Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture

Religion and Media in the Construction of Cultures

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Chapter 3: Religion and Media in the Construction of Cultures

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The current questions about the politics and cultural influence of the religious broadcasters of fundamentalist leanings in various religious traditions raise many of the classical issues regarding media and religion in public discourse. Is religion part of the public cultural patrimony, or is it a matter of personal opinion that is best consigned to the private sphere? Does the decline of some of the institutional churches confirm predictions of inevitable secularization, or do the new religious movements signal a resurgence of the sacred in the public sphere? These quandaries about the public role of religion, especially in broadcasting, reflect the erosion of old certainties in the sociology of religion and echo the call for a paradigm change in theories of religion, culture, and media.

Policies regarding religion in public discourse have followed closely our social theories of religion and culture. This is another example of the "double hermeneutic" noted by Giddens (1984), in which there is a constant moving back and forth from the first level of interpretation of meaning in everyday lay language to a second level of interpretation **[p. 38 ↓]** developed by the metalanguage of the social sciences (p. 374). The Enlightenment political-economic project removed theological discourse as a basis of public consensus but continued to see religion as somehow important for the development of modern industrial societies. Social theories of religion followed suit. The Durkheimian tradition of social theory considered religious sentiment to be a foundation for the social integration of modernizing societies. Weber interpreted religion as the motivation for the personal and social mobilization needed for industrial progress. Ernst Troeltsch viewed religion as a positive ethical foundation for a new social order, but the Marxist tradition considered religion to be an obstacle that must be replaced with a secularizing "religion" of socialist progress. In one way or another, all of these theories

of religion reduced public religious discourse to a function of industrial progress in the new nation-state (Beckford & Luckmann, 1989, pp. 1–2).

As the public sphere began to be identified with the state, the discourses of the press and other forms of mediated communication were also considered a volatile threat to orderly public consensus and, like religion, were either consigned to the sphere of private opinion or were allowed into the public sphere as a form of circulating the information necessary for industrial progress. Later, broadcasting was defined as having a public function needing public regulation, but only reluctantly, under the guise of technological orderliness. Not surprisingly, religious studies and media studies developed with little theoretical interrelationship, especially as regards their common role in the public sphere.

When broadcasting began in the 1920s, these conceptions of the role of religion and media in national development provided a framework for including a kind of nondenominational religion in the programming. The presence of religion in the new medium legitimated the entry of media into the privacy of homes, where "religious" religion was consigned, and made broadcasting a supporter of the kind of civil religion that Bellah (1967) has described. Mainline religious leaders joined hands with broadcasters and political leaders to ensure that their message was recast into the nondenominational language of public progress, instrumental rationality, and nation building; competing sectarian groups were excluded from broadcasting (Horsfield, 1984, pp. 3–8).

The postmodernist movements of the 1960s and 1970s have profoundly unhinged the Victorian solution to the interrelation of religion and media in public discourse. The new ethos questions a worldview **[p. 39 ↓]** based exclusively on instrumental rationality and claims that each subculture based on ethnicity, race, language, gender, personal interests, region, or cult has its own epistemology and its own logic. Every subculture should be provided with the means to project its identity into the public forum. The new definition of *democratization* as privatization has suddenly seemed plausible; and this has led to policies of deregulation of the public sphere and a kind of consensus formation founded on single-issue, polling-based politics. The ensuing "culture wars" are raising fears, but there seems be theory of the new public sphere to explain what to do (Hunter, 1991; Wuthnow, 1989).

Religious studies are increasingly aware of the breakdown of 19th century conceptions of religion and society and are attempting to create a new theoretical formulation that is broad enough to explain not just the new religious movements, but religious phenomena across time and space. Religion is not just a factor of social integration, but points beyond the present organization of society and is just as likely to be socially disruptive, culturally ecstatic, and politically revolutionary (Beckford, 1989, pp. 170–171). Sociologies of religion are moving beyond a simple, linear model of religion and society that presumes a steady march of secularization (Warner, 1993, p. 1048). There is a theoretical and methodological capacity to see the manifestation of religious phenomena in myriad sociopolitical contexts and in all social formations. Religious aspirations and motivations are no longer seen as located largely within specific institutions and ecclesial organizations. The sense of the sacred and religious sentiments may be part of the revitalization of churches, cults, and movements; but even here, they are seen more as general, autonomous symbols of "ultimate meaning, infinite power, supreme indignation and sublime passion" (Beckford, 1989, p. 171).

Media studies are likewise moving away from a paradigm that reduced media to the function of transporting and circulating the information needed for rapid industrial progress (Rowland, 1983). The focus is shifting to the many actors who are creating cultural meaning in the forum of the media and in the struggle of audiences to define their identities in interaction with the media (Morley, 1992).

The present chapter examines the emerging trends of religious studies and media studies to construct a theory of religion and media in the public sphere in a postmodernist context of radical cultural pluralism. On the one hand, there is an affirmation of the need and the right to project **[p. 40 ↓]** diverse value identities in the public sphere, continually contesting the validity of a single hegemonic national culture, language, and religion. On the other hand, the new context demands a process of global peace and negotiated cultural consensus in which all persons and subcultures can immediately recognize something of their identities.

A central question of this chapter is how to allow discursive autonomy to the sacred, with its implications of unity, ultimateness, and transcendence, in a public sphere that is increasingly pluralist, secular, hegemonic, and pragmatic.

A central argument of this chapter is that the modernist oppositions of sacred versus secular, poetic imagination versus instrumental rationality, subjective versus objective, person versus society, and pluralism versus personal conviction are better expressed in terms of what Giddens (1984) has characterized as *dualities* that are enabling conditions for each other. The sacred and the secular are two autonomous but interdependent discourses within a multiplicity of categories of meaning that interpret different modes of existence (Jensen, 1995, p. 31). The autonomous "symbolic realism" of the sacred, to use Bellah's term (1970, pp. 3–19; Wuthnow, 1992, p. 53), affirms an equal autonomy of the secular. The imaginative, exploratory, prefiguring discourses of what Klaus Bruhn Jensen (1995) has referred to as "time-out culture" are not simply subordinate to and measured by the "time-in culture" of pragmatic agency (pp. 56–58). Rather, these two cultures are mutually interpellating and complementing each other. Instead of the modernist solution of making the secular and instrumental efficiency the norm of public discourse, this theory sees these as a continual mutual affirmation in which the sacred evokes the secular and the secular evokes the sacred.

