Introduction

Why Study Religion and Popular Culture?

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In recent years, there has been a growing awareness across a range of academic disciplines of the value of exploring issues of religion and the sacred in relation to cultures of everyday life. This is evident in the growth of interest in the study of religion and 'popular culture', including the intersections between religion and consumer culture, leisure cultures and lifestyles, changing forms of household space, technology and emerging forms of social network. There has also been growing attention paid to the relationships between religion and the media, such as the use of new media and communication technologies by religious groups, the representation and exploration of religion and spirituality in the media, the religious significance and content of media texts and rituals, and the popular consumption of religious and spiritual media.

But, why study 'religion' at all? After all, religion is often perceived by cultural theorists as an inescapably negative, indeed corrosive, phenomenon, which must be jettisoned if we as a society are to mature. As the success of Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion* and other writings on the New Atheism have demonstrated, there is still a widespread suspicion, certainly at a popular level, that discourse involving religion has nothing constructive to offer in the twenty-first century. Identifying an unbreachable dichotomy between 'science' and 'religion', the image of 'warfare' or 'conflict' is a common one, in a manner which corresponds to the language adduced by two instrumental late-nineteenth century publications—John William Draper's *History of the Conflict Between Religion and Science* (1874) and Andrew D. White's *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (1896). For many people today, science is believed to provide the only reliable path to knowledge—it is seen as objective, universal, rational and based on solid observational evidence, whereas religion is perceived as belonging to the realm of the emotional, irrational and the subjective (see Barbour 1998: 77). As Robert Pirsig attests, 'When one person suffers from a delusion, it is called insanity. When many people suffer from a delusion it is called Religion' (qtd in Dawkins 2006: 28), and Dawkins himself writes that if *The God Delusion* 'works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down' (ibid.).

Influential though such perspectives are, however, McGrath is right that '*The God Delusion*, more by its failings than its achievements, reinforces the need for high-quality religious education in the public arena' (McGrath 2007: 4). No one—whether theist, agnostic or atheist—exists in a cultural vacuum and Dawkins is no less immune from the social, economic and political matrix within which his work is promulgated than the most conservative of Christian theologians. As I have suggested elsewhere, for instance, the distrust of human judgement that permeates Karl Barth's *The Humanity of God*—with the underlying understanding that God is Wholly Other and that we can only know God through God's own revelation, to the point that theology should thus be self-validating—cannot be dissociated from what Barth witnessed at first hand as the folly of the First World War and the sincerely held belief that humanity was utterly lost before God (see Deacy & Ortiz 2008: 3). Similarly, Dawkins, although coming from an antithetical ideological starting point—one which posits that 'Natural selection not only explains the whole of life; it also raises our consciousness to the power of science to explain how organized complexity can emerge from simple beginnings without any deliberate guidance' (Dawkins 2006: 141)—concedes that he would have written a very different book, had the contemporary cultural climate been different. Dawkins bemoans the prevalence in the world today of what he calls 'the genie of religious fanaticism' (ibid.: 61), which, whether in the form of Islamic extremism or the naïve and educationally backward teachings of Creationism and Intelligent Design, have relegated the existence of 'subtle, nuanced religion' (ibid.: 15) to the margins. Such is Dawkins's disdain for anything that impedes the advance of rational, empirically proven scientific discourse that even the academic study of theology is deemed worthless. Whereas, as he attests, 'Science has eradicated smallpox, can immunize against most previously deadly viruses' and 'can kill most previously deadly bacteria', theology 'has done nothing but talk of pestilence as the wages of sin' (Dawkins 1998: 6). Accordingly, 'If all the achievements of scientists were wiped out tomorrow, there would be no doctors but witch doctors, no transport faster than horses, no computers, no printed books' and 'no agriculture beyond subsistence peasant farming' (ibid.). On the other hand, 'If all the achievements of theologians were wiped out tomorrow, would anyone notice the smallest difference? … The achievements of theologians don't do anything, don't affect anything, don't mean anything', prompting Dawkins to ask: 'What makes anyone think that "theology" is a subject at all?' (ibid.).

It is largely in response to these sorts of questions that this volume has been conceived. Dawkins may well see science and religion as engaged in a battle to the death from which only the former can emerge triumphant, but, as McGrath construes it, 'The Dawkinsian view of reality is a mirror image of that found in some of the more exotic sections of American fundamentalism' (McGrath 2007: 23). No matter how persuasively Dawkins argues, as he did in an article for *The Guardian* newspaper just four days after 9/11, that 'To fill a world with religion … is like littering the streets with loaded guns. Do not be surprised if they are used' (Dawkins 2001), it is questionable that this warfare model, by which 'Religion is persistently and consistently portrayed in the worst possible way', to the point of 'mimicking the worst features of religious fundamentalism's portrayal of atheism' (McGrath 2007: xii), ought to comprise the final, definitive word on the subject. As Barbour put it a whole decade before the publication of *The God Delusion*, 'The image of warfare is common today, partly because conflict between extreme views lends itself to dramatic media coverage, while more subtle and complex intermediate positions tend to be neglected' (Barbour 1998: 77). Compelling though his rhetoric may be, the way forward is to move from binary oppositions—whether construed in terms of the 'sacred' vs. the 'secular', the 'Church' vs. the 'world', or, indeed, the 'virus' of religion vs. the sophistication of science—towards according critical attention to the manner and the extent to which the boundaries are deemed to be much more fluid and malleable. Without denying that Dawkins's concern about the way in which Creationism has entered the school curriculum is legitimate—in his words, 'Any science teacher who denies that the world is billions (or even millions!) of years old is teaching a preposterous, mind-shrinking falsehood' (Dawkins 2002)—we ought to find ways of bringing the 'religious' and the 'secular' spheres into serious dialogue in an effort to do justice to the complex dynamics at work in the contemporary world.

