Research Report

Religious Socialization by the Media?
An Empirical Study and Conclusions for Practical Theology

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1. Media Religion

Over the past two decades, secularization theory has increasingly been questioned, not only for the American but also for the European contexts. Empirical findings indicate a resurgence of religion on the one hand and a broadened concept of religion in research on the other. These findings have lead to the alternative view that religion in modern western societies is not on the verge of dying but rather seems to take on new and diverse shapes. *Transformation theories of religion*[1] admit that religion does decrease in its traditional institutional forms, but hold that it is transformed into something like "civil religion" (Bellah), "invisible religion" (Luckmann), "implicit religion" (Bailey), or pluralized and individualized forms of religion.[2]

In the fields of anthropology and religious studies, certain transformation views of religion were put forward by scholars such as Joseph Campbell, Mircea Eliade, and Victor Turner, who discovered mythic and ritual elements in our western societies – which usually seem to be dominated by profane rational thinking and technical processes. They found these elements mainly in the leisure activities – of theatre, play, concerts – and in the media. Drawing on their work, other scholars like Robert Jewett and

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1 Timothy Crippen, Old and New Gods in the Modern World. Towards a Theory of Religious Transformation, in: Social Forces, 67, 1988, 316–336; Wilhelm Gräb, Sinnfragen. Transformationen des Religiösen in der Modernen Kultur, Gütersloh (Gütersloher Verlagshaus) 2006; Hubert Knoblauch, Populäre Religion. Auf dem Weg in eine Spirituelle Gesellschaft, Frankfurt am Main & New York (Campus Verlag) 2009.

2 See, for example, Günter Thomas, Implizite Religion. Theoriegeschichtliche und Theoretische Untersuchungen zum Problem ihrer Identifikation, Würzburg (Ergon) 2001; Hans-Georg Ziebertz/Boris Kalbheim/Ulrich Riegel, Religiöse Signaturen Heute. Ein Religionspädagogischer Beitrag zur Empirischen Jugendforschung, Gütersloh (Gütersloher Verlagshaus) 2003; overview in: Manfred L. Pirner, Religiosität als Gegenstand Empirischer Forschung, in: H.-F. Angel et al., eds., Religiosität. Anthropologische, Theologische und Sozialwissenschaftliche Klärungen, Stuttgart (Kohlhammer) 2006, 30–52.

John S. Lawrence,[3] Roger Silverstone,[4] Michael Real,[5] Günter Thomas,[6] and many others have pointed out the religious, mythic, or liminal character of media culture, mainly of television and film.[7] Some have even spoken of television or film *as* religion. More generally, the term "media religion" (Medienreligion) has been used. Both identifiers suggest that the media share certain characteristic features with religion and, like a "real" religion, inform the community of media users.[8]

To give but a few examples, a high number of media stories tend to be structured like religious redemption dramas with the good superheroes successfully fighting the bad, often with the help of supernatural powers, sacrificing or at least risking their lives to save the good or even the world. Media stories also tend to deal with the great human questions that are usually regarded as religious questions and are not generally discussed in our rational everyday communication: Where do we come from? Where do we go? What is the meaning of life? Is there a meaning in suffering? Is there something like destiny? Is there a reality beyond the one we can perceive? What is right or wrong and how can we know? Further, media stories deal with basic human feelings such as fear, aggression, and love, often using symbolic language that is derived from religious traditions.

The question of the homogeneity or standardization of "media religion" is controversial and can be expected to find a different answer in different countries and in different areas of media culture.[9] For the realm of popular film, German film critic Georg Seesslen has elaborated specific mythic structures of the various film genres; however, like many before him, he finds some basic mythic structures and motives to be predominant in a majority of popular films across the genres. Many of them, he claims, are

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3 Robert Jewett/John S. Lawrence, The American Monomyth, Garden City, NY (Anchor) 1977.

4 Roger Silverstone, The Message of Television. Myth and Narrative in Contemporary Culture, London, (Heinemann Educational Books) 1981.

5 Michael R. Real, Super Media. A Cultural Studies Approach, London (Sage) 1989.

6 Günter Thomas, Medien – Ritual – Religion. Zur Religiösen Funktion des Fernsehens, Frankfurt am Main (Suhrkamp) 1998.

7 See overview in: Manfred L. Pirner, Fernsehmythen und Religiöse Bildung. Grundlegung einer Medienerfahrungsorientierten Religionspädagogik am Beispiel Fiktionaler Fernsehunterhaltung, Frankfurt am Main (GEP) 2001.

