Religion and/as Media

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Politics after Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India
by Arvind Rajagopal
Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001, 392 pp.

Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion and the American Enlightenment
by Leigh Eric Schmidt
Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000, 318 pp.

Religion and Media
edited by Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber
Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001, 649 pp.[1]

IN THE current intellectual climate, it seems almost impossible to invoke the words 'religion' and 'media' without bringing to mind the events of 'holy terror' on 11 September 2001, and the spectacular image of the collapsed World Trade Center as a fallen idol of global capitalism. Since that fateful day, media channels have been flooded on an unprecedented scale with images and stories about the fervently held beliefs and implacable habits of 'religious folk' around the world: a digitally mediated – and, from the vantage point of many anxious pundits, a dangerously febrile – cloud of religious revival gathering over the horizon of secular modernity. But if an emerging consensus suggests that religion is everywhere now, thanks in no small measure to the media technologies that carry it into our homes and streets and places of power, it is hardly evident that there exists a readily available conceptual language for making this ubiquity intelligible. More precisely stated, a critical approach to the mediation of religion and the representation of religious media practices has been hindered by widely held – and quite specious – assumptions about the putatively distinct realms of religion and media, as well as the various technologies,

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techniques, embodied regimens, narrative structures and institutional conditions that are presumed to secure their conjunction. Let us consider two illustrations.

The first event occurred on 11 October 2001, exactly one month after the attack in New York, and four days after the release of Osama bin Laden's first video address, in the midst of a frenzy of speculation as to whether bin Laden was actually admitting responsibility for the attacks, or at least providing an explanation. On that date, US National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice issued a request to US broadcast networks not to air any more taped messages from members of al-Qaeda. White House spokesman Ari Fleischer explained in a press briefing later in the day that the American administration was concerned that bin Laden and his network might be using the international news media to convey coded messages. 'At best', Fleischer explained, 'Osama bin Laden's messages are propaganda, calling on people to kill Americans. At worst, he could be issuing direct orders to his followers to initiate such attacks'.[2] The major US networks – CNN, CBS, ABC, NBC and Fox – all quickly toed the administration's line, promising not to broadcast any more videos without first allowing American intelligence officials to review their content.

The second event is much less monumental in the course of recent world history, but no less revealing of our commonsense understanding of the relationship between modern media and religious sentiments and practices. On Christmas Eve of 2001, in the small town of Alamagordo, New Mexico, congregants from the Christ Community Church, a local evangelical community headed by Pastor Jack Brock, gathered to light a bonfire in which they ritually destroyed a collection of Harry Potter books, alongside other items they considered to be the work of the devil, including ouija boards and AC/DC records. Pastor Brock explained: 'Behind that innocent face is the power of satanic darkness. Harry Potter is the devil and he is destroying children.'[3] The New Mexico incident was in fact only the last of a series of Harry Potter book-burnings that took place during 2001. On 26 March, just outside Pittsburgh, the Church of the Harvest Assembly of God had also committed the boy wizard to flames, along with videotaped copies of Walt Disney's animated *Pinocchio*. On 15 November, in Lewiston, Maine, a group of Christians calling themselves the Jesus Party gathered in the town park for a 'book cutting' ceremony; apparently the local Fire Department had denied them a permit to build a bonfire, and so they set to work on a pile of Harry Potter books with their scissors. These rituals, one should add, were only the most dramatic enactments of a widespread mood of indignation that was reverberating among Bible-believing Christian communities in North America and elsewhere during the year 2001, as fundamentalists and evangelicals narrowed the focus of their moral outrage onto these fantasy tales celebrating witchcraft and adolescent mischief in the absence of parental authority.

It would be easy to assign both these incidents to their respective obscurity. But in their juxtaposition, they shed some interesting light on the

position of religion and media in the popular imagination, as well as the academic scene. In the first case, claims about secret messages only distract us from what were surely the most significant aspects of bin Laden's video: namely, the eloquent performance of a self-proclaimed 'holy warrior', well-steeped in traditions of Islamic rhetoric, who so deftly situated the shocking events of 11 September 2001 within the language of heresy, infidelity and 'just war'.[4] One could of course argue that the American administration was only seeking to regain some of the ground lost to bin Laden in the face of his stunningly humiliating video performance, as they attempted to distance audiences from the content of his message and re-focus its meaning through the lens of cryptography. In this regard, it is particularly interesting to note how the White House announcement quickly unleashed a flurry of speculative pronouncements centred on the possibility that the coded messages might be located, not in bin Laden's spoken text, but rather in his hand movements, and in the various combinations of fingers waving up and down before the camera. Parenthetically, one might point out that such allegations invoke a gestural semiotics which has a considerable provenance in the Western imaginary, allowing for a purposeful (if not an ignorant) misreading of Middle Eastern cultural traditions of gestural performance as a form cryptic communication, such as one is supposed to find in Masonic ritual. In any event, the desire to unmask bin Laden's secret intentions rests upon a familiar trope within social-scientific discourse, rooted in a long history of anticlerical political philosophy: the attempt to delegitimate religiously encoded practices by presenting them as tricks of mystification, as cynical deployments of technologies of imposture designed to generate secret profits, or to exploit the credulities of the innocent.

But if, as the pundits suggested, bin Laden was furthering his malevolent agenda by transmitting secret signals through the very channels of modern media that were meant to expose (and thereby discredit) him, Protestant evangelical communities appeared equally committed to *dispelling* such media power. In fact, the Harry Potter incidents stand on the shoulders of a long history of Christian critique of modern media, whether in the form of a Kierkegaardian lament over the 'cheapening' of an authentic message,[5] or more practical programmes to insulate social enclaves from the deleterious effects of naughty books, pop music, television or the Internet. In the Euro-American context, the archetype of this media strategy might be the Catholic Church in the 16th century, as it struggled to maintain its grip on the spread of ideas by controlling the circulation of printed material. The censorship efforts of the Church, embodied in the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, first promulgated in 1559, serve as a useful analogy for thinking about book-burnings by Protestant evangelists at the cusp of the 21st century; both practices can be clarified within a secularist discourse about modern media as social forces that work to dissolve religious identities and their sources of authority. This, after all, is what makes religious censorship appear to its detractors as futile, abhorrent and comical in equal measure.

