While the global proliferation of new electronic media forms in recent decades has had a profound impact on many arenas of knowledge and practice, the effects of this process on religious traditions have been particularly striking, as a growing body of scholarship on this topic attests. Anthropologists working within a variety of religious contexts have explored how adherents of diverse religious traditions rework and redefine some of the fundamental norms of those traditions as they accommodate to the technological forms, discursive protocols and market values of globalising media infrastructures. The increasing reliance on mass media by practitioners of religious traditions has also coincided with the growing salience of religion as a social and political force, what some have referred to as the ‘return of the religious’.

For the purpose of this exchange, I would like to consider one provocative and influential argument concerning the relationship between media and the religious in the context of contemporary globalised modernity. In the Introduction to his 2001 co-edited collection (with Samuel Weber), *Media and religion*, as well as in a series of subsequent publications, the Dutch philosopher Hent de Vries has put forward a bold proposal concerning the mutual imbrication, what he terms the ‘virtually interchangeability’, of religion and media within contemporary societies (2001: 19). Framed as an elaboration of some of Jacques Derrida’s reflections on religion and the contemporary, de Vries’ argument moves between a formal analysis of philosophical categories and a sociological assessment of globalisation and its implications for the meaning and practice of religion. As with his other outstanding contributions to the study of religion and secularity, de Vries’ meditation on the categories of religion and media is both thoughtful and intellectually daring, and merits the attention it has received from anthropologists. At the same time, de Vries’ highly original framing of the ‘interface’ between religion and media also reveals certain analytical shortcomings that I want to examine here, shortcomings that owe, at least in part, to the way the argument collapses and confuses different senses of ‘media’ and ‘mediation’.

My inspiration for writing about de Vries’ work on this topic owes in part to two exceptionally fine review articles, one by Matthew Engelke (2010) and the other by Jeremy Stolow (2005). Although the two pieces discuss different de Vries volumes, both engage insightfully and thoughtfully with de Vries’ ‘religion as media’ argument. One thing that struck me in reading both of these reviews, however, was the way the authors muted a certain discomfort with the argument, suppressed it, as it were, by interpreting the text in a distinctly anthropological direction, as a call to attend to material practices in the study of religion. In doing so, it seemed to me they missed the opportunity to
explore key conceptual problems within de Vries’ analysis, problems that, in different guises, appear in many works on religion beyond those specifically concerned with media. In the course of a subsequent conversation with Matthew Engelke, it became clear that there was something worthwhile in trying to spell out our respective points of agreement and disagreement. In what follows, I begin with a brief outline of de Vries’ argument, tracing some of the different notions of mediation upon which it relies. I then turn to examine the argument’s location within a particular European philosophical tradition in order to think about how the conceptual assumptions of that tradition present an obstacle to the anthropological analysis of religion and media.

**AN ‘INTRINSIC RELATION’**

De Vries’ argument departs from a reflection on the vertiginous expansion of new media technologies around the globe and the implications of this process for those practices and forms of knowledge we call religious. While religious traditions must have always been entwined with and dependent upon media infrastructures, he suggests, the intensification of this relationship within modern technological culture produces a qualitative change: an ‘intrinsic relationship’ now binds ‘the mediatic and the religious’ (2001: 20). In this context, religion becomes first and foremost a practice of mediation, indebted to and inseparable from technological artifice. De Vries cites Derrida’s own reflections on this interrelation: ‘digital culture, jet, and TV without which there could be no religious manifestation today, for example no voyage or discourse of the Pope, no organised emanation of Jewish, Christian, or Muslim cults, whether “fundamentalist” or not’ (2001: 20).

