

**Religion in the Media**

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### Introduction

It is a source of ongoing tension in the United States. How does a country that was founded on biblical principles tolerate or accept individuals who hold different, and often opposing, religious beliefs? This is a debate that can be easily seen in the various forms of media. In a world that is becoming increasingly connected with the various forms of media, the traditional forms, practices, and communities of religion is becoming less of an influence in forming religious identities.

### Literature Review

Jeremy Stolow notes in his work that, unlike the large body of academic studies on gender, race, and social class, there is not a particularly large record of critical engagement with religion. Even so, he writes that it's not possible to continue to keep religion confined to social traditions and gatherings (2005).

In her writing "Media and Religion" (2015), Paddy Scannell references what is known as Mediatization theory. This is a theory that is concerned with the impact and effect of the media system as a central social institution on other social institutions. While this theory was developed in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is still relevant in the rapidly changing media of today's world. Scannell references the use of the television and the internet in its use to spread religious beliefs. For example, the Chabad, the ultra-orthodox sect within Judaism, justify the internet as a "gift for God to be used for godly purposes and for the salvation of their own community and others (Scannell, 2015).

An article by C.D Cunningham suggests that while religious individuals have embraced these (social media) technologies, the traditional religious institutions have often provided a retreat from the less desirable effects of the same (social media), an escape from the screens so to speak. Furthermore, Cunningham notes that social media has provided a way for the “nonbelievers”, who were previously isolated as a community of belief, to find one another and support each other. These “nones” make up the second largest religious identity in the United States according to Cunningham (2021).

Cunningham writes that the rise of social media has changed the ways in which faith is experienced. As mentioned previously, this is particularly seen in the role that media and the web has played in transmitting information and connecting people (2021). This was certainly the case at the height of the Covid pandemic, when Cunningham’s article was published, as faith communities live broadcast services through the live feature on Facebook or YouTube.

In a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2014, of over 10,000 adults, it was reported that an average of 1 in 5 Americans shared their religious faith online weekly. Additionally, nearly half of U.S. adults saw someone else share their faith online. Other survey participants reported listening to religious music or talk radio, and 40% reported sharing something about their faith in an offline, “real life” setting. It’s also worth noting that young adults (ages 18-29) were most likely to share their faith online or in apps than those age 50 or older. This could suggest generational differences in technology use and media consumption. However, even with the use of media, participants who attended religious services frequently were more likely to say that they engaged in electronic forms of religious activity than those who attended services less often.

In the article, “Faith and ‘The Facebook Effect’: Young Social Media Regulars Less Committed to One Religion, Baylor University Study Finds” reports that, “Youths who use social media are more likely to develop a “pick-and-choose” approach to customize their faith- regardless of what their religious tradition teachers- than those who do not use social media” (2016). The article writes that the Facebook effect holds that all spiritual options become resources that can be tailored to meet the spiritual needs of the individual. Additionally, Paul McClure, sociology research at Baylor, reports that social networking site users are between 50 to 80 percent more likely to be flexible in their religious beliefs and practices (2016).

### **Interview**

A personal interview was conducted with Claire Larkin. Mrs. Larking is employed as a brand marketing manager, and holds a degree in Media, Culture, and Communications. Claire was asked questions about religion in the media, as well as in the U.S.A few of her responses are below. Mrs. Larkin was asked whether she thought media helps or hinders individuals as they for their religious identity. She stated,

This question is a little unclear to me since “media” can mean a lot of things, but assuming that it means “mass media,” I believe that it can be a double-edged sword. Free, untethered access to information is necessary for people to freely form their own personal beliefs, whether it relates to spirituality, religion, or the absence thereof. As we have seen throughout history, however, media has also been used for propaganda and religious indoctrination, which essentially extinguishes free will and self-determination (Larkin 2023).

Mrs. Larking was then asked in what ways does she see religion portrayed on social media. She responded that she typically doesn't engage with religious natured posts on social media. However, she does note that she occasionally comes across Evangelical influencers on Instagram or YouTube. She notes that their posts are often oriented towards the individuals sharing their beliefs and either directly or indirectly attempting to convert their audience (2023). When asked what her thoughts about religious pluralism becoming a norm in the United States, Larkin responded,

If religious pluralism is being perfectly observed within the United States is another question. We have certainly seen recent instances where the safety to worship has been undermined (e.g., the Islamophobia that flared up in the early 2000s and continues to the present day, the recent uptick in anti-Semitic terrorism, and shootings perpetrated by white supremacists in historic Black churches). I'd also argue that the "or not" part of that definition is increasingly being challenged, as I've outlined the recent movements to incorporate Christian doctrine in public spaces, such as schools, in the prior question and as we've seen with recent Supreme Court rulings.

She goes on to state that ultimately diversity in thought, belief, and spirituality can be beneficial if the human rights and dignity of all humans and animals are not infringed upon. Additionally, one groups or persons religious beliefs shouldn't dictate how another person lives their life (Larkin 2024).

## **In the Media**

Religion is often portrayed as a key theme or source of conflict in films such as *School Ties* and *Malcom X* both produced in the year 1992. *School Ties* is the story of a young Jewish man in the 1950 who experiences antisemitism views of his classmates while attending a prestigious high school on a football scholarship. While at school the main character David is forced to keep his Jewish religious identity a secret. The trouble arises when David is forced to choose between playing in an important game or observing Rosh Hashanah. The secret slips out and David soon finds himself an outsider among his classmates and teammates (Silver, 2022).

Pauline Cheong of Arizona State University writes that the topic of religion has produces increasing interest in communication scholarship in recent years. She specifically points to a growth in the subfield that focuses on new media and religion and the relationship between the two (Cheong, 2017). Cheong goes on to write that religious communities use social media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter (now X), YouTube, and Instagram to engage with, inform, and celebrate accomplishments within the community (2017).

## **Conclusion**

According to Banks and Banks, there is ongoing tension in the United States. How does a country that was founded on biblical principles tolerate or accept individuals who hold different, and often opposing, religious beliefs? This is a debate that can be easily seen in the various forms of media. In a world that is becoming increasingly connected with the various forms of media, the traditional forms, practices, and communities of religion is becoming less of an influence in forming religious identities. However, based on the research it seems this may

not be the full picture. Additional research and review may be necessary to gain a more accurate picture of the connection between religious practices and media.

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[fraser-and-matt-damon-starred-in-school-ties-one-of-hollywoods-few-movies-about-antisemitism-at-school](#)

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