The Religious and Mass Media as Discourses of Reflexive Prefiguring of Culture

Religious studies and media studies have freed themselves from the reductionist functions of social integration and modernization largely by aligning themselves with the cultural sciences; and they have found common ground as discourses that monitor, evaluate, and orient the integrated development of cultures (Geertz, 1973; Wuthnow, 1992, pp. 37–58). Both religious studies and studies of public communicative discourse **[p. 41 ↓]** start with the awareness that humans *create* the conceptions of their past and future history. Both religion and media stand at the edges of the construction of the islands of commonsense meaning. On the one hand, both religion and media explore possible alternative meanings of history outside of these islands; and on the other hand, they continually validate and maintain the internal coherence of the world of constructed meanings. Both theologians and rhetoricians are constantly monitoring public discourse

to ensure that the rules of sense and nonsense, the rational and the irrational, are working—or if not, finding ways of adapting these rules to new situations.

Religious and media studies are an instance of what Giddens (1984) refers to as “reflexivity” in social theory. Just as it was not possible to explain and predict religious or media behavior as deterministically related to the functional prerequisites of social systems, so also Giddens seeks to avoid both the imperialism of subjectivity and the imperialism of social structure by defining social practices as a process of reflexive “positioning” and “negotiating” between one's personal existence and social rules as one goes about the practical affairs of life. Giddens describes *reflexivity* as the conscious, monitored dimension of social life that is constantly assigning meaning to the transactions of everyday life (pp. 2–5). Giddens proposes three levels of consciousness: the *repressed consciousness; the discursive consciousness*, in which consciousness becomes verbalized in systems of meaning and engages in justification and explanation; and the *practical consciousness*, in which awareness is focused on outcomes (pp. 6–8).

Klaus Bruhn Jensen (1995) uses Giddens' structuration logic as the framework for his theory of mass communication, but suggests that Giddens does not develop sufficiently the practices of signification in the concept of discursive consciousness (pp. 39–40). Jensen argues that social action is not simply a direct duality of human agency and social structures, but has a triadic structure in which “social structures are enacted through human agency with continuous reference to a *medium*, resulting in the ‘social construction of reality’ (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Through signs, reality becomes social and subject to reflexivity” (p. 39).

This echoes Wuthnow's (1992) insistence that the primary focus of religious studies is not simply individual internal beliefs reacting directly to social structures such as class systems or social institutions. The individual-society dichotomy needs to be amended with more attention to **[p. 42 ↓]** the role of religious discourse that “lies at the intersection of the individual and the community. [This discourse]… individuates convictions… but it also reinforces a sense of collectivity at the same time” (p. 48). Wuthnow proposes that the analysis of the organization of meaning in texts, in discourse, and in the media moves the study of religious culture from a “study of the meaning of religious symbolism to the study of the symbolism of meaning” and begins

to take seriously Bellah's argument in favor of an approach in the sociology of religion stressing “symbolic realism” (1966; 1970, p. 53).

Many disciplines within the cultural sciences have documented the fact that reflexivity becomes a specialized cultural practice; namely, that certain areas of cultural discourse, practice, and institutional organization are more concerned with exploring the possible developments of culture beyond the existing confines of the social construction of reality, whereas other areas are more concerned with sustaining the already established set of institutions, pragmatic goals, and safe patterns of meaning. Klaus Bruhn Jensen (1995) has formalized this duality of cultural practice as part of his theory of mass communication in terms of what he calls “time-in culture” and “time-out culture,” a metaphor taken from the world of sport (pp. 55–58). Time-out culture “places reality on an explicit agenda as an object of reflexivity and provides an occasion for contemplating oneself in a social, existential or religious perspective” (p. 57). Time-in and time-out are not two cultures, but two mutually challenging and supporting dimensions of culture, one *prefiguring* the shape of social action and the other *configuring* social action.

The conception of culture as distinct but mutually interacting and mutually supporting areas of prefiguring and configuring enables us to see the sacred and the secular, imaginative representation and pragmatic action, aesthetic practice and social practice, not as oppositions, but as dimensions that presuppose and address each other. This also highlights the fact that moving back and forth across the “edge” of the social construction of reality and finding an equilibrium between these two dimensions of culture is a central problem of cultures that religious and media studies are attempting to address.

Although the debate between substantive and functionalist conceptions of religion continues (O'Toole, 1984, pp. 10–42), the most common tendency in religious studies is to define the religious as a process of **[p. 43 ↓]** seeking a response to the ultimate, “limit” questions of meaning in life (Bellah, 1970, p. 253; Turner, 1991). This does not assume, as Bryan Turner (1991) notes, that the “‘problem of meaning’ strikes all members of a society in the same way and with equal force” (p. 246), but it does assume that religious discourse plays a central role in the way societies represent a synthesis of the core symbols. These symbols both integrate the culture around

what Victor Turner (1974) has called “root paradigms” and establish the separating boundaries between cultures.

Peter Berger (1967) left a lasting influence on religious studies when he defined the religious as a cultural activity that deals with sustaining the boundaries between the islands of meaning socially established as real, commonsense, and rational, and the areas beyond the boundary that are considered dream, fantasy, aberrant, and insane. The religious endows socially constructed reality “with a stability deriving from more powerful sources than the historical efforts of human beings” (p. 25). Religious discourse deals with the manifestations of an autonomous, fully meaningful, “sacred” order, not constructed by human endeavor, that both guarantees the continued meaningfulness of the humanly constructed reality and wards off the invasions of chaotic meaningless. More important, religious institutions monitor the exploratory forays out of the imperfect and impure world of the secular into the mysterious realm of the sacred sources of meaning, truth, being, and happiness. But the religious also forces the sacred to address and return to the secular.

