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Medias et religion en miroir

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- 1 This book fills a very obvious gap in the literature. Despite the evident importance of the subject, relatively little has been published on the relationships between religion and the media in the European context. Far more, of course, has been written on the same phenomenon in the United States, paying particular attention to televangelism – something relatively absent in Europe. Why this should be so is of interest in itself and reflects very directly one of the central themes of this book: namely how do the media relate to the society of which they are part? Or to put the same question in a slightly different way, why has it not proved possible for the American televangelists to make headway in the European context? What is it about Europe that prevents their success?
- 2 This publication does not address that particular issue; it is, nonetheless, a very welcome addition to the literature in that adds considerably to our knowledge about an increasingly important field. The editors have gathered together an interesting set of papers, most of which were presented to a meeting of the Association Française de Sciences Sociales des Religions, held in Paris in 1998. The emergent book is divided into four sections. The first is concerned with the image of the religious in the media; the second with (a) legal and institutional frameworks across Europe and (b) the strategies utilised by various religious ‘actors’ (individual and collective) to operate within these; the third relates to the reception of the media (i.e. the audience); and the last is concerned with how the media construct the religious. What pressures, for example,

are brought to bear in order to make a successful, usually visual, presentation? Does the result necessarily falsify the religious issues at stake?

- 3 Running right through the book are a number of cross-cutting themes, notably those which elaborate the tensions between religion and the media. In order to appreciate this relationship, two extreme positions must be avoided. First that of dissociation, in which religion is simply regarded as *pas*se and the media as modern, or even post-modern. There is, in consequence, no need to discuss their relationship since they belong to different realms. The opposite tendency leads to a different danger: the likelihood of confusing the two fields, regarding them so much as functional equivalents that they are virtually interchangeable. Either, for example, can be seen in Durkheimian terms – as a reflection of society itself, or in Marxist terms – as form of collective anaesthesia. Neither the Durkheimian, nor the Marxist perspective is wrong in itself, but both tend to deflect attention from the relationship *between* the two elements that forms the focus of this publication.
- 4 The following remarks should be seen as illustrative of the range of material included; the book as a whole is, however, warmly recommended.
- 5 A pioneering chapter (Messner) brings together such information as exists on the constitutional arrangements that are found in some, if not all, the European Union states concerning access to the media on the part of different religious groups. It is striking that a similar exercise has been repeated several times over with regard to religion and the educational systems, but not, until now, for the media – arguably as influential as education in the forming of both individual and collective attitudes. The issue is, of course, fast moving as the number of media outlets proliferates; no sooner is one brought under some sort of control than another emerges. Public service broadcasting remains, however, a crucial dimension of European life, leading to complex issues concerning access. Who is going to decide these questions and on what grounds? If the market does not rule (as it does for the most part in the United States), who does?
- 6 A recent example of innovation in this respect is the representation of Buddhism on French public service television (Koné-el-adj). The image presented has been very largely positive; the effects on the Buddhist community rather more mixed. Not only has the decision to effect such broadcasts led to division among French Buddhists (not all were in favour of ‘going public’), the community has also undergone a corresponding transformation. Following the German pattern, for example, it has elaborated a form of Buddhist ‘creed’, an essentially Christian notion but necessary to operate within the French broadcasting system. (This response provides an excellent illustration of the often unwitting domination of Christian understandings in European culture, in secular as well as religious contexts, and in places where a genuine effort has been made to extend a welcome to other-faith communities.) In a rather similar vein, somewhat alien structures have had to emerge within the French Buddhist community in order to deal with the correspondence resulting from obviously successful programmes.
- 7 Finally, the chapter on advertising (Freyssi-net-Dominjon) offers a perceptive and amusing review of how the religious can be employed to sell a wide range of products (secular as well as religious). Benetton offers an excellent, if controversial, example. Religious images remain a minority enterprise in the advertising repertoire, but they serve as a valuable reminder of the residual (almost entirely Christian) memory in the

population (in this case France), from which particular images can be exploited by the advertising world. For how much longer this will be possible is an interesting question to ask.