As Gaye Ortiz and I have argued elsewhere, 'Whether we are speaking of religious fanaticism and fundamentalism or the media's trivialization of cultural values and moral standards, there is much work to be done in continuing mutual conversation instead of resorting to authoritarian edict, censorship, or even hostilities as remedies for the cultural crisis of the new millennium' (Deacy & Ortiz 2008: ix). In the world of both religious fanaticism and Richard Dawkins (and to this end, it is worth commenting that the differences between them are not all that pronounced, inasmuch as Dawkins sees himself as on an evangelical crusade to rescue science from the evils of religion), there is a clear and ontological distinction between 'right' and 'wrong'. For Dawkins, religion is 'bad' and science is 'good', and there can only be peace and progress in the world if and when religion in all its manifestations is exposed as a dangerous illusion and supplanted by science, while for adherents to more evangelical and fundamentalist forms of religion, it is religion that is a force—the force, indeed—for good and it is atheistic thinking that must be rejected. In actuality, however, there are considerably more sophisticated forms of theological and cultural enquiry 'out there', as this volume will attest. In my own field of Religion & Film, for example, Melanie Wright is correct that 'the past ten years or so have witnessed a remarkable growth in scholarship predicated on the religion–film interface' (Wright 2007: 11), for example, along the lines of my own thesis that the 'secular' medium of film is one of many cultural agencies that has challenged traditional religious institutions and even taken on their functions (see Deacy 2007: 253). As Clive Marsh argues in *Cinema and Sentiment*, for many people the act of going to the movies may be no less part of their 'life structure' than working, eating, sleeping and socializing, to the point that 'As a major component (binding commitment) in a person's life … cinema-going is functioning as a religious practice for some' (Marsh 2004: 1). Might it even be the case, Marsh suggests, that those who work in film 'may be functioning more authoritatively or at least more influentially than bishops' (ibid.: 3)? After all, as Christine Hoff Kraemer has recently argued, 'In some cases, the communal viewing of a film in a darkened theater and the lively discussion it inspires have become a more vital site of spiritual exploration and reflection than the mainline church service' (Kraemer 2004: 243), and I have previously written that there is something theologically significant about the way in which 'groups of people file into a theatre at a specified time, choose a seat, and prepare with others for what could be said to amount to a religious experience' (Deacy 2001: 4; cf. Ostwalt 1995: 154–5). Whereas for Dawkins, religion and the secular sphere can (and should) be clearly distinguished, Marsh correctly affirms that the 'secular' medium of film often works by getting people to do something that is identifiably theological in nature, since it is 'not possible to be moved to the core of one's being, or to ask questions about ultimate meaning and value without raising theological questions' (Marsh 2004: 10). He continues that this is not a strategy for trying to surreptitiously bring theology in through the back door—a charge one can imagine issuing from Dawkins and other detractors of religion—but 'a response to the fact that this is where theological discussion … is happening already' (ibid.).

Despite all the talk, therefore, of secularization—in terms of statistical evidence, we learn that 'only 7.5% of the population in England attended church on a regular basis' (Lynch 2005: 166) at the end of the twentieth century and according to some estimates 'around 1,500 people leave the church each week in Britain alone' (Pope 2007: 9)—Robert Pope is correct in his affirmation that 'religion, or at least the religious questions of origins, meaning and destiny in life, have maintained their potency in contemporary culture even when the popularity of institutional religion has declined' (ibid.: 1). Many theologians are already taking on board, for instance, the empirical reality that the reason students are interested in studying theology at university is not because they are necessarily interested in learning about ecclesiastical history or theological doctrines, such as those pertaining to sin, salvation and redemption, *per se*, but because they have encountered the use of theological vocabulary in popular culture and want to see what theology has to say about this. In my own case, I have increasingly found that one of the most popular undergraduate theology modules is in the area of religion/theology and film; Marsh is spot on in his attestation that the theology students of today 'are those who sit in lecture- and seminar-rooms across the world and may not have begun to examine the differences between salvation, liberation and atonement, but *are* interested in tackling them and have seen *The Shawshank Redemption*' (Marsh 2007a: 4). Moreover, Marsh maintains that 'There is no escaping this and it is not a situation to be regretted. It is simply the way things are' (ibid.: 2). In a very real sense, there is no reason why this should come as a surprise, although in Dawkinsian terms it might seem remarkable that such a debate is actually taking place at all. If the line of demarcation between religion and culture is permeable, John Lyden is correct when he affirms that 'there is no way to completely separate religion from culture' and that, conversely, 'if those aspects of culture that are usually viewed as nonreligious or opposed to religion meet many of the same functions of what we call religions, then we also cannot really separate culture from religion' (Lyden 2007: 205). Stewart Hoover takes a similar line, in his contention that the realms of religion and the media 'occupy the same spaces, serve many of the same purposes, and invigorate the same practices in late modernity', such that 'it is probably better to think of them as related than to think of them as separate' (Hoover 2006: 9).

Irrespective of whether one takes the line that religious practices are being displaced and dispersed by secular agencies such as film, or whether one could go even further and affirm that the entertainment industry has superseded and replaced religious institutions in the quest for meaning-making (cf. Deacy 2001: 4), this is a far cry from the black-and-white, 'religion' vs. 'secular' dichotomy adduced by proponents of the New Atheism. Even if it is held that we have entered some kind of post-Christian era, where non-institutionalized forms of spirituality and religion have taken the place of churches (and the popularity of yoga, devotion to fitness regimes and preponderance of 'Mind, Body, Spirit' sections in mainstream bookstores all testify to the fact that alternative agencies may be taking on religious functions in the modern world [see Marsh 2004: 11]), there is no reason why theologians should not be involved in the ensuing discussion, rather than, as Dawkins would have it, be relegated to the periphery. In Dawkins's eyes, theology is not 'of the smallest use to anybody … When has theology ever said anything that is demonstrably true and is not obvious? I have listened to theologians, read them, debated against them. I have never heard any of them ever say anything of the smallest use, anything that was not either platitudinously obvious or downright false' (Dawkins 1998: 6). As Marsh suggests, however, 'theological discussion is necessary, for those who do it, and for the society of which they are a part' (Marsh 2007a: 176). After all, are not religious traditions 'carrying vital resources for people to work with in their quest to understand how to live' (ibid.)? Instead of drowning out the theologian, a more measured response would to be to take the line, as Marsh does, that 'societies will be all the poorer without theological traditions to inform them' (ibid.).

