. But the very notion of truth in relation to a single event – as well as that of health for each individual – might have different connotations depending on the way we perceive the contextual reality: the set of conditions in which a single event can possibly be a meaningful part of a larger story.

In the conventional analysis of media performance at times of war (e.g. Thrall, 2000), the bulk of attention goes to the constraints imposed by military or political authorities in the form of censorship or controlled access to

the field. Common to these accounts are at least three ideas: (a) an objective “truth” is there, somewhere; (b) it might be “discovered” if reporters were left to work unhampered; (c) “good” broadcasting effectively “discovers” it and brings it to the people at home. Accounts along these lines provide important clues on how the politics of media really work and are, in many cases, valuable contributions to the identification of the nature and magnitude of the constraints and pressure affecting reporting. These works, however, tend to downplay the more elusive but by no means less influential role of cognitive aspects such as metaphors and narrative patterns interiorised by journalists and reproduced, albeit we presume unconsciously, in their narrations of events. The notion of “good” war coverage cannot be grounded on the conventional word-world match, and a more sophisticated concept of truth is needed to establish quality criteria suitable for this type of analysis.

A further point here has to do with the cultural connotations of specific metaphors. The particular understanding of war for a particular society should be part of the picture and questions of intelligibility have to be asked in order to interpret the social saliency of narratives that represent war or traffic as natural phenomena. To accept the idea that the narratives of war coverage are affected by metaphoric representations of the overall state of affairs – e.g. war is a natural phenomena or a crusade – is not enough when the broadcasting agency can reach such a diverse audience as BBC world and CNN International do. If news stories are narrative texts and broadcasting is presumably a communicative act whose intelligibility depends on identifiable (communicative) conditions, then we might suspect the intelligibility of these conditions to be culture-specific rather than generic. To put it differently, the metaphors “we” use in “our” narratives to make an overall point about “them” are constitutive of both “us” and “them”, and – albeit with different connotations – both for “us” and for “them”.⁵ Once the crusade metaphor appears in intercultural communication – such as transnational broadcasting – it performs as a communicative act whose intelligibility varies dramatically from one audience to another.

The cultural dimension of intelligibility is often underestimated as a potential source of undesired effects of communicative behaviour. While conventional communication theory distinguishes the recipient from the content of a message, from the perspective of cultural intelligibility we might dare to suggest that *the recipient is the message*. As a communicative act, the crusade metaphor solicits cohesion, sacrifice and commitment to opposing the threat of terrorism for, say, an audience in the United States Mid-West, but it implies Holy War against Islam to Arab and Israeli audiences in the Middle East – and probably also to European ones. This dimension of intelligibility is particularly relevant when it comes to the analysis of transnational broadcasting because of important elements of ambiguity. In communication theory, the intended recipient of a given message is sometimes called the “target”. The target of transnational broadcasting is not a single audience but rather what we might call an *audience network*: a complex system of interrelated

publics whose identities are difficult to establish. In the 2003 war against Iraq, the audience network of transnational broadcasting included domestic and foreign audiences as well as Western and non-Western ones. For al-Jazeera, BBC World and CNN International audience networks, the conventional distinction between information, propaganda and entertainment was inconsistent. Two examples should suffice:

1. Images of civilian casualties: information about the real effects of war or anti-Allied propaganda? Al-Jazeera presumably held the first position and BBC and CNN the second, but the audience network of each broadcasting company can include both positions.
2. Animations describing the unfolding of the military campaign and the technical characteristics of the weapons system used: information, propaganda or entertainment? Animations of this sort were used by the BBC and to a greater extent by CNN. Although there is evidence that some of the information provided was part of a long planned Information Warfare Campaign, the interpretation of this content and even the effect of propaganda are not homogeneous in the audience network of each broadcasting company.

Looked at from the communicative setting of transnational broadcasting, the crusade metaphor appears both appealing and dangerous. It is appealing for its capacity to frame the narrative of conflict within the universally known plot of good against evil; for its unmatched ability to solicit unconditional acceptance of sacrifice and justification for extreme practices. It is dangerous because, as we shall argue below, it sets tempting but profoundly misleading ethical criteria for multicultural war reporting.

War narratives in BBC World and CNN International

Our point can be summarised as follows: the crusade metaphor is dangerous because it supports narratives which blur the distinction between propaganda and information. In our study, we only consider the two Anglo-American broadcasting companies, CNN International and BBC World. The comparative study of war coverage in the news stories of these organizations provides an interesting approach to conventionally determined aspects of news reporting. The British and the Americans were allies, they both represent Western democratic values and they share a common language and faith. BBC and CNN share a relatively high public acceptance as reliable sources. Nevertheless, our study shows that there are considerable differences between CNN International and BBC World even if these two broadcasting companies are on the same side in the conflict. While the Americans conceived the war as a crusade, the British looked upon it more as a soccer game. We do

not claim that either of the broadcasting companies would explicitly have claimed that the war was either a crusade or a soccer tournament. Our point is that we are able to point out conceptual patterns according to which scattered reports from the war were understood and presented by these agencies. We chose to call these two patterns “crusade” and “soccer game”.

Morality and war

The first and probably more obvious reason why the uncritical adoption of the crusade metaphors is detrimental for journalistic ethics is that it blurs the distinction between information and propaganda. Both fulfil the social need to make sense of tragic events by offering narrative texts that might effectively lead people to tolerate war as inevitable and regard its costs as acceptable in relation to stated goals.⁶ In its functional capacity as controlled mass communication propaganda represents the rule rather than the exception for mass communication in time of war. Control through censorship, manipulation, concealment and selective revelation is not a habit peculiar to authoritarian regimes only but rather a necessity for all types of regimes – whatever their nature – when they are at war.⁷ Notwithstanding some basic common traits, however, war coverage and war propaganda differ in many important respects, among which the role of morality seems particularly significant. In propaganda, the moral ground of broadcasting is established *a priori* by its commitment to one of the warring parties: behaviours are given meaning in relation to their consequences for the war effort as perceived from one – not both – parties in the conflict. Informative communication cannot establish an *a priori* moral ground – except presumably for very general ideas reflecting current beliefs about human rights and military practices. We are not arguing here that moral considerations should be excluded from reporting in order for this to qualify as “good” reporting. Quite the opposite, we are arguing for the adoption of a higher moral ground independent of the beliefs and interests of the opposing military authorities and against the adoption of conceptual metaphors that establish *a priori* where righteousness resides.

People are normally considered good or bad depending on what they do or try to do. On the other hand, the crusade metaphor supported narrative patterns depicting the US and British soldiers as “good guys” and the Iraqi as “bad guys” despite their respective actions. The crusade metaphors effectively sustained the narratives of “enmification”, a concept used in the psychological study of war to denote the whole of communicative practices through which an enemy becomes the Enemy, an absolute Evil who should be given only two options: destruction or redemption (Rieber & Kelly, 1990: 3-39). Moralization transfers the news story about war and the actions related to it from the realm of behaviour to that of identity. The enemy is not bad for what he *does* but for what he *is*. At the same time, the “good guys” are good no matter how cruel and unnecessary violent their practices may

be. The moralization of war is one of the main – if not the main – objectives of war propaganda. Despite a critical attitude toward the arguments for war as presented by the US and British governments, BBC world adopted the same narrative patterns that CNN International did in describing the invasion of Iraq as a war of “liberation” and the Allied forces as morally superior to their Iraqi colleagues.

The actual war coverage was affected in some important respects by the moralization effect of the crusade metaphor. The resistance of the Iraqi army against overwhelming forces at Umm Qasr was downplayed in order not to undermine the unfolding of the Allied psychological and information warfare campaign, which was based on the assumption that the Iraqi army would not fight to defend the regime of Saddam Hussein. The fact that at least the Iraqis did fight meant in practice that either they were supporting a dictator, or that the war of “liberation” was not perceived as such by a significant part of those who were supposed to benefit from it. Both possibilities were detrimental to US and British propaganda.

The issue of civilian casualties become immediately distorted. Serious efforts to assess the human costs of war were perceived as hostile propaganda, and they caused pressure for censorship. Partly as an effort to remove civilian deaths from the picture, the reports on military technology were also moralised. References to the use of high tech weaponry especially by American army was invariably coupled with their supposed precision which gave the Allies an alleged capacity of discerning “bad” and “good” Iraqis. Technological superiority hence translated into the moral supremacy of Allied military practices, *beside the actual effects of these practices*. In this way, the representation of military technology reinforced the crusade narrative pattern and the rhetoric of the “liberation” of Iraq beside the practical consequences of applied military technology on the Iraqi population. The claim about the “undreamt-of” precision of the US arsenal by US Secretary of Defence Ronald Rumsfeld featured repeatedly on both the BBC and CNN, while reports about the use of napalm at the onset of the war, of fragmentation bombs in urban areas, or the accidental killing of civilians, members of the press or even friendly troops was given a lower profile.

However, the most dangerous effect of moralised war narratives created by the crusade metaphor is presumably that on the self-perception of the media regarding their role and performance. This is also the domain in which the differences between BBC World and CNN international are more obvious.

After Baghdad was bombed for the second night in a row, Iraqi officials asked CNN staff to leave the city. Despite the fact that reporters and military analysts explicitly acknowledge the importance of CNN World coverage for the waging of the Allied information campaign and psychological warfare (see e.g. CNN 21 Mar 2003, 07:14 and 07:08 GMT), CNN Jim Clancy showed genuine surprise and resentment. In his opinion CNN coverage was “fair”. This is how he announced that piece of news.

(CNN) You know that we have tried to cover all the sides of the story and bring it to you fairly, showing you all sides of the story ...We have been told now: Iraqi officials are ordering CNN to leave the Iraqi capital Baghdad... We regret to be telling you this because after all the efforts have been made to bring you their side of the story as you've seen here in the last months, weeks, years ... now we've been told that CNN has been ordered to leave Baghdad ...⁸. (CNN, 21 Mar 2003, 16:39 GMT)

CNN felt unjustly punished by Iraqi authorities but showed no sympathy when only a few hours later CNN correspondent at the Pentagon, Barbara Starr, reported live that the US were going to "take over" Iraqi TV and radio. This is how she delivered this piece of news:

(CNN) ... one official said ...we would only strike what we would need to that would be supporting the Iraqi military, we don't want to do anything that is going to cause a humanitarian crisis. He [unnamed military official] forewarned that we might, in the next day or so, see some of Iraqi state-run television and other media being taken over ... by the United States, we would like very much to command the airwaves but we are also concerned that that type of activity might provoke some sort of humanitarian disturbance or unrest ... (CNN 21 Mar 2003, 20:34 GMT)

A few days later, deeper into the war, this is how BBC Carol Walker presented Arab media in a critical report of Allied propaganda efforts:

(BBC) The Arab world is bombarded by news and images of the war [images from al Jazeera TV] Al Jazeera is one of three Arab satellite channels broadcasting 24 hours a day. Tony Blair's assertion that Iraq will be administered by the Iraqis once Saddam has been removed made headlines news today. But often the message from London and Washington is lost amidst the pictures of death and destruction caused by their weapons. Many Arab people find it hard to believe this is supposed to be a war of liberation [images of wounded Iraqi children and women]. The British government is courting the Arab media as never before in its effort to counter hostility to the military action [insertion al Arabya network with critical interview to Foreign Secretary Jack Straw] ... [insert critical comments by Arab journalists] ...But any media campaign can be blown off course by the reality on the ground [American shooting] ... and ultimately the Arab world will be convinced of the motives of Great Britain and the United States only if they leave a genuinely free and independent Iraq after the war is over ... (BBC 3 Apr 2003, 09:51-54 GMT)

Although in other instances unconditionally supportive of British action in the war, available evidence suggests that BBC World was able to partially preserve the media domain from the moralization of the war effort more effectively than CNN International. There are no reasons to believe that CNN

correspondents genuinely believed they were doing a “great job” in covering the war and equally genuinely found it perfectly right that Iraqi TV and radio should be bombed.

Polarization

A further threat to the distinction between information and propaganda in transnational broadcasting springs from the polarization effect the crusade metaphor had on war narratives. Propaganda typically performs its function in providing support for war by emphasising the differences with the enemy as part of the enmification process. In politics polarization is a specific process which leads a multiplicity of actors to converge on a smaller number of positions or to establish a few large coalitions. In international politics, for example, polarization was one of the most overt effects of the Cold War when every state on the planet was compelled to choose among three options: the USA, the USSR or the non-aligned. The most visible effects of polarization are dismissal of criticism and disagreement as hostile behaviour and the treatment of critics as enemies. In doing this, polarization creates artificial identities – forcing actors’ positions into the roles of friends or foes – thus dramatically constraining the possibilities for accurate information, reporting and debate, and enhancing, by contrast, the influence of prejudices and stereotypes (Tajfel, 1981).

The war against Iraq produced similar results in many respects. Even before the beginning of hostilities, when the UN Security Council was still hoping for a non-military solution (extension of the weapons inspectors mission), some in the CNN had already interiorised the “with us or against us” contained in the crusade metaphor. This translated into embarrassing dissenting opinions. This is how, for example, CNN Jim Clancy commented on the speech by the French Foreign Minister, broadcast live from the UN Security Council, which followed the US Secretary of State Colin Powell’s presentation:

(CNN) Firmly on defence and not choosing sides other than the one France has already staked out, and that is calling for more inspections, Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin. They are complicating things if you will, calling for an enhanced regime of inspections that might require another UN Security Council resolution there and saying, we shouldn’t be in any rush to go to war...”.
(CNN 5 Feb 2003, 17.43 GMT)

Right after that, CNN journalist Zain Verjee interviewed the Editor of al-Quds al Arabi, Abdel Bari Atwan. The idea of inviting comments from an Arab journalist was presumably inspired by an effort to voice an alternative view from non-Western commentators. This plan, however, rapidly turned sour once the guest started to express his perplexity and outright disappointment with the overall quality of “evidence” provided by Powell.

(CNN) The issue of an al-Qaeda link to Iraq: what did you make of that?
Atwan I believe this is the Secretary of State's weakest point ... (CNN 23 Feb 2003, 17:43 GMT)

CNN Verjee interrupts Atwan and, after having established that Powell's evidence was compelling, she asks Atwan a question whose value cannot be other than rhetorical:

(CNN) We have seen a lot of visual evidence that most people, some at least, would say was compelling ... Are you convinced by those intercepts that Iraq is hiding weapons, that Iraq is deliberately not cooperating? (CNN 5 Feb 2003, 17:46 GMT)

In his answer, Atwan states that more time should be given to the UN inspectors to actually check the information provided by Powell, which, as such, does not seem convincing enough to justify a war – a point made also by British arms control expert Trevor Findlay simultaneously on air on BBC World. Visibly annoyed by Atwan's response, CNN journalist Zain Verjee cut short the interview, concluding:

(CNN) Unconvincing to you Abdel Bari Atwan [turning away visibly annoyed]. We'll continue to check on you as we dissect the body of what Colin Powell had to say this day at the UN Security Council. (CNN 5 Feb 2003, 17:48 GMT)

While CNN International appears to endorse a stand of militant journalism in support of Powell's case for war, BBC World openly criticises many of the premises on which war was considered necessary. This is how BBC security correspondent Frank Gardner answers the BBC's Stephen Cole's question: "What does Western intelligence really think about Iraq?" a few hours before Powell's speech to the Security Council:

(BBC) What it [Western intelligence] thinks about Iraq is really divided in two issues: Is Iraq hiding weapons of mass destruction? Probably, yes, according to Western intelligence. Has Iraq, or has Saddam Hussein's regime, got an institutional link with al-Qaeda? Almost certainly no. Now what we are seeing here, Steve, is a large degree of manipulation of this intelligence by politicians. It's clearly in President Bush's interest and in Prime Minister Tony Blair's interest to pump up the case against Saddam Hussein as much as possible. (BBC 5 Feb 2003, 11:06 GMT)

At about the same time when the CNN journalist Zain Verjee was reprimanding her Arab colleague, BBC's Nik Gowing went so far into his critical attitude toward Powell's alleged "evidence" as to ask Trevor Findlay, arms control expert and executive director of Vertic, the following question:

(BBC) (Gowing): Should we have assumed, should we believe that this is genuine, or in other words has not been put together in a lab by the CIA or the dirty tricks department somewhere in Washington? (...) The reason I've said that is that, of course, if we think back to the incubator story, of the babies, where the incubators were switched off in Kuwait, we now know that that was all fabricated, put together by the dirty tricks department back in 1990 – 1991

(Findlay): Indeed ... so that is possible ...

(BBC, 5 Feb 2003, 17:45 GMT)

Despite an overall more critical stand on the specificities of Powell's case for war, however, BBC International like CNN World established an important historical linkage which framed the symbolical meaning of that presentation in more positive terms for the US. The case for war against Iraq was associated with one of the most delicate moments in the history of the Cold War, when the world seemed to be on the brink of a direct military confrontation between the US and the USSR: the address of US Ambassador Adlai Stevenson in the same forum forty years earlier, facing the Soviet Ambassador with the "photographic evidence" of missiles in Cuba in 1963. First on BBC:

(BBC) ... Another place, another time, but history is almost repeating itself. Just over four decades ago the US Ambassador to the UN, Adlai Stevenson, presented evidence to the Security Council that showed a nuclear missile build-up in Cuba. Now the Bush administration is attempting to replicate that dramatic diplomatic feat ... (BBC 5 Feb, 11:01 GMT)

And later on CNN:

(CNN) You can't help drawing a comparison with a dramatic event at the United Nations four decades ago. That was when US Ambassador Adlai Stevenson confronted the Russian ambassador with photographic evidence of Russian missiles in Cuba. Will Secretary Powell's turn before the Security Council have the same impact? (CNN 5 February, 15:15 GMT)

Notwithstanding obvious inconsistencies, this analogy deserves attention for the linkage it establishes with the Cold War narrative. In this narrative, the US action was legitimised on the ground that the enemy was an agent of somebody else, just as Western communist parties in those days, were believed to be the "fifth column" of the USSR. By establishing a narrative linkage with the Cuban missile crisis, CNN World and BBC International effectively recalled the political polarization of international affairs in those years and the US supremacy as the leader of the "free world" – an idea that appears much less convincing today. At the same time the linkage implicitly depicts the Saddam regime as a threat of comparable magnitude to that of Cuba equipped with nuclear missiles, and both as "agents" of a bigger and more threatening power – Bin Laden and the Soviet Union respectively. Notwith-

standing the fact that the British intelligence services report leaked to the BBC explicitly denied effective links between the Saddam regime and al-Qaeda, the narrative of the war against Iraq was presented as a legitimate initiative in the frame of the “war on terror” since the beginning. CNN International and, surprisingly given its more critical attitude on the issue, BBC World did not hesitate to adopt a narrative pattern which supported, rather than challenged, the analogy with the US – Soviet confrontation at the UN Security Council on the Cuban missiles.

A certain image of the West

The moralization and polarization of war narratives brought about by the adoption of the crusade metaphor by BBC World and CNN International contributed, presumably unintentionally, to discrediting the multicultural claim of these companies. Far from being “global”, their war narratives represent not even the majority of the views in the West but rather those of a relatively small minority with rather specific cultural, ideological and political traits – and certainly not very multicultural ones.

BBC World was more critical than CNN in giving coverage to those who did not find the Bush and Blair case against Saddam convincing enough to justify a war. This critical stand was lost however once the war appeared inevitable. On 17 March 2003, after the pro-war coalition renounced the effort of legalizing the war with a vote by the UN Security Council, they both seemed to endorse the US and British stand on the issue: war had become inevitable because of, rather than despite, the lack of determination by the UN, and France was to blame for it (e.g. CNN 17 Mar 2003, 15:16 GMT; BBC 17 Mar 2003, 18:06 – 18:08 GMT).

In addition, while ambassadors from Germany, Russia, China and France were having talks to try to avoid the war and Hans Blix was still working on his report, both BBC World and CNN International shifted their attention to the future battlefield to come: the former showing the opposing armies as soccer teams before a game (BBC 17 Mar 2003, 15:21 and 15:22 GMT), the latter issuing warnings of an impending chemical attack – eventually to be proved groundless (CNN 17 Mar 2003, 16:51 GMT). Since the very early hours after the so-called “breakdown” of diplomacy and later in the early stage of the war, BBC and CNN showed a marked inclination to uncritically adopt the narratives and even some linguistic formulas used by British and American political and military authorities (e.g. “decapitation” and “opportunity strike”, “shock and awe”, the “liberation” of Iraq, etc.).

It might be argued that patriotism might actually be a luxury that transnational broadcasting cannot afford. Or then, from a different perspective, the point may presumably be that no transnational broadcasting can stick to journalism’s ethics of independence when vital national values are at stake – and that the

BBC and CNN should give up their “global” claim and settle for a more modest but credible role as international voices of national cultures. Narrative polarization undermines the global claim of these broadcasting organizations. It does so because the political purpose of this and other formulations such as the “war on terror” or the “liberation” of Iraq were originally produced to support the idea that the US and the UK governments are the only credible advocates and models of Western “civilizations”. Endorsing their point of view means giving those governments authority and credibility far beyond the scope of their mandate and, what is most important for transnational media, seriously undermining their own credibility world wide.

This aspect should be taken even more seriously in view of the “clash of civilization” rhetoric and its influence on the narratives of the “war on terror” adopted by both the American and the British governments. Seen through these narratives, the war against Iraq was only one step in a broader struggle with strong cultural connotations, which reaches indefinitely into the future and spreads unbounded at every level of society and in every corner of the world. While the “vision” behind this rhetoric is by no means dominant in the West, the adoption of the crusade metaphor in transnational broadcasting war narrative supports and reproduces the sub-culture which identifies with that vision.

Neither the BBC nor CNN were able to resist the political polarization which accompanied and supported the diplomatic drift. Even less were they able to do so when the war started and the focus shifted to the coverage of British and American military action along the familiar patterns of “infotainment” (Brants, 1998; Thussu, 2003). In doing this, the BBC and CNN endorsed in practice, if not in principle, the idea that the war against Iraq was indeed a “crusade”, by exhibiting narratives which unambiguously reflected the standpoint of the British and American political and military authorities. While patriotism understandably generates unilateral sympathies, the narrative moralization and polarisation of war coverage in Iraq established unnatural identity boundaries which amplified the social influence of groups whose interests and/or social identity actually depended on confrontational rhetoric for effective preservation. The moralization and polarization of the war brought about by “crusading” narrative patterns fostered, despite a rational interest in the opposite, the perception of war as a clash of civilizations rather than the “liberation” of Iraqi people from an authoritarian regime.

Towards an ethic of transnational broadcasting: intelligibility analysis

We would like, in conclusion, to summarize the overall point of this article and focus on some implications which can be drawn from it for an ethic of accountability in transnational broadcasting.

Seen through the reports of BBC World and CNN International, the war against Iraq did not appear at all as a “liberation” but rather as an episode in the “crusade” that Bush unwittingly announced earlier in September 2001. This metaphor turned out to be a dangerous one for these organizations because of the particular traits of the conceptual structure behind it. This conceptual structure had an effect on the war narrative that was presumably beyond awareness and hence beyond control, producing the distortions we have here described in terms of moralization and polarization. Taken together, these distortions undermine – fatally in our view – the global claim of these organizations, exposing a patriotic attitude which, albeit in principle understandable, is hardly compatible with the professional standards commonly accepted – and applied – elsewhere.

In this article we have endorsed the view that the practical possibility of assessing media performance is a necessary and preliminary step for the notions of public interest and accountability to be usefully applied to media communication. While accountability seems to be particularly important in relation to transnational broadcasting by virtue of its influence, it is not necessary for overt pressures to be exerted by identifiable political actors for these biases to exist. The sheer dependency by the military authorities for much desired action footage, the pressing rhythm imposed by extended live broadcasting, and the intrinsic tendency to simplify complex events to make them intelligible to an extremely wide and diverse audience are just some of the aspects supporting the narrative model chosen by transnational broadcasting to cover the war against Iraq.

Looked at from the perspective of narrative intelligibility, the role of metaphors seems to merit further attention. At least two ideas in this respect can be drawn from this type of analysis. The first one is *narrative awareness*: the sensitivity toward the social dimension of a narrative text, the capacity to distinguish the metaphors behind war news stories and to acknowledge their distinctive narrative implications. This type of awareness should be considered part of those professional requirements that make journalists both authoritative and accountable for the quality of their work.

The second idea is narrative *appropriateness*. Applied to the type of metaphor and the conceptual structure utilized to experience the war to make sense of it in news stories, narrative appropriateness should be a basic requisite for good broadcasting. This idea requires that the conceptual structure on which the metaphor is based is supportive, compatible or at least not at odds with the kind of actions considered appropriate to the state of affairs where a particular metaphor is applied. In this light, for example, the narrativization of traffic accidents in terms of natural phenomena is not appropriate if the purpose of social communication is to solicit more responsible and cautious behaviour on the part of car drivers. This notion seems to be particularly important when intercultural communication is at stake – as is very much the case in transnational broadcasting. In this respect, we firmly

believe that the invasion of Iraq could have been represented differently if the goal was to curtail the ideological appeal of opposing fundamentalisms.

The analysis of narrative intelligibility can help to identify culture-specific narrative patterns and the metaphor/s supporting them. It might help to shed some light on how the crusade metaphor is kept alive through narrative texts that unconsciously reproduce it and how unwanted effects in political communication among the main actors tend to reinforce it. Since metaphors are culture-specific – they have a given meaning only in relation to a given culture – this kind of analysis seems to provide a more reliable standpoint for the analysis of culture-specific elements in transnational broadcasting – the metaphors “we” use in “our” narratives to make an overall point with “them”.

At times when the political atmosphere seems ever more poisoned by prejudice and hostile stereotyping, critical news broadcasting appears as an increasingly valuable form of controlled communicative behaviour. Intelligibility analysis, we believe, can help in fostering awareness and understanding, preserving diversity in opinion and respect for beliefs but, at the same time, making ignorance an inexcusable fault.

Notes

1. According to semiotics, there are the following types of signs: icons, indexes, and symbols. Icons are signs that represent, or refer, due to morphological or structural similarity, e.g. a portrait is an iconic representation of the person portrayed. Indexes are naturally or conventionally related to the thing they refer to, e.g. fever is an indexical representation of health disorder. Symbols are purely conventional signs, such as words, traffic signs, or letters. A single sign, e.g. a television image, usually carries iconic, indexical as well as symbolic meaning. The iconic function of an image may consist in the fact that it portrays Saddam Hussein, its indexical significance being that a certain piece of news deals with Iraq. However, the symbolic meaning of that image could be that there is a sinister fate awaiting the Iraqi people if they do not surrender to the U.S. forces.
2. According to text linguistics, there are the following text types: narrative, descriptive, instructive and argumentative. Paradigmatic examples: narrative – a joke; descriptive – a phone directory; instructive – a user’s manual; argumentative – practical syllogism. Events can be presented in all four text types.
3. By “propositional”, we mean that a certain expression asserts or proposes that a certain state of affairs is the case (“that P”). For instance, in speech act theory, cf. Searle, utterances are supposed to have a certain *propositional content*. According to this line of thought, a speech act can be successful only if the proposition is true. If it is not true – for instance in fiction – speech act theorists regard the act as parasitic, pretended or something else of that kind.
4. According to Adolf Reinach and David Armstrong, there are two kinds of entities: particulars and states of affairs. (Chains of events would be states of affairs according to this dichotomy.) Particulars are either temporal or non-temporal, i.e. events (I become angry) and objects (my chair). Linguistically, particulars are identified by the use of nouns, e.g. “chair”, “cat”, “birth”. The ontological nature of particulars is that they *exist* (or do not exist). Particulars cannot be modalised (e.g. there are no possible chairs, possible cats, impossible births or necessary examinations). There are no negative particulars (i.e. there are no negative chairs in my room, the smallest number is zero).

States of affairs are different from particulars in the following ways: Linguistically, states of affairs can be identified by the use of phrases such as “it is the case that ...”, “it is necessary that ...”, or “it is impossible that ...”. They do not exist, they either obtain or do not obtain. Either it is the case that Finland lost the war or it is not the case. States of affairs can be modalised. Hence it is possible that Finland lost the war, or even necessary.

Reinach's makes his main point in this context regarding types of mental acts related to particulars and states of affairs. He claims that particulars are primarily *objects of perception*. States of affairs, on the other hand, are primarily *objects of judgment*. We see cars, trees and people. We appreciate, dislike and worry about states of affairs. Our contribution to this discussion is to claim that narrating belongs to the “judgement” type of mental acts but not to the “perception” type. That is why one of us claims (Lundsten 1999) that television is a *presentational* but not a *perceptual* medium.

5. The practices constituting an “inside” also establish concomitantly an outside; the message contained in the crusade metaphor is directed at both domestic and foreign audiences. For the conceptualisation of this problem in IR theory see Walker, 1993.
6. This feature, despite technological evolution, has remained very much the same since the advent of the mass media and can be regarded as a structural element of war propaganda.
7. This is why, we might say, war is not a healthy exercise for the preservation of democratic values and political freedoms, and why nations engaged in a prolonged state of war cannot remain democratic for long. This point was made long ago by Lasswell (1927: 627-631). For a different contemporary view see Bernays, 1928.
8. The Iraqi decision came as no surprise given that CNN reporters in Baghdad had been commenting on the hits of US bombardment and on the direction of the anti-aircraft fire, more or less consciously providing Allied military authorities with precious information for damage assessment and countermeasures.

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III

THE SACRED AND (POST)MODERN MEDIA CULTURE

Sacred Scenarios and Digital Narratives

Larry Friedlander

Once people began writing and printing books, stories became words, words, and only words. In pre-literate times, by contrast, stories were performances enacted in space and time. The storyteller was an actor and an improviser, working in front of a lively and unpredictable audience gathered perhaps around the hearth after a day of work, or crowding into the communal hall at festivities and rituals. Performing in such an environment, the narrator had to work hard to keep the audience's attention, singing, pacing the area, gesturing, or even miming key moments of the action. The story thus unrolled in a rich aural and spatial world where the sounds of the lute and gasps of the audience underscored and parsed the narrative performance. Once the collective audience became the modern solitary reader, however, this primitive environment was lost. Instead, authors had to learn new techniques of language and structure to compensate for the lack of physical presence. Now, in our time, the wheel has come full circle. In this digital age, the computer returns us to the past, to a narrative scene replete with lively interaction and complex spatial enactments.

The digital environment is richly aural, spatial, and multi-dimensional. Digital story comes wrapped in a new kind of flexible and virtual space that acts as a container for and an enabler of narrative meaning. Unlike the flat and unchanging spatial field of the book, the electronic screen is complex, dynamic and open-ended, a space of quick and endless transformations, one linked invisibly to an almost infinite variety of other spaces. With a computer we can "perform" the narrative, and even invite the audience to participate in the very creation of the work. Digital stories therefore differ from printed texts in these two basic ways: they are visual and they are interactive.

Because of these features, this digital space reaches out to include the audience in powerful ways. No longer passive, the user actively intervenes in the unrolling of the narrative. Interactivity is not an accidental feature of this medium but its very essence. It is not enough for digital authors to tell a story, they must provide the reader (or the user, to employ the current term) with opportunities to react to the story. Sometimes this interaction is only

minimal, a matter of stopping or starting the story, or zooming in on one element, or choosing a pathway through the events or exploring an environment. But the user can also intervene more radically and alter the very meaning of the story. For example, he or she can change the ending, introduce a new character or a new setting, or link the narrative to others in the electronic ether. In fact, new technologies can virtually insert the user into the narrative as an “avatar” or persona, or can transfer the site of the narrative from the screen to mobile devices, or to multiple sites. So storytelling must now take into account the space of the story and the physical surroundings of the users.

