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Media and Religion in (Post)Colonial Societies: Dynamics of Power and Resistance

Editorial

Media and religion, both broadly understood, often form the mise-en-scène for power struggles in competing narratives of conflict, protest, oppression, and resistance. Religious practices are visual and material practices that communicate meaning, and media thrive on harnessing the cognitive and affective power of religious symbols or narratives. Many media producers draw on the ability of religions, as communicative systems, to distill human experience and to create particularly powerful structures of affect. The intricate and dynamic relationships between media and religion are part of cultural efforts to inscribe and embody meaning on an individual and collective level, and thus to turn chaos into order, to establish and communicate categories and boundaries.

Yet up until quite recently, the study of these relationships has not always paid attention to the fact that meaning is not simply communicated in a neutral fashion, but that meaning-making happens in a context of asymmetric relationships of power. With their images, stories, and practices, media and religions shape a community's imaginary and knowledge about self and others, and they contribute to the very "imagining" of "homogenous" communities and nations[1] that has played a central part in colonial history. These imaginings have resonated throughout the postcolonial emergence of independent nation-states, and they continue to affect the attempts to label, organize, and frame postcolonial and neocolonial (power) relationships between communities and nations.

In this issue of JRFM, we focus on how religion and media participate in and complicate the power relationships between (western) colonizers and

1   Anderson 1991.

(non-western) colonized during the historical period of colonialism and in "coloniality", a term introduced by Aníbal Quijano to describe the ways in which colonial dynamics of othering and difference, as well as western epistemologies, continue to shape the cultural, economic, political, and religious forces within and between communities.[2] The studies published here focus on these very continuities and ruptures between historical colonialism, postcolonialism, internal colonialism within a society, and neocolonialism: Amruta Patil introduces us to her work with graphic novels as a space of subversion and critique; Genoveva Castro discusses cinematic reimaginings of Indian mythology; Philippe Bornet directs our attention to 19th-century visual representations of India; Héctor Varela Rios offers a decolonializing theological reading of an influential work of 19th-century Puerto Rican art; and Sakina Loukili analyzes the ways in which self-identified Muslim parties in the Netherlands use social media as "third spaces".

In media studies, postcolonial theory, on which the contributions in this issue draw substantially, has provided a helpful frame for the analysis of dynamics of power and resistance, in both the past and the present.[3] Yet this theoretical framework also has come under some critique since the turn of the century, partly because of its tendency to reduce the complexity of colonial encounters to simplistic binary patterns. As Wendy Willems argues, attempts to "de-westernize" academic media studies have often perpetuated rather than subverted dominant eurocentric structures and cultural assumptions.[4] Raka Shome also emphasizes that media, their uses and users, have played a major role in maintaining colonial power imbalances and imposing western structures of knowing,[5] and they largely continue to be dominated by the west in postcolonial times, both in popular culture and in the academic study of it. Instead, Shome argues, media studies need to find new and different ways of "engaging how very different geopolitical and colonial contexts in the South (and the non-West more generally) have produced media practices, cultures, and objects that may challenge what we understand by media, its history of development, its possible uses, effects, and so on".[6]

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2   Quijano/Ennis 2000.
3   Rajagopal 2011; Merten/Krämer 2016.
4   See Willems 2014.
5   See Shome 2019.
6   Shome 2019, 306.

This critique of postcolonial theory opens up a range of new questions and reconsiderations in media studies, not least the need for more sustained attention to the role of religion, which so far has been under-researched. We will use the remainder of this introduction to map out some of what we consider to be particularly pertinent questions for the field of media and religion in postcoloniality, gesturing towards initial considerations as well as avenues for further research. The contributions collected here touch on some of these questions and they will also, we hope, inspire further research.

One issue relates to the notion of "global" media itself, with its assumption that media produced in the west and globally distributed are perceived to be truly "global", i. e., received as formative meaning-making narratives everywhere. However, this notion perpetuates the binary of the (former) colonizer as the producer of cultural meaning and the colonized as its passive recipient. As Bornet in this issue shows, the stories of production and reception of media (in his case engravings and photographs) are much more complex and implicate multiple sites and subjects, with consequent shifts in representation and significance that are not always easily pinned down. In order to more accurately account for these movements and re-significations, it might thus be helpful to speak of "transcultural", instead of "global", media and media studies, and to look at the contextual and local sites of media production and consumption.[7]

Other questions relate to the epistemological dimension of media and religion: How do their stories and images with their affective and cognitive power shape our understanding of the world and of others and – more fundamentally – our understanding of reality itself? How do they not just reflect but also create reality, a reality in the service of colonial powers, or one that resists them? Varela Rios's critical analysis of the painting *El Velorio* shows for example the crucial differences between a colonialized view of the represented material reality as "chaotic" and opposed to the immaterial sacred and a decolonialized understanding of it as complexity and dynamic movement, and as participating in the sacred.