The fact that Marsh observes that 'Indifference or hostility to religion may be mixed up with very religion-like practices and a very human desire to find or construct meaning' and that even those people 'who regard themselves as religious do their meaning making in relation to a range of resources and practices that is wider than they realize' (Marsh 2007b: 150) serves to show that the contours of the debate are more fluid than the Dawkinsian mindset allows. Over the last decade, for example, there has been a growing range of literature on religion, media and popular culture, including Bruce David Forbes & Jeffrey H. Mahan's *Religion and Culture in America*, which has moved away from a traditional focus on the beliefs and practices of established groups and cultural élites in order to concentrate more on the lives of everyday people (see e.g. Mahan 2000: 292). Sporting rituals, for example, 'shift our attention from the "official" performance of the work of art to the performance activity of the audience' (ibid.: 293), while Michael Jindra, writing in the same volume in relation to the concept of TV science fiction fandom, establishes that, when fans of a programme such as *Star Trek* 'fill out a mythological universe and keep it consistent through the formation of a canon of acceptable and unacceptable … events', together with the 'schisms and oppositions' (Jindra 2000: 167) that such movements regularly generate, this is territory that the scholar can ill afford to overlook. Similarly, writing in 1982, M. Darroll Bryant claimed that 'as a popular form of the religious life, movies do what we have always asked of popular religion, namely, that they provide us with archetypal forms of humanity—heroic figures—and instruct us in the basic values and myths of our society' (Bryant 1982: 106). This also links with Lyden's more recent thesis, as expounded in *Film as Religion*, that 'If the religious dimensions of film were better understood, we might see both how film's views may parallel those of various religions and how film functions religiously in its own right' (Lyden 2003: 34). Accordingly, as I have written elsewhere, 'if our definitional net is woven in too conventional a mode, then a great deal of fascinating contemporary religiosity will just pass through it' (Deacy 2005: 18).

It is not therefore wide of the mark to propose that a 'secular' practice such as cinema-going 'does not simply fill in the time left by the absence of religion, but actually enables film-watchers to participate in the business of religion' (Marsh 2004: 6). The fact that those participants do not bring religious commitment in the conventional sense thus militates against Dawkins's assessment that religion is dangerous, because so many of its adherents subscribe to archaic, superstitious and irrational pre-scientific teachings on the question of the origins of the universe. In a nutshell, Dawkins's understanding of religion is too limited. He equates religion unequivocally with 'belief in God', such that the bottom line is that 'God's existence is a scientific fact about the universe, discoverable in principle if not in practice' and that 'If he existed and chose to reveal it, God himself could clinch the argument' (Dawkins 2006: 73). There is, however, rather more to the definition of religion than Dawkins's rather simplistic position permits. In sociological terms, for instance, there are important questions relating to ritual practices, and social and behavioural dispositions, which do not necessitate a concomitant belief in a Creator God. Writing in relation to Durkheim's theory of religion, Paden argues that

> Like a creator god, society fashions the world and its sacred institutions, even affixing hallowed times and places. Like a lawgiver and moral guardian, society ordains the behavioral order of things and punishes violations … Like a god, society gives to us and expects to receive back from us. Religious behavior really *is* social behavior. (Paden 1992: 32)

On this reading, even though religion may be a fundamental human endeavour, the existence of a supernatural God is not the be all and end all of religion. For Durkheim, indeed, group solidarity gives the believer 'more strength in himself, either to cope with the difficulties of existence or to defeat them. He is raised above human miseries because he is raised above his condition as man' (Durkheim 2001 [1912]: 311).

It may be Dawkins's position that 'one of the truly bad effects of religion is that it teaches us that it is a virtue to be satisfied with not understanding' (Dawkins

2006: 152), but, as the case of Durkheim has highlighted, religion is considerably more nuanced than such a picture suggests. Indeed, if, as a Durkheimian model indicates, religion comprises 'a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and surrounded by prohibitions … that unite its adherents in a single moral community …' (qtd in Durkheim 2001 [1912]: 44), it is hard to defend Dawkins's categorical affirmation that, if religion is abolished, the divisions and tensions within humanity will also thenceforth disappear. As Dawkins puts it, 'If children were taught to question and think through their beliefs, instead of being taught the superior virtue of faith without question, it is a good bet that there would be no suicide bombers' (Dawkins 2006: 348). Yet, as Milja Radovic's chapter in this volume reveals, there is a very fine line between religion, ethnicity and nationalism—and one could add to this mix such factors as language, gender, age, sexual orientation, class, wealth, political views and tribal allegiance (see McGrath 2007: 52)—such that the 'simplistic belief' as espoused by Dawkins that, *per se*, 'the elimination of religion would lead to the end of violence, social tension or discrimination' (ibid.) is very wide of the mark.

To sum up, the treatment of religion by authors such as Dawkins tends to miss the point of where religious belief, expression and commitment tend to be located and can be encountered in contemporary society. Dawkins may see religion as a wholly negative phenomenon—a virus, no less—but there are less fundamentalist (and for that matter less monotheistic) types of religiosity present in society and, if there is any scepticism advanced even among academics regarding the viability of work undertaken at the intersection between religion and popular culture (see Deacy 2001: 16–17), this is because there is still too often a tendency to understand religion as having very strict, and clearly demarcated, boundaries. Religion is alive and well in the twenty-first century, but since it is not bound up with God, the Bible and the Church in quite the way Dawkins has in mind, the debate is too often incomplete and impoverished. Reading Dawkins, one would think that the study of religion and theology were only for 'religious' people. Yet it certainly does not follow that the study of religion entails an uncritical and naïve religious adherence and commitment on the part of the investigator. As the case of John Hinnells demonstrates, one can be an atheist while at the same time being sympathetic to the religious beliefs and practices of others (as evinced by Hinnells's pioneering work on Zoroastrianism). In his words, 'Of course one does not have to agree with something in order to study it' (Hinnells 2005: 5)—rather, it is vital to study religion because of the massive power throughout history that religious traditions and institutions have wielded.

Moreover, has anyone even come up with a satisfactory string of words to describe what 'religion' actually is? As Peter Connolly succinctly puts it, 'Like many territories, religion has a number of disputed borders' (Connolly 1999: 4), and Hinnells rightly notes that all labels have limitations, making 'religion' a useful, but nevertheless potentially misleading term. In the words of John Hick, 'Religion is one thing to the anthropologist, another to the sociologist, another to the psychologist (and again another to the next psychologist!), another to the Marxist, another to the mystic, another to the Zen Buddhist and yet another to the Jew or Christian' (qtd in Crawford 2002: 3). Accordingly, for Hick, there is 'no universally accepted definition of religion, and quite possibly there never will be' (ibid.). Hinnells asks, indeed, whether there is even such a thing as 'Christianity', as opposed to a variety of different types of Christianit*ies*—'Are Primitive Welsh Methodists a part of the same religion as the Russian Orthodox?' (Hinnells 2005: 10). The US Presidential election campaign in 2008 of former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney ensured that the question of religious affiliation became a pivotal component of the race to succeed George W. Bush in view of Romney's affiliation to the Mormon Church. As the BBC's North American Editor, Justin Webb, wrote in December 2006: 'Is the Republican party too bigoted to select a Mormon as its presidential candidate?' (Webb 2006) At the root of the controversy is the uncertainty among many Americans as to how to categorize the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints vis-à-vis 'mainstream' Christianity. To cite Webb again, from November 2007:

> At a party here in Washington recently, I conducted a scientific survey of my own. I asked all those I met what they thought of Mormonism. The respondents (including a very senior member of a mainstream Christian denomination) all thought it was weird, weird, weird. Several sniggered about multiple marriages, despite the fact that official Mormons have not been polygamous for a century (Webb 2007).