Likewise, media studies have moved away from a preoccupation with social control through prosocial or antisocial effects, to a focus on the processes of exploring new paradigms of meaning at the boundaries between accepted common sense and the unexplainable. Silverstone (1981) has used Lévi-Strauss's conception of resolution of conflicting cultural meaning through mythic narrative to explain how television news and drama take seemingly irrational, strange, and highly specialized esoteric information and weave the new information into existing, understandable discourses of common sense. Hoover (1988, pp. 101–103), Jensen (1995, pp. 56–58), Newcomb and Alley (1983, pp. 18–45), and many other communication theorists have applied Victor Turner's conception of ritual process to explain the media as a liminal space of cultural freedom that audiences move into to be reinvigorated by a quasi-religious experience of perfect community and then move back to the pragmatic world. **[p. 44 ↓]** Carey (1977) has been inspired by Geertz's conception of culture to describe media studies as a ritual communion in which all major actors involved in the media reflect on the significance of the meanings that are brought before us in the media's interpretation of social reality (1973, pp. 409–425). Stuart Hall (1977, 1982) and many others in the critical studies tradition argue that the media discourses represent an autonomous arena of social

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struggle, in addition to the struggle over the political-economic bases of cultural power, in the attempt to resist, subvert, and resignify hegemonic ideological discourse.

Thus, religious studies and media studies share the analysis of different aspects of social reflexivity: (a) the cultural practices sustaining and repairing the integrated pattern of meanings in cultures; (b) the processes of defining the boundaries between the socially acceptable constructions of meaning and translating what is beyond the boundaries of the "rational" into commonsense terms; (c) the practices of constituting the core values as a "test" that can be put on hold as "sacred" and untouchable while the society can explore new cultural formulations and carry out intense debate among many different subcultural contenders (Gonzalez, 1994, pp. 54–182); (d) the constitution of time-in and time-out cultures that can challenge and evaluate each other; and (e) the continual contestation of ideological discourses.

The Differences and Complementarity of Religious Studies and Media Studies in the Reflexive Reproduction of Cultures

If religious studies and media studies share a common ground, quite obviously the two disciplines have very different intellectual histories and bring quite different capacities for analyzing the reflexive prefiguring of cultures. Religious studies have sharpened the concepts of sacred and secular and have developed a phenomenological discourse for detecting continually new and diverse symbolic expressions of the sacred in an immense variety of cultural and social formations. Religious studies have also come to see the sacred and secular not simply as opposites, but as interdependent aspects of the continuing dialogue between the ideal that is "always beyond" and the imperfect that is "always becoming." Where religious studies are weakest, I would argue, is in their lack of a sense of **[p. 45 ↓]** the communicative process through which sacred and secular symbols are created and recreated. There is a tendency to get stuck on the dichotomy of either attributing to religious symbolism a kind of autonomous, substantive existence or reducing religious symbolism to the ephemeral functionalist reflection of sociopolitical processes (Beckford, 1989, pp. xi-8; O'Toole, 1984, pp. 10–42).

Media studies, on the other hand, bring an increasing ability to detect the social processes of creating discourses and texts that articulate a moment of meaning and then continually to challenge and reformulate that definition of meaning. What media studies lack is the ability to distinguish between moments in which the media are “configuring” relations of social power and moments in which commitment to that structure is suspended to “prefigure” a different possible world. Media studies are still stuck on the debate between advocates of the power of the media and defenders of independent interpretation by audiences. Nowhere has this weakness been more evident than in the debates about just how powerful the televangelists are. Their phenomenological analysis of sacred and secular, on the other hand, greatly enriches our understanding of the media in social agency and imaginative representation practices.

Religious studies bring a phenomenological methodology (Wuthnow et al., 1984), exemplified in Peter Berger (1967), Mary Douglas (1966, 1970) and David Martin (1980), for entering into the prefiguring logic of symbolic metaphors experienced in ecstasy, prophecy, dream, rituals, and rallies and for detecting the processes of assigning sacred meaning to objects, spaces, times, and experiences. Once the codes for the sacred world are identified, this phenomenology follows the code through its pathways of transmutation and classification. Most important is the methodology for revealing the many logics through which the sacred and the secular are mutually addressing and challenging each other. The ideal city becomes the symbol of perfection, absolute goodness, the pure, the truly coherent integration of meaning, the all powerful, and the infinite. In contrast, the secular is codified as the realm of the imperfect, the limited, and the disintegrated, the sinful and impure, the mixture of good and evil, the weak and the inconsistent, and the ephemeral, short-term interests in life. Yet the seeds of the sacred, the perfect, and the whole are there in the analogical logic of the *via negative* and in the symbols of the “already but not yet” (Tracy, 1981).

[p. 46 ↓] As the sacred code extends into the area of “governance,” there is first a demand of strict justice and order, but immediately the dialectics of mercy, redemption, and restoration enter. The sacred affirms a realm of intolerance and punishment of evil impurity; but as the sacred addresses the secular realm of common sense, pragmatism, predictable explanation, the controllable, a place where one must make compromises

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with ideals in order to get on with the job of society, the sacred begins to double around, relent, and become loving and compassionate (Martin, 1980, pp. 69–70).

The dialectic of love and redemption transmutes into the dialectic of restoration. In religious experience, the holy is associated with the foundations of reality, the deep-down, unshakable structure of existence, the unchangeable givens of existence, the beginnings, the natural, and the “really real.” By contrast, the secular is associated with human construction, the artificial, being severed from the deeper roots, straying away from the inherent order of existence, and destroying the natural sacred destiny of all existence. The secular represents the breakdown of community through structures of social differentiation and power, war, disease, and exploitation. In response to this, the sacred is the restoration of harmony and justice, the rediscovery of the roots of human existence, healing, and ordering one's life in line with the absolute justice of existence.