8 George Gerbner/K. Lonolly, Television as New Religion, in: New Catholic World, 4, 1974, 52–56; John L. Lyden, Film as Religion, New York (New York University Press) 2003.

9 See Manfred L. Pirner, The Media Culture Approach to Religious Education. An Outline with a Focus on Interreligious Learning, in: S. Miedema/W. Meijer/A. Lanser-van der Velde, eds., Religious Education in a World of Religious Diversity, Münster (Waxmann) 2009, 149–164.

transformations from the Christian religious tradition.[10] For practical theologians, this analysis, combined with the several analyses of media's mythic qualities and social functions, suggests an area rich for study. The social practice of film is seemingly drawing from and transforming religious tradition, as it is also shaping the religious perspectives of viewers.

2. Media Socialization and Religious Socialization

Although there are many socialization theories with different perspectives, the following core definition by Klaus Hurrelmann certainly represents a broad consensus. He defines socialization as "the process of generation and development of the human personality depending on and interacting with the social and material life conditions" in a certain society.[11] While in the 1970s the emphasis in socialization theory and research, especially in Germany, was on the influence society exerts on individuals, the emphasis has shifted to the interactive and constructive aspect of media influence over the past thirty years. Researchers point out, in particular, that young people are not "passive recipients of external social forces," but rather "active participants in the construction of their own social lives and identities."[12]

As for media socialization, one conclusion from most major empirical studies in the field of youth sociology and media pedagogy is that the socialization of young people in Western societies has to a large part been taken over by the media. The adolescents' life-world (*Lebenswelt*) today is to a considerable extent a media-world. The electronic media represent major socializing agents.[13] They convey "knowledge, world views and life orientations," however actively and constructively these may be acquired by the individual children or adolescents.[14]

Looking at religious socialization in Western Europe, the empirical evidence over the past decades has shown a significant decline of the importance of the family and church communities as socializing agents. As mentioned above, these findings have fuelled secularization theories but, in light of transformation theories of religion, they indicate that other socializing

10 Vgl. Georg Seesslen, Das Kino und der Mythos, in: Der Evangelische Erzieher, 44, 1992, 537–549.

11 Klaus Hurrelmann, Einführung in die Sozialisationstheorie. Über den Zusammenhang von Sozialstruktur und Persönlichkeit, Weinheim (Beltz) 1995, 114 (translation: M.L.Pirner).

12 David Buckingham, Children Talking Television. The Making of Television Literacy, London (Falmer) 1993, 14.

13 Daniel Suess, Mediensozialisation von Heranwachsenden, Wiesbaden (Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften) 2004, 65 (translation: M.L.Pirner).

14 Bernd Schorb, Sozialisation, in: J. Hüther/B. Schorb, eds., Grundbegriffe Medienpädagogik, München (Kopaed) 2005, 381–389, esp. 387 (translation: M.L.Pirner).

agents have at least partly taken over. Taking into account the significant presence of (transformed) religion in the media on the one hand (often identified as *media religion*), and the enormous importance of the media for socialization processes in our present Western societies (*media socialization*) on the other hand, one can hypothesize that young people experience a kind of *religious socialization by the media*.[15] The question remains: is there empirical evidence for this hypothesis?

3. Empirical Evidence for Religious Socialization by the Media?

As one of the major scholars in the field of media effects, George Gerbner developed his "cultivation theory" in the 1980s. According to this theory, heavy and regular viewing of television cultivates, in the long run, precisely those attitudes and world views presented by television.[16] As a by-product, so to speak, of his comprehensive investigation on the American Electronic Church, he and his team found that heavy viewers of general (non-religious) television tended to have a stronger belief in the literal inspiration of the Bible, in miracles, and in the power of speaking in tongues than light viewers. On the other hand, the research team found a negative correlation between religious experiences, church attendance, and active involvement in church communities on the one side and heavy television viewing on the other.