But whatever our position with respect to bin Laden videos or the burning of Harry Potter books, we should be able to recognize how these stories are entwined with a powerful myth about social modernization. This is the myth which credits modern media – beginning with the printing press – with a key role in the world-historical disembedding of religion from public life, and its relocation within the private walls of bourgeois domesticity, or deeper still, the interior, silent universe of individual readers and their infinitely replicable activities of decoding texts. For some, this is a tale about loss of meaning and moral crisis that comes with the dematerialization of palpable structures of religious authority. For others, it is a heroic story about the empowerment of social groups to challenge the repressive apparatuses of Church and Court. Print culture in particular is said to have enabled this empowerment in so far as private acts of reading, scrutinizing and deliberating are aggregated into collective acts of opinion-making and debate: a process Jürgen Habermas (1989) famously describes in his account of the birth of 'the modern public sphere'.[6] Yet in both versions of the myth, one can discern a common metanarrative about the disembedding of religion, and its virtual replication outside the circuits of face-to-face exchange between religious professionals and laities. This metanarrative is structured around the assumption that the mere expansion of modern communication technologies is somehow commensurate with a dissolution of religious authority and a fragmentation of its markers of affiliation and identity. Despite the growing body of scholarship challenging both the evidence and conceptual viability of modernization as a process of 'secularization', assumptions about religious decline, displacement or crisis continue to dominate accounts of the institutional, discursive and performative conditions of mediated communication in the modern age. Indeed, wherever religious modes of discourse and practice are not treated as entirely unworthy of critical attention, it is still characteristic to integrate them into contemporary cultural studies as stubborn archaisms or as returns of the repressed – that is, as signs of subversion of modernity's undelivered promises of civic virtue and political order embodied in a sovereign, collective will.

An Emerging Field of Inquiry

Cultural studies may not have a particularly impressive record of critical engagement with religion (when compared to the quite remarkable body of scholarship on gender, sexuality, race and social class), but even the most pedestrian account of what is going on in the world today is likely to provoke some doubts about the myth of modern media as agents of secularization. Everywhere one looks, one cannot help but notice the deep entrenchment of religious communities, movements, institutions and cultural forms in the horizons of modern communication technologies and their attendant systems of signification and power. In the context of our contemporary geography of digital information flows, virtual telepresence, panoptical visualization, concentrated media ownership and fragmented audiences, it seems no longer possible to contain religion within the confines of 'traditional' social

logics of institutional loyalty, the performative demands of face-to-face interaction, the controlled circulation of sacred texts, or the localized boundaries of 'ritual time'. Instead, the field of religious symbols, practices, and modes of belonging has been radically extended through the colonization of a dizzying range of genres, technologies and forms: from popular history and pop-psychology books to websites, cartoons, trading cards, posters, rock music, bumper stickers, television dramas, scientific treatises, package tours and sundry forms of public spectacle. In increasingly intimate ways, this economy of mediatic performances and consumer products – for which many religious leaders have demonstrated considerable business acumen, and for which, by the same token, audiences have been whetting their appetites – precedes and organizes the very conditions of possibility for local, everyday, embodied forms of religious practice and affinity. This suggests that 'media', in all their economic, symbolic, performative and techno-prosthetic dimensions, have become central to the terms of interaction within and among the embodied regimens and imagined worlds that constitute the sacred in the global present.[7] Evidence of such a tight weave between religion and media can readily be found, not only at the level of practice among actually existing institutions and communities of faith (and, of course, their corresponding market segments), but also at the level of broader, cultural constructions haunted by 'religious' imagery and figures of discourse, including current notions of transnational belonging and multicultural citizenship, tolerance and intolerance, universality and difference, hospitality and war, or faith and credit.[8]

Over the past few years, we have been fortunate to bear witness to a growing body of scholarship that focuses squarely on the relationship between religion and media: generating new theoretical frameworks, documenting hitherto neglected arenas of discourse and cultural practice, and to those extents mounting a serious challenge to the intellectual marginalization of religion in contemporary cultural studies.[9] The texts under consideration in this review article are only scattered examples of an emerging field of study, embodied in new institutional sites for research and public discussion – such as the Center for Religion and Media at New York University, the Centre for Religion and Society at the University of Amsterdam, or the Center for Media, Religion and Culture at the University of Colorado – and new arenas for scholarly debate, such as the *Journal of Media and Religion* and the *Journal of Culture and Religion*. The intellectual sources of this work are necessarily eclectic, traversing several traditions of inquiry: including (but not limited to) ritual studies, the sociology of religion, cultural anthropology, journalism, postcolonial studies, post-structuralist philosophy and literary theory, history of religions and art history. By the same token, the types of objects with which recent studies of religion and media engage are strikingly diverse. They include:

- religious movements that 'make use of' media technologies – old and new, big and small – as resources to secure legitimacy, to communicate

with distant followers, to proselytize to uncommitted constituencies, to secure financial aid or to enlist 'the people' in specific projects;[10]

- religious communities (and leaderships) that struggle to sustain their integral existence by restricting access to the media-saturated 'outer world': refusing interviews, unplugging TV sets, shunning photographers, censoring books, building firewalls and so on;[11]
- changes in the content and structure of prayer, ritual performance, storytelling, music, study, juridical decision-making, knowledge-production and other religious domains through technological advances in the capacity to record, store and transmit information, and the putative effects of such technologies to refashion the body, compress space and time, or instil new forms of 'archive fever';[12]
- the spread of religious images and themes in popular music, pulp fiction, film, TV and public spectacles: a process which is said to generate new, hybrid forms of 'religious art' or 'religious entertainment', ranging from substitute products (parasitic upon the 'mainstream' market of cultural commodities, but which accommodate the generic, ideological and affective expectations of 'religious' audiences), to the crossover genres of media products that can be consumed by 'religious' and 'non-religious' audiences alike;[13]
- the 'religious' – that is to say, the transcendental, enchanting, thaumaturgical, uncanny, haunting – powers of media technologies themselves, by virtue of which social relations have been enveloped in the irreducible mystery of virtual, instantaneous telepresence, or the salvific promises embedded in images of urban techno-utopias, the renewal of an ecologically precarious planet, and fantasies about the remote dispatching of bodies into the spectral realms of cyberspace, or even outer space.[14]

In short, the conjunction 'religion and media' encloses a vast array of objects, practices, discourses, modes of knowledge and techniques of representation – a multiplicity which is just as much the product of a flourishing arena of activity as it is of the enhanced capacities of discernment among its observers. But just what are the insights produced by this scholarship? More precisely stated, is it possible within all this work to define a cutting edge against which the dominant suppositions about religion and media can be revised? What kind of thinking will perform the critical incisions needed to dissemble the popular myth of religion as the 'other' of modern media practice?

At the risk of crude generalization, I would like to propose that the *least* fruitful work consists of studies that simply seek to trace the various ways religious adherents, leaders and movement activists either 'succeed' or 'fail' to transmit religious messages through the strategic control of the material communicational resources required for self-confirmation ('preaching to the converted'), or to perform the work of outreach, proselytism and related forms of social mobilization. In this understanding, the relationship between religion and media is elaborated in terms of an *instrumentalist*

conception of media practice: one which supposes that communication consists of sequential processes of movement of an essentially unchanged content from source to destination, and which defines the differences between contexts of production and those of reception in terms of noise or interference. Among other things, such a model risks leaving unexamined how negotiations over meaning conducted at the grassroots or 'popular' level play a constitutive role in all communicative acts – as if it were sufficient to characterize media reception as a process of passive assimilation, or consumer desire as a self-propelled, anarchic force into which religious leaders merely insert their colonizing projects. In other words, instrumentalist approaches are designed precisely to avoid the most thorny questions about how media and mediation constitute inherently unstable and ambiguous conditions of possibility for religious signifying practices, as well as their articulation with broader, public realms of religious belonging, to say nothing of the incorporation of religious regimes of discipline, virtuous conduct or ecstatic performance in embodied everyday life contexts, and in the cultivation of the self. On the other hand, I would suggest that the most fruitful studies often turn out to be those which proceed, not from the instrumentalist formula, 'religion *and* media' (and all the less so, 'religion and *the* media', an expression which restricts the range of practices and techniques of mediation to the terrain of mass-circulation print and broadcasting), but rather from the idea of 'religion *as* media'.