There may not be any ready-made answers to hand, but it is clear that, instead of seeking to ask whether religion is 'good' or 'bad' or whether a particular tradition such as Mormonism is 'mainstream' or 'deviant', a more fruitful starting point would consist of the attempt—indeterminate and ambivalent though the results may be—to *define* what religion is (or might be) in the first place, rather than to impose one's own prejudices and/or ignorance on to the agenda.

To this end, *Exploring Religion and the Sacred in a Media Age*, which addresses the very question of the diversity of religious experience and encounter with respect to contemporary culture, is a fitting counterpart to the work I have been involved in over the last decade in the emerging field of Religion & Film, where I have made the case for bringing two discrete, but potentially complementary, disciplines into critical dialogue. We live in societies where the media plays an increasingly integral role—film, for example, has arguably become 'Western culture's major storytelling and myth-producing medium' (Johnston 2007: 16)—yet theologians and religious studies scholars have only started to address this phenomenon in recent years. It is thus anticipated that this volume will make a significant contribution to the growing interest in this area of study by bringing together a selection of the best papers from the joint conference of the British Sociological Association Sociology of Religion Study Group conference and the UK Research Network Group in Theology, Religion and Popular Culture, which took place at St Catherine's College, Oxford, in April 2007. This was one of the first conferences in the UK to explore this area in depth, and it attracted interest from a range of international participants contributing to this area of research. Of the 57 papers accepted for the conference, 14 have been selected for inclusion in this book. These range from chapters by key-note speakers at the conference, who are international leaders in this field, to contributions from other scholars with established or emerging expertise.

A key strength of this book is also its interdisciplinary range, offering perspectives on the study of religion, media and popular culture from a range of disciplines, including theology, religious studies, media studies, cultural studies, film studies, sociology and anthropology. With contributions from the United Kingdom, New Zealand, North America, Hong Kong, Australia and Serbia, the collection reflects the international dimension of this field. Each of the chapters consists of focused case studies of particular texts, practices, communities and audiences and is at the cutting edge of contemporary debates in sociology, religion and the media. Topics include the examination of media rituals, marketing strategies, empirical investigations of audience testimony and the influence of religion on music, reality television and the Internet.

The collection begins with Tom Beaudoin's insightful call for scholars who conduct research in religion and culture to pay closer attention to their underlying motivations, attachments and methodologies. What exactly is their relationship to the academic disciplines and practices that they use? He queries whether such studies are the pure and objective scholarly productions that they deem them to be or whether they say rather more than they might be prepared to allow about their own idiosyncrasies, fantasies, daydreams and fictions—indeed, their 'fandoms'. He is especially concerned about the problematic theological assumptions that guide the generation, classification and reportage of sociological data pertaining to, for example, the religious and spiritual lives of modern American teenagers. Beaudoin's concern is that such studies, one of which he examines here in depth, misread the nature of everyday faith. As he observes, the definition of what constitutes real or authentic faith is provided in such studies by institutions and their representatives and it is against these that the testimony of, say, teenagers themselves are measured. Priority in such surveys is given to 'pure official teaching', with anything that falls short of this standard a deviation. In reality, however, Beaudoin attests that the particular beliefs that are sanctioned by religious leaders are implicated in non-theological, cultural, political, social and economic factors, yet such surveys continue to hold fast to an unproblematic and self-evident ahistorical and idealized view of Christianity. Beaudoin therefore calls for a proper analysis of the practices that comprise the study (and those who do the studying) of popular culture to be conducted in order that, for example, researchers may consider, instead, how sociological data may actually have something spiritually constructive and new to teach the larger church. Academics may see themselves as detached, rational and able to decode the discourses of others, but, he proposes, they have more in common than they care to acknowledge with the category of 'fandom' as developed in popular culture studies. Academics, like fans, are inclined to venerate—no less irrationally—particular passions, attachments and subjectivities. Intrinsic to both academia and fandom is an obstinacy concerning the superiority of one's chosen object of engagement and Beaudoin highlights the need for academics to undergo a self- and communal examination of their motivations and fandoms before they even attempt to speak on behalf of other people's faith. A richer academic conversation is thus needed about the cost of the stability of the scholar in the studies and research that they carry out.

In chapter 2, Nick Couldry asks whether contemporary mediated societies are inclined to become increasingly ritualized, with the reality TV programme *Celebrity Big Brother* cited as a prime example of a media ritual. He is not writing as a religious studies specialist, but Couldry's argument has a clear affinity with the argument adduced by Emile Durkheim in his *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Couldry stresses that his concept of 'media rituals' does not involve arguing that some aspects of contemporary media are rituals because they carry some of the feelings that we may associate with religious ritual. Rather, he chooses to look at purely structural and formal analogies that may be constructed between media rituals and Durkheim's thinking. According to Couldry, Durkheim's understanding of ritual can refer to practices that are secular as well as religious and ritual practice reinforces the distinction between the sacred and the profane. Couldry attests that the rhetorics of order that underlie media rituals are increasingly prevalent in contemporary societies and that through media rituals we acquire a direct and immediate connection to certain central social realities. Just as Durkheim saw religious rituals as organized around the mutually exclusive categories of sacred/profane, so media rituals are organized around the categories of 'media' vs. 'ordinary' (as shown by the perceived distinction between 'celebrities' and 'ordinary persons'). Couldry argues that media rituals enact and reproduce the categories which underlie beliefs in the social institution of the media, just as religious rituals reproduce the categories which underlie religious beliefs, and he examines the extent to which the 'media world' in some sense 'stands in for', and gives us special access to, our collective 'reality'. In Durkheimian terms, Couldry asks whether religious authority is based in the same type of social source as the media's authority, that is, the claim to stand in for the social, and then proceeds to examine the ethical ramifications of this. Can we obtain a framework for thinking about media ethics that can take on the challenges that an intensely mediated and ritualized public sphere will generate for our chances of living peaceably together?

