

# Mediatization of religion and Cultural Studies: a reading of Stuart Hall\*

## *Midiatização da religião e Estudos Culturais: uma leitura de Stuart Hall*

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### ABSTRACT

Although the issue of religion does not occupy a prominent place in the works of Stuart Hall or even in Cultural Studies in general, some contemporary phenomena related to media and religion relations can be analyzed within this key of interpretation, mostly when we think on the intersection with identity. In this text, some theoretic and conceptual possibilities are outlined in order to understand the process of mediatization of religion from a perspective of articulation of identities, focusing, in particular, on questions related to body and culture.

**Keywords:** Mediatization, religion, Cultural Studies, identity

\* The topics in this article were concurrently formulated and developed in Martino (2016b), particularly in Chapter 7.

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### RESUMO

Embora a questão da religião não ocupe um lugar de destaque na obra de Stuart Hall ou mesmo no âmbito dos Estudos Culturais, alguns dos fenômenos contemporâneos direcionados para as relações entre mídia e religião podem ser analisados dentro dessa chave de compreensão, sobretudo quando se pensa na intersecção com questões de identidade. Neste texto são delineadas algumas possibilidades teórico-conceituais de compreensão dos processos de midiática da religião a partir da perspectiva de articulações identitárias, focalizando, em particular, as questões relacionadas a corpo e cultura.

**Palavras-chave:** Midiatização, religião, Estudos Culturais, identidade

Religion does not seem to have a vantage point in Cultural Studies' agenda, for among its main themes problematized in its theoretical, critical, and political trajectory, religious phenomena are generally not dully included as object of analysis. No classical work – understood here as founding texts for this interdisciplinary study – has exclusively approached this theme – there is, at most, scattered comments when dealing with other topics. To start with it, we should recall a companion organized by Mizruchi (2001), where specific aspects of some national contexts are explored. However, even in this case, there is no tensional dialogue with Cultural Studies' perspectives.

In the works of Stuart Hall, in particular, the theme emerges as in a leap year, generally in connection with representational issues, such as politics and identity. Nevertheless, it is not our intention here to reassess religious topics within Cultural Studies, even in the works of Hall. However productive, this perspective would detract from the scope of this text. Our intention, always on a tactic and experimental level, is to *think with* Hall and other authors on some problematic issues related to religion in contemporary society.

Due to its cultural dimension, religion can be understood as a theme more particularly appropriate to Cultural Studies than contemporary expressions involving religiousness; specifically so once its cultural and political relevance is dimensioned within a global scenario. Political, cultural and even economic transformations that took place since the end of the Cold War have found in *religion*, in its myriad of forms, an important vector that needs to be understood according to its various dimensions – particularly, as a cultural formation that involves identity and political contours.

Beyond any doctrinaire, dogmatic or ritual consideration, religion can be understood as a social phenomenon related to other founding elements of society, and, according to this, it has its unique dimensions, such as discourse and cultural practice, that need to be thought from a historic and political point of view. To a certain extent, this has been a major concern since the first attempts to think religion from a social science's point of view – since Marx, Weber, and Durkheim's endeavors, to mention the three most important thinkers on the topic, their main intention was precisely to understand religion from its branches and implications in a changing society.

Therefore, it is as a cultural phenomenon, in which discourses and practices are intertwined with representations and world perspectives, that religion is to be taken in this text; as such, religion is to be understood from reflections brought up by Cultural Studies, for in their claims to think culture from daily practices, meanings, codes and representation

based on political, historical and economic factors, Cultural Studies offer a possibility to understand social transformation – and transformation of religion itself – in terms of potentialities and conflicts existent not exclusively in its scope of action, but also in its intersection with political, social and cultural spaces.

Even in the so-called secular societies, religion can be understood as a gathering vector among many daily spaces and moments: from political discussions and decisions, influencing international relations, to daily practices, as the setting of codes of behavior in the public sphere, and the ordering of body uses and affective relationships in the private sphere. Thus, religion is not circumscribed to inward dogmatic practices, but also to cultural practices with political and cultural implications. It is this assumption, taken as the bedrock for this text, which makes it particularly appealing to Cultural Studies.