Liquid Aura

The problem with the phrase 'religion *and* media' is that it is a pleonasm. Whether as the transmission of a numinous essence to a community of believers, the self-presencing of the divine in personal experience, or the unfolding of mimetic circuits of exchange between transcendental powers and earthly practitioners, 'religion' can only be manifested through some process of mediation. Throughout history, in myriad forms, communication with and about 'the sacred'[15] has always been enacted through written texts, ritual gestures, images and icons, architecture, music, incense, special garments, saintly relics and other objects of veneration, markings upon flesh, wagging tongues and other body parts. It is only through such media that it is at all possible to proclaim one's faith, mark one's affiliation, receive spiritual gifts, or participate in any of the countless local idioms for making the sacred present to mind and body. In other words, religion always encompasses techniques and technologies that we think of as 'media', just as, by the same token, every medium necessarily participates in the realm of the transcendent, if nothing else than by its inability to be fully subject to the instrumental intentions of its users.[16] It is also worth noting, in at least one etymological account, that the words religion and communication both refer to the work of *binding together*, and it is in this sense, perhaps, that religion constitutes the imaginary and figural archive for all techniques and technologies that render the world available to human volition (see de Vries in *RM*, pp. 28–33). Behind modern-day experiments with nanotechnologies

and cybernetic robots lies the shadow of Kabbalistic-Hermetic aspirations to animate statues and other objects. Buried within the Internet's drive toward instantaneous, disembodied information exchange one finds the ancient desire to approximate the unblemished rapport of angels, spirits and other divine beings. For his part, Samuel Morse, 'inventor' of the telegraph in 1844, showed a keen awareness of this sacred dimension of technological mediation in having chosen to inaugurate the new era of electrical communion with the prophetic words: 'What hath God wrought?'

Morse's question points to the wondrous quality of our quite inescapable relation to the world of mediated presence. One of the chief aims of Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber's anthology, *Religion and Media* – a collection of 25 essays by leading philosophers, critical theorists, historians and anthropologists – is to draw a provisional map of this sacred imaginary, exploring its phenomenological structures, as well as the dispersal of religious techniques and technologies across the surface of modern societies. Jacques Derrida's essay, 'Above All, No Journalists!', provides a useful point of departure for this exercise. It engages with the power of modern Western visuality and its doxic assumption that 'there is no need any more to believe, one can see. But seeing is always organized by a technical (mediatic and mediatizing) structure that supposes the appeal to faith' (*RM*, p. 63). For Derrida, this sense of the world made present in a form 'permanently inhabited by the miracle' (*RM*, p. 76) is best illustrated in the case of television, the quintessential technology for the virtualization of the senses and their ghostly re-presentation:

> No matter how alert we may be, we still look at television as though it were presenting us the thing itself. . . . No critique can penetrate or dissipate this structural 'illusion'. . . . Even if one were to regard everything on television as being a fiction, such vigilance would not exclude a certain waking hypnosis or a fascinated quasi-hallucination: one perceives, without perceiving it, the ghostly noema of the thing itself – *as if* it were the thing itself. . . . The critique of televisual mystifications does not prevent them from operating, and from doing so in the form of the spectral noema of 'making present'. (*RM*, pp. 85–6)[17]

If this discussion is framed in part by Husserlian phenomenology, it also invokes the problem of mediated presence famously posed by Walter Benjamin in his 'Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' essay (1968), a key subtext for Derrida, and arguably for the entire range of contemporary discussions about religion and media. Technical reproducibility, Benjamin argued, involves detaching objects from their auratic conditions of 'here-and-now-ness': arresting their 'capability of returning the gaze', and hence effecting their emancipation from the 'traditional' relations of power invested in ritual cults (relations which are also found in the 'secularized' context of the bourgeois cult of beauty). But in Benjamin's precise wording, as too many of his readers fail to note, reproductive techniques and the ever-expanding 'permeation of reality with mechanical equipment' do not so much *destroy*

the aura of the artwork as provoke its 'withering' [*verkümmern*], abolishing the sense of the object's unapproachability, and thereby the 'liquidation' of the traditional relations of power and value in which this auratic relationship was once encased (1968: 221–2). Through techniques of reproduction it now becomes possible for objects 'to meet the beholder or listener in his particular situation', and thereby to generate new forms of intimacy and collective imagination no longer based on the irreducible signature of the original, but rather on the mechanical provenance of the copy.

Of course, for Benjamin, writing in Europe in the 1930s, this liquefaction of aura was connected to the construction of what he regarded as new, 'emancipatory' sites of sensuous cognition – quintessentially represented in the work of cinematic montage – within which the 'distracted' masses were poised to absorb socialism's lessons about mastery of nature and egalitarian self-representation (lest they succumb to the fascistic 'aestheticization of politics'). Today, however, we might find it more useful to dispense with the specific terms of Benjamin's political framework and treat 'liquid aura' as a point of reference for one of the key questions about religion and media in our current age: what happens to sacred presence once it is mediated, and re-mediated, through an ever-thickening raiment of technological apparatuses and in ever-widening circuits of exchange? Can mediation actually bring 'the sacred' closer to us, and if so, with what effect? In this light, it is interesting to return to Derrida's account of the visual power of television and the way this power rests on a repressed vocabulary of summoning, prestidigitation, testimony and confession. These terms index a reactivation of aura, not simply on the terrain of the technical apparatus itself, but also with regard to the spread of 'universal religion', a category which, Derrida hastens to note, has a distinctly Christian provenance. From this perspective, the globally resonant power of the contemporary televisual economy is indissociable from a long-standing project of imperial domination, in its very heart inscribed by a language of Christian brotherhood.[18]

However, Derrida's thesis about television as the pre-eminent 'Christian' apparatus of representational power in the contemporary era is only one among several possible readings of Benjamin's thesis concerning the circulation of auratic signifiers in a post-auratic milieu. Arvind Rajagopal's *Politics after Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India* explores this issue in a very different cultural context – although, once again with specific reference to television – reminding us that there does not exist a single, global logic aligning historical shifts in communicational practice, political power and the recycling of 'religious' aura. In his account of the dramatic rise to prominence of Hindu nationalism over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, Rajagopal explores how Indian television has functioned as both a sign and a symptom of the altered scale of politics itself, enabling the articulation of new relationships between intimate, everyday experience and collective participation. He proposes that the visual regimes and forms of communicative address instituted by television

were in fact crucial to the advance of *Hindutva*: the field of 'religious' symbols, practices and cultural affiliations consummating in a reclamation of the modern Indian state by its 'majority constituency', the Hindus, whose 'authentic' self-expression is said to have been curtailed by the Nehruvian consensus of official secularism and state-sanctioned developmentalism (*PAT*, pp. 13–24, 34–52, 146–7). For Rajagopal, therefore, *Hindutva* does not comprise a fixed or timeless set of 'religious' resources but rather an auratic presence within the post-auratic environment of India's (increasingly) televisually mediated national imaginary.