De Vries elaborates Derrida’s insights in a decidedly McLuhanesque direction: religion – a term whose conceptual contours conjoin the transcendent with subjective interiority in de Vries’ unmistakably modern, privatised Christian rendering – becomes absorbed without remainder in its external forms, its medium becoming its religious message. De Vries clarifies the implications of this transformation for scholars concerned with religion: ‘We should no longer reflect exclusively on the meaning, historically and in the present, of religion – of faith and belief and their supposed opposites such as knowledge and technology – but concentrate on the significance of the processes of mediation and mediatization without and outside of which no religion would be able to manifest or reveal itself in the first place’ (2001: 28). (One is tempted to ask: if a small group of people (say in Portland, Oregon) decides they want to worship their chosen deity in some particular fashion, can’t they do so without ‘mediation and mediatization’? Why not?)

Although de Vries’ account emphasises sociological and technological transformation, a good deal of the argument rests upon formal analysis. This is evident, for example, in an argument about the formal (conceptual) similarity of the miracle and the special effect, an argument meant to bolster his more sociologically driven claims about the inseparability of the religious and the mediatic. The analysis he pursues here works, in deconstructive fashion, by identifying and developing instabilities within the conceptual binaries at the heart of Enlightenment and post–Enlightenment philosophical traditions, most salient among them, the oppositions between religion and science, technology and theology, knowledge and faith. While I don’t have space here to do justice to the depth or
range of the conceptual inquiry he undertakes here, the style of his argument is readily visible in his claim that the notion of the ‘special effect’ cannot be understood (‘thought or experienced’) without reference to the conceptual resources of the religious, to such ideas as the miraculous, the unmoved mover, *causa ex nilbi*, and so on. (The concept of ‘effect’ itself, he suggests, stands for ‘any event or action whose structure finds its prime model in the theological’ (2001: 24.) Through such a deconstructive reading, de Vries seeks to show, on one hand, that our secular categories are parasitic upon and entwined with what we call the religious and, on the other, that our ideas of religion are thoroughly dependent upon the technical, technological, mediatic, etc.

**A THEOLOGICAL STANDPOINT ON MEDIATION**

Let me now raise a few issues in regard to the notions of mediation discussed so far. First, note the extent to which the conceptual framework de Vries works within reflects the standpoint of a particular post-Enlightenment Christian theology. The idea that religion’s public forms should be understood as (never fully adequate) *mediations* of an internal, private religious essence has its genealogy in that tradition as it developed in early modern Europe (Asad 1993). One sees the apogee of this development today, for example, within those currents of Evangelical Christianity whose radically privatized sense of religiosity finds expression in the claim that religious institutional forms are actually *secular* given their disjunction from personal experience of the divine. In short, it is precisely through the adoption of what might be labelled a Protestant theological sensibility – an expression I use as shorthand here for traditions emphasising the opposition between inner belief or faith and outer expression – that all religious forms can be construed as, in a significant way, mediatic. De Vries’ argument, in other words, invites us to assume a convergence between two rather distinct notions of mediation: a theological one (the Christian idea of Christ as mediating between the divine and the human, as well as the notion of a necessary gap between private experience and outward expression, drawn from a Protestant moral psychology), and a sociological one (the widespread use of what are called media technologies). One key problem with this analytical framework, as I will elaborate further, is that it reduces fundamentally different models of mediation to a single phenomenon. Insomuch as the different senses of mediation invoked here rest on very different assumptions about the subject (the psychology of emotion, experience, etc.), an attempt to think through their interrelation would necessarily have to address these differences, something that de Vries’ text never attempts. Note, for example, that no notion of inside/outside is necessary for an account of the functioning of many mass media technologies (whereas an understanding of the market will be). In what sense then can we speak about an ‘intrinsic relation’?