The challenges

Both these aforementioned features – interactivity and visual/spatial experience – disrupt the ordinary strategies of printed narratives and pose new challenges for the digital author. The primitive storyteller had no difficulty in gauging and responding to his audience’s reactions. He was physically present and was able to exploit body, voice and space to keep his audience’s interest. But the digital author is not present and, even more important, he or she does not tell the story directly, but rather writes a program that will then generate, organize and supervise the unfolding of the narrative. Now, how can a computer program interact with its audience the way the Bard of old did? Like the Bard, the program should provide for maximum interaction and meaningful and shapely narrative by responding to and integrating the user’s interaction. An ideal program would maintain a firm sense of the plot structure even as the plot is being tugged at in all kinds of unexpected directions by the user’s interactions. Such a program would ‘understand’ the overarching shape of a story and then integrate the user’s actions into a coherent and aesthetically satisfying story.

But a program is not a person and it cannot understand a story; it can only execute choices that are built into its code. It is rather like the Golem of legend: powerful and stupid at the same time. It can create virtual worlds and execute extraordinary commands but it has limited knowledge of the real world and of the users and their reactions, and an even more limited understanding of what makes a good story. So the program instructions, or algorithms, must supply provide the program with a clear outline of narrative choices and eventualities that the program can consult as it rolls along, making the story happen. The algorithm must define the underlying structure of the narrative, ensuring that the story has a beginning, middle and end, and that the narrative has a pace and complexity that makes it exciting and meaningful.

Interaction makes writing such an algorithm very difficult, as the programmer cannot foresee what the user will do or choose at any one point. As the

user freely roams from one choice to another, the story can disintegrate into a muddle of events and moments without the tense, forward movement we expect in a good story. If however, to counter this potentially chaotic situation, the program completely controls all the major elements of the narrative and the user is only allowed trivial interventions in the story, then the excitement of interaction is lost. The problem lies in finding the balance between structure and freedom, between allowing the user freedom to intervene radically, by changing the outcome for example, or restricting the user's choices in ways that maintain tight control over plot and character. The more power the program allows the user, the more difficult it is for the program to create an aesthetically pleasing narrative.

To solve these difficulties, digital authors have taken one of two strategies: either they emphasize traditional story values – tight plotting, nuanced characters, surprise and climax – and simply deploy the spatial elements as a neutral background (much like a book), or conversely they create very simple plots and place them in a richly interactive and visually exciting world (as in video games for example). Many video games use such archetypal narrative structures familiar to us from myth and folktale, ones we might call names such as The Quest, the Battle between Good and Evil, the Trip Through the Forest and so forth. These narrative forms provide a clear and flexible way to provide structure to the interactive experience. The program can follow rules that tell it to keep the hero on a certain path and to permit only certain deviations from the appropriate way forward, and to reward the hero at the end of the journey. Such simple structures can deliver extraordinarily complex results when applied with some ingenuity, as these games indeed demonstrate. But these schema are finally too simple and not capable of supplying the satisfyingly dense and nuanced effects of traditional fiction. But can we design stories with complex and nuanced plots and characters that also exploit the full potential of the virtual environments, *and* are also nimbly responsive to the audience's participation? If we could provide the program with a more complex schema, an algorithm that defines the intersection of a temporal narrative (such as the archetypes I have just mentioned) with the spatial orders within which the narrative experience unfolds, we could produce an interactive narrative that unites time and space dimensions.

I will suggest in this article that we can find a model for narratives that intricately combine narrative and spatial structures in certain underlying patterns of myth and ritual. I will call these paradigmatic patterns, *sacred scenarios*. As in a theatrical script, a scenario defines both the setting and the modes of action that can occur within a performance. A sacred scenario describes the spatial relationship between the human and the sacred and from this relationship generates a set of possible actions or narratives that can move through this sacred environment. These scenarios are what make myth and ritual possible. If we can imagine designing a digital narrative that is built on these traditional scenarios we may have one way, and only one of course, to frame and organize the mix of elements in the digital world.

Sacred scenarios: supporting myth and ritual

The sacred scenario specifies the way the humans and gods interact and the space in which this interaction takes place. As these scripts contain the possibility for both narrative and rite, they enlarge our notions of narrative and in so doing present us with some intriguing possibilities for digital storytelling. This sounds very abstract, so here are a few examples:

Myth: In the Norse Eddas we read the tale of the Yggdrasil (“The Terrible One’s Horse”), also called the World Tree, a giant Ash tree that grows out of the nether world and penetrates into the sky, binding together all the three worlds. The great god Odin, master of wisdom and death, lives at the top of the tree and sends his ravens daily to fly up and down its length to spy out the doings of the inhabitants of earth and hell.

Ritual: In Siberia, in Nepal, in Indonesia, and elsewhere, shamans cut down a tree that has been magically selected and, planting it on front of their huts, climb to the top. There they voyage in trance to other worlds, where they discover the source of the calamities afflicting the community, and help stray souls return to the human world.

Two sacred modes, narration and rite. Clearly, they are connected but how and why? While scholars dispute the priority of one over the other¹ – whether the rite enacts the story or whether the myth has been invented to explain the rite it is clear that both narrative and rite share a similar spatial and cosmological vision. The myths and rituals that employ the notion of a World Tree envision the cosmos as a layered bundle of worlds which is bisected by central axis or natural highway.² The action that typifies this paradigm is the journey up and down the tree. The object of the journey is to discover or recover knowledge and wisdom from the other worlds in order to benefit the community on earth. Traveling along this perpendicular path is difficult and only certain gifted and skilled spiritual technicians can navigate its perils and penetrate into the forbidden upper and lower realms. During this journey, for example, shamans confront terrifying demons and monsters and are often boiled alive and their bodies reconstituted. These “spiritual technicians” are aided in their dangerous quest by the community’s presence at the rituals, and by the cultural shared belief in the efficacy of the rite, a belief that is strengthened by each iteration of the rite.

The importance of such scenarios is attested in the huge number of stories involving World Trees or ladders (or even bridges) current throughout the world, from Siberia, to Nepal, to Africa and North America. In the Bible, for example, we read of Jacob’s ladder, a site where angels can descend and humans can ascend. Such sites supply a frame for many kinds of sacred stories and practices³ and suggest a deep relationship between story and rite. Each is a different mode of actualizing a mythic intuition common to many peoples, i.e. that there is a link between different realms of space, time, and meaning, and that travel between these spaces brings knowledge, power, and danger. The story develops this mythic intuition as history and explana-

tion, using it to clarify the origin and nature of the cosmos; the rite, through the actions it prescribes, actualizes the power of the intuition, and revives and unleashes the powers that are implicitly promised in this view of the world. Neither does exactly what the other does. The two modes are complementary, both referring to an underlying narrative pattern, or scenario, that symbolically enacts a particular specific culture's view of the cosmos and of man's place in the largest schemes imaginable.

A focus on sites where human and supernatural realms intersect is a feature of "scenarios" found in many cultures, but each culture evolves its own specific version.⁴ For example, let us take a rite and story common to our Western culture. We have all read or heard of the Last Supper, and we all can see the connection of this narrative to the rite of Communion in which worshippers share in the magical transformation of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. In this paired narrative and rite, or sacred scenario, the divine is imagined as descending into natural objects (food), and then as penetrating even more deeply into our world by being ingested and swallowed by the ritual participants. Thus the altar is a channel through which the divine power descends to enter into the wine and bread, and from thence into our bodies. In contrast to the paradigm of the world tree, the concern of this sacred scenario is not so much to permit voyage to the other worlds but rather to draw the power and grace of the heavenly realms directly into our bodies.

Yet other sacred scenarios involve creating a site to house gods on earth. In Greek temples, the statue of the god resides in a house specially prepared for it and the worshipper needs to penetrate within this divine dwelling to contemplate, worship, and perhaps achieve a mystic merger with the divinity. This kind of space is also notably found in Buddhist mandalas, where it is actualized purely through the mental concentration of the worshipper who visualizes the sacred edifice and then, in deep concentration, journeys into it and through it to the innermost sanctum of the deity. Here the emphasis is on the means the worshipper uses to actually enter into and decipher the mystery of the dwelling, and what can be learned or risked in the process.

Sacred scenario as matrix for digital narrative

Sacred scenarios unite topology with narrative and provide us with a huge store of narrative shapes and patterns that articulate basic human experiences. Because they are so fundamental, they potentially deliver exciting fantasy narratives with deeply held and emotionally charged visions of life. As such they are rich resources for the digital world. An author could expand and reshape these paradigms into modern myths.

Imagine a digital story in which the basic movement in time and space is modeled on such a paradigmatic scenario. In such a narrative environment,

the user would be able to explore the space freely but the space would have a pre-assigned shape (such as one modeled on a World Tree or on a tabernacle). This underlying shape would effectively constrain and define the scope of the user's possible interactions. The program would understand what kinds of moves and events are appropriate to each part of the space and to each section of narrative time, and thus would be able to order and limit the user's freedom thereby facilitating the emergence of a shapely narrative. That is, in the world tree environment the digital program would be free to generate multiple stories as long as the resultant stories are structured about a journey to the upper or lower worlds, and as long as they contain certain actions or events (an incantation, a flight, an encounter with a demon, a change in shape and so on) that belong in this kind of sacred space. The program could specify rules based on simple polarities and binary categories such as: up down, in-out, gate-threshold-interior, center-circumference, leave-return and so on. These simple spatial categories could be amplified and made dramatic by the addition of more emotionally charged yet still simple ones such as: enemy-friend, protector and deceiver, and self-other. Using these sets of polarities and descriptors, we could devise algorithms that control an interactive experience, allowing freedom for users' interactions and still keeping the experience anchored to the space/time structure of the story.

In a journey on the World Tree, for example, the computer could understand what actions are possible within the paradigm, what goals are acceptable, and how to dramatically enhance the story by the inclusion of obstacles and helping agents. In the sacred space, every participant has a richly defined persona complete with goals, attitudes, and gifts: supplicant, shaman, warrior, communicant, choice-maker, riddle-solver. This means that the scenarios would provide the designer of the program with a set of characters and functions whose features can be incorporated into the code of the program.

When realms meet there is a dynamic exchange of power and knowledge, of voyage and return, of the possibilities of transformation and the risks of such a transformation. And such dynamics enrich our stories and make them deeply human. My purpose in calling attention to these scenarios is to offer designers and authors paradigms that could enrich their narrative structures. Instead of a one-dimensional narrative structure (such as the hero's journey or the battle of god and evil) we can work with a multi-dimension structure that is focused on the intersection of planes and worlds.

Some versions of sacred scenarios

Now let me briefly point to some examples and describe how each of these paradigms acts to generate story and ritual. Each scenario may be distinguished by the differing ways it locates this intersection of worlds, and the types of actions that are appropriate to this site. Specifically I will discuss

five kinds – the World Tree, the Body of God, the Mandala, the Tabernacle, and the Crossroads, and try to 1) identify kinds of narrative associated with each, and 2) suggest some possible ways these spaces can work to form and enrich digital narratives.

Journeys up and down

Many cultures imagine the world to be somewhat like a giant layer cake, with separate spaces for different beings lying on top each other, but with a link or chain or ladder that enables movement between these separate realms under special conditions. This link is often imagined as a giant “World Tree” whose roots go into the underworld and whose top penetrates into the world of the gods. This view of cosmos is culturally expressed both in narrative and in rite.

The Edda recounts the tale of the Yggdrasil (“The Terrible One’s Horse”), also called the World Tree, a giant ash tree that grows out of the nether world and penetrates into the sky, binding together all the three worlds. The tree lies at the center of the world (axis mundi) and allows access to all of space and to the three realms: the realm of Asgard (the realms of the gods), Jotunheim (the realm of humans), and Niflheim (the realm of the dead.). Three wells lie at its base: the Well of Wisdom (Mímisbrunnr), guarded by Mimir; the Well of Fate (Urdarbrunnr), guarded by the Norns; and the Hvergelmir (Roaring Kettle), the source of many rivers. Odin, who is god of wisdom and of death, lives at the top of the tree in the realm of the gods and he sends his ravens to fly through all the realms and bring back news of what is occurring there.

Another story is told also of a world tree, but this time within the fairy tale tradition: Jack plants the bean and a stalk grows up to the sky. Ascending the giant stalk, Jack enters the worlds of the Giants where he steals powerful magic objects, angering the supernatural beings who then pursue him down to earth. He only escapes when he cuts down the stalk, barring the Giants’ entrance into the human world.⁵

Versions of these scenarios as rituals are found the world over. Typically shamans in a vision see a certain tree out in the forest, which is then sought out, cut down, trimmed of its branches, brought back into the village, and implanted anew in a central public location. In a trance, singing, drumming and invoking the gods, the shaman climbs the tree and voyages to the realms of the gods and the dead, bringing back clues to the cause of sickness and calamities afflicting the people. As Eliade explains, “The birch symbolizes the Cosmic Tree or Axis of the World, and that is therefore conceived as occupying the Center of the World; by climbing it, the shaman undertakes an ecstatic journey to the Center.”⁶

Such rites clearly depend on a vision of the structure of the cosmos that replicates the one we saw in the myth and fairy tales. The rites both depict

the story of ascent and descent into non-human realms and they empower the shaman to actually breakthrough into other realms and to steal its secrets for human use.⁷

This scenario consists of a precisely imagined spatial configuration and of actions that arise from the nature of that space. The space here is dominated by a vertical structure that rises through and ruptures the boundaries separating the three worlds, and the action it permits is the ascent and descent of the ecstatically transfigured being, the shaman, who in the name of his people dares to travel between the worlds in order to wrest knowledge or treasure and bring it back to our world.

Dante's *Divine Comedy* offers a Western narrative built on the pattern of the World Tree. The poet is a kind of shaman being tutored by an elder magician, the poet Virgil. The poet is taken on a journey down and up through the three worlds of Hell, Purgatory and Heaven, so that he may bring news of these realms back to the human world and thus rescue all of us from the sins that spring from our ignorance of the divine cosmology.

Eating the Gods

The story is told: on the night before his crucifixion Jesus partakes of bread and wine with his disciples. Lifting the cup and the wafer he says: "This is my body and blood." A rite is enacted. The priest lifts a chalice with wine breaks a wafer and feeds the communicants at the altar rails who ingest the body of the God, and with it the power of his grace. The rite at once tells or refers to the story as found in the New Testament and it also actualizes the narrative, turning it from mere story to powerful and efficacious action. The wine actually becomes, at least for the believers, the blood of Christ. Both myth and rite however depend on an anterior story pattern, which imagines that the Divine can descend to the world and can be literally ingested into the human realm. As in the scenario of the World Tree, we have an intersection of realms and a rupturing of boundaries. The difference here is that it is the deity who does the traveling, and it is the god who sacrifices himself and not the shaman.

Now this rite has its origins in early Israelite culture, as we can quite clearly see in the rituals of the Seder feast which center about the ceremonial consumption of unleavened bread and of four cups of wine. But, interestingly enough, the Jewish rite is explained by quite another story, that of the Jews' flight from Egypt. In this early Jewish narrative, the blood refers not to Jesus' blood but to the tenth plague, when God shed the blood of the enemy's first born, and the bread not to Jesus' body but to the matzo the Jews baked in their hasty exit from the land of Egypt.

We see here an example of the resilience and flexibility of these myth/rite ensembles which serve two quite different religions, while still maintaining the underlying paradigm: both these stories and rites involve a meeting

of two realms, not through travel between spatially separated realms but through a miraculous transformation of food into flesh and blood. So the heavenly realm descends into the human: in the Jewish story, the liberation of the Israelites through the intervention of God; in the Christian, the actual ingestion of the god during Communion. What is striking is that, while the story/rite cluster has undergone profound changes it still maintains an underlying structure which helps to generate new stories and rites. In the same way, the notion of the ceremonial ingestion of divine power manifests itself in innumerable stories and myths throughout history and even reappears in modern genres such as horror, especially in tales of vampires.

Penetrating into the house of God

Hindu temples serve as the residence of a deity, though in this case the house of the god is erected deep in the innermost darkness of the sacred temple precincts: a small dark unadorned place where the statue of the god is dressed, bathed and fed in rites that serve to lure the god's spirit into the space. Worshippers circumambulate the precincts in a clockwise direction gradually penetrating the temple through increasingly sacred spaces until they come upon the womb chamber of the god.

In Tibetan Buddhism, a mandala is also a representation of the palace of a deity but one that is that is painted on a two-dimensional surface, or actually constructed as a three dimensional model, or even simply visualized by the devotee in meditative trance. It is used for private meditation and for public rituals of initiation. The word itself is Sanskrit for a circle or polygon, alluding to the typical shape of the mandala, as a series of squares embedded in concentric circles. Every part of the representation refers to an aspect of the palace, its outer walls, its gates, gardens, and internal rooms; at the same time, each element has a spiritual significance, embodying various virtues or wisdom the meditator needs to gain to progress on her path, and the obstacles she must overcome. For example, the mandala is directionally oriented to the cardinal points and the meditator must enter by one of these gates, each of which offers a different opportunity and different moral challenge (such as generosity and greed) she must, however, pass the four outer circles: the purifying fire of wisdom, the vajra circle, and the circle with the eight tombs, the lotus circle. Wrathful deities bar the way to those not capable of the spiritual task and act to destroy the imperfections attending the meditator. A circle of fire surrounds the palace, being the circle of samsara, the suffering deluded everyday world, and so on. The iconography of these elements is fixed by tradition, but there are countless ways to assemble and compose the array of gods, deities, symbols, producing many moving works of art (which accounts for the multitude of profoundly beautiful mandalas that exist).

However, the purpose of the mandala is not aesthetic appreciation but practical spiritual profit. By entering the mandala in guided mediation the

aspirant moves along a carefully constructed spiritual path that eventuates in the sight of the inner Buddha who presides over this realm; in advanced practice the meditator experiences a merging with the central deity, thereby incorporating the deity's wisdom and potency.

It should be immediately obvious that there are profound connections between the mandala paradigm and the world tree. In both, we enter into non-human realms in search of power and even of union with the supernatural. However, the mandala as a space suggests a different underlying cosmological paradigm and a different kind of story for in it the deity is seen as enthroned on the earth. In Tibetan the word mandala is translated as circle/circumference, alluding to the journey from outside to an inner point of knowing, but also suggesting that the circumference (denoting the profane world of desire and unruly passion) is potentially the center, i.e. the place for transformation of those passions to the energies of compassion and wisdom.⁸ What prevents us from accessing the deity is our lack of vision and insight, so we must train and cleanse our perceptions and sharpen our spiritual sensitivity and then we will be granted a vision that will transform us.

Proust's masterwork, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, depends on this pattern of outside and inside, center and circumference. The narrator is drawn into the center of his world (of Parisian high society) and encounters its deities – glamour, fame, social prestige, and artistic accomplishment. As he proceeds deeper and deeper into this mundane palace he increasingly sees through the illusion of these worldly powers and substitutes a more accurate and spiritual view of the inhabitants, until finally, at the end of work, he is granted a vision of the innermost deity, the great principle of time and decay and mortality, and then he is granted the power to go and construct his own palace, the palace of art, as seen in his work. This progression through realms of illusion in search of a purification of vision and an encounter with innermost truth shapes many great works. Both the mandala and the Proust are stories that promote personal rituals of penetrating insight.

Solving puzzles: Crossroads/Labyrinths

"In a labyrinth, you do not lose yourself," the lady told me at Grace Cathedral.

"In a labyrinth, you find yourself."⁹

The story of Oedipus hinges on a meeting at a crossroads. Oedipus, in a fit of anger strikes down an older man in the carriage, who tragically turns out to be his father. That Oedipus takes that fateful step at the place where three roads meet suggests the portentous nature of human experience. The play specifically connects the crossroads with the intersection of past, present and future and suggests that we, like Oedipus, are placed at every moment in the intersection of temporal possibilities and forced to make momentous and life-defining choices. No wonder crossroads were places of wonder and dread,

and that the Goddess whose statue ruled the site was Hecate, the three headed deity who was Queen of the Underworld. She was one of the triple goddesses, along with Demeter and Persephone, and she was connected with the forces of the nether regions that both benefit and threaten humans. As goddess of magic and the night, she was often shown with three faces and three arms, suggesting her position at the intersection of past, present, and future. Hence she is the Lady of the Crossroads, and often offerings of food were left to her there, especially during the full and new moon¹⁰.

Her ambiguous status as Goddess and Demon derives from the mythic intuition that choice leads to the grave, and that the power of decision is framed by the limitation of human choice; eventually all our choices will only lead us to the final moment of decision, when past and future fold into a present that disappears into the maw of death. Hecate was supplicated by the sacrifice of puppies, a particularly cruel rite to the modern imagination. Yet she was also a guardian for those who could see past the terrors of the crossroads, as she guided people to safety through the underworld and protected the natural world by ensuring the return of spring after the false death of winter.

Narratives of the crossroads type are staples of certain kinds of popular action stories where heroes are faced with agonizing decisions with the life and death of civilizations at stake. An interesting version of this paradigm is found in a story that has lasted in spite of its melodramatic and sentimental elements, "The Lady or the Tiger" by Frank Stockton. As a young boy this story seemed to me profoundly important. Now on rereading I see how thin and obvious it is as a narrative, "hokey" in fact, but its power remains as a narrative that touches a place of wonder and dread in us. To recount the story: a cruel king, angry that the hero has dared to make love to his daughter, orders that he be placed in a public amphitheatre where he is faced with a choice of two doors. Behind one waits a beautiful lady and behind the other a man-eating beast. The Princess, who is watching this ceremony, knows the answer but we are not sure if she will tell the hero the right answer and thus lose him to another, or let him choose to be destroyed. Upon a signal, he chooses one door. The narrator continues:

Now, the point of the story is this: Did the tiger come out of that door, or did the lady? The more we reflect upon this question, the harder it is to answer. It involves a study of the human heart, which leads us through devious mazes of passion, out of which it is difficult to find our way. Think of it, fair reader, not as if the decision of the question depended upon yourself, but upon that hot-blooded, semi-barbaric princess, her soul at a white heat beneath the combined fires of despair and jealousy. She had lost him, but who should have him?¹¹

Labyrinths also figure as favorite motifs of tragic stories, and for similar reasons. Such narratives feature an all- too human protagonist who must choose

without understanding how or what to choose. In the original myth, Minos, King of Crete, had the Labyrinth constructed to hide the monstrous child of his errant wife Pasiphae who had mated with a bull. But the monster in the maze, symbol for the dark powers that lie at the center of our experience, is only satisfied with human blood. In Racine's version of the story, Minos' daughter Phaedra also must choose between dying herself or seducing her stepson. Here the gods are of no help; there is no escape from the decision at the crossroads. A human and vulnerable hero must encounter and slay the beast at the heart of the puzzle in order to find his way out of the maze.

The pagan myth was interestingly enough adopted and adapted by the Christians, who substituted the figures of the Warrior and the Devil for the Minotaur and Theseus, adjusting the context but preserving the sense that at the heart of the maze is the secret enemy that must be conquered in order for spiritual progress to proceed.

The myth of the maze expresses the eternal hope of salvation – that eternal life will be won for all by the actions of one savior. This warrior will defeat the forces of evil lurking in the center of the maze. The central malevolent power may be a bull, the Minotaur, Khumbaba, Typhon, Satan, or, by metaphorical extension, the wicked Pharaoh of Egypt, the giant Goliath, the menacing Turk. As for the hero, he has assumed many faces over time...The name of this warrior may change, but he is inseparable from the maze. Every myth needs a hero.¹²

As we saw in the discussion of Passover and the Eucharist, while the rites and the stories change, the underlying pattern retains its ability to shape and empower.

The Moveable Dwelling: The Tabernacle

Then the cloud covered the Tabernacle, and the glorious presence of the Lord filled it. Moses was no longer able to enter the Tabernacle because of the cloud that had settled down over it, and the Tabernacle was filled with the awesome glory of the Lord. Now whenever the cloud lifted from the Tabernacle and moved, the people of Israel would set out on their journey, following it. But if the cloud stayed, they would stay until it moved again. The cloud of the Lord rested on the Tabernacle during the day, and at night there was fire in the cloud so all the people of Israel could see it. This continued throughout all their journeys. (Ex. 40: 34-38)

Some scholars distinguish between fixed and moving sacred spaces (locative and utopian). As an example of the latter, the Tabernacle is a site of a divine presence that is constantly on the march. The tabernacle is a moveable temple, created specifically for the Jew's journey through the desert of Sinai. It houses

the Ark of the Covenant, as well as a portable altar and other ritual implements, and serves as a temporary meeting place for the community. In addition to serving as a dwelling of the Lord on Earth, it also acts as a kind of divine tank battalion, blitzing fire and lightening as it advances over terrain that it colonizes in the name of God. It is thus a missionary space, a traveling road show of God's wonders. Where it goes, it transforms ordinary space into holy space, and in the process converts alien into personal territory. Its aggressive and dynamic nature is well suited to nomadic cultures. For the Jews in their Diaspora, it becomes the model of the permanently available sanctuary, inviting the numinous presence even in the most hostile environments.

As a paradigm, it is particularly well suited to Western imperialistic cultures, as can be seen in a contemporary incarnation: the Starship Enterprise. A massive technological Tabernacle, the spaceship transports the god of technology into all corners of the galaxy, and converts hostile space to friendly colony.

Conclusion

I hope that these comments may help us to create stories that are resonant and many-layered and grow out of our deepest intuitions about the mystery of our experience, narratives that help us glimpse the tangled and varied relationships we have with the sacred around and within us. I am appending as a sort of example/case study an account of an installation I did together with Glorianna Davenport, Senior Scientist at the MIT Media Lab, in 1993. We tried to embody the notion of a narrative of sacred space together with a spatial embodiment, a rite of passage. I excerpt below from an article some of the features of the experiment. As you will see, the architecture of the Tibetan Wheel of Life was the impetus for a complex interactive experiment in multi-dimensional narrative.

Both he and Davenport had long been fascinated by the literary and artistic possibilities of interactive technology, and both were intrigued by the idea of creating an 'Interactive Transformational Environment.' They agreed to design and build such an installation in the Villars Experimental Media Theater at the Media Lab in MIT as a project for Davenport's upcoming Workshop in Elastic Movie Time.

The collaboration began with a series of questions concerning the future of interactive technologies and interactive environments. As technology becomes more 'intelligent' and more precisely responsive to a user's wishes and actions, its functions can increasingly be distributed throughout the everyday environment. Eventually, might not the computer itself dissolve into the very fabric of our environment? Could we not imagine a world thoroughly permeated with hidden functionalities invisibly available to us? What would it be

like to be in a world that 'knew' we were there, and that was totally responsive to our every move, a world that literally transformed itself as we traversed it? What kind of rules might pertain in a landscape dominated by change and by transformation?

These ambitious musings helped us formulate some initial goals for our project: First, we would create an interactive world situated in a 'real' space outside of the computer box, a kind of museum installation cum theater-set. This space, however, would retain many of the functionalities of the computing environment. Visitors would immerse themselves in this world with their whole body, mind, and feelings. We hoped that it would feel as though they were walking through a computer monitor into a magic landscape.

Second, we decided the space should contain or embody a narrative, and that the narrative should be actualized by the transformative actions of the visitor moving through it. After much discussion, we settled on an overarching theme: the wheel of life, the cycles of change and continuity that whirl us along in the journeys of our lives. The space would be broken down into four sub-spaces, each containing a distinct story but each connected to the space as whole. Each sub-space would take as a starting point for its design one of the traditional elements – earth air, water and fire – and each element would be associated with a set of attributes, – emotional, historical, technical...

The first job was to create the conceptual framework for the piece and to develop detailed plans for its implementation. The initial challenge was to envision a space that was also a story, an 'embodied' narrative world with self-defined rules and procedures that expressed the symbolic content of the area, – water, earth, air. Moreover, while the space would seem open for free exploration, it would in fact have to lure the visitors through it in a fixed sequence of interactions, or else the transformations could not take place. Here, the role of the guide was paramount.

(Here is part of the description of the Water Area)

The water group designers (began with a vision of a) world: dark, pre-natal, engulfing to create the impression of an abrupt descent into a watery world, the group decided that as the explorers entered into a totally dark space they would suddenly be confronted with a huge video image, projected on the opposing wall, of a hand that seemed to reach down, pick them up, and throw them into the watery deep. The visitor, surrounded by images (projected on the walls) of people and other marine beings staring inward, would feel trapped in a watery enclosure. The space itself developed as a kind of giant fishbowl made of scrim that twisted upwards until it almost disappeared out of sight in the reaches of the ceiling. (When this environment was actually built the fishbowl shape rose forty feet in the air!)

To devise a suitably aqueous atmosphere, the group played with methods of creating shifting reflections. After rejecting as impractical the idea of covering the space with water itself, the group designed a hoop covered with Mylar, a

semi-reflecting material, which was set at the top of the fishbowl form; a small fan was then used to vibrate the surface, thus creating watery-like reflections on the walls and floors below. This, together with some ingenious lighting and a floor littered with 'drowned' objects made for quite a powerful and eerie feel of underwater space. A seventeen-foot whale (created out of rebar, mesh wire, and painted muslin) with a shocking-pink fluorescent mouth dominated the area; by entering the mouth, the visitor activated a radar system that made the whale talk and sing.

Finally, some lines from *The Tempest* suggested a narrative. ('Full fathom five they father lies;/ Of his bones are choral made;/ These are pearls that were his eyes;/ Nothing of him that doth fade/ But doth suffer a sea change/ Into something rare and strange...') The whale 'sang' these lines but the song remained indecipherable until the explorer learned to communicate with the whale and sing back to it. By accomplishing a set of tasks in a prescribed order, the explorer freed herself or himself from the watery world. (Davenport and Friedlander, 1997: 2.)

The audience then proceeds through areas of Earth, Air and Fire, each area with its own narrative and its own interactions. The complete cycle suggests the transformational power of the Tibetan Wheel of Life as a scenario that actualizes our sense of the mutations and circularity of our experience.

In conclusion, I hope that this article may be of some practical use to designers of digital interactive narratives. Clearly my speculations about the nature of sacred scenarios are merely speculations and not attempts at some rigorous theory about myth and ritual. But all who are interested in the impact of digital environments on our notions of the sacred may find some of these speculations suggestive. *Caveat Emptor!*

Notes

1. For a succinct summary of the scholarly debate over the connection between myth and ritual, see Bremmer (2004: 42).
2. Eliade (1972: 270).
3. See Scott and Simpson-Housley (1991: 24) for a discussion of sacred geography and the appearance of the axis-mundi in various cultures. For an interesting variation see Mathews and Garber (2004: 49) for a description of the uses of this notion of center in Mayan sacred architecture.
4. It is interesting to compare Eliade's treatment of the World tree in Shamanistic cultures with his treatment of the Jewish Temple as a kind of *Axis Mundi* (Eliade, 1978: 335). For a contrasting view, see Holm (1994: 125).
5. See, Jacobs (1890).
6. Eliade (1972: 120).
7. An interesting variation on the world tree is the Islamic Tree of Life that is imagined as having its roots in heaven and its branches on earth (Bennet, 1994: 95), giving a theological twist to the original paradigm.
8. An excellent overview and glossary of mandala components is available on the web <http://www.graphics.cornell.edu/online/mandala/>.