And here enters the most central logic of religious symbolism: the dialectic of paradox. The image of the sacred began as power, perfection, transcendence, unpredictability, and dangerous mystery; but as it moves into dialogue with the power and artificiality of the human city, the logic of the sacred calls for a return to original community and to humble willingness to serve others. The symbols of the sacred become simplicity, poverty, a childlike existence, the imperfect, the broken, and nothingness. The language of the sacred is rooted in a paradoxical logic—the juxtaposition of opposites (Crossan, 1988; Martin, 1980, pp. 58–70).

The discourse of paradox leads, finally, to the symbolism of religious revitalization (McLoughlin, 1978; Wallace, 1956), personal conversion (Rambo, 1993) and the ritual process of cultural renewal (Turner, 1969). The sacred creates the images of perfection, but then the image becomes an idol; and it is the secular that must enter to smash the sacred image so that it can be reborn and called back to its original holiness.

[p. 47 ↓] Thus, the phenomenology of religious studies rescues us from a reduction of all reality to linear, unidimensional, instrumental rationality and reminds us that the construction of culture is not a linear progression toward utopian community, but a paradoxical, continually reversing process of “making and breaking of the image” (Martin, 1980).

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Creating a Public Cultural Text—with the Public

Media studies, freed from a narrow administrative preoccupation with effects, are increasingly concerned with the relation of media to the social construction of cultures. As Klaus Bruhn Jensen (1995) argues,

> I take as an initial premise, at the *theoretical* level of analysis, that societies come before media as generators of meaning. Meaning flows from existing social institutions and everyday contexts, via media professionals and audiences, to the mass media, not vice versa. (p. 61)

The media are working in “sacred space” and are a site for the dialogue of the sacred and the secular in three areas: (a) the search for ultimate, consistent patterns of mythic meaning and the integration of the “unexplainable” into the commonsense cultural consensus; (b) the search for perfect community and the confrontation of community with the power structure of social practice; and (c) the search for authentic personal identity and the resolution of the conflicts between personal and social identities. Media studies have come to realize that there is communication only if all the major actors in the signification process see the public cultural text as somehow a reflection of their own identities (Martin-Barbero, 1993, p. 223–228; Wilson, 1993, pp. 126–152). Media studies, perhaps more explicitly than religious studies, are concerned with the different phases or moments of the involvement of the public in the signification of the sacred and in the dialogue of sacred and secular meaning.

The first moment of sacred-secular signification highlights the context: the nature of media as a leisure-time activity in which, freed from the constraints of a formal workplace, audiences may let their imaginations and feelings roam free. As Newcomb and Alley (1983) suggest, the media invite us to enter into a time and space apart from the ordinary world, **[p. 48 ↓]** where we can consciously entertain another possible world that we could create (pp. 18–45). Leisure is the time when individuals and communities are free to define their personal and cultural identities (Kelly, 1983), and the media consciously create an ambience of exploration. The media use narrative, symbolic

languages, which are cast in archetypal modes connotative of the mythic tradition of the culture, and which project the meaning beyond the everyday routines of life (Silverstone, 1981). Most important, the media are associated with festive times, which are redolent of the calendars of theological and civil religions. The time-out dimension stresses the ritual nature of theater, film, and television in which the person is invited to leave the context of short-term work goals and struggle for hierarchical power in society to contemplate the timeless values and sense of communal origins. The public then returns to everyday life with a kind of mandate to transform the everyday (Turner, 1982).

The second moment in the mediation process focuses on *the capacity of media artists, professionals, and “stars” to articulate the sense of the sacred and formulate this into dramatic symbols*. Newcomb (1978, p. 279) borrows Marshall Sahlins' reference to creators of advertising as “cultural synapses” who have their antennas out to discover the objects and activities in the public imagination particularly charged with emotion in order to transform these objects and activities into symbols of deep streams of value that people can identify with. Media artists do, in fact, live ecstatically in a world beyond common sense, possessing a “gift of the muse” that makes them, relative to the established social construction of reality, somewhat insane. Media professionals are not only dedicated to prefiguring and articulating, but are driven to seek out the audience in order to celebrate the moment of applause when the artist has managed to bring the audience to share deeply her or his own intuitive experience (Newcomb & Alley, 1983, pp. 31–45).

The third moment is *the creation of a text* that makes it possible to “hold” the communicative moment in a form that we can return to repeatedly. This enables us to contemplate the text more deeply to draw out the full meaning in a type of *lectio divina* and preserve this meaning for future generations. The celebratory act becomes a formulaic genre with a format, standardized language, and traditional metaphors that assures publics of a given age, sex, occupation, and educational background that this media will, indeed, be an “entertaining” moment for them (Feuer, 1987). The textual genre also assures the media artists that **[p. 49 ↓]** their gift and their desire will find a community of interpretation. Part of the formula of these genres is the continual recasting in new cultural languages of the archetypal symbols embedded in the foundational religious texts of a religious tradition so that the audience can place

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in dialogue these references to the primeval sacred with the present secularity of the culture.

Recent audience research has shown that although media producers may tend to use well-known formulas and symbols so that the text will be intelligible to a mass audience without great difficulty, interpretations vary a great deal because each member of the audience is a complex composite of cultural identities and can call on very diverse repertoires of interpretative codes. Media producers know that part of the pleasure of the audience emerges from the sense of independence and power of negotiating the meaning placed upon the text (Fiske, 1987, pp. 95–99). Indeed, the affirmation of personal identity is arguably one of the sites of the sacred in contemporary society (Luckmann, 1967). Thus, the fourth moment of signification is *the implicit invitation to negotiate and recreate the text* from the perspective of personal and cultural identities.

The construction of cultures, especially the signification of the sacred, is always a contested process in which some groups attempt to affirm that their cultural capital is sacred, natural, and beyond question, and other groups attempt to delegitimize and desacralize these symbols of identity. Recent developments in media theory have identified a fifth moment, *the struggle over the symbolism of media texts* (Jenkins, 1992, pp. 24–49). One of the most typical evidences of this struggle is when a particular devoted public (the fans) takes a genre considered “trash” by establishment groups—new popular musics, soap opera (Brown, 1994), sports—and makes the “trash” the symbol of the subcultural identity in much the same way that the primitive Christian community took the cross and inverted its meaning from humiliation to glory.