The coherence of de Vries’ argument, I am suggesting, depends on our willingness to accept certain theological assumptions. To highlight this point, note what happens to the analysis if we define a religious tradition, as some anthropologists have done, not as essentially mediatic, but in terms of a set of instituted practices by which adherents of that tradition attempt to live in accord with the valued ways of life they have inherited, including but not restricted to practices presupposing a distinction between internal experience and external expression. Viewed in this light, religious practices – including all of the technical, technological and mediatic elements that are integral to
them – no longer appear as mediatic vehicles enabling the manifestation of (internal) religiosity; such practices are the religious tradition (note: while the figure of Christ may be thought of as mediating between the divine and the human, Christians have rarely seen him as exterior or external to Christian faith). We would say, for example, that the printed Quran does not mediate the traditions of Islam; the variety of ways the Quran is touched, held, cared for, read, recited, cherished, as well as printed and circulated are simply part of what is entailed in living as a Muslim (the soccer ball does not mediate the game; it is a constitutive and necessary element within it). This is not to say that scholars should not be concerned with the way the spread of new media forms and formats changes the conditions under which the task of practising a religious tradition is defined and pursued. Certainly they should. But note how different the question is here once the post-Enlightenment theological cornerstone of internal experience/external expression is left aside.

**DEFINING THE EXTERIOR**

Let me clarify further the distinction I am drawing here by reference to another citation from Derrida that de Vries draws upon. In the context of a comment on contemporary Islamic movements, Derrida suggests: ‘the surge of “Islam” [le déferlement “islamique”] will be neither understood nor answered . . . as long as one settles for an internal explanation (interior to the history of faith, of religion, of languages or cultures as such), as long as one does not define the passageway between this interior and all of the apparently exterior dimensions (technoscientific, telebiotechnological, which is to say also political and socioeconomic, etc.)’ (Derrida, cited in de Vries 2001: 20). Derrida is correct, of course, to emphasise the importance of what he calls ‘exterior dimensions’ for any analysis of contemporary Islamic revivalism, including, among other things, the economic, political and technological instruments and rationalities of global modernity. It is the specification of that exteriority through its opposition to an ‘internal explanation’, however, that strikes me as not quite right, especially as this line of analysis is developed in de Vries’ text. For wouldn’t an ‘internal explanation’ of faith necessarily encompass the variety of means and expressive forms (including media-based forms) through which people expressed the dynamic response to God indicated by the notion of faith in the course of their lives? From the vantage point of what I have for shorthand called Protestant theology (recognising the heterogeneity erased by this term), such expressive forms may be seen as unnecessary and external to the history of faith, but clearly the readership assumed in Derrida’s and de Vries’ texts are not, primarily, theologians. Placed within this conceptual orbit, the notion of exteriority acquires a unique connotation: an artefact that stands in a disjunctive relationship to the interior (or transcendental) essence which it (always somewhat inadequately) figures.

Compare Derrida’s comment with the following observation by Talal Asad in the same de Vries volume, also concerning the internal/external opposition as it bears on the analysis of religious traditions.

Following Wittgenstein’s advice, one should not look for the sense of the claim ‘I am in touch with another world transcending this’ in some evidence that might tell us how good a picture it is of an inaccessible world, and attribute the sense to faith if that evidence isn’t forthcoming. Instead, one should look to its grammar –
to the part it plays in a particular, active social life where psychological ‘inside’ and behavioral ‘outside’ are equally (though in different ways) signified by linguistic and nonlinguistic behavior that is publicly accessible. From this perspective the man or woman of faith is not a split subject (as Wilfred Cantwell Smith has it) living, on the one hand, in a pressured, imperfect, particularized world and, on the other hand, always linked through his or her faith to another world transcending this. Faith is inseparable from the particularities of the temporal world and the traditions that inhabit it. (Asad 2001: 139)

Like Derrida, Asad calls on the student of religion to pay attention to its ‘publicly accessible’ dimensions. These public dimensions, however, include the ‘psychological “inside”’ of faith insomuch as the virtue of faith is integral to the way one lives, to the practices one engages in publicly as a member of a religious community. The practices within which faith is publicly expressed are not exterior to that faith but constitute it as a dimension of life specific to a particular religious tradition. This is not to deny the religious adherent’s sense of a private, interior space, inaccessible to others. But what will be relevant to the domain of explanation will be precisely the public forms through which that interior sense finds expression in social life.