Drawing upon this research, Gerbner drew the following far-reaching conclusion:

> General commercial television viewing may supply or supplant (or both) some religious satisfaction and thus lessen the importance of religion for its heavy viewers. Demographic groups whose light viewers of television are most likely to find religion important, such as older, lower-income, lower-education, and non-white respondents, distance themselves the most as heavy viewers of general television from that high estimate of religion's importance. When viewers sharing

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15 See also Manfred L Pirner, Religion, in: R. Vollbrecht/C. Wegener, eds., Handbuch Mediensozialisation, Wiesbaden (VS-Verlag für Sozialwissenschaft) 2009, 294–301. From a specifically educational perspective, Graham Rossiter arrives at a similar hypothesis, the plausibility of which he tries to underline very convincingly by theoretical reflection: "For many children and adolescents, and indeed for some adults, film and television can have a formative influence on spirituality and identity." Graham Rossiter, The Shaping Influence of Film and Television on the Spirituality and Identity of Young People: An Educational Response (3 parts), in: International Journal of Children's Spirituality, 1 (1), 1996, 52–67; 1 (2), 1996, 21–35; 4 (2), 1999, 207–224.

16 See George Gerbner et al., Religion and Television, Philadelphia (Annenberg School of Communications) 1984. As far as I can see, Gerbner has never systematically clarified the relationship between his notion of "cultivation" and the notion of "socialization," although it is obviously a very close one. It seems that he avoided the term socialization because it usually refers to children and young people while Gerbner insisted on cultivation effects also on adults.

these characteristics do not watch religious programs on television they blend into the heavy viewing general television mainstream which seems to displace, if not replace, religion as an important part of their lives.[17]

In this conclusion, Gerbner does not take into account the above-mentioned positive correlations between certain religious attitudes and heavy viewing. Also, he and his team do not address the question of whether the negative correlations have to do with the contents of television or with the fact that, for heavy viewers, television viewing just leaves no time for church or religious activities.

Building on Gerbner's theory, Harry M. Gibson in 1992 conducted an empirical study inquiring into possible influences of television on the attitude towards Christianity of 5,432 Scottish state school pupils. Findings of positive correlations between television viewing and pro-social behaviour in other studies prompted Gibson to go beyond Gerbner's approach and to suppose that the content of television programmes would be decisive for promoting a negative or a positive attitude towards Christianity. Consequently, he differentiated between the pupils' viewing preferences using four main clusters of programmes: soap, sport, light entertainment, and "current awareness" programmes (news, information). His hypotheses, however, are more influenced by Gerbner's displacement theory than by the pro-social behaviour perspective. Gibson anticipates that soap operas, sport, and light entertainment have become a kind of substitute religion, satisfying many of people's religious needs, which would be indicated by negative correlations between a preference for viewing these genres and a positive attitude towards Christianity. He expected, on the other hand, a positive correlation between viewing current awareness programmes and a more positive attitude towards Christianity (the latter being measured by the Francis scale of attitudes towards Christianity).[18]

The results of Gibson's study are quite different from what was expected. They show that "there is a positive relationship between watching soap operas, light entertainment and current awareness programmes on television and attitudes to Christianity, and no significant relationship between watching sports programmes on television and attitudes to Christianity."[19] Gibson tries to explain this outcome by referring to arguments from other studies that the media tend more to "reinforce already existing attitudes and behaviour patterns than produce new ones."[20] In my opinion, it would have been more plausible to point back to the pro-social behaviour perspective, arguing that all the three genres with a positive correlation to

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17 Ibid., 10.

18 See Leslie J. Francis, Measuring Attitude towards Christianity during Childhood and Adolescence, in: Personality and Individual Differences, 10, 1989, 695–698.

19 Harry M. Gibson, The Influence of Television on Adolescents' Attitudes towards Christianity, in: Journal of Empirical Theology, 5, 1992, 18; cf: 18–30.

20 Ibid., 28.

pro-Christianity attitudes can be said to carry pro-social tendencies. Unfortunately, there were no genres involved in Gibson's study that show aggressive and anti-social features or touch on mythic religious world views such as mystery, horror, or fantasy films. Also, the study did not include other religious attitudes apart from the attitude to Christianity.

4. Theoretical Foundations of the Empirical Study

In my own investigation I have picked up the thread of Gibson's inquiry, but I have also tried to avoid some of its shortcomings, to widen the research perspective, and to broaden its theoretical basis. To this end, Gerbner's cultivation theory can be complemented by insights drawn from approaches like Klapper's predisposition theory[21] and the Uses and Gratifications Approach advanced mainly by Blumler and Katz.[22] These theories emphasize the active role of media users in choosing and interpreting media material. Though not denying that the media have an influence on people, these approaches would go on to say that media users actively select those media and media elements that they choose to influence them. This activity of selection can be seen as being determined by the predispositions of the individual, by his various needs, or by the social group that is important to him (family, peer group, and so forth).