From contemporary media studies, it becomes apparent that although there is a continual negotiated incorporation of symbols of the sacred into hegemonic cultural formations, the new symbols of the sacred are continually “escaping” from hegemony within new cultural movements to signify countercultural identities. And just as soon as new symbols of the sacred are formed in alternative movements, the media are there articulating these into a media text, and the cycle begins over again.

[p. 50 ↓]

The Analysis of the Religious in Texts of the Public Media

Having developed some basic conceptions of the dialogue of sacred and secular and how religious studies and media studies enter into this dialogue, we turn now to a central question: the emerging discourses of sacred and secular in the moments of intensive reflexivity.

A first premise is that social systems do, in fact, enter into episodes of more intensive reflexivity. If the Enlightenment project located religious and media studies within an analytic framework and a worldview of unilinear progress of instrumental, efficient rationality, the cultural sciences have helped us to see that there is another, deeper historical current continually reasserting what Geertz (1973) has termed “primordial sentiments of community.” If cultures do tend toward innovation, it is also necessary for cultures to continually rediscover the core symbols so that society and culture can return to these constitutive and formative symbols (Geertz, 1973, pp. 255–320; Rambo, 1993, p. 26). Religious studies and media studies in combination not only identify the continual renewal of cultural identities and the resacralization of the cultural environment, but enable us, in a second hermeneutic, to become aware that our social analysis is part of these revolutions of primordial sentiments (Wallace, 1956; Wuthnow, 1992, pp. 1–8).

A second premise is that these intense moments of cultural revitalization and confrontation between sacred and secular may be operative at one level—for example, within a particular denomination—while at a more general national or cultural level there is little sacred-secular dialogue or it is carried on with a completely different set of discursive symbols. One example of this is the apparent anomaly of secularization at the societal level and, at the same time, intense religious revitalization activity in certain movements. Four levels are proposed here, each with quite different discursive strategies of sacred-secular symbolism: (a) sacred-secular dialogue at the level of existential human concerns above any one national/regional cultural tradition; (b) the level of particular cultures, usually a nation or region with a common “civil religion”; (c) sacred or secular revitalization within a particular denominational organization;

and (d) the expression of the sacred at the level of individuals in relatively small but intense movements, sects, and cults. Obviously, the wider and **[p. 51 ↓]** more diverse the public addressed, the more abstract and inclusive must be the symbolism and discursive strategies.

A third premise is that different levels can be at quite different moments of quiescence or revitalization, but if there is an intense sacredsecular dialogue at all levels at the same time, this could imply profound changes not only in global religious paradigms but also in cultural paradigms.

A fourth premise is that the sacred is not identified with explicitly religious organizations or institutions and the secular with other types of organizations, but rather that the sacred and secular are interrelated aspects of all institutions (Beckford, 1989, pp. 171–172). For example, the revitalization within a church or denomination might be a move toward a more open, secularized definition (as happened, for example, in the Catholic Church in the movement articulated in the Second Vatican Council). The central question is not whether our societies are becoming more or less sacred or secular, much less whether church activity is growing or diminishing, but rather how the discourses of sacred and secular are addressing each other at this moment.

Finally, a fifth premise is that the meaning of the sacred is not the annihilation of the secular or vice versa, but rather to call each other into dialogue and reform. The analysis focuses on the ways revitalization is generating new symbols of the sacred and the secular and creating new discourses that are putting the sacred and secular into dialogue. We want to identify the sites of struggle over sacred and secular meaning in cultural practice, especially in the genres of mass popular communication. This enables us to see our own personal and collective roles in the construction of social reality without lapsing into hopeless cynicism, replacing one utopian ideology with another, or retreating into a shell of cultural fundamentalism.

Theory in the cultural sciences is most useful for understanding what kinds of cultures we are creating and for discerning whether these are the kinds of culture we want. Theory is also important for explaining the historical process we are living in and for critically examining our reflexive response to this history. The following analysis of the creation of new symbols of sacred-secular interaction at four different levels of

revitalization movements illustrates how this methodology might be applied at the empirical level.

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Revitalization Movements at the Level of Transcultural, Existential Human Concerns

There is broad consensus in religious studies that the worldwide countercultural movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s marked a “new religious consciousness” (Glock & Bellah, 1976), the formulation of new symbols of the sacred (Martin, 1981), a new phase in religious revitalization (McLoughlin, 1978, pp. 193–216), and new forms of ritual liminality (Turner, 1969, pp. 112–113). This revitalization movement transcends civic religious symbols, symbols within specific religious traditions, and cult symbols because it has been global and because it addresses basic human problems of alienation. Indeed, it has sparked the formulation of theories of religion and globalization of cultures (Beyer, 1994, pp. 97–98; Robertson, 1992, p. 81).

The starting point for analyzing the interaction of the sacred and the secular in a revitalization movement is in the symbols of utopian, transcendent community and the closely associated countersymbols that attempt to delegitimize what are considered to be the sites of alienation from community. The counterculture called to reform the central symbols of the “secular” that modernity held sacred: nationalism, the rationalistic bureaucratic organization of industrial modernization, the mobilization of industrial capitalism, the myth of unilinear evolution, the epistemology of instrumental rationality (Ellul, 1967), socialization structured around graded educational systems, and the print media. The new symbols of the sacred in this movement are well known: the small, interacting, participatory, and expressive community; the return to nature; the symbol of all humankind forming a multicultural family (dropping surnames that may indicate nationality, denomination, race, language, or sex); and the use of symbols of global popular culture to level and unite all humankind. This juxtaposition of contrasting symbols and discourses sets up an atmosphere of reflexivity, freedom to rethink mythic frameworks, and distance from everyday life.