Rajagopal's argument is based on a close reading of the remarkable concatenation of events that issued during and in the wake of the telecast of a popular version of the ancient Hindu epic *Ramayana* on Doordarshan (the Indian national TV broadcaster) beginning in 1987. He weaves the story of the collective national ritual of watching the weekly telecasts together with the steady rise of the Ram Jamnabhumi ['Birthplace of Ram'] movement, one of the largest and most successful mass mobilizations of post-Independence India, which reached its apogee with the destruction of the Babri Masjid Mosque at Ayodhya (in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh) on 6 December 1992. Many have noted that the 16th-century mosque has served as a key object of attention for the *Sangh Parivar* – the family of political and cultural organizations and social networks constituting the modern Hindu nationalist movement – who claim the site as the authentic birthplace of the Hindu deity Ram, and who to this day vow to construct a new temple in his honour. Rajagopal shows how the Ram Jamnabhumi movement took off against the backdrop of images of a great Hindu culture that had been routinized by TV serial productions of epics such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, and inscribed in popular discourses of the modern Indian state as the legatee of ancient Hindu wisdom and science, empowered to retrieve this illustrious antiquity and to reclaim its rightful place on the world stage (*PAT*, p. 139). This message was available for articulation with such varied programmes as neoliberal market reform, a 'Hinduization' of the Indian state, and even, where need be, the exercise of the detergent powers of anti-Muslim violence, all of which were crucial to the electoral successes of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the 1990s. In other words, by raiding a symbolic terrain hitherto excluded from politics – namely, religious faith – Hindu nationalists were able to forge a new, 'populist' language of economic and legal reform that aimed to break apart the 'illegitimate' monopoly of the Indian state by the Nehruvian secular elite (*PAT*, pp. 146–7, 199–200).

In this reading, the success of Hindu nationalism stems from its capacity to work both within and outside the political sphere proper, helping to establish new homologies between patterns of religious identification, forms of consumption and the requirements of electoral affiliation. Television serves as the privileged medium through which this 'Hindu public' has been formed, while at the same time delineating the horizon against which the Hindu nationalist message is embattled by the threats of depreciation

of its symbolic power, decomposition of its meaning and a slackening of commitment from the audiences it is supposed to interpellate.[19] This is because televisual communication stages a significant shift in the very conditions of possibility for political (or indeed 'religious') authority, empowering ordinary citizens to participate in new imagined communities of sentiment unleashed by television's perceptual field, and to that extent challenging the 'top-down' character of 'traditional' modes of authoritative address. With a growing reliance on a mass medium like television – unprecedented in its capacity to implode diverse images, temporalities and user contexts into a single communicative event – expressions of political power must become more intimate and familiar in their language, more solicitous of the individual lives of citizen-consumers, and thus reflective of a closer alignment of the electoral arena and the market (*PAT*, pp. 5–11, 24–32, 117–20). On these terms, Hindu nationalism appears to be caught within the paradox of promoting a 'traditional' model of political and religious authority within a visual, cognitive and discursive regime that cedes to the approval of 'the people' and the authority of their sanction (*PAT*, p. 69). Even the figure of Ram, arguably the central unifying icon for the Hindu nationalist movement, is subject to the exigencies of image management, sensational media stunts during political campaigns, and other strategies aimed at reinforcing and extending the 'life cycle' of this auratic presence in the imaginary of a populace deeply ambivalent about its civic responsibility. 'I am tired of Ram, I want a new name', Rajagopal reports from one schoolgirl's response to the semiotic excesses of the Birthplace campaign (*PAT*, p. 19) – a perfect illustration of the precariousness of sacred aura within expansive fields of communicative practice, and a provocative model for thinking about the fate of religious mediation in other cultural sites.

Word, Image, Sound: Sacred Signs and the Human Sensorium

One of the virtues of Rajagopal's analysis of televisual communication and Hindu nationalist mobilization is that it attends in great detail to the specificity of the resources that enable this articulation, as well as the cultural presuppositions and social forces that render it so fragile. His study is also instructive as an account of the relationship between visual culture and publicity that departs significantly from Eurocentric hierarchies of sensory value, and especially those renditions which privilege text- and typographic-centred forms of visuality as the (ideal) consummation of the temporal, deliberative and performative conditions of modern publics. I shall return presently to the question of what constitutes a 'religious', as opposed to some other sort of public. First, however, we should follow the cue given here to reflect more broadly on the range of possibilities for religious presence to be materialized in and through the most primary media of all, the human senses. Ever wary of the danger of perpetuating a specious taxonomy of 'comparative religions', a new generation of scholars has been

at work proposing ways to account for the fact that different traditions organize the mediation of religion and the sacred power of mediation differently, engendering distinct regimens for disciplining the senses, and for locating them within what are often incommensurable systems of value. Consider, in this regard, the contrasting investments in 'visual piety': on the one hand, the well-known (if greatly exaggerated) suspicion of 'graven images' in Jewish and Islamic traditions; on the other hand, the rich visual economy of Catholic saint veneration, the use of masks and other material culture in African animist rituals, or Hindu practices of *darshan*, the reverential form of 'seeing' a divine power and thereby receiving its grace.[20] The written word is likewise located within competing social systems for defining religious action. These range from acephalous, non-literate traditions of practice, such as one finds in popular Hinduism (marked by its exclusion from the world of the Brahminic literati and the Vedic textual tradition), to the epistolary culture of early Christianity, which transformed Jewish sacramental sign-systems into a 'universal' creed tied to the Roman imperial system of circulation of papyrus texts (see Schneider in *RM*, pp. 201–5).[21]

In sum, while it is true that all religious traditions recognize the power of words, images and sounds (and also, to be sure, smells, tastes, textures and other bodily sensations), the terms on which such sensory data are made meaningful and legitimate are hardly universal. One must guard against crude generalizations about the hierarchical ordering of the senses, the varying degrees to which they can provide authoritative and reliable knowledge of 'the sacred', or the demands they make to purify oneself in order to receive spiritual gifts.[22] Even in the context of Western Christianity, there are divergent vocabularies for defining the human body, its proclivities towards sin, its capacities to mediate truth and pleasure, or the work performed by modern technologies of recording and transmission on the sensorium of Christian believers. This is one of the lessons to be derived from Leigh Eric Schmidt's *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion and the American Enlightenment*. The book presents a bold attempt to rewrite the standard accounts of the modern, Western disciplining of the senses and, more precisely, the philosophical and cultural primacy such discipline is alleged to have accorded to 'sight' over 'sound'. Rather than simply taking for granted (as some do) that modernity was born through a historical shift from orality to literacy – a transformation from the blurry world of exchange between engaged speakers and listeners, and sounding bodies and voices, into a silent universe of disembodied eyes and scanners of written words – Schmidt examines one specific route along which the scopic regimes of modern text-literacy and detached observation were supposedly produced. The basis for his study is the efforts of French, Scottish and American Enlightenment philosophers, natural scientists, state legislators, doctors and other elites to contain popular (and what were often regarded as distinctly 'effeminate') practices of devout hearing, cries of rapture and other mystical auditions. In his account, Schmidt focuses on the material as well as the conceptual instruments that led Enlightened critics to their

understanding of the 'true' origin of sacred sounds in wholly human acts of mystification and duplicity. Moreover, he situates this Enlightenment critique in the broader context of the transatlantic Protestant world, and its social and economic transformation during the 18th and 19th centuries. This method produces an exemplary and richly detailed counter-narrative about the rise of what some proclaim as 'secular modernity' and its disenchanted sensory regimes, inviting comparison with other contexts where the relationship between religious imagination and sensory mediation has been configured (and also contested).[23]

