

Book Review

Daniel A. Stout. Media and Religion: Foundations of an Emerging Field. New York: Routledge, 2012. ISBN-978-0-8058-6384-0

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Daniel A. Stout, who has done his doctorate from Rutgers University, is the author of this book. Dr. Stout is currently working as a Director with the Hank Greenspun School of Journalism and Media Studies, at the University of Nevada Las Vegas. His research interests are, Audience analysis and the interface between media and religion. Dr. Stout is the founder of the *Journal of Media and Religion* (Erlbaum) along with the recent *Encyclopedia of Religion, Communication, and Media* (Routledge). Dr. Stout has several journal articles and numerous book chapters to his credit. His books are considered foundational works in the field of Media and Religion. He also teaches courses in advertising and has been working at the *Houston Chronicle* as a Manager for their Special Advertising related Projects. Dr. Stout was also a former Head of Advertising Division of the Association of Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC).

Daniel A. Stout writes this book from a perspective of highlighting and mainstreaming an important but not so explored field, Media and Religion. Stout examines the respective field thoroughly from a historical background to contemporary interpretations and from cultural context to professional aspects of

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the subject. The author has also emphasized future research areas of this emerging field the foundations of which have been laid by himself.

The relationship of religion with other academic disciplines has been defined quite a lot and with great effectiveness. Stout writes this book to shed light on the unavoidable relationship of media and religion. Media and religion these days cannot be separated as media is repeatedly playing an essential part in contemporary religion and similarly, religion is crucial to comprehend media's place in society. He provides an expansive view of religion and also draws mass communication students' attention towards exploring religion from a scholarly perspective.

This book has eleven chapters and every chapter has a separate theme which gives an insight to the subject. Stout starts off with a detailed introduction of the dire need for a closer study of this field. In the introduction, stout draws our focus on multimedia aids in religious practices and presence of organized religion in number of different media. He further says that religious experiences can also be gained through the media of popular culture. Stout explains an important fact because of which media and religion have been understudied, is the term religion itself. If the goal is to examine some quasi-religious activities of media, one has to understand the term religion in a broader spectrum.

An optimal definition of Johnstone is stated in the book, "a system of beliefs and practices by which a group of people interprets and responds to what they feel is sacred and, usually supernatural as well". This definition is rather broad and also suggests that theologians' view of religion is different than the view

academicians have for religion. For moving beyond the semantic barriers which created a great hindrance in study of this subject, a term 'Numinous' has been used throughout this book. Numinous means to have solid religious or spiritual characteristics and this existence of spirituality is not bound in denominations only. Term, numinous, is expansive in nature and also caters to the religious experiences that may occur outside the religious institutions.

Stout provides some key concepts and historical insight on media as religion and personalized religion. To explain these key concepts, Stout coins the term 'mediation' that refers to the use of media technology at some level in everyday activities. Further he discusses in detail that, how religious activities have emerged from media practices and events, how media related experiences takes numinous characteristics and how religious rituals spin around media. An example related to this is given in the text of a family gathering watching some cultural show on DVD may initiate some useful debate on a moral topic. Because media helps facilitate a consecrated service for tying people together in fellowship. TV has a history of depicting moral dilemmas by presenting heroic and villainous figures.

Stout also highlights the contemporary practices in the same chapter for explanation of personalized religion. One doesn't have to drive to faraway places to practice religion or have religious experiences. Engaging in such experiences, hand held or computer devices are enough, which makes it easier for people to experience religion regardless of the time and space.

Levels of analysis is another area which is discussed in this book. Stout sheds light on a promising area of study, how media as

well as religion generates emotional responses and also how communities are formed around media messages irrespective of their geographical element. As an example, author relates these communities with earlier communities that were also formed on the basis of books (particular messages) they used to follow, but not because of their geographical area. So, forming communities who practice same rituals, have same beliefs and tag themselves under the same community, is not a new idea.

Further he gives historical evidence of the existence of art forms like, dance, music and chanting, for religious activities and also discusses the irony of today where these ancient cultural forms of worship are missing in some religions. Role of printing press in the development of religion and how mass media has been used repeatedly in earlier age to transport messages to distant regions was discussed to establish a historical link between media and religion. Stout talks about, Revivalism, a phase where media was important to attract new followers and theaters were used to preach new teachings.

By walking down, the historical trail, stout concludes the topic by describing media and religion today. He explains the key role played by numinous media these days, where Individuals have more options in terms of accessing information. They don't have to rely on face to face conversations or congregations to have religious experiences. Religion because of media has become a commodity that can be accessed by anybody at any time.

Author also brings Mediated Religion under discussion in this book. He explains how media triggers emotions. Three types of mental states were discussed which are practiced by the followers

of any religion. Stout explains that how these religious experiences are mediated by media. Flow, where people are so involved in something that nothing else seems important to them. Literature plays an important role in engaging readers and holy books can be taken as literature. Meditation, is second type where you stop the normal flow of thoughts to concentrate. Meditative practices are available on DVDs, also some TV shows are dedicated to the art of meditation. Trance, the third type of mental state is the suspension of consciousness. Trance TV, film, radio and internet are examples. Stout clearly explains how these three numinous experiences are mediated through technology.