Discussing media in a postcolonial context also raises the question of media ownership and requires a reconsideration of notions such as "property" or "individual ownership" when media images or religious traditions are exchanged and travel across contexts, often without stating the original

7   An example of an ethnography of "global media" in local contexts is Murphy/Kraidy 2003.

producer of an image or its "owner", as Bornet also notes. The blurring of the roles of media creators and consumers, expressed in the study of digital media in the term "prod-use/prod-user",[8] thus has, perhaps, a longer prehistory than imagined. In a more contemporary context, the productive ambiguity between media producer and consumer is apparent in Loukili's contribution, where the consumption of media (here, mainstream news) is directly related to, and even a part of, the production of media as a resistant discourse.

While digital media, the focus of Loukili's analysis, seem to open up new possibilities in terms of media production, accessibility, and consumption, they also raise further critical questions that need attention: Do they provide tools for more equitable access to distant or even global audiences and the production of local narratives and thus represent sites of postcolonial agency, or do they, on the contrary, reproduce old colonial asymmetries?[9] Are religious authorities contested through the broader participation in content production, or are they instead reinforced? Can digital media become, as Loukili argues, a means to "talk back" against mainstream media and religious or social institutions, and their images of the internal or external other, and a space for alternative socio-religious discourses and political agency to develop? Or do the logics of digital media, and perhaps in particular of social media, lend themselves to tendencies of polarization and populism, as we can also observe across the world?

The focus on the particular emphasized in methodologies inspired by postcolonial theory as a means to avoid the universalization of a single (western) perspective is also helpful in media studies. Attention to a specific medium can provide insight into the complexities of its production and reception contexts, and the way in which political and religious authority might have been associated with a medium and its use in the (post)colonial situation. For example, how did the predominantly written culture of post-Enlightenment Europe, with its particular forms of argumentation, rationality, knowledge production and conservation, and narrative memorialization favor the imperialistic ambitions of western powers?[10] The wide dissemination of textual material and the associated changes in media consumption (such

8   Bruns 2007.
9   See for example Sundaram 2009, about digital piracy as a way to overcome these asymmetries, which also challenges the above-mentioned notions of property and ownership.
10   See Goody 1986 for an anthropological analysis of the impact of writing on societies and religions.

as reading practices), as well as the emphasis on literacy (and with it literary practices and traditions) in western education in colonial contexts, arguably produced irreversible changes in social structures – including, of course, in religious communities and with the help of religious agents such as Christian missionaries. Yet at the same time, even if print was often imported by western agents, it was quickly used locally to promote local traditions and, over the long term, local independence movements and nationalisms.[11] Patil's creative mingling of text and images and her emphasis on the figure of the storyteller in her graphic novels might be seen as ways to play with these shifts between oral and literary traditions, visual and textual media, and to make her own contribution to the continued multimedia narrative of mythologies, both traditional and contemporary.

The media of photography and cinema also opened up particular new opportunities: while it has often been noted that films produced in the western cinematographic industry have tended to represent stereotyped images of non-western cultures, it must also be stressed that photography and cinema have been transnational (or global) enterprises from the very beginning.[12] As Bornet points out in his contribution in this issue, these technologies were quickly adopted in colonial contexts to serve their particular, and often anti-colonial, agendas. In many of these cases of local media production, religious themes have played an important role in the identity formation of groups. As popular and powerful stories, they are likely to bring together people from various horizons and have the ability to touch people on a deep emotional level, making them particularly persuasive – something Patil also draws on in her graphic novels. Religious themes can also be used to speak indirectly about political realities, especially in contexts in which the expression of political preferences is or was dangerous or censored.[13] Today, and with the assistance of cheaper and more accessible digital technologies, local production contexts continue to draw on religious stories and themes to make sense of the postcolonial and neocolonial situation of various communities in a global context.[14] These possibilities are apparent in

11 See Green 2014 for a study of how evangelical missionaries in South Asia brought new techniques and media that were appropriated in Muslim circles, and Mitter 1994 for an analysis of the relations between printed art and Indian nationalism.

