

THEOLOGY AND MEDIA(TION)

Rendering the Absent Present

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Introduction

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The word “media” conjures a range of emotional and ideological responses in the context of the United States today. The common way it’s used mostly refers to mass media, with a dash of new media, and involves the ridiculously fast news cycle, mostly related to celebrities and politics.

This volume is not unrelated to this understanding of media, but it seeks to expand the notion to include all of the ways in which we engage with methods, objects, and structures that “go between.” Media are those various means by which individuals connect to individuals, individuals connect to communities, and particularly relevant for this volume, individuals and communities connect to the transcendent. This echoes Birgit Meyer’s definition of media, which includes “both new and old mass media, as well as objects, sacred spaces and the human body” and makes up that which has been “authorized within particular religious traditions as suitable for humans to link up, in one way or another, with the divine or spiritual.”¹

But Meyer’s definition raises many questions, and this volume is an effort to both tease these questions out and to provide some responses from theology and religious studies. As central as media are to any religious tradition, they can be messy—fraught with all of the problems of the human experience. It is telling that Meyer uses the word “authorized,” as authority is a crucial element of

¹Birgit Meyer, “Medium,” in *Key Terms in Material Religion*, ed. Brent S. Plate (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 140.

mediation in religious traditions. Who develops the various media we employ in our religious lives? Who sanctions certain media and disqualifies others? What happens when the authorities making these decisions become unreliable judges of the ways in which we are meant to connect to one another and to God?

Religious traditions in general are well suited for questions of mediation if we imagine media in Meyer's terms. For example, the paradox of presence and absence is at the heart of many religious traditions, as they move constantly within the often uncomfortable but inevitable space between the immanent and the transcendent. This dynamic is at the heart of Christianity: "No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). From the beginning, Christian thought has wrestled with questions of mediation. Following his death, resurrection, and ascension, how is Christ made present to the world today? How are distant communities held together in communion? What means should Christians use to spread the word of God?

Gospel narratives of Mary Magdalene and the Gardener or the Road to Emmaus point to the challenge of how to navigate the relationship between presence and absence. Mediation has, in fact, been a consistent and underlying concern of Christian theology, through Christ, the church, liturgy, scripture, tradition, ethics, and pedagogy. These questions have been amplified in new ways through the rise of digital technology and culture, posing challenges to traditional perspectives on embodiment, ritual, sociality, and aesthetics. More recently, the global pandemic of 2020–2022 has shown many ways that the relationship of presence and absence underlies our relationships within families, religious communities, universities, and more.

In the Catholic tradition, the church has been officially commenting on media (in a narrow sense) from at least 1766, when they warned against mass-produced paperback novels and other printed materials that "pollute the pure waters of belief and destroy the foundations of religion."² The height of its commentary on mass media was during the 1930s, when it was instrumental in developing the Motion Picture Production Code, more com-

²Pope Clement XIII, *Christianae Reipublicae: On the Dangers of Anti-Christian Writings*, 1766.

monly known as the Hays Code, for Hollywood, drastically changing both the form and content of modern films and laying the groundwork for contemporary rating systems still in use in the United States.

Several authors in this volume pick up on this understanding of media, focusing on “old media” such as print (Dulle) and new media such as TikTok (Sloan Peters). But we intentionally wanted to take Meyer’s cue and broaden the notion of media to include a wide variety of understandings of media and mediation.

Meyer gives us a starting point but only does so to the extent that she can analyze the “material turn” within religious studies as an academic discipline. The present volume approaches the question of media/mediation from a variety of perspectives, reflecting on the complexities and considerations of what it might mean to “link up to the divine” and to one another in view of this link to the divine.

We begin with the first part, “Mediation and Bodies.” Hanna Reichel pushes the conversation about authority forward and beyond the bounds of the church, inviting us to consider different understandings of belonging. Reichel raises interesting points about our current ideological identities, which are often mediated by a divisive and violent political discourse across various media. Most notably, Reichel ends with a reflection on the Body of Christ that turns our attention to considering the “misfit” as normative for this ecclesiology.