The canvas of Schmidt's analysis is quite broad, encompassing a series of exchanges between Enlightenment literati and religious actors, and the reverberations of these exchanges across the Atlantic world, beginning in the late 18th century. On the one hand, he examines the multi-layered devotional frameworks for hearing the oracular words of Scripture, the inner whisperings of Christ, or the voices of angels, spirits and demons, and their materialization in a range of rituals, performances, mechanisms and commodities that constituted the sounding body and the attentive ear, such as were found in early Methodist revival meetings, Swedenborgian speculations about angelic speech or Spiritualist seances. On the other hand, he recounts the history of learned attention to and fascination with hearing – and especially the mechanics of creating the 'illusion' of real auditory presences – from the viewpoint of Enlightenment acoustics, both as a science and a source of entertainment. Whether through its fanciful designs for speaking statues and automata, or its more sober advances in the engineering of acoustic technologies and the mediation of the human voice (from ear trumpets and speaking tubes to gramophones), the Enlightenment worked to submerge practices of Christian hearing and speaking within an expanding culture of technical expertise and commodified leisure. This is well illustrated in the case of controversies over ventriloquism, which Schmidt traces from their origins in theological debates about demonology and spirit possession to scientific analyses of techniques of misdirection, muscular control and the feigning of voices as the 'real' bases of the power of ventriloquists to draw audiences under their spell (*HT*, pp. 136–63). In the history of interaction between pious listeners and Enlightenment sceptics, the latter never tired of producing materialistic models to explain the spiritual 'disorder' of 'hearing things', nor of using such models to legitimate their technocratic, medical and political campaigns against religious enthusiasm of all stripes. For Schmidt, therefore, the faculty of hearing was not simply an object of Enlightenment curiosity, but also a key site for the cultural project to secure a new, 'reasonable' Christianity of 'quiet and calm', where there would be found 'no bodily ecstasies, no revival meetings, no mortifications of the flesh, no demonic agency, and no hallucinatory provocations' (*HT*, p. 192).

In short, Schmidt shows us how, in the context of 18th- and 19th-century transatlantic Protestantism, the project to contain eruptive and anarchic manifestations of spirit was closely tied to a steady re-education

of the senses: in this case, a retraining of the ear in the service of civic virtue and genteel refinement (*HT*, pp. 6–7). Although it is possible to find roots of this project in ancient Greek philosophy, it was in the 18th century that long-standing Western concerns about the reliability of hearing began to be mobilized for the establishment of a new form of human subjectivity based on reasonable management of the senses and restraint of the passions they elicited. In Schmidt's reading, the Enlightenment vision of the well-ordered, autonomous self – with its capacities for clear-sighted observation and the precise discrimination of taste – was predicated on the banishment of discordant noises, the silencing of oracles, the policing of hearsay and the propagation of claims about the dangerous complicity of such phenomena with superstition, credulity and feminine dependence. The unmasking of 'impolite' religious vocalizations and auditions as 'merely empty signs' thus served as 'a token of republican freedoms; their exposure augured a society rid of the corrupting powers of religious establishments and the dark conspiracies used to maintain those hearings' (*HT*, p. 97). On these terms Schmidt points to one of the key challenges for anyone trying to think about the manifestation of sacred presence in and through the human sensorium: how can one describe such relations without unreflectively replicating the Enlightenment hermeneutics of suspicion: the desire to 'unmask' the sacred senses and to reduce their mystery to a logic of deception? But how, on the other hand, is one supposed to distinguish specifically modern regimes of sensory cognition and practice without acknowledging the many ways religious sensibilities have themselves been transformed by Enlightenment critique, as well as the technological apparatuses of mediation in which that critical project has been materialized?

A Religious Public Sphere?

Schmidt's account of the history of disciplining of the senses is also an investigation into the constitution of modern public spheres and the ways religious sensory regimes are related to the historical development of distinctions between private and public in modern nation-states. Once public legitimacy became defined in terms of reasoned debate, orderly conduct and management of the passions, new demands could be placed upon devout Christians, and others with access to resources that could potentially upset the consensus being forged between 'modern' religious establishments and 'secular' political authorities. All who were unwilling or unable to accept the new conditions of restrained Christian virtue and genteel refinement were liable to suffer the consequences that accompanied such obloquies as 'enthusiasm' or 'fanaticism'. Parenthetically, one might also note how this project of containment has been replicated in much work of the modern human sciences, where an implicit notion of religious normalcy is embedded in long-standing concerns about secularization, religious revival or the spectre of 'fundamentalism', for that matter. But perhaps the most valuable inference to be drawn from Schmidt's study is that projects to circumscribe religion – such as by confining its legitimate

expression to the privacy of the domestic sphere – can be realized only by passing through the realm of embodied experience. To the extent that all forms of seeing, hearing or touching bodies eventually point to the intractable enigmas of human frailty, mortality, fecundity or desire, the management of the senses is necessarily a management of the sacred imagination, which in its modern version is constituted as the always-incomplete project of state governmentality. Although Schmidt is careful to confine his analysis to the particularities of 18th- and 19th-century practices and technologies of hearing, representations of sounding bodies, and their epistemological and political ramifications on the Protestant imagination of the early American republic, his discussion does point to this larger set of questions about the relationship between embodied religious imagination and the institution of regimes of public conduct grounded in the authority of the modern state. In this respect, it is not sufficient simply to ask how, with the rise of modern nation-states, religious senses have been circumscribed by, say, the logic of the state apparatus, or the performative demands of public conduct in our contemporary, media-saturated age of global capitalism. One must further inquire whether and how religious publics themselves come into being alongside, underneath, against, across, or within the embodied regimens and imagined landscapes of modern nation-states, and to what extent their conditions of emergence, growth, differentiation or decline follow rules distinct from those of their 'secular' counterparts.