A second site for the creation of new symbols of the sacred is the ritual occasions for ecstatic experience of the transcendent, the creation of a liminal space apart from everyday life, and a space for allowing the "real self" to come forth. As Victor Turner (1982) indicates, liminal space is established largely by creating a symbolic atmosphere. Ritual almost **[p. 53 ↓]** always creates a separate ambiance through music, dance, incense, special clothing and food, and the sacred symbolism of ritual space. Bernice Martin (1981) and others argue that in the countercultural movements, rock music (sometimes combined with trance-inducing drugs), with its ritualized concerts, discotheques, and meetings of small groups of friends in homes, was and continues to be a major ritual site for the new expressive movements (pp. 153–184). Rock music has many symbolisms, but its origins in a combination of Afro-American and occidental country-western music has been a sacred symbol of rejection of modern progress and a return to a primeval existence. An alternative site of ritual symbols was created by the adaptation of Eastern religious traditions to the needs of middle-class Western youth. This borrowing enabled young people to reach out of the decadent mythic tradition of nationalism to something untainted, closer to nature, mystical, communitarian, and nonformal.

A third site for the creation of sacred symbols is the definition of a new mythic conception of history. Some of the central symbols in the counterculture movement have been concerned with a future of restoration of the harmony of nature, the harmony of the person with nature, and the internal harmony of the person—all in direct contrast with the antisymbols of modernizing development.

The reassertion of the sacred eventually must address the secular more directly. A first moment of confrontation with the secular is in the form of paradoxical symbols in which the desire of the realizations of the secular are appealed to, but it is affirmed that the true realizations are in forms quite the opposite of the societal myth. For example, the counterculture recognized that growth and development are good things, but affirmed that "small is beautiful" Symbols such as "flower power" recognize the desire of power in modernization, but assert that power is found in its opposite.

In a second moment of addressing the secular, the prophets of the movement realize that it is not possible to ignore or reject the secular project, but that the sacred must contribute to the secular project. Many of the alternative religious movements, such as

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the Human Potential groups and the Nichiren Shoshu, attracted more stable adherents with symbols of self-realization, self-fulfillment, and self-improvement or, more directly, by suggesting that one has to have a level of personal attractiveness and interpersonal competence to bring about community and a more personalized society (Hamilton, 1995, pp. 211–213).

[p. 54 ↓] In all of the symbol formation, there is a process of interaction with the public cultural expression, that is, in the mass media. One of the first public manifestations of the counterculture was the Berkeley Free Speech movement, which was concerned, typically, with the right to dramatize and project the new sacred symbols into public space and in so doing to catch the attention of the mass media. These symbols were designed with an eye to their ability to catch the eye of the mass media and become *symbols of identification* for millions of other young people on university campuses. Once the media discovered the potential of the counterculture for good mass media, various genres of media began to articulate this and to create a text: the news in terms of the political dramatism (especially to exploit the debate about the Vietnam War), the innovative appearance of the Beatles on the *Ed Sullivan Show*, but especially the development of the rock music genre as a text expressing the countercultural symbols (Martin, 1981, pp. 180–183).

In turn, the youth wing of the movement transformed the varieties of rock music into the symbol of their subcultures to create a series of new texts, a process of interaction of youth identity formation and the mass media that continues today.

From the perspective of the religious institutions identified with modernization, the countercultural movement was antireligious and secularizing. Indeed, from the perspective of many definitions of secularization, this movement did tend to delegitimate the presence of the sacred symbols of "civic religion" in many parts of the culture. On the other hand, one could argue that at the broader existential level, there has been a massive sacralization of cultures evident, for example, in the peace movements, in the collapse of many totalitarian regimes, in the emphasis on decentralization and communitarianism in development, in education and especially in the priority of leisure lifestyles of today.

As we have noted above, this has encouraged the search for new paradigms of interpretation in both religious studies and media studies.

The Civil Religion of the Populist Nation-State

An earlier great religious revitalization movement, which created a highly developed system of religious symbols and involved both religious **[p. 55 ↓]** studies and media studies, was the sacralization of the way of life built around the democratic welfare state from about 1830 to 1970. Although industrialization was identified with the secular by the artistic Romantic movement, the revitalization attempted to discover and rescue the sacred in this new age. Although the symbol system owed much to the French Revolution and the Enlightenment, these symbols needed to be fused with a popular religiosity of the “common man,” the origin myths of the folk, and the democratic ideal of the community—local, regional, and national—to take on sacred, transcendent dimensions. This sacralization of the new populist civil community and democratic solidarity provided a strong basis for the Durkheimian tradition of a “sociology” of religion that found its best expression in Bellah's “civil religion” (1967; 1970).

The core of the new system of sacred symbols was centered around the populist movements that exalted the working class man—a notoriously patriarchal set of sacred symbols—and his honest work that made the nation possible. The wisdom, virtue, common sense, and productivity of the laboring man forming a community was irreducible evidence of the presence of the sacred. These symbols quickly developed a set of antisymbols delegitimating aristocracy, which had been the patron of the sacred, the arts, and the order of society for more than a thousand years in Western Europe. The churches with a dissident, antifeudal tradition, or the wing of churches identified with popular movements, became an important force legitimizing the new sacred symbols of the common man and pointing out that the hereditary aristocracies had lost their anointing (Hofstadter, 1955, pp. 23–36). By contrast, the common citizen is pure, just, without guile, the solid foundation of the virtue of the nation, capable of being an instrument of the transcendent through the vote and through education. If once God's

wisdom was expressed in kingly anointing, now it was expressed in the voice of the majority.

These symbols were sacred precisely because they were built around paradox: the simple, working-class person was the foundation of education, science, wise government, and a just society. The school, centered around children and youth, became a sacred symbol (Dolan, 1984).

