



Media Portrayals of Religion and the Secular Sacred: Representation and Change by Kim Knott, Elizabeth Poole, and Teemu Taira, Ashgate: Farnham, Surrey, 2013, xvi + 233 pp., ISBN 978-1-4094-4805-1, US\$134.96 (hardback); ISBN 978-1-4094-4806-8, US\$44.96 (paperback); ISBN 978-1-4094-4807-5, US\$49.95 (e-book PDF)

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Bells, gongs cymbals and horns make a thunderous din, and the dervishes, clad in long robes, beads, bracelets and coloured head-bands, whirl faster and faster in a hypnotic trance, until with a final deafening scream they run wildly through the doors of the shrine to the courtyard beyond. (p. 300)

According to a simile often found in Sufi literature, the journey to a reunion with divine reality can be likened to an almond. The tough, outer husk of the fruit is like the *sharī'a*, the revealed law of Islam; its inner shell is like the *ṭarīqa*, the Sufi 'path' or 'way', while at the centre its kernel represents the *ḥaqīqa*, divine reality itself (p. 61). What kind of guide is this *Cambridge Companion* on this journey or, to put it another way, how far does it take us into the almond? Well, Ridgeon has succeeded in assembling a very information-rich series of papers, enhanced by the fact that CUP appears to have relaxed its guidelines on avoiding footnotes.

Occasionally the information is almost too dense: lists of names and dates can proliferate, so that one has the sense of a huge amount of material being packed into a limited space. Given this, a more comprehensive index would have been useful; the three indices of names of individuals, (transliterated) technical terms, and (English) terms and place names are by no means complete. And might space have also been found for further discussion of the fascinating overlaps between Sufism and other conceptions of Oneness, including Neoplatonism? After all, Porphyry's commentary on Plotinus's *Enneads*, usually known under the title of 'Theology of Aristotle', had been translated into Arabic by 840 CE, and when 'Azīz Nasafī's treatise *Kitāb-I Tanzīl* says that 'the sign of whoever reaches God's essence is that he sees himself as an expanded, unlimited and infinite light' (p. 137), it is hard not to recall the divine luminosity of which Plotinus speaks when he says that, in its vision of the One, the soul becomes luminous, 'filled with intellectual light, become pure light, subtle and weightless [...] become divine, is part of the eternal [...] it is like a flame' (*Ennead*, VI.9 [9]). Yet Ridgeon has already had to sacrifice a longer preface and any kind of conclusion in order to bring this *Companion* in at just over 300 pages. Overall, this collection will surely animate its readers to engage with the further reading listed at the end of each contribution, and in this sense it leaves them (in the words of 'Urfī Shīrāzī) 'like a moth empassioned over fire' (cf. p. 179).

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Media Portrayals of Religion and the Secular Sacred: Representation and Change by Kim Knott, Elizabeth Poole, and Teemu Taira, Ashgate: Farnham, Surrey, 2013, xvi + 233 pp., ISBN 978-1-4094-4805-1, US\$134.96 (hardback); ISBN 978-1-4094-4806-8, US\$44.96 (paperback); ISBN 978-1-4094-4807-5, US\$49.95 (e-book PDF)

This collaborative book explores contemporary British media representations of religious and secular concerns, institutions, events, and people in mainstream newspapers and television. Co-authors Kim Knott, Elizabeth Poole, and Teemu Taira combine sociological and media-studies perspectives to reveal how religion

and the 'secular sacred' are portrayed and what those depictions show about changes in society, religion, and the media. In an increasingly secular and religiously diversifying society, yet one still dominated by Christian normativity, mainstream media remains the primary avenue for conveying to the public information about religion, they argue. Despite the importance of media in reflecting and fashioning social understandings of religion and secularity, relatively little literature exists on this topic. The authors successfully fill this gap in empirical studies on media and religion in the UK as well as provide a rigorously contextualized local exemplar for future national studies to emulate.

Like Mark Silk's *Unsecular Media: Making News of Religion in America* (1998), which the authors cite favorably, and Sean McCloud's *Making the American Religious Fringe: Exotics, Subversives, and Journalists, 1955–1993* (2004), which the authors do not mention, this book succeeds in demonstrating how cultural consensus informs reporting on religion and how the media maintains such norms by framing certain religious (e.g., Muslims) or non-religious (e.g., New Atheists) groups as bad while promoting Christianity or religion-in-general as good. Against assumptions about a secularist media, the authors demonstrate that journalism is not anti-religious and that there has actually been more reporting on religion rather than less. Taking a cue from Stewart Hoover's work, such as *Religion in the News: Faith and Journalism in American Public Discourse* (1988), the authors also place media portrayals of religion within evolving institutional media contexts and investigate the effects of such depictions using reception studies of news consumers.

