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Hent de Vries, Samuel Weber (Eds.): Religion and Media

Stanford: Stanford University Press 2001 (Cultural Memory in the Present), 647 S., ISBN 0-8047-3497-6, \$ 70.00 (hc)

The collection of essays *Religion and Media* is an important contribution to a variety of disciplines, including but not limited to philosophy, media studies, sociology, religious studies, anthropology and literary theory. It is huge in scope, theoretically ambitious and is sure it to become a standard work in courses and

seminars in media studies, literary theory and comparative religion where the status of ‚the religious‘ is at issue. The editors, Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber, are well known in literary theory in the English speaking world and they have each been important figures in the ‚turn to religion‘ that has taken place in critical and literary theory over the last few years. After September 11 *Religion and Media* is even more topical than it was when it was published in 2001. It will not doubt become a source book with regard to the often very troublesome interpenetration of religion and media and it will serve to guide and shape future discussions regarding the ‚turn to religion‘ in theory.

The volume itself offers a panorama of the most recent developments in the emergent nexus of religious studies, media studies, philosophy and sociology. At 650 pages it contains the work of 25 different authors. The quality of the essays themselves are generally very high. Some of the contributors are among the most important figures in critical theory; Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, Samuel Weber, Hent de Vries and Mieke Bal. Its most theoretically sophisticated section contains two short well selected pieces from previously published work by Theodor Adorno and Niklas Luhmann. The other contributors come from a variety of disciplines ranging from Philosophy, Literature, Anthropology, Film Studies, Political Science, Comparative Religion, History, German and Comparative Literature. This is appropriate because, as Hent de Vries makes clear in his introductory essay „In Media Res“ the ‚turn to religion‘ is in essence an interdisciplinary phenomenon that must of necessity draw on „the conceptual resources of several fields“ (p.31).

Religion and Media is organized into four parts. Part I (titled „Introducing the Concepts“) addresses the core theoretical concerns of the book in a series of works that explore the concepts of ‚Religion‘ and ‚Media‘. This section contains work by Hent de Vries, Samuel Weber, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy and Talal Asad. Part II (titled – „Seeing and Believing: Historical and Philosophical Considerations“) offers a series of historical and systematic accounts of the nexus of religion and media. The essays here treat various structural interweavings of media and religion through a variety of phenomenon ranging from the Jesuit reformation of China, Ignatius of Loyola, Martin Luther to television. One of the key guiding presuppositions throughout this section and indeed throughout the book as a whole, is that neither ‚religion‘ nor ‚media‘ can be taken for granted in conceptual terms. Media is here understood in its broadest philosophical and historical sense as communication systems that generate ‚reality‘, or following Marshal McLuhan as ‚the extension of man‘. I think it is safe to say that the terrain of analysis in all of these essays is not religion and media as separate terms but rather religion as media and media as religion. Throughout the book the two terms radically interpenetrate one another. The authors in section II are Gertrud Koch, Haun Saussy, Burcht Pranger, Manfred Schneider, Jenny Slatman, Paola Maratti and Mieke Bal. They address heterogeneous, historically disparate phenomenon

that nevertheless have contemporary significance. Section III (titled „Local Rites, Global Media: Critical and Anthropological Approaches“) is the most empirically oriented section of the book. These essays are, as the name suggests global in scope, analyzing the intersection of media and religion in a variety of contemporary phenomenon ranging from anti-Semitism in Indonesia, the remaking of Hinduism in India, the Shinkinen Sengu rites in Japan, the Maria Lionza cult in Venezuela, the Truth and Reconciliation Committee in South Africa, ‚fundamentalism‘ in Turkey, filmic discourse in Iran and aboriginal art in Australia. Part IV (titled - „Two Documents“) includes the above mentioned extracts from *The psychological technique of Martin Luther Thomas' Radio Addresses* by Theodor Adorno and *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* by Niklas Luhmann. These selections provide the overarching project of *Religion and Media* with a higher degree of theoretical precision and focus than is at first apparent from the broad panorama of previous essays.

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