**NATURAL HISTORY OF RELIGION**

De Vries’ text repeatedly invites us to recognise religion’s condition of possibility in the mediatic, the artifactual, the technological, to the point of their virtual identity. In doing so, de Vries’ argument bears strong affinities with a long-standing tradition of secular criticism. As Eric Leigh Schmidt (2000) has recently explored, critics of religious authority in 19th-century America drew on discoveries in the emerging field of acoustics in order to demonstrate that oracular voices, long an important part of popular religious experience, could be produced by technological contrivance, that what appeared to be divine voices were actually the effect of a certain artifice, a technology of deception. Schmidt locates this scientific debunking of religious claims within the broader attempt to produce a natural history of religion. De Vries’ argument, I suggest, owes a significant debt to this tradition of critique. This is evident, for example, in his suggestion, noted above, that the miracle and the special effect are formally indistinguishable, a claim whose rhetorical structure parallels the common 19th-century observation that the divine voice and the artifically produced vocal simulacra were, for all means and purposes, indistinguishable. When de Vries concludes that ‘Analytically, there is no observable difference between true and false miracles, between the icon and the idol, between prayer to the divine name and blasphemy’ (2001: 27–8), we are squarely on the terrain both of post-Enlightenment Christian theology and secular epistemology (note: many religious traditions, Catholicism included, still distinguish true miracles from false ones). For the anthropologist concerned with religious traditions, the analytical task may lie precisely in learning to observe how practitioners differentiate between icons and idols, for example, and how this skill of discrimination shapes the way they relate differentially to different objects.

Admittedly, de Vries departs sharply from earlier traditions of secular criticism in one key aspect: rather than seek to secure the purity and authority of Enlightenment reason (of science over religion, knowledge over faith, etc.), he instead seeks to
destabilise the oppositions upon which the claims of secular reason rest. Such an engagement with the binaries of Western thought has great merit, as de Vries has repeatedly demonstrated in other contexts. In Religion and media, however, he pursues this deconstructive inquiry through an argument that winds up reducing religion to media, or rather, renders them ontologically equivalent.

One gets a better sense of the analytical direction suggested by de Vries’ work on religion and media in his discussion of political Islam, found in the Introduction to his subsequent volume on Political theologies (de Vries 2006). Hewing closely to Olivier Roy’s influential writings on this topic, de Vries argues that the more Muslim reformers, activists and militants rely on modern technologies and institutional forms to pursue their goals, the more their own activities are evacuated of any relation to the traditions of Islam. As he notes, echoing Roy’s assessment of ‘the failure of political Islam’: ‘so-called religious fundamentalisms of the world continue to express and further the very disenchantment of the modern world against whose vehicles (global markets, media, hegemonic political models, economic liberalization, and cultural liberties) they believe they protest’ (de Vries 2006: 10). De Vries and Roy are right, of course, to emphasise the extent to which contemporary Islamic militancy is propelled by social and political concerns rather than religious or Islamic ones (though wrong, in my view, to reduce it to an aspiration for ‘virtual belonging’ (de Vries 2006: 11), while dismissing its geopolitical determinants). It is the broader claim, however, that the reliance upon the political and technological instruments of modernity by contemporary Muslims necessarily cuts them off from traditions of Islamic authority – that ‘it cannot but secularize’, as de Vries puts it (2006: 13) – that strikes me as untenable. Roy’s own argument here relies on his adoption of an essentialised and intellectualised notion of Islam, as a tradition rooted in a relatively immutable set of scholarly and aesthetic practices and institutions, and thus one fundamentally incompatible with the interpretive conventions and consumerist protocols governing mass media contexts (see my discussion of Roy’s work in Hirschkind 2010). This view leads Roy to argue, for example, that ‘The Islamization of the French suburbs is largely a myth: youngsters are fascinated by Western urban youth subculture (baseball caps, hamburgers, rap or hip hop, fashionable dress, consumerism)’ (cited in de Vries 2006: 14). Does the fact that one participates in mass media culture – wearing baseball caps or performing hip hop music – necessarily contradict or vitiate one’s commitment to living as a Muslim? I don’t think so. Indeed, there is a considerable body of anthropological scholarship emphasising a more contingent and variable relation between Islamic traditions and changing media ecologies, work that explores new forms of Islamic authority, knowledge and practice that have arisen in conjunction with the adoption and dissemination of new media practices (e.g. Hirschkind 2006; Larkin 2008; Messick 1997; Skovgaard-Petersen 1997; Starrett 1998). Admittedly, there are some important differences in the way de Vries and Roy approach these issues (for Roy the mediatic effaces the religious, for de Vries the mediatic become coterminous with the religious). Where their respective viewpoints converge, as seen in de Vries’ discussion of political Islam, lies in a shared understanding of the way contemporary mass media absorb religious practices and transform them in accord with their own modes of functioning. This assumption leads in both cases to a neglect of the various ways new media technologies are themselves incorporated within and reconfigured by traditions of religious practice.
GLOBALISATION AND UNIVERSALITY

