Mediating Christianity in Asia

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to provide a broad survey of the intimate relations between media and Christianity in contemporary Asia by taking into account two overlapping strands of scholarship, one of technology and society, the other of religion and the media. Particular attention is given to how the invention of new media technologies causes important shifts in the ways people practice their faith and how Christian communities are formed in Asia. With the trend towards media convergence resulting in the blurring of the distinction between the 'old' and 'new' media and with people's differential access to forms of media in Asia, the article argues that an effort to achieve a more nuanced understanding of the interaction between media and Christianity in Asia has to examine how people's particular social, economic and political locations crucially influence their interpretations of various mediated Christian texts and their experiences of Christianity. Furthermore, the theological positions that Christian communities in Asia have toward diverse forms of media technology and the extent to which new media technologies are integrated into people's daily life shape the ways Christianity is practiced in different parts of Asia and the ways in which the actual contours of Christian religious boundaries are drawn.

Keywords: Asian Christianity, media, mediatedisation, technology, Internet, evangelism, spirituality
In this sense, technology is integral to the human application of knowledge that connects people intersubjectively with one another and with the material world, in the process through which people come to shape their ideas of who they are and mould the constitutions of their society and culture (Lim 2009a: 2).

A similar line of reflection has emerged in the scholarship of media and religion (Stolow 2005). This body of research has revolved around the problem of people's construction of meaningful identities as they interact with mediated religious texts produced by and circulated via myriad systems of communication. Here, the effort of Stewart Hoover and his collaborators has been highly influential (Hoover and Clark 2002; Hoover 2006). Relying primarily on insights from cultural studies and the results of detailed empirical investigations, they show how the particular social, economic and political locations of the audience crucially influence their interpretations of various mediated religious texts and their religious experiences. The invention of new media technologies often causes seismic shifts in the ways people conduct their social, economic and political activities. The most frequently cited recent example is the invention of the World Wide Web, which reconfigures, among many other things, the way commercial transactions are conducted across the world (for example, financial dealings at the speed of electrical pulses), how people cultivate and maintain social ties (for example, via email and blogs) and how the relationship between citizens and the state has evolved (for example, e-government portals and political mobilisations via social media). In recent years there is in many societies a trend towards convergence between the so-called 'new' and 'old media', so that 'traditional' media institutions such as printed publications, television channels and radio broadcasting have either shifted completely to, or integrated with, a web-based platform to reach out to audiences.

The development of new media technologies such as the Internet and the proliferation of digital content in the online environment have prompted researchers on religion and the media to ask how the increasing permeation of the 'new media' into all aspects of contemporary life has impacted on religion. Some like Hjarvard have argued that the influence of the media has come to encompass to unprecedented degrees such a wide range of social activity that even the realm of religion can be considered thoroughly 'mediatised', that is, contemporary manifestations of religiosity in its social, cultural and political dimensions are integrally shaped by the logics of media. In a highly industrialised, media-saturated...
Another corpus of research that our discussion of Christianity and the media in Asia can profitably draw on argues that religion itself can be considered a practice of mediation. Central to this discussion is the view that the transcendent in religious experience is not a self-revealing entity, but is always brought forth through a mediation process. In other words, intrinsic to religion is a mediation process that both conditions the manifestation of the transcendent and serves as a bridge between the immanent and the transcendent. Here the concept of media is extended beyond the familiar one of films, television, photography or computers to include 'incenses or herbs, sacrificial animals, icons, sacred books, holy stones and rivers [and] the human body, which lends itself to be possessed by a spirit' (Meyer 2009: 11; see also de Vries 2001; Horsfield, Hess and Medrano 2004). In this vein, understanding Christianity and media in Asia involves paying close attention to the specific ways and methods by which representations of the Christian God/Jesus Christ are created, and also how such representations are circulated and shared among believers, thus engendering in turn the relations that structure various Christian communities (Spiry 2008). As new media technologies emerge, become widely appropriated by believers and influence alternate ways of imagining the divine, social relations between believers are in turn reconfigured to create new communities.