Particularly, religion is here understood not as a general concept, hard to be circumscribed, but as something specific, which can be termed *mediatization of religion*; namely, a contemporary form of representation and religious experience. Initially, mediatization of religion can be understood as a joint social process – in this case in particular, religious conceptions and practices – connected with a media environment.

Although the process of mediatization of religion claims to have its origins in the Western World, it seems to be a global phenomenon, in which different manifestations of religiousness, among its various potential forms and expressions, acquire other dimensions whenever articulated with the media processes that surrounds them. From the aspects related to religion abovementioned, mediatization presents itself as one more fraught with meaning when addressed from a Cultural Studies perspective, for it seems to reveal, to begin with, a tensional connection between two elements: cultural processes and media processes, contextualized in the political and cultural scenario that they belong to. Religious and media semiotic codes, if intermingled, religion and media semiotic codes seem to give birth to something altogether different: new kinds of religious experience and understanding that requires an understanding of cultural, political and identity issues concerning these experiences.

### RELIGION AS CULTURAL PRACTICE AND IDENTITY

The importance of religion in the making of identities, both individual and collective, is one of the most important topics of discussion on

religion and religiousness. From the beginning, from an anthropological and sociological perspective, the question of identities and collective representation has never failed to take its role in the debate. Despite numberless disagreements and different approaches offered by many researchers in the field, there seems to be a consensus that, in social terms, religion is an important factor both to the making of identities and to its representation in the public sphere.

From Hall (1996b) and Grossberg's (1997) analysis, the definition of identity is related to the possibilities of performing itself in public; the process is more of achieving than granting it: the right to be whom and how oneself is. At the same time, the making of an identity is also related to the space of representations, in the way it is socially engaged with the multiple hierarchies that build up the public sphere. Thus, to be some one is a political act.

This dimension is located from a bio political perspective, understood as the possibilities of controlling and using the body, to issues such as media political representation of a group or a collectivity. Religion as part of beliefs, discourses and practices of various persons becomes, in this way, a focus of attention to questions related to the making of identities, its representations and possibilities of co-existence in the public sphere. As part of cultural identity, religion is a consensus ground and attribution of meanings to the life of an individual in terms of a place of conflicts related to economic, political, and, quite often, ethical issues. This complexity challenges any narrow interpretation, more so when it is thought against a broader context known as the *process of secularization*, which, at first, typifies Western societies – for a conceptual analysis on the topic, the works of Keane (2000), Martin (1991), and Dobellaere (1981) offer a comprehensive overview that far exceeds the scope of this text.

The role of religion in the making of identities in late modernity can seem, at first, to challenge many perspectives that point out to a continuous decline of practices, institutions, and religious prerogatives. This point of view, understood almost always under the heading of *process of secularization*, counted among its premises with the idea that rationality in the modern world would ban religion from the space of deliberation and decision-making, restricting it to the personal sphere and, as such, outside public affairs. Imprisoned in a *magic* world, liable to *disenchantment*, in Weber's perspective, understood as a perception of collectivity, in Durkheim's opinion, or denounced as an ideological practice responsible to the maintenance of a given system, according to Marx's analysis,

religion seemed to follow the paths of an irretrievable decline, and could possibly disappear in the face of modernity.

As Pierucci (1997) stressed out, indeed, the process of secularization, at least in the Western World, kept up and continues to keep up with its rhythm, in spite of several moments in which religion seem to interfere with public affairs. Officially disconnected with the State, as well as with broader political and economic spheres, religion has not sustained itself as a system of traditional practices in the face of modernity. The presence of religion in the public sphere, as well as its intrusion in issues of a collective interest, does not happen as an “official” instance, as would occur in a theocracy.

In pluralistic societies, to borrow Habermas’ designation, religion is brought to the level of the public sphere alongside many other players, in a competitive situation to insert its topics in the public debate and with an aim at influencing decision-makings. However intense its participation may be, it is but one among other pressure groups, devoid of any specific prerogative, due to the alleged transcendental bond which is at the root of its practices. Several authors who have worked in the wake of these reflections suggest that the strength of religion in the public sphere arises from its adjustments to modern political procedures (Hoover, 1997; Martelli; Capello, 2005; Marsden, 2008; Martino, 2012; 2016a; 2016b).

