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Book Review

Anthony Hatcher: Religion and Media in America

Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018, 296 pp.,
ISBN 978-1498514446

By considering cultural phenomena including protest, politics, production, pilgrimage, publishing, and parody, Anthony Hatcher establishes how the medi-ization of religion furthers a religious thread in public life and what he calls the “Christian effect” (xiv) in the United States. He examines how “Christianity both adapts to and is affected by new media forms” (ix) by investigating the individuals and organizations that subsidize, create, and distribute content related to religion and spirituality, particularly to Protestant Christianity. Actors and audiences reinforce certain ideologies and resist and confront church practices. Hatcher’s three genres of inquiry are civil religion, religion and entertainment, and sacred and profane media. The book covers how both liberal and conservative political movements pursue and receive mainstream news coverage; how religious actors enter the entertainment field and author content; and when the topic of religion is a subject of inquiry and surveillance.

Hatcher constructs why some might call the United States a Christian nation by tracing the cultural, political, and faith-based motivations of various actors in politics and popular culture. Citing Lynn Schofield Clark’s “Protestantization” argument regarding the culturally dominant set of values derived from the Protestant Reformation and William D. Romanowski’s discussion that some Christians view themselves as God’s co-creators of culture, Hatcher demonstrates how Christianity has a prominent presence in the public sphere. Hatcher articulates that evangelicalism in particular has a desire to *publicly* demonstrate faith and cultural transformation, to “Christianize” public secular culture despite pluralism (ix), and has proactively utilized media technologies.

Throughout the text, Hatcher reinforces the myriad interconnections between politics, rituals, and news and entertainment rhetoric. As politics is newsworthy, the Christian Right has strategically employed press coverage and used media to gain political and cultural power. From the left, Reverend William Barber II’s engagement of social media and subsequent media coverage amplified

his profile and the North Carolina Moral Monday protests. Politics is not the only staged arena in which to influence the public. Christian organizations note the entertainment industry's significance as a source of role models and purposely funnel people into the sector to influence secular culture (69).

A former journalist and current Professor of Journalism at Elon University, Hatcher appears to engage Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding and content analysis.¹ Most chapters of the book focus on the active agents behind the encoding process: activist Reverend Barber's voice and the impetus behind Moral Mondays (chap. 1); the Christian Socialist clergyman who wrote the Pledge of Allegiance and those who employed it for marketing and political purposes (chap. 2); the female founder and contestants of Actors, Models, and Talent for Christ (chap. 3); Emilio Estevez and Martin Sheen's work on the independent film *THE WAY* (Emilio Estevez, US 2010; chap. 4); religious societies and Bible translation (chap. 5); and authors behind religious satire (chap. 6). While Hatcher mainly focuses on religious actors, religion engages non-believers through its moral tenets or its national and cultural relevance, providing an animating force for civil religion. The encoding/decoding model considers the frameworks of knowledge, relations of production, and mediated technical infrastructure. Similarly, Hatcher's work examines the religious perspectives of the participants as well as the economic and political systems related to production and reception. Thus, readers gain insights into religious motivations but also learn, for instance, how capitalism and marketing provided the impetus in the dissemination of the pledge and American flag for promoting a children's publication in 1892. In 1951, as anti-communist sentiment spread in the country, the Knights of Columbus, the world's largest Catholic fraternal society, proposed the inclusion of the words "under God" in the pledge. Of all the religious symbolism officially added to public life in the 1950s, this move, Hatcher claims, caused the most controversy and litigation (51). Hatcher proposes, "One could argue the nation moved from seeing itself united by a common humanity to a fearful one seeking the protection of God" (50).

Chapter three, on Actors, Models, and Talent for Christ (AMTC), and chapter five, on the Bible-publication industry, demonstrate how meaning making is a profitable growth industry. The chapter on AMTC presents the viewpoint of entertainment as evangelistic outreach (80) and how religious impulses are never divorced from economic systems. Although some religious groups oppose popular culture, this chapter demonstrates an active Christian pursuit of success in the entertainment industry. AMTC, a "talent development ministry" (68), has fostered figures such as *The Voice* contestant country singer Brendon Chase and *American Idol* singer Tim Urban. AMTC believes that "through the movement of

1 Hall 1973.

actors, models and talent for Christ, millions upon millions of lost and prodigal children will enter the Kingdom of God” (81). Individuals pay up to \$5,245 to participate in an entertainment training bootcamp and receive coaching and competition opportunities. AMTC has been criticized online for its high fees and suggested outcomes. Interestingly, Hatcher suggests, “If AMTC succeeds in its stated goals, faith-based entertainment and entertainers will become the mainstream” (81). It should be noted that the organization closed in January 2018, prior to the book’s publication.

