

Discourses on Religion - Media Intercession: Delineating the Fault Lines

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Abstract

The questions and concerns of existing media studies on Islam have largely been confined to (1) whether the new information and communication order bring (Muslim) communities closer together or atomize their already precarious relationships (2), how does the introduction of new communication technology play an important agentive role in shaping religious discourses in Muslim communities (3), is religious authority waxing or waning, diversifying or centralizing in the information age? and (4), how religious elites have overcome autonomous media infrastructures, their institutional apparatuses and the independent consumers they have produced by entrenching their religious authority in new ways. Sometimes they have also been studied as a question of representation or in tandem with economic liberalism and argued that it was the political and neoliberal economic reforms in the last three decades and the subsequent creation of a pluralized media landscape that helped Muslims to develop the discursive competences, skills, institutions and other infrastructures essential to articulate their religion in public, intervene in public debates and to restructure the public sphere. The present paper argues that such questions and answers not only consider religion and media as two autonomous entities belonging to two antagonistic realms acting independently, but often give media a higher epistemic value over religion.

Keywords:

Religion, Media, Islam, Economic Reform, Reintellectualisation, Network Society

In an article by Biersdorfer (2002) published in the *New York Times* titled “Religion Finds Technology” the author begins by explaining the scene inside a church in the Kensington section of Brooklyn in the US on an early Sunday morning as follows:

“Live full-color images from cameras placed around the room started to appear on the wall-mounted projection screens, and the crowd began to quiet down in anticipation. The room was full of sleek video and audio gear and illuminated by theatrical lighting equipment”.

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After an elaborate description of the objects and scenes in the interior of the church, Biersdorfer warns his readers that one should not mistake this scene for a stage production, a sport event or a studio floor set up for television show recording. "It is a church on a Sunday morning preparing for their weekly service," he reminds his readers. He is awed by the presence of the latest communication technology, primarily developed to facilitate better communication between human beings, in a chapel built for mediating between God and his followers.

In the last few years of my research on religion and media, I had also encountered awe and surprise from others alerting me to the fact that I may have been mistaken in bringing together religion and media technology in my research. In my conversations with them I could sense the origin of these anxieties. It was based on two convictions. One, they truly believed that religion and media belonged to two different realms. If the former is a matter of the afterlife, the latter is considered as a matter pertaining to the here and now. The second conviction had direct bearing on my person. As a journalist I used to write for both mainstream and alternative media organizations (in Malayalam and English) about developmental issues such as the agrarian crisis, the Adivasi land question and the Civil Society movements in South India for many years, before I took a long break. Recently I started writing again for the Malayalam press, but this time dealing with a completely different set of issues and concerns than what I once used to. The issues I engaged with in my recent writings were mostly about religion, above all Islam and its interactions with the media. And that constituted the second source of their worry. Many of my readers seriously believed (of course they were all well-wishers too) that by choosing religion, particularly Islam as a subject to study and to write about instead of development I was destroying a successful future in journalism.

This tendency to see religion and media as two antagonistic realms and the anxieties it generates are not new at all. It is not a misconception particular to those outside the scholarly circles also. These anxieties have been part and parcel of a larger symptom in the very way questions on religion and media were posed and answered in the academic disciplines as well. Such questions and answers not only consider religion and media as two autonomous entities belonging to two antagonistic realms acting independently, but often give media a higher epistemic value over religion.⁶ It is this higher epistemic value

⁶ Daniel Lerner (1958), one of the key proponents of the modernisation theory argue that media plays a crucial role in the modernisation process. His pioneering work *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing Middle East* (1958) notes, "As people are more exposed to media, the greater is their capability to imagine themselves as strange persons in strange situations, places and time than did people in any previous historical epoch" (p. 52). A more recent edited volume on media in South Asian religious societies proceeds on the very assumption that the relationship between media and religious societies has always been a

attributed to media technology that causes Biersdorfer of the *New York Times* or the friend of mine in Kozhikode to get surprised whenever they see religion alongside media or vice versa.