9. Kerman (2004).
10. See March (2001: 349).
11. Stockton (1886: 10).
12. *The Maze and the Warrior*, by Craig Wright, Harvard University Press; quoted in Kerman (2004).

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As It Is in Heaven

Dionysian Ritual on the Big Screen

Anita Hammer

*Oh, happy is he who, blessed by his knowledge
Of the gods' rites, discovers purity,
Who opens his heart to togetherness
...
Sing out in joy
With loud Phrygian cries
While the holy sweet-throated flute
Climbs the holy scale and the scaling Maenads climb
Up the mountain, the mountain.
Euripides "The Bacchae" 72-74, 154-160.*

These introductory lines written by the Greek playwright Euripides c. 408 BC, while he was visiting the Macedonian countryside, may serve as a proper introduction to the Swedish film *As It Is in Heaven*. I shall, in the following article address issues related to Dionysian aspects of religion based on the main themes and the storyline of the film. I will argue that the film has themes closely paralleling that of the cult of the oriental and Greek god *Dionysus*. The key themes from which I draw the parallels between the imagery of the Dionysian cult and the Swedish contemporary film will be: the seasonal cycle from winter to spring; the cult of fertility and procreation; local ritual and collective creativity in a ritual framework; wine and trance; and questions relating to the fact of a male god leading a cult of mainly women worshippers. The expression of women's sexuality in these contexts will be of particular interest for my comparative analysis.

The practice of ecstatic religious worship taking place in a male-dominated or patriarchal society and involving female sexuality is not unproblematic. In Scandinavia as well as generally in the globalised world today, questions regarding female sexual expression in male-dominated cultures are unresolved. In the following I shall approach this question by means of a comparison between the film and the ancient Dionysian ritual.

The film *As It Is in Heaven*, produced in Sweden and released in 2005, was directed by Kay Pollak. The music was composed and produced by Stefan Nilsson, and featured some of Sweden's best-known actors, among them Mikael Nyquist, Frida Hallgren, Helen Sjöholm and Lennart Jähkel.

In spite of there being no mention of ritual or myth, and no reference to Dionysian cult or any other mythic-cultic practice within the framework of the film (except for Christianity, which within the narrative framework is polarised with the "Dionysian" theme), I will argue that Dionysian religion is what this film is about. *As It Is in Heaven* was nominated for an Oscar in spring 2005 for the best foreign film. It was also loved by audiences. It has been seen by 1,4 million people in Sweden (Haddal, 2005), and at the Tromsø International Film Festival in Norway it won the Audience Prize (Tiff, 2005). (For a comprehensive study of the film and its relation to the commercial aspects and dynamics of Swedish society, see the forthcoming work by Erik Hedling cited in the list of references, where the present analysis is also discussed.) The reviews, however, have been mixed. The most negative censure came from the Swedish cultural critic Po Tidholm, who criticised the film as a "commercial" for "the management psychology of new religion" and accused Pollak of having produced an "idealized portrait of himself" (Tidholm, 2005). Based on the reactions of the public, and the common interest in, and appreciation of, the film, I will argue that this is something very different from a commercial for new religiosity. The film works positively in its own right by addressing complex issues in a concrete, everyday manner. Moreover, it "works" because it portrays an old cultic concept, and by showing the implications of local ritual on a local community. I will also argue that *As It Is in Heaven* is an example of how "popular culture" may more easily portray and activate religious concepts and ritual aspects of culture, than "high culture" could. In my view, an artistic language that communicates via cultural codes that presuppose a culturally educated audience would not be able to convey ritual content in the way that it is portrayed by the concept Pollak has chosen. In the following, I shall even suggest that the anti-intellectual attitude is part of the message of the film, and that this attitude is in accordance with the "Dionysian", and part of the reason why I consider this film to be an excellent portrayal of it.

The Dionysian "heaven" in popular culture

The following is a rough synopsis of *As It Is in Heaven*:

The narration starts with the arrival and *return* of the main character, a famous conductor called Daniel Dareus, to his childhood village in the Swedish countryside. He settles in an empty old schoolhouse with the intention of retreating from the international public music scene. The local church choir, however, draws him in to their activities. This sets off a chain

of unexpected events centred round Dareus' work with the choir and focusing on the liberation of repressed emotions in various members of the local community, particularly involving the women of the community, who become the instigators of change. The story culminates in the choir participating in an international musical event, which leads to the violent death of the main character, Dareus.

Before I begin my argument with a description of these events *As It Is in Heaven*, I will give a brief introduction to Dionysian ritual and some of its contents. Carl Kerényi (1996) subtitles his main work on Dionysus "Arche-typal Image of Indestructible Life". This is the only cult of ancient Greece that may have been exclusively carried out by women; in any case, it is beyond doubt that women were prominent in this cult. The film *As It Is in Heaven*, without any mention of either Dionysus or Maenadism may nevertheless be seen as a contemporary staging of the Dionysian concept of "indestructible life" – and as such it represents a challenge to some of the established norms of the Western intellectual. The reviews have been varied, but audiences have been ecstatic. It is a film with an everyday setting and with everyday agendas that can easily be recognized and identified with. But, at the same time, it raises deep and unresolved questions about relations between the individual and the community. The expression of female sexuality is a key issue in this context.

Among deities of the culture that we revere as the "cradle" of Western civilisation, none has been more extensively addressed, and less understood, than Dionysus. This "twice born" male consort of Maenadic women, who is bountifully generous, phallic, ecstatic and powerful, but who still ends up being torn to pieces, according to some stories (Graves, 1955: 110; Kerényi, 1996: 247-247), is a profound cultural force. As an image of interpretation, Dionysus has come to represent an idea of chaos and ecstasy (Nietzsche, 1956) in human life. Dionysus is described as a "paradox", as he incorporates forces of both life and death, childhood innocence and divine wisdom in one entity. Plainly, it would seem to be difficult, if not impossible, to understand Dionysus through the Western intellectual approach (des Bouvrie, 1993).

In *As It Is in Heaven*, the local church choir functions within the narrative framework of the film as a community within a community – or what Victor Turner would have called "communitas" (Turner, 2004). In the film, this "communitas" has its basis in women's liberation. The scene of the choir rehearsal takes on the quality of a dedication to the goal of "bringing out the music that already exists" and possibly "opening up people's hearts". The rehearsals represent a liminal space in which a creative chaos emerges that may have the potential to change the life of the choir, and it is the women of the choir who are the most eager "Dionysian" followers. Women become the agents of Dionysian forces. The individuals' participation in the Dionysian process of "liberation" also affects the structure of the local community within which the "communitas" grows. In the film, this exceptional time and space is related to the emergence of the women's sexual liberation within the

“*communitas*”. This liberation comes to alter the social structure of the community as a whole.

It may not be surprising that it is a film portraying a non-intellectual approach to life which presents itself to me as a contemporary enactment of the Dionysian myth and ritual. By portraying liberation through local ritual in “popular culture”, Kay Pollak challenges the intellectual hegemony of the cultural elite. In my opinion, the film may in fact be regarded as a lesson in understanding of the function of ritual, and a far more successful one than could be achieved by any academic approach.

Dionysian ritual

The “action”, or dramaturgy, of the Dionysian festivals in the Greek *Lenaia* in the countryside, and also *around* Athens, was a celebration taking place in early spring. The image of Dionysus was carried in a procession, followed by women and (possibly later) male worshippers. Detailed descriptions of what actually took place in the Dionysian festivals are scarce, but the importance of the festival is testified to by numerous allusions to women’s behaviour during the festival in ancient literary sources (Euripides, 1982 [408]). We know, however, that the image of the god is brought out to the countryside (or mountain), and later returned, and that the purpose of the ritual celebrations was to restore to the community the power of life and fertility after the winter season. The celebrations are known to have been violent, and they are described by Euripides as possibly leading to violent death, even to being torn to pieces by the frenzied *Maenads*. Those who cannot withstand the force of Dionysus may be destroyed.

Synnøve des Bouvrie writes: “The ‘*ludic*’ renewal of the community, it seems, should be seen as a collective process, in contrast to modern intellectual criticism, which is exercised by some few and most often remains without consequence” (des Bouvrie, 1993: 79-112). A ritual approach to the Dionysian implies that the functional aspect of the Dionysian theme is the key to understanding it, and that the mythological stories – although intertwined with, and part of, ritual, are secondary to the ritual practice itself. This view is possible if one considers the mythological deity – in this case Dionysus – to be an image that maintains ritual practice in cultural memory, and that this image is sustained by means of a regular cult practice whose function is to nourish and to sustain community on several levels. Ritual practice must be approached from its communal aspect, which implies looking at how the members of the community relate to each other within it and towards their shared environment, and to the belief system on which the community is built. These are the main and overall concerns of ritual. (Bell, 1997; Rothenbuhler, 1998; Turner, 1988.)

The well-known theme of the *return*, or homecoming of the "hero", leading to *change* in the community and ending with the human *sacrifice* of the "hero" is the storyline of the film. It is thus clear that, without mentioning ancient myth or ritual patterns of initiation (Harrison, 1999), *As It Is in Heaven* actualises and *demonstrates* the function of the hero myth in the context of a local community. The theme of the film may be formulated as: *The transformation of everyday life by means of devotion to a communal artistic experience*.

This process of transformation is set off by the presence of the main character, Dareus, here perceived as a "Dionysus-like" hero. The fact that the liberation of the community leads to the *sparagmos* (dismemberment) of the main protagonist is a specific Dionysian trait, and as I shall also show, the film is rich in imagery and allusions to a religious experience of a kind that opposes puritanism and promotes a *fertility cult*.

Maenadism – a female cult

There is no doubt among scholars that women played the major part in the worship of Dionysus in Athens as well as in other parts of Greece. It is also beyond doubt that the union of the sexes was an important part of the Dionysian principle. The *Basillina* (the "Queen" or high priestess), with her fourteen *Gerairai* ("Venerable ladies", her assistants), performed a *hierogamos* (a sacred marriage rite involving a symbolic or actual act of copulation) with Dionysus himself (Zaidman and Pantel, 1992).

The importance of this rite is well documented, although it may seem contradictory for a woman's cult to be so predominant in ancient Greek culture, in view of the weak position of women in the Greek *polis* (des Bouvrie, 1990). Synnøve des Bouvrie concludes, however, in her analysis of *The Bacchae* of Euripides, one of the most important sources of Maenadism: "In its basic structure the women's behaviour assumes the model of the rites of rebellion: mothers abandoning their homes, their children, and their weaving. They roam from the inner centre of *oikos* and *polis* to the outer space of the civilized world..." (des Bouvrie, 1998: 64).

Des Bouvrie is very clear in that the women's participation in the cult of Dionysus is a consequence of their controlled and house-bound daily lives with no "democratic" rights in the democracy of the Greek *polis*. Control of female sexuality was a cornerstone of Greek society, resulting from the legal system of strict male inheritance of property and property being the basis of democratic rights (des Bouvrie, 1990). Des Bouvrie also argues: "It seems clear that women engaged in these rites of reversal during a period when they were particularly excluded from arenas of formal power" (des Bouvrie, 1993: 9).

As has been noted by iconographers (Zaidman and Pantel, 1992), vase paintings from the fifth century B.C. portray both male and female “performers” in the Dionysian mysteries. The male celebrants played music and danced, while the female *Maenads* wore ivy (the evergreen leaf that remained green in winter) and carried the *thyrsoi* wand. The process of entering into a state of trance in a collective ritual setting by means of music, singing and dancing was certainly an important aspect of the Dionysian mysteries, and getting into an intoxicated “uncontrollable” frenzy was also part of the ritual. One must bear in mind in interpreting these phenomena, however, that they represent “controlled uncontrollability” – they are separated from everyday life by being defined as “ritual time”, and as such they may exemplify inverted behaviour, or at least behaviour that is outside the social norms of everyday life.

It is interesting that Zaidman and Pantel, in their description of trance as an individual phenomenon as opposed to a collective one, have a passage on Dionysian trance that fits the women’s activities in *As It Is in Heaven* very well:

“Within this civic context of Dionysiac worship the use of trance should be viewed as a ritualized social behaviour aimed at bringing about a change of state and status in the worshipper, enabling him or her to become ‘other’ and thereby assume a form of alterity defined by precise civic norms and values” (Zaidman and Pantel, 1992: 200).

In the film, the trance, or trance-like state of mind, is expressed only in the rehearsal room of the choir, and while the choir are together. The public performance of singing, however, reveals this state of mind to the local audience and comes to represent “another state of mind” that transcends the existing separate categories of religion, sensuality and self-expression that exist in the local community. These are the occasions when each individual of the choir becomes visible as one who “transcends” the social norm. Zaidman and Pantel also describe the individual and collective aspects of trance in their descriptions of the Dionysian:

“The two dimensions of this experience, the collective and the personal, cannot be separated out: the trance was collective, in that it unfolded as a group phenomenon within the membership of the cult society, and yet at the same time it affected individually each member of the group, who found himself or herself brought face to face with the god” (Zaidman and Pantel, 1992).

Intoxication and ecstasy induced by drinking wine are a part of the Dionysian cult. Dionysian ritual is known to have taken place in conjunction with the fertility cult and the tasting of wine in early spring. Des Bouvrie notes, however, that in the Dionysian context the wine-drinking is to be viewed as social rather than individual intoxication: “We should, then, conceive of wine primarily as a social force instead of a means of nutrition and delight” (des Bouvrie, 1993: 7). Coming “face to face with the god” may then be interpreted as an experience of oneself not as a separate being but as a

wine-induced extension of the self into a communal experience, for which the intoxication within the ritual framework becomes a vehicle.

Thus, in the Dionysus cult we have the following elements: the annual cycle from winter to spring, wine, fertility, local ritual, trance, a male “god” leading a cult of mainly women worshippers, and collective creativity in a ritual setting. The function of the ritual as an *inversion* of the social order has been pointed out by des Bouvrie. It seems clear that the formal position of women in the social order in the Greek *polis* was not altered by the Dionysian ritual, although it may have functioned as a temporary outlet for repressed emotion. Based on what we know of the maintenance of social structure over time, in the *polis* there may be reason to assume that the Dionysian festival was a seasonal ritual of inversion that secured the social order by ensuring that repressed emotion was regularly “vented”.

I will now describe the essential elements of the film *As It Is in Heaven* and show that these are the same elements that are essential in the ancient cult of Dionysus.

Biographies of the protagonists

The first image on the screen is of a “field of ripe barley”, a familiar image of the earth’s fertility. In this field, we see Dareus, the main male protagonist, as a boy playing the violin. While doing so, he is violently attacked by other boys. Next we see him arriving as a grown man in the same, but now barren, landscape of fields of snow.

In the brief but revealing “flashbacks” of memory, the images show that as a boy Dareus was an outcast in the community presumably because of his musical gift; he is “different”. His father is dead, but he has a caring mother. The mother, however, has a strong belief that “all will turn out for the best”, and she binds the boy to herself with very close emotional ties. The boy expresses a wish to marry his mother when he grows up. At the age of seven, the son and his mother escape from the village and move to the city. The boy has a powerful dream of his task in life: *to find the music that will open human hearts*.

When the boy is fourteen – the age of puberty and transition (initiation) from boyhood to manhood, he takes part in a world championship competition for young musical soloists. On this occasion, we see an image of the mother, dressed in a pink suit and carrying a bunch of white flowers, and as she crosses the street in a hurry to reach her son, she gets run over by a car and dies. The young boy pursues his career, and at the age of fifteen he is given a new surname by his agent. The change of name of course indicates a change of identity. After a lapse of time, we then see the grown-up Dareus, now a world-famous conductor, collapsing during a concert on a stage in Milan, after which we witness his arrival in the snowy winter landscape of

the Swedish countryside. He has had a heart attack, which is described in the film as a “tired” heart.

The mythological story of Dionysus relates that he was born as “a horned child crowned with serpents” (Graves, 1955: 103), he was torn to shreds by the Titans, he was reconstituted by his grandmother, and he too was driven out of his birthplace and into hiding. As an adult, he returned, purified, to Phrygia, where he invited women to join him in his cult (Graves, 1955: 103-107). Daniel Dareus shares with Dionysus the story of being threatened and harassed as a child, being removed from danger by a female, and returning as an adult to bestow his gift of “creative madness” and fertility on the community and on women in particular. The sacrifice of death is another common element. The story shared by Dareus and Dionysus also fits well into the typical pattern of “ritual initiation” with its elements of “absence – initiation – return”. Harrison (1999) describes the ritual connected with the *Kouretes hymn* as an action in three stages. In the first stage, the child is removed from home and mother and given into the care of male attendants. In the second stage, the child is hidden, killed and dismembered – in an actual or symbolic sense. The third stage is a process of return to life and to home.

The pattern described by Harrison is typical of a rite of initiation (Turner, 1982: 24-26), and it also fits the pattern of the typical “hero story”, which may be easily recognized from various initiation cults, from the great epics of the Greeks to the storylines of Hollywood films. The particular approach of *As It Is in Heaven* to this theme, however, is that it is related to a practice that I will describe as “ritual” – namely that of the choir rehearsal. This ritual is closely intertwined with women’s liberation, and the influence of this liberation on the development of the story is what gives it a specifically Dionysian aspect. In bringing to the fore the prominent role of women in the Dionysian ritual approach, Pollak re-writes the male-dominated Dionysian interpretations of the past centuries and brings the actions of women back to the centre stage of Dionysian worship.

Winter, spring and midsummer in a Swedish village

“In Athens, as in Delphi, the winter months belonged to Dionysus” (Kerényi, 1996: 290). The film *As It Is in Heaven* also starts in a wintry landscape, and the main chain of events takes place through winter, early spring and midsummer. As Dareus arrives in the cold and empty old schoolhouse, the local pastor, Stig Berggren, arrives with the gift of a bible, which Dareus refuses. In the next image a white hare gets shot by the local truck driver Conny (= con-man?), using a weapon belonging to the pastor. The local custom of killing the “Christmas hare” by bashing it against a wall is shown. The different attitudes of the three men towards the killing of the hare and the scene between these three male protagonists personify and define the three main

“forces” that will be activated and confront one another in the various actions to come. The pastor represents the suppression of sensuality and rigid Christian puritanism of the church. Conny is a brute predator not only of hares but also, as we later shall see, of women. Daniel Dareus (whose Christian name is an allusion to the story in the Old Testament) is the one who confronts these combined forces. That the forces are combined is plainly and effectively demonstrated by the fact Conny shoots the hare with a weapon belonging to the pastor.

The white hare is a symbol of procreation. It is known in mythology as Aphrodite's favourite animal, and according to pagan belief, sterile women may become fertile by eating hare's meat (Cirlot, 1962; Biedermann, 1992). The description of the hare as a “Christmas hare” also connects it to the Christian seasonal celebration – perhaps pointing to the sacrifice of Easter – as well as to midwinter pagan celebrations. The annual cycle from the barrenness of mid-winter through the awakening of spring and culminating in the abundance of mid-summer, the day of John the Baptist in the Christian calendar, is paralleled in the storyline in the fight against barrenness and the suppression of sensuality, the midsummer fulfilment of Dionysian delight, culminating in the death of summer and anticipating the beginning of a new cycle. This is in accordance with the annual cycle of fertility rituals. I have argued earlier that such a cycle of ritual goes back to the ancient Sumerian culture, with which the Greek Dionysian practices have a great deal in common (Burkert, 1931; Hammer, 1997; Zaidman and Pantel, 1992). A new cycle of growth from death is explicitly stated in the words of the character Lena, who says in the love scenes in the last part of *As It Is in Heaven*: “There is no death”, and it is also symbolised by a pregnancy. But let me first discuss how the characters and themes in the film are intertwined.

Characters and themes

One way of approaching the different characters is to show their connection to various themes of the film. Each character is related to one or more central themes, and the role of each character and the connections between them may be seen as constituting the sum of the various central themes. This approach is supported by the activities of the choir in the plot and the final scene of the film, where a “symphonic” unity is created with the voices of the characters, each one of whom represents a certain theme. The theme and the “voice” of the character (Bjørkvold, 1993: 169-200) constitute the character's identity: the “voice” becomes the expression of identity, and the specific musical theme of each character represents the relation of each character to the action of the film.

The character of Daniel Dareus is, as I have argued, that of a “hero” cast out of the community and returning as its “saviour”. Asked by the pastor (in

the opening scene in the schoolhouse earlier referred to) whether he intends to stay there, Dareus states that his intention is to “listen” – indicating within the narrative framework that this might be the opposite of what the other male characters are doing. We also hear that his dream, and his aim in the story, is to listen to the music that is already there and to “bring it down” so that it may open the human heart. This may be seen as a spiritual task, and in Dareus’ determined prosecution of it against obstacles the action of the film manifests spiritual intention on the level of individual self-expression as well as on a community level.

Shortly after his arrival, early in the film, Dareus meets Lena in the local shop. Lena has been betrayed by her last lover and is heartbroken. In the bike shop, he meets Arne, who invites him to come and listen to the choir. Dareus hesitates to come to the rehearsal of the choir in the church, but then agrees to turn up “just to listen”. The local leader of the choir is a very respectable woman named *Siv*. The local people insist that Dareus should come and help them develop their work, but he refuses. On the way home, however, he happens to walk past the home of one of the choir members, Gabriella, who is married to the truck driver Conny. Seeing Conny beating Gabriella, Dareus intervenes, and Conny threatens to shoot him. This event motivates Dareus to become engaged with the choir – an engagement that he takes on with hesitation – but which increases in intensity as he gets involved in the personal development of members of the choir. Lena (from the local shop) and the wife of the pastor, Inger, are also in the choir. Daniel is offered a job as Cantor in charge of music in the church and leader of the choir, and he decides to take the job.

Daniel’s work with the choir is a new task for him, a task that requires “listening in a new way”. He conveys to the choir the principle of *listening*: it all starts with listening, and the process of singing is about *opening up to the music that already exists: it is already there*. It involves a physical, corporal endeavour with each member and between the members of the group to “bring down” (from above) the music that already exists. Each member has to find his or her own “tune”, and in doing this, she works with the balance of her body, using her torso and stomach, performing finger exercises and bodily exercises on the floor that bring her into touch with her own body and her own vocal expression. Lena “a carefree, courageous and loving child of nature, Inger (the pastor’s wife) and Gabriella make up the female trio who, through their individual development in the choir and the choices they make, come to act as protagonists for change in the local community. The choice of these three women, each with her own unique qualities, as the trio who follow (and on one occasion “rescue”) Daniel is an allusion to Christ and the three women who come to His grave grave. Thus there is a clear reference to spiritual resurrection.

Lena is considered by the churchgoers to lead a promiscuous lifestyle. She is beautiful, lively, spontaneous and sensual. In one major encounter with *the simpleton* (see below for a description of this character), she shows

that her capacity for giving love is not one of selfishness but one of generosity and love of mankind. Lena is clearly an “archetype” – in the sense of “typical cultural representative” of the woman who, by “giving herself”, or her sensuality where it is needed, is connected with the “Maenadic”. Lena also becomes an image of Maria Magdalena in expressing her capacity for unconditional love. Lena’s character is one that gives love, in various forms, to several partners. In the relationships portrayed, her need to be given to, as well as to give, is emphasized. One may associate her name with that of the Lenaia in the Greek countryside. Needless to say, she is Magdalena and Aphrodite in one gestalt – she is the one of the three characters who ends up in bed with the hero – just like the priestess in the Dionysian *bieros gamos* (Zaidman and Pantel, 1992). Her character is a reminder of the aspect of unconditional love, repressed by the patriarchal Christian church. This problem is, however, not resolved within the framework of the film, and I shall return to it later.

Inger, the pastor’s wife, is fighting for sexual liberation from religious authority, while Gabriella struggles along the hard road of liberation from domestic violence. Using auditory metaphors, as the language of the film does, they all struggle to find their own voice in order to express their particular capacities in life. The main male characters of the local community all represent some kind of oppression. Arne has been a bully, but is also an initiator. Conny and the pastor have been described above. Holmfrid is a fat man who has been bullied by Arne since childhood. His emotional stability is also shaken by the activities of the choir group, and strong emotions are released in him.

The simpleton

Lastly I will introduce a figure of great importance in that he acts rather like a chemical (alchemic) catalyst which, when it is added to the story, has the capacity of bringing out the individual ethical qualities of those around him, and of sparking off interaction in such a way that he is able to fuse the individual with the collective, transform a hopelessly inadequate agent into a mystically effective one. This is Tore, a local retarded or autistic figure who moves around the community and turns up in places unexpectedly, as he does at one of the early rehearsals of the choir. It may not be merely a coincidence that the name of this character is “Tore” – which is phonetically identical to the verb *att töras* (to dare) in Swedish. When Tore accidentally arrives during a session of voice work in a choir rehearsal, he lets his own voice be heard, and in spite of protest from some of the “bullies” his voice is also included. It is Lena who functions as the carer of Tore in the choir. And it is Tore who becomes the vehicle of what appears to the film audience as the peak of acceptance and self-expression, when he sets off the climax in the final scene of the film.

The figure of *the simpleton* is well known from the European theatre tradition: he shows up as *the fool* in many Shakespearean plays, and he descends from the tradition of the fool in European folklore (Bakhtin, 1984). The character of *the fool* is also closely related to inversion, the “king-for-a-day” theme. The wisdom of the fool points to a non-intellectual, intuitive and spontaneous expression that is uncensored. The character Tore represents musical intuition and suggests that it is the simple-minded who are closest to “heaven” – and who are able to open up and “‘bring down’ [from above] the music that already exists”. He combines Dionysian creativity and the New Testament’s message of love. Therefore, this figure also represents a discussion between different approaches within the Christian faith, and shows that the message of Christianity is not as simplified in the film as it may appear to be from the censorious descriptions of the representatives of the church.

Maenadism and female sensual liberation?

One major question that is raised by the film is that of the expression of female sensuality and of the women’s relation to the main male protagonist.

This problem is explicitly expressed in dialogues between the pastor and his wife, Inger. While the pastor clearly suppresses and hides his sexual desires and is unable to share his sexual longings with the person he loves, Inger, she claims that “sin” exists only in his mind, and that “it is the church that invented sin”. Inger is a character who in the course of the film undergoes a transitional change from accepting the status quo to “breaking free” from suppression. Through the collective process that takes place during the series of choir rehearsals she regains her bodily expression, in which process the consumption of wine also plays a part. The climax of her liberation is a scene in the film when she goes into ecstasy while dancing in the group – an event that does not go unnoticed by the local community. When her husband encourages her to ask for God’s forgiveness, Inger however replies: “God does not forgive, for he has never damned.” Clearly the Christian ideology of the New Testament is here aligned with the joyous Dionysian principle.

Gabriella is a woman for whom Daniel Dareus decides to write a special song. After seeing her being beaten, and having been himself threatened by her husband, Daniel composes “Gabriella’s Song” (see below). In rehearsal, the voice harmony does not work, and consequently the choir realises that something is being suppressed. Siv blames this on Lena, claiming that she has a life style that does not befit the church-goer, hopping “in and out of cars”. The quality of impurity that is attributed to Lena here is in contrast to the image portrayed of her in the film. We here encounter the suppressive aspects of Christianity which in local culture are often seen as being in opposition to Dionysian sensuality.

"Everyone here is in love with you," says Gabriella to Dareus on one occasion. The emotions that are stirred up by the vocal and physical exercises in the choir group are emotions of release, and as is known from works with drama exercises in group dynamics (Moreno, 1945; Landy, 1993), these kinds of emotions are powerful and confused. Therefore the film's portrayal of several women in the group being erotically attracted to Dareus is a realistic of description of what happens in such situations. The emotions that are stirred up may be interpreted as a mixture of hope and surrender, of the personal and the collective, and it is often inevitable that longing for emotional "redemption" is temporarily projected on to a figure of authority, in this case Dareus, as a saviour figure. This again may complicate relations between members of the group as well as with the person who inspires the process (Dareus). It is important to note, however, that it may be inevitable that such confused emotions are aroused in a context where there is intense group work with the body and voice. It is therefore equally important that ethical rules should be obeyed, so that aroused emotions are not used in the situation for other purposes than those intended by the group, which in this case is that of "finding one's voice", one's own personal expression. This is the point where it becomes crucial to distinguish between group interaction that is framed by a certain time and space and what takes place outside this time-space, that is everyday life and social interaction. This is the difference between what is marked as what I will argue to be "ritual time-space" within the narrative framework of the film and non-ritual everyday social interaction. I will argue that the scenes that portray the interrelating between members of the choir in their rehearsals are clearly *ritual* interaction – in other words, they meet for a purpose that is set apart from everyday life, and their activity is related to "serious life" (Rothenbuhler, 1998: 27) in that it comes to represent a new meaning in life for the participants.

In the case of the relationship between Dareus and Lena, the mutual attraction becomes a love relationship that is sexually consummated. This consummation, however, takes place at the end of the process, and is not acted out within the "ritual" framework. The Dionysian impulse of surrender to the collective and the bringing of chaotic emotions into the open in the film clearly has an effect on the local community and presumably changes it, possibly forever. But at the same time as these emotions leave the "ritual" space and are transferred to a more public arena, they become no longer chaotic but directed towards the common aim of the participants: to overcome the suppression of sensuality and individual life forces.

Looking back at des Bouvrie's description of Maenadism and Dionysian celebrations as an inversion that functions as a temporary outlet, and as such keeps the society going in the long run, the function of "ritual" in *As It Is in Heaven* works differently for the "Maenads" Lena, Inger and Gabriella. There is a permanent change in the status of these three women in the Swedish village community, as there is in that of the male participants. The roles of

both Inger and Gabriella vis-a-vis their husbands are inverted on the social level. And in Gabriella's case this inversion is of dramatic consequence.

Gabriella's song

Gabriella hesitates to give a solo performance of the song that was written for her. She anticipates that such a performance will provoke a violent reaction. It is only because of an episode between other characters in the choir, where a lifetime of harassment of one of the members (Arne) by another (Holmfrid) is brought out into the open by *violent emotion* that she gets the courage to "voice herself". The theme of the song centres around the right to live one's own life on one's own terms. The text is very simple and plain; it culminates with the following words (my translation):

I want to know that I am alive
All the time that I've got.
I will live the way I want.
I want to know that I'm alive,
Know that what I give is enough

and the text ends:

I am here,
And my life belongs to me.
And the heaven that I believed in
I shall find somewhere.

I want to know that I have lived my life

These are humble words that work in the context of the film to convey the personal consequences of the "togetherness" expressed in the text by Euripides celebrating the Dionysian ritual in Greece. The Greek rituals were no "women's liberation" movement but, transferred to a contemporary Swedish village, that is what they become. Gabriella's voice rises before and above the local audience in such a way that it becomes a statement of belief in the joy of life and a threat to those who suppress it. The performance of Gabriella's song becomes the turning point of the plot. After this performance, the power of the life forces unfolding through the bodily and musical spirit of the choir becomes evident in the local community and also sets off the counter-forces of suppression. Gabriella is right in her anticipation of provoking violence, but it is provoked to such a degree that it alters the power structure of her violent relationship and marshals the counter-forces of the community.

