

Adam Bajan

## Book Review

# Marcus Moberg: Church, Market, and Media A Discursive Approach to Institutional Religious Change

London: Bloomsbury, 2017, 202 pp., ISBN 978-1-4742-8057-0

In an era of apathetic secularism, Marcus Moberg offers up a finely tuned discursive analysis of mainline Protestant efforts to increase relevance through marketization that is as original as it is thought provoking. As a socio-cultural practice, marketization involves a combination of free-market ideas and the continuous development of new media technologies to communicate these ideas (6). Accordingly, Moberg's principal thesis is that these ideas and developments have infiltrated religious organizations, where they quickly become part of discursive structures within these organizations and are reflected in official church communication. It is these discursive structures which Moberg focuses on in his engaging and lively analysis.

Following a detailed introduction to the study of religion, markets, and media in the first chapter, Moberg aptly notes that previous studies in this field have largely focused on the effects of mediatisation on religious groups while ignoring how these effects may be rooted in free-market ideas and neoliberal culture, thus giving the book its *raison d'être*. The book's second and third chapters provide a detailed review of canonical literature on critical discourse analysis and the various theoretical approaches used in the study of religion and media. While these early chapters are by no means uninteresting, they are quite typical of contemporary scholarship focusing on the intersection of religion and media.

However, the book's fourth and fifth chapters are given over entirely to a very detailed analysis of official church documents at seven mainline Protestant churches in five countries. These are, in order of appearance: the Presbyterian Church (USA), United Methodist Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Church of England, and the national churches of Denmark, Sweden, and Finland. Specifically, Moberg's analysis involves a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of 79 publicly available documents from these churches including an additional reading of a further 47 documents, 33 of which are used in this volume.

Throughout his analysis, Moberg argues for the influence of marketization on religious organizations, noting that these influences become reified in “the promotion and circulation of certain clusters of [religious] discourses” that are deeply rooted in neoliberalism (48). This is to say that a CDA of publicly available church documents reveals the presence of neoliberal ideologies, specifically in the rationale for the adoption of new public management (NPM) techniques as instruments of organizational change. It must be emphasized, however, that while cultural context is a factor in Moberg’s analysis (namely in how cultural differences have affected the historical development of religiosity in the study’s chosen countries), this is not the focus of the book.

Instead, Moberg chooses to focus on the neoliberal underpinnings of NPM techniques and how these techniques impact the communication strategies of mainline churches where they are used to increase public visibility and therefore market share. As Moberg defines them, NPM techniques are “premised on the idea that the public sector will benefit from adopting the organizational cultures, routines, and practices of the private sector” (49). The significance of this to Moberg’s study is that churches are no exception to this idea. Indeed, Moberg is quick to point out that the sharp decline in social and cultural importance and influence of mainline Protestant churches since the 1960s has been met in recent years by neoliberal efforts to maintain social relevance via NPM; which is to say that these churches desire to increase their public visibility and therefore their market share.

Exactly how this occurs is an aspect of the book that Moberg fails to fully address, however. For example, while he is quick to point out that marketization serves as an “agent” of institutional religious change, he candidly admits that it does not actually exercise any agency in and of itself (54). As he sees it, the display of marketization discourses by religious organizations signifies the influence of larger forces of neoliberalism for the simple reason that church documents display a deliberate, self-reflective understanding of the need to adopt strategies which are implicitly neoliberal. Essentially then, Moberg pulls a sleight of hand in that he implicitly argues that neoliberal forces, dressed up as NPM practices, have crept into religious spheres of influence but that these forces and practices are by no means a direct influence and as such should not be viewed from a reductionist, deterministic standpoint producing agency or causality.

Such a deficiency presents a problem. On one hand, Moberg offers up an explanation of how mainline Protestant churches suffering from declining social relevance hope to regain some of this relevance by the adoption of neoliberal ideologies and NPM practices, yet on the other, his analysis does not initially account for where the impetus for this change stems from. Moberg, however, believes he has found his way out of the trap of causality by invoking mediatiza-

tion theory. Broadly speaking, mediatization describes a process in which “the influence of media [...] has gradually expanded within virtually every domain of society and culture and public and private everyday life” (58). Notably, mediatization is itself a dual process in which media “have simultaneously also attained the position of social institutions in their own right” (58).

The significance of this in regard to Moberg’s study is that he effectively argues that the marketization discourses within mainline Protestant institutions are themselves discursive elements of neoliberalism which Moberg links to processes of mediatization. Citing David Harvey, Moberg argues that the neoliberal push toward maximization of efficiency in society requires the development of increasingly efficient information and communication technologies (ICTs) necessary for the “accumulation, transfer, storage, and dissemination of ever more massive loads of information” (58). Within this neoliberal worldview, the mediatization of society is inevitable, owing to the widespread presence of ICTs, which are necessary for the rapid development of neoliberalism to occur.

As Moberg argues, mediatization is said to occur as either a direct or an indirect process; the former occurring when un-mediated activity becomes mediated and the latter, when an activity, organization, or context becomes gradually influenced by media over time (58). The significance of this to Moberg’s study is that indirect mediatization is seen as being intertwined with so-called “media logics” or metaphorical frames of reference underpinning the subjugation and subsumption of un-mediated activities by media.

For Moberg, the gradual adoption of new media and NPM techniques by religious organizations qualifies as an indirect form of mediatization, one which sidesteps the recurring issue of causality by invoking media logics not as causal determinants but rather as one of many socio-cultural pressures inducing change. Admittedly, mediatization theory is much debated by scholars who see the theory as convenient albeit difficult to demonstrate empirically. Yet Moberg more than does the theory justice in his use of it to frame the study at hand.

Moberg accomplishes this by bringing a unique perspective to mediatization, one that is perhaps not so obvious at first glance. Citing Heidi Campbell, Moberg argues that the culture of the internet and ICTs has led to the appearance of so-called “religious digital creatives”, or RDCs. As Moberg notes, it is RDCs who have the necessary skills and expertise to lend their services to religious organizations, helping these organizations to develop their structures and adapt to the “new technological realities” of contemporary digitally mediated life and in so doing bridge the knowledge gap between neoliberal NPM techniques and religious tradition (69).

Moberg’s implication of RDCs as a driving force for discursive religious change which itself is representative of religious structural change via neoliberalism and marketization is a valiant attempt to resolve the issue of causality

in mediatization. However, it is not clear whether he is entirely successful in doing so. This is because although RDCs provide a potent source of legitimation for pressuring religious organizations to adapt or perish, the force of their influence remains empirically vague, even if its end result is visible in the publicly available church documents that Moberg analyzed in his study.

Taken together then, Moberg's highly original combination of neoliberalism, mediatization, and NPM discourse aptly demonstrates that while they may have arrived late at the game, mainline Protestant churches are certainly no strangers to changing with the times. As Moberg notes in the conclusion of his book, "practical changes in the organizational structure, communication practices, and modus operandi of social institutions and organizations tend to be preceded by changes in discursive practices" (153). Moberg demonstrates this with wit and zeal and his book serves as a much-needed and engaging contribution to the study of religion, media, and society.