A second site of the formation of sacred symbols was in the formation of the sacred community by discovering the historical origins of the common man in the “folk” and “nation” and the mythic destiny of this folk to form an egalitarian community. The modern industrial nation **[p. 56 ↓]** could find its origins in the folk and the ordinary people. In the new immigrant nations, this far-distant tribal origin was replaced by the origins of the nation in the rural community. In the United States, for example, the symbol of the community of agriculturalists and artisans around the church, the town meetings, the school, the community boosterism, the respect for freedom of expression based on the inherent wisdom of the common man, and the acceptance of participatory decisions became unquestionable symbols of the sacred. As the rural community became more remote, this sense of commitment to community was transformed into universal professionalism based on the sacred oath of the professional to serve society and to serve individual clients regardless of their background. This was grounded in codes of ethics, the responsibility of the professional community, and the guarantees of the nation state (Bledstein, 1976). There was far more resistance to militant labor and farmer communitarianism, but this eventually found sacred legitimacy in the welfare state, largely through the development of the “social gospel” and the “social teaching” of the churches.

What was particularly important in the forming of this set of sacred symbols is that the major churches essentially joined in with the secular project of the nation-state to legitimize its democratic pluralism; and insofar as the churches separated themselves from the aristocracy, they were accorded a role in articulating the sacred symbols of the new order. Part of the price was that the churches had to become simply different “denominations,” playing down dogmatic differences and upholding the basic civic religion of progress, democracy, free speech, free association, and human rights (Herberg, 1955, pp. 85–112). Indeed, the religious traditions felt that they could recover

their sacredness only by leaving the confines of the churches and dogma and moving out into the secular world, becoming more secular in order to address the secular.

A third site for the elaboration of sacred symbols was the rituals of local and national community. Every public event, from sports contests to political elections, had its moment of sacred reflection symbolized by the national hymn, by the presence of the representatives of the major religious denominations, by taking sacred oaths to serve the nation, and by the ritual exaltation of the rights of the common man. The mobilization for nationalistic wars and for colonialistic expansion—whether overseas or across "frontiers" into "wilderness" territory—were sites of sacred symbols of sacrifice, martyrdom, and tests of faith.

[p. 57 ↓] The mass popular media, rooted in the doctrines of freedom of expression and the right to information and education, became another site for the creation of symbols of civic religion. The "mass media" had their origin in the populist movements (Schiller, 1981). The genres of the penny newspaper—editorial comment, comic strips, the popular serial novel, the short story—were formed around the articulation of the sacred symbols of these movements: popular protests, nationalistic wars, and so forth. Once the penny newspapers defined the text of the popular media, these were carried on by film, radio, and television (Tunstall, 1977). Indeed, it became difficult to distinguish theology, religious studies, social philosophy, and social teaching of the religious traditions, journalistic debate, and public philosophies of communication. The criteria for public truth was no longer metaphysics, but rather the objectivity guaranteed by the methodology of the social sciences. Again, the role of the mass media was sacralized by its code of public service and by bringing in the denominations willing to support the civic religion as part of the public service of media to the nation-state. The sects and movements unwilling to support the religion of the liberal democracies were excluded.

Today, the nation-state and the modernist organization of society make less sense to people as an agenda for the construction of cultures. Likewise, the symbols of the sacred associated with this agenda make less sense. But the disappearance of this form of dialogue between the sacred and the secular does not mean that the sacred is simply absent from our lives (Warner, 1993). There are simultaneously other processes of sacralization. The social alienation generated by the civil religion became the foundation for a third kind of contemporary religious revitalization.

The Sectarian Revitalization of Evangelical Fundamentalism

Since the 1950s, the evangelical tradition has been able to mobilize one of the most attractive sacred symbol systems in the world; and it is demonstrating striking growth not only where Protestantism has been traditionally strong, but also in Latin America and Africa. The force of evangelicalism, however, is largely that of a "choice" for revitalization within the Christian faith system.

[p. 58 ↓] Whatever may be the social origins of evangelicalism—we deliberately avoid a sociological reductionist explanation—it is a tradition that shares a common devotion to the sacred located in a revelation of the transcendent that is not affected by the passing changes of culture. The most typical symbols are the inerrancy of the revealed word of God preserved in an unchanging written form, a written statement of unchanging theological propositions, an unchanging moral code, a personal asceticism that avoids the vanities of passing fads of popular culture (Rosman, 1984), the unchanging oral wisdom of the elderly, classical conservative and conserving social institutions such as the patriarchal family, and a diffidence regarding modern science and technology (except where it can be considered a pure instrument not contaminating the unchanging word of God; Marsden, 1980, 1991). For the contemporary evangelical movement, the symbols of the secular are the power of late modernity (or postmodernity) to restructure nature itself: ending and shaping human life at will, restructuring sexuality (and socially related aspects of sexuality) at will, and denying in the public cultural forum that reality has any sacred ground whatsoever that is off-limits to human transformative efforts (Hunter, 1987). Thus, unborn life, family-centered heterosexuality, and public manifestations of religiosity have become symbols of the sacred.

The Protestant evangelical tradition has always distrusted any kind of cultural, socially mediated contact with the sacred and has tended to find "salvation" in the direct vertical descent of God's irrepressible miraculous power in their lives. Thus, an important symbolic indication of sacred presence is the prophetic preacher who has received a call directly from God (with little approbation by the institutional church) and who exudes

the power to radically convert, to heal, to hold the audience in a motivational trance, and to put together with enormous energy the religious event of the revival (Marsden, 1991, pp. 98–121; Schultze, 1991, pp. 69–96). A secondary sacred symbol is the organization that surrounds the charismatic preacher, helping him to make present the unchanging word of God. Coming in contact with the powerful word of God is enough to transform a person (Bruce, 1990).

Another set of sacred symbols grows up around the experience of the religious revival, where one is swept away by the power of God. Just to enter the revivalist tent or hall is to draw near to the sacred, and the atmosphere itself—the singing, the sonorous preaching, the conversions, **[p. 59 ↓]** and the healings—induces the sacred power of God to operate in quasisacramental fashion. The experience of spiritual rebirth, going back to one's childhood and mythic cultural origins, recalls an archetypal symbol of the sacred. Evangelicalism in the United States calls for a return to more primitive values, and Pentecostalism in Latin America also appeals to the desire to a return to pre-Columbian nativist syncretism in countries such as Guatemala (Concha, 1996).