Religion against Media

As indicated above, this worry has been a prevalent one in many academic studies on media and religion in the last several years. Francis Robinson (1993) in his study on technology and religious change in South Asia exemplifies this tendency in a different way by asking why “print did not begin to become established in the Islamic world until the nineteenth century, four hundred years after it began to be established in the Christendom” (pp. 229-251). According to him this ‘late arrival’ of printing technology in the Islamic world owes to the way knowledge and its authority have been maintained in the Muslim world. Here he presents religion and technology not only as two opposite ways of understanding things, but technology as also the legitimate way of understanding and correcting religion. Subsequently, Robinson would argue that the large-scale resistance from Muslim religious authorities towards adopting printing technologies was basically to prevent their followers from knowing their religion legitimately. By arguing so what he is indicating towards is the “inherent tension in religion, particularly in Islam to interact with technologies” (pp. 229-251).⁷

The ‘unpredicted return of religion’⁸ and the massive expansion of media technology have been considered as two important developments in the recent past. Some scholars argue that these two phenomena are two unrelated events. They might have happened simultaneously by coincidence and should be studied independently. Others argue that these are two well-connected events demanding attention in relation to each other. What are the implications of these two seemingly different approaches toward religion-media entanglements? What hopes has this attempt to establish or demolish the relationship between religious and technological media set in place? When they are studied in relation to each other how are the questions being asked and answered? When they are

unilateral one where communication technologies shape religious traditions and systems, not the other way round. See Babb & Wadley (1997).

⁷ I will examine this argument in detail in the next chapter while discussing the introduction of print technologies among Muslim communities.

⁸ The narrative of modernity proposes a transition to a rational, modern order where religion does not have any significant role. However, the post-colonial experience points towards a different direction. The post-colonial condition in many parts of the world is chiefly characterized by the relevance of religion in public life. Religion in such communities and cultures, instead of withering away has survived and emerged as a standpoint proposing an alternative epistemology and ontological explanation for everyday life. This phenomenon has been by and large termed in popular as well as academic studies as return of religion or as a return of religion. See Raschke (2012), particularly the chapter titled ‘Postmodernism and the return of the “religious”’ (pp. 52-69).

studied independently how are they being posed? How different or similar are these approaches? From where do these approaches enter the broader philosophical traditions? And finally, what kind of conceptual assumptions about religion and media are persistent in these traditions? Considering how these approaches have been elucidated in various academic studies in the past might serve to answer some of the questions raised above.

Religion and Media

Manuel Castells (1996), known for his conceptual formulation on network societies (originally proposed by social theorist George Simmel)⁹ basically argues that the “social structure and activities of “New society” in the information age are organized, shaped and sustained not by vertical hierarchical systems, organizations or schemas such as religion but by electronically processed information and communication technologies” (pp. 3-4). Though there have been social networks/connections throughout human history, according to Castells, the restructuring of industrial economies in the wake of globalization, the rights-based civil movements of the 1970s and ’80s, and the revolution in information and communication technology in the last three decades distinguish all the previous structures of networking/connections from the one we experience today. The important technological characteristic of the present time, for Castells (2000), is the historically specified communication system organized around the electronic integration of all the previous modes of communication systems available to human beings, from the typographic to multisensorial information technologies. The mode of connection that binds this ‘comprehensive medium’ together and its consumers as a ‘truly network society’ is a set of ‘inter connected nodes’ that are ‘value free and neutral’ (emphasis mine), which includes and excludes relevant nodes based on decentred performance standards and shared decision making (p. 16).