But what is a religious public? To date, the study of religion and media has not produced a common definition of the religious public sphere. No doubt, part of the problem stems from the ambiguity of the word 'public' itself. Does the term refer to an arena of collective deliberation and debate, or can it also be a site of affective association? Does it fall within or does it stand against the formal frameworks of citizenship or the institutions regulating 'church and state'? Is it a concrete, visible space of gathering or something that only comes into being in and through the circulation of texts (including visual and audio texts)? What is the difference between a public and a market? Can publics be open-ended and infinitely extensible? Or is every public always and necessarily mediated by specific cultural and aesthetic forms, speech genres and interlocutory protocols, and material conditions for sharing social – although not necessarily territorial – space, all of which point to the limits of its membership? And if the latter, how restrictive can these rules for admittance to a given public be without losing the sense of its publicness? Lastly, is it at all helpful to think of 'public' as a countable noun, or would we be better served by restricting ourselves to using only the adjective? These questions are of central concern for scholarship on religion and media because no study can proceed without at least implicitly assuming the existence of a field of production of religious signification, a system of exchange between producers and consumers, a body of readers (and embodied readers), an arena of agonistic tension, competition or debate, and other material conditions of possibility of public expression. After all, where does religious mediation happen if not on the

terrain of sociability among friends and strangers, patrons and clients, leaders and followers, insiders and outsiders, that we think of as a public sphere?

Some have found it productive to think of religious publicity as something existing in a world apart: constituting a 'counterpublic', the principal performative conditions of which are embodied in its capacity to re-work, transform, challenge, satirize or otherwise slip out of the frame of the dominant public spheres of modern nation-states.[24] This idea of a 'religious counterpublic' is most congenial with a larger set of claims about the ways practices of mediated communication – and especially advanced electronic technologies of recording, transmission and distribution – have led to a deepening crisis in the imaginary of modern nation-states, especially (although by no means uniquely) in the postcolonial situation. Indeed, many have noted the coincidence between the recent expansion of the field of religious mobilization at both the intra- and transnational level and the increasingly global accessibility of communication technologies, and electronic media products in particular. Many have suggested that this conjunction has been crucial for the creation of new spaces for the imagination of community separate from modern states and their ('secular' or only nominally religious) discourses of civic national identity. Such 'alternative' imagined communities might always have existed alongside or beneath the official public discourses and performative spaces of postcolonial states, shadowing the grand projects of economic, cultural and institutional modernization. But in more recent years, so the argument goes, the failures of economic modernization and the weakening capacity of modern states to monopolize the communicative channels of public discourse have empowered various groups – especially 'religious' leaderships and communities – to challenge the terms of their forced confinement, to offer alternative bases of social affiliation and alternative visions of the good society, and in these ways constitute a new horizon of political mobilization among 'the people'.

This argument is well illustrated by Charles Hirschkind (2001a, 2001b), who, in the case of contemporary Egypt, examines the way new forms of public space are being constituted through a dramatic growth of *dawa* [Islamic outreach] movements, their ability to redefine 'traditional' Islamic notions of civic virtue and ethical conduct, and their capacity to upset the balance of power among established political authorities. Embodied in an array of institutional forms – educational centres, preaching associations, private mosques, and an expanding network of publishing houses and distributors of audio-cassette sermons – *dawa* movements have played a crucial role instigating a broad public discussion in Egypt (and elsewhere in the Islamic world, see, e.g., Güle, 2002) about the reshaping of one's character according to new standards of pious behaviour. Hirschkind shows how *dawa* practitioners and their supporters have politicized the putatively 'private' domains of individual choice and lifestyle by subjecting even the most intimate and mundane aspects of daily

life to public scrutiny: the precision of one's gestures in prayer, the dangers of gossip, the modesty of one's dress and so on. Cassette sermons – which are notoriously easy to copy, exchange and play in countless public and domestic spaces – have played a key role in the creation of this public domain, enabling *dawa* practitioners to fortify the bases of Islamic community among those ill-equipped to participate in 'traditional' modes of Qu'rānic interpretation and debate. The audio-cassette medium has thus given impetus to a public discourse that spills outside the framework of the pre-established Islamic institutions of Egyptian society, epitomized by the state-run mosques or al-Azhar University (in Cairo). 'It is precisely this disjuncture', Hirschkind concludes, 'between the kind of public subject fashioned within the [cassette-mediated] *dawa* movement and one who will perform the role of national citizen [located within the vast array of state-controlled institutions that constitute an "official" version of Islam in Egypt] . . . that has made culture a site of considerable struggle' (2001a: 15).

The 'counterpublic' produced through the circulation of Islamic cassette sermons has numerous corollaries in the world today, such as Pentecostalist cinema and its audiences in Ghana (Meyer, 2002), or the video games, rap music and melodramatic novels that circulate within the Christian evangelical community in the United States (Frykholm, 2004; Hendershot, 2004; Kintz, 1997). In each case, one postulates the existence of a religious public in terms of a circulation of discourse marked by its stylistic, idiolectical and pragmatic differences from the 'dominant' public spheres of modern nation-states, and which maintains an awareness (however dim) of its subordinate status. In the right circumstances, these 'sub-fields of restricted production' (following Bourdieu's terminology, see 1993: 53) can become more than simply parallel discursive arenas defined by their particular interests, tastes, standards of competency or material conditions of circulation. They become arenas for collective mobilization: launch-pads for resisting or even challenging the authority of the dominant public spheres of modern states. However, because every 'counterpublic' is still a 'public' – subject to the same performative demand to win legitimacy through claims of representativeness, and the need to marginalize those within and without who threaten to subvert this effort – it is far from clear whether the term 'counterpublic' really helps to clarify the nature of religious publicity and its relationship with what are purported to be the 'non-religious' dominant public spheres in the world today. For his part, Rajagopal dispenses with the language of counterpublics, and refers instead to a single 'split public', consisting of discrete sectors, each inhabited by a different language of politics, and distinct regimes of aesthetic and affective value (*PAT*, pp. 147–8, 152–5, 210). In this way Rajagopal focuses squarely on the terms of interaction between the diverse social groups and networks of discourse that make up Indian public life, including the transnational arenas that encompass Indian diaspora communities in the West. Rather than being understood as a bounded and discrete totality unto itself,

Hindu publicity emerges as a site of negotiation and creative tension structured by the collaborative efforts – as well as the misunderstandings and mistranslations – of insiders and outsiders, adherents and detractors, and producers and consumers.

The idea of a 'split public' may not be universally applicable for the study of religious publicity in distinct national and transnational contexts. But Rajagopal's methodological decision to trace the way the discourses and practices associated with *Hindutva* emerge and change shape along borders of a public space marked by social and political cleavages has much to offer for other scholars of religion and media. His approach recalls Bakhtin's proposition that 'the realm of culture has no internal territory', that cultural meaning is 'entirely distributed along the boundaries' (1984: 301). By this token, one might conclude that the idea of religion and/as media is always worked out on the terrain of intersecting boundaries and surfaces that constitute social life, whether in the spectacular form of bombs and book-burnings, or through more mundane idioms, embodied enunciations or technologies of sacred presence. It is the task of future scholarship to develop new techniques of cognitive mapping: ones that, among other things, do not allow the ever-shifting boundaries of religious publicity to disappear behind the fiction of a unitary and integral world of religious others.