Which brings me to the last point. An underlying premise of the argument developed by de Vries is that the modern concept of religion founded on the dichotomy of inner essence/exterior mediation has become universal through processes of globalisation, what Derrida glosses as *globalatinisation*. In other words, a consideration of the provincial character of the modern concept of religion is avoided through the assumption of its global hegemony. This premise sets the stage for de Vries’ rather seamless conjoining of philosophical and sociological forms of inquiry.

The assumptions upon which this analytical frame rests, I want to suggest, are untenable. An analysis of religion and media, of mediation and mediatisation within different religious traditions, cannot be adequately framed through the singular lens provided by what I have called, for brevity’s sake, the Protestant problematic of internal/external. This is due, first and foremost, to the fact that the conceptual articulation of inside and outside, of the religious subject to its behavioural expressions takes a significantly different form depending upon which tradition one is speaking about, as a vast archive of anthropological scholarship attests. The questions, and challenges, posed to religious adepts by the spread of new media infrastructures will be distinct in accord with the conceptual resources of their distinct traditions. To state this is not to deny the immense power of Western categories and practices. But the global extension of these Western forms must be seen in light of the particular histories of remaking, histories not assimilable to the modern concept of religion and its universalising career.

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In his carefully argued and insightful contribution to this exchange, Charles Hirschkind finds a wrench in the works of Hent de Vries’ god in the machine. Hirschkind suggests there is a problem with de Vries’ claim that religion and media are virtually interchangeable in contemporary societies, a problem that stems from de Vries’ adoption of a certain Protestant theological sensibility that ends up reducing religion to media. I think it is fair to say that in his introduction to Religion and media de Vries (2001) can be read as reducing the former concept to the latter; his introduction to Political theologies (de Vries 2006) likewise raises issues. But to focus on the first text here, since it offers a fuller elaboration, part of the problem is de Vries’ example of the formal similarities between the miracle and the special effect. As de Vries himself points out, there is a long-standing tradition within Protestantism that is sceptical of the appeal to miracles; on the face of it, this might read as evidence of the sensibility to which Hirschkind refers.