This seems to indicate a twofold movement, embedded in its complexity: on the one hand, the loss of a properly *official* character of religion as a political actor in Western modernity; on the other, the continuous rise of religion as a cluster of doctrines, discourses, and practices dictating the way individuals and collectivities should behave in everyday life. From a process of secularization, religion has been kept from official bodies of decision-making, while its importance as cultural vehicle in the making of groups and communities has been preserved.

At the same time, it is worth noting that the so called secularization paradigm does not always account for non-western perspectives, where religious experiences have a more direct contact with the State than mere pressure groups or interest. It is worth remembering that in many nation states religion has been, or it was until recent, an important factor for the making of national identity.

Cultural Studies have pointed out to the complexity of this connection as something hard to be analyzed singly but from a methodological framework. Far from being stalled compartments in relation to context, cultural practices are always in connection with it, either directly or obliquely.



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On this viewpoint, religious practices can be thought in terms of cultural practices where political, social and economic issues are derived from.

In late modernity, *religious experience* seems to stress some aspects of *political experience*, to the extent in which, in pluralistic societies, religious borders seem to be equally less defined in relation to *official* instances, to which dissent figures and communities have stood against. Definitions of the religious, or as Sanchez (1999) puts forward, the introduction of the category “religiousness”, in contrast with the institutional view of “religion”, suggest an equal movement in the stretching of the religious when coordinated with other cultural practices. This perception is perhaps made clearer when one thinks of the several ways to experience religion in contemporaneity, even more so in a mediated society.

### MEDIATIZATION OF RELIGION AND CULTURAL IDENTITIES

The process of mediatization of society presents itself as a complex network of social, economic, political, technical, and technologic factors that challenge, at first, any perspective about social practices exclusively centered on media. Mediatization is a concept that has been developed and discussed in the framework of media studies and has not been defined but in connection with some basic propositions – and even in these cases it does not come under close scrutiny. The idea of the term is referred by authors belonging to different backgrounds as an articulated movement between social processes and media environment, where its logical differences and components are intersected in a tense articulation that makes it impossible to be reduced to one or to the other<sup>1</sup>.

More than the simple physical, numeric or quantitative expansion of media devices in a society, the notion of mediatization seeks to refer to the way social practices are linked to media environments transforming both processes. The mediatization concept does not think *media* and *social practices* as stalled compartments that would be liable to *influences* – in the sense of media effects on social processes –, but as interrelated practices immersed in several semiotic codes existent in social space, such as political, economic, and cultural logics.

According to Hall (2000), an identity is formed from a complex system of semiotic, anthropologic, and psychoanalytic boundaries of equality and differences. These boundaries, more than individuals, persons or predetermined groups are drawn up mainly as signs, to which *equal* and *different* meanings are assigned to in a relatively arbitrary manner within a space of circulation of a discursive power suitable to it – therefore, mobile. Thus,

1. For a discussion on mediatization in particular, see Livingstone (2009a, 2009b), Krotz (2009), and Hjarvard (2008).

the strength of representation is clearly shown in the possibility to socially define the way in which a particular person or group can or should be interpreted in a large scale.

The strength of representation consists in a large-scale definition, so as to understand the identity/difference binary, allowing a quick and superficial definition of us in relation to *them*. Us, in this case, stands for what is equal, or identical, where ties are accurate and genuine; whereas ties with *them* is marked by a mixture of interests, curiosity, hostility, and fear, in the borders of Freudian psychoanalysis (Martin, 2010).

Mediatization of social processes inevitably encounters identity processes. Many studies – such as Gomes (2004), Fausto Neto (2004), Gasparetto (2011), and Martino (2013) – identify in the process of mediatization of religion the rise of new forms to experience religiosity. Defined by Gomes (2010) as “a new way to be in the world”, mediatization gains considerably more significance in establishing identities.

Mediatization of religion clearly encompasses religious experiences in terms of identity and difference, which are made more visible in a media environment. If, on the one hand, the making of community ties, particularly in digital medias, allow the creation of a more or less direct sense of common experiences – *communication*, in the sense assigned by Williams (2003) –; on the other, it is also a space where differences are clearly perceived, shaped by the same processes of institutional division in non-mediatized areas of religious filed.

