

PCSU

Issue 1



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Media, Religion, and Crisis: Entanglement, Mediatization, and the Reconfiguration of the Sacred.

MELISSA L. GOULD

Definitions of religion vary across disciplines, cultures, and contexts, and these definitional choices shape what can be studied and how it is interpreted (Lambek; Mason; Perreault). Categories such as religion, and the sacred, are therefore not fixed, but are historically and culturally constructed. While classical sociology, particularly the work of Emile Durkheim, positions the sacred and the secular as distinct domains (see Berger; Hamilton; Trammell), this binary is increasingly untenable (see Carrette and King; Gould *Christianity Sells, Thank God for Commercials*; Latour; Hoover). Instead, media and religion operate within a shared cultural and symbolic space, drawing on overlapping practices and systems of meanings (Grant; Hoover; Hoover and Venturelli; Knott et al.; Lindstrom).

Media and religion are not discrete domains but are increasingly interwoven through shared cultural logics and practices. Religious organizations adopt media logics to represent and disseminate their messages, reshaping religious communication within contemporary media environments (Hjarvard). At the same time, media cultures, including fandom, draw on religion as a cultural resource, reworking and “rescripting the sacred” in ways that extend beyond institutional contexts (Satana and Erickson 114). These dynamics also provide a lens through which media behaviors can be understood: audiences may be positioned as followers, while religious symbols, narratives, and identities circulate within consumer cultures as branded and marketable forms (Einstein; Twitchell).

The relationship between media and religion has long been characterized by moments of disruption, negotiation, and transformation. From the rise of print culture to the proliferation of broadcast media and, more recently, the platformization of digital technologies, media have functioned not only as channels for religious expression, but as sites where the meanings, boundaries, and authority of religion are actively produced, maintained, and contested (Eisenstein; Hoover). It is in moments of crisis, whether technological, political, cultural, or epistemological, that these dynamics become most visible. Crisis can be understood both as a material condition and as an analytical lens, one that foregrounds the complexities of the mediatization and appropriation of religion.

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This special issue, *Media, Religion, and Crisis*, brings together five articles that collectively examine how religion is mobilized, contested, and reimagined, across a range of media environments, from television and film to influencer culture and social media platforms. Rather than treating religion as a fixed object, the contributions align with critical traditions in religious studies that understand ‘religion’ as shaped by power, discourse, and institutional interests (Asad; McCutcheon). In this sense, crisis does not simply affect religion; it actively participates in how religion is defined and the conditions under which it operates. Recent scholarship in digital religion and media studies suggests that these processes are intensified within contemporary media environments, where connectivity is accelerated and algorithmic systems amplify visibility, engagement, and participatory behaviors.

Across the contributions to this issue, crisis operates in multiple ways. It emerges as a crisis of definition, in which boundaries of religion are destabilized and renegotiated; a crisis of authority, where traditional religious and institutional hierarchies are challenged by new media actors; a crisis of representation, where religious narratives are reworked across popular culture and digital environments; and a crisis of modernity, where religion resurfaces within secular or post-secular contexts. These overlapping dimensions reflect Koselleck’s understanding of crisis as both a moment of danger and a point of transformation, a threshold at which new forms of meaning-making processes become possible.

In the first article, Lauren Horn Griffin’s “‘TikTok Refugees’, RedNote, and the Crisis of ‘Religion’”, highlights the instability of religion as a category within digital environments. Set against the backdrop of the threatened TikTok ban in the United States, the migration of the users, who self-described as “digital refugees”, to the Chinese platform Xiaohonshu (RedNote) highlights how definitions of religion are shaped by platform governance, state regulation, and transnational cultural exchange. By tracing how these shifts raise broader questions about who defines religion, and how those definitions circulate, the article demonstrates the ongoing construction and reconfiguration of religion within the age of global hyperconnectivity.

Rosser Johnson’s “New Let a Good Crisis Go to Waste’: Religion, Performativity, Outrage, and Andrew Tate” shifts the focus to influencer culture and the strategic deployment of religion within digital media. Through thematic and rhetorical analysis, Johnson examines how Andrew Tate draws on the cultural capital of religion within the attention economy. The article considers how Tate’s

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public conversion to Islam, alongside subsequent controversies, circulate within broader narratives of masculinity in digital culture, demonstrating how religion can operate as an identity marker and symbolic resource that can be publicly performed and strategically deployed within digital culture.

Jason Bartashius's "'Don't Be That [Queer] Guy': Evangelical Fight Club Ministries and the Omission of Homophobia in Christian Articulations of Hypermasculinity," extends the focus on hypermasculinity and religion by examining how media texts are appropriated within religious contexts to address perceived crises of masculinity. Focusing on the uptake of *Fight Club* among evangelical leaders, the article analyses how hypermasculine identities are constructed through selective theological framing. In doing so, it highlights how media is used to model and reinforce particular forms of Christian masculinity, while obscuring underlying tensions around gender and sexuality.

Genn Ruan's "Thai BL Fandom in the Ruins of Modernity and Chinese Queer Imaginaries Animated by Religiosity" situates crisis within the context of Chinese modernity and its impacts on queer identity. Drawing on theories of the 'contact zone' (Pratt) and 're-enchantment' (Yang), Ruan explores how Chinese fans of Thai Boys' Love media draw on religious discourse to reframe queer desire. The article introduces the concept of 're-enchanting acculturation' to describe how fandom operates as a site where modernity is both contested and reconfigured, demonstrating how religion functions as a cultural resource within transnational media engagement.

In the final article, "*Of All the People on God's Earth*": Biblical Reading of an AI Apocalypse in *I, Robot*", Kelsey and Hannah Ridge examine the representation of artificial intelligence in *I, Robot* through a theological lens. Drawing on scripture and science fiction scholarship, the authors expand existing interpretations of the film by identifying a broader theological framework that includes figures such as Satan, Moses, and the Holy Ghost. This article shifts the focus from everyday digital crises to speculative and theologically grounded future, highlighting the continued relevance of religious narratives in interpreting technological change.

Taken together, these articles demonstrate that crisis is not merely an external condition impacting media and religion, but a constitutive force that shapes how religion is defined, mediated, and experienced. Across digital platforms, influencer cultures, religious communities, fandoms, and popular media, crisis functions as a productive tension that destabilizes established categories while

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enabling new forms of meaning-making. This aligns with broader shifts in the study of media and religion, which increasingly emphasize fluidity, hybridity, and the entanglement of cultural, technological, and political processes.

At a moment when global societies are grappling with overlapping crises, from political polarization and technological disruption to cultural and epistemological uncertainty, this special issue offers a timely intervention. By foregrounding the interplay between media, religion, and crisis, it invites scholars to reconsider not only how religion is mediated, but how it is continually remade through the very conditions that appear to threaten it.

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