In the third chapter, Stephen Pattison makes the bold and provocative case for engaging more deeply from the perspective of Christian practical theology with artefacts. He argues that while artefacts—works of human creation—of a sacred or aesthetic significance may be objects of academic analysis, they are mostly ignored by commentators and critics who tend to assume that there is a disjuncture between the material/inanimate and the human. The material world of artefacts thus lacks fundamental interests and rights and exists solely for human use and manipulation. Yet, Pattison contends, there is a need to redress the balance, not least because artefacts make claims upon the human world—our bodies, persons, beliefs, societies and practices—and a relationship of mutual recognition and respect for all things is preferable to one of domination and exploitation. The fact that artefacts are among the highest forms of human self-realization exacerbates the need to see them more as we presently relate to persons and agents and to cultivate person-like relations with them. After all, artefacts shape us and make us who and what we are—because of the bicycle, for example, a whole generation of pedestrians have been transformed into tourists. In theological terms, Pattison suggests that artefacts may even be seen to constitute the products of and witnesses to embodied human logos—they are the products of and witnesses to embodied human logos. Not to engage with, or to admire, artefacts thus comprises a lost opportunity. Artefacts need our appreciation, care and respect if they are to survive and flourish, and many artefacts, from the most lofty (cathedrals) to the most prosaic (doors), outlive and outlast their progenitors—to the point, even, of acting as memorials to the humans that created them. Sometimes, he argues, they have a value over and above that of human beings themselves—valuable paintings, for instance, may be evacuated in times of war ahead of the exigencies of living people. The fact that artefacts do not have free will is no reason, according to Pattison, for consigning them to the (literal and metaphorical) rubbish heap. Some humans and animals lack the ability to undertake reciprocal responsibilities, but that does not mean we accord them no moral significance—whether we are talking about an embryo, a person who is comatose or the environment. Pattison argues strongly that if we invest in relationships with artefacts, we can be more properly engaged in the experience of living, thereby challenging attitudes of unthinking acquisition and consumption. In response to the charge that a relationship with artefacts might lead us away from relationships with fellow humans, he concludes that the opposite may be the case and that there is no reason why we cannot be concerned with both. If human life is shaped by artefacts, to care about humans is to care about our relations with material things.

Jolyon Mitchell's chapter (chapter 4) examines how various media are used to promote, celebrate and offer a critique of purported martyrdoms, with particular reference to how mediated representations of recent martyrdoms within Islam reverberate across various cultural and religious settings. This is a pioneering study as very little work to date has accorded adequate consideration to why the concept of 'martyrdom' has become a point of contest. Mitchell begins with the recent assassination in Pakistan of Benazir Bhutto, and, by paying attention to testimony on the Internet, where the story of her murder has already been amplified and elaborated, he appraises whether the manner and form of Bhutto's death determines her 'martyr' status and what kind of martyr she will become—will she be a martyr for freedom, social justice and democracy, or a martyr for Islam? Moving on to discuss memorials to those who were killed during the Iran–Iraq war of the 1980s, Mitchell questions whether any links can be forged between contemporary Iranian martyrdoms and the death 1,300 years ago of Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, and as to whether there is a distinction between describing, on the one hand, volunteer soldiers who lost their lives, and, on the other, suicide bombers, as martyrs. Mitchell also looks at the work of scholars who have gone beyond purely religious and theological explanations for what motivates suicide bombers—to what extent, for example, do political goals play a role, especially in the light of claims that suicide bombing is primarily a response to foreign occupation and a strategy for political liberation? Significantly, Mitchell notes that despite the often vociferous support that suicide attacks receive within Islam, more nuanced pictures emerge on the Internet, where the appropriateness and legitimacy of suicide bombings are often condemned on religious grounds. Many sites, for example, advocate that 'true' Islam is peaceful and life-bringing, such that there is a clear distinction between Islam and Talibanism. Mitchell then concludes by examining how the apparent democratization of Internet communication has helped to ensure the further fragmentation of the contested term 'martyrdom', to the point that modern media is a pivotal site for Muslims and Christians alike to express their strongly held beliefs in the face of violence, terrorism and war.

In chapter 5, Michael W. DeLashmutt raises vital questions about the extent to which technology has become a central facet in the construction of self-identity and personal values. His focus is on the religious self-identity of IT workers in Seattle, a city where religious identity is disproportionately lower than in other regions of the US and where the rate of employment within the IT industry is high. DeLashmutt is particularly well qualified to undertake research in this area, having worked for a number of years within the information economy in Seattle. Using Paul Tillich's understanding of technology as a starting point, DeLashmutt asks whether technology contributes to the radical construction of identity, community, ethics and even religious faith. He says that as a Christian practical theologian he is interested in exploring how cultures produce forms of expressing something akin to what Tillich meant by Ultimate Concern. To what extent can technology convey the Ultimate (so that the language of techno-theology becomes apt)? If technology offers a plausible functional alternative to religious devotion, does this account for the low religious adherence of those who work in the IT sector in the Seattle metropolitan area? According to statistics, DeLashmutt notes that more people living in the Pacific North West choose 'none' as their religious identity than anywhere else in the United States. But, looking at the evidence, he indicates that no definite correlation can be made between this particular region's employment data and its rate of religious affiliation, which was low even before the likes of Amazon, Microsoft, Real Media and hundreds of small Internet corporations took root there in the last couple of decades. He draws on three case studies and reaches the conclusion that religious views have little to do with his respondents' choice of vocation and, vice versa, that their choice of vocation has little to do with their religious views. Rather, DeLashmutt points out, issues of religious affiliation have more to do with family, community and life situations and his research subjects' reasons for working in this sector are entirely pragmatic, such as wishing to make money or pursue a challenging career. This is one occasion, DeLashmutt acknowledges, in which his research has produced results contrary to his original expectations and which causes him to reflect on his research in new and challenging ways. He concludes that we need to pursue new ways of conceiving of spirituality apart from functionalist accounts of religion and that the onus is on the academic to appreciate that the way in which a research subject may understand religion is not necessarily identical or equivalent to the manner in which it is used in academic discourse. The same words may have different definitions. Rather than see religion as being on the defensive when it comes to the challenges posed by technology, DeLashmutt makes the instructive point that the Church might actually be better served by placing technology in the background, not the foreground, especially in an age when contemporary users of technology are favouring the ability of technology to facilitate collaboration and community (as evinced by the popularity of social networking sites such as *Facebook*)—'two things for which the Christian church could find an immediate resonance' (p. 99). Technology may thus be complementing, rather than competing with, organized religion.