These insights correspond with the state of research and discussion among cultivation theorists. In his elaborated critique of cultivation theory and research, W. James Potter points to empirical studies that have shown that two of Gerbner's axiomatic assumptions are no longer tenable: (1) nonselective viewing, which claims that viewers tend to watch by the clock rather than by taste; and (2) uniform messages, which claims that no significant difference exists between the basic contents of different television genres. The empirical evidence shows otherwise: studies that refer to specific television genres and take the viewers' selective activity seriously have found differential effects to be stronger than global effects.[23] Consequently, it seems advisable to focus on media *preferences* in empirical studies – as Gibson did – rather than on the quantity of media consumption. Another argument for such a concentration on media preferences is that those genres that are the viewers' favourites will probably be watched

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21 Joseph Klapper, The Effects of Mass Communication, New York & Glencoe (Free Press of Glencoe) 1960, 19–25.

22 Jay G. Blumler/Elihu Katz, The Uses of Mass Communication, London (Sage) 1974.

23 W. James Potter, Adolescents' Perceptions of the Primary Values of Television Programming, in: Journalism Quarterly, 67, 1990, 843–851; W. James Potter, Cultivation Theory and Research. A Conceptual Critique, in: Human Communication Research, 19, 1993, 575; cf: 564–601.

with intensified attention and involvement and therefore will have a stronger effect on viewers than other shows.

Theories of and empirical findings about selectivity also have a bearing on the *interpretation* of correlations between media preferences and religious or moral attitudes. Media effects should not be regarded as a one-way street any longer, but may move in both directions. Certain television programmes, such as mystery films, may influence viewers to believe in ghosts, demons, or supernatural powers; however, it is also possible that people who already believe in ghosts, demons, and supernatural powers tend to choose mystery films as their favourite programmes, and then, indeed, one may expect that the existing attitude will be reinforced. It is again W. J. Potter who explicitly admits that cultivation research cannot *definitely verify* that the relationship between television viewing and certain attitudes is a causal one.[24] However, correlation findings can *support* the hypothesis that attitudes are influenced by television.

Relationships found in empirical cultivation studies are thus in principle open to both ways of interpretation: (1) television viewers can be influenced by their favourite programmes into developing a certain attitude, or (2) they choose certain programmes because they go well with their already existing attitude. If linked together, the two separate interpretations may suggest a kind of spiral development, as psychologist Ekkehard Kleiter has claimed for the field of television aggression.[25] According to his reciprocal-effect-model ("Aufschaukelungsmodell"[26]), there is a reciprocal reinforcement process, evidenced by the effects of television violence on viewers' aggressiveness and the preference of aggressive viewers for watching television violence. Transferred to our example from above, this would mean: mystery films may promote people's belief in ghosts, etc.; consequently, people who believe in ghosts and other supernatural phenomena tend to select mystery films as their favourite films, which again may reinforce the ghost-beliefs, and so on and so on. The spiral model combines quite plausibly the thesis that media do in fact have effects on people's attitude with the insight that people's use of media is selective. It also leaves space for the possibility that a person is prompted to enter the spiral by extra-media factors (e.g. an encounter with fascinating occultists) or by intra-media factors (e.g. seeing a fascinating mystery movie). Of course, there is also the possibility that a person will leave the spiral and perhaps enter another one. Again, this may be prompted by either kind of factor.

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24 Potter, Adolescents' Perceptions (n. 23), 585.

25 See Ekkehard Kleiter, Film und Aggression – Aggressionspsychologie. Theorie und Empirische Ergebnisse mit einem Beitrag zur Allgemeinen Aggressionspsychologie, Weinheim (Deutscher Studienverlag) 1997.

26 Ibid., 444.

5. The Empirical Study[27]

A questionnaire was given to 302 adolescents, 164 girls and 138 boys, who were attending Protestant confirmation classes in the area of Bamberg, Northern Bavaria. Among other questions, the young people were asked about television preferences: "What kind of TV programmes do you like watching?" A list of genres was also presented with options for their selection: "I love it" [sehr gern = 1] / "medium" [mittel = 2] / "I don't like it" [mag ich nicht = 3]). The genre names offered were taken by and large from popular German TV magazines (such as "adventure films," "family films," "criminal films," "western films," "science fiction films," "information and documentary films," "news shows," and so forth). The questions concerning religious beliefs and attitudes comprised three sections of the questionnaire. The first one asked about more general, partly para-religious concepts, such as belief in supernatural phenomena, ghosts, possible contact with the dead, extraterrestrial beings on earth, horoscopes, the existence of angels, reincarnation, and God. The second one dealt with the idea of God, using adjectives like "just," "loving," "threatening," and so forth. The third section had questions about specifically Christian propositions, such as "Do you believe that Jesus told the truth about God?"; "Do you believe that Jesus really worked miracles?"; and "Would you call yourself a Christian?"

