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BOOK PROFILE: *RELIGION AND MEDIA*

A profile of *Religion and Media*, edited by Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber. Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 2001. 672 pp. \$75.00 (cloth); \$29.95 (paper).

THE SIZEABLE COLLECTION, *Religion and Media*, is an impressive and wide-ranging contribution to the interdisciplinary study of these two fields and their interaction. *Religion and Media* is the result of two international workshops where the caliber of the compilation is evident in the thought-provoking essays by the twenty-five international contributors. Authors such as Talad Asad, Mieke Bal, Jacques Derrida, and Jean-Luc Nancy dominate the majority of the collection, but the classic essay by Theodor W. Adorno "The Religious Medium" and a section of Niklas Luhmann's *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft (Society as a Social System)*, ground the modern theoretical queries in a history of thought on religion and media.

The collection is divided into four sections and here I will briefly attend to representative selections from each. Part I, "Introducing the Concepts," opens with Hent de Vries, "In Media Res: Global Religions, Public Spheres, and the Task of Contemporary Comparative Religious Studies." As evident from the title, de Vries' essay serves to position *Religion and Media* and explain its task. De Vries points to two trends that explain why this collection was necessary. On the one hand there is the "new media" explosion of the 20th century (internet, film, television, etc.) and, on the other, the "return of the religious" on a global scale. Many of the following essays deal with these two themes, along with an attempt to situate the arguments within the historical debates concerning representation and religion, icon and images.

While religion may seem to some (admittedly those "some" most likely do not make up the readership of this journal) obsolete in the secular state of modern culture, de Vries compellingly argues that religion is not the opposite of knowledge and technology and, further to this, that it forms the cultural

resources, the archive of culture, that allows concepts to materialize. Emerging media necessarily surfaces from and through this archive, and much of the collection is concerned not with how media is formed in relation to religion but how religion manifests itself through the process of mediatization. De Vries cites Samuel Weber's *Mass Mediauras* as the impetus for the collection.¹ According to de Vries, Weber's book consistently verges on posing the questions of religion's relation to mediatization (de Vries asks, "Might not religion form in fact the element within with these relatively new developments [in media] became possible in the first place?"²) and the religious quality of media itself. De Vries's discussion of the miracles and special effects and Derrida's "Above all, no journalists!" an exploration of secrecy in religion in an information age, directly address this latter question. Part I is the most theoretical of the sections – essays by Talal Asad, Samuel Weber, and Jean-Luc Nancy, as well as an interview with Derrida, Laurence A. Rickels, and Weber make up this section – and as such, primarily explores, with theoretical sophistication, the concepts of "religion" and "media."

Part II of *Religion and Media* deals with historical and systematic considerations of this process of religion and mediatization. This section follows Part I by extending and historicizing the arguments, a pattern evident throughout this book that deserves note since this is no easy task given the size of the collection. Gertrude Koch's essay, "Mimesis and the Ban on Graven Images," looks to examine the often very critical dismissal of images in the Frankfurt School. Turning to Adorno's use of aesthetic theory, Koch puts mimesis in conversation with *Bilderverbrot* in order to reexamine the potential of critical theory for media and religious studies. This essay nicely positions the reader for a re-consideration of Adorno and critical theory while foreshadowing Part IV's essay by Adorno.

Jenny Slatman's "Tele-vision: Between Blind Trust and Perceptual Faith" is a nice parallel to Derrida's essay in Part I. Slatman shows how, with the medium of television, the viewer sees with the eyes of another seer, creates a space where perception is based on faith and belief in the all-seeing, a permanent eye of the medium. Arguing against Jean-Luc Marion's equation of idolatry with televised images, Slatman suggests, echoing de Vries and others, "[l]et us therefore consider the mediatic structure of television, advancing the thesis that television does not simply provide idolatrous images, but mediates the appearance of the world." (223)

Part III consists of anthropological and critical studies in religion and media,

¹ *Mass Mediauras: Form, Technics, Media*, ed. Alan Cholodenko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

² Hent de Vries, "In Media Res," 13.

which echo the concerns of the book as a whole. Patricia Spyer's "The Cassowary Will (Not) be Photographed: The 'Primitive' and the 'Japanese,' and the Elusive 'Sacred'" (Aru, Southeast Moluccas)," examines the trope of the unphotographable native in ethnographic literature. The irrepresentability of the sacred aura – and here one can see reason to return once more to Derrida's discussion of the miracle – and the celebration of the refusal by the "primitives," is examined in light of the modern medium of photography itself. Spyer artfully demonstrates that the "primitive" desire not to be photographed already operates within the confines of the modern world. Likewise Rosemarie Bernard's essay, "Mirror Image: Layered Narratives in Photographic and Televised Mediations of Ise's Shikinen Sengū," examines the televised production of Shikinen Sengū rites in Japan: a recuperation of old traditions via cultural modes of identity.

The conclusion of the book, Part IV, starts with Adorno's essay "The Religious Medium." In this piece Adorno examines how radio evangelist Martin Luther Thomas used religious material as a platform for hate propaganda. This essay speaks to the interface between the medium and the message that so many in the collection have pointed out. However, while Adorno sees Thomas' radio addresses as a perversion of Christian doctrine, one might argue, after reading this collection, that those radio addresses were only possible in and through the archival source of the Christian message.

Niklas Luhmann's "Morality and the Secrets of Religion" deals with a systems theory reading of religion. The main idea is that religion, like other systems, is a self-referential system and, as such, will inevitably produce the elements that define it. Luhmann sees transcendence as a defining term for religion and thus paradoxically sees that religion will always strive to transcend itself and this paradox; a postmodern Sisyphean task to say the least.

Despite the number of contributors and variety of topics, *Religion and Media* is a very consistent collection. I doubt many readers will take in all the essays and thus will be unaware of this strength. One of the themes that surfaces repeatedly is that the study of media and its interface with religion makes one aware that there is no experience that is unmediated, uncoded, unformed by cultural systems. This collection, like others, stresses the need to understand religion in an interdisciplinary light. *Religion and Media* appears at the same time as many other influential resources on media and religion arise. Like Gary Shapiro's contemplation of the Taliban's destruction of idols and the pedagogical role of

the Teletubbies,³ and S. Brent Plate's newly edited collection on the interrelation and interaction between religion practices and film production,⁴ this collection likewise speaks to the contextualization and theorization needed to understand the contemporary world.

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³ See his introduction to *Archaeologies of Vision: Foucault and Nietzsche on Seeing and Saying*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

⁴ *Representing Religion in World Cinema: Filmmaking, Mythmaking, Culture Making*, (New York: Palgrave, 2003).