The empirical data for this volume derive from two separate studies, one conducted in 1982–1983 by co-author Knott and Robert Towler and the other conducted jointly in 2008–2010 by Knott, Poole, and Taira. Each study employed qualitative and quantitative content and discourse analyses of three television stations over a seven-day period plus three popular daily newspapers, in paper and digital formats, over two months. In the first study, Knott and Towler coded media indices as either 'conventional religion,' which they defined as institutional religions and new religious movements, or 'common religion,' by which they meant popular beliefs and practices such as superstition, fate, luck, astrology, and the paranormal. The methodology of the second study was somewhat constrained by that of the first, to allow for comparison, although the authors added a third category they label 'secular sacred,' which they define as 'matters that were non-negotiable and inviolable but with no supernatural referent,' to account for the increasingly secular British milieu (p. 41). The authors reassigned items from the earlier study to account for the new 'secular sacred' category. For the second study, the authors also added focus groups to analyse audience reception of media representations.

By placing their research on religion and the media in social, historical, and theoretical contexts, the authors show how such changes have affected media portrayals of religion. Declining religious affiliation and the growth of minority religions both raised the question of the decay of Christianity in the UK while also revealing the normative role of Christian heritage in British society. Atheist activism and religious diversity have gained media visibility, as has discourse on religion, in a shifting media context of proliferating sources, ownership consolidation, and global diversification. In this new social and media landscape, religions must now 'justify themselves in public discourse' (p. 35) by representing themselves in the news, evidencing the importance of the media in shaping public

understandings of religion, which are now governed by media logics of profit maximization and sensationalism. This 'mediation' of religion (religion as media) occurs alongside religious 'mediatization' (media as religion), wherein media takes over the functions of religion, such as providing public rituals, ethical orientation, and a sense of belonging (p. 36).

Comparing the two studies, 1982–1983 and 2008–2010, the authors observed that there was a substantial increase in reporting on religion in newspapers, due to their increased size, while the frequency of references to religion and the secular sacred on television remained the same. A key intervention of this book is to correct the misimpression that media ignore religion by accounting for references in articles and programs in which religion is not the main subject or is referred to metaphorically rather than literally, such as in ads, sports, and dramas. In newspapers, Christianity dominated coverage of 'conventional religion' in both periods, with Islam taking second place, although nearly always in contexts of terrorism or assimilation. On television, there were more Catholic than Protestant references in both periods, but in the later period Islam was referenced more often than any other religion. Luck and gambling led the 'common religion' category for both periods in both mediums. Atheism topped reporting on the 'secular sacred' in newspapers and television. The authors demonstrate that coverage of Christianity remains hegemonic but as 'background, embedded in Britain's culture' (p. 56).

Coverage of Christianity in public life reveals both its normativity and an anxiety about its status, as shown in media portrayals of the Church of England playing a vital role in forming a national identity yet also coming under criticism for clergy immoralities and declining church affiliation. In a pluralizing and secularizing society, Christianity is portrayed as increasingly marginalized yet simultaneously defended by newspapers as central to Britishness. Religions other than Christianity are usually ignored unless they have political significance, exhibit conflict, or connect to an aspect of UK multiculturalism. A major change in religious reporting between the two studies is the marked rise of Islam in the news, which also shifted from a purely foreign focus toward including more domestic stories, given growing Muslim immigration to the UK. Muslims are portrayed as a terrorist danger and threat to cultural values and as nearly unassimilable subjects. Media coverage of 'common religion' increased from the first to the second study, particularly portrayals of the paranormal in fictional television shows and in programs pitting skeptics against people claiming supernatural powers. Media fascination with 'the unexplained' has arisen alongside the cultural popularity of the paranormal.

Beyond the rise of discourse on religion, the authors note a new discourse on atheism and secularism in the media that was not present in the earlier study. Media reports largely reduced atheism to the views of Richard Dawkins, which reporters criticize even as they publicize. Key themes include debates over the compatibility of religion and science (particularly evolution), the decline of Christianity, and public campaigns for atheism. While most UK journalists are non-religious, they are frequently critical of anti-religious perspectives. According to the authors, the ideological perspective that dominates the media is a 'moderate secularism with a relative separation of the religious and the secular' (p. 114), with Christianity represented as the prototypical good and moral religion. The authors also note a double standard at work with secularism: 'When juxtaposed with domestic Christianity, it is often criticized for being too narrow or too strict; when treated in an international but non-Christian context, it is presented more positively' (p. 114).

In two case studies, of two papal visits (John Paul II in 1982 and Benedict XVI in 2010) and the 2009 denial of entry by the UK to Dutch politician Geert Wilders amidst criticism of his anti-Muslim views, the authors demonstrate how press discourse shapes national identity as well as popular understandings of proper religion. Despite initial media misgivings about each pope's visits, during and after the visits coverage was uniformly positive, portraying both as success stories. Whereas the 1982 papal visit highlighted ecumenism, media coverage of the 2010 visit emphasized interfaith tolerance and offered a new frame of being religious as good and being atheist as bad. Regarding the Wilders debate, media claims of freedom of speech triumphed over concerns about hate speech. The Wilders episode reveals the struggle over defining national identity in majority/minority relations, with Muslims portrayed as undemocratic outsiders and the UK as free and Christian.