The approach was mainly an exploratory one, so I will not go into the details of pre-study hypotheses, but rather will concentrate on reporting the most important findings. A first and expected result showed that there were no relationships between the quantity of television or computer use and religious attitudes. As in other empirical studies from youth sociology in Germany,[28] the analysis indicated that the amount of time spent on media as such does not have much to do with the formation of opinions on religious issues.

This was different with the adolescents' likes and dislikes of certain television genres. Possible correlations between such television preferences and religious beliefs were examined with the t-test for independent samples. It

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27 I owe thanks to Professor Ernst Hany, psychologist at the University of Erfurt, for his valuable help with the statistic evaluation of the study's data. The complete study including an additional study on teachers' awareness of the necessity of media education for religious education is documented in: Manfred L. Pirner, Religiöse Mediensozialisation. Empirische Studien zu Zusammenhängen Zwischen Mediennutzung und Religiosität bei SchülerInnen und deren Wahrnehmung durch LehrerInnen, München (Kopaed) 2004. For a summary in German, see Manfred L. Pirner, Religiöse Mediensozialisation? Ein Empirisches Forschungsprojekt, in: M.L. Pirner/Th. Breuer, eds., Medien – Bildung – Religion. Zum Verhältnis von Medienpädagogik und Religionspädagogik in Theorie, Empirie und Praxis, München (Kopaed) 2004, 154–164.

28 See, for example: Deutsche Shell, ed., Jugend 2000, Opladen (Leske & Budrich) 2000. I re-analyzed the data of the Shell research project under this specific perspective.

was soon evident that several TV genres did not show any correlations. It also became clear that gender constituted a confounding variable, while the level of school education did not show any significant interaction with the correlations (the German secondary schools are split into three ability levels). Consequently, the two gender groups were separated and the search for relationships was conducted within each group.

In Tables 1 and 2 below I present significant results of the t-test for independent samples, presented separately by gender. The most important result certainly is that *there are indeed significant correlations between TV preferences and religious attitudes within the two gender groups.* What is particularly striking, of course, is that we found by far more of them among the girls (Table 1; 16 cases) than among the boys (Table 2; 5 cases). This may indicate that the girls tend to be more strongly influenced by television in their religious attitudes than the boys, which is supported by findings that, in general, more girls than boys believe in horoscopes, ghosts, and so forth. Remembering our theoretical reflections above, however, the results may also be interpreted as showing that the girls tend to select more reflectively those television genres that correspond with their religious beliefs than the boys do. It will be instructive to look at some of the results more closely.

One can clearly see from the girls' table (Table 1) that most correlations cluster around the genre horror/mystery and tend to show the highest values there. As one visualized example of the general trend here, we can take a look at the diagram below (p. 286) showing the cross-tabulation relationship between the preference for horror- and mystery-films and the belief in reincarnation.

A clear majority of those girls who love watching mystery and horror films believe in reincarnation while an equally clear majority of those who do not like the genre do not share this belief, which results in a rather high t-value of -4.391. Quite the same goes for further religious attitudes: those who are fond of mystery and horror films tend to believe more frequently in supernatural phenomena, ghosts, contact with the dead, extraterrestrials, and horoscopes than those who do not like the genre. A quite plausible interpretation of these results is that supernatural, transcendental powers and extraterrestrial beings play an important role in the horror/mystery genre. From a cultivation theory perspective, the strongest effects of television on viewers can be expected in those cases where television reality differs considerably from everyday reality respective to the common sense view of reality, which obviously goes for the fantastic film genres. Therefore, one of the pre-study hypotheses had been that fans of this kind of film or series would be more ready to believe in such phenomena. In fact, similar correlations were found between horror/mystery preference and belief in extraterrestrials among the boys of this study, and between fantasy and science fiction preference and the belief in supernatural phenomena and ghosts among the girls, thus supporting the hypothesis.