Carlton Johnstone's chapter (chapter 6) also draws on the unexpected and unconventional ways in which religious language and knowledge have the capacity to be drawn upon and appropriated in more 'secular' contexts. His focus is on the study of billboard advertisements in Auckland, New Zealand, which challenge claims that Christianity and the Church are anachronistic and redundant in the modern world. With particular reference to two recent marketing campaigns which heavily exploited religious vocabulary, Johnstone's chapter raises important questions about the disparity between people's positive response to Jesus and their negative response to organized religion as well as significant broader questions concerning the representation of God in popular culture. Is God an old man with a long white beard, as conveyed in the depiction by Michelangelo in the Sistene Chapel, or could he be black, as in the case of the film *Bruce Almighty* (Tom Shadyac, 2003)? To what extent are perceptions of Jesus culturally assimilated and historically located rather than normative? Are we passive consumers or is it the case that there is no such thing as a natural or correct reading of an image or text? To what extent does social position play a role in the interpretation of media texts? The billboards that Johnstone refers to enable people—as his study of empirical testimony has shown—who are reluctant to engage in conversation about God and Christianity to build a bridge and have a dialogue about religion and theology. The main focus of his study is the 'Hell Pizza' advertising campaign which reappropriates the biblical idea of Hell as a place of eternal torment and punishment to refer to a gourmet pizza outlet. Ironically the net result of this, as Johnstone identifies, is to bring back to the discussion table a concept that 'has virtually been eliminated from the vocabulary and doctrinal repository of most churches' (p. 112). He refers to the way religious ideas are being emptied and refilled with branded meaning and indicates that the adverts do not transmit messages by themselves—without the viewer as decoder they are meaningless. Similar to the above chapter, which questions whether technology might be taking on religious functions, Johnstone raises a broader question: whether advertising comprises a form of religion. Is advertising, in a consumer society, one of the institutions creating meaning and thus replacing the Church? Or is it the case that, rather than a new form of religion, religiousness is being exploited for the purposes of advertising? Johnstone then examines Michel de Certeau's concepts of strategies, tactics and textual poaching to explore the marketing of God and Hell in two rival marketing campaigns. Johnstone's conclusion is that, if the biblical rivalry between God and Satan is being successfully played out in the streets of modern-day Auckland, there has been a sea-change in people's religious and cultural values in the last 20 years and we are now witnessing 'a semiotic landscape that is fluid and polysemic' (p. 118).

In chapter 7, Ellen E. Moore also examines the manner in which secular media can help—or even hinder—personal faith. Her focus is the nature of contemporary American evangelism as it is shaped by the media and the questions it poses to churchgoers concerning the importance of truth and objectivity. She pays specific reference in this regard to the various ways in which evangelical Christian congregations engaged with *The Da Vinci Code* (Ron Howard, 2006) upon its theatrical release in May 2006. Moore observes that whereas many Roman Catholic leaders advocated a boycott of the film, a number of evangelical churches appropriated its style in their worship and literature: not only did they screen the film to churchgoers, they also made their websites resemble scenes from the movie and created 'code breaking' games to play on church grounds. Although at first glance there would appear to be a conflict between a secular, mainstream media culture and evangelical Christianity, Moore raises the possibility that the values they espouse are not all that different. Looking at the concept of a 'spiritual marketplace', she examines how church leaders are increasingly adopting a consumerist strategy and ideology, to the point that there is an ongoing redefinition of churches as businesses and the faithful as 'clients' in which the individual is privileged over and above the institution. Accordingly, individual churchgoers can even reject the Church's teachings, if they impede, or stand in the way of, the individual's search for meaning and happiness in life. Finding that the media are an important evangelizing tool for reaching out to 'unchurched' individuals, who may be either unfamiliar or disillusioned with traditional religious institutions, Moore suggests that it can prove difficult for pastors to call for an outright rejection of popular culture when the media play such an integral role in attracting new members and 'bringing them to God'. She even cites one Presbyterian pastor who invoked *The Da Vinci Code*'s lead actor, Tom Hanks, as a source of religious authority, since the minister concerned had read or heard somewhere that Hanks was a Christian. Drawing on her observations of several evangelical church services in Illinois, which she supplemented by focus group discussions, Moore also argues that church leaders are being forced to confront their congregations' acquaintance with, and dependence on, rationalism and scientific reasoning, in which ordinary churchgoers are predilected to frame their religious beliefs in the language of science, evidence and knowledge, rather than faith alone. To this end, Moore cites the testimony of churchgoers whose relationship to the Bible and Church teachings was changed by *The Da Vinci Code*, in that following the disclosure in the film that one of the characters is the last living descendant of Jesus Christ, they wanted to know whether the Church could use DNA testing in order to establish whether or not Jesus' bloodline was continued. Moore's chapter thus raises fascinating questions about how the 'sacred' is being redefined in the light of scientific and media discourse and points to broader issues about how changing religious practices influence contemporary culture and politics beyond the specific context of American evangelicals.

In chapter 8, Danielle Kirby continues the search for the sacred within the context of secular culture. Her focus is the way in which the popularization of the Internet has facilitated the establishment and growth of 'virtual', albeit loosely affiliated, communities, whose adherents believe in the existence of a non-human world, populated by mythological souls and selves. This raises key questions about the ways in which works of fiction—in the form of books, films, television and comics, to name some of the more obvious ones—can be drawn upon to carry and convey sacred and spiritual meaning. Irrespective of whether such groups believe literally in the worlds portrayed in narrative fiction or whether such texts 'merely' provide support and inspiration for religious, metaphysical and spiritual beliefs, Kirby's exercise is important, if we are to avoid misrepresenting what 'alternative', syncretic religious groups stand for. While such groups tend to acknowledge the explicitly fictional basis of the texts to which they relate, they nevertheless believe, as in the case of adherents to Jediism, in a 'personal acceptance of the moral and spiritual code' (p. 143) that is attributed to their fictional counterparts—in this instance, the Jedi of the *Star Wars* films. Rather than literally believe in the existence of the Death Star, for instance, a Jedi might find that the ideals espoused by fictional characters are worth emulating in his or her own life. The central focus of Kirby's study is the Otherkin, who exemplify a far more literal interpretation of narrative fiction than Jedis, to the point of believing that they are themselves more-than-human. They are a community aimed at personal metaphysical enquiry and mutual support. Kirby raises fascinating questions concerning the nature of how they may be said to comprise a 'community'. She notes, for example, that despite being dispersed geographically and comprising a 'virtual' phenomenon, there are off-line group activities and meetings, too. The conclusion she draws is not that the Otherkin are religion-like or implicitly religious, in the way that football may be deemed to encompass religion-like traits and tendencies, but that they are actively religious—their concerns are of a spiritual and super-empirical nature. Kirby's chapter also encompasses a discussion of the nature of fan cultures more generally and whether the alternative worlds that such groups adhere to is pre-existent, thus existing prior to their composition by an author, with the author 'merely' channelling the worlds concerned, or whether the 'fictional' worlds concerned have been constructed by the readers or viewers themselves, through their various interests, predilections, hopes, aspirations and needs.