But interestingly, Castells excludes religion from this ‘interconnected nodes’ claiming that religious communes refuse to ‘bend to the network’ (p.19) and he is very categorical on this when it comes to the question of Islam. He not only places the historically encoded information such as that of religion and its moral world outside the realm of integrated communication system and the network society it envisions, but also argues that the latter makes all the

⁹ The intellectual origin of the idea of network society goes back to the German Sociologist George Simmel (d.1918), who analyzed the effect of modernization and industrial capitalism on complex patterns of affiliation, organization, production and experience. His book *Conflict and the web of Group-affiliations* (1955) is considered as a pioneering work on this. See Chayko’s (2015) review of this book titled “The first web theorist? George Simmel and the legacy of ‘The web of group-affiliations’”.

symbolic power of traditional communicators external to the ‘comprehensive medium’ irrelevant. The only possible way for this historically transmitted transcended information to secure an earthly coexistence with information societies and sustain their relevance is to ‘recode themselves in the new system’ by ‘losing their super human status’ (pp. 10-20). He also hopes that societies will become truly secularized and enchanted when all the superhuman wonders can be seen online (Castells, 1996: p. 406).

For Castells (1997) the contemporary religiosity or what he calls the ‘conspicuous consumption of religion’ one sees today is a temporary paradox in the secularization process. Global informationalism and the spatial-temporal sensibilities that the secularization process invokes will finally lead the societies to the mechanical reproduction of belief; superhuman wonders online. He describes these processes as a move from the “inducement of virtual reality to the construction of real virtuality” or what he calls “the belief in making” (pp. 370-75).

The role of religion in the information age, Castells believes is reactionary in nature. He makes this argument explicit when he opines that “religion is contemporary culture’s main discontent and the mere sign of resistance to the new logic of informationalization and globalization” (pp. 19-20). The contemporary Muslim religiosity, which he calls “fundamentalism” in these descriptions, is either a “reaction against unreachable modernization or the evil consequences of globalization and the collapse of the post-nationalist project” (p. 26). It is this antagonistic approach towards religion and technology that allows Castells to argue that when the world enlarges via information, it will force religious authorities to control it and as a defensive strategy, religion will have to go public. Islamic fundamentalism for Castells is precisely part of such a public articulation of Muslim religiosity.

Interestingly enough, in his later work on identity in the information age Castells (1997) makes a different turn from his earlier postulations. Like Oliver Roy (2004) here he counts ‘Muslim fundamentalism’ among the many nodes that constitute the new network society, which according to him is the product of the information age.¹⁰ But he does it with a precautionary note that ‘Muslim fundamentalism’ can also be the result of deficiency of information that enables and structures the conditions of possibilities for global jihadi networks to form, organize and sustain (pp. 12-22). Thus while it is the excess of information available to one through various technologies that makes network society possible, in the case of Islam it is the deficiency of information, according to Castells that acts as the organizing principle for network society.

For our analytical purposes what is noteworthy here is the way religion/religiosity in general and its Islamic version in particular finds an entry

¹⁰ Manuel Castells here specifically mentions *Al Qaeda*.

and exit in Castells' studies. On the one hand religiosity for him is an aberration in/from contemporary life. It reminds one of modernity's unfinished projects and promises. Once modernity has a comprehensive hold over the world religion/religiosity will disappear. So religiosity for Castells is something to be ignored as it is just a matter of time before it will disappear. On the other hand, Castells takes religion/religiosity very seriously in his analysis and sometimes even describes it as reminiscent of modernity itself. In doing so he presents the growth and popularity of global *jihadi* organizations as evidence for the historical importance of network society and its resilience in today's world order. He further argues that these organizations contribute in their turn to the rise of what he terms "the network state" and thereby alter the existing international order (pp. 108-44). But even when he counts religion as one of the nodes among the modes of network society, in whatever limited fashion, he dismisses public articulations of religion except its 'fundamentalist' versions expressed through the means and actions of *jihadi* organizations. Other forms of religious expressions are, for him, reactionary trends against deteriorating patterns of socio-economic exclusion triggered by globalization (p. 42).