Diagram:
Cross-tabulation of TV preference for „mystery/horror" with belief in reincarnation (girls only)

Genre: mystery/horror - girls only
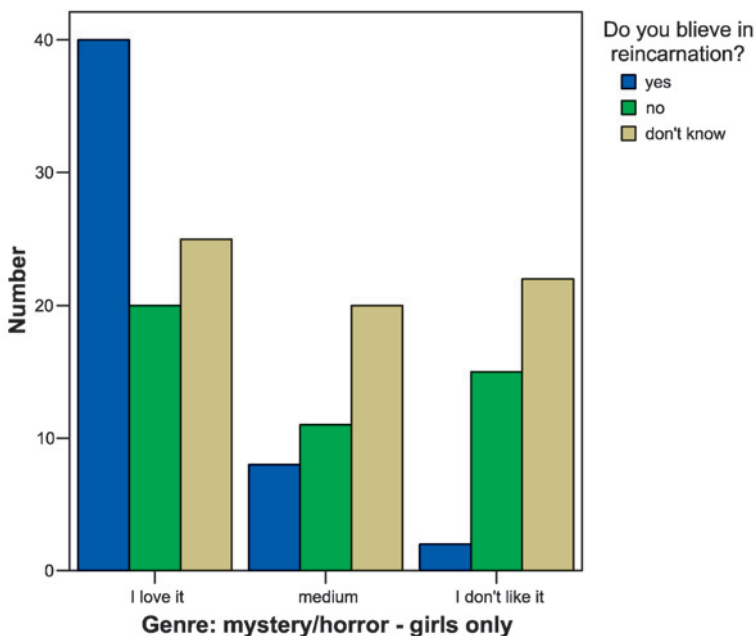
The negative correlations among the girls between the preference for news and information or documentary films and the belief in horoscopes are also quite easy to explain. Those girls who prefer these genres will be expected to be more reflective and enlightened than others, particularly compared with those who are mainly interested in relational films, who tend to believe significantly more frequently in the truth of horoscopes. It must be admitted, however, that not all the results of the study are open to plausible explanations. Why, for instance, did we find among the boys a negative correlation between the preference for family films and calling oneself a Christian? This result is hard to explain and would require further confirmation and complementary qualitative research.

Table 1
t-test (TV preferences) x (belief) – girls only

	18. belief in supernatural phenomena (girls only)	N	mean value	SD	T
preference for fantasy films	yes	74	2,16	,703	-2,709*
	no	31	2,55	,568	
preference for horror / mystery films	yes	73	1,42	,762	-4,479**
	no	31	2,16	,779	
	19. belief in ghosts (girls only)	N	mean value	SD	T
preference for science fiction films	yes	65	2,08	,835	-2,846*
	no	55	2,49	,742	
preference for fantasy films	yes	64	2,05	,722	-3,518**
	no	54	2,50	,666	
preference for horror / mystery films	yes	65	1,25	,587	-7,656***
	no	55	2,24	,793	
	20. belief in possible contact with the dead (girls only)	N	mean value	SD	T
preference for horror / mystery films	yes	30	1,30	,651	-4,142***
	no	78	1,94	,858	
	21. belief in aliens already living on earth (girls only)	N	mean value	SD	T
preference for family films	yes	28	2,39	,497	2,928*
	no	95	1,99	,676	
preference for horror / mystery films	yes	28	1,25	,518	-5,146***
	no	94	1,94	,878	
	22. belief in horoscopes (girls only)	N	mean value	SD	T
preference for relational films	yes	75	1,55	,643	-4,752***
	no	45	2,16	,737	
preference for horror / mystery films	yes	75	1,53	,723	-2,780*
	no	45	1,96	,928	
preference for information / docum.	yes	75	2,79	,412	3,010*
	no	45	2,44	,693	
preference for news shows	yes	74	2,58	,574	2,970*
	no	45	2,22	,735	
	24. belief in reincarnation (girls only)	N	mean value	SD	T
preference for relational films	yes	50	1,46	,641	-2,994*
	no	70	1,87	,711	
preference for action films	yes	50	1,88	,659	-2,641*
	no	46	2,24	,673	
preference for horror / mystery films	yes	50	1,24	,517	-4,391***
	no	46	1,89	,875	
	30. I call myself a Christian (girls only)	N	mean value	SD	T
preference for news shows	yes	61	2,34	,680	-3,350**
	no	33	2,76	,502	

significant cases (* p < .05, ** p < .001, *** p < .000)