The Kerényian interpretation of Dionysus as an “image of indestructible life” regains a feminist dimension in the women’s stories in the film. The Dionysian as an “indestructible” force of life is, when related to female suppression and male violence perpetrated within the framework of marriage, actualized in present time. The main quest of the male protagonist, Daniel Dareus, “to ‘bring down’ [from above] the music [that is already there] that can open human hearts”, has emerged as a reality, and it has powerful consequences. It is important to note, however, that is not the voice of Gabriella alone that effects the change, but the fact that she has the support of the choir, musically and socially. The efficacy of her change would not be possible without it.

And the story continues ...

Meanwhile Siv, the former choir leader, quits the choir after an incident in which it becomes apparent that “all the women in the choir are in love with Daniel”. She is the only woman character who acts an anti-force to the power of change emerging in the choir. In the story, her departure is part of the turning point from changes being within the ritual framework of choir rehearsal to their spreading outside it and provoking social change.

On Midsummer’s Day (24th June), a day that in the European pagan tradition is the day of the celebration of fertility cults, Daniel Dareus is dismissed from his job as choir leader by the church ministry. He is also legally accused of having taken advantage of his position for “personal advantages”. But sexual intercourse is not part of Dareus’ agenda. The sensuality of the musical and personal work, although interpreted by some as merely sexual attraction, is part of a larger whole, of which sexual intercourse may be a potential factor, but the realisation of which is of a creative and indestructible kind. It is the acceptance of human presence and personal qualities as contributions to the whole of life in all its bounty.

There is, however, a compulsory “love element” in the film. Lena, with her capacity for surrender, is attracted to Dareus, as are the other women, and Daniel is attracted to her. We also get strong indications that Lena has a contact with “angels”, and that she is able to see people’s “wings”. “There is no death,” says Lena to Dareus – an omen that death is exactly what is going to take place in the final scene of the film.

The pastor has a total psychological breakdown, and his wife leaves him. He wants to kill Dareus but then has a heart attack. The battered Gabriella, with her two children, is helped and sheltered by the choir community when she leaves her violent husband. Dareus is then beaten up and thrown into a lake, a scene that sets off childhood memories of an event of which is echoed by this action. From the point of view of the story of Daniel Dareus, this point represents *anagnorisis*, recognition of the hurt that happened to him when he was an outcast in his childhood. It also is the recognition of *home-coming*.

The final climax of the film takes place on location in Austria at a festival called “Let the People Sing”. The love relationship between Dareus and Lena is recognized and fulfilled. (They have known each other for 184 days, which is equal to half a year in the annual cycle). Before the choir goes on stage, Dareus goes missing. He has a heart attack and collapses in a toilet, where he bleeds to death from an injury resulting from his fall. Simultaneously, the *simpleton* (Tore), while waiting for the conductor, starts singing in a high, clear tone, and the choir joins in. The audience then also joins in, and the sound of countless human voices singing their own tune is conveyed through the ventilation system and thus accompanies Dareus’ transition to the other world. This is the final *sparagmos*, to use the Dionysian term for being ripped to pieces in the final sacrifice, which is death.

Dareus and Dionysus

Looking back at the statement by Zaidman and Pantel (1992) cited earlier, elements of the Dionysian ritual such as the state of trance of the group celebrating with wine (the Dionysian drink) are also present in the rehearsal practices of the choir in *As It Is in Heaven*. Zaidman and Pantel also point out that within such celebrations there is no clear distinction possible between the individual and the group. “For the main function of Dionysus was to reveal to every individual what he or she had of the stranger within them, an interior alterity which the god’s cult taught his devotees to discover by the circuitous route of the mask and the trance” (Zaidman and Pantel, 1992: 198).

The Dionysian message in the film is that of an emotional liberation that brings forth an opening out to spirituality. Allusions to the life of Jesus Christ, the Christian hero, who like Dionysus, brings a message of death and resurrection, are also present in *As It Is in Heaven*. In fact, the film makes a connection between the New Testament’s message of love and Dionysian spirituality. This is underlined in the film through the use of the songs: “Amazing Grace” and “Härlig är Jorden” (Lovely Is the Earth, a Scandinavian Christmas hymn). Dareus is the one who “dares” to take on the Dionysian task and to suffer the ultimate Dionysian sacrifice of physical death for bringing the gift of music.

Popular culture and ritual

I have suggested above that the theme of the film may be how everyday life can be transformed by means of devotion to a communal artistic experience. I have argued that the choir practice in the film can be seen as a portrayal of ritual. All over Scandinavia there are local choirs that practice every week, and there are seasonal gatherings of different choirs (Hammer, 2005). This

means that such practices are socially and perhaps ritually important in Scandinavia, and although such dramatic events as are portrayed in *As It Is in Heaven* extend the boundaries of what most choir members may expect in their local activities, the film draws attention to the importance of local popular culture.

In today's secularized society, characterised intellectually by post-modern fragmentation, questions concerning "authentic" representation and the search for "genuine" religiosity have long been out of fashion. In the area of critical theory and post-modern simulacra, the human need for ritual representing a constitution of meaning that also makes sense in everyday life and that is concerned with social and ethical as well as spiritual questions, has been suppressed.

In my view, the film *As It Is in Heaven* is important. It provides an approach to questions regarding spiritual meaning in an everyday context, and it reaffirms the human need for efficacious ritual practice in a de-ritualized world, where religious ritual is to a large extent no more than a "ceremony" left over from religious institutions that have gradually ceased to serve a ritual function that is effective in providing spiritual experience and answering the questions of everyday living. It shows how cultural activity may function as "communitas" in relation to the local community as a whole. It also focuses on spiritual experience as *shared* and communal experience, and in doing so sets the individual and personal spirituality of the Protestant church in a broader perspective.

As It Is in Heaven as a film is, however, not a ritual. It is a portrayal of a ritual process, but is not a ritual in itself: "... no matter how mythic in structure, a text or artefact is not an element of ritual until it is put to use by people and functions in this way" (Rothenbuhler, 1998: 98). *As It Is in Heaven* may activate the need for ritual and community in its audiences, however, and it does raise questions, and perhaps some suggestions, about how it may be possible in today's society to find a ritual that can be meaningful to the life of each individual and to the community. The popularity of the film may be some indication that it does so.

My concern in the present context has been to show how the film *As It Is in Heaven* parallels a Dionysian ritual in structure as well as in themes. I have not argued, however, that the film functions as a ritual for its audiences. Applying Rothenbuhler's precise, but open, definition of ritual: "Ritual is the voluntary performance of appropriately patterned behaviour to symbolically effect or participate in the serious life" (Rothenbuhler, 1998: 27), one cannot claim that the film as such serves a ritual function. We cannot assume that a film-goer goes to the cinema for a purpose connected with "serious life". Nevertheless, if not ritual as such, as a portrayal of ritual, the film does raise several questions concerning ritual practices in today's societies as well as in history.

The portrayal of the ambiguous situation of women with regard to worship and liberation, particularly when viewed against the background of

various religious and cultural issues in the globalised world of today is challenging. The film portrays charismatic religion as liberating, as within the framework of the story it provides a liberation from rigid structures of patriarchal religion. We do know, however, that this is far from being the case in many charismatic religious practices.

Like Gabriella's urge to live her life as an individual, the Dionysian will not go away; it is only slumbering,

Happy is she who opens her heart to togetherness (after Euripides).

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Sacred Film

Jolyon Mitchell

Can a film be sacred? If so, what sets a moving picture apart as sacred? And how far is a film's apparent sacredness defined by the intention of the director, the actual content of the film or the way in which viewers interpret what they actually watch? In this essay I explore whether a film can be sacred in each of these three ways: directorially, textually and receptively. To investigate, I consider the role of the director, the place of the text and the activity of the audience in several distinct theoretical and concrete contexts in the first half of this chapter. This triadic approach informs the second half of this chapter, where I analyse the extraordinary phenomenon of West African Video film. This case study provides fascinating territory for exploring whether and where the sacred can be found in film.¹

Rather than replicate the extensive and useful discussions of what 'sacred' actually means found elsewhere in this book,² I will restrict myself to initially noting that while the term sacred film can be used both substantively and functionally. Substantive in that a director, a film and a viewer can all interact with the actual substance or contents of a religious tradition. From the earliest days of cinema films have tackled sacred themes and topics both explicitly and implicitly. This has implications for both the reception and the production of a film. A devout Catholic viewer, for example, may identify one narrative as sacred, while another spectator from a different denomination or faith may find it profane. A director, brought up in a strict Lutheran home, may create films that interrogate the sacred tradition in which she or he was raised, while a Catholic filmmaker may cinematically celebrate or question the religious rituals that he or she experienced as a child. Underlying this chapter is the theory that substantive beliefs about, and experiences of, the sacred inform the creation, content and reception of a film. How far is the sacred in the setting of the cinema able to take on a more functional role? In other words, can the sacred function as a source, catalyst or background for the craft of filmmaking and the practice of viewing? Clearly these two sides of the sacred, the substantive and the functional, are inextricably connected. Belief in the sacred can inform viewing practice and vice versa.

This leads towards the question of how useful is a broad and eclectic definition for this term. One of the aims of this essay is to test out the following definition: a sacred film is set apart both substantively and functionally for religious purposes by the intention of the director, by the actual cinematic content and through the audience's use of the movie. In reality, through the majority of this essay the substantive definition dominates and as it is not possible to cover all aspects of the sacred, I have primarily, though not exclusively limited myself to considering the Christian tradition of the sacred.

The substantive qualities and functional uses of sacred film are also to be observed beyond the cinema. First, given that music, texts or rituals are regularly described as sacred, it appears reasonable for some critics also to speak of sacred film. In common usage when people speak of a sacred object or a sacred form of expression they normally mean that this text or music is in some way religious in its content or in the way that it is used. As a sacred media its actual substance can often, though not always, bring consolation, insight or meaning. Second, just as sacred can mean something which is set apart as religious or holy, so a film some commentators believe, can be perceived or used in this way. Ordinary objects such as bread, wine and water are taken and declared to be holy or dedicated to a particular deity. They are believed to function sacredly. This usually takes place in the context of worship. We shall see how it is possible that films or dramas on television can be used, or even venerated, in an analogous fashion. It is rarer, however, to find films located in the midst of worship. Of course, whether a film can be used as part of worship and who has the prerogative or ability to transform an ordinary movie into a sacred film are topics open to debate. Third, although most icon painters perceive themselves to be involved in a sacred craft, many other artists do not believe that the end result of their endeavours will be a sacred work of art. Likewise, most film directors do not see their practice as sacred or moving towards creating a sacred film. Nevertheless, in spite of this intention films often contain narratives that portray sacred spaces or people. In this context the substance of the film is almost transformed by its functional use. Some viewers, ignoring the film producers' intentions, go further, bestowing on film some spiritual meaning or a sacred aura.

Walter Benjamin (1936: 665-681) famously declared that in the age of mechanical reproduction works of art lose their aura once they are mass-produced. On the simplest level, by aura Benjamin is referring to the uniqueness of a work of art. The act of reproducing, whether through a photograph or on a film, severs the original from its actual historical and spatial context, as well as its ritual function. Detachment from its setting undermines not only its authenticity but also its authority and distance from the viewer. Replicas or copies, according to Benjamin, are therefore unable to recreate the aura of the original. Nonetheless, he recognises that 'the shooting of a film, especially of a sound film, affords a spectacle unimaginable anywhere at any time before this' (Benjamin, 1936: 674). In this essay I also consider whether many movies, while mechanically reproduced, can develop their own sacred aura (Morgan, 1999).³

In order to do this I will consider cinematic examples from several distinct periods and spaces. We will turn first briefly to scrutinize the cinematic vision and work of one of the leading film directors of the twentieth century.

The Director: Searching for the Sacred?

The Swede Ingmar Bergman is widely recognized as a cinematic master-craftsman, directing over forty films, many of which are recognized as standing among the classics of cinema (cf. Mitchell, 2005). As the son of a Swedish Lutheran pastor, Bergman was brought up in a pious and some would say autocratic home, which shaped his self-understanding and questioning of the sacred, and which in turn influenced his filmmaking. Bergman 'contributed vividly to the cinema of alienation, the cinema of the dispossessed individual, the post-Christian fallen world' of the second half of the twentieth century (Bragg, 1993: 11). Influenced by dramatists such as Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) and August Strindberg (1849-1912) (Björkman et al., 1973).⁴ Bergman wrestled with the place of the sacred in the midst of despair, anxiety and suffering in many of his films, especially during the 1950s and early 1960s.

Films such as his bleak trilogy about people living in search of comfort and guidance in the absence of God, *Through a Glass Darkly* (1961), *Winter Light* (1962), and *The Silence* (1963), and his Passion film *Cries and Whispers* (1973), explore several of these themes. In *Winter Light*, for example, a Swedish pastor continues to worship even though he has lost his own faith and is faced by the death of God all around him. Bergman saw himself as someone like this pastor who had lost his faith and now confesses that the artist 'considers his isolation, his subjectivity, his individualism almost holy.'⁵ The artist is trapped in his own loneliness, walking in circles, unable to recognize the existence of the other. For many critics, this trilogy and in particular *The Silence* (1963) concludes Bergman's cinematic exploration of the sacred. These three 'films describe a religious problem in three stages, or by "reduction", as Bergman puts it in his foreword to the published screenplay: a movement from "certainty achieved" to "certainty unmasked" and finally God's silence, "the negative impression".' (Koskinen, 2001).⁶ From this perspective the title of the final film in the trilogy, *The Silence*, becomes significant as it represents the 'emptiness and silence that has descended over a godless world.' (Koskinen, 2001). In spite of Bergman's own claim that at this time he 'cast off' his faith in God, that 'holy rubbish that blocks one's view', some writers still claim that Bergman's 'total cinematic work – not merely a few selected examples- is amenable...' to being interpreted as part of 'a pervasive spiritual search' (Bird, 1982: 142).

However one interprets the later films in his *oeuvre*, at an early stage of his career Bergman could not fully dispense with his understanding of God's place in the creative process. For example, Bergman appears to have been

intrigued by the legend of Chartres, which told how the cathedral was burnt down, but then rebuilt by thousands of anonymous craftsmen. In his introduction to the script of *The Seventh Seal* (*Det sjunde inseglet*, 1956), he identifies himself with those nameless builders:

If I am asked what I would like the general purpose of my films to be, I would reply that I want to be one of the artists in the cathedral on the great plain. I want to make a dragon's head, an angel, a devil – or perhaps a saint – out of stone. It does not matter which; it is the sense of satisfaction that counts. Regardless of whether I believe or not, whether I am a Christian or not, I would play my part in the collective building of the cathedral.

Bergman sees himself creating something sacred not out of stone but out of celluloid. Earlier, in his introduction to *The Seventh Seal*, he not only bemoans the individualism of the artist, but also claims that 'art lost its basic creative drive the moment it was separated from worship.' Given his own wrestling with the apparent disappearance of God, it is surprising that he believes that this separation was like the severing of an umbilical cord:

In former days the artist remained unknown and his work was to the glory of God. He lived and died without being more or less important than other artisans; "eternal values," "immortality," and "masterpiece" were terms not applicable in his case. The ability to create was a gift. In such a world flourished invulnerable assurance and natural humility.⁷

Bergman was far from unknown when he wrote this introduction. *The Seventh Seal* was the seventeenth film that he had directed and remains one of the most commonly cited. At several moments the star of this film is not the knight (Block, played by Max von Sydow) or his squire (Jöns, played by Gunnar Björnstrand), but death personified. The backdrop to the film is the plague. The film is permeated by the theme of death, and explores how different characters respond to their own impending death. Returning from the Crusades the knight may try to escape death by playing it at chess, but he will never win nor escape. Bergman admitted that this cinematic exploration was cathartic, in that after making this film, while he still thought about death it was no longer an obsession. Especially during the fifties and early sixties Bergman is a director who repeatedly expresses his theological angst on screen.

In *The Seventh Seal* the Knight seeks out knowledge in the face of death personified. In the confessional scene he is asked:

Death: What are you waiting for?

Knight: Knowledge.

Death: You want a guarantee.

Knight: Call it what you will. ... What will become of us, who want to believe but cannot? And what of those, who neither will nor can believe? ... I want

knowledge. Not belief. Not suppositions. But knowledge. I want God to put out His hand, show His face, speak to me. (*Seventh Seal*)

Block's journey in *The Seventh Seal* resonates with Bergman's own experience: a search for a silent God in the face of both death and human love (Kalin, 2003: 57-67). While he may not have explicitly dedicated or set apart his work to the 'glory of God,' his ability to create and to explore through the screen was clearly a gift that provokes profound questions about the nature of the sacred.

Bergman is a rare example of a director who acknowledges some basis to his cinematic search in theological thinking. Many directors tend to express sacred, religious or theological themes without formally naming them as such. The theme emerges from the narrative because it is expressive of primal fears, aspirations, and predispositions, not because it has been consciously planted there. The continued popularity of many Bergman films, especially his more explicitly religious or sacred-themed films such as *The Seventh Seal*, reflects how this cinematic poet of modernity continues to speak to a new generation of post-modern viewers, some of whom have moved beyond enquiring after the absence of God to questioning how a multiplicity of beliefs can co-exist peacefully.

The Film: Creating a Sacred Text?

Film may have the potential to embody searching for the sacred, but do movies have an inherent capacity to illuminate sacred texts? Recently a number of biblical scholars have answered this question affirmatively. For example, while Larry Kreitzer is by training a biblical scholar, he has made his name through exploring the ways film and fiction can illuminate biblical texts. To date Kreitzer has produced four books, which aim to enable 'a dialogue to take place between the biblical text, great works of literature, and that most persuasive of modern art forms, the cinema.' He describes this process as 'reversing the hermeneutical flow'. In essence this triadic approach means using classic works of literature and their cinematic interpretations as a way of shedding fresh light on biblical passages. Traditionally it is the sacred scriptures, which are used to illuminate the secular world of film, but this approach inverts the process, with film being used to open up the sacred texts. He brings the skills of a New Testament scholar to bear upon such texts. Kreitzer's three-way or triadic approach is becoming increasingly well known, though it has been criticised for its preoccupation with authorial intent (Nolan, 2003: 173-174). Nevertheless, Kreitzer's books illustrate how films can be used to shed light on sacred texts. From this viewpoint, it is almost as if the cinematic texts themselves have taken on a sacred quality.

Robert Jewett is another biblical scholar who has immersed himself in the world of film criticism. His stated motivation and method are different from

Kreitzer's. In his first two books on film he uses St Paul as a conversation partner with specific movies, claiming that, given Paul's missionary desire to be all things to all people, if there had been film in his day Paul would also have engaged with film criticism. Instead of Kreitzer's triadic approach he uses a two-way 'interpretative arch', which intends to treat both biblical and cinematic texts with exegetical respect. He often moves the reader from the world of the film text to the world of the biblical text and back again. One concern raised about both Jewett and Kreitzer's approach is the perceived tendency to rely upon literary models of film criticism, rather than embracing the rich resources of film theory, such as various psychoanalytic-based or spectator-led approaches (Nolan, 2003: 169-178). The danger is that the attempt to 'read' a film turns it into something that it is not: a written text. Films cannot be reduced to mere words to be analysed (Martin, 1981: 122). Other skills, such as visual sensitivity, are required to analyse the sacred quality of a film.

Several writers on theology and film go even further than Kreitzer and Jewett, in *Images of the Passion* (1998) Peter Fraser examines the films, which in his opinion best portray Christ's passion, describing them as sacramental films. For Fraser, 'the sacramental film allows for the appropriation of spiritual presence sought by the devotional writers, but in a public experience' (Fraser, 1998: 5). Each chapter offers an interpretation of a specific film such as: *Gallipoli* (1981), *The Mission* (1986) and *Black Robe* (1991) suggests that if the *Diary of a Country Priest* is embraced as the director Bresson intends then viewers 'will be brought into a sacramental experience with the living God' (Fraser, 1998: 11). This is a hard claim to verify, but it does exemplify a belief that film can illuminate the viewer. For Fraser the sacramental film can become an object of 'mystical contemplation', and he predicts that in the future films may well become 'more prominent in popular practices of Christian piety' (Fraser, 1998: 6).

This prediction does not appear so far fetched with the production of *A Movie Lectionary* entitled *Lights Camera... Faith!* (2001, 2, and 3) by Peter Malone, with Rose Pacatte. These three books bring specific films into dialogue with the Catholic Lectionary Gospel readings. Part of the vision behind this trilogy is to encourage Church leaders to use film in the context of worship, as part of the homily or post-communion meditation. The encouragement to integrate films into worship is reminiscent of the use of motion pictures in church meetings or even in worship services during the early part of the twentieth century. These books further reflect how film is now perceived by some as a potential catalyst for prayer, a place of devotion and a source of revelation (cf. McNulty, 2001).

Catholic author and film critic Andrew Greeley supports such a view, claiming that film, as part of 'popular culture' is a '*locus theologicus*', a theological place – the locale in which one may encounter God' (Greeley, 1998: 9). For Greeley (1988: 121) God 'lurks in the places in which the 'stories' of popular culture occur.' He has recently developed these points more explicitly in *God in the Movies*, where he claims that cinema is a place where viewers

can encounter the divine (Bergesen and Greeley, 2000) For Greeley, it is not simply the explicitly religious films that can become a location of engagement with the sacred; it is also those, which deal with other significant topics such as death (*Flatliners*, 1990), grief (*Truly, Madly, Deeply*, 1991) and feasting (*Babette's Feast*, 1987).

While other recent writers claim to look for and even find 'God in the Movies,' (Barsotti and Johnston, 2004) including popular blockbusters such as *Star Wars* or *Superman*. They invariably admit that this is an arduous task, similar to trying to catch light. (Anker, 2004) When he was a young director and screenwriter, Paul Schrader, provided a more sophisticated account of the revelatory function of film, concentrating on more 'art-house' forms of cinema. On the basis of a study of three non-Hollywood directors, Ozu, Bresson and Dreyer, Schrader suggested that through their realistic and sparse filmic style it is possible to encounter the sacred (Schrader, 1972).⁸

Interestingly, few of these writers consider the ways in which film can undermine, challenge or shatter the sacred. If a sacred film is, as described earlier, a movie which is set apart in some way for religious purposes either by the intention of the director or by the actual cinematic content or audience use of the film, surely it is equally possible for a film to subvert the sacred. Rather than bringing consolation it heightens despair or even desolation. Instead of celebrating sacred virtues or values it embodies myths of false horizons, such as the myth of redemptive violence. Consider the example of Terry Waite, who was bored 'beyond imagination' as a solitary captive in Beirut. He had no books, apart from the bible, and no company, apart from his guards. When he was offered a video he jumped at the opportunity to relieve the tedium. Eventually after his evening food a trolley was wheeled in. He lifted his blindfold: 'The video begins. A helicopter sweeps across a desolate landscape, men in camouflaged uniforms swear at each other in undertones as they lie concealed in a dugout. Then the shooting starts. It's Vietnam. The violence is indescribable. I can't bear it; it assaults my sensibilities. Finally it comes to a miserable, bloody end.' He cannot agree with one of his captors who believed that it was a good movie. He found these 'cheaply made films' that are 'churned out in America' and 'distributed along with the other accoutrements of Western life' obscene. 'It is the glorification of violence which disturbs me so much. Violence, death, mutilation produced and marketed for entertainment sickens me' (Waite, 1994: 210-12). Not surprisingly his own situation, where he frequently heard gunfire and shells explode outside his window, heightened his antagonistic response. This experience puts into sharp relief the observation that the viewer's context, in this case a cell as opposed to a comfortable cinema, may significantly contribute to the way in which a film is received as anti-sacred. While the viewer is far from a blank slate watching in a vacuum, the actual content, the *mise-en-scène*, of the film itself provides some of the basic resources by which the audience experiences a film as sacred or not.

The Audience: Making Films Sacred

As is clear from the previous section there has been a rapid increase in the amount of writing produced on discerning the sacred, religious or theological in film.⁹ Up to this time the vast majority of these texts focus on either the film itself or the director of the film, leaving out of the discussion what the audience does with the film. The conversation to date has also primarily focused on Western films, ignoring Bollywood, the Middle-East and the burgeoning video film industry in Ghana and Nigeria.¹⁰ How do audiences make films sacred?

It is an unforgettable experience to sit in a packed cinema or video house in Accra and watch a locally produced Ghanaian or Nigerian video film. The audience is rarely entirely silent, and often actively cheers, boos or prays out loud for the characters.¹¹ This experience stands in sharp contrast with sitting in a Western multiplex watching a Hollywood film, where the audience is usually almost entirely silent. The peace is occasionally disturbed by a cough, or the rustle of sweet wrappers or the crunch of popcorn. Any talking is normally 'shushed' and exclamations are rare, the exception being laughter during comic moments or screams at sudden surprises in horror-movies or thrillers. The silencing of the Western audience is a fascinating story well told elsewhere. (Levine, 1988) Appearances, however, can be deceptive. This comparative silence does not mean that audiences are necessarily entirely passive. Research by Hoover and Clark (2002), for example, illustrates how the opposite is in fact the case. Audiences actively weave complex patterns of meaning on the basis of the media that they consume. Some of the least expected films can become woven into webs of sacred meaning by viewers. Nevertheless, precisely which films are viewed and the cultural context in which they are watched remains a significant element for understanding the complex triadic relationship between the spectator, the director or producer and the cinematic text, as films are marked as sacred. It is difficult to discuss how audiences can make films sacred in general terms. A specific case provides concrete evidence of how an audience's beliefs, participation and interpretation can interact with both the film production and the actual cinematic text.

Case Study: Searching for the Sacred in West African Video Film and Audiences

In the rest of this chapter, following my earlier framework, I focus on three components of West African video film: the audience, the film producer and films themselves. This is in order to investigate why these video films have displaced Hollywood productions that dominate in so many other parts of the world? Why have these locally produced video films become so popular?

I will suggest that these films dominate the market in Ghana partly because they have been invested with a sacred quality by both the directors and audiences. They may be mechanically reproduced, but they retain their aura or iconicity. Part of the reason for this is that they articulate local concerns and customs in highly realistic cinematic forms. More precisely, the popularity of these video films is derived from the fact that they often make concrete and visible the hidden forces of evil that are perceived as lurking behind the modern urban life of cities such as Accra. These feature length films are eclectic, drawing upon a range of cinematic and theatrical traditions: from local street drama to Hollywood action movies. They have evolved considerably over the last decade. In the 1990s the majority of these films focused primarily either on the family (exploring themes such as faithfulness between marriage partners, loyalty between parents, children, siblings or the extended family), or the quest for money and power in relation to the occult.¹² These are morality tales that are invariably played out against the backdrop of spiritual warfare. Sometimes films show how the family can be shattered by involvement in the occult. Initially, the vast majority of Ghanaian video films lacked the suspense or explicit violence embodied in Western movies, but with the increased popularity of more violent Nigerian and jointly produced Ghanaian-Nigerian films, the local film industry in Ghana in the late 1990s has evolved into producing and marketing movies that have closer parallels with their Western counterparts.

Elsewhere I have identified a range of conversations currently taking place in the emerging field of religion and media.¹³ By focusing upon these highly popular and religious video films in Ghana and Nigeria, this chapter contributes to a number of these ongoing discussions. This unique phenomenon in West Africa merits close attention, and is also pertinent to research into the relationship between film and the sacred.

Understanding the new wave of West African popular video films

The year 2001 saw over 600 video films produced in Nigeria and nearly 100 in Ghana. The number has increased every year for the last ten years. In 2002, however, most productions in Nigeria ceased for several months. This 'recess' was an attempt to bring order to a market that was becoming saturated with new productions.¹⁴ This was only a brief pause in the production of local films. Given that 'Anglophone Africa remains far behind francophone in the production of feature films' (Magombe, 1996: 670), these video films represent a vital new development in film production in Anglophone Africa. With a lack of investment and scant resources for creating indigenous African films, American films have dominated the cinemas of Ghana and Nigeria until the last few years. 'With the advent of video', Nigerian film historian

Frank Ukadike suggests, 'Ghana has been able to cultivate an indigenous film and video culture' (Ukadike, 1998: 570).

William K. Akuffo, has produced over 30 films in Ghana, and is one of the leaders of the new video movement in Ghana. He was originally a cinema projectionist who approached various filmmakers with the suggestion that they should use video rather than celluloid for film production. In spite of being a vastly cheaper alternative this idea was rejected, so he decided to work on his own. In the early 1990s, he purchased a VHS camera and made his first film *Zinabu* independently, editing on two video machines. No one would purchase this video film so he rented a cinema house, Globe Cinema in Accra, and advertised the video as a Ghanaian film. He assumed that most people had a bias against video at that time. So for the premier he camouflaged the bulky video machine and put it right in front of the film projector so that nobody would actually know where the pictures were coming from. When they started showing the film Akuffo admits: 'I was quite scared because I didn't know how people were going to receive it because of how the professionals were going about it, and to my surprise they [the audience] clapped, they laughed and everything' (Akuffo interviewed by Mitchell, 2000).

The popularity of locally produced video films is clear even after a brief walk through the streets of Accra. These videos are sold not only in video shops and general stores, but also off the back of carts and from stands in the city's markets. Locally produced videos, not the Hollywood films, tend to dominate the shelves. Franklin Kennedy-Ukah has spent several years researching these video films in Nigeria. He points out that there are also video cafés, which become the location for vigorous discussions provoked by the films.

Often we come together and watch some of these tapes. People, especially young people, discuss these videotapes in groups. Even on [Nigerian] university campuses we have little video cafés, we have group video viewing sessions on campus and each week about four, five sessions are held in the university where young people come together; friends come together to watch these videos. It goes to show how tremendously popular, how tremendously important the people think this aspect, this sphere of popular culture is (Kennedy-Ukah interviewed by Mitchell, 2000.)¹⁵

It is interesting to note how audiences use these films. The sheer ubiquity of video houses and video outlets in Accra and Lagos illustrate that it is by no means only in universities that they provoke discussion. Local people now watch many of these films on television, and sometimes even in churches. Increasingly, films are watched and discussed at home, in front of the VCR. But what aspect of these films generates the liveliest discussions?

Contested Sacred Figures¹⁶

One of the most common areas of debate is the portrayal of religious or sacred figures in many of these video films. Traditional African religious leaders are frequently caricatured, stereotyped or even demonized. They can be the cause of sickness, violence or death. In short, they are the catalysts or agents of evil. They are sometimes portrayed as having direct links with actual spirits, who in turn are depicted as having real power. Sacred spaces and leaders become points of contest. In the Ghanaian film *Namisha* (Akwetey-Kanyi Productions, 1999), the protagonist Sloba exerts terrible revenge on those who have stolen his wife and were responsible for the death of his two daughters. He uses Namisha, one of the spirits beholden to the earth spirit Abadzen, to seduce his enemies and then brutally murder them. Ministers from the historic mission churches (such as the Methodists, the Presbyterians or the Anglicans) on the other hand, are often represented as well intentioned but ultimately ineffectual and marginal to the outcome of the story. They neither contribute to nor counter the horror. Pastors from the independent Pentecostal or charismatic churches, by contrast, are typically portrayed as dynamic and spiritually powerful. They often use the accoutrements of power, such as mobile phones or computers alongside a large black leather-covered Bible. Frequently, it is they who overcome or at least help to overcome the evil forces, which let loose the agents of horror. At times, the three-way dynamic is simplified to a sharply defined two-way conflict. Africanus Aveh teaches film and video at the University of Ghana in Accra and believes that:

In most of the videos we see the Christian pastor is always neatly dressed in a suit or in a white cassock. He is always a peace-broker who is welcome in every home, who mends broken marriages, who will be consulted and bring life through counselling, etc, etc. But on the other hand you see the African traditional priest being portrayed as a killer, being portrayed as a fraud, being portrayed as a liar who kills for a fee, who help people achieve all their evil and demonic intentions. For example, if you are a young lady and you see a man that you like and the man is already married, it is portrayed that these young ladies consult the African traditional priest and then he is able to help them snatch legitimate husbands from other women. (Aveh interviewed by Mitchell, 2000.)