Notes

1. The following abbreviations will be used when citing these texts: Rajagopal (*PAT*), de Vries and Weber (*RM*), Schmidt (*HT*).

2. See http://www.cnn.com/2001/US/10/10/ret.bush.media (accessed December 2003).

3. See http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/1735623.stm. Cf. http://www.sunjournal.com/story.asp?slg=111501christian, and http://abcnews.go.com/sections/us/DailyNews/book_burning010326.html. (All sites accessed December 2003.)

4. For an insightful discussion of 'religious' dimensions of the 11 September 2001 drama and its immediate aftermath, see Lincoln (2002).

5. More generally, the idea of mediatization as a vehicle of social degeneration is based on a widely held metaphysics of authenticity, one root of which can be traced back to St Augustine's account of the semiotic poverty of language, once the divine logos was encased in 'fallen' flesh. Whatever its precise lineage, the presumption of a more authentic mode of communication, existing prior to the work of media, surfaces in such varying contexts as Marshall McLuhan's analysis of the atrophying effects of electronic media on the lineal-typographic psyche of 'Western Man' (1964), Horkheimer and Adorno's description of re-enchantment in the 'culture industry' (1968) and Jacques Ellul's lament about the technological order of modern society and the withering of moral purpose (1964).

6. For 'classic' accounts of the world-transformative role of print culture, see Eisenstein (1979), McLuhan (1962), Ong (1982). For critical rejoinders to this narrative, see, *inter alia*, Arnove and Graff (1987), Burke (2000), Goody (2000), Johns (1998), Thompson (1995), Wall (1993), Warner (2002).

7. This relationship between advances in media, shifts in locally bounded cultural production, and the work of imagination is, of course, one of the key planks of Arjun

Appadurai's argument about the procession of 'modernity at large' (1996), although his discussion does not deal systematically with the religious field, but rather tends to collapse it into 'ethnicity' or 'culture'.

8. On faith and credit, see Derrida's account of the 'transcendental condition of the fiduciary': the appeal to faith lying at the very root of all shareable knowledge, and thus of every bond that constitutes social existence itself, in the form of a proposition: 'I believe you' (*RM*, p. 63; cf. Derrida, 1998). For complementary discussions of the discursive and performative character of 'modern belief', and its religious roots, see de Certeau (1984), Žižek (2001).

9. In addition to the collected essays in *RM*, a number of works have been anthologized over the past few years. See, for example, Eickelman and Anderson (1999), Holt and Lundby (1997), Hoover and Clark (2002), Kintz and LeSage (1998), Mitchell and Marriage (2003), Plate (2002, 2003), Stout and Buddenbaum (1996). To this one can add a long and growing list of book-length studies, a representative sample of which can be found in the References.

10. This has been most famously noted in the case of American Protestant televangelism (Bruce, 1990; Hadden and Shupe, 1988; Kintz and LeSage, 1998), but the corollaries have been documented elsewhere, such as in the cases of Egyptian Islamic preachers-cum-media stars (Eickelman and Anderson, 1999), the Jewish 'ultra-Orthodox' newspaper industry in Israel (Levi, 1990), or the organization of global media spectacles such as the Catholic World Youth Days (Casanova, 1997), not to mention the hundreds of local radio stations around the world which for decades have been utilized by religious emissaries to conduct study classes, music, revival preaching and other forms of outreach (Hackett, 1998; Hadden, 1987, 1991; Schulz, 1999). To this one must add appropriations of *micro-media* – including cellphones, audio and video-cassettes, photocopied and faxed statements, pamphlets and other ephemera – which have served religious movements as effective vehicles for circulating messages among remote populations, or in conditions where official censorship has made it untenable to communicate by other means.

One of the best-known examples is the use of cassette recordings and photocopied transcripts of speeches by the Ayatollah Khomeini before and during the Iranian Revolution, which spread through oppositionist religious networks in a pattern akin to that of underground samizdat literature in the Soviet Union during the 1950s (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi, 1994). Throughout the Muslim world, micro-media continue to play a key role for Islamic communication in all its varieties, including 'Islamic' popular entertainment, liturgical materials, the cultivation of 'everyday' Islamic virtues or overtly political critiques of nominally Islamic political elites (see, *inter alia*, Eickelman and Anderson, 1999; Hirschkind, 2001a, 2001b; see also Caplan, 1997 for a comparable analysis of Jewish *haredi* audio-cassettes).

11. As in the case of Jewish *hasidim*, Southern Baptists, and others who are said to be preoccupied with restricting access to the dangerous, 'outside' influences of popular music, television or the Internet, and who decry the vulgar tastes, the loose morals and the consumerist mentality that apparently accompany these media forms. On the fraught history of Protestant fundamentalist withdrawal from and engagement with mainstream American society and culture, see Harding (2000). On *hasidic* Jewish strategies of boundary-maintenance in the media-saturated North American context, see Belcove-Shalin (1995).

12. Consider the transformation of Jewish knowledge-production through

post-Second World War accelerations in book publishing and the arrival of computer-assisted systems of information processing, which have enabled Rabbinic elites to constitute and disseminate new theoretical and moral discourses and new representations of 'authentic' Jewish traditions and Jewish law, as derived from the comparison of formerly inaccessible texts, especially reproductions of rare Talmudic commentaries-related literature (see Goldberg, 1981; Stolow, 2000). One of the most ambitious efforts to digitally store and collate Jewish religious texts and their commentaries has been the 'Responsa Project' at Bar-Ilan University, Israel, which began in 1963, and which now encompasses over 68,000 discrete sources and 300,000 hypertext links between its various databases (see http://www.biu.ac.il/JH/Responsa/).

The Islamic Awakening has likewise been tied to revolutions in textual production, and the rise of what has been called the 'new Islamic book', consisting of simple and inexpensive pamphlets, manuals and other popular texts written in colloquial rather than formal Arabic, and thus accessible to a wide readership lacking the recitational, calligraphic and literary skills necessary for participation in the traditional forms of elite Qur'ānic scholarship and debate (Babb and Wadley, 1995; Edwards, 1995; Eickelman, 1992a, 1992b; Eickelman and Anderson, 1999; Gonzalez-Quijano, 1998; Messick, 1993; Robinson, 1993, 1996). The proliferation of these kinds of works – as well as their electronic extension onto the Internet (Bunt, 2000, 2003), or their transcription as audio-cassette sermons (Hirschkind, 2001a, 2001b) – has been taken as a sign of an emerging field of religious symbolism and intellectual production in the Islamic world, within which one can locate a new generation of self-trained religious intellectuals who have been pivotal for the formation of so-called Islamist movements over the past couple decades.