More importantly, though, in my view the problem has to do with the degree to which de Vries builds his argument around the techno-fantastic. He gives too much attention to new media. The situation isn’t helped by his appeal to the Jacques Derrida of ‘Faith and knowledge’ (2002) and ‘Above all, no journalists!’ (2001). What Derrida has to say in those pieces about religion and the contemporary via his remarks on digital culture, jets and televisions, and the ‘religious manifestations’ they allow, distract from the crucial point – that a media studies that does not take the concept of mediation as its primary concern is bound to fail. Look instead to Of grammatology, where Derrida (1974) addresses understandings of what constitutes presence in speech and writing – it’s in these discussions that the ultimate stakes of mediation are laid bare. This doesn’t mean that digital culture, jets and television are irrelevant, but the basic issue they address – how presence gets constituted – is no different from any other media. As Derrida himself puts it, ‘The choice is not between media and presence. The presentation of the presence itself supposes a mediatic structure’ (2001: 81). The answer to Hirschkind’s question about whether or not the small group of people in Portland, Oregon can worship their deity without mediation and mediatisation, then, is ‘no’. (They might be...
able to do without mediatisation, if that is taken to mean the reification or production of a medium.) They can certainly do it without televisions and jets, but they cannot do it without their senses. ‘A voice and nothing more’, to borrow a phrase from Mladen Dolar (2006); yet there is always something more.

So beware the sparkle of the new. Another way to put this is that Derrida and de Vries are least convincing when addressing lived religion – the ‘manifestations’ to which Derrida refers. There is an irony in this, however, because de Vries’ model is most compelling in a sociological register. My interest in de Vries and the media turn in the study of religion is, as Hirschkind notes, precisely in how it allows us to work on (and work up, and work over) religion without undue emphasis on belief, faith and other such ostensible indices of what is interior, immaterial and ineffable (Engelke 2010b). This is not to disparage these concepts altogether. Belief and its conceptual cognates perform valuable work for the human sciences. Yet inasmuch as de Vries’ formulation of religion and media allows us to focus on materiality and practice without recourse to idealist or intellectualist or rationalist ‘explanations’, that formulation can be useful for the human sciences. Indeed, I would be surprised if de Vries did not agree with what Hirschkind quotes from Talal Asad – that Wittgenstein gets it right and ‘faith is inseparable from the particularities of the temporal world and the traditions that inhabit it’ (Asad 2001: 139). Or, as Asad puts it elsewhere in the same text, ‘the materialities of religion are integral to its constitution’ (2001: 132).

And so another irony – or perhaps tragedy. I am arguing that, as de Vries articulates it, religion as mediation allows us to get beyond belief. Another way to put this is that the approach allows us to get beyond one of the more tenacious conceptual demands of Protestant theology within modern social thought. And yet, according to Hirschkind, where de Vries goes wrong is precisely through his adoption of a Protestant theological sensibility – the one which is centred around ‘the opposition between inner belief or faith and outer expression’.

It’s on this point that I want to focus in the rest of my contribution to this exchange. For in making the argument thus, Hirschkind raises the stakes and forces consideration of a more general issue: the prevalence and persistence of something Protestant in what we call ‘religion’. This argument deserves attention no matter what aspect of religion one is interested in, but is particularly hard to ignore when it comes to questions of media and mediation, since it is precisely the concern with mediation that gets cast as the impetus for the Reformation.

We are now accustomed to hearing that even the most ostensibly secular disciplines, secularised concepts and methodologically atheist commitments owe a lot – or even still express – a Christian theological sensibility. And we hear it for good reason: it’s not untrue. Hirschkind is thus furthering a long and distinguished line of anthropologists who have pointed out the ways in which certain Christian concepts and narrative structures shape modern thought and conditions of social life. In the most powerful forms, these concepts and narrative structures are taken to be natural and universal, as Marshall Sahlins (1996) has shown, for instance, in his treatment of economic science. Even closer to the interests of Hirschkind, of course, are the readings of religion and ritual by Asad (see especially 1993: 56–62), in which he makes astute observations about the ways in which theological understandings of outward signs and inward meanings get refracted through anthropological analyses.