At other moments the battles between the faiths are more explicitly represented. In the final scene of the Nigerian film *Magic Money*, for example, the Christian pastor and African traditional priest call, even shout, for the help of their respective Gods. They both dance on the spot and gesticulate aggressively, but the traditional priest is literally laid low, overwhelmed by the more powerful force called upon by the Christian pastor.

This literalistic battle scene is taken a step further in *Namisha* where one character commits his life to the elemental spirit Obadzen. He has a secret

room to which he adjourns to pray to this spirit. She declines to assist him. So he tries to use his own power. In a scene reminiscent of a science fiction movie, he hurls curses out from his room; with them go super-imposed circles of light thrown towards his opponents in the sitting room. They are accompanied by echoing sound effects. The pastor, who has been praying with three women associates, is knocked down and lands back on the sofa. The praying in tongues does not abate, if anything it continues more vigorously. The pastor recovers and this time rays of light burst from them, and knock out their opponent. This scene is more comic than horrific, with some audiences in Ghana laughing out loud at the weakness of the traditional religionist enacted in this sequence. Intentional and unintentional comic episodes balance moments of suspense, surprise and horror. Only later when Namisha murders her unfortunate victims or turns into a black raven to escape her pursuers is there anything redolent of the more traditional forms of the horror film. Nevertheless, it is clear from the scene described above that the forces are portrayed semi-realistically and that the stronger force is to be found with the prayerful Christians.

These and other similar portrayals provoke fierce criticism from a number of local commentators. Elom Dovlo is head of the religion department at the University of Ghana in Accra:

I think the films should be more authentic in reflecting traditional culture and should be geared more towards how there could be interaction between Christianity and traditional culture, rather than be geared towards condemnation of that culture and the people who follow it. [At present it] simply causes tension within the society. (Dovlo interviewed by Mitchell, 2000.)

This tension has its roots in Ghana and Nigeria's colonial past, where traditional religion was perceived not in terms of the sacred but in particularly negative, even demonic terms.

Up to this stage in the discussion a number of points have emerged. First, West African film is largely ignored in many studies considering the relation between film and the sacred. This is unfortunate, as it is a rich seam ripe for exploration. Second, in parts of West Africa, Ghanaian and Nigerian video films have provided an alternative source of entertainment to Hollywood films. In many shops and most video cafés, particularly in Ghana, they have actually displaced Hollywood films as the most popular item for viewing. They offer a rare example of a local industry that, whilst lacking extensive production and post-production facilities and budgets, nevertheless resists the domination that Hollywood exerts in many parts of the world. Third, one regular criticism of these films is the negative stereotyping of traditional African religious figures and the positive stereotyping of Christian leaders. Given these observations and criticisms, and given the lack of technical sophistication, why is it that many of these films are so popular in Ghana and Nigeria?

Cinematic Popularising of the Sacred

'Prior to being sold as a video cassette for home viewing, a popular movie can easily be seen by tens of thousands of people in Accra's cinemas in the center and suburbs and become the talk of the town. Often its story is "broadcast" through mobile people such as taxi drivers, street vendors, and traders in Makola market' (Meyer, 2001: 65-84). The popularity of these video films can be explained from several different perspectives. One of the most persuasive explanations concentrates upon the belief systems that they embody. Many of these films reflect dominant popular beliefs, in particular a belief in the reality of evil powers. These powers are portrayed as trespassing into the everyday lives of Ghanaians. From studying particular films and listening to audience responses it is clear that many of these videos are popular because they enact, in highly realistic forms, how evil forces find their ultimate demise in the face of the Christian God.

On the basis of several local interviews, it is clear that many Nigerian and Ghanaian viewers believe that evil spirits, evil characters and evil powers really do exist, and are indeed responsible for bringing about tragedy in people's real lives. Given this belief system, cinematic portrayals may be seen as fictionalized accounts of reality.

The sacred sphere becomes part of the everyday sphere. These portrayals thus reflect common beliefs, common concerns and common anxieties. In the video-film houses of Accra it is common to find audiences applauding and cheering as the Christian character vanquishes the apparently evil witchdoctor or traditional religionist. Another research project would be required to analyse the extent to which the audiences recognize these scenes as genuinely reflecting everyday concerns, practices and experiences of faith, and how this might vary in different parts of Ghana and Nigeria.

Nonetheless, it is valuable to highlight the 'realistic' way in which themes are enacted in these films. For example, consider one scene from *Time* (Miracle Films, D'Joh Mediacraft and Igo Films, 2000), one of the first jointly produced Ghanaian and Nigerian films. In it one of the key characters has kept the corpse of his wife in his wardrobe in their bedroom. He is following the advice of the traditional healer who had told him that if he does this, she will provide him with all the money that he needs. In the scene under consideration, his son nervously enters the room, crosses himself and then opens the cupboard door. He is shocked by the sight of the corpse of his dead mother and falls back on the bed in the horror. The following shots include an image of the corpse essentially vomiting money. There are actual bank notes coming out of mouth of the corpse. When I saw this in central Accra, there were gasps of shock from the audience. These became louder as the father bludgeons the boy to death with a baseball bat for uncovering the corpse. While this film deals explicitly with the contest between distinct sacred spheres, the extremely violent nature of the screenplay raises questions

as to whether such cinematic depictions may actually distance the viewer from the sacred.¹⁷

In interviews a number of the producers and directors made it clear that many are not creating film for proselytizing or pastoral purposes. They do not intend to create a sacred film. Another one of Ghana's most prolific directors and producers William Akuffo, for example, confided that his thirty films:

Don't reflect my beliefs at all. They've got nothing to do with my beliefs because to start with I don't believe in all the Christianity crap that is going around me, although I don't believe in this Africanian thing so... I am not an atheist; but I believe there should be a supreme being somewhere but since I haven't seen him, I don't bother myself very much about him. I don't think my films reflect what I think at all. (Akuffo, interviewed by Mitchell, 2000.)

For Akuffo the bottom line of making films is to appeal to large numbers of Ghanaians and make himself rich. This is his stated objective. He recognizes that the majority of his potential audiences are Christian and he makes his films accordingly. Sacred themes represent a significant element of his expanding repertoire. In Nigeria targeting films appropriately is more complex as filmmakers face an audience composed of Christians and Moslems. Many make video films with one particular faith group, or even sub-group, in mind. Moreover, as the anthropologist Brian Larkin points out: 'there's a tension in Northern Nigeria between local, Hausa-produced videos and Lagos-based videos. For Hausa filmmakers, they couldn't possibly, nor would they necessarily want to, get away with certain sorts of licentious activity that goes on in Lagos videos' (Larkin interviewed by Mitchell, 2000).¹⁸ Thus audiences exert a significant influence over the practice of filmmakers, often encouraging a moralistic and Christian approach to cinematic storytelling.

Reflections on the Case Study

These examples from West Africa raise significant questions as to both what audiences actually do with a film and the context in which films are seen.

We watch a movie, but we do more than that – we participate in a cultural and social phenomenon. To the extent that this event allows us to transcend mundane life for a prescribed period of time, we are part of a sacred space, a sacred time, and transfixed by the experience, we are confronted by an alternative reality, a 'not me', an otherness. (Ostwalt, 1995: 155.)

Ostwalt's suggestion that the practice of going to the cinema is like a secular ritual, with its own sacred space and sacred time, is an intriguing vision. But

how far does Ostwalt too easily blur the experience of those viewers who are well aware of the difference between entering a cinema to watch a film and entering a place of worship to participate in prayers? It is not entirely clear that the cinema has challenged or even replaced religious practices as some commentators suggest. Admittedly, several cinemas in the UK are now housed in former places of worship. For example, in central Edinburgh, Scotland, St Thomas Church, a three storey and five bay symmetrical rectangular-plan classical church built in 1830-1 was converted into the Filmhouse cinema complex in 1981. Transformation of sacred worship spaces into cinemas is not the entire story. By contrast elsewhere many old movie theatres, particularly in North America, have been converted into places of worship. For example, the old Central Park Cinema, having been a profitable and popular cinema for decades, and reckoned to be 'one of the most important extant theaters in Chicago',¹⁹ was turned into the Church of God in Christ in 1971. Perhaps most ambiguous are those are cinemas which now share their space with churches. For instance, the *Palladium* in Accra, Ghana, screens films during the week and weekends, but rents the hall to the Christian Family Church on Sunday mornings.²⁰ Just as these different sets of interactions between cinemas and churches suggests, this essay has shown how the relationship between the sacred and the cinema is a complex one.

I have suggested that while there are many explanations for the popularity of video films in Ghana and Nigeria, the fact their narratives explore what is sacred allows audiences to identify with many of the characters. Their ability to adapt to the market and to develop new themes and approaches partly accounts for their continued popularity. There is a sense in which these filmmakers are creating a new genre, which breaks open traditional understandings of the action or horror genres. It is a genre, which has its roots firmly fixed in Western African cultural soil, but still bears fruit in a surprisingly diverse fashion. Several moviemakers have moved beyond producing the simple family drama or occult spectacle or sacred tale to more eclectic and violent representations. The sacred element in various recent films is but one aspect of these movies. Unlike several recent Hollywood films, such as Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* the religious or sacred theme is not an end in itself.

The elements of the sacred in these films can be seen as cultural artefacts that provide valuable insight into the moral landscape, the anxieties and the questions commonly found in Ghana and Nigeria. For example, how do the beliefs of the village-dweller change when they come into contact with the city? Does or should such a shift inevitably lead to a violent abandonment of traditional beliefs and practices? Why does Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity have such a tremendous appeal? How do charismatic Christians relate to other Christian, Islamic and African traditional groups? How can these religious groups co-exist when they all have competing claims to the soul of both countries? Alongside these issues the local video film phenomenon is itself evolving. New sets of questions are raised such as: Why is there now in Ghana

a strong preference for Nigerian films, and Ghanaian producers are struggling to meet their own production costs? How far is the reception of these films influenced by the social spaces in which they are watched? Given the extent of the video film phenomenon in Ghana and Nigeria, these and other related questions deserve further investigation.

Conclusion

I have suggested that not all films are necessarily sacred. Some films clearly celebrate capitalism and consumerism. Others reinforce the belief that consumerism itself has been made sacred. The Hollywood film industry for instance has become for some viewers an alternative kind of church, with its own sacred times and spaces, its own viewing rituals and canonization ceremonies. It promotes the accumulation of wealth and individual celebrity over the formation of character and caring communities. This industry can create cinematic distractions from the real and endemic violence in the world. These observations are complicated by the fact that while many films celebrate the myths of heroic individualism or romantic love or redemptive violence, others function counter-culturally, challenging the status quo in a way reminiscent of some of world's most sacred and revered religious figures.

In a longer essay it would be possible to set out some criteria, such as considering whether a film celebrates violence or hatred, which would qualify the working definition, set out earlier, which if used imprecisely allows all films to be declared sacred. In this essay I have tried to show how mass produced films do not inevitably lose their aura and can still carry with them hints of the sacred. To do this we have moved from Sweden (and the searching for the sacred with Bergman), via North America (and the work of biblical scholars intent on using film to illuminate sacred texts or even sacred experiences) to Ghana (and the mixed uses of video film audiences and intentions of film directors found there).

Significant differences emerge when these three cases are compared. Even in supposedly secularised European nations searching for the sacred has far from evaporated. The ongoing popularity of Bergman's films, many of which interrogate religious beliefs, is emblematic of a continued fascination for narratives that dance with the sacred. In many parts of West Africa the sacred remains part and parcel of the fabric of daily existence. Films produced in Ghana and Nigeria are part of a growing commercial cinematic enterprise in which producers recognise the power of stories about the sacred to attract large audiences. In many cases the sacred becomes commodified and one of the ways of effectively marketing a film. By contrast some North American biblical scholars who use films to illustrate sacred texts, demonstrate how films can be used to question and to celebrate the place of the sacred in the midst of the world's largest consumer economy. These scholars use some

films with no obvious connections with the sacred, and attempt to re-enchant them. Audiences do the same, not only in North America and Europe, but also in West Africa. Simply because a director has no intention of creating a sacred film, or the actual content is far from explicitly sacred, does not prevent some members of the audience to transform the film into a sacred artefact.

Notes

1. I am particularly indebted to Knut Lundby for his insights and general encouragement with producing this article. Elements of my discussion later in this essay on: 'The Director' and 'The Film' are updated and expanded from part of my essay on: "Theology and Film", see Mitchell (2005).
2. See, for example, Knut Lundby's definition of sacred in this book, drawing upon Durkheim's 'set apart and forbidden'. My own working definition does not include 'forbidden' and does not rely too heavily upon the Durkheimian perspective.
3. Morgan (1999) suggests that many nineteenth and early twentieth century mass-produced images, such as tracts, bible illustrations or engravings, retained their aura through devotional use and this visual piety eventually 'diminished the rigid distinctions between Catholic and Protestant attitudes towards images'.
4. 'Strindberg has followed me all my life. Sometimes I've felt deeply attracted to him, sometimes repelled...he expressed things which I'd experienced and which I couldn't find words for.' See Björkman et al., *Bergman on Bergman* (1973: 23).
5. Bergman, introduction to *The Seventh Seal*.
6. See also Koskinen's discussion of Bergman at <http://www.sweden.se>
7. Bergman, introduction to *The Seventh Seal*.
8. For a definition of his terms see Paul Schrader (1972: 3-13).
9. See Steve Nolan's extensive annotated bibliography on religion and film in Mitchell and Marriage (2003). For a more up to date bibliography see Mitchell (2005).
10. Part of this section on West African film is adapted from Mitchell (2004: 107-121).
11. I am indebted to Birgit Meyer, Rosalind Hackett and the International Study Commission on Media, Religion and Culture for providing the opportunity to experience this first hand in Accra, Ghana. I am particularly grateful to Birgit Meyer who has shared many of her insights from extensive research into this phenomenon. [Website: www.pscw.uva.nl/media-religion]. I am also indebted to Brian Larkin for generously sharing his research about Nigerian video culture.
12. See Birgit Meyer's insightful articles for a more extensive discussion of these themes, including a helpful discussion of the move beyond family and occult dramas in Ghana: Meyer, B. (2002a and 2002b: 45-62).
13. See Mitchell and Marriage (eds.) (2003). In the final chapter of the book, 'Emerging Conversations in Media, Religion and Culture', I set out seven areas of developing concern: the participative turn, the narration of identity, the multi-religious perspective, the quest for communicative justice, the historical perspective, the transformation of religious and theological reflection and the ethics of the audience. I argue on this basis that developing a single coherent methodology is premature if not impossible.
14. See Steinglass, M. (2002), When There's Too Much of a Not-Very-Good Thing, in *The New York Times*, May 26, Sunday, Late Edition, Final Section: Section 2, Page 16; Column 1.
15. Interviews were also used in Mitchell, J. (28 May 2002), 'Western African Popular Video Film', *Omnibus*, radio documentary, BBC World Service.
16. See Lundby's discussion of Sacred Figures and Contested Sacred Spaces in his chapter earlier in this book (p. 46, 50).

17. For consideration of these films as 'moral parables' see Mitchell (2004), esp. pp. 114-117.
18. See also Larkin, B. (2002 and 2000).
19. Theatre Historical Society of America, *Marquee* magazine, Vol. 35, No. 1, 2003.
20. For a photo of this see Meyer, Birgit (2003: 127).

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Seek and You Will Find

A Critical Discussion of the Search for “Christian” Content in Popular Culture

Andreas Häger

During the last decade, a field of research on religion and popular culture has evolved as a parallel and partly overlapping field with the “media, religion and culture” (MRC) paradigm. The fields¹ have some common concerns – the main one could perhaps be described as the study of religion outside the narrowly defined institutions – and there are scholars contributing to the central publications in both fields.² A difference between the fields (apart from the clearer structure of MRC, theoretically, as well as organizationally through the study commission (*The International Study Commission on Media, Religion and Culture*³), international conferences and anthologies, etc.) seems (hardly surprising) to be a stronger focus on the media within MRC. Possibly, the MRC field also has a stronger presence of media and communication researchers, while the religion and popular culture field is to a greater extent populated by people from the religious studies and theology departments. The stronger focus on religion has its clear advantages (as does the looser structure, to my mind), but the field of research on religion and popular culture has some problematic aspects – “teething troubles”, as it were – that are less evident within MRC (but I still believe that it is also relevant to consider the issue in relation to that field). The topic of this article is one such “teething trouble”, which could be described as a tendency to read Christian content into the works of popular mainstream⁴ artists and works.

Much of the emerging field of research on religion and popular culture focuses on interpretations of various aspects of popular culture: of individual works, of the career and work of particular artists, or of whole genres or forms of expression. The aim of this article is to discuss how such interpretations function as a search for “sacred” or “spiritual” dimensions in popular culture. More specifically, the purpose is to discuss how these “sacred” dimensions in academic interpretations of popular culture are tied to existing religious traditions, mainly Christianity, and how the interpretations may function as a means for reading a particular Christian content into the works of a popular mainstream artist.

It is self-evident that all texts are there to be interpreted, and any interpretations must be allowed, including a Christian or theological interpretation. But I still think that attempts to look for a particular Christian content in popular texts should be carried out with caution. The reason that I see these interpretations as problematic is that they, often implicitly but sometimes quite explicitly (for examples, see below), constitute a claim to a Christian monopoly on interpreting culture and explaining human existence, and thus function as a denial of the pluralistic character of today's society. I will return to this topic in the concluding part of the article.

The study of religion and popular culture is – with the exception of some pioneering works such as Nelson (1976) and Greeley (1988) – a recent phenomenon in the academic world. But it is a field that after a “slow start” virtually exploded around the turn of the millennium. A number of anthologies have been published, notably Forbes & Mahan (2000), Stout & Buddenbaum (2001) and Mazur & McCarthy (2001). There is an online journal called *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*. The field is dominated by American scholars as well as American cases, but the field is also expanding in Europe, including Scandinavia (e.g. Bossius, 2003; Häger, 2001; 2004a).

The discussion of the field is here narrowed down to a small number of examples, mainly four studies interpreting the American rock star Bruce Springsteen and some of his songs.

Some examples of interpretations of popular culture within religious studies

This part of the article discusses some examples of interpretations of popular culture in the academic research on religion and popular culture. Four studies focusing on the American rock musician Bruce Springsteen have been selected as cases. These are two chapters from books by Greeley (1988) and Sigurdson (2003), and two articles, one from one of the major recent anthologies in the field (McCarthy, 2001), the other, older, article from an academic publication in religious studies (Yamin, 1990). The texts are taken as examples, and the purpose is not primarily to discuss Springsteen and academic interpretations of his works, but to discuss research on religion and popular culture more generally. I have elected to discuss interpretations of one single artist as a way of limiting the scope of the article and possibly providing a clearer focus.

My aim is to discuss the interpretations of Bruce Springsteen and his work in these studies in order to illustrate different aspects of how the “sacred” dimension of popular culture is tied to established religion in academic research and more specifically how a Christian content is construed in Springsteen's songs. The discussion of the studies is not to be understood as reviews of these texts or any other form of attempt to discuss them in their

entirety, nor is it my purpose to criticize the texts but to use them as tools for the discussion in this article. As stated above, I take the stance that these interpretations are valid and legitimate from a certain perspective, the perspective of these authors, and I merely want to discuss these interpretations from my own perspective. The article has what could be termed a meta-perspective, where texts that could be labelled “previous research” in the field are treated rather as material for analysis, where I make my interpretations of the interpretations of Springsteen.

“Catholic troubadour”

Andrew Greeley is a renowned sociologist of religion (e.g. Greeley, 1973), as well as a Catholic priest and novelist. Greeley’s (1988) *God in popular culture* is one of the earliest works in what has become the academic field of research on religion and popular culture. He deals with many different artists, and works of popular culture, discussing them in light of the concept “the Catholic imagination”.

Greeley discusses Bruce Springsteen in a chapter titled “Born in the USA: Springsteen, Blue-collar Prophet and Catholic Troubadour” (Greeley, 1988: 133-148). Greeley’s main point in the discussion on Springsteen is that Springsteen is a Catholic, and that this is evident in the lyrics of Springsteen’s songs. Initially, Greeley is a bit cautious, stating that there is “no trace” of “explicit reflection on Catholic doctrine” in Springsteen’s lyrics, and “almost no Catholic symbols” (Greeley, 1988: 138), but he argues that Springsteen’s Catholic upbringing still shows in the music in a perhaps unconscious way.

Greeley finds that a central message in Springsteen’s work is the message of hope:

Am I saying that this hopefulness comes out of his Catholicism? You bet I am. Where else did he get it and sustain it against all the trends and fashions in his profession? (Greeley, 1988: 138.)

The expressions of hope and holding on to one’s dreams which Greeley (1988: 139) finds at what he calls “a deeper level” – that is, a level that is not explicit – in Springsteen’s lyrics, he claims are “incorrigibly romantic and incorrigibly Catholic” (Greeley, 1988: 140). Such an expression is for example the notion that

Maybe you can’t exactly go home again, but you can take home with you – a profoundly Catholic sentiment (Greeley, 1988: 139).

Greeley (1988: 143) also compares Springsteen to one of the main biblical authors, saying that “on the subject of human sinfulness, Springsteen sounds like Saint Paul.”

So after all, Greeley finds evidence of Catholic and more general Christian doctrine in Springsteen. And in spite of his initial statement on the lack of Catholic symbols, he also states, regarding a recurring symbol in Springsteen's lyrics, the river:

But, while there is tragedy in "Tunnel of Love", there is also hope. The water of the river still flows, but now it stands for rebirth. Light and water, the Easter and Baptismal symbols of the Catholic liturgy, the combination of the male and female fertility principles, create life in "Tunnel of Love". (Greeley, 1988: 142.)

The passage apparently refers to the song "Spare Parts", which talks of a single mother who attempted to drown her child in a river, but regretted it, picked up the child again and returned home.⁵ The song contains an explicit religious reference in saying that the woman "cried till she prayed" before picking up the child again. But saying that the sunshine and the river of the Springsteen song are "Easter and Baptismal symbols of the Catholic liturgy", and that Springsteen uses these symbols because of his Catholic upbringing, is clearly Greeley's own (and to my mind not very persuasive) interpretation. The discussion on the "male and female fertility principles" could perhaps be seen as an interesting exception to Greeley's emphasis on Catholicism in Springsteen.⁶

Perhaps even more striking than Greeley's reading of Catholic dogma and symbolism in Springsteen's lyrics is his statement on Springsteen's significance as a religious figure:

The release of Springsteen's album "Tunnel of Love" may be a more important Catholic event in this country [i.e. the U.S.] than the visit of Pope John Paul II (Greeley, 1988: 142).

and the assertion that this significance will only increase:

I don't see how his music can help but become even more religious than it already is. [...] he will become an even more important religious prophet than he is today. (Greeley, 1988: 142.)

All in all, Greeley's discussion of Springsteen is a very clear example of how a scholar of religion and popular culture interprets an artist and his works in a way that ties this artist to a religious tradition and to institutional religion – and claims that the particular artist's qualities mainly derive from this connection to a particular tradition. Greeley (1988) is also very explicit in the demarcation of this tradition, Catholicism, and in the interpretation of Springsteen as expressing "profoundly Catholic sentiments".

Springsteen as theologian

In his article “The Theology of Bruce Springsteen”, George Yamin (1990) initially discusses so-called “Christian rock”, and claims:

There are other rock-and-roll artists whose music contains, on less superficial levels than is found in Christian rock music, a religious and even a theological dimension that is generally overlooked, but which needs to be exposed. In this category, the most prominent figure is *Bruce Springsteen*. (Yamin 1990: 2; italics in original.)

Yamin (1990: 2) describes Springsteen’s music as “nothing less than a modern-day theological epic” as well as – in his conclusion – “a genuine continuation of the religious heritage of the Hebrew-Christian tradition” (Yamin, 1990: 18). More specifically, Springsteen, according to Yamin (1990: 6), “retells and recapitulates (though often by way of interpretation) the Judeo-Christian story of salvation history”. The main thrust of Yamin’s article is the documentation of this retelling, in passages titled “Paradise lost”, “The promised land” and “Pilgrim’s Progress” – all of which are set off with a quotation from the Bible.

As is evident from the longer quote above, Yamin (1990) compares Springsteen to Christian rock and finds that Springsteen has a more profound theological message than is common in this genre. It is also interesting and important to note that the premise of Yamin’s analysis of Springsteen is a defense of rock music against the harsh criticism from some conservative Christian circles (in Yamin’s text exemplified by the Peters brothers (e.g. Peters & Peters, 1986; cf. Martin & Segrave, 1988: 285-286). Yamin (1990: 2) explicitly states that he wants to “enter into the arena of rock-and-roll ‘apologetics’”.

The use of religious terminology as metaphors in discussing media and popular culture is quite common in research as well as in popular accounts, perhaps most obviously in the term “idol”, but also in describing artists as “icons”, concerts as “rituals”, etc. Yamin (1990) excels in this metaphoric use. He says that Jon Landau left his career as a journalist to become Springsteen’s manager “like the fishermen and tax collectors of the gospels who left their professions to follow the call of Jesus” (Yamin, 1990:3). Depicting Springsteen’s background, Yamin talks of “the ‘nativity’ of this future Messiah” in New Jersey, and he describes Springsteen’s early life by saying that “the ‘messianic secret’ was well-kept” (Yamin, 1990:3). Such metaphoric use – that particularly in the messianic description can be compared to the well known cult around Elvis (cf. e.g. Strausbaugh, 1995) – could be understood as merely humorous, as not carrying any deeper meaning. On the other hand, one may, with for example Fairclough (1992: 194), argue that metaphors structure the way we think in a fundamental way. An example of a very strong metaphor comes in Yamin’s (1990: 16) interpretation of the lyrics of the song “Darkness on the Edge of Town” (*Bruce Springsteen’s songs*),

where the narrator of the song announces that he will “be on that hill”. Yamin (1990) compares the narrator with “another lonely and world-forsaken figure before him – Christ himself”, and compares the “hill” in the song with Golgotha.

An interesting aspect of Yamin’s (1990) discussion of Bruce Springsteen is his use of a phenomenological approach to religion. With Eliade (e.g. 1959), he discusses Springsteen’s definitions of sacred space and time, concluding – with good evidence from the lyrics – that these are the street and the night, respectively. This of course indicates a very general religious content in Springsteen’s work, reference to “traditional religion” in Yamin’s (1990: 4) phrase, rather than a connection to any particular religious tradition. Yamin finally also refers to a rock’n’roll religion similar to the one evoked by McCarthy (2001) (see below), in a lengthy quote from a story told by Springsteen in concert, where he tells that he has received an eleventh commandment from God, stating: “LET IT ROCK” (Yamin, 1990: 17; capital letters in original).

In a similar fashion to Greeley (1988), Yamin (1990) clearly finds that Bruce Springsteen is a noteworthy artist because of his “theological dimension”. In comparison with the comments on Springsteen in Greeley (1988), Yamin’s article does not focus as much on finding doctrine from a particular tradition. The very clearly unorthodox tale of the eleventh commandment, as well as the discussion of sacred space and time, are examples of religious aspects that cannot be said to be tied to a particular tradition at all. The interesting feature of Yamin (1990), from the perspective of this article, is how, in spite of such general findings as the sanctity of the street and the night in Springsteen’s lyrics, he still claims that Springsteen’s work has a profoundly theological dimension, and is a continuation of the “Hebrew-Christian tradition”.

The promised land

Kate McCarthy, co-editor of the anthology *God in the Details: American religion in popular culture* (Mazur & McCarthy, 2001), discusses Springsteen in an article titled “Deliver me from nowhere: Bruce Springsteen and the myth of the American promised land” (McCarthy, 2001).

She sums up her interpretation of Springsteen in the statement:

Springsteen is linked to a myth much larger than himself, a myth that reaches back not only to the formation of American identity but to the Bible (McCarthy, 2001: 24).

and she particularly mentions “the biblical themes of exodus and promised land” (McCarthy, 2001: 24). Just like Greeley (1988), she presents some initial reservations about her interpretations, saying that she does not see the “religious meanings” as intentional on the part of Springsteen or his fans, but

also says she is convinced that an analysis of the themes of exodus and promised land in Springsteen gives important insights into “the spiritual meanings of being an American” (McCarthy, 2001: 24).

Apart from discussing Springsteen’s biblical allusions, McCarthy (2001: 26) talks of Springsteen’s “dialogue [...] with Jewish and Christian religious traditions”, and discusses what she finds to be a “baptismal quality” (McCarthy, 2001: 37) in Springsteen’s music (and in Jon Landau’s legendary early review of a Springsteen concert). But McCarthy (2001) also, and perhaps more importantly, ties Springsteen to the American civil religion. She understands the recurring themes – by McCarthy referred to as “symbols” or “myths” – of exodus and a promised land as a (partly ambiguous and ironic) celebration of America and American culture. Springsteen’s use of the road, or street, and driving one’s car, as central themes, is described by McCarthy (2001: 29) as a presentation of “the spiritual import of the automotive exodus”. McCarthy (2001: 31) also refers to Springsteen’s description of gospel radio as “long distance salvation” in the song “Open All Night” (*Bruce Springsteen’s songs*) – although she actually talks of the “long distance salvation of rock’n’roll radio”.

In her description of Springsteen as “linked to a myth that reaches [...] to the Bible” (McCarthy, 2001: 24), McCarthy (2001) uses religious terminology in her discussion, saying that Springsteen has a “dialogue” with the Judeo-Christian tradition – a statement that can be compared to Yamin’s assertion that Springsteen is a “continuation” of that tradition, although a dialogue could perhaps be seen as more distanced from the tradition than a continuation. But McCarthy (2001) emphasizes, and her description of the “spiritual” aspects of Springsteen makes it clear, the fact that she finds Springsteen to be connected both to a Judeo-Christian tradition and to the tradition of American civil religion.

A hungry heart

As a final example of analyses of Springsteen and his work, I will discuss a chapter from a book by the Swedish theologian Ola Sigurdson (2003). The topic of the book is “the return of religion” (an expression that forms part of the title of the book and here is given in my translation, as are all quotes from the book), and particularly the way(s) religion has “returned” in the media and popular culture. Bruce Springsteen is discussed, along with U2 and Madonna, in a chapter titled “The Hunger We Call Love”. Sigurdson describes Springsteen as “yet another famous artist whose lyrics often contain biblical and religious themes”, and says that “there are more ambiguous as well as more direct allusions to a higher being in his lyrics” (Sigurdson, 2003: 88-89).

