Medium

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What do a spirit medium, an icon, the Bible, a taped Islamic cassette sermon, and a poster depicting a Hindu god have in common? These diverse items—the list could easily be extended—are all media that have been authorized within particular religious traditions as suitable for humans to link up, in one way or another, with the divine or spiritual. The notion of the medium employed here goes much further than more narrow definitions that underpin the study of mass communication or journalism. Including both new and old mass media, as well as objects, sacred spaces and the human body, this broad notion is central to an approach to religion as mediation, which has emerged over the past decade. Media are understood here as central to practices of mediation through which religious identities are represented and the "sacred" becomes manifest in "the world." From this perspective, modern mass media and digital information and communication technologies form a subcategory of the more encompassing notion of the medium.

Such a broad view of media as embedded in practices of religious mediation has been inspired by, and informs, a broader turn to "material religion" in the multidisciplinary study of religion. Many scholars agree that the appeal of and concerns about religion today can only be fully grasped if the materiality of religion—the modes through which religious concepts and beliefs sediment and become tangible in social and political settings—is taken into account. Taking seriously materiality does not merely imply paying attention to religious stuff. Above all, it challenges conventional understandings of religion, according to which spirit is privileged above matter, and calls for a critical analysis of how and why our understanding of religion has gotten de-materialized in the first place (Pels 2008). This empirical and conceptual

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engagement with "material religion" also is the driving force behind this journal. In line with the particular concern of this special issue to explore recent as well as longstanding concepts in the study of religion in the light of what one could call the "material turn," in this essay I would like to flesh out a number of issues that arise from a material take on media. My central point is that a focus on media is central to "rematerializing" our understanding of religion.

Media as Embedded Sensational Forms

Importantly, by regarding media as intrinsic to religion, the initial puzzlement about the religious use of mass media—with televangelism being a prime example— that instigated the rise of interdisciplinary research on religion and media, has been left behind (Vries 2001). Taking seriously media as part of—rather than opposed to—religion, allowed scholars to raise new questions about the religion–media nexus. Instead of assuming that the recent adoption of electronic and digital media into religion would mark an extraordinary watershed, scholars realized that media, broadly understood, offer a fruitful starting point for analyzing religious change. Examples such as the Protestant Reformation and its privileging of the biblical text over the veneration of saints, Christian missions' dismissal of spirit mediumship and the use of sacred objects in indigenous African religious traditions as "fetishism" or, to take a recent much debated case, the Taliban's demolition of sixth-century Buddha images at Bamiyan suggest that divergent views about the use of particular media in relating to the divine underpin conflicts between religions, while the use of particular media and the rejection of others is central to defining a particular and distinctive religious identity. At the same time, the negotiation and adoption of new (or newly available) media, such as for instance books, radio, cassettes, television or the Internet, is central to the transformation, and hence continuation, of religion.

Conceptualizing media—understood as a broad array of authorized material forms that are to bring about and sustain links between humans and what, for lack of a better term, I call the "transcendental"—as an indispensable condition without which the latter would not be accessible and present in the world, leads right to the question of religion and materiality. Elsewhere I have proposed a view of media as incorporated in more or less fixed "sensational forms" that have been authorized within particular religious traditions, and that render the transcendental accessible and sense-able in a particular manner (Meyer 2006). Tangible sensational forms are at

the heart of religion, rather than being second rate and alienating by definition.

This approach of media as embedded in a view of religion as mediation clashes with more conventional views of religion, that have long dominated research, and that are behind the initial puzzlement about religions adopting mass media. I would like to argue that this puzzlement de facto echoes Protestant views of religion, placing personal experience and immediate encounters with the divine at the core, and regarding form and (church) structure as secondary. Meaning, content, and inward belief are privileged above media, form, and outward behavior. From such a Protestant perspective, religious media tend to be dismissed as human-made and hence as unsuitable to get close to God. While this is an intriguing "media theory" by itself, it should not be taken at face value by scholars. Matthew Engelke (2007) has described the tension between the Protestant emphasis on an immediate encounter between believers and God who is found to resist being represented via human-made forms, on the one hand, and the actual dependency on some kind of mediation so as to get in touch with him, as "the problem of presence." This problem of presence ensues from the concomitant denial of mediation *and* the striving for immediate encounters with God that demand mediation of some sort.