In the case of religion, it would not be amiss to say that the process of mediatization is related to *new forms to experience religiousness*, articulated by a media environment, without losing, however, some of its fundamental characteristics. One of the aspects in the process of mediatization of society, in institutional terms, is the overlapping of this articulation: mediatization of religion does not seem to mean a complete change in the logic of religion, as if it would be replaced by the logic of media; a causal relation would indeed hardly be liable to a theoretical or empirical demonstration. It is actually a complex process of negotiation of meanings, where both logics alternate between them, and without a continuous, cooperative or conflicting solution – now working on a closer level, now intermingled by resistances; these last are responsible to the maintenance of social processes specificity in face of media processes. Without this, social practices would not be articulated by media environment, but engulfed by it, which does not seem to be the case. Cultural processes directly articulate experiences of a mediatized religion where that happens. In its various forms, mediatization of religion defines new ways



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to experience religiosity, and, consequently, the making of identities therein connected. Recent bibliography on media and religion includes different modalities in the making of religious identity set in media spaces, which indeed resumes a practice already accomplished some decades earlier (Bruce, 1990).

Whereas Campos (1997) suggests a performing element in practices of religious denominations that are highly mediatized – concepts of “high” and “low” mediatization are developed by Martino (2013) –, Dias (2001) shows how “cultural codes” (Fiske, 1998) in auditorium programs broadcasted by open TV stations are used in religious programs in a way as to convey a message according to benchmarks already clear to the public. Borelli (2010) shows how traditional religious practices, such as pilgrimage, acquire new contours on account of linking the logic of media in dialogue with traditional rituals. In turn, Carranza (2011) has carried out an extensive study where he interprets the mediatization of Catholic Church in Brazil as a process of redefining religious practices among churchgoers – which had already been equally stressed by Patriota (2008).

At the same time, it can be noticed that this process does not *transform* or *effect* religion in the sense of disfiguring it, but rather with a view to find new places for its practices – and this implies, as a counterweight to identity, perspectives of differences.

In mediatized religion, media environment also corresponds to a conflicting environment. Intolerance, mutual disrespect, discourses, and hostile activities towards others who reveal a different religious identity are signs of an enclosure identity respecting otherness. In mass media as well as in digital medias, mediatized religious experiences turn this space equally into a locus for conflicts and disputes.

Relations of identity and difference, in this particular, seem to branch itself into numberless dimensions within mediatized religious space, either to reinforce the bonds of a group or, thenceforth, to enhance differences as something potentially closed to any dialogue – in this specific scenario, it can be noticed that the other, at best, is seen as someone who should be amended; or, at worst, as someone who should be discursively transformed or neutralized. This shutdown to differences is potentially symptomatic when claiming present identities, and it is always reinforced in the scope of mediatized religion. It is in this complex and contradictory movement that tensions between dominance and resistance can be observed; both factors are present in the spectrum of mediatized religion. As an example, there are the symptomatic discourses and practices addressed to the female.

**IDENTITY AND POWER IN MEDIATIZED RELIGION: THE BODY ASPECT**

The making of cultural identities in the scope of mediatized religion is not exempt from inherent contradictions within this process as a whole. Its contradictions, resisting movements to a dominant discourse, combination of sense in which various references are joined together in different proportions, degrees of importance and interest according to numberless variables. In this process, it is possible to find contradictions between dominance and resistance as something present within the religious scope, which has been pointed out by Hall (1996a: 147) while indicating this dual and contradictory perspective.

In this sense, discourse weaved by mediatized religion tends to be guided by the symbolic boundary of a sense of belonging, which is turned into something objective by pronouncements as well as by cultural practices and personal relations. Language, way of dressing, received forms of relationship, and even musical taste are among distinctions that are amplified in representation – and, therefore, of public recognition – in the process of mediatization of religion. In the case of male/female opposition, this process seems to clearly express definitions concerning speeches, attitudes, and legitimate practices – which do not prevent them from manifesting contradictions, and internal and external tensions.

In the scope of mediatized religion, signal distinctions of identity and difference pertaining male/female opposition are particularly displaced so as to adapt themselves simultaneously to religious logic, which genealogically privileges control, and media logic, responsible to benefit exposure and aesthetic.