Apart from media impact on the practice of Christianity, it is also necessary to discuss how Christianity interprets and appropriates media, especially the new media such as the Internet. For instance, for the Roman Catholic Church, the proper understanding and utilisation of the media is framed primarily in terms of its teachings on social communication, which includes two main components. First, media as constitutive of social communication have to be understood as playing a central role in human development, where the person is considered in 'a holistic manner, engaging the whole of one's life, from the economic, political, and psychological dimensions of human existence, to the artistic, social, and spiritual, all in equal measure' (Caccamo 2009: 302). The Vatican's view of media technology echoes that of the latest philosophical and sociological insights by scholars on technology as discussed above, in that people's knowledge and reflections about the world and about themselves are inescapably conditioned by media technologies, to the extent that the totality of the human experience can be considered a mediated experience. Second, the media is essential for the development of the very social institutions that are necessary for the
maintenance of human life. The media is integral to the channelling of important and truthful information between social institutions and members of society, which in turn facilitates cooperation and mutual understanding, allowing different individuals and groups in society to seek the common good (Caccamo 2009: 303). This highlights the importance the Catholic Church places on the public role of the media in providing timely and accurate information for decision makers and citizens so that deliberations over matters of public concern can be fruitfully conducted in an open and reasonable way. Given the sizable number of Catholics in Asia, an awareness of the Vatican’s position on media is indispensable in an investigation of how institutional values of the church impinge on the ways in which ordinary believers attribute meanings to and utilise media, and of the interactional dynamics between the application of institutional norms and everyday practices.

MEDIA, EVANGELISM, COMMUNITY FORMATION
From the creation of devotional images of Jesus to the printing and distribution of the Bible and religious tracts, and from the production of Christian feature films to the use of the Internet for disseminating Christian messages, Christian groups and churches continue actively to use the media, as in the past, as an important instrument for universal evangelisation. Given that Pentecostalism and its variants are the fastest rising forms of Christianity in many parts of the world, including Asia, we can expect that in the coming decades the Christian use of the media will be largely influenced by how these groups and churches utilise the media to spread the Gospel and create communities of believers. Theologically founded on the idea of the ‘Great Commission’, which exhorts each individual Christian to consider evangelisation as a personal calling, the Pentecostal movement since its inception utilised mass media for spreading the Gospel. The main means was initially the radio, followed by television, and now the Internet. The case of Pentecostalism shows that the extent to which religious messages are promulgated and the ways in which religious ties are formed depend significantly on the technology of communication. For example, when radio became portable, cheaply available and mass produced, Christian groups and missionaries relied on it heavily for evangelisation, especially to peoples living in remote areas. In the 1950s, during the Cold War, American televangelism made huge inroads into countries such as the Philippines, South Korea and Japan (Kay 2009: 248). The actual type of media being used for religious communication and proselytising has to be based on such considerations as the predominant type of media accessible by the targeted audience and the availability of funding for different media technologies. This is largely related to the fact that there is still unequal development in Asian countries in terms of economic wealth, communication infrastructure, openness to external cultural influences, political liberalisation and state control over the mass media.

Nowadays, many Christian organisations use a variety of media forms concurrently, rather than relying on just one type to reach out to their audiences. For example, in the South Indian city of Chennai, Thomas (2007: 29–30) has shown that there are five main media avenues utilised by Christians (especially the Pentecostals and Neo-Pentecostals) for Christian television: 1) national broadcasters; 2) transnational satellite channels; 3) secular cable channels; 4) indigenous Christian cable channels; 5) web-based telecasting. The last avenue, web-based telecasting, has limited audience reach, while the transnational Christian channels such as GOD TV and Daystar TV count the English-speaking middle class among their main audiences. The programmes with widest reach, however, are those based on Indian languages produced by independent Christian producers for local channels (Thomas 2007: 30). Consider also the case of the El Shaddai in the Philippines, a charismatic group founded by Mariano ‘Mike’ Velarde in 1981, which grew out of a popular radio programme. According to one estimate, the group has between nine and eleven million members (Wiegele 2006: 497). Even today, radio is an indispensable element in El Shaddai spirituality, largely due to the fact that it is the most affordable and hence most accessible form of mass media for the majority of Brother Mike’s followers, who are drawn mainly from the lower socio-economic classes. In addition to providing entertainment, for many Filipinos the radio also offers a wide platform for social, political and religious commentary. These days, El Shaddai spirituality is mediated through both radio and television, by which the sacred power emanating from Brother Mike during mass rallies is transmitted to followers around the country, in effect incorporating diverse localities into a single religious space (Wiegele 2005: 50; Francisco 2010: 201).

The cases discussed above highlight the saliency of socio-economic class in shaping believers’ experience of Christianity via the mass media. We can expect to see that for those in the poorer, lower economic classes, cheaply produced printed texts, television, radio, inexpensive mobile phones would be more widely used, whereas for those in the
upper and middle classes, the Internet, as well as the latest entertainment and communication technologies would feature more prominently. Since the explosion of the number of Internet users and the widespread adoption of mobile technologies since the late 1990s, many Christian groups in Asia have appropriated these relatively new media – web-based information systems such as e-mails, weblogs, social media sites, websites, chatrooms and the like – to reach out to believers and to non-believers. The development of Web 2.0 with new systems of online information storage and sharing has prompted a flourish of research on religion and the Internet, much of which has focused on the experience of Christianity. Studies show that participants in these web-based services are usually not passive users who only seek and receive information. They are the producers (producer and user) engaging in dynamically evolving interactions with multiple co-participants, contributing to the online production of Christian content and information sharing. The proliferation of social networking sites, wikis, file-sharing networks, folksonomies and syndication sites, accessible not only via desk-bound computers but increasingly via mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets, has transformed the ways in which Christian evangelisation is conducted and how the faith is practised.