As stated already, the suspicion of media does not only pertain to Protestantism, but also shaped the (early) study of religion as a modern discipline. Widespread is the view of text as a medium that distorts original content and that requires appropriate modes of interpretation that lead back to the immediate origin of what has been stored imperfectly in the textual form. This view still informs an understanding of mediation as secondary to, and even as alienating from an immediate religious encounter. It is one of the central theoretical concerns in recent research on religion and media to critique and transcend this problematic perspective, according to which media—understood as instrumental tools or vehicles of content—compromise and alienate by definition. From the perspective of mediation that has already informed much recent work on the religion and media nexus, media are understood as taking part in effecting the transcendental. Acting as "mediators" that shape the content which they transmit, rather than merely acting as tools of transmission or "intermediaries" (Latour 2005: 39–40), media produce belief.

A Paradox

Studying the religious authorization and use of media we face an intriguing paradox: the propensity of media

to "disappear" in the process of mediation (Eisenlohr 2009). While media play a central role in bringing about a connection between humans and the divine, to participants they are usually not present "as such." This raises the question how it happens that the role of media in religious mediation often tends to be overlooked by religious practitioners, or at least is framed in a quite different manner than approaches of media by scholars. The point is that from a religious perspective, media are made to vest the religious mediations in which they take part with some sense of immediacy—allowing believers to experience a direct encounter with the divine—yet become more or less downplayed or even invisible in the process. For instance, as David Morgan has shown convincingly (1998), in American popular Protestantism images of Jesus are embedded in religious "looking acts," through which people may achieve an extraordinary encounter with Jesus as a living presence. Conversely, as I found in my own research in Ghana, pictures of Jesus are in high demand (see Figure 1), while pictures of evil powers are

FIG 1
Selling pictures of Jesus in a traffic jam in Accra, Ghana. Photograph: Birgit Meyer and Irene Stengs.

perceived to be prone to render present what they depict and are therefore regarded as dangerous. The point here is that from a religious perspective the image does not merely *represent* some divine or demonic power, but actually renders it *present* to the observer. Similar cases exist with regard to mass printed posters of Hindu deities that are approached as "photos of the gods" who are not simply subject to the gaze of the beholder but look back (Pinney 2004). In other words, the image is part and parcel of an authorized "sensational form" that vests the image with power and organizes religious practice and experience in a distinct manner, characteristic for a

FIG 2

Billboard advertising a Pentecostal-
Charismatic Church in Accra, Ghana.
Photograph: Birgit Meyer and Irene Stengs.

particular religious tradition. Important here is to note the impact which media have on beholders. Indeed, the role of media in religious mediation needs to be analyzed from a relational perspective that takes into account how they address beholders by triggering particular sensations (see also Howes this issue; Meyer 2008). In many religious settings, media are involved in bringing about a sense of being touched by a divine presence, as is for instance the case in many Pentecostal churches (see Figure 2). Invoking electricity as a metaphor for the mode of operation of the Holy Spirit, in Pentecostal circles television and DVDs are authorized a suitable for spreading the gospel and for touching spectators via the screen.

Thus, to return to the paradox sketched above, media tend to "disappear" when they are accepted as devices that, naturally as it were, merge with the substance which they mediate. On the other hand, they "appear" if this synthesis is cracked. This occurs when the appropriateness of a medium to transmit a particular content is contested—as, for instance, is the case with the dismissal of statues of African gods as human-made "idols" or "fetishes" on the part of Christian missionaries. The point here is that the "appearance" and "disappearance" of media is socially produced and depends on authorized perspectives on what media are and do, or are not supposed to do, in broader practices of mediation.

To Conclude

In my view, scholarly analysis of the religion and media nexus is to lay bare the social practices through which media are made to effect the transcendental for religious

practitioners. Paying attention to the concomitant "presence" and "disappearance" of media leads right into the heart of the mysterious process through which media make the transcendental tangible in a persuasive manner. While it is important to realize that the technological properties of media imply their own constraints and possibilities, we need to be careful not to reduce media to some kind of technological determinism through which media are vested with a power of their own, as is the case in the recently much debated framework of mediatization launched by Stig Hjarvard (2008), who argues that in our time modern mass media impress their own logic onto cultural expressions. Taking seriously media as material forms far exceeds the level of mere technology, and requires to have a keen eye on the social processes through which media are effectively made to partake in generating religious experience.

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