Accusation of religion as a privileged instrument of class domination is a topic that has been widely discussed in a Marxist tradition to which Hall (1973; 1974), in his studies on ideology, is in intense dialogue with. However, the critique of religion was presented in what is called the *young Marx* – “Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right”, where can be found the famed claim that religion “is the opium of the people”, dates back from 1844, the same year the “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts” were published. As Löwy (2007) stresses, to a large extent, what is understood today about religion preserves many elements pertaining Marx’s critique, justifying, therefore, a concept of religion as a form of ideology specifically linked to the interest of dominant classes. However, as the philosopher has equally pointed out, it is important to observe that from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century religion has also presented itself as a space of resistance, where heterogeneous and dissonant identities are being made, and where discourses and religious practices find a way to stand against hegemony.

Hall offers hints to think that homogeneous forms are followed up by spaces of resistance, which are re-appropriated and transferred into a new language. From his readings of Gramsci, Hall (1997:41) suggests to think the “subtle variations” of an ideology in its different ways of elaboration and appropriation – which does not exclude, by the vey polysemy of language, counter-hegemonic empowerments.

Thus, far from being a monolithic perspective of domination, religion constitutes itself as an asymmetric space of negotiation where the maintenance of a certain *status quo* and forms of transformation of the same order walk hand in hand, sometimes in the same discourse.

The process of mediatization of religion offers a wider exposure to this issue, mainly when dealing with the making and representation of identity. In this sense, it is worth observing some present situations that has become particularly visible. It is even possible to state that mediatization of religion has simultaneously offered a possibility to both enhance body autonomy and body subjection, specially the female body, within and without religious symbolic spaces (Arthur, 1999; Martino, 2008).

Turner (2004) argues that one of continuous religious prerogative has been the control of body uses – particularly the female body. Sometimes seen as a source of deviation to a received and legitimate behavior, at least to some religious denominations, paradoxically the body becomes an element of repression from its constant emphasis: its visibility in discursive terms aims at highlighting what can not be seen, understood and thought as something outside discourse itself. As Curti (1998) reminds us, narratives of female bodies are encompassed in prescriptive and descriptive considerations respecting a female identity defined beforehand – by a male narrative.

This aesthetic, linked with media practices of fashion, semiotic dress codes in a secular space, often creates a conflict with religious codes of body concealment. Babb (1997), Hoover (2003), and Clark (2007) devoted their work to show religious identity as a result from the intersection between media and doctrinal discourses properly speaking.

Initially, it would be rash to see in these discourses and practices only elements of *domination* or *resistance* devoid of its contradictory potential. At the same time, both concerning churchgoers or clergymen, empirical observation suggests multiple appropriations of religious discourses and practices that go beyond any generalization – for this, see Dantas (2008). As Hall (1997: 468) reminds us, cultural supremacy does not imply “a complete domain”, but a constant shift in power game in cultural relations. There is a constant mobility between move and retreat in mediatized reli-

gious discourse, in a continuous fluctuation of sense – which indeed only fully realizes itself in the way female churchgoers make them appropriate to their everyday practices.

### FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

A detailed analysis of issues referring to the relationship between mediatization of religion and Cultural Studies would certainly require more than one monographic work. What I have intent here was to work with some aspects of the issue concerning some viewpoints and possibilities related to the making of identities within a mediatized religious environment so as to highlight three of the numberless possible appropriations.

As a cultural practice, religion did not vanish in the modern world. Secularization process, in its confluences and divergences, has certainly withdrawn religion from official politics and economics. Nevertheless, tied to a specific discourse production, it remains and consolidates itself as a political point of action in claiming identities – an advocacy of these interests. In particular, the process of mediatization of religion contributed to consign a new space of individual and collective practices, as well as religious public representations.

In this regard, the process of mediatization of religion seems to interfere directly in the process of religious identity, either in providing particular spaces of renewed religious practices in media environments or in strengthening, in the same space, challenging and contradictory discourses – to illustrate this last aspect, I have briefly dwelt, as an example, with contradictions respecting female power in a religious and mediatized space.

More than final answers, I have sought here for tracks to open a discussion in a moment when religious discourses and practices, intersected with cultural, economic, and mainly political spaces, reveal themselves as important to understanding social processes in contemporaneity – at least within spaces where a perspective of dialogue is already expected. ■

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