12 For a critique of the complexity of the role of photography and other visual media in the colonial and postcolonial context and their histories, see Azoulay 2019.

13 See for example Pinney 2004; Dwyer 2006.

14 Meyer 2015.

Castro's analysis of the cinematic reimagining of Rāvaṇa as a positive figure of identification for the oppressed and social outcasts, which shows that traditional religious narratives can become a resource to articulate critique or resistance with regard to socio-cultural issues.

With this attention to diverse sites of media production and consumption, it is critical to account for changes in linguistic practices and values – albeit sometimes "transparent" and invisible. English has become the de facto *lingua franca*, the dominant language for communicating across borders and cultural contexts, both in media and in their academic study. This raises the question of how the dominance of one particular language shapes knowing the world through its specific concepts and structures, and the forms of (visual and textual) communication of this knowledge. As Patil shows, the question arises of what these linguistic developments imply for creators and recipients of media in non-English cultures in terms of production and distribution, as well as in terms of worldviews or expectations associated with a given language. Are digital media, which have primarily been created within a western English linguistic framework and its respective technologies, for example, able to account for the diversity of the world's languages, alphabets, and cultures? What kinds of linguistic "hybridizations" are at work, how are they influenced by social and religious values, and how do they affect social and religious communities? Are we witnesses to a worldwide cultural and linguistic uniformization, or are new media providing ways for minorities to express their own views in their own idiom?

These questions open up numerous avenues of research on the relationship between media and religion in the context of postcoloniality. The contributions gathered in this issue of JRFM address some of them without, of course, exhausting the subject. Attending to a wide range of temporal and cultural contexts, as well as media and religious traditions, the articles investigate the complex relationships between people, religion, and media – continuously reworked and renegotiated – under the conditions of postcoloniality.

In the exclusive interview, "Playing with Words, Worlds, and Images", Patil discusses her multifaceted work with the editors of this issue. Through the medium of the graphic novel, she creates powerful narratives that are also visually beautiful artworks. Attentive to aspects such as gender, social inequalities, and the environmental crisis, she turns old stories that had been "fossilized" in the past into living mythologies for contemporary times.

Focusing on Indian mythology in the contemporary context as well, Castro analyzes in her contribution, "Validating Demons: Recasting Rāvaṇa as a Leader of the Oppressed in Mani Ratnam's Film Version of the *Rāmāyaṇa*", how the figure of the villain, Rāvaṇa, has been reinterpreted over time in interaction with contemporary social and political issues, embedding the film in a long tradition, especially in South India, that has recast Rāvaṇa in a positive light.

Moving back in time while remaining in the same context, Bornet's contribution, "Unruly Images: Representing India in the Calwer *Bilder-Tafeln zur Länder- und Völker-Kunde* (1883)", analyzes a volume published with the ambition to show the whole world through images. While such images have often been interpreted as a case of "visual Orientalism", a closer look shows that the images circulated through a range of contexts (from typical missionary visual propaganda to traditional Indian iconography, drawings made by travelers, and photographs) in the process, resisting attempts at reducing them to one-dimensional objects.

Also drawing on a historical artefact, a well-known 19th-century Puerto Rican painting, Varela Rios's article, "Using Latinx Theology's *Lo Cotidiano* to Decolonialize Oller's *El Velorio*", offers a decolonial reading of the painting "against the grain" which, with its emphasis on the everyday and material culture, highlights alternative (theological) forms of engaging reality and the divine together with a critique of colonial hierarchies.

Loukili's contribution, "Making Space, Claiming Place: Social Media and the Emergence of the 'Muslim' Political Parties DENK and NIDA in the Netherlands", is an example of colonial dynamics of othering and disempowerment taking place not only in the (former) colonies but also within metropolitan societies. Focusing on the example of two self-identified Muslim parties in the Netherlands, Loukili analyzes the role of media in othering, and the use of social media by the two parties to "talk back" and claim a space in discourses of migration, Dutch identity, politics, and religion, showcasing thus the ambivalent role of media and religion in dynamics of power and resistance.

These studies highlight the multilayered, and often contradictory, processes of power and resistance in the interactions of media and religion, and they offer rich material beyond their particular case to reconsider theoretical and methodological questions in the study of media and religion in postcoloniality.

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