Time and history also assume a sacredness in that the prophet feels an irresistible call to announce the irresistible coming of the kingdom of God at this particular time. There is an urgency to preach the transforming word to the whole world and to call all to respond to the word immediately.

The present evangelical revitalization movement began at the level of interpersonal communication in the new form of urban revival, but radio and television evangelists quickly picked up the new symbols of adaptation to urban society and created the genre of the televangelist (Hoover, 1988; Horsfield, 1984). Once again, the media became an important site for generating the new sacred symbols in the images of Billy Graham and Pat Robertson. Although technology, especially media technology, is part of the secular world, once it is used for announcing the gospel it becomes a site of the sacred. The media are sacred gifts of God given in these “last times,” and powerful persuasive rhetoric is just as much a symbol of the sacred. Asking the audience to gain power by touching the TV set in their homes is simply an extension of this symbolism.

Politics become a sacred symbolic action for evangelicals because this is the installation of God's kingdom, and all of the techniques of gaining political power are therefore sacralized.

Interestingly, in facing the dilemma of postmodernism, evangelicalism is tending to take the postmodern “secularity” seriously; and it is the postmodern “new religious consciousness” and radical communitarianism that is entering to smash the idol of evangelical identification with the modernist individualism (Hunter, 1991, pp. 157–186).

The Postmodern Cults of Symbolic Liminality

This analysis would not be complete without at least briefly indicating a fourth type of revitalization movement at the level of the person and **[p. 60 ↓]** small groups. This vague form of cultural and religious revitalization has been referred to as “the new movements” or “the postmodern.” A central characteristic is that the conscious creation of culture and symbols has become a site of the sacred. As Melucci (1989) notes in his study of the new movements, the young especially are aware that we have cut our moorings to “nature” and that we can make the world anything we want to. They have studied “communication” and know that symbols are inherently communicating meaning. Creating a symbolic liminal state and then consciously inhabiting that, knowing that it is totally artificial, is a celebration of the sacredness of our own human creativity. We can verify the sacredness of this by just as quickly destroying the edifice of symbols and moving on to create another one. The secular is all that is sane, ordinary, commonsense, permanent, and instrumentally rational. As soon as something begins to be considered rational, the “Nomads of the Present,” to use Melucci's (1989) term, quickly move to create a symbolic world that is quite bizarre, alternative, and —“creative”! The texts that articulate this are persons such as Michael Jackson, who resist all sexual or any other definition. Madonna quickly moves beyond any social construction of reality and tells us by the extremely conscious use of sacred symbols that the sacred is always beyond the edge of common sense.

An Agenda for Further Research

The present chapter has been more concerned with exploring a new set of questions for research in the area of religion and media than with more definitive conclusions. A summary of these issues for further discussion may be the best way to synthesize this chapter.

First, if the creation of sacred symbols and the “poetic” construction of meaning are too important in the construction of cultures to be excluded from the public sphere as autonomous discourses, then how do we think of their presence in the public sphere, especially at the level of a second hermeneutic? Do practitioners of religious studies and media studies necessarily have to be objective, areligious, and unpoetic people in the act of their study? The introduction of Giddens' concept of reflexivity and Jensen's discussion of time-in and time-out cultures may be starting points, but where do we take this?

[p. 61 ↓] Second, it is proposed that there is a considerable variety of modes of creating sacred symbols at sites of meaning and that the different modes of the sacred and the secular are in continual dialogue. To focus on one mode of sacralization to the exclusion of others may lead—mistakenly, I would argue—to affirmations of inevitable secularization or inevitable sacralization. Likewise, to make one mode of creating sacred symbols (e.g., the civic religion) the normative mode negates the variety and shifting importance of the sacred in the construction of cultures. But how do we think of a variety of modes of sacralization interacting with others with equal normative validity? I have suggested that the process in the public media of dialogue between media and audience, continually creating and recreating public texts, implies exchange and negotiation between modes of sacralization. But will a public sphere be sustained if there are, in fact, multiple criteria of “truth”?

Third, this chapter has suggested that the common focus of religion and media studies is the analysis of the emerging symbols of the sacred and how the symbols of the sacred and the secular are continually addressing and evoking each other. The analysis of this dialogue across the edges of our socially constructed realities is part of the reflexive process of understanding what kind of culture we are creating and whether

this is the kind of culture we want. This sort of analysis avoids the tendency to reduce the religious in media to issues of control and impact, a tendency that has dominated the study, for example, of the electronic church. The analysis of "impact" is from the "outside" and has generated very little solid theory of religion and media.

Does this approach respond to the issues of hegemony and ideological co-optation of the search for religious meaning? I would argue that research, conceived as a reflexive double hermeneutic, is also a process of continually feeding back to religious groups the symbols of the sacred they are creating in order to ask if this is the expression of the sacred that they sense in their own personal and cultural identities.

The central question posed at the outset of this chapter remains: How are we to conceive of the presentation of the religious and the sacred in the public sphere in an era of radical pluralism that is suspicious of civil religions and equally suspicious of denominational revivals and other cultural revitalization movements? Part of the answer lies, I think, in the new self-conception of the media as a ritual space in which various actors are dramatizing their sacred symbols. Elsewhere (White, 1990), I have **[p. 62 ↓]** described the key importance of the media as public cultural rituals and as a process of cultural negotiation (White, 1995). Increasingly, we are overcoming the high-culture/low-culture dichotomy and are willing to see the "popular" as the common language of all. The media invite all cultural fronts to be present in a time-out context when our dogmatic, purist identities are most permeable and we are in festive mood, ready to discover something of our common sacred archetypes in the sacred symbols of all. The media experience is a moment more open to the immense variety of sacred symbols being generated, and audiences are less ready to dichotomize the sacred and the secular. Thus, both media studies and religious studies are coming together to create a new understanding of the media as cultural negotiation.

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