Christians throughout Asia with access to the Internet can now participate in chatrooms about their faith; subscribe to e-mail lists to receive information concerning devotional prayers, church activities, donation appeals and so on; and read online Christian magazines and newspapers to find out more about alternative forms of religious practices. Many have also acquired a self-identity and modus operandi inseparable from these media. A good example is Korean Christianity as described by Kristeen Kim (2007), who analyses the web-presence of two mega-churches in Korea – the Myung Sung Presbyterian Church (MSC) and the Yoido Full Gospel Church (YFGC) – and examines how the Christian spirituality of Korean mega-churches has evolved as they embraced the power of the Internet. The analysis of both the design and content of the churches’ websites provides insights into how Pentecostal Christian groups present ideas about the divine, spiritual life, as well as their views on current issues and Christianity’s relationship with the wider society.

Both these websites give the strong impression that Christianity is at ease with modernity and technology. The MSC website contains images of the church next to modern high-rise buildings to convey the message that the church is both at home and having an important spiritual role
to play in a modern secular environment. The accompanying highbrow orchestral music and operatic singing suggest order, elite culture and formality.

The Yoido Full Gospel Church is part of the Full Gospel Broadcasting group (www.fgtv.com). The fact that ‘tv’ appears on the website address is significant, for it reveals clearly how the group consciously seeks to embed itself in the multimedia world and to publicly acknowledge it, as part of its self-understanding. The Full Gospel Broadcasting website, accessible in seven other languages apart from Korean, not only offers a virtual church, but also provides a wide range of lifestyle options as part of its other ‘ministries’. The broadcasting ministry transmits videos and music from the church over the Internet and is linked with the group’s six cable TV channels. There is also a Sharing Community, which contains chatrooms, movies, cartoons and teaching videos (some on Korean cooking). There are resources for personal devotions and daily columns written by dedicated bloggers. The Village of Praise ministry offers worship material such as devotional songs and prayers. The group also publishes a national newspaper, The People’s Daily (Kukmin Ilbo), which is available online. As usage of mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets becomes ever more widespread, in South Korea and elsewhere, the Yoido Full Gospel Church and Full Gospel Broadcasting are offering mobile services providing daily Bible verses, ring-tones from popular Christian music, podcasts and TV programmes for users to download.

As web-based information systems become increasing integrated into the daily lives of people in Asia, especially among those belonging to the educated, urban-based middle class, who tend to have greater access to such systems, it is likely that increasing numbers of Christian groups and churches will rely on these systems and the latest media technologies to reach out to audiences, and also ground their theologies and self-understanding in relation to these media technologies. Cruz (2009) argues that the widespread use of the latest media technologies in worship in many churches highlights a new ‘techno-spirituality’ that enables the churches to embed firmly and to thrive in an environment of late-capitalism suffused with consumerism and saturated with media technologies. The fact that the ‘Prosperity Gospel’ exerts so strong a hold over the mega-churches throughout the big cities of Asia such as Singapore, Seoul and Chennai coupled with the fact that the forms of media technology utilised in these churches are so similar suggests that ‘techno-spirituality’ is a manifestation of the globalisation of a particular
form of Christianity, one which has strong affinity with a global middle class steeped in the values of consumerism.

The increasing accessibility of the Internet and the nature of online interaction have resulted in profound changes to the way Christian evangelisation is conducted. These days the travels of missionaries to non-Christian territories are complemented with online evangelism, focusing on seeking converts who are adept users of the Internet. This, according to Cornelio (2009), is the 'new face of global evangelism'. One important reason why the Internet has become such a major arena for Christian evangelisation is that more and more people are seeking information on religious matters using the Internet. This phenomenon is related to what Stephen Warner has termed a 'new paradigm': religion in contemporary societies is as much achieved as ascribed. Many people are participating in religious seeking as part of their construction of self and identity, and the Internet can provide the resources for these religious seekers reflexively to engage in processes of identity- and meaning-construction (Castells 2001; Hoover and Park 2004). Will the Internet stimulate new levels of religiosity, or will it cause the eventual demise of organised religion? Many Christian groups with a strong web presence in fact encourage seekers to pursue their religious interests and participate in religious activities by approaching their local churches, emphasising the importance of face-to-face interactions.