Knott, Poole, and Taira's analysis is strongest in their conclusion. They clearly and persuasively demonstrate that the 'British mainstream media as a whole came across as fairly pro-religion, but anxious about the crisis of both Christianity and secularism, the rise of Islam ... and an increasingly vocal atheism' (pp. 173–174). In the conservative press, which is more dominant and popular, 'Britain was constructed first and foremost as Christian ... though with a recognition of increasing diversity and a dislike of the supposed secularism' of leftist politicians (p. 174). For the liberal press, 'Britain was cast as secular and plural, with an accompanying discourse of Christian decline and irrelevance' (p. 174). 'The persistence of religion across mainstream media sources and in all genres is probably the most significant finding of this study,' especially in the context of declining religion and the loss of a formal religious voice in television programming, they claim (p. 185).

One limitation of this book's research design, which the authors acknowledge, is its focus on newspapers and television only despite the growth and influence of other media forms, such as online news aggregators and social media's ability to direct attention to alternative news sources. Additionally, the authors did not include some of the most widely read publications in the UK, such as the *Daily Mail* and the *Guardian*. In these ways, the second study is hamstrung by the first study, which while useful for comparative purposes also weakens the scholars' contemporary analysis and reduces its generalisability. Despite these shortcomings, the authors have done an admirable job with the sources they do examine, and choosing a few sources to explore in depth, as they do, offers insights that are valuable in addition to making a more manageable research project.

My greater concern is with the category of the 'secular sacred', which the authors proffer as necessary to account for the rise of non-religious self-identifications in the UK and 'emergent individual spiritualities focused on "life", music, healing, nature, and anti-capitalism' (p. 176). While the authors coded 'secular sacred' to include items such as the environment, football, and home ownership, in their analysis of media coverage of this category they mainly discuss representations of atheism and secularism. Thus, the 'secular sacred' is primarily defined oppositionally to religion, but it is not clear whether this categorization reflects media constructions of such values or the authors' own definitional position. Moreover, it misses an opportunity to reveal the co-implication of secular and religious identifications. For example, stories about mediatized rituals such as royal weddings in Anglican churches exhibit a sort of nationalism that could be labeled as a 'secular sacred' value, rather than just 'conventional' or 'common religion.'

The authors suggest that growing numbers of religiously unaffiliated citizens result in a rise of religious illiteracy, but they offer no evidence for such a proposition. To the contrary, other studies have shown that atheists are the most informed about different religious traditions. Therefore, the authors' contention that media portrayals of religion 'constitute the extent of public knowledge' (p. 175) about religion is dubious. However, they are right to claim that the media's role as a primary provider of information about religion to the public is 'complicated by the medium of delivery' (p. 174), which emphasizes conflict and celebrity.

Knott, Poole, and Taira have produced a valuable book that fills a gap in the scholarly literature on religion and the media in the UK, and they have provided a helpful map for future studies. They skillfully show how media representations in the UK promote a pro-religious (and often pro-Christian), pluralist, and moderate secularism perspective. This book will be useful for researchers interested in empirical studies of media and religion, how social and media industry changes affect coverage of religion and secularity, and how scholars can assess media treatment of non-religious populations, movements, and values.

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Theorizing Islam: Disciplinary Deconstruction and Reconstruction by Aaron Hughes, New York: Routledge, 2014, 146pp., ISBN 9781844657902, US\$34.95 (Paperback); ISBN 9781908049360, US\$125.00 (Hardback)

In the introduction to his *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1843), Karl Marx famously noted that the criticism of religion is the beginning of all criticism. For inasmuch as religion is ideology par excellence, a general theory of the world that obscures this world's reality and its truths, critical deconstruction of religious discourses is a prerequisite to any scholarly evaluations of the world as such sans fantasy and illusion. This original Marxist insight has informed countless scholars in the modern academy and provided succor to numerous popular atheisms. And some version of it is clearly a cynosure for Aaron Hughes's new book *Theorizing Islam: Disciplinary Deconstruction and Reconstruction* (2014). Hughes contends that the study of Islam in the field of religious studies 'has largely ceased to function as an academic discipline' in the wake of 9/11 and is now instead primarily 'theological in orientation, manipulative in its use of sources, and distortive in its conclusions' (p. 3). For though scholarly detachment and critical distance from the subject of our investigations is nowhere more crucial than in the study of religion, scholars in what he pejoratively calls 'Islamic Religious Studies' routinely peddle in lazy essentialisms and astonishing apologetics. 'Invoking Nietzsche's metaphor of philosophizing with a hammer' (p. 123), Hughes suggests that the only way forward for this field is to tear down its regnant discursive architecture, deconstruct its dominant assumptions, and reconstruct it using theoretical, methodological, and critical approaches appropriate to a modern academic discipline. *Theorizing Islam* therefore reads, by turns, both as a powerful,