It is evident from Castells' approach reproduced in the above discussion that he sees religion and the media as antagonistic to each other and their coming together as an undesirable act.¹¹ Such an understanding, part of long standing hegemonic arguments in social theory, according to Eickelman (1996) is a result of "oversimplified dichotomization of tradition and modernity" using which most of the social theorizations of contemporary religiosity have been carried out. For Eickelman this over simplification comes from a specific conceptualization of modernity which "lay in sharp contrast between two artificial constructs of modernity and tradition and the consequent misunderstanding of the entrenched social functions of tradition" (pp. 23-24). Such "oversimplified conceptualizations" are set in place in the long traditions of hope that theories on modernization and disenchantment are expected to prove disappearance of religion from public. It is obvious that such a notion will insist one to place religion/religiosity and information/media in antagonistic terms. For them the conjuncture of these domains is an undesirable act.

¹¹ It could be said that such a reading of Castells skips the critical attention he deserves. However, the ambiguities present throughout his tirade in fact argue the opposite; being religious in Castells' formulation does not mean abstention from modern media technology. But such a reading of Castells I would argue is only possible at the expense of his overall understanding of religion vis-à-vis technology and the role he assigns to both in relation to the other. This becomes clear when one looks at the way he presents feminism and environmentalism as transformative movements made possible along with technological revolution, but positions 'fundamentalism' as a reactionary movement. The role of new communication systems and the information society it envisions in this regard is to radically transform spatial and temporal understandings sustained by a socially, culturally and historically encoded information system such as religion. Information society then sets forth a disembodied view of information and communication technology.

Religion after Media

Now let us consider Eickelman and Anderson (1999) (henceforth E&A) who seem to argue that the relationship between the religious and the technological is a systematic one more than a reactionary one as Castells and others have suggested. E&A begin their studies by critiquing scholars who study religion-media intersection with their over simplified understanding of modernity and tradition. When scholars like Castells see religion as a social system that refuse to “bend to the network” as a problem to be ignored, E&A see contemporary Muslim religiosity triggered by various media technology as just the opposite; religion is something which flourishes along with globalization and its information and communication technologies. According to them “the easy accessibility and proliferation of electronic media facilitate the constitution of a new Muslim public and enable them to challenge both the state and religious authorities, build civil society and engage in transnational relations” (1999: pp. 7-10). The new Muslim public sphere, according to them, is constituted by the new media technologies both as an alternative concept to the civil society in the Muslim context or as an entry point for Muslim religiosity to go public. By arguing so, they suggest that all forms of contemporary Muslim religiosity are distinctively a modern phenomenon.

Though E&A and Castells seem to differ in their understanding of Muslim religiosity vis-à-vis information and communication technology, at closer analysis they look more similar than at first. The paradoxes in Castells’ claims take on a new form in E&A, who begin their analyses claiming to offer a critique of scholars working with an oversimplified dichotomization of the religious and the technological. It is this curious similarity of thought that underpin the intellectual projects in Castells and E&A who come from different disciplinary and ideological backgrounds and begin their inquiries with two different hypotheses, but at the end render similar kind of explanations when it comes to the question of Muslim religiosity vis-à-vis communication technology that I want to emphasis here.

A closer analysis of E&A’s arguments on what they call the new Muslim public in the Islamic world will bring out how Castells’ propositions are mirrored in their work – that religion and technology belong to different realms and contemporary religiosity is a reaction to globalization and the resultant binaries he (Castells) draws on. In E&A’s formulations, religion and technology do not belong to different realms but the latter facilitates the former. To elucidate this claim and to bring out the Castells in E&A, I offer here a detailed analysis of the latter’s propositions.

Three things are fundamental to E&A’s conceptual understanding of the new Islamic public sphere. They are the new media, the new public and reintellectualisation. Let us take each of these three elements separately.

Imagining new media¹² as more than a technology and thus necessarily different from all other communication technologies in the past, E&A argue:

Minor and emergent channels of communication that have proliferated are not mass in the sense as conventional print and broadcasting. They are composed and consumed within more specialized, often voluntarily entered fields where producers and consumers, senders and receivers, are far less distinguishable than broadcasters or the press and their audience. Instead they merge in a kind of transnational community that moves the centre of discussion and its impetus off shore or overseas because their technology is mobile or was first available there (1999: p. 8).