Table 2
t-test (TV preferences) x (belief) – boys only

		N	mean value	SD	T
	18. belief in supernatural phenomena (boys only)	N	mean value	SD	T
preference for information / docum.	yes	73	2,21	,799	-3,437**
	no	31	2,65	,486	
	20. belief in possible contact with the dead (boys only)	N	mean value	SD	T
preference for family films	yes	28	2,14	,705	-3,582**
	no	80	2,64	601	
	21. belief in aliens already living on earth (boys only)	N	mean value	SD	T
preference for horror / mystery films	yes	51	1,29	,610	-2,515*
	no	58	1,62	,745	
	22. belief in horoscopes (boys only)	N	mean value	SD	T
preference for relational films	yes	32	2,16	,884	-2,516*
	no	80	2,59	,630	
	30. I would call myself a Christian (boys only)	N	mean value	SD	T
preference for family films	yes	56	2,70	,502	2,428*
	no	35	2,34	,765	

significant cases (* $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$, *** $p < .000$)

Another set of interesting results appeared in the second section of the religious belief questions. Here the adolescents were asked to choose among eleven possible adjectives those three adjectives that best described God as they imagined God to be. As most of them chose only positive characteristics of God (just, forgiving, all-powerful, kind, loving, omniscient) and hardly any negative attributes (unjust, punishing, cruel, fearful, can predetermine everything), the scrutiny had to be restricted to possible correlations between TV preferences and the selection of positive attributes. There were three significant correlations, as Table 3 below demonstrates, two among the girls and one among the boys.

Again, the result is intelligible, based on the tendency of mystery/horror films to depict supernatural and transcendent powers and beings as threatening, fearful and aggressive. Comparing the proportion of those selecting and not selecting the attribute of "loving," one might expect that those who love the horror/mystery genre tend to imagine God to be less kind and loving than those who do not like this type of film. A positive correlation could be found between the preference for family films and the divine attribute of "loving" among the girls. This result can also be quite plausibly interpreted as an influence of television on the girls' ideas of God, or as part of a spiral form of interdependence, assuming that family films tend to propagate values like love, care and harmonious relationships.

As to the third section of religious attitudes in the questionnaire, the specifically Christian ones, there were no significant correlations at all with TV

Table 3
t-test (TV preferences) X (God's attributes) – girls and boys separately

	26. God's attribute 'graceful' (girls only)	N	mean value	SD	T
preference for horror / mystery films	selected	67	1,88	,879	2,120*
	not selected	96	1,60	,774	
	26. God's attribute 'loving' (girls only)	N	mean value	SD	T
preference for family films	selected	62	1,90	,718	-2,316*
	not selected	102	2,16	,656	
	26. God's attribute 'loving' (boys only)	N	mean value	SD	T
preference for horror / mystery films	selected	38	1,68	,809	2,049
	not selected	99	1,38	,650	

significant cases (* p < .05)

preferences. This is not entirely surprising because results from media research have shown that those attitudes that are linked with the basis or core of a person's value system cannot easily be changed through mass communication.[29] The more important a belief is for a person, the less susceptible it is to change; the more peripheral a belief is for a person, the more easily it can be modified. Accordingly, one possible interpretation of the missing relationships between specifically Christian beliefs and television preferences would be that these beliefs are characteristic of a strong kind of belief and are therefore not susceptible to change, whereas the items of the first and second section belong to the weak kind of belief, which tend not to gain eminent importance for a person's life. Another possible explanation would be that the contents of mainstream television programmes in Germany usually do not touch on specifically Christian themes or faith propositions and therefore have not much influence on this area of religious attitudes.

6. Discussion in the Context of other Studies

The empirical study has shown evidence of relationships between media use and religious beliefs, exemplified by the correlations between television preferences and certain opinions on religious issues. In a strict sense, these findings cannot definitely verify but they can *support* the hypothesis that media have a significant influence on young people's religious attitudes. In the light of our theoretical reflections and of results from other cultivation and media effects research, this influence should not be regarded as a uni-directional effect, but rather as the result of an interdependent process of selection, media effect, and active acquisition by the recipient.

29 See Michael Schenk, Medienwirkungsforschung, Tübingen (Mohr Siebeck) 2002, 189.

The study's findings can thus support a theory of *religious socialization by the media*. In line with Gerbner's cultivation theory, those genres that are most distinct from our everyday life and worldview showed the most and highest significant relationships to belief items: mystery, horror, fantasy, and science fiction.