Through his study of TruthMedia, an evangelistic website belonging to the Campus Crusade for Christ, Cornelio (2009) shows that online evangelism characteristically displays a number of essential features. First, there is an effort to bridge socio-cultural gaps when the reach is potentially global. To be effective, evangelistic websites and Christian online communities are usually available in a few languages. Thus, while a website might originate from a particular society with a dominant national language, such as the Yoido Full Gospel Church, to have extensive reach it needs be available in other languages, especially those of its targeted audience. Articles targeted at particular ethnic groups are often written by authors of the same ethnicity; similarly, the ethnicity of an online evangelist should ideally match that of the seekers they are trying to convert. In short, an aspiration towards universal reach coupled with particularistic cultural sensibilities.

Secondly, online evangelistic websites seem to encourage creativity among their members or volunteers in finding innovative ways to establish relationships with users and seekers for effective evangelism. An important reason is that the seekers, like many Internet surfers, tend to have relatively short attention spans and display the habit of flitting among a variety of sites. Thus, evangelistic websites usually contain attractive graphics and provide sophisticated multi-media experience, all requiring high levels of creative input, to attract and hold the attention of visitors. Furthermore, many websites aim to create viable communities with norms guiding the interactions of members and other active users. For example, converts might be encouraged to contribute back to the community by, for example, becoming a volunteer for the wide range of tasks available, such as chatroom moderator, online evangelist or column writer or by producing multi-media presentations, building their own evangelistic websites, and so on. The possibility for one to post reflections and comments on one's spiritual progress and on theological matters, write encouraging words and respond to other users' posts allows for the emergence of performative and discursive codes – in other words, a site-specific culture – that facilitates a sense of community.

Lastly, the greater involvement of users in Christian online communities can often lead to a democratisation of leadership. Religious and organisational leadership training can be provided through online programmes, with minimal or no qualification requirements. This leads us to consider the issue of the Internet and religious authority in Christianity. The traditional forms of authority, based on oral transmission or on print-based textual learning, are being increasingly challenged by the more interactive, dynamic, horizontal and non-linear kind of learning that characterises the Internet experience. The Web has also the tremendous potential of levelling out power differences between different Christian groups, so that a relatively new and unconventional Christian group can appear to be as mainstream as better established denominations (Turner 2007: 118, 127).

Asia has witnessed the rise of a number of centres of evangelical Christianity with significant proportions of the population identified as Christians. The emergence of these centres seems to correlate with their rapidly modernising economies, openness to global cultural flows, and highly developed communication infrastructures. Robbie Goh (2005) argues that places like Hong Kong, Singapore and South Korea are fast becoming important nodes in the regional flow of personnel, finance, theological expertise, artefacts and technologies that are involved in myriad aspects of Christian ministries: evangelism, theological training, media outreach, social activism, humanitarian aid, political mobilisation, social welfare provision, among others. These three locales are also
who are physically present and who function as human media and making incense offerings during Mass are some of the dominant mediated forms of Christian religiosity (Lim 2009b).

CONCLUSION

The main aim of this article was to provide a broad overview of the intimate relations between media and Christianity in contemporary Asia by taking into account two overlapping strands of scholarship, one of technology and society, the other of religion and the media. Presently, Christians throughout Asia do not just attend religious services on Sundays and special occasions such as Easter, Christmas and other feast days. Many also rely on the humble radio to listen to sermons and Christian messages transmitted through the airwaves or sit in front of their television sets experiencing the collective effervescence of a religious rally or search the World Wide Web for Christian websites that provide answers to their religious questions and that allow them to connect with fellow believers in far-flung corners of the world. Others again would experience great difficulty even in acquiring a copy of the printed Bible in their own language, either due to their physical isolation or to concerted efforts at religious repression by state authorities. While it is imperative for us to examine the differential access of various social groups to different forms of media in their practice of Christian spirituality, it is also important to note that many people live in a multi-media social environment, with exposure to print, oral or online media simultaneously, albeit to varying degrees depending on changing contexts. Globally, the increasing popularity of Internet-enabled social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter would demand much more future research that takes this important socio-technological development into account. These days, with the trend towards media convergence, the distinction between the ‘old’ and ‘new’ media is becoming increasingly blurred. Moreover, if we were to take a longer term, life-course perspective, it would be possible to analyse the changing patterns of religious practice of Christians in Asia as they move through different stages of their lives while gaining access to different forms of media technology. In sum, the theological positions that Christian communities in Asia have toward diverse forms of media technology and the extent to which new media technologies are integrated into daily life influence the ways in which Christianity is practiced in different parts of Asia and how the actual contours of religious boundaries are drawn.
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