New Media, which is very central to the Islamic public sphere that they envision, “reconfigure audiences as communities”, “radically reduce the social and cultural distance between producer and consumers” and “occupy an interesting space between the super literacy of traditional religious specialists and mass sub literacy or illiteracy” (pp. 9-11). They see new media as the “natural home” of emerging bourgeois middle class Muslims in the Islamic world. These Muslims draw on numerous media domains made possible by new media technologies to produce creolized discourses¹³ on Islamic texts and practices that are not authorized anymore or importantly, do not require to be authorized by traditional religious authorities anywhere but are instead produced by new people in intermediate discourses. These new people, “who have emerged and have benefited from the huge increase in modern mass education” (p. 10) “widen the circle of those affected by new media constitute a market for new mixes of ideas” (p.11). Thus Madrasas, the traditional Islamic centres of teaching and learning, trained and strengthened a small number of elites and their networks and empowered this small group of elite to interpret religious traditions and circulate the authoritative techniques to others (Eickelman, 1992). In contrast, the “more widely open and spread” modern mass education opened up and brought in new avenues for a wide range of “intellectual techniques and authorities” (p. 650). This transformation in the domain of knowledge practices,

¹² By new media they generally mean means of mass communication using digital technologies such as the Internet.

¹³ By creolized discourses I mean those discourses that emerge from the new players and sites outside the traditional knowledge circles of Islam. They include Muslim media commentators, tele-evangelists and popular preachers. They make use of new media technology extensively in order to make their arguments on issues of religious importance. Their arguments not only contradict and challenge the traditional interpretations of religious texts and practices but are fundamentally based on the assumption that rulings on Islamic affairs does not require a mufti or judge qualified to do *ijtihad*, critical independent research. The controversial Bombay-based tele-evangelist Zakir Naik and the Cairo-based Amor Khaled and their religious rulings are good examples of this. This dynamics between popular arguments and traditional authority or what Nathan J. Brown (2016) calls multiplication of religious spheres in the Islamic world according to E&A is a product of new media environment.

according to Eickelman finally lead to what he calls “the erosion of exclusivities” that previously defined and sustained communities of discourse.¹⁴

According to E&A the link between the new media and the new people in the Muslim world is “reintellectualisation” of Islam. By “*reintellectualisation*” of Islamic tradition, they mean “presenting Islamic doctrine and discourse accessible in vernacular terms, even if this contributes to basic reconfigurations of doctrine and practice” (1999: p. 12). Social theorists had earlier used the category of reintellectualisation to denote ‘folk/local Islam’. But this term has also been widely criticized for deflecting attention from the presence of the global in the local throughout the Muslim world and presenting them as necessarily contradictory (Bull, 1999; Gibb, 1998). But E&A claim that their conceptualization of reintellectualisation of Islamic tradition in the new media context strongly differs from its previous theorizations.¹⁵ For them, with the arrival of new media and its subsequent creation of new people, “Islamic discourse not only moves to the vernacular and become accessible to significantly wider publics, it also becomes framed in styles of reasoning and forms of argument that draws on wider, less exclusive or erudite bodies of knowledge, including those of applied science and engineering” (1999: pp. 12-13).

What does the entanglement between new people, new media and reintellectualisation of Islamic knowledge traditions do? According to Eickelman (1999) at a very fundamental level this conjuncture does five things: (1) empower protest groups within Islam, such as minorities including women; (2) increase fragmentation of religious authority; (3) subsequent democratization of Islamic knowledge tradition; (4) brings into the picture new players to claim religious authority; and (5) inaugurates new ways in which Islam can be approached, studied and commented upon and finally transform religious and political beliefs into a conscious system. Thus media technologies,

Set aside the long tradition of authoritative discourses by religious scholars, so that chemists, medical doctors, journalists and even garage mechanics can interpret “Islamic” principles as equals with scholars who have graduated from the schools of Ulema....New public spheres in which religious norms, practices and values play a significant and sustained role that is not necessarily coterminous with civil society but that can offer powerful support for it. (pp. 14-15, 38)

Such blurring of lines between religion and civil society should remind one, E&A say, of the impossibility of sharply demarcating between the public

¹⁴Eickelman’s understanding of the function of media in the Islamic world is shaped by his earlier studies on Islamic educational institutes in Morocco. For more details see Eickelman (1985).