Author then explains world religions and denominations. He writes, "Media are at the center of worship". He explains that people from every religion are consumers of mediated religion. Worship revolves around particular categories of media, like novels, classical music, trance radio, and recordings. Stout has examined five major world religions, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. He describes a concept of media branding, in which he tells that how religions around the world utilize media, as now there are community radios, channels that are owned by religious groups, they have their own websites. Author writes, "All religion use media to reinforce sacred beliefs".

Further in the book, Stout discusses the role and usage of media among these five major world religions. As these five religions stated above have different doctrines, they surely have restrictions as well as applications for media according to their belief system. But one way or the other, every religion has incorporated media somehow, as author writes in his book, "media

play a key role in numinous experiences”.

Stout relates the post modernism school of thought with the subject, media and religion. He writes in his book that anything and anybody can give spiritual experiences. Religious principles can be communicated through any media form; hence we should not overlook the numinous aspect of different artifacts. Even in today’s world, celebs act not just in the capacity of their actual job but even more than that at times. For the explanation of this concept, he quotes an example of the famous Operah Winfery Phenomenon and Edward Presley. He later stresses upon the ethical issues of media artifacts, as he writes, “ethical analysis is vital in an age when pop media are also numinous vehicles for teaching morality”.

Stout also sheds lights on an important and recent phenomenon that is known as new media. He reveals the presence of religion in cyberspace. Since the internet is a synthesis of several media forms, it has a greater value when it comes to quasi-religious activities and experiences. Author quotes examples of online presence of religion and how religious groups take benefits out of this popular medium among youth. He presents some amazing stats regarding the usage of internet also a valid criticism on trustworthiness of the medium.

Further in the book, author debates about the relationship of entertainment and religion by tracing down the historical background of this relation. He quotes a few examples like, some Feature Length Films, (*The Ten Commandments*, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, *Tender Mercies*, and *Places in the Heart* etc.), a few Radio shows and their specific programs, (*World Buddhist Radio*, *Hindu radio*, and a program *Unshackled*), Popular Fiction, (*Voltaire’s Candide*,

O'Connor's *Wise Blood* and Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*) and also some useful examples from Television and Online Media.

Author also directs our attention to a controversy that is inherited with this concept of entertainment and media, and that is blasphemy. Because earlier when the celebrity culture emerged, people started idolizing individuals from all walks of life and they do that even now. Author gives an example from John Lennon's comment that the Beatles were "more popular than Jesus" (Cleave, 1966). This example clarifies how people used to assign Godlike traits to the performers.

Later in the book, Stout describes how journalists play their part. Journalists promote religion and endorse interpretations about different religious groups since whatever society learns, depends on the interpretations available through media. Journalism and news has historical roots in religion, because all Holy Scriptures can be considered religious news or information from GOD. Author then elaborates, how printing press has helped in preaching religion as well as establishing uniform doctrines.

Towards the end in the book, Stout manages to explain how media is excessively used by religious groups. Religious advertisement is a common practice and this concept of marketing in religion is as old as religion. Stout writes in his book, "persuasion and call to action are the elements common in advertising". He also stresses upon the need of public relations for religious groups as people form opinions about those groups on what they see on media, for this he writes, "public relation efforts can dispel rumors and combat misinformation". At the end author provides a classroom learning activity; a play. This activity discovers religious

issues and information.

Now coming to the strengths and weaknesses of this book. I would like to start off by saying that this book provides a scholarly approach for examining the subject of Media and Religion. It covers almost every aspect that is required as a foundation of any emerging field. Stout has managed to enlighten readers with an insight of most of the concepts related to this subject in broader terms, depth of some areas is still needed anyhow. The thematic chapters of the book are very well written with many useful references and examples from history as well as contemporary media. What I like about this book is the earlier clarification of the term religion in a broader spectrum and choice of the word, numinous to explain media-religion phenomena. This plays an important role in eradicating the semantic barriers.

This book emphasizes that journalists and academicians should see religion broadly and must understand the closer link religion and media share. One thing more that makes this book easy to read is the key concepts that are provided at the end of every chapter, which helps readers knitting a web of multiple notions about media and religion. Then there are questions to ponder, again at the end of every chapter that encourages readers to think and directs them to learn.

One of the shortcomings of this reading that I have noticed is a lack of examples and case studies from all the major religions that Stout claims to discuss and also that these concepts of quasi-religious experience and numinous might not be embraced by all. I see this media-religion debate very useful as I am viewing it from a scholarly perspective but what about the religious groups, they

might not accept the expansive view of religion as it is considered a highly private affair. Anyhow from an academician's view point I appreciate Stout's efforts for initiating the exploration of this understudied field. Stout has given rise to some very important aspects of this field that are still to be discovered in depth. I look forward to read some current and comprehensive researches in this field of media and religion.