13. As in the cases of reggae music and its Rastafarian religious themes (see, e.g., Hebdige, 1976), 'Pentecostalite' cinema and video in West Africa (Meyer, 1999, 2002, 2003), or 'Islamic' themes in Egyptian TV melodramas (Abu-Lughod, 1993, 2002). See also Plate (2003) for an eclectic anthology on related themes of religion and cinema, Fisher (*RM*, pp. 456–86) on Iranian cinema and Ginsburg (1991, 2002) on indigenous cinema. On the fraught relations of exchange between indigenous cosmological representational practices and the museological, economic and disciplinary regimes of 'high art', see McNamara (*RM*, pp. 487–513), Butler (*RM*, pp. 514–27) and Myers (2003). On 'substitute' media products and entertainment forms catering specifically to Christian evangelical audiences in the USA, see, *inter alia*, Frykholm (2004), Hendershot (2004), Ketchell (2001), Kintz (1997), McDannell (1995). On 'retail *hindutva*' – the production of 'Hindu' commodities and the modes of affiliation and participation they generate within the Indian public sphere – see Rajagopal (*PAT*, pp. 26, 42, 63–8).

A related area of concern is the representation of 'religion' in so-called secular, mainstream organs of mass media, a striking example of which is the intense preoccupation of Western print and broadcast media with Islamic insurgencies and other irruptions of so-called religious fundamentalism, for which the Iranian Revolution has served as the archetype for the past two decades (see, e.g., Said, 1997). For a broader discussion of the presence of religion and religious themes 'in the news', see, Stout and Buddenbaum (1996, 2002) and Wolfe (1984). See also the special issue of the *Journal of Media and Religion: Framing Religion in the News* (vol. 2, no.1, 2003).

14. See Schmidt (*HT*, pp. 238–44), Rickels and Weber (*RM*, pp. 94–107), Schneider (*RM*, pp. 198–215). See also Christians (2002), Noble (1997), Sconce

(2000). On the 'religious' discursive origins of the notion of communication as a 'communion of souls' and the embedding of this doctrine of 'spirit presence' in a range of technological processes of recording and transmission, see Peters (1999).

15. Any use of terms such as 'sacred', 'sacral', 'transcendental', 'divine', 'holy', 'numinous', 'spirit', 'spiritual', or indeed 'religion' and 'religious' is inherently problematic, at least in so far as one thereby assumes the existence of universal, transhistorical categories available for phenomenological or sociological reduction. My reliance upon this vocabulary is thus ironic, and the sympathetic reader will regard them as signs of 'writing under erasure'.

16. Samuel Weber, in a McLuhanite tone, describes this as the law of prosthetic supplementarity – 'an "extension" of human capacities, [which] simultaneously distances and undermines what it extends, exacerbating the vulnerabilities of the finitude it seeks to alleviate and protect' (*RM*, p. 52).

17. A complementary argument is rehearsed by Jenny Slatman, who draws upon Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of sense perception to interrogate the deep intimacies of vision and faith in the 'idolatrous' institution of modern regimes of televisuality (*RM*, pp. 216–26). For a more detailed discussion of televisual communication, incorporating, *inter alia*, Benjaminian insights into the 'tactility' of visual media, Raymond Williams's discussion of televisual flow, and a provocative interpretation of television as a hybrid economy drawing from the logics of both capitalist and gift exchange, see Rajagopal (*PAT*, pp. 4–12, 24–6, 31–2, 77–84, 119–20, 154–5, *et passim*).

18. In his unpacking of the term 'globalatinization' [*mondialatinisation*], Derrida suggests that proclamations about religion – about all 'religions' – in such varied contexts as ecumenical dialogue, international law or 'religion in the news', for that matter, invariably involve a process:

> . . . [of inscribing] oneself in a political and ideological space dominated by Christianity, and therefore [of engaging] in the obscure and equivocal struggle in which the putatively 'universal' value of the concept of religion . . . has in advance been appropriated into the space of a Christian semantics. (*RM*, p. 74; cf. Derrida, 1998)

On the other hand, for a rejoinder to Derrida's notion of globalatinization with specific reference to Islamic traditions of commentary and critique (and their transposition to contemporary Iranian cinema), see Fisher (*RM*, pp. 456–86). This debate opens up a much broader set of questions about the political, discursive and epistemological terms upon which the 'science' of comparative religions is founded – questions which cannot be given the treatment they deserve in this context. See, however, Asad's helpful posing of the issues in *RM* (pp. 131–47).

19. Eschewing any simple model of causality between the *Ramayana* telecast and the advance of Hindu nationalism, Rajagopal regards the televisual regime as replete with perceptual, affective and ideological fissures and cleavages. The absorption and transformation of its messages into politically effective vehicles were more effectively achieved, Rajagopal argues, only once they were *re-mediated* through other sites of discourse and performance, such as vernacular print, public processions and spectacles, consumer awareness campaigns, or riots and other organized acts of violence.

This work of re-mediation is well illustrated by the interaction of different

sectors of the Indian press – specifically the structured misunderstandings between the 'liberal' oriented English-language newspapers and the more complexly situated Hindi-language papers (*PAT*, pp. 158–71). In Rajagopal's analysis, the English-language press largely refused to comprehend the claims of the Ram Jamnabhumi movement, and in this regard was itself naive and overly credulous about the nature of popular Hindu beliefs. This cultural isolation of the English-language press actually worked to the advantage of the Hindu nationalist movement. To the extent that Hindu nationalism was perceived by the English-language elite as a force which was closed, implacable and impervious to reason, the former was able to present itself as a monolithic force, masking deeper contradictions within the movement (to which, ironically, the Hindi press was far more sensitive).

20. The term 'visual piety' is borrowed from Morgan (1998). See also Morgan (2000) and Plate (2002) for useful surveys of religion and visual culture in cross-cultural perspective, and Patricia Spyer's account of religious and magical dimensions of the representational logic of photographic visibility and the constitution of photographic truth (*RM*, pp. 304–19). On *darshan*, see Rajagopal's analysis of 'Hindu' practices of televisual perception and reception (*PAT*, p. 93 *et passim*). Cf. Pinney (1999). On the Hebraic 'ban on graven images', see Gertrud Koch's discussion of the relation of mimesis to *Bildverbot* in Adorno's critical theory (*RM*, pp. 151–62). On the other hand, for revisions of the cliché that Judaism and Islam are 'aniconic' religions, see Bland (2000), Flood (2002) and Halbertal and Margalit (1992). For broader discussions of practices of iconism, aniconism and iconoclasm in various religious, artistic, techno-scientific and popular contexts, see Freedberg (1989), Gamboni (1997), Latour and Weibel (2002).

21. For studies of the status of writing, textuality and reading in different religious contexts, see, *inter alia*, Boyarin (1993), Halbertal (1997), Messick (1993), Tracy (1998).

22. For broader discussions of religion and embodied experience, and the differences between 'religious' and 'secular' views of the body, see Coakley (1997), Turner (1996).

23. See, for instance, Hirschkind (2001a, 2001b) for a provocative study of Islamic traditions of recitation and virtuous listening, and their transformative encounter with the technology of the audio-cassette.

24. The term 'counterpublic' was developed in the context of arguments with Habermas's account of the modern public sphere, most famously in the work of Negt and Kluge (1993). See also Nancy Fraser's influential discussion of 'subaltern public spheres' (1990). For a helpful recent discussion and an attempt to redefine 'counterpublic', see Warner (2002).

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