Nicholas Buxton's chapter (chapter 9) draws on first-hand experience of taking part in a British TV documentary series, when he lived in a Benedictine monastery (Worth Abbey) for six weeks. One of the other participants, a self-confessed atheist, underwent a religious experience during his time at the monastery, prompting Buxton to ask whether a Reality TV series can really be the right medium for fostering such a personal journey. Besides the legitimate question whether it can ever be possible to have a religious experience without also having a religious faith in which to situate it and a religious language with which to describe it, Buxton's chapter raises significant questions about how the monastic principles drawn upon in the programme, such as silence and simplicity, correlate with the world of Reality TV. Is a medium of entertainment and escape from reality capable of communicating something real and authentic? Can a line of demarcation be drawn between reality and Reality TV? How porous is the distinction between fact and fiction in television? Can a TV documentary be anything other than a constructed narrative as opposed to an unmediated, neutral record of reality? Is there a disjuncture between the 'transformation' or 'self-improvement' of the 'contestants' (and/or their houses and gardens) that has now become a staple of Reality TV and the spiritual transformation one might expect to happen in a monastery? Buxton discusses the paradox of effectively having two monasteries to contend with—the 'real-life' experience of living in Worth Abbey and the media event of a Reality TV programme that is set in a monastery. Would his, and that of his fellow contestants', experience of spending six weeks in this environment have been any different had the event not been televised? Did the process of being observed by a television audience have any effect on the experience of being there? Buxton suggests that, although physically absent, the viewer was nonetheless ever-present, which raises questions whether viewers are seeing the 'real' self or the 'performed' self. He notes that even the attempt to avoid acting and performing in front of the camera itself became an act and that there was a perceptible difference in the group's behaviour when the camera crew were not present. Buxton raises important questions about the media 'packaging' of religion, like Johnstone's chapter, and, in particular, the way filmmakers subsumed the 'radical otherness' of the transformative experience of the atheist-turned-believer into the nature of religion as a form of therapy. What is the media's role in the construction of selfhood in the modern world? Instead of, as in traditional religious terms, having one's attention directed away from oneself on to something higher and transcendent, Buxton concludes that Reality TV is interested only in exploring the move towards the self and one's inner life—thus creating a distinction between the 'virtual' and the 'real' monastery.

In chapter 10, Rupert Till examines the relationship between religion and Electronic Dance Music Culture (EDMC). He asks whether there is such a thing as EDMC spirituality. As in the case of DeLashmutt's first-hand experience of working in the Seattle Metropolitan area and Buxton's time spent in a monastery, Till has insider knowledge of club culture: he has worked in it since 1991 and has thus been in a prime position to undertake participant observation over a long-term period. In functionalist terms, Till examines whether the design of clubs might be found to resemble churches, with, for example, the DJ booth taking on the characteristics of an organ loft or pulpit—an analogy that extends to the club names which often have overt religious connotations, while clubbers can be seen raising their hands upward towards the light in the manner of a Pentecostal Church service. The clubs themselves also denote separation from mainstream culture, being places of escape, release and transgression, although Till notes the irony that it is often Christianity that is the target of transgression, rather than, say, Hinduism or Islam, while at the same time clubs borrow from Christian culture. Till argues that the most obvious evidence of religion and spirituality within EDMC is the many instances of transcendent experiences, described by clubbers, which he recounts at length. He observes, however, that most clubbers do not regard themselves as 'religious' or see EDMC as having a religious or spiritual dimension. Like DeLashmutt, who found that workers in the IT sector had a different understanding of the term 'religion' to those in the academy, Till suggests that there is a dichotomy at work, in which it is the language, traditions and history of religion that are being rejected, rather than its philosophical essentials. Dismissive of religion though his respondents may be, Till nevertheless finds that, in Weberian terms, clubs are providing a focus of community for the homeless self, created by the individualization of society in the modern industrialized world—a role that traditional religions fulfilled in the past. That there is a social and community dimension to EDMC is evident from Till's fieldwork, with individuals seeking closeness, attachment and empathy—even ecstatic merger—with the group, in what amounts to 'sacred space', both separate from the everyday world and a key focus of community and identity. Accordingly, Till concludes that EDMC enables us to understand the importance within our cultures of tradition, ritual, community and transcendence and the importance of dancing together to music.

Milja Radovic's chapter (chapter 11) looks at the interplay between Serbian films from the 1990s and the socio-political regime of Slobodan Milosevic, with particular reference to the representation of nationalism and its connection with institutional religion (the Orthodox Church of Serbia) in *Pretty Village, Pretty Flame* (Srdjan Dragojevic, 1995). Radovic interrogates what the film says about the cultural context of the time and whether there is a link between ecclesiastical mission and political activities. She suggests that the film comprises an important barometer of the particular mindset of Serbian people during this period and of the way Milosevic's regime affected people from various backgrounds. Although the film bears witness to a number of competing symbolisms, Radovic attests that ultimately there is a strong, although indirect, message which opposes the regime. She refutes the charge that the film is pro-Milosevic by virtue of the way it deconstructs the very stereotypes and myths upon which Milosevic's populism was based. Dealing with questions of implicit versus explicit religion, Radovic notes that Orthodox Christianity is not specifically analysed in the film, nor were the filmmakers interested in dealing with religion *per se*. But, she argues, *Pretty Village, Pretty Flame* discloses much about the Serbian Orthodox Church and its impact on the people of Serbia, with its religious elements inseparable from the representation of nationalism, and religious intolerance is presented as an integral part of the conflict. Her conclusion is that the film provides a critical depiction of religious-mythological concepts of nationhood as well as pointers to the way nationalism and religious intolerance are equated and connected, in particular, how Milosevic's regime presented the conflict as a continuation of the historical battle for Serbdom, of which Serbian Orthodoxy was an integral part.