¹⁵ Here also we see the textual/lived or global/local Islam binary operating in the background, but differently.

and the private, and indicate the more important continuities between these spheres. As a result, the private transcends its traditionally assigned space and enters into the realm of political intervention. Though this political intervention catalysed by the fragmentation of traditional religious authority may lead to political instabilities in the Muslim world in the short run, they are definite that it will finally contribute to and will materialize the formation of a civil society throughout the Middle East and in the Muslim world (Eickelman, 1999: pp. 29-38; Anderson, 1999: pp. 41-53).

As opposed to what E&A had claimed in the beginning that they work against the oversimplified dichotomization of tradition and modernity and for a realization of blurred lines between these two, we see in contrast that this binary plays a significant role in their theorization of the conjuncture between the new media, the new public and the reintellectualisation of Islamic knowledge tradition. Take for example the detailed explanation they provide for reintellectualisation of Islamic knowledge tradition which for them play a crucial role in the development of new Islamic public sphere. Reintellectualisation here demands specific understanding of tradition, authority, temporality, mode of argument and reasoning. Curiously, the acceptance of such specific understanding of tradition and its temporality, as E&A did will not yield any critique on the “over simplified dichotomization” they level at scholars like Castells and others but will only add new layers to their own oversimplifications. In their analysis, E&A do recognize the new interpreters of Islam or what they call the new public as a legitimate public as long as the “reintellectualisation of Islam is anchored less in the long standing conventions of Islamic interpretation than in the modern demands and experiences of Muslims; a shift from a law based to an experience based way of reasoning” (1999: p. 13). Such a theoretical position by default assumes that tradition can only be accessed, legitimized and incorporated through competing interpretations. As a result of this, the Muslim public, and so is Muslim politics, an arena where Muslims argue not over what the correct interpretations of tradition is but what is the appropriate interpretation of tradition for the present day context and what it means to be a Muslim in this context. This contemporary interpretation is only possible by liberating Islam from the traditional Ulema’s mediation. E&A among others assume that it was the liberalization of media that made liberalization of Islamic discourses possible.¹⁶

Though E&A argue that religiosity flourishes along with the expansion and popularity of media technology, they do not legitimate all forms of religion in

¹⁶ Following scholars who see parallels between the religious resurgence and the proliferation of media technology in the last few decades some make the argument that there is a strong connection between liberalization of media that made liberalization of Islamic discourses possible. This has been the dominant trend in many of the studies on Muslim media. See for example, Hackett & Soares (2015).

their analysis but only specific forms of religiosity. So their analysis is predetermined by their conviction of what forms of religiosity should flourish. If it was 'fundamentalism' that found minor recognition in Castells' information network society, it is the "reintellectualised Islam" that finds a place in E&A's emerging Muslim public. Other forms and formats that contemporary Muslim religiosity takes on are the symptoms of the present age's anomalies according to both of them. What does it mean? It simply means that religion cannot enter any debate as it stands. It requires religion to meet certain kinds of conditions and to remake itself accordingly. The task of information and communication technology among religious communities today is to rework religion in order to mould it into a presentable form. In short, it suggests that religion is a problem to be explained along the lines of modernity and its institutional and technological forms. Both Castells and E&A argue this in two seemingly different ways; while Castells' proposition suggests that contemporary religiosity is a phenomenon to be ignored, E&A proposes that religiosity afforded by media technologies is the key to modernity. While the former position explains this problem as a symptom of incomplete modernity, the latter argues that it is a problem, but can be overcome by using tradition positively. What E&A propose is to attempt to "get people to adopt as part of their tradition what really is not part of their tradition" (Agrama, 2012: p. 13).

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