Sigurdson (2003: 79) compares Springsteen – and the Beatles – to one of the major authors in Christian history:

The church father St. Augustine wrote the following at the end of the 4th century: “Love, and do what you will”. In the 1960s, the Beatles wrote the song “All you need is love”. St. Augustine also wrote that “our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you”, while Bruce Springsteen still claims that “everybody’s got a hungry heart”.

Sigurdson (2003: 80) interprets the song “Hungry heart” as an expression of the insufficient character of love between humans, and he says that it is “exactly this insufficiency that theology reflects on”.

Most of Sigurdson’s discussion of Springsteen is devoted to the album “The Rising”, on which several songs deal with the attacks on the World Trade Center buildings in New York in 2001. One of these songs, “Into the Fire” is – or as Sigurdson (2003: 89) puts it, “seems to be” – a tribute to the firemen who died in the aftermath of the attacks. The chorus of the song contains the words “may your faith give us faith, may your hope give us hope, may your love give us love” (*Bruce Springsteen’s songs*; Sigurdson, 2003: 90). Sigurdson, as a theologian, reminds us of Paul’s text on faith, hope and love in 1. Corinthians 13, and he says that:

This refrain could be directed to a person who is ready to sacrifice his or her life if needed [...] At the same time it seems a bit far-fetched to imagine that a prayer for strength, faith, hope and love is only addressed to a fireman going into an inferno. (Sigurdson, 2003: 90.)

An interpretation of this song as a prayer to a “higher power” (Sigurdson, 2003: 90) is anything but obvious – which Sigurdson himself is the first to admit. The topic of prayer is more explicit in another song in the album, “My City of Ruins”, which is quoted extensively by Sigurdson (2003: 92), and this song has perhaps influenced Sigurdson’s interpretation of “Into the Fire”.

Sigurdson (2003) is more explicit than any of the other authors discussed here in his reservations about his own interpretations, and he puts the emphasis on a discussion of how Springsteen raises “theological” questions rather than provides (for example) Christian answers. But particularly the comparison of Springsteen with the church father St. Augustine – a comparison that is obviously inspired by Sigurdson’s background and way of thinking rather than anything explicit in Springsteen’s text – can be seen as an example of how Sigurdson also ties Springsteen to Christian tradition. On the other hand, Sigurdson (2003: 91) moderates his interpretations of Springsteen as possibly part of the Christian tradition by referring to the fact that the album “The Rising” also mentions Buddha and Allah.

Discussion

The main purpose of this article is to discuss and problematize one aspect of academic research on religion and popular culture: the tendencies to interpret artists and works from a Christian perspective, reading Christian content into, for example, the song lyrics of successful mainstream artists. The examples presented and discussed in the previous passage, where four scholars present their views on the religious elements in Bruce Springsteen's songs, primarily serve as illustrations of this main point. As I already pointed out, my discussion is not intended as any form of review or other in-depth critique of the studies used as examples. Although my perspective here has been critical, I find many positive aspects in these studies, not least the fact that they bring out the importance of popular culture as a field for religious studies.

These four studies were selected as examples primarily because they discuss the same well known artist, and therefore provide a possible means for a delimited and unified discussion. Springsteen is perhaps not ideal for my argument, since his use of metaphors such as "the promised land", or occasional references to biblical figures, make it relatively easy for scholars to interpret him as part of a particular religious tradition.

Other examples of more striking interpretations are available, as for example when Greeley (1988: 164) asks the reader, regarding Madonna's hit song "Like a Virgin":

Does not the song repeat the traditional Catholic teaching that human passion is the sacrament of Divine passion that the most gentle and tender of human lovers is a hint of what God is like?

Madonna has been a recurring case not only in academic studies on popular culture in general (e.g. Schwichtenberg, 1993), but also in studies on religion and popular culture (e.g. Greeley, 1993; Häger, 1996; Hulsether, 2000) and I therefore like to think that my choice of Springsteen as the focal point for the discussion here also serves to provide a broader picture of the field. But I think that the analyses of Springsteen primarily show how research in the field of religion and popular culture tends to take such vague references to religious symbols such as the use of the term "promised land", or allusions to prayer, and attempts to fit these references, and the artist using them, into a well defined established tradition. In addition, these references seem to encourage the interpreters to read almost any kind of text, about "racing in the street", "a hungry heart", or "the river", as expressions of a (Judeo)-Christian tradition, or as a way to deal with issues that are defined as "theological" (and therefore at least indirectly tied to the same tradition). The examples show, to my mind, that there is a strong interest within these studies (and by implication, in much of the field of research on religion and popular culture) in incorporating (for example) Bruce Springsteen into Christianity. I again

want to emphasize that I do not question the rights of theologians – or anyone else – to interpret Springsteen, or other popular culture, but rather find problematic the fact that some of these interpretations, in my view (in my meta-interpretation), function as a defense of a perceived, albeit to my mind lost (if it ever existed), monopoly of Christianity to explain human existence.

The studies used as examples have been published over a time span of fifteen years – a time span that in the brief history of research on religion and popular culture is quite long. The discussion here has followed a chronological order, and it is quite possible to read the differences between the studies as indications of some form of development within the field. I initially termed the tendency to look for and find Christian messages in mainstream popular culture as a “teething trouble” in the research in the field, and therefore have already implied that it is a tendency that may be passing (and one purpose of this article is, of course, hopefully to contribute to this). Sigurdson (2003) clearly seems more aware than Greeley (1988) of the problematic aspects of interpreting Springsteen as Christian. But Sigurdson’s (2003) comparison of Springsteen with St. Augustine, which evidently is completely detached from the views of Springsteen and (the vast majority of) his fans, on the other hand, shows that a construction of a mainstream artist as Christian is quite possible in a contemporary Scandinavian academic context.

The use of the four Springsteen studies to exemplify the whole field of studies on religion and popular culture obviously stems from the impossibility of providing an extensive overview of the whole field, at least in this context. But before concluding this article, I would still like briefly and very sketchily to discuss some other studies of religion and popular culture that can be viewed from the perspective of this article. This may also give a somewhat broader view of the field as a whole, as well as provide an attempt to show the reader that the quoted studies of Springsteen do not constitute isolated incidents but are rather examples of a trend that to a significant extent distinguishes the whole field. And I am not attempting to claim that all these studies are totally flawed, but I do believe that they contain some problematic features of the category that is discussed in this article.

By no means all, but certainly some, of the articles in Forbes & Mahan (2000) as well as in Mazur & McCarthy (2001) focus on finding Christian messages in popular culture. The same can be said for a few anthologies focusing on one particular form of popular culture, such as Porter & McLaren (1999), containing articles analyzing the world of Star Trek; or Spencer (1994a) and Gilmour (2005), on popular music. *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* also represents the trend to some extent, perhaps again particularly at the very beginning of the journal’s short existence (the first issue appeared in 2002). The journal’s review section gives an overview of the field, and also contains generally favorable reviews – albeit with some reservations, as is typical of the genre – of some books of the type that present the “gospel according to” a particular phenomenon within popular culture (Pinsky, 2001; Neal, 2002), of which particularly Neal (2002) is very explicit in attempting

to divine Christian content from mainstream popular culture, in her case the Harry Potter books.⁷ A monograph containing several examples of how popular culture, e.g. music videos, is “mined” for Christian content is the book on “Generation X” by Tom Beaudoin (1998) (prefaced by Harvey Cox and endorsed by Wade Clark Roof). It must also be pointed out that many of these books contain research strongly focusing on the criticism of religion – and especially of institutional Christianity – in popular culture, as well as on religious aspects not directly tied to institutionalized traditions. My discussion in this article thus describes only one aspect of the research field.

As the volume in which this article appears is published in a Scandinavian context, I would like to provide some examples of studies on religion and popular culture from this region. A pioneer in the Nordic, and particularly the Finnish, context is Lasse Halme (1989; 1994), who has published studies on popular music. His approach has been, inspired by the theologian Paul Tillich, to find a “deep dimension” in popular music, and this “deep dimension” is often exemplified by Christian aspects. Other somewhat similar examples of studies on popular music may be found in (some of) the articles in Häger (2004a), as well as on a broader spectrum of popular culture in a thematic issue of the Norwegian journal *Prismet* (Kvalvaag, 2004). Sigurdson (2003) and Bergom Larsson *et al.* (1992) can be counted among the more “popular” works produced by academics – the latter focusing on film, and providing a borderline case when it comes to the definition of “popular culture”, as the focus is on the directors Ingmar Bergman and Andrei Tarkovsky.

Concluding remarks

I initially described the topic of this article, the tendency within studies on religion and popular culture to look for Christian content in mainstream popular culture, as a “teething trouble”. This is an indication that I know that it is possible to conduct research on religion and popular culture without looking for an underlying “gospel” in the works of any popular artist.⁸ I also want to emphasize that I have merely focused on one aspect of the field as well as of the works mentioned and the studies discussed in some (but by no means exhaustive) detail. These studies have many merits, the greatest of which, particularly in the earlier works, being the fact that they give attention to not only the possibility but also the urgent need to study popular culture from a perspective of religious studies and therefore counter a trend in that field to focus rather on high culture (Larsson, 1987 and Wikström, 1997, which deal with religion and literature, may be mentioned as Scandinavian examples of this trend). At the same time, they are clearly countering another (and to my mind obviously much more problematic) older tendency, the sometimes very harsh criticism of popular culture in some

religious circles – a purpose explicit in Yamin's (1990) claim to write "rock-and-roll 'apologetics'".

But even if the studies of Springsteen discussed here, and the field of research on religion and popular culture in general, has clear merits, it still seems worthwhile to me to bring to light the tendency in academic research on religion and popular culture to look for a Christian content in mainstream popular culture, because I find this tendency problematic. From the perspective of my sociological interpretation of the theological interpretations of Bruce Springsteen (and other popular cultural phenomena), I find it problematic for two reasons. The first reason is that I see the search for a Christian message in popular culture as an attempt to defend a perceived Christian monopoly on explaining our existence, to defend a unique Christian legitimacy – an attempt that must be described as futile and unfortunate in an increasingly pluralistic society. I argue that all the studies used as examples can function as such attempts, even if this is most obvious in Greeley (1988), for example, when he asks "where else" (Greeley, 1988: 138) than in the Catholic church can Springsteen have found a lasting sense of hope. To my mind it is surely a better solution to accept the pluralistic situation, the multitude of voices proclaiming many different messages, and find one's place in that situation, than to deny it and pretend that Christianity dominates culture – because even Bruce Springsteen is a Catholic and/or a theologian, as it were.⁹

It is also clear that the tendency I am discussing and attempting to problematize is not entirely unconscious or "subconscious" on the part of the researchers in the field. I here want to mention two scholars who quite explicitly take stands contrary to mine on the issue of pluralism.¹⁰ In an article in his previously mentioned anthology, Jon Michael Spencer (1994b) argues for a musicological branch he calls "theomusicology", which attempts to "examine secular music for its religiosity" (Spencer, 1994b: 205) and should "view religion as all-pervasive in culture" (Spencer, 1994b: 205). Spencer is here quite general in his formulations, speaking of "religion", but the examples in his article focus on Christianity, very clearly so in the discussion on gospel influences among black soul artists, and more vaguely in branding a certain genre (which includes Bruce Springsteen) "sacramental rock" (Spencer, 1994b: 124), or calling the title to Marvin Gaye's song "What's Going On" "a profoundly theological question" (Spencer, 1994b: 217). All in all, Spencer (1994b) thus seems to me to quite clearly question the pluralistic situation that I – and other scholars before me, such as Schwarze (1994), published in the same volume edited by Spencer – argue must be taken into account in research on religion and popular culture (and in research on the role of religion in contemporary society in general).

In a recent volume on the possible positive influence of the arts on (American) religion, Robert Wuthnow (2003) discusses in a very clear manner how he understands the relation of what he sees as a growing interest in spirituality to established religious tradition, for example, in the statement that

The current fascination with spirituality may even pose a threat to the nation's churches and synagogues, especially if the theological wisdom and service-oriented dedication that have been central to the Christian and Jewish traditions are being abandoned for a do-it-yourself faith oriented toward good feelings. (Wuthnow, 2003: 24-25.)

Wuthnow (2003: 24-25) sees a need for "evaluating contemporary spirituality" and lists a number of criteria for this evaluation, based on the principle that "spirituality can usefully be examined [...] in terms of its relationship to organized religion":

[O]ne criterion is whether the present interest in spirituality is so newly acquired that it may be ungrounded, as opposed to being rooted in a more extensive exposure to a religious tradition. Another criterion is whether spirituality is a private, perhaps personally invented, set of beliefs and practices or whether it is pursued in the context of a religious community that gives it depth and stability. An additional criterion is whether spirituality involves borrowing from all the ideas to which a person may be exposed or whether there is a deeper commitment to a particular religious tradition. (Wuthnow, 2003: 25-26.)

Even if Wuthnow (2003) deals with popular culture only very cursorily, I think it is interesting to bring his study into the discussion in this article, as he so very explicitly describes as problematic any other kind of "spirituality" in the arts (or popular culture) than the kind that can be seen as having a clear connection to the Christian (or Jewish) tradition. The quotes from Wuthnow (2003) could be understood as a program for a denial of a pluralistic society and a claim that culture displaying a clearer connection to the Judeo-Christian tradition is better than culture without this explicit connection. It is possible to interpret Wuthnow (2003) and Spencer (1994b) as expressions of a way of thinking that lies behind for example the interpretations of Springsteen which claim that he is a good artist because he belongs to a Judeo-Christian tradition.

If in this text I claim that the search for Christian content in popular culture has some problematic aspects especially as a part of an academic endeavour, it must of course at the same time be recognized that there are products within popular culture, some artists or works and even whole genres, where it is quite easy to find religious and even Christian references. As already stated above, Bruce Springsteen is one such artist, and Madonna is another, while the genres of heavy metal or hard rock are often bursting with biblical reference. But the question that should be asked is, what does this mean?

To many scholars in the field of religion and popular culture, it seems to mean that Christianity is "all pervasive" in contemporary culture, and even that much of popular culture is not merely referring to Christianity but even preaching a Christian message – the same message as the apostle Paul or

the church father St. Augustine. I hardly think the same scholars who make such allusions would claim that the fact that the names of several the week-days in (for example) English are derived from old Norse gods is proof that the worship of Oden is still going strong (and the names of the days of the week are certainly a more central aspect of our culture than for example the lyrics of Bruce Springsteen's songs).

As stated above, the first reason why I believe that the tendency of studies on religion and popular culture to focus on possible Christian content in popular culture should be discussed critically is my interpretation of this type of focus as an attempt to deny a pluralistic situation and defend a unique Christian legitimacy, and my view – which therefore differs from the views of Spencer (1994b) and Wuthnow (2003) – that this attempt is futile. The second reason for my being critical toward this tendency is the obvious possibility that it may cause researchers to miss other important aspects. In particular, the study of what possibly may constitute the “sacred” for the fans of popular culture, what to them is “set apart”, must suffer if it is more or less assumed that the “sacred” comes in a familiar – Christian – shape.

It should of course also be mentioned that it is possible to combine a more open approach and one focusing on possible Christian aspects. Beaudoin (1998) is an example of this, but I find that I am more interested in his discussion of the role of suffering in “Generation X” spirituality and in popular culture, for example, than in his references to biblical quotes on “suffering servanthood” in the same discussion (Beaudoin, 1998: 110). I also find many of his interpretations quite unconvincing, for example, when he (Beaudoin, 1998: 84-86) claims that a kitchen utensil, a cleaver, in Soundgarden's video “Black Hole Sun” is a symbol of Jesus Christ. It will be clear that I hold the view that it benefits research to avoid such hazards, and that I find the search for a solution combining an eager hunt for Christian content in mainstream popular culture with a more open view on the meaning it may hold for a greater community of fans one that is fraught with difficulty.

The discussion on finding a “sacred” or “spiritual” aspect in popular culture and media, other than in aspects recognizable as (or possible to interpret as) arising out of a Christian or other established religious tradition, is clearly related to the much greater issue of the definition of religion. Knut Lundby (1997: 161) suggests that instead of viewing religion as something defined either substantively or functionally, we could see “the sacred as a variable ranging from the substantive to the functional”, and he continues:

Some communities, like traditional religious groups, stress substantive elements of religion. Other, more fugitive communities might be more functionally based. (Lundby, 1997: 161.)

Relating this to the issue of interpreting popular culture, one could assume that religious interpreters, including some scholars, focus on substantive elements, recognizable as part of a religious tradition, while the fans may

focus on functional elements, for example the use of popular culture in the formation of one's identity.

It is therefore possible to claim that a focus on substantive elements, recognizable as part of a religious tradition, lies closer to a religious understanding than to interpretations that predominate within the fan community. But it is also possible to assume that most fans of someone like Bruce Springsteen recognize certain expressions, such as "the promised land", as stemming from a tradition and a set of institutions that are specialized in handling the sacred; and that these expressions therefore function as indicators of especially important subjects. Such a recognition may then show the fans that the works of popular culture where these expressions occur deal with an especially important topic. This is one way of understanding McCarthy's (2001) discussion of Springsteen, which says that the term "promised land" is used to show the significance and the "transcendent possibilities" (McCarthy, 2001: 27) of America and being American (a topic that sometimes is difficult for Europeans to understand, but that is another matter...). But, and this is my main point that I will repeat in conclusion of my text, it is important to separate such an understanding from claims that an artist or work of popular culture is part and parcel of a particular religious tradition or proclaims the same messages as the institutions carrying this tradition – and even that this is how things should be.

Notes

1. It is of course also possible to define other neighbouring and overlapping fields of research, such as religion and film (e.g. Johnston, 2000), religion and communication and religion and popular music (Spencer, 1994a; Häger, 2004a).
2. Notably Stewart Hoover (Hoover & Lundby, 1997; Hoover & Clark, 2002), who has contributed to Forbes & Mahan (2000), as well as Stout & Buddenbaum (2001).
3. The International Study Commission on Media, Religion, and Culture is a group of scholars and practitioners who have gathered to consider the shape and direction of both productive and reflective work in these three intersecting fields. It is part of the wider ongoing process of reflection and study which is being conducted currently by various organizations and individuals throughout the world. It is intended to facilitate continuing dialog and to stimulate and support both scholarship and media production in the area. (see <http://www.iscmrc.org>)
4. I use the term "mainstream" rather than for example "secular", as I believe that the line between "religious" and "secular" culture is difficult to draw, although I do not believe that all culture is inherently Christian or even religious.
5. The Lyrics to "Spare Parts" and other Springsteen songs can be found on the artist's official web site (*Bruce Springsteen's songs*).
6. But I, on the other hand, believe that Greeley himself could see the discussion of these "principles" as quite compatible with Catholicism.
7. Pinsky (2001) and Neal (2002) should be understood as popular books rather than academic studies, but *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* is an academic journal and reviews the books (on <http://www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/br3-gospelaccharry.html> and <http://www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/br4-gospelsimpsons.html> respectively).
8. I have myself also contributed to the research field, including work in previously mentioned anthologies (Häger, 2004a; Kvalvaag, 2004 and Gilmour, 2005), and also with articles

- on religious themes in the work of popular artists, the Swedish pop artist Di Leva (Häger, 2004b) and the Irish singer Sinéad O'Connor (Häger, 2005), while attempting to emphasize that these artists express a very ambiguous message and particularly a very ambivalent relation to Christianity.
9. I have discussed the Christian – and not merely academic – discourse on popular music as a defense of a perceived unique Christian legitimacy in previous work, particularly in Häger (2001) (and in English in Häger (1996)).
 10. It is clear that my discussion here very much involves the huge issue of the role of values in academic research.

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Harry Potter and Religious Mediatization

Jeanette Sky

Harry Potter is not a religious book; it is not even a religious phenomenon, although in some quarters it has become one. Harry Potter is a children's book that has turned into a global phenomenon. All over the world people are reading the same stories about a young boy going to a school of wizardry, where he is soon engaged in fighting dark and hidden powers. The latest estimate I read for the sales figures of Harry Potter books was more than 200 million copies, but that was well before the sixth book in the series was put on the market all over the world one minute after midnight on 16th July 2005.¹ And like both books four and five, it was number one on Amazon's bestseller-lists months before its publication. With sales figures like those the Harry Potter books have gained since the first book was published in 1997, it is obvious that they are reaching a wide audience across borders of generation, gender, nationality, culture and religion. The books are read by young and old, men and women in Asia, Europe, Africa and America.²

But do they all read the same story? How much do our cultural and religious backgrounds influence what we read into or out of cultural products? As the globalisation theoretician Peter Beyer has argued, globalisation is also a story of *glocalisation*, implying that global phenomena are changed to some extent in new local settings. As a global phenomenon, the Harry Potter books are interesting examples of how various cultural and religious backgrounds influence not so much *what* we consume, but *how* we consume. The story of the reception of the Harry Potter novels and the story of their immense success cry out for some cultural historical explanation or at least analysis. What particularly interests me here in this article is what people read into or out of these particular written narratives on the basis of their own cultural or religious backgrounds. In other words, this article deals with the culturally coded reception of media content. More precisely, it deals with the reception of Harry Potter among conservative Christians in America.

Religion as narrative

Let me start with my own reading. Although I hold that the books are secular, I still find it valuable to analyse them from the point of view of the history of religion. The reason is that although secular, the books play with, almost flirt with, various contemporary and historical religious and mythical ideas. I will explain this by way of a narrative definition of religion. Following the historian of religion, Gavin Flood, I understand religion to be binding narratives within a given culture (Flood, 1999). Developing the theory further, I will argue that religions are *more or less* binding narratives; meaning that although some religions in the modern world lose their binding quality on peoples' lives, or even die as living systems, they still live on, albeit often in non-binding forms, in various narratives within any given culture.³ In the form of texts (in a broad understanding of the word), religion pervades culture in either fragmentary or more consistent fashion and thus serves to create new narratives.

Furthermore, taking religions to be narratives also opens up the possibility to understand religions as inter-textual.⁴ Religious narratives are intertwined with various other cultural and religious narratives and may thus be described as what Lévi Strauss once called "bricolages". And although he used it more strictly for myths, I will use it for religions in general. As bricolages, or inter-textual narratives, religions or parts of religious systems are easily adopted in the cultural strata of a society other than the strictly religious, like secular literature, art and the media. From this point of view, even secular products like a children's novel, often make use of religious ideas and mythical elements because they are part of a cultural discourse where these elements and ideas are floating around.

In other words, we have to move beyond the perspective of religious belief and towards religion as part of a larger cultural discourse or narrative where various religious ideas and belief systems coexist with secular elements. We need only think of the ways in which modern commercials play with religious symbols and metaphors, using angels to sell cream cheese or the devil to sell Vodka. No one would argue that the commercials are religious because of the fact that they make use of readily available religious symbols. Religious metaphors, when no longer part of a binding narrative, become ready-mades with a particular and attractive familiarity in the culture to which they belong.

But although a religious system can be non-binding for some people, it can be binding for others. This makes for a complex situation where disputes over the content of cultural products and their use of religious symbols are to be expected. The Harry Potter books may indeed contain bits and pieces of religious ideas and symbols, but this does not make them religious. Nevertheless, this is how they are read in some quarters of the world. Particularly in America, the books have taken on a religious significance.

Flexibility of meaning

A critical question is why some people read these books as religious pamphlets, whether good or bad, while others, like me, see them as completely secular?⁵ Is the text, or any cultural product, really that flexible? It does indeed seem so. To paraphrase Paul Ricoeur, I will argue that when a text is published it leaves the life and dominion of its author/maker and takes on a life on its own. The text is in this process, according to Ricoeur, closed backwards and opened forwards to the many new interpretations its receivers meet it with on the basis of their own lives and cultural backgrounds. In this way a text is indeed flexible and can take on a multitude of meanings. This is a hermeneutic process of interpretation, where the reader's horizon of understanding meets that of the text.⁶

The various kinds of reception that the Potter novels are met with are not peculiar to these novels; rather they can serve as particularly clear-cut examples of how cultural products always receive various and often deviating interpretations. The Potter novels are clear-cut examples because of the vast popularity of the books. Their global popularity shows us that although the same written narrative can be read by people all over the world, the meanings they put into it are highly different. New *glocal* products are made in the form of new interpretations of the same written narrative. In the case of the reception of the Potter novels, these interpretations are not only private opinions; they are often made public in the form of books, Internet sites and articles. This gives us a unique possibility to analyse just how differently a cultural product can be interpreted by different people according to their cultural and religious background. In this article, I will focus on some of the religious interpretations that have been put forward in books for or against Harry Potter within conservative Christian circles in America.

Children's literature and religious reception

The debate has been raging in America and elsewhere since the first sign of Harry Potter's popular appeal. When children's books are read by children and adults alike, our ideas of good literary taste are questioned. Children's books are generally considered more popular than high culture, unless they gradually come to be considered classics over the course of time, like Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books, J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*, C.S. Lewis' *Narnia* chronicle or Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. Literary critics like Harold Bloom have stated that the Potter books are quite simply badly written and therefore belong in the garbage-bin,⁷ and Jack Zipes has found their morals bad and their gender roles horrible (the wands are read as phallic symbols).⁸ Others have argued that the books present fascist values.⁹

But in America questions of high or low culture or gender roles have generally not been the most crucial issues in the debate about Harry Potter. Here religious issues have been the most important, and they have split not only the Christian world as such, but also one of America's strong Christian factions, in two. The heated debate between conservative evangelicals over the issue of Harry Potter has split them into "Harry-haters" and "Harry-lovers".¹⁰ While the former group has stated that the books teach a dangerous religious doctrine, the latter has claimed that the books are in line with the Gospels, and that they preach Christianity. Denominational affiliation does not seem to be of any significant importance to most of the persons on either side of this debate. The important thing that is argued from both sides is that they are "good, conservative Christians" of whatever denomination. The important religious split is thus not whether you are Catholic, Orthodox or Protestant, but whether you are Liberal or Conservative. And whether pro or con Harry Potter, the authors I have looked into all adhere to the Conservative camp. Although they share most of their religious views of the world, they obviously do not agree upon Harry Potter. Books have been published from both sides that argue their points of view. Internet sites have been made that do the same. There have been book burnings and attempted banning of the books from schools and libraries. And there have been priests preaching Christianity from the point of view of Harry Potter, dressed up in wizard's costumes inside churches fitted out like the Hogwarts School of Wizardry.

What is interesting is, of course, that representatives within the conservative Christian community have such different (and equally strong) views on the same book. Of the books that I have examined, three of them were written by conservative Evangelicals and one by a conservative Orthodox. The question is how they read such diverse messages out of the very same books. How can the books both be understood to preach dangerous occultism and at the same time be read as leading people to Christ? To answer this question, we need to look first at what is at stake in the debate, and how their arguments or their interpretations are being made. But first let us look at the particular genre in which Rowling is writing.

As children's books about wizardry and magic, the Harry Potter works place themselves within a long tradition of children's literature and fairytale. From its beginning as a separate genre for children in the nineteenth century, magic and make-belief has been seen as a natural part of its content. This "natural" link between children and magic is a result of romantic ideas in the nineteenth century that have lived on into our own time.¹¹ Before romanticism, books for children were basically instructive, although there was a boom in fairytales in France in the seventeenth century, with writers like Charles Perrault, but these fairytales were not primarily directed at children but adults. The association between fairytales and children is quite clearly a romantic invention.

Today children's literature is very much based on fantasy and magic, and Rowling writes herself into a strong tradition in Britain of such fantasies,

written not only by authors like C. S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, but also by earlier writers from the nineteenth century like George MacDonald and Lewis Carroll. From its beginnings, the genre of children's literature has also been marked by its dual audience. Although written for children, the writers more often than not had both adult and child readers in mind. It was often stated that they were writing for the childlike of any age. In this way, the genre is very much a romantic product in that it preached that children have an imagination superior to that of adults, and that through the children's literature and their worlds of fantasy adults could gain new access to this imagination. Christian authors like MacDonald, Lewis and Tolkien further argued that through the imagination and fantasy in children's books the readers obtained access to a religious realm; the imagination brought the reader closer to God.

This is precisely the argument put forward by the conservative Christians that take a favourable attitude to the Harry Potter books. Books published in this vein are titles like *Looking for God in Harry Potter*, *The Gospel According to Harry Potter*, and *What's a Christian to Do about Harry Potter*, to mention but a few. In addition to books like these, study guides have been published aimed at Sunday school teachers, preachers and parents, where themes from the Harry Potter books are linked to central themes in the Bible. To the writers in this group, Rowling's books are in the same line of tradition as those written by Christian authors like Lewis and Tolkien, and thus they find a hidden Christian teaching in the stories. As John Granger, an Orthodox priest and the author of *Looking for God in Harry Potter*, states: "...the magic in Harry Potter and other good fantasy fiction harmonizes with the miracles of the saints" (Granger, 2004: 5). Or, as he states a little earlier in the same book:

I am convinced that the fundamental reason for the astonishing popularity of the Harry Potter novels is their ability to meet a spiritual longing for some experience of the truths of life, love and death taught by Christianity but denied by a secular culture. Human beings are designed for Christ, whether they know it or not. *That the Harry Potter stories 'sing along' with the Great Story of Christ is a significant key to understanding their compelling richness* (Granger, 2004: 2; italics in original.)

The argument is interesting, for while it would be easy to agree that Harry Potter probably meets some sort of spiritual longing, at least among some readers, it is harder to accept that this spirituality is something that is only preached by Christianity. What the author in effect does is to create a split not between the sacred and the secular, but between *Christianity* and the secular. Thus, if taken to have any spiritual content, the books would have to be Christian. Interestingly, Granger is also the only one of the Christian writers on both sides of the split who actually says that Rowling has stated "that her faith is a key to understanding her work" (Granger, 2004: xix),

unfortunately he has no reference for this information. Most of the others either refer to her as unwilling to make any pronouncement on the matter or quote her recent statement that she belongs to the Church of Scotland. In Granger's words, however, she is a "*professed* Presbyterian (Church of Scotland)" (Granger 2004, my italics). Thus he turns her from a possibly passive member of a national church,¹² into an active or "professed" believer.

Christian and conservative

If we go to the other side of the split, we find the information about Rowling's religious affiliation presented somewhat differently. But as we shall see, it is more or less the same rhetorical strategy that is used to argue the point. The difference in interpretation could perhaps be ascribed to this party belonging to another Christian denomination. But, as argued above, denominational affiliation is not the critical issue here. There are both negative and positive interpretations of Harry Potter within all the major Christian denominations – Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant – but they are all more interested in affirming their conservatism than in declaring their denominational affiliation.

A typical example can be found in Granger's introduction, where he refrains from placing himself within any Christian denomination, but rather highlights his conservative position. He and his wife are raising their seven children in the context of their faith, which entails: "church attendance and family prayers, as well as home-schooling and living without television" (Granger, 2004: xiii). Furthermore, they are, as he states, also very careful about not only what they read to their children but also what they allow the children to read for themselves. Granger's introduction is formed in the form of a narrative of personal experience; of how he came around from wanting to ban the Potter books to actively endorsing them for Christians after having read them. It should be noted that this "personal experience" formula is used by most of the writers from both sides of the dispute over Harry Potter. It is a rhetorical device often used in religious writings, and it gives a peculiar authority to the narratives. As they speak from personal experience, who can argue against them?