In chapter four the author offers his decoding of the film *THE WAY* (2010). Hatcher presents his personal appreciation for the film, stating that its “subtle spiritual and religious messages more genuinely reflect the lived human experience than those of overtly Christian movies, or tangentially Biblically-based Hollywood blockbusters” (85). With its narrative featuring the ancient religious route the Camino de Santiago in Europe, this film appears to Hatcher as a bridge between the rituals of institutional religion and a spiritual journey associated with being “spiritual but not religious”. By selecting a film involving the religious theme of pilgrimage but not a religious protagonist, Hatcher contends that institutional religion offers the framework upon which spirituality resides. He cites Leonard Norman Primiano, who states, “This spirituality of seeking is characterized by a deeply personal but transient religiosity with roots in traditional religious beliefs and practices; an interest in noninstitutionalized religious contexts and an eclectic, idiosyncratic and at times isolated spirituality fascinated with the supernatural” (xxvii). Indeed, the film features visions of a dead character and the crew knows of miracles that enabled the film’s production process. While the film is not a Hollywood blockbuster, Hatcher appreciates its slow unfolding, its mystery and message of forgiveness and redemption. He invokes Martin Sheen’s own reaction to a culminating scene when a Dutchman falls on his knees before a statue of St James. Hatcher quotes Sheen saying in the film, “Boom I’m gone... That moment, you fall to your knees in thanksgiving and praise. You fall to your knees for help, for mercy. [...] It’s our own personal hymn. And this film just rings with it. It’s just so deeply personal” (110).

Chapter five expands on the material production of the Bible, including details of the crowd-funded Kickstarter Bibliotheca project. This reader-friendly redesign of the Bible was printed in Germany on fine opaque paper with sewn rather than glued binding (163). At the time of its launch in 2014, the project became the ninth most popular Kickstarter project in the world and in just a day reached its goal of \$37,000. This case study considers the Bible as a commodity, one that can be owned and copyrighted, is likely manufactured in China and is high in sales and profitability.

Chapter six illuminates satire’s role in critiquing religion, including televangelists and the prosperity gospel. It features the work of niche publications *The*

Wittenburg Door and *Ship of Fools* as well as comedians Stephen Colbert and John Oliver, who have mocked “‘what people do in the name of religion’ rather than religion itself” (203). Humor facilitates the recognition of shortcomings and speaks to a desire to reform.

Hatcher highlights how religious and non-religious ownership of “old” media (radio, newspapers, magazines, and TV) supported the circulation of religion in public discourse. He cites how the Knights of Columbus’s newsletters and Hearst’s newspaper editorials supported adding “under God” to the Pledge of Allegiance and urged the public to write letters to their local politicians. These letters played a role in the approval of the legislation, emblematic of how individuals have contributed to social history. Furthermore, the Christian Right disseminated its messages via rallies, roundtables, and James Dobson’s *Focus on the Family* broadcasting and publishing vehicles which reached millions well into the George W. Bush administration (7).

The book also discusses the role of social media as a part of today’s technical infrastructure. Both positive and negative commentary on social media spread the message of Moral Monday and garnered attention in mainstream publications. Stephen Colbert’s testimony in support of undocumented field workers went viral. Hatcher adds that “social media is often the friend of satire, and the enemy of satirical targets” (205).

I especially appreciated the areas where Hatcher reminds readers that religious messages have socializing and uniting capacities whether in person on the Raleigh capital steps or in film action. He connects the prior fusion movements with the unifying Moral Monday movement. He also highlights instances where religion has been unafraid to confront itself or stand up against injustice. Reverend Barber, *THE WAY*, *The Wittenburg Door*, *Ship of Fools*, and Colbert offer an alternate testimony regarding faith instead of crafting a self-protective or triumphant message regarding Christianity. In mentioning *THE WAY*’s multi-faith cast and the film’s more spiritual than religious narrative, Hatcher emphasizes a focus on journey, not destination. The book suggests that an active religious life does not only mean being a Christian witness at work or participating actively in civic life, it should also mean engaging in institutional and individual self-reflection.

Some issues with the text begin early on. The title of the book on the cover and its references to itself are inconsistent. The book title is *Religion and Media in America* whereas at times it is called “Religion and Media in the Digital Age”. This issue and its rather broad title highlight that no book can comprehensively cover all aspects of religion and media in America.

In addition, I found some of the writing stilted and more of a recitation of facts and prior scholarship. While Hatcher does cite the consolidation and conglomeration of Christian publishing ownership, I was surprised that the relationship between Fox News and Donald Trump was neglected.

Overall, Hatcher effectively reinforces how religious narratives touch upon our social experience as Christian voices engage media industries in a world of technological innovation and commodification. One is also reminded of how substantially religion is embedded in American politics. This book could be used to introduce students to specific cases of the various Christian actors whose voices shape America and its social history. I would especially recommend the first chapter on Barber and the last chapter on religious satire.

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