Trevor Williams’s essay draws on French phenomenologist Emmanuel Falque’s discussion of “animality” to highlight the centrality of the body in the divine-human relationship. Amy Maxey engages with Luce Irigaray and Audre Lorde to push against formulations of mystical eros that overly focus on the unconscious, arguing instead for a view of mystical eros that engenders both self-consciousness and responsible engagement with society. Laura Taylor highlights the role of using sources in theology and how these can render particular voices absent or present within theological discourse. She then focuses in particular on depictions of key Christian symbols in feminist visual culture as efforts to envision a more inclusive and less oppressive world.

Matthew Gummess considers how Catholic theology might respond to transgender persons if it were to assume, *a priori*, the validity of their claims about their bodies. From this, he engages

with the theology of the body of John Paul II, arguing that the commensuration of body and soul in Thomistic thought does not require a binary view of gender. Jacob Kohlhaas draws on the thought and the style of Bruno Latour to consider the meaning of parenthood in Catholic thought, arguing that the particular and transformative character of being a parent can be illustrative of the transformative encounter with the sacraments.

The second part, “Mediation and Place,” begins with the plenary address from Joseph Flipper. His essay introduces us to the community of his upbringing in Idaho. Flipper considers the role of the land as mediator in the complex history of the Indigenous Numipunn Wéetespe people and their relationship to Catholicism in the context of colonization.

Deepan Rajaratnam enters into contemporary discussions around synodality by arguing that the *sensus fidei* is better understood by considering the culture and practice of local churches rather than the typical, universalized tripartite structure of the sense of the bishops, of the theologians, and of the church as a whole. Christopher Denny argues for an approach to ecotheology that prioritizes praxis over theory, seeing the former as both more effective for responding to ecological problems and for emphasizing the embodied reality of the human relationship to the world.

Timothy Hanchin takes Pope Francis’s call for ecological conversion and applies it to the campuses of Catholic colleges and universities, arguing that the decisions these institutions make about landscaping and architecture play a pedagogical role in forming students and in fulfilling institutional mission. Ethan Vander Leek brings together the philosophy of William Desmond and Rowan Williams. Through these two thinkers, he provides a theological account of mediation drawing on the classical doctrines of creation and incarnation.

The third part, “Mediation and Art,” considers various ways that absence and presence are engaged through music, visual arts, and new media. Tim Dulle considers the work of mid-century American artist Corita Kent. Dulle places her work in the context of Marshall McLuhan’s well-known “medium is the message,” and discusses both in the context of Vatican II-era shifts in understandings of the media and the sacred. Charles Gillespie brings us into the world of Hildegard of Bingen, the twelfth-century Benedictine abbess known for her visions. Gillespie focuses on Hildegard’s

use of music (and the spaces between) to bring herself and her community into an encounter with God.

Jane Sloan Peters brings the discussion of media into the present moment, focusing her work on the social media platform of TikTok. She argues that TikTok offers a way for Gen Z to try to make sense of suffering and provides evidence from her own experience as a theological educator. Dennis Wieboldt offers a historical account of American Catholic use of mass media, specifically focusing on Fulton Sheen's *Catholic Hour* and its role in presenting natural law to the laity. Vicente Chong proposes art's capacity to mediate divine revelation. Drawing on Karl Rahner's theological understanding of symbol, he shows how the art of Sammy Chong can disclose the image of God as servant.

In the part titled "Mediation and Responsibility," the volume concludes with our first plenary address from the Convention, Robert Orsi's "Religion(s) in the Ruins of the Temples." Orsi centers his discussion on the ongoing sexual abuse crisis, inviting us to consider the church's role as mediator broadly. This gets to the heart of the question of authority/authorization, giving voice to the silenced and marginalized in the church. By closing with this essay, we mean to bring the conversation back to the messiness of mediation (to say the least) and to lift up the voices of victims and survivors.

By offering a broad consideration of media(tion) in this volume, we hope to present a picture of the robust discussions we had in the summer of 2023 and to inspire ongoing conversation about the relationship of theology to the media landscapes in which we always find ourselves, no matter the point in history.