The focus on world cinema continues in chapter 12, in which Yam Chi-Keung focuses on two films by Hong Kong actor and filmmaker Stephen Chow. Yam recognizes that East Asian cinema has not been accorded much attention in the emerging Religion & Film field. His chapter is an important attempt to redress this imbalance. Using textual and contextual analysis, he examines the manner in which *Shaolin Soccer* (2001) and *Kung Fu Hustle* (2004) may be found to comprise parabolic representations that express important aspects of the mass psychology of the people of Hong Kong in the years following political reunion with China in 1997. Although Chow's work has been neglected in major scholarly works on Asian cinema, Yam argues that despite the films' appearance as non-sensical and irreverent entertainment, aimed at a mass audience and devoid of serious substance, they manifest, in their depiction of marginalized underdogs struggling for survival in a changing world that is hostile towards them, some of the deepest collective concerns of contemporary Hong Kong and proffer a vision of hope. In *Kung Fu Hustle*, for example, the characters may well be displaced from mainstream society, but they are portrayed as heroes who exhibit both extraordinary physical strength and moral courage. Placing the marginal at the centre subverts the conventional relationship between the centre and the margin and redefines what it means to be socially excluded and powerless. In particular, the impetus to transform the destiny of the marginal community comes from within this very socio-economic class itself, rather than from an outside élite who, in the manner of, say, the American Monomyth, would break into the world from above in the form of a saviour-figure. Yam suggests that hope for the future comes from the ability to reconnect with the collective memory of hardship that has been common in Hong Kong's recent past. While not explicitly religious films, Yam argues that there is a religious undertone at work in Chow's movies—they preach a 'secular gospel' devoid of explicitly sacred, eschatological and transcendental content, while nevertheless addressing fundamental issues that the contemporary local audience deem to be 'sacred'. The absence of a dichotomy between sacred and secular is a useful corrective, Yam concludes, to the tendency in Western academia to set up just such a dichotomized paradigm, in the form, for instance, of the secularization thesis.

In Chapter 13, Sarah Lawther examines the impact that the Internet has had on the way in which religions are depicted and understood. In a way that mirrors Kirby's discussion of the relationship between the Internet and the rise of alternative religions, Lawther examines the inter-connection between religious involvement in the online world and the extent to which this has the capacity to change what happens offline (although the focus here is specifically on mainstream religious traditions). Looking primarily at the homepage—the initial point of contact—of religious websites from the Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Muslim and Jewish traditions, Lawther examines how religions choose to present themselves and asks a number of pertinent questions: what are the differences between religion *in* cyberspace (religion online) and religion *on* cyberspace (online religion)? Is there a difference between the way religion is presented and the extent to which the Internet offers a new form of religious experience? Can the boundaries between the two categories be tightly drawn? Does the Internet enable or encourage religious experimentation? If so, how challenging might this be to traditional forms of religion? To what extent does the medium shape the message? While anyone can access the sites concerned in her study, Lawther notes that this may not have been the intention of the authors, who may, for instance, have a local, select audience in mind and certainly did not create these Internet sites for the purposes of social scientific research. Lawther's chapter investigates a number of ethical and methodological questions that thus arise. As there is no central source of control or authority on the web, does this tend to favour non-hierarchical traditions? Is the medium swallowing the message to this end? How objective can sampling be, if some religious organizations are using 'pay-for-placement' advertising where they appear as the sponsored link for any searches that are conducted on search engines for religions? Does this skew the results? Does the updating of sites reflect the fact that religions are evolving—or is this simply down to skilful marketing strategies? Finding in the course of her research that a significant number of images on the home pages of religious sites are of the social and communal dimension of religion, Lawther asks whether this reflects the fact that the motivation for, say, Christians who join online communities is not information, but a need for relationships? Or is it the case that 'community' images are easy to show and can be uploaded easily and economically from a digital camera? Lawther concludes by examining the effect that online images of sacred figures are having on offline religious experience and the extent to which offline communities are being sustained by their online presence.

In the final chapter (chapter 14), Katharine Sarah Moody also looks to the Internet. The focus here is on the way the Internet is a site where people are working out their self-identity, with particular reference to blogging and open source software. Similar to Kirby's study of virtual communities, Moody is also interested in the websites of emerging groups, although her focus is mainly on Christian communities. Recognizing that much research to date has tended to ignore the online aspects of emerging Christian communities, Moody offers an invaluable corrective to scholarship in this area by facilitating the inclusion of seldom heard voices, using the methodology of Radical Orthodoxy's post-secular understanding of theology. Her research finds that the Christian web bloggers concerned tend to reflect in a Christian fashion upon all manner of phenomena and events, including music, film, football, beer, food, fashion and politics, as well as specifically theological concerns. She identifies in particular a website which has been created by an online community of users who are engaged in the reconstruction of theology following an open source methodology (similar in form to Wikipedia, which allows users to update entries, edit pages and alter page content and layout). She examines how the source code of the Christian tradition—whether the Apostles' Creed or anything to do with such topics as eschatology or ethics—is being questioned, reinterpreted and modified by web users. The effect is that 'the conventional understanding of theology as a bounded discipline reserved for "the experts"' (p. 234) is being exploded. The ramifications are, she observes, being experienced off-line, too, with what is happening online providing a model or template for what is going on in the 'real' world. Moody's conclusion is that the blogosphere presents researchers with an opportunity for conducting research that would be constrained by more conventional research methods. In interview situations, for example, there is not the same sort of flexibility or scope for allowing discussion topics to develop. The advantage with blogs as data is that the participants' own personal theorizing can be expanded through their engagement with other voices. There is therefore something far more collective and up-to-the-minute happening with web-based research than conventional, library-destined academic research permits, although Moody acknowledges that a number of ethical and practical questions still need to be addressed. How far ought one go, for example, to enable potential respondents to access and contribute to, or participate in, a web blog? The dangers that Moody spells out of 'link slutting' and 'link whoring', and of other inappropriate 'netiquette', makes for a very topical chapter which explores innovative and pioneering directions for future empirical research.

Exploring Religion and the Sacred in a Media Age is thus a very creative and academically rich counterpoint to some of the more dismissive treatments of religion that have been so much in vogue of late, not least through the advances of Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and other advocates of the New Atheism. In the place of what McGrath discerns in *The God Delusion* as the 'atheist equivalent of slick hellfire preaching' and the substitution of 'turbocharged rhetoric and highly selective manipulation of facts for careful, evidence-based thinking' (McGrath 2007: x), this volume has sought to ensure that a more multi-faceted and creative engagement with religion is on offer. It has been written with an international audience in mind, and is recommended reading for the growing number of undergraduate and postgraduate courses in religion, media and popular culture—of which there is a particular concentration in North America, Britain and Scandinavia, but also a growing number in other parts of Europe, Latin America and Asia—that are at the cutting-edge of contemporary academic discourse.

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