Much of this archaeological and genealogical work refers in general ways to ‘Christian’ and/or ‘Judeo-Christian’ thought. It is therefore interesting to note that
if this Christian sensibility is further specified it tends to be as Protestant. You don’t often hear the argument couched in terms of a Catholic sensibility, and still less, of course, an Orthodox one. Indeed, it would be fair to say that a good deal of the most important recent work by anthropologists on the relationship between Christianity and social theory has specified its various Protestant legacies (e.g. Cannell 2005; Keane 2007; Meyer 2006; Pels 2008).

With this observation in mind, I want to question Hirschkind’s invocation of the Protestant sensibility argument in two ways. The first has to do with its applicability in the case of Hent de Vries. The second has to do with the possible constraints that such an argument can have on the development of a general anthropology of religion and media, inasmuch as it can be taken to suggest that such anthropology is necessarily Protestant in content or form. Neither questioning should be read as a refusal of Hirschkind’s point. They are, rather, suggestions to adopt a certain type of perspectivism (with apologies to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro) at the philosophical level of engagement.

In order to raise these questions at all, it is important to admit that, like Hirschkind, I can only invoke simplified versions of the traditions and sensibilities in play. But to be sure, as Birgit Meyer (2010) has recently suggested, the classic Weberian model of the Protestant sensibility is no longer fit for purpose (if indeed it ever was). By definition, a Lutheran in Germany and a Pentecostal in Ghana may both be Protestants, but, arguably, very little in their respective sensibilities might unite them. This is to say nothing of diversity within singular institutions or traditions, such as the Church of England; you could be forgiven for failing to see the relation between a High Church service in Oxfordshire and a charismatic one in east London.

Starting from this level of remove, and with a debating spirit in mind, I would argue that de Vries is better understood as expressing a ‘Catholic sensibility’ on media and mediation than a Protestant one. As Hirschkind notes, ‘de Vries elaborates Derrida’s insights in a decidedly McLuhanesque direction’. And yet Marshall McLuhan’s media theory is nothing if not Catholic. That theory is essentially the doctrine of transubstantiation writ large. So how does de Vries look from this perspective?

As I noted at the outset, one concern with de Vries’ approach to religion and media is that it reduces the former to the latter: religion becomes media without difference. Hirschkind writes that ‘de Vries elaborates Derrida’s insights in a decidedly McLuhanesque direction: religion – a term whose conceptual contours conjoin the transcendental with subjective interiority in de Vries’ unmistakably modern, privatised rendering – becomes absorbed without remainder in its external forms, its medium becoming its religious message’. But a McLuhanesque reading of mediation in this context is not about reduction; it is about transduction, or – to make the argument ‘Catholic’ – a transubstantiation of sorts. We should not lose sight of the fact that for McLuhan, any mediatisation entails a change not only in the world but of the world, yet, again, it is important not to overemphasise what is ‘new’ in new media technologies. In McLuhan’s work, the transductions that such technologies generate always bring us back to the set of basic interfaces provided by the human sensorium: his tribal man (ears) gives way to literate man (eyes) who gives way to electronic man (ears again). To be sure, all media are ‘extensions of man’ for McLuhan. And as Dominic Boyer reminds us, ‘McLuhan’s core argument was that human beings stand in a largely reactive state to their media extensions’ (2007: 23). So this does raise questions about where our focus should be: the person or the prosthetic. It also raises questions about human freedom and agency. But my basic point is that ‘reduction’ has no place in a McLuhanesque formula.
This gets us to the transubstantiation and McLuhan’s Catholicism. It was, first of all, an actual Catholicism marked, in the early days at least, by the enthusiasm of a convert. ‘I need scarcely indicate,’ McLuhan wrote to his mother in 1935, ‘that everything that is especially hateful and devilish and inhuman about the conditions and strains of modern industrial society is not only Protestant in origin, but it is their boast(!) to have originated it’ (1999a: 15). It would be interesting to re-read The Gutenberg galaxy with this remark in mind. Perhaps more to the point, though, in that letter McLuhan makes clear that what appeals to him about Catholicism is its sensuousness, its celebration of the body of Christ that he saw to be disavowed by the Protestants. This body, for McLuhan, is precisely the exception to mediation’s rule, and the confounding of the message that rule seems to demand. In a 1977 interview with Pierre Babin, McLuhan starts to speak of something called ‘the real message’, which is ‘Christ’s penetration into all of human existence’ (1999b: 102). ‘In Jesus Christ,’ he says, ‘there is no distance or separation between the medium and the message: it is the one case where we can say that the medium and the message are fully one and the same’ (1999b: 103).