While Granger speaks from an Orthodox Christian viewpoint, there seem to be overwhelmingly more voices coming from the Protestant camp in America, but this has to be seen in relation to the fact that Protestantism is the faith of the religious majority. The important and interesting split is to be found within the conservative parties within each denomination (the liberal sides being, not surprisingly, overall more positive than the conservatives, and also less inclined to write books about their opinions). It is within the conservative parties that the debate is raging over whether Harry Potter speaks with or against the Bible. And one of the reasons for this is perhaps that, although overwhelmingly critical of the modern world, they are incredibly

good at making use of modern products like the mass media such as the internet, television, newspapers and books to promote their religious views.

Another reason is to be found in their religious view of the world. For conservative Christians, human souls in general stand in daily peril of being lost to the devil; thus it is a religious duty to convert more people to their own religious worldview in order to save them and make God's plan come true. Although this may seem like an oversimplification of their religious views, it is actually a point that is made in all the books I have examined in this connection. As the evangelical writer Connie Neal states in her book *What's a Christian to do with Harry Potter?*: "Regardless of the position you take on Harry Potter, you are a member of the Christian community, which has a more crucial issue at stake: to make sure children are clear on biblical warnings against the occult" (Neal, 2001: 125). And she continues,

The Bible cautions us to be on guard against invisible forces of spiritual evil. The combination of the author's [Rowling's] disbelief, kids' tendency to act out what they encounter in engaging fantasy worlds, and the Bible's warnings form a triangle of real danger for real kids – even though no one intended it. (Neal, 2001: 126.)

Neal has written two books and one study-guide about Harry Potter and is a profound fan of the books. And although she finds that the books are in line with Christianity, she also finds that occultism and witchcraft are real threats in the world. For Neal, it is important to guide children through the Potter books, and teach them how to read them in accordance with the Bible.

As these Christian communities tend to read the world in dichotomies between black and white, good and evil, most cultural products released into these communities tend to be read accordingly. And as the Potter novels are aimed at children, the question of where these books place themselves in the split between good and evil becomes all the more important. Issues to do with children's education and parent's religious and cultural beliefs are always very emotive matters.

So far we have seen how some conservative Christians find the Potter novels to be in line with the teachings of Christianity. Let us now turn to what is being said from the other side of the split over Harry Potter.

Reading Potter as a tale of evil

As we shall see, occultism is still put at the forefront of the debate, but this time Rowling is no longer thought quite as innocent as in Neal's quote. Richard Abanes (2001) has written the book *Harry Potter and the Bible; the Menace Behind the Magick*,¹³ and here Rowling is no longer a Christian but a neo-pagan. He quotes Rowling from an interview where she stated: "I don't believe

in magic in the way I describe it in my books. I mean, I do not believe in the wand waving sort of magic.” (Abanes, 2001: 22) For Abanes, this creates the following question:

Is there another ‘sense’ in which Rowling *does* believe in witchcraft? What brand of all the different forms of magic that exist that are *not* the wand waving sort of magic might she embrace? Are there any bits and pieces of paganism with which she may agree? (Abanes, 2001: 23, italics in original.)

Abanes evidently thinks there is. He finds evidence for this for instance in the fact that Rowling has stated that the number seven (which is the number of books the series will contain) is “a magical number, a mystical number”. Moreover, he finds evidence in what he calls the “fact that not everything in the Potter-series is imaginary” (Abanes, 2001). Rowling has “admitted”, as Abanes puts it, that “she had studied mythology and witchcraft in order to write her books more accurately”. But that is not what she said, if we are to believe Abanes own full-length quote of Rowling. What she said was:

I do a certain amount of research. And folklore is quite important in books. So where I’m mentioning a creature, or a spell that people used to believe genuinely worked – of course, it didn’t... then, I will find out exactly what the words were, and I will find out exactly what the characteristics of that creature or ghost were supposed to be. (Abanes, 2001.)

Abanes goes on to quote Rowling as stating that “one-third of the sorcery-related material appearing in her books ‘are things that people genuinely used to believe in Britain’” (Abanes, 2001).

We need to stop here for a moment to look more closely at how Abanes can turn these words of Rowling’s into evidence that she is a neo-pagan or Wicca. The most important point is how Abanes manages to turn Rowling’s use of the word folklore into witchcraft. As we can see from how he sums up her argument, and the actual quote from Rowling, he replaces folklore with witchcraft. This may perhaps seem innocent enough, but it is not. Folklore consists of collections of folk-belief of which belief in witches may be a part, but studying folklore in order to do research for a book does not turn a person into a witch or neo-pagan.

What we have to take into account here is the religious worldview Abanes writes from and within. He is a conservative evangelical Christian, and he has written extensively on cults and the occult. There is no doubt that he finds his place within the anti-cult movement in America, and as such he receives special acclaim from K. Neill Foster, his publisher in Christian Publications. As Foster states in an introductory note in Abanes’ book:

Speaking from the perspective of having been involved in the extrication of various people from occult subjection and bondage over many years, I have

to say that Abanes has made his point. The Harry Potter series is loaded with occult references and, given the vulnerability of children and the capacity for contagion in occult matters, he is not at all overstating the “menace behind the magick. (Abanes, 2001: xiv.)

Thus we have once again reached the crucial point in the debate about Harry Potter in America. Are the books preaching occultism or Christianity? The books are not read as innocent fantasy and make-belief by any of the writers I have quoted. The books have ended up in the middle of a battle over the minds of young children. As the books’ popularity is still rising, and they are being used more and more as reading material in schools, the question about the religious content of the books has become a burning issue. From a conservative Christian perspective, it seems that either the books have to be made Christian, or they have to be banned. This is more or less what seems at stake in the debate.

Evil as a reality

It is important to note here that from the point of view of both camps in this struggle, from both these Christian perspectives on the books, occultism is real. Even a “Harry-lover” like Neal argues:

Those who are not guided by Scripture may look at all the “magic” in the Harry Potter books and say, “It’s just fantasy. None of this is real.” They don’t believe that there are real demonic forces at work in our world, much less in Harry Potter’s. However, those of us who believe the Bible know that, mixed in with all the imaginative words, mythology, fables, legend, folklore, and fairy tale imagery are some terms that correspond to real occult witchcraft practiced in our world today and clearly forbidden by God.

Knowing that Rowling says she does not believe in magic troubles many Christians who realise her disbelief in the power of real witchcraft does nothing to halt the demonic forces that God says are real. (Neal, 2001: 97.)

Thus to all these Christian writers occultism is a real threat and something that should be fought night and day. Occultism is the devil’s power and new religious movements like neo-paganism and Wicca are seen as dangerous competitors as they are interpreted as opposing the work of God. So the question is not whether there is dangerous occultism or not, but whether it is to be found within the Harry Potter books. To Neal

...the Harry Potter books are deeply moral and can be highly instructive as ‘training in righteousness’ if one *rightly* aligns these stories to Scripture. The challenge is being sure to make a *proper* alignment between the elements in

the stories and basic elements of Judeo-Christian moral training. (Neal, 2001: 166, my italics.)

Thus, on the one hand Neal finds the books in line with Christianity, but on the other hand she also sees a “danger” that, if not “rightly” or “properly” aligned to the Bible, they can be misinterpreted. Interestingly, this legitimates the necessity of her own instructional writings on the Harry Potter books.

For Abanes on the other hand, the picture is somewhat different. Rowling does not only use religious ideas that people used to believe in Britain. Quite the contrary, in Abanes’ view:

What Rowling fails to mention is that a vast amount of the occult material she has borrowed from historical sources still plays a significant role in modern paganism and witchcraft. Consequently, her writings merge quite nicely with contemporary occultism. (Abanes, 2001: 24.)

And as if this was not enough, he continues: “This could easily present a spiritual danger to children or teens, or even adults, who are either leaning toward occultism or who may be vulnerable to its attractions” (Abanes, 2001: 24). From Neal’s and Abanes’ arguments, we see that they both believe in the danger of actual occult practices in the world, but whereas Neal does not find this kind of occultism in the books, but rather see it as “literary magic” and thus “literary devices”, Abanes finds that Rowling is really preaching occultism. What Abanes has set out to do in his book is nothing less than to try to save these “vulnerable” people before they are captured by the dangerous occultism in the Harry Potter novels. (In many ways Neal can be said to be doing the same thing as she wants to ‘guide’ readers through the Potter books by aligning them to the Bible).

Abanes has given his book a dramatic twist in order to show how bad it can get when people are caught up in occultism. Towards the end of his book, we meet Sean Sellers “the youngest person ever to be placed on death row at the Oklahoma State Penitentiary” (Abanes, 2001: 177). This tragic end to the young man’s life was, according to Abanes: “... a predictable ending to a life marked by nothing but anger, bitterness, frustration and hatred” (Abanes, 2001: 177).

From a problematic childhood, Sellers was, according to Abanes, drawn towards occultism. It all started with his involvement at the age of fifteen in a local Dungeons & Dragons fantasy role-playing group. From there, he was gradually drawn towards “witchcraft and Zen” (Abanes, 2001: 178), and his interest in occultism finally led him into a “satanic coven”. How his Zen-interest possibly fitted into any involvement with occultism is hard to see, but for Abanes there is no contradiction in his story of Seller’s gradual spiritual decline from his first partaking in fantasy role-playing to his ending up as a Satanist and finally a killer. It is typical of Abanes’ biographical retelling of Seller’s spiritual journey that it has an abrupt turn towards the end of the

young man's life. He is converted to Christianity in prison, and, according to Abanes, during his final moments he not only said "Here I come, Father... I'm coming home", but as the deadly chemicals were injected into his veins, he sang two verses from his own song "Set my spirit free that I might praise Thee. Set my Spirit free that I might worship Thee". (Abanes, 2001:186.)

A tragic history of a troubled young boy from a difficult social and family background is thus turned into a religious journey that culminates with his salvation through the death penalty! Abanes further tries to give authority to his interpretation by quoting a child psychologist named Reid Kimbrough, and we learn that:

... occult involvement includes a student listening to music which has death or suicide in its lyrics, possessing paraphernalia such as skulls, black candles or a satanic bible, preoccupation with a Ouija board or tarot cards, drawing satanic symbols on themselves or property and wearing black clothing (Abanes, 2001: 186-87).

Occultism is a real threat in Abanes' world because it is a spiritual peril: "Consequently, the Bible strictly forbids tampering with occultism or condoning it as an acceptable option for spiritual growth" (Abanes, 2001: 187).

Humour or real-world magic?

But how does Abanes fit Harry Potter into his view of the threat of occultism? As we have seen, neither Neal nor Granger are able to make this link although they believe in occultism as an evil threat. In Abanes' book, the Divination classes at Hogwarts School of Wizardry are picked out as being some of the most potent examples of dangerous occultism. He states:

...Rowling's Harry Potter series contains several forms of divination (i.e. gaining information about the past, present or future by occult means): astrology, crystal gazing, palmistry, fire omens (pyromancy), runes, reading tea-leaves and trance states (Abanes, 2001: 187).

As all these practices are condemned in both the Old and New Testaments (Abanes quotes Deuteronomy 18:10-12 as an example), the Bible would forbid the ones we find in Harry Potter. What Abanes fails to see is the ambivalence and humour with which Rowling chooses to portray precisely the divination classes and the divination teacher Professor Trelawny. No one is more ridiculed in the books than this lady, who is described in a way that most people would recognise as the stereotype middle-aged woman interested in New Age ideas, something that is further underlined in the way she is played by Emma Thompson in the film versions. This is from Harry's first

meeting with her in the third book (*Harry Potter and the Prisoner from Azkaban*):

Harry's immediate impression of her was of a large glittering insect. Professor Trelawny moved into the firelight (...); her large glasses magnified her eyes to several times their natural size, and she was draped in a gauzy spangled shawl, innumerable chains and beads hung around her spindly neck, and her arms and hands were encrusted with bangles and rings. (Rowling, 1999: 79.)

Furthermore, Harry and his friends Ron and Hermione actually find the classes and the teacher so hopelessly stupid that they do everything they can to avoid them, Hermione actually skipping the course because she thinks the teacher is a big fraud. Before she does so, we get another description of the divination class, which this time has moved from reading tea-leaves to gazing into crystal balls. As Trelawny says in her typically "misty voice":

'Crystal gazing is a particularly refined art,' she said dreamily. 'I do not expect any of you to See when first you peer into the Orb's infinite depths. We shall start by practicing relaxing the conscious mind and external eyes' – Ron began to snigger uncontrollably, and had to stuff his fist into his mouth to stifle the noise – 'so as to clear the Inner Eye and the superconscious. Perhaps, if we are lucky, some of you will See before the end of the class.'

And so they began. Harry, at least, felt extremely foolish, staring blankly into the crystal ball, trying to keep his mind empty when thoughts such as 'this is stupid' kept drifting across it. It didn't help that Ron kept breaking into silent giggles and Hermione kept tutting. (Rowling, 1999: 219.)

As the children's voices and giggling grow louder, the teacher interrupts abruptly, saying "You are disturbing the clairvoyant vibrations!" Peering into Harry's crystal ball, she is obviously about to pronounce one of her regular and vague dark prophecies when Hermione interrupts her, calling her ridiculous. At which Trelawny exclaims:

I am sorry to say that from the moment you arrived in this class, my *dear*, it has been apparent that you do not have what the noble art of divination requires. Indeed, I don't remember ever meeting a student whose mind was so hopelessly Mundane. (Rowling, 1999: 220, italics in original.)

Hermione, being the best student in her year, takes this as a fortunate moment to escape the classes and takes her things and leaves. The critical attitude towards the Divination teacher is kept up throughout the books, particularly through the scepticism and ridicule of Hermione and Professor MacGonagall. But not even Hogwarts' Headmaster, Professor Dumbledore, has any real faith in Divination, never having studied the subject himself.

To Abanes, however, this humour and ridicule is nonexistent. Rather he tends to take any mention of elements he associates with occultism to be a reference to real-world magic. But as we can see from the above mentioned examples from the Potter novels, Rowling is rather ridiculing than promoting occultism. Nevertheless, the relation between seriousness and play in relation to supernatural phenomena are often blurred in Harry Potter. And this probably makes the books all the more disturbing to readers who tend to view most cultural products in relation to their own strict religious worldview.

Rowling generally portrays Trelawny as a fraud, but also as one that evidently believes in her own ability to see into the future. Although mostly wrong, we learn in the fifth book (*Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*) that she was actually the one who foretold Harry's prophecy. Thus she is mostly wrong, but sometimes accidentally right in her foretelling of the future. The point is that when she is right she is not aware of it, but when she is wrong she thinks she is correct. As Professor Dumbledore says to Harry in the sixth book (*Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*): "Between ourselves, she has no idea of the danger she would be in outside the castle. She does not know – and I think it would be unwise to enlighten her – that she made the prophecy about you and Voldemort, you see." (Rowling, 2005: 400.)

In other words, she foretold Harry's prophecy without knowing it and she cannot even foresee the dangers lurking outside the walls of Hogwarts School of Wizardry at a time where the world of wizardry is growing darker and darker. Still Abanes obviously finds that the Divination taught at Hogwarts is dangerous, and that it could possibly tempt children into occultism. In an incident in the third book where Trelawny seems possessed by a voice not her own, speaking as if in a trance, Abanes sees an example of "real-world-occultism" (Abanes, 2001: 194). Trelawny speaks the words of Voldemort, the Dark Lord; He-Who-Should-Not-Be-Named, but in the book she is neither, as Abanes argues "producing this deep, husky voice" herself, nor is she aware of what it says. Most people would read the incident as a dramatic literary device, but Abanes reads it as real mediumship and occultism, "a form", he states, "so abhorrent to God that in the Old Testament anyone found guilty of mediumship was to be stoned." (Abanes, 2001: 194-95.)

Religion as a provider of ready-mades

At least to some conservative Christians, Rowling's ambivalent treatment of what they consider real occult elements poses a problem because they tend to align them with a strict belief system that is constructed upon the dichotomy of polar opposites. But although the fictional frame of Potter is built upon the fact that magic works, these elements are not treated as sacred, or religious, but as play. In Rowling's fictional universe, the magic is treated as a matter of fact, and there is no supernatural reference to explain how it works.

The magic seems more like a replacement of modern-day technology. In many ways, we could say that the magic world of Harry Potter has stopped sometime in the nineteenth century, being almost a cosy caricature of the literary world of Dickens. Without aeroplanes, the internet and TV, the magical world of Harry Potter has its own counterparts in the form of moving paintings and newspaper pictures, flying buses and high-speed mail-delivering owls.

There is no doubt that Rowling is indeed making use of culturally embedded ideas of religion and magic. In this way, we could say that she uses them as cultural ready-mades that she gives a new twist. As cultural ready-mades, they are laden with various meanings both secular and religious. How we read them depends for a large part on our own plane of reference. In my view, Rowling is closer to the way people tend to think about these religious ideas from an *etic* and not an *emic* position; that is more from outside the religious systems than from within them. The crystal gazing and reading of tea-leaves in the Divination classes are amusingly portrayed because that is how our culture generally ridicules New Age ideas. No matter how many people in one way or another share some of the worldviews found within alternative forms of spirituality, most people do not belong to any new religious movement and would not be pleased to be told that their view of the world is the same as those found in New Age doctrine. From a Christian conservative worldview like that of Abanes, however, New Age ideas are not humorous, but rather represent a dangerous rival to Christianity. Thus the humour does not work for him, and the books turn into religious pamphlets preaching occultism. Whether or not Rowling's play with magical elements functions as entertainment or not is obviously due to one's own religious worldviews.

Finding God in Potter

But if the Potter books are filled with dangerous occultism according to one Christian writer, how can others find them to be preaching Christianity? Like Abanes (and Neal), Granger (2004) finds: "Just as there are good spiritual beings, there are harmful spirits as well. Pretending there is no devil is as naïve and perhaps as dangerous, if not more so, than seeing demons behind every door." (Granger, 2004: xiv.) Abanes would possibly fit into this latter category, but the two writers still share a distinct and literal belief in the existence of the devil. Granger is nevertheless quite unable to find the devil in the Harry Potter works. According to Granger:

The Harry Potter novels ... touch our hearts because they contain themes, imagery, and engaging stories that echo the Great Story we are wired to receive and respond to. (...) they address the need (really an innate need akin to our need for physical nourishment) that we have for spiritual nourishment in the

form of edifying, imaginative experience of life in Christ. Because the Harry Potter books serve this purpose, they are excellent vehicles for parents wanting to share the Christian message of love's victory over death, of our relationship to God the Father through Christ, even of Christ's two natures and singular essence. (Granger, 2004: xix.)

Granger's book has one agenda, and that is to give the readers "this hidden key so you can unlock the implicit Christian content of the books and share them with others, from children who are fans to sceptical friends" (Granger, 2004: xx). Granger is not overlooking the fact that the books contain magic, but he makes a distinction between what he calls *invocational* magic and *incantational* magic. The former designates a form of magic that invokes demonic powers, and the latter a form of magic that shows in story form the "human thirst for a reality beyond the physical world around us" (Granger, 2004: 4). It is this latter form that he finds in the Potter books, as he states: "Not one character in any of the ... books ever calls in evil spirits. Not once." (Granger, 2004: 5). In this way Granger finds that the Harry Potter novels belong in the tradition of C. S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, who are often hailed as good Christian fantasy writers.

Even Abanes finds these latter writers to his liking. But Abanes makes a distinction between Tolkien and Lewis on the one hand and Rowling on the other. As he sees it, the first two are writing within the category of mythopoetic literature, "meaning that they [the stories] take place in worlds dissociated from the real world in which we live" (Abanes, 2001: 230). The Potter books on the contrary are not mythopoetic: "Rowling's fantasy is set in our twenty-first century world, complete with contemporary forms of occultism (e.g. astrology and divination) and references to persons and events from our own human history (e.g. Nicholas Flamel, Hand of Glory, Witch Hunts)." (Abanes, 2001: 230).

However, as Granger also points out, obviously well aware that this distinction is often made between Rowling and Lewis; even Lewis' *Narnia* chronicle starts in the real world with the children finding a way into the magical land through a closet in their bedroom.¹⁴ But Abanes does have a point; the magical world of Harry Potter is more intertwined with the world of humans than the magical worlds of Tolkien and Lewis. Not because of any use of contemporary occultism, as he would have it, but because the entry into the world of magic is found at various places in modern-day London, and because during the course of the books the two worlds increasingly meet. But this is probably also one of the attractions of the novels. In many ways Rowling is indeed enchanting the everyday world, making us think about it in a new way – not least through the character of Ron's father, who is constantly fascinated by the world of humans and comes up with questions like: "Now, Harry, what *precisely* is the function of a rubber duck?"

With reference to an Orthodox Christian Bishop, Granger notes that the Harry-haters "have missed the spiritual forest for the sake of their fixation

on the magical imagery of the literary trees" (Granger, 2004: 9). There is indeed reason to agree with this; reading the magic in these novels literally seems only possible from within quite particular religious worldviews. Equally, I would argue, reading these novels as spiritual, or Christian, seems impossible except from within particular religious worldviews.

Conclusion: culturally embedded readings of cultural products

So where does this leave us? Are the novels about Harry teaching dangerous occultism or are they leading people to God? On the one hand, we find Conservative Christians like Abanes, who states that even the good characters in the novels act "quite contrary to the biblical definition of 'goodness'. This is most apparent in Harry." (Abanes, 2001: 33.) On the other hand, we find Conservative Christians like Neal arguing that "the moral world of Harry Potter is in keeping with what the Bible reveals about the nature of good and evil. Therefore we can *use* these stories for godly purposes." (Neal, 2001: 172, *italics in original*.)

What the biblical definition of goodness is, Abanes does not say, but it seems that goodness is defined by obedience to rules and not lying. Obviously Harry and his friends fail to do both. But they break the rules, as the defenders of the Potter books are quick to note, for a greater cause. This greater cause is never taken into account by Abanes, who rather finds that Harry is always acting for selfish purposes. Harry's defenders find in him rather a willingness to sacrifice himself in order to save others, and thus see in him a Christ figure.

It seems that what is found depends on the eyes of the beholder. What is obvious, however, is that Potter is not only a children's story anymore. It has been argued from within religious studies that:

...while it would be wrong to make too much of children's fantasy stories such as J.K. Rowling's tale of Harry Potter, the significance of such literature on contemporary worldviews is worth mentioning (Partridge, 2004: 54-55).

Maybe we should turn the question the other way around, and ask instead, or at least also, what contemporary worldviews do to popular literary works like Harry Potter. From Christian quarters, there is obviously no anxiety about making too much of children's fantasy stories like Harry Potter. Rather they seem to use the Potter books as a potent means to promote their own religious views. Whether pro or con Harry Potter, they are turning a secular product into a religious pamphlet, writing their own religious worldviews into a popular cultural product. Their willingness to, or their inability not to, read a popular-cultural product according to their own religious worldview,

reminds me of a quotation in Wendy Doniger's *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth*, which is originally from Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*:

When I mention religion, I mean the Christian religion; and not only the Christian religion, but the Protestant religion; and not only the Protestant religion, but the Church of England (qtd. in Doniger, 1998: 66).

Although the writers we have met in this article do not belong to the Church of England, they are definitely reading the world in the same way as in the above quote. The reason for this can be found in the fact that for them Christianity, in whatever form they choose to interpret it, is a binding narrative. As Connie Neal argues in her latest book on Potter, *The Gospel According to Harry Potter*: "As Christians who take passing on our faith very seriously, our reading is always built on the foundation of the Bible as our standard of absolute truth." (Neal, 2002: viii). In this process of reading, secular products are mediated in religious terms.

Notes

1. According to a newspaper note in the Norwegian newspaper *Aftenposten* on the 5th October 2005, the sales figures have now passed 300 million copies.
2. When the fifth book was published in 2003, TV pictures all over the world showed that the "Potter-mania" was just as big in Tokyo and Singapore as in New York, London or Sydney. The release of the books at the same time all over the world helps to uphold the hype around the book series, as not even the translators or reviewers get any advance copies, and the contents of the books remain a secret for everyone until the day of publication. But it also helps to make the reading of the book into something of a global ritual with people knowing that they are participating in an action – the buying and reading of the same book – shared by millions of other people all over the world. In Britain, it has been estimated that 70% of the adults who ordered the fifth book in the series, ordered it for themselves and not their children (see Sky, 2003a). The books are now issued in both "children's" and "adult" editions, the latter being "luxury" versions.
3. See Sky, 2003b
4. The term "intertextuality" was coined by Julia Kristeva to designate the various relationships that a given text has with other texts. In her view: "Any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations, and any text is the absorption and transformation of another." (Kristeva, 1980: 66.)
5. The reception of the books in Europe and America reflects a general difference between these continents with regard to religion. America being the ultimately more religious, the issue of religion has also come to the forefront in the American debate; whereas in Europe the issue of the debate has been over racism and gender roles. As the sociologist of religion Peter Berger has recently argued, Europe is rather an exception in a global perspective when it comes to religion. Whereas religion is more or less "bubbling", as he puts it, all over the world, Europe seems to be the only place where secularisation is a reality. See Berger in Linda Woodhead, Hiroko Kawanami and David Smith (eds.). *Religions in the Modern World: Traditions and Transformations*. London & New York: Routledge 2002.
6. But there is also another interesting aspect to this issue with regard to Harry Potter, and that is that a sequel of books is involved in the process. The series is not finished as a whole. As the books gained such broad popularity so early in the writing of the series,

one may indeed wonder in what ways this hermeneutic process is widened. Is it possible that the various interpretations the books are given by the reading public have a reciprocal influence on J.K. Rowling in the writing process? There have been changes in the books which seem to imply that Rowling is influenced by what some of her critics say. The girls have grown stronger, the social issues are broadened and there is a greater mix of ethnic backgrounds among the students.

7. Harry Bloom in an article in the Wall Street Journal 2000.
8. Jack Zipes: *Sticks and Stones. The Troublesome Success of Children's Literature from Slovenly Peter to Harry Potter*. Routledge 2001.
9. This particular criticism came from the British critic Suman Gupta in his book *Re-reading Harry Potter*.
10. Evangelicalism is a broad movement within Protestant Christianity which has gathered up many of the most distinctive emphases of the sixteenth century Reformation and developed them into a form of Christianity that has flourished in the context of modernity. As such it is not a denomination but a widely influential current of Christianity. There are, for example, Evangelical Anglicans, Lutherans and Presbyterians. An evangelical style of Christianity first emerged in Europe and America in the eighteenth century in movements like Methodism, and it has staged periodical revivals ever since. Its identity as a pan-denominational movement became clearer and more self-conscious throughout the course of the twentieth century, partly in reaction to secular culture, and partly in reaction to what it regards as the easy accommodation of such culture by liberal Christianity. The most extreme and anti-modern wing of Evangelicalism emerged in the twentieth century in North America under the banner of Fundamentalism, and it broke from the broader current of Evangelical Christianity after 1957. Evangelicalism has a problematic relationship with modernity. Evangelical Christians are hostile to, or critical of, many features of the modern world, particularly in the area of personal morality, and they oppose the breakdown of the family signalled by the growing divorce-rates, tolerance of homosexuality and the abandoning of traditional domestic roles by women. The fundamentalists go further in opposing any teachings and practices which they regard as contrary to biblical teaching even if these have the backing of science; a good example of this is the theory of evolution. Jesus and the early church is the inspiration, not the modern world. But some aspects of the modern world, like capitalism, are easier for evangelicalism to accommodate.
11. See Sky, 2003b; 2002a & 2002b.
12. Although not a state church, the Church of Scotland is the national established church to which the majority of Scottish Presbyterians belong to day. As a national, and not a state church it has independence from the state in spiritual matters. In this way it is both established and free. A 2001 census revealed that 42% of Scots identified themselves with the Church of Scotland by religion, but only 12% of the population was registered as members. It remains unclear whether Rowling belongs to the ones feeling a religious identification or the ones being actual members.
13. Abanes (2001: 96) consciously uses the spelling magick and not magic when he writes of Harry Potter. In order, he writes, to separate between "any form of occult magic from sleight-of-hand tricks performed by stage magicians". Thus magick is used to designate real occult practices, and Abanes obviously places Rowling in this category.
14. This became a popular literary device after Carroll's *Alice* books and MacDonald's *Phantastes* (where a closet is used for the first time as an entry to fairyland). MacDonald's particular way of merging fantasy and Christianity was a great inspiration to Lewis.

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A Space Set Apart?

Young People Exploring the Sacred on the Internet¹

Mia Lövhelm

Ulrika: I think that, I'm looking for a group and a community, otherwise I'd just settle for keeping ... my religion privately, like, but...I think it seems really difficult to be...to stand on your own, you know. //... 'Cause I want it to be for real.

Mia: And it becomes more real then if you have a group of people around you?

Ulrika: Yes, I think so, 'cause then it's not something that I've invented, then there are others too who...have similar thoughts.

*Ulrika*² represents one of the several hundred young men and women who regularly log on to the Internet in order to kill time, meet new friends but also discuss more profound issues of life such as religion. The excerpt is taken from interviews with users of one of the most popular Swedish web communities for young people, whose experiences I followed during the year 2000. Some of these found it possible to use this site for seeking what they called a "serious" religious identity. Others, like *Ulrika*, did not. As described above, this kind of interaction could not provide the support that she needed in order to experience her own faith as "for real" and not just "invented".

In her seminal book *Life on the Screen* (1995: 262), Sherry Turkle described how the Internet could be used as a "space for growth". The particular conditions of interaction online provided, she argued, a "transitional space" for experimenting with new ways of understanding reality, oneself and others that where highly suited to the conditions of a postmodern world. The aim of this article is to discuss some of the problems and possibilities of using the Internet as a space for young people to experience and explore a possible answer to the ultimate or "real" meaning of their own lives. The first part of the article consists of a discussion of how previous research has conceived of the Internet as a context for this process, and how it differs from spaces set apart for such processes as we know them from more traditional social settings. The second part will discuss young people's experiences of exploring

existential meaning on the Internet through the use of empirical data from a case study of discussions on religion at the Swedish web community that I call “the Site” (see Lövhheim, 2004).

Being young in late modern society

In the literature on young people and youth culture, metaphors such as “transitional space” or “free zone” have been used in order to describe what it means to be young (Fornäs, Lindberg & Sernhede, 1994: 10; cf. Schultze *et al.*, 1991). By using these metaphors, researchers seek to address two related aspects of the particular conditions shaping the life of youth in contemporary society. The first concerns how the phase of youth itself can be seen as a separate time between the innocence and dependence upon others that characterize childhood and the freedom but also the responsibilities of adult life. Since the mid-19th century, young people in Western societies have to a large extent been separated or isolated in a world of their own, organized by specific institutions such as school, youth organizations, and more recently goods and forms of media specifically aimed at the youth or teenage market. The second aspect of young people’s specific life conditions concerns their quest for a space of their own, outside the control of adult society or, increasingly, commercial interests.

