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Review: Religion and media In America

Resenha: Religião e mídia na América

Revisión: Religión y medios en América

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Religion is a very important part of American culture and society. That is one of the main reasons why there is a wide range of specialized communication programs and formats on religious themes. The media and business groups that produce and design this content time are very broad in nature. This media context is a challenge for researchers who, for decades, have been dedicating their efforts and resources to these thematic planes. There are many publications on the world of religion and the media, but it cannot be said that there is a research trend (linear and uniform). Anthony Earl Hatcher's¹ book forms cutting-edge research that takes into account a wide range of academic traditions on these subjects.

The term “religion” is used in the title, but the term “Christianity” could very well be used, as all the case studies are related to Protestantism and Catholicism. The body of the publication is made up of three thematic blocks, with two chapters per block. The different segments are: acknowledgments, introduction, conclusion, documentary sources and indexes. The book was published in the United States, with the publishing seal of Lexington Books.²

In the acknowledgments and the introduction, a series of reflections on the theme of the book are outlined and the motivations of the research context are listed. Professor Hatcher comments on the evolution of his professional career bound to the world of communication specialized in religious themes. Also, he justifies the methodological transformations of the publications arising from his different research cycles. For the author, religion is a topic present in the debate of political representatives and public spaces, and for this reason, it must have a place within the research agendas of social studies. The institutional work of religion is unfailingly linked to the expansion strategy of the media and the analysis of religiosity cannot be dissociated from cultural studies. The introduction attempts to define and theoretically define Reformed Protestantism, the tele-preaching model and the concept of popular culture to make the development of the following chapters more fluid.

The first block is entitled “Civil Religion.” In these pages, the social implications in the world of Christian communication and the ideological impregnations of Protestant activism are explored. Two main excerpts emerge from this block: Christian movements keep their proselytizing vocation intact in the new digital contexts and Christian identities strengthen ties with a model of conservative nationalism.

The first chapter, “Moral Mondays in the South. God Talk, Christian Activism, and Civil Disobedience in the Digital Age,” condenses a series of adaptations of Christian rhetoric in the process of the Digital Revolution; in other words, the transition from the old dialectical lines of Christian activism and the social rebellion of conservative “America” against the advance of progressivism in public institutions. Throughout the chapter, the conservative drift of Christian communication and the social disconnection of the Democratic Party with the activist movements located in the orbit of tele-evangelism are exposed. In the second chapter, “So Blessed by God. Adding the Almighty to the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag”, addresses the systematic strategy of activism to identify with national symbols and “patriotic”

sentiments. There is also a review of sacralization in the media spaces of the oath, the hymn, the flag, the collective prayer, the presence of symbolism in public spaces, et cetera.

"Religion and Entertainment" is the title of the second thematic block. Professor Hatcher contributes a series of very original elements because the entertainment function of religious programming content is a very little studied subject. In this section of the publication, the different assets and agents of religious communication are analyzed from an entertainment perspective in two case studies: tele-evangelism (Actors, Models & Talent for Christ - AMTC) and audiovisual productions linked to the structure Christian media (The Way).

The third chapter, "God Wants His Stars Everywhere. The Media Mission of Actors, Models, and Talent for Christ," shows the ingenuity, to put it kindly, of Christian producers in using any format for the transmission of values and moral concepts. Electronic communication inspired a new form of priesthood in the early part of the last century, but media trends and fads among audiences have triggered a series of structural adaptations in recent decades. The fourth chapter, "Sacramental Pilgrimage. Catholicism, Humanism, Spirituality, and Community Along The Way," reflects on the process of assembling ideological elements in the process of communicative creation. Tangentially, this type of communicative content sets theological references and narrative settings favorable to the dissemination of doctrinal examples. The chapter pays special attention to the film by Emilio Estévez: *The Way* (2010).

American audiences demand communication products specialized in religious themes. This factor is decisive for communication groups when designing their programming. In this way, there are journalistic institutions and communication companies of a non-religious nature that produce very different types of content related to the world of religiosity and spirituality based on production criteria that stem from sources typical of American popular culture. "Sacred and Profane Media" is the title of the third thematic block.

"Copyrighting God. Translating, Publishing, Marketing, and Selling the Bible," is the title of the fifth chapter. It presents us with a process of commodification of the intellectual production of Christianity for the purpose of financing by institutions and individuals linked to ecclesiastical organizations, as well as a process of commodification associated with producers without a strictly Christian nature. For this, the author raises several paradoxes and focuses on some contradictions. Among them, the reflections contained in the epigraph stand out: "Made in China." Both cases have a long historical history. In the sixth and last chapter, "Jesus Laughed. The Uses and Abuses of Religious Satire," Professor Hatcher raises a lack of equal treatment in the media when it comes to satire with religious symbols. Since the 1970s, a disrespectful and constant humor has been displayed towards the figure of Jesus and the belief system of Christianity. Many current examples are also put on the lack of criteria, while maintaining that there is a very different treatment with other great religions. The ridicule of religious groups can pose a risk of discrimination.

The conclusion tries to defend the idea of six parallel investigations within the whole of the publication. The analysis of the communicative agents seeks: the promotion of a civic and respectful culture in the context of the investigation, the explanation of the religious interactions with a range of cultural phenomenon at the communicative level and the independence of the motivations of the investigation with respect to religious organizations with which some kind of link can be kept. All sections of the book are raised from the approaches of popular culture and communicative models. Professor Hatcher ends his work, on page

229, with an interesting reflection: "The media cannot replace religion, but they can be religious and spiritually significant." The documentary sources section is very interesting, both for the quantity of the collected works, and for the novel nature of the same.

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1 He graduated from the English Philology degree program and completed a Master in Media Discourses at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Subsequently, he completed his doctorate at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in the Mass Communication Research program. He is currently an Associate Professor (since 2002) and Chair of the Department of Journalism at Elon University (North Carolina). He teaches the subjects of "History of Journalism" and "Religion and the Media." He has a long history in the local press: Winston-Salem Journal, Thomasville Times, Daily News, The Charlotte Observer and Herald-Sun. Among his long list of publications, he highlights his work as coordinator in the book: *Mass Communication in the Global Age*.

2 It is one of the business ramifications of the Rowman & Littlefield publishing group. The group's parent company was founded in 1949 in Lanham, Maryland with the intention of entering the growing market for academic work and scientific dissemination. Today, it is an international corporation with distribution and production offices in several Anglo-Saxon countries. Since its inception, the group has engulfed a multitude of companies in the same sector until it reached its current size. He specializes in various fields of the social sciences and humanities, but his collections on international relations, philosophy, cultural studies and political communication, educational theory, and religion stand out.