This is the approach to the medium and the religious message, I think, that better describes that of Hent de Vries. It isn’t a ‘Catholicity’ per se he’s pushing, although it is perhaps worth noting how often Catholicism serves as both a sociological and philosophical point of reference in his work (not least in his attention to the miracle). Just so, Catholicism is the Christianity that seems to matter most to Derrida. The very idea of globalatinisation is indicative of this, not only for the extent to which it pays homage to the language of the Church, but also for how, in doing so, it privileges the universal over the vernacular. And we can also trace it in his various remarks: an offhand reflection on a visit to Poland; anchoring his imagery in Rome; a clear fascination with the Pope. All the same, what really matters here is the refusal of a reductionism. De Vries is cultivating mystery – he is looking for transductions – and nowhere seems to accept a post-Protestant disenchantment of the world. This perspective is confirmed in de Vries’ (2008) more recent articulation of what he calls ‘deep Pragmatism’, which combines ideas from William James, Richard Rorty and Alain Badiou in a purposefully obscured vision of how to get ‘beyond’ the concept of religion. Insofar as I understand de Vries on this point, getting beyond religion means we must first ‘break back through to it again’ (2008: 68; original emphasis) – to hold the Enlightenment conclusion suspect, and at bay. Pace Hirschkind, I don’t think de Vries should be folded into the natural history of religion.

It doesn’t seem to me, then, that de Vries is particularly interested in extracting meaning out of religion, or other such ‘interior’ content for which the exterior form is only ever inadequate. When Hirschkind argues that the interiorities of faith have to be included in its public dimensions, that ‘the practices within which faith is publicly expressed are not exterior to that faith but constitute it as a dimension of life specific to a particular religious tradition’, I find precisely this sort of sensibility at play in de Vries’ work.

The points and counterpoints I’ve been offering in relation to Hirschkind’s important intervention run the risk (among others) of seeming provincial. How much is lost by containing the terms of the exchange to the two major forms of Western Christianity? It would certainly be a mistake to reduce the analysis of religion and media to them. Nor should we hide behind the quasi-anthropological rumination of Derrida on globalatinisation, in which Western Christian terms become the inevitable ones through which any critique can be marshalled. ‘I am struck,’ Derrida writes, ‘by
the muffled and almost desperate struggle of the non-Christian religions when they attempt at the same time to Christianize themselves and to defend themselves against Christianity’ (2001: 73). Such an argument of encompassment is deadly to the analysis of religious manifestations, and actually strikes me as at odds with Derrida’s otherwise anti-essentialist approach. To Christianise is not to become Christian – it is to participate in the always already ongoing process of its remaking, and thus both to affirm and deny the existence of something called Christianity in the first place.

This still leaves anyone interested in what I referred to earlier as a ‘general anthropology of religion and media’ in a difficult position, since it demands that such an anthropology be essentialist and anti-essentialist at the same time. It is here that the focus on mediation strikes me as so potentially useful (Engelke 2010a, 2010b). One challenge, of course, is to see whether and to what extent this focus works in relation to other than Christian traditions. The proposition that it does is at least a viable one on the evidence of the contributions to Religion and media (de Vries and Weber 2001). Other work, too, suggests so, not least the anthropology of sound that animates the work of Hirschkind (2006) and others (Eisenlohr 2009; Schulz 2008) on Islam.

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