

## Book Review

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**Daniel A. Stout**, *Media and Religion: Foundations of an Emerging Field*. Routledge, New York, 2012, pp. x + 204, ISBN 978-0-8058-6384-0 (Pbk), ISBN 978-0-8058-6383-3 (Hbk), ISBN 978-0-203-14811-2 (Ebk).

Stout has managed to pull off an ambitious initiative. In this textbook-like survey, he offers students tools and resources for the study of this new 'emerging' field of media and religion (from 'inside and outside institutions'). He achieves this with thematic chapters that provide both historical and conceptual 'foundations' for this new field, and that cover the major media.

The 'Key Concepts' chapter introduces important notions and approaches: media as religion, personalized religion, levels (individual, social and cultural) of analysis, secularization, medium vs. message and media ecologies. It also presents psychological, sociological, anthropological and literary approaches. The 'Physiology and Mental States' chapter explores how religion, 'mediated by technology in new ways', is experienced through a number of 'mental states of consciousness' that it classifies into 'flow' (cf. Csikszentmihalyi), meditation and trance (pp. 28-31) states, to which the 'numinous' appeals. The 'World Religions and Denominations' chapter highlights the role media, whether traditional or new, play within religious organizations, and how these 'interpretive' communities (Christian audiences—Roman Catholics, Protestants, Mormons—and Jewish, Islamic, Hindu and Buddhist audiences) view, use/reject or shape media. The 'Cultural Religion' chapter examines the new admixtures of religion and various popular culture phenomena (e.g. Oprah Winfrey, the Deadheads and Parrotheads, Trekkies, Elvis and sports fans, and the Rothko Chapel community) in order to illustrate the four elements of the numinous. The 'Media Criticism' chapter introduces various approaches to media analysis: didactic, audience response, formalism, ethical, Marxist and critical.

'The Internet' chapter introduces issues related to online community, identity and authority, and explores institutional strategies via the lens of proselytizing, authority maintenance and information boundaries formation. It also explores online usage patterns, particularly 'occasionalization', in terms of 'full-experience', 'social network' and 'online searching' occasions. The 'Entertainment Media' chapter discusses popular films, radio, feature-length films, television and online entertainment, and their incompatibility/compatibility with religion arguments. It explores the novel overlapping of the two areas in the form of religious entertainment, religious figures also being viewed as celebrities and celebrity worship as a conduit to the numinous. 'The News' chapter surveys the history of religion journalism up to our information age in which the news/religion dynamics mirror sweeping societal changes, followed by principles of good religion reporting: education, accuracy and inclusiveness. The 'Strategic Communication' chapter explores the relationship between advertising and (religious) marketing and religion (in secular advertising), a religion-marketing paradox illustrated with an exploration of material culture and religious products, religious pluralism and the spiritual marketplace, and the rise of 'integrated marketing' and public relations. The last and longest chapter provides a classroom

learning activity: a play, penned by Stout, which explores issues of religion, information and its censorship, but the relevance of which remain to be demonstrated. Copious references are provided, although some are absent from the bibliography (e.g. Eaton 2009; Smith 2007; Shouse and Fraley 2010, etc.). Each chapter ends with 'Key Terms' and 'Questions to Ponder', inserts students will find most useful.

With the scope of themes and issues the work includes, the scholarly fields it explores and the many useful references it provides, *Media and Religion* covers much ground. Moreover, the work brings together research data from quite a variety of disciplines and approaches and thus demonstrates how an interdisciplinary approach provides fruitful avenues for present and future research. While many important topics are far too briefly discussed, the work manages to present a very insightful introduction to major ideas, issues and works important for this field.

One would have liked, however, greater precision in the use of the two central concepts of religion ('not theology'), the first being religion as a broad 'analytical concept' (pp. 2-3, 165), and the second being religion as the numinous, another useful 'concept' (pp. 6-7, *passim*). For example, 'cultural religion' is defined (in 'Key Terms'), first, as 'Religious practices that center in media of popular culture (e.g. movies, novels, television programs, etc.)' (p. 8), and later as 'A phenomenon where elements of religion (i.e., belief, ritual, community, and deep feeling) are exhibited outside denominations, often through media of popular culture' (p. 58). What is missing is a clear and concise explanation of 'cultural religion', a 'category' of religion (p. 6) whose meaning and usage one derives from its various occurrences (pp. 48, 52, 56, 58; cf. 172 n. 1, n. 2, n. 3).

Similarly, the concept of the numinous is sometimes used infelicitously. This only obfuscates arguments or case studies, especially where the original understanding of the term as 'deep feeling' (*passim*) gets blurred with the adjunction, without much explanation, of three other 'elements' (community, belief, ritual) (pp. 47, 80, 167, *passim*), or when mention is made of 'numinous media' (nine occurrences, absent from 'Key Terms'). 'Numinous media' are associated with the Reformation and nineteenth-century Christian revivalism (p. 16) and media criticism (p. 71); they become 'conduits to heightened emotions' involving 'other elements of religiosity' (p. 31); their rise began in the 1960s (p. 17); and they are 'ubiquitous' in the present time (p. 66) in which we live (pp. 13, 20, 34). A clearer articulation of what the numinous, as a (phenomenological) concept, means, and of its usage, would greatly enhance its usefulness as an analytical tool. Further clarification and precision of these (and other expressions) will be most welcome, if only for pedagogical reasons, in an updated edition.

These few shortcomings, in fact, highlight an important point the work is trying to make: the need for greater interdisciplinary research. Greater input from research and perspectives of various religious studies will undoubtedly lead to more sophistication in the understanding and usage of the important concepts of religion and the numinous.

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