The German scholar Thomas Ziehe (1994: 9, 38) has described how these two aspects shape young people’s lives through the concepts “cultural release” and “cultural expropriation”. Late modern society is characterized by a fundamental erosion of traditional patterns of life, norms and identities. On the one hand, this situation opens up possibilities for an unprecedented multiplicity and flexibility, which offers greater freedom to break with previous confinements and traditions, explore alternative forms of relations, and cultivate a plurality of lifestyles and identities. On the other hand, the increasing appropriation of experiences through, for example, the media impinge upon young people’s ability to experience things by themselves and on their own terms. This erosion of traditional mediators of trust and their replacement by what Anthony Giddens (1991: 19, 144) terms the institutionalized reflexivity of late modern society fundamentally challenges the purpose of the transitional phase of youth in pre-modern societies. Instead of a phase preparing the individual to enter into a new identity, which is relatively clearly defined by tradition and the local community, the individual is faced with the task of exploring and constructing the self as part of a lifelong reflexive project (Giddens, 1991: 5, 54). This change may, in addition to new possibilities, also give rise to feelings of insecurity and existential anxiety (Ziehe, 1994: 38; Giddens, 1991: 198-200). Such feelings can lead to attempts to reconstruct ontological security and traditional boundaries among young people. This indicates that the need for symbolic and ritual expression of

important transitions in life is as important for young people today as it was in earlier societies, even though the boundaries defining youth and adult life have become more ambiguous and diffuse.

Young people, transitional space and sacred space

Discussion of the Internet as a “transitional space” is related to the ideas of *rites de passage*, or rituals of transition, and their function in modern as well as tribal society presented by Victor Turner (1977; Grimes, 2002). These kinds of rituals traditionally fulfilled the function of transforming and preparing an individual for entering a new position or identity in the social structure. Central to Turner’s discussion of these rituals is the concept of “liminality” (1977: 94). Liminality³ can be seen as a quality of the margin or liminal phase in a transition ritual, set between the separation, where the individual through symbolic acts is separated from his or her previous position in society, and the re-aggregation or reincorporation, when the individual takes up a new position. Liminal entities are fundamentally ambiguous, Turner writes. They are “betwixt and between the positions assigned and the arrayed law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (Turner, 1977: 95). In this, they actualize the fundamental dialectics of social life, between structure and anti-structure, and the necessary balance between the two. Thus, people and spaces characterized by liminality open up possibilities to rethink and revitalize the values and order of a society. The experiences of liminality bind those who share it together in what Turner termed “communitas”: a specific, egalitarian sense of community which undergirds the social order (1977: 96-97). In tribal society, a space or a person acquires liminality through being stripped of attributes and hierarchies of the past before acquiring those of the coming social order or position (Turner, 1977: 125). Therefore liminal conditions and people are also characterized by being on the margins and/or in an inferior state. Turner himself pointed to how liminality could be also expressed in modern society through for example millennialist movements or the hippie culture, and to the similarities between ritual and play (Turner, 1977: 112; cf. Jones, 1997).

There are similarities as well as differences between the concept of liminality and the concept of the “sacred” as a characteristic of a transitional space. As pointed out in the introduction to this volume, ideas about the function of the sacred often start out from Émile Durkheim’s discussion of its function in the life of the individual and of society (Durkheim, 1995: 34-39). Following Durkheim, sacredness is something that objects acquire when they are “set apart and forbidden” from profane life. This quality has to do with what these objects represent: that which is of supreme value for a group of people. But sacredness also has to do with the collective acts of groups of people in setting an object apart and keeping it separate from the pro-

fane. An object can only remain sacred as long as the group continues to do this (Fields, 1995: xlv-xlvi).

A transitional space used, in this case, for the integration of young people as new members in a society can thus be a sacred space in that it is separated from, and stripped of, the (orders of) the profane or ordinary world, but also in that it makes possible an expression of “*communitas*”, of the underlying values uniting a group of people. In Turner’s work, the significance of a transitional space lies, however, not just in its expression of these supreme values, but also in its expression of their *constructed* nature. Thereby it opens up the possibility to question as well as reconfirm social values and orders. The experience of liminality shows the constructed nature of what a group of people hold as sacred, its content as well as its boundaries with the profane. At the same time, liminality can only come about in a space or position set apart from ordinary or profane life.

Religious symbols, texts and rituals have throughout history played an important part in defining and expressing the sacred in a society and in mediating its meaning to new generations (Durkheim, 1995: 44). In Sweden the Lutheran Church has for centuries fulfilled this function, for example through the ritual of confirmation (Sjöborg, 2001). In pre-industrial Sweden, this ritual was the primary way in which core values in society were inculcated in a young man or woman. The Christian Church also offered a framework for understanding the meaning and goal of the individual’s life and position in society – that is for the construction of identity – which was accepted by a majority of the people. In contemporary Sweden, this function of the Church in the transitional phase of youth is increasingly questioned. Today less than 40 percent of Swedish teenagers still take part in confirmation classes (www.svenskakyrkan.se/statistik). A majority of Swedish teenagers are still interested in religion, but the values, practices and spaces that they see as sacred are varied and more connected to everyday life than to the transcendent. Less than 20 percent share the beliefs of the Church or regularly attend services (Sjödin, 2001: 105, 129, 131-132).

As described by Nancy T. Ammerman (2003), in late modern society there are many competing “narratives”, some connected to religious institutions and others presented, for example, in the media and in popular culture, offering definitions of the sacred and “scripts” guiding individuals on how to relate their own life to it. An individual’s understanding of the relation between the self and the sacred – what I will refer to as “religious autobiography” (Lövhheim, 2004: 73) – is thus constantly constructed in the intersections between these narratives and situations that actualize experiences and questions of existential meaning.

Several studies in the field of youth culture have explored how young people in modern society use the street, park, shopping mall or, more recently, different media as alternative spaces where issues of the meaning of life and of individual identity can be explored and expressed (Hall & Jefferson, 1976; Skelton & Valentine, 1997). Until recently, the place of religion in young

people's process of finding such spaces has to a great extent been overlooked (cf. Clark & Hoover, 1997). Two recent studies⁴ that address this issue are Lynn Schofield Clark's (2003) work on young people's use of popular films and TV series on paranormal phenomena for coming to terms with existential dilemmas and experiences of the transcendent and Thomas Bossius' (2003) study of young people using religious symbols in Black metal and trance music in the process of identity construction. These studies show how young people use media and popular culture to reflect on how values and symbols defined as sacred by dominant religious traditions in adult society can be useful for finding meaning in their everyday life. In this process the boundaries between what is sacred and what is profane as mediated by these traditions are challenged, although young people also seek to reaffirm such boundaries as a way of securing some stability and coherence in their lives (Clark, 2003: 131,140; Bossius, 2003: 282).

The internet as a transitional space

The Internet offers a new kind of space for social interaction, one constructed by networks of computers. Today the Internet is also increasingly being used to explore and discuss the meaning of the sacred as mediated through various religions narratives (Dawson & Cowan, 2004; Højsgaard & Warburg, 2005). Whether the Internet can also be seen as a sacred space has been discussed by Stephen O'Leary (2004), Gregor Goethals (2003), Jan Fernback (2002) and Christopher Helland (2000), among others.

As stated above, Sherry Turkle argued (1995: 261-262) that the Internet provided a "transitional space" particularly suited to the conditions of meaning construction in late or post-modern society. Interaction through computer-mediated communication (CMC), she argued, could provide a certain kind of "safety" for such experiences since it "operates in a time out of normal time and according to its own rules". Thus, online experiences made possible the development of ways of approaching reality, oneself and others that, unlike face-to-face interaction, admitted of multiplicity and flexibility and acknowledged the constructed nature of perceptions and identities in late modern society.

Steven O'Leary's discussion of the Internet as sacred space starts out from the rituals of "Technopagans". The efficacy of a ritual lies in its capability of asserting difference, of "performing the ways things ought to be in conscious tension with the way things are" and thereby making these things come about (O'Leary, 2004: 51). He suggests that the rituals performed by Technopagans bring about this efficacy, not through physical experience, but through the recreation or claiming of a space in which the sacred is manifested through use of the power of language. In this way, Technopagans establish a space set apart from the world outside and from other online arenas, for the pur-

pose of expressing collective visions of what “things ought to be in conscious tension with the way things are” (O’Leary, 2004: 54). Rituals on the Internet are, presumably to a larger degree than those taking place through physical presence, characterized by a fundamental awareness of their own quality, as well as the quality of the sacred they invoke, as constructed, arbitrary, and artificial. Nevertheless, O’Leary claims that these rituals may as well as any other ritual fulfill the end of “restructuring and reintegrating the minds and emotions” of their participants (O’Leary, 2004: 56).

Studies of individual experiences of using the Internet as “a space for growth” for the construction of religious identities are less common. Helen Berger & Douglas Ezzy in their study (2004: 186) of the meaning of participation in witchcraft-related online communities among young Australian and American witches concludes that, in line with Turkle’s apprehensions, “participation in the Internet may actually be facilitating identity integration under the conditions of late modernity, in which relationships are increasingly dispersed geographically and temporally and identity is always in the process of transformation”.

Young people, religion, and the internet as a transitional space

These previous studies give several indications of how the Internet can serve as a space for exploring how beliefs and practices representing the sacred, mediated by various religious narratives, can help individuals handle the ambiguous character of existence in late modernity. However, many of these indications are still general and tentative in character. We still need to know more about, for example, whether some Internet sites might be better suited for such purposes than others, and how different groups of people can take advantage of these possibilities. In the following part of this article I would like to explore these indications a bit further, in order to bring out some issues that might be relevant to pursue in further research. Here, my primary concern is how the Internet can provide transitional spaces that facilitate the process of constructing religious autobiographies for young people in late modern society.

A first step in studying whether a particular Internet site can serve as a transitional space for young people is to specify what the characteristics and functions of such spaces could be⁵. Following Turner, liminality is represented by people and spaces that represent something different than the positions and conventions of ordinary social structures. This difference is the key that makes a liminal space into an opportunity to rethink and revitalize the values and hierarchies founding the social structure. Several of these characteristics echo Turkle’s description of a transitional space online. It operates “on its own rules” which are characterized by ambiguity and fluidity. This character is implicitly ascribed to the online setting as being “outside” or *set apart from*

“normal” time and rules. This character is implicitly related to the lack of physical contact, which brings about a *destabilizing of cues that signal social attributes and hierarchies*. Through these characteristics, the online transitional space provides a certain “safety” and can fulfill its function as a “space for growth”. O’Leary points to how the construction of a sacred space set apart from other off- and online spaces is carried out through *the power of language*. However, the existence of this specific space, and thereby of its specific character, depends on each participant’s explicit acceptance of these conditions and willingness to keep them going. Therefore, a sacred space online is also fundamentally *constructed and arbitrary* in character. Nevertheless, these spaces hold the potential of enacting the dialectics between “restructuring and reintegrating” the minds of individuals and society.

While Turner emphasized the function of liminality in reconstructing a relative stable social order, Turkle and O’Leary focus more on how online arenas characterized by similar characteristics can prepare individuals to approach a social structure which is increasingly ambiguous and arbitrary. Turkle envisions how a transitional space online can help individuals cope with this situation through breaking with confining social structures and approach reality, the self and others as constructed, multiplex and flexible entities. Here, the function of “restructuring” minds and social positions is emphasized more than the “reintegrating” function. Her discussion of how the Internet cannot become an alternative life, but rather should be “discarded after reaching greater freedom”, to some extent addresses this function (Turkle, 1996: 262). O’Leary also emphasizes the function of envisioning another kind of order, but he leaves open the question of whether disembodied actors and relationships online will reaffirm the social hierarchies of the world offline or depart from them (2004: 56).

Starting from these characteristics of a potential transitional and/or sacred space online as outlined above, we can formulate some questions for studying to what extent they apply to a particular Internet site. First of all, we need to know more about how the site is constructed as a space set apart from the conditions of the “normal”, or everyday, offline life of users. What features of the particular site fulfill this function? We also need to consider the implications they have for the key elements identified by previous studies. Do they substantiate or challenge them? How, for example, do they affect the suspension of cues signaling social attributes and hierarchies in an offline context? How do they affect the possibility to construct a consensus of rules and values among participants through the “power of language”, which O’Leary sees as crucial for defining and shaping a sacred space?

Secondly, we need to look deeper into the implications of the particular character of an online context. Here, we need to study how users of the site experience the ambiguity that is formed by the presumed destabilizing of the “normal” social structure. As O’Leary points out, ambiguity gives opportunities for flexibility but also awareness of the constructed, arbitrary, and artificial character of the space and the meanings produced therein. Previous

research shows that young people experience and respond to this kind of ambiguity in different ways. Therefore, we need to ask whether the experience of a particular Internet site produces a sense of safety that enhances reflection and perhaps reconstruction of – in this case – understandings of self, other people's choice of religion, and the transcendent reality. Or does it rather feed insecurity?

The internet as transitional space: experiences from a Swedish case study

In the following discussion, I will use the example of a particular online arena, the Swedish web community "the Site".⁶ This web community is not oriented towards religion *per se*, but supplies discussion groups and chat rooms on a wide variety of topics. During the time of the study, it was visited by a large number of young people from a variety of backgrounds⁷. The empirical material that will be used in the following discussion was collected through online observations of eight discussion groups on religion, four focusing on the Christian faith, and four focusing on new or alternative forms of religion such as Wicca, Shamanism and Magic. Furthermore, fifteen young men and women in the age range of 18-20 were interviewed about their use of the web community during one year. These young people came from a variety of religious backgrounds. Eight of them were more or less active in different Christian denominations, while the other half oriented themselves toward the alternative religions mentioned above. For several of the informants, the year when the study took place was the year when they were about to leave high school, thereby ending twelve years of compulsory education in Sweden. The experience of leaving high school initiates a process of entering adult life, characterized by responsibilities and freedoms such as becoming accountable for one's own decisions, supporting oneself economically and leaving home, but also finding one's own identity and purpose in life (Ungdomsstyrelsen, 2003: 43). Thus, for the informants, the time of the study intersected with a time in their lives that in several ways was characterized by experiences and questions about transition from one stage in the process of constructing identities to another stage.

A space set apart from "normal" life

In what ways was the Site constructed as a space set apart from the informants' everyday, offline situation, especially with regard to discussions on religious and existential issues? Here, I will focus on two aspects: its character as a separate place for young people, and its function of providing a separate

time for them to pursue their own agenda. Like other web communities, the Site required that users became members in order to fully take advantage of its services. This included access to discussion groups, instant messages, and a personal web page where participants could present themselves in different ways. Members logged in by using a name of their personal choice and a password. The act of logging on to the Site thus signaled that users were entering a space separated from other spaces offline as well as on the Internet, as pointed out by O'Leary. This experience was also supported by the presentation, the layout, and the history of the web community⁸. It was started by a young Swedish man as a "hobby", and when the Site grew, he administered it primarily with the help of a few friends. The Site was presented as "a fun place to meet other people online", and the layout was fairly simple, not very elaborate or "flashy". Discussions on the Site were not moderated, and the webmaster described himself as fairly "broadminded" as to what opinions could be voiced, with the exception of outright commercial postings, and discrimination or agitation directed against particular groups of people. All of these features contributed to present an image of the Site as a cool, laid-back place to hang out, made by young people for young people, away from the eyes and structures of the adult world. When asked about why they became members, several of the informants also gave as reasons: "Every young person in town uses it" or "A friend/Some friends of mine used it".

As a web community, the Site provided access to this meeting place at all hours. That the Site was providing a time set apart from everyday duties in young people's lives was evident from the rising number of log-ins during lunch-time and in the evening and night. Many of my informants described how they used the Site primarily during break time in school, or late in the evenings when the family computer was free. This use of the Site, in order to get a break from the agenda of school or to "have some fun" after school, was also clear in the way several of the users primarily associated their use of the Site to their time in high school. Leaving high school for many of them also meant abandoning or cutting down their use of the Site.

Thus the Site could present a place set apart for discussions of religious and existential issues on terms set by young people rather than by teachers, parents or religious leaders. The informants described how it gave access to other kinds of topics than those raised in the school context, and a wider range of opinions than those voiced in the religious youth groups they attended in their local communities. Furthermore, the Site provided access to discussions at times that suited young people. The function of providing a place and time set apart for these kinds of discussions on religion was, however, also complicated by the particular conditions for interaction with the Site. Its character as a place set apart for young people was – during the latter part of the study – threatened by its growing popularity.⁹ When its size had outgrown the time and computer facilities of the original founders, they established contact with a commercial IT company, and announced the launch of a new version of the Site. Several members reacted against this as a threat

to the original character of the Site. As the new version was more elaborate and thus more difficult to access, primarily for those connecting to the Internet through a modem, members started to complain or leave the Site.

The examples outlined above show some ways in which technical aspects such as the interface of an Internet site may facilitate but also complicate its possibility to become a space set apart in time and place for young people to explore the role of religion in their lives on their own terms. The final example also highlights the fact that, in addition to online conditions, we also need to take into consideration conditions in the offline world when discussing whether the Internet can fulfill this feature of a transitional space. As the example of the Site shows, access to this space required access to a computer and preferably a fast Internet connection that was still quite expensive for an average Swedish family at the time of the study. Furthermore, this access often had to be negotiated with peers wanting to use the school computers, or with family members wanting to use the family computer.

A space for destabilizing social positions

The second crucial feature of a transitional space described in previous studies is its ability to suspend or destabilize cues signaling social attributes and hierarchies that structure the user's position in offline social structures. When becoming a member of the Site, users were asked to choose a pseudonym and submit information about their age, gender, and place of domicile. This information could then be presented in a kind of label accompanying the name, as well as on the member's personal web page. On this page, members could also display images, interests, as well as associations on the Site such as their cyber friends and their most frequented discussion groups. This information, along with a person's chosen name, thus made up the signs of a member's identity on the Site. The fact that the information was (primarily) given in text rather than in a visual, aural or tactile form, gave members opportunities to circumscribe, change or altogether discard the signs to identity used in everyday, offline life. All the informants brought up this possibility when describing their use of the Site. They expected, through the "anonymous" character of interactions, to be able to do things they felt restricted from doing in their everyday lives; for example to be more outspoken, challenge stereotypes, or discuss delicate issues. Thus, their intentions were to try out ways of presenting religious convictions and identities on the Site that in some way differed from their experiences of approaching these issues offline.

An analysis of the patterns of social interaction in the discussion groups did, however, show that rather than allowing a flexibility in the kind of approaches to, and relations between, religious groups that the informants experienced in the offline context, the textual signs in pseudonyms and

postings and on personal web pages lead to the use of stereotypes, or polarizations between users of different religious convictions. This primarily happened between users signaling affiliation to a Christian tradition and those who presented themselves as atheists, Satanists or Wiccans. The experience of many of these informants was aptly summarized in a comment made by one of the young Christian girls:

... on the Site it's often like people have a certain image of the church, and they sort of stick to it, and also of a person who is a Christian ... it's like, you know, people don't know how things really are, and they cannot get to know things better through the Site either.

This ambiguity of textual signs is highlighted by the experience of one of the most active atheists, who was approached as a Christian since on his web page he listed several discussion groups on Christianity and made some ironic statements about Christian beliefs! Users who became placed as a “naïve and stupid Christian”, then had great difficulties in changing this image, and found themselves trapped in endless, polarized debates. Several of them referred these problems to the way the discussion group was arranged on the Site. Postings allowing no more than 500 characters, lack of moderation, and the steady inflow of new members picking up on the same topics did not provide the means they needed to change the situation.

For users who oriented themselves towards other religious traditions than Christianity, the Site seemed, in line with Berger and Ezzy's findings (2004) described earlier, to provide a space where traditional offline, religious authorities could be challenged and new alternatives explored. On the Site, Christianity, for several centuries the dominant mediator of religious beliefs and practices in Sweden, came rather to hold an inferior position with respect to approaches to religion based on science, or witchcraft, Shamanism and Satanism. However, the informants interested in Wicca, magic and Satanism also had experiences of an unexpected polarization between users. In this case, interactions as mediated through discussion groups seemed to lead to the formation of new divisions between participants, based on signs of “experience” or “serious” versus “unserious” intentions. Such signs consisted of references to books, rituals, years of practice, etc. While this kind of experience can be difficult to ‘prove’ on the basis of written text, the criteria of online conduct, treatment of new users was also used to separate more and less “experienced” and “serious” users. As explained by an informant called *Vera*, someone who is “serious” about his or her religion “... permits everybody else to think whatever they like, and then you discuss things, not like ... scold someone, you know”.

Another way of destabilizing social position can be to use several different pseudonyms in interactions. When one of the informants tried this strategy, he got this reply: “... in view of the fact that you don't use one identity but several, how can you ask something of other people?”. This shows how a

“serious” and therefore trustworthy position in the interactions seems to require a certain stability rather than instability of personal identity.

These examples indicate that the ambiguity created by the use of solely textual signs in online interactions not only give users a possibility to destabilize social positions, but may also reaffirm or reconstruct religious stereotypes, divisions and hierarchies in the offline context. The experiences of primarily those who as a result of criticism or scolding were assigned inferior positions in the interactions, like the “stupid” Christians or the “inexperienced” magicians, showed that trying to reverse such positions could be even harder in this supposedly “anonymous” space than in face-to-face interactions. Users who dominated the interactions were those who were frequently present in the discussion groups, but who were also skilful in dismissing other people’s arguments and expressing their own opinions in short, written contributions. These users were, predominantly, young men. This illustrates how the potential to circumscribe social positions and hierarchies online also has to be related to the resources and restrictions of different users. Such individual factors might be a user’s religious convictions, gender and previous experiences of written discussions and of using the medium.

A space for constructing religious autobiographies

The examples above show that in some respects, the Site did improve conditions for approaching religion in ways that served the individual’s needs and intentions, as compared to those in the offline context. This was primarily the experience of young people interested in religious traditions that were seen as marginal and obscure by mainstream society. On the Site and other places like it, Wiccans, Satanists or magicians could claim a religious identity of equal significance and legitimacy with that of Christians. However, discussions on the Site could also lead to critique of convictions and intentions and new dilemmas that a person might not have been exposed to as a solitary practitioner in the offline context. The Christian informants had similar experiences. On the Site, on the one hand, they found discussions that offered a flexibility and plurality on crucial issues that was missing in the local congregation, but on the other hand they faced new difficulties in trying to “restructure” other people’s preconceived ideas about Christian lifestyle and beliefs.

Almost all the informants in the study left the Site within the year that I followed them. This was in part due to changes in their offline lives, but primarily to the fact that the Site could not, in the long run, provide the kind of conditions that they expected and needed in the process of forming religious identities that helped them to deal with the challenges of life. The polarized and fragmented discussions, and difficulties of expressing themselves due to limitations of time and space, made them feel trapped in ascribed identities that they did not see as congruent with their religious auto-

biographies. For these young people, experiences of interaction on the Site did challenge and “restructure” their understandings of religion and religious identities, but not in ways that also enabled them to try out new approaches to these issues.

Four of the informants did, however, seem able to use the Site in accordance with expectations outlined in previous research. These informants differed in several ways; two were male and two female, one was a Christian, one a pagan, one an atheist and one a “seeker”. However, they all found ways to handle many of the problems experienced by the other users. Their ability to find these strategies was based on some competences that they possessed more than the other informants. All of them had access to computers of their own, and thereby were able to actively participate in the discussion groups. They were skilful in expressing their beliefs and convictions through written contributions. Furthermore, these users had an approach to religion that fitted the character of the discussions, characterized by reason, distance, critique, wit, and irony. These characteristics seem to give them a sense of trust in their ability to handle the conditions of online interactions. Thereby they were also able to accept and use these interactions to develop further understandings of their own and other people’s religious identities. This is exemplified in these reflections of two of the informants:

Stirner: I’ve also gained more respect for ... the more secular part of Christianity. Svirk and people like him. For people who have reflected on this and, well, for some reason accept God’s existence ... but who accept other people’s opinion about this and do not try to adjust reality in order to fit the Bible. I respect these people so much more, and so I don’t look upon Christians as a homogeneous group in the same way as before.

Maria: I’ve become more humble, perhaps, realized that I really don’t know everything and ... there is like, no evidence either of God’s existence or the opposite. So I think that I’ve come to realize that I don’t know as much as I thought I did before.

These experiences reflect some of the attitudes that Turkle (1995: 262) described as “in tune with” the “postmodern world”, such as acceptance of multiplicity and flexibility of religious beliefs and identities.

Conclusion

Can the Internet function as a new kind of “transitional space” for individuals seeking to construct meaning in an increasingly complex late modern society? In this article I have discussed whether some key features that underpin such anticipations in previous research can be applied to a popular Swedish web community “the Site”. The features that I chose to focus on

were those of the Internet site as a space set apart from conditions that structure “normal” life for young people in terms of restrictions of time and rules given, for example, by school and religious institutions in their local community. I have also focused on how the ambiguity of social interaction online might open up new possibilities to destabilize and rethink social positions and conventions in “normal” life. The discussion above shows that such characteristics can be found on the Site to some extent. It is constructed as a space set apart for, and suited to, the interests and needs of young people, where they can get away from the structures set by adults in school and in the local congregation. However, its character as set apart from the conditions of young people’s lives offline is quite fragile. One factor that can affect this character is the influence of corporate interests looking for lucrative markets among young Internet users. On the Site, the cooperation with the IT company on the one hand ensured the possibility to keep it open for a growing amount of users, but on the other hand it led to alterations which threatened its character as a space controlled solely by young people for young people. These indications point to how anticipations of the Internet as a “transitional space” were often based on early studies of relatively small, closed groups of Internet users (like Technopagans). The findings of my study show that the possibility to find and maintain a space “set apart” can be more complicated in the case of larger, more heterogeneous Internet sites. The experiences of the informants show how too many conflicts and differences in experiences, needs and intentions among individuals on a certain site also can wreck its possibility to become a space set apart. This corresponds to O’Leary’s discussion of how *a common language and direction* is crucial both to construct and to keep this kind of space going. This issue is not least important in considering the expansion of the Internet since the mid-1990s, in terms both of the number of users and of the interests represented. The example of the Site thus shows that the set-apart character of an online space is intrinsically linked to, and dependent upon, conditions in “normal” or offline life, such as the economic means to keep a web community going. Another side of this is the possibility of access for young people to this kind of space. An online space might be more accessible than a space for discussions on existential meaning in the local context, but still such basic preconditions as access to computers are essential. My findings show that in order to fully take advantage of the potential of an online space as a transitional space, young people need to negotiate access and time to use the computer with their families and peers at school (cf. Slevin, 2000).

As to the criteria of the ambiguity of online interaction as destabilizing the “normal” social order, the examples above show that interactions on the Site did challenge the young informants’ previous experiences of religious beliefs, values and positions in Swedish society. Thus, the meaning of religion in their lives became more ambiguous on the Site. However, the consequences of this ambiguity were more complicated than envisioned in previous research. The experiences of the informants show how it also led to reaffir-

mation of stereotypes concerning traditional, Christian religious beliefs and their function in individual lives. In the case of alternative beliefs about the sacred or transcendent, the ambiguity of online interactions often resulted in a construction of boundaries in order to separate authentic or “serious” religious identities from “fake” versions. These findings show that we need a more critical and nuanced discussion of the anticipation that online interaction, due to differences in signs for presenting and interpreting identity, can become a space for envisioning and perhaps enacting things in ways that challenge understandings of the sacred as mediated by conventional religious narratives.

The ambiguous consequences of the ambiguity of online spaces also points to the need to rethink early anticipations of the function of online spaces in the lives of contemporary individuals. The issue at the center of my discussion in this article has been whether the Internet can give access to transitional spaces for young people’s reflections on existential meaning, and on religion as a source for coming to terms with their own lives and identities. Thus, an important question toward the end of the article is also whether an Internet Site can function as a *sacred* space. Earlier in this volume, Knut Lundby discusses the need for a more dynamic definition of the sacred in contemporary society. One of his central arguments is that an object is constructed as sacred in the interplay between elements that carry a substantial sacred potential because they – in a certain social context – have a “heritage” of being connected to values of supreme importance, and the way these become received, interpreted and used, by a certain group of people. The sacred, he argues, should be seen as “rooted in persistent communication within a specific context”. This discussion opens up a possibility to see a sacred space as a site of negotiation and contest over the continued legitimacy of sacred symbols as such (cf. Chidester, 1995: 9-15). Starting from this perspective, the Site could be seen as a sacred space for young people – not in that it is set apart from, and brackets off, the conditions of the world of these young people offline, but in that it *makes explicit* the complex, contested character of ultimate values and existential meaning in their everyday lives, and thus challenges them to reflect on their significance and legitimacy in their project of constructing identities. However, previous studies (cf. Clark, 2003; Bossius, 2003) have shown that when young people explore religious narratives as potential guides for giving meaning to their experiences of what is sacred or of supreme importance in life, they seek ways to establish their independence of religious institutions and the rules and hierarchies associated with them. But they also seek ways to establish coherence and stability in order to handle the complexity and ambiguity of their everyday lives. In Turkle’s description of the online transitional space, the sense of *safety* is crucial to its function as a “space for growth”. The examples above show that increased plurality and ambiguity concerning the meaning of the sacred in discussions of religion online can give a sense of safety or trust, but it can also create insecurity (cf. Linderman & Lövheim, 2003). The examples of the four informants who felt

at ease at the Site show clearly that ambiguity and flexibility alone are not enough to generate this trust. As exemplified above, conditions such as skills in using computers and in expressing oneself through written text, gender conventions and questions of access to computers also seem to be relevant.

Turkle in her description of the Internet as a transitional space emphasizes the flexibility and ambiguity that characterize the liminal phase in Turner's description of the function of such spaces. But in Turner's discussion of the function of a transitional space, as well as in Durkheim's discussions of the sacred space, their significance in individual and social life is related to their ability to express the fundamental interplay or dialectic between structure and anti-structure, the stability and ambiguity of that which is set apart as sacred. The findings of the Swedish case study discussed in this article indicate that an Internet site, in order to function as a sacred space where young people can explore issues of ultimate meaning, must include possibilities to "restructure" identities and ideas encountered in life outside the Internet, but also to "reintegrate" the complexities and ambiguities of this life within a structure of meaning and relevance to the individual.

This article has but begun to raise questions about when, how and for whom the Internet can provide spaces that more enable individuals in late modern society to explore the meanings and values in life that are "for real". We clearly need more studies in order to develop our understanding of this potential of the Internet further. We need to study different kinds of Internet sites, and we also need to specify further what aspects of the online context can contribute to establishing an Internet site as such a space. Also, this article shows that we may benefit from approaching these experiences not only as set apart from "normal" time and rules, but also as integrated in the everyday life of different groups of people.

Notes

1. This essay is based on the article published in online journal: *Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* (www.online.uni-hd.de). A few paragraphs are reproduced and a few others are adapted, with permission of the online journal.
2. All names of informants used in this article have been altered in order to protect their anonymity. The translations of all quotes from Swedish have been made by Mia Lövhheim.
3. An analytical distinction can be made between liminality as a state which ritual brings about within the individual, and as a characteristic of the space in which such experiences are made possible. Here my concern is the conditions of the space that make experiences of liminality possible, and I am thus focusing on the second of these senses.
4. See also Flory & Miller, 2000; Tomasi, 1999; Beaudoin, 1998.
5. Here I will limit my discussion of such characteristics to the studies mentioned earlier in the article. See also Goethals, 2003: 257.
6. In order to protect the identity of my informants I do not reveal the name or URL of this site. For further information about the methods and results of this study, see Lövhheim, 2004.
7. In the year 2000, when the study was undertaken, the number of member accounts was approximately 800 000.
8. This information was obtained through e-mail interviews with the webmasters of the Site.

9. From February 2000 to October 2000, the number of individual member accounts with the Site increased from 200 000 to almost 800 000.

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