During and after the evaluation of my own research project, some valuable qualitative empirical studies were published which can be seen as complementary to it. Following a mainly ethnographic approach and drawing on case studies, these studies further support the hypothesis that media can exert formative influences on viewers' religious or para-religious attitudes and world views. In her book *From Angels to Aliens*, Lynn Schofield Clark reports on her study that is based on in-depth interviews and focus groups with about 100 American teenagers.[30] During the research process she was lead to concentrate on the supernatural in the media, which means that she focused on precisely those film genres that showed the most and highest significant t-values in my investigation. Clark concludes that the media can clearly be seen as one source of religious identity formation among young people today and that this source becomes increasingly important for those young people "with the least interest in formal religion."[31] Also, Clark's results reaffirm the view that the relationship between media and religious beliefs is not simply one of media effects but a more complex, reciprocal, and multi-faceted one having to do with what she calls "the blurring of boundaries" between the stories of traditional religion and those of popular media culture.[32] Relying mainly on the young people's self-interpretation, she emphasizes the tendency that the media stories are not taken seriously by the young viewers and that most of them "do not consciously seek information about the supernatural from the media."[33] Perhaps my own findings can contribute to challenging even more than Clark does the teenagers' conviction that "they are unlikely to have their minds changed about what they do believe" by the media.[34]

In 2007 two major German qualitative studies were published that were also able to demonstrate influences of the media on young people's religious orientations. Astrid Dinter investigated adolescents' use of computers and found that general user experiences, as well as the contents of some computer games, can imply religious dimensions in a wide sense.[35] Closer to my own study in his theoretical framework, Jörg Herrmann conducted bio-

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30   Lynn Schofield Clark, From Angels to Aliens. Teenagers, the Media and the Supernatural, New York (Oxford University Press) 2003.

31   Ibid., 224.

32   Ibid., 230.

33   Ibid., 227.

34   Ibid., 227 f.

35   Astrid Dinter, Adoleszenz und Computer. Von Bildungsprozessen und Religiöser Valenz, Göttingen (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht) 2007.

graphical interviews with 20 young adults on possible religious aspects in their reception of television, movie films, and books.[36] He mainly concentrated on the functional dimensions of religion that he found in his interviewees' media reception, but he was also able to trace some influences media experiences had on their explicit religious beliefs. For instance, he reports the case of 39-year-old Hans, whose regular viewing of the TV series "Kung Fu" in his adolescence lead him to read books on Buddhism, attend seminars, and practice Buddhist meditation up to the present day.[37]

The advantage of ethnographically oriented qualitative studies such as the ones mentioned above is that they can highlight the meaning of media reception within the complex web of young people's social relations and everyday lives. Their disadvantage is that they cannot make reliable judgments as to the extent to which the relationships they found between religious orientation and media use are characteristic of adolescents in general or certain groups of adolescents in particular. It is in this respect that quantitative studies like my own can be helpful and can complement our knowledge about religious socialization by the media.

Of course, it is necessary to conduct replication studies, which should also broaden the data base by a larger, representative sample and additional differentiations in the items. Also, admittedly, more sophisticated empirical methods can and should be used in further studies; this goes for the construction of the questionnaire as well as the statistical evaluation, which should certainly comprise multiple regression procedures. At the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg, we are planning such a replication study. What is more desirable still are longitudinal studies, which allow researchers to make more valid statements about how media experiences influence the development of religious beliefs and attitudes over time. More generally, future practical-theological research should focus on what Lynn Schofield Clark describes as: "a closer examination of different factors that can play a role in how individual young people make decisions about their religious lives and identities".[38]

7. Conclusion

Framed and complemented by other research, the reported empirical study can, I think, support the hypothesis that young people today use television (and other media) as a source for religious orientation in a society in which institutionalized religion has lost much of its former influence. Religious

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36 Jörg Herrmann, Medienerfahrung und Religion. Eine empirisch-qualitative Studie zur Medienreligion, Göttingen (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht) 2007.

37 Ibid., 257.

38 Clark, From Angels to Aliens (n. 30), 180.

socialization (in a wide sense) has obviously been taken over in part by the media.

For practical theology in general, and for religious education in particular, this result has far-reaching implications. *First* of all, it challenges secularization theories, and especially those sub-theories that suggest, dominantly or exclusively, the substitution of religion by secular phenomena. The findings of our study rather support the view that transformed fragments and elements of religious traditions are passed on outside institutionalized religion in the realm of general (popular) culture and, in this way, influence people's world views. However, these transformed elements of religion often appear in syncretistic or distorted forms. From a theological perspective, popular media culture therefore appears to be ambivalent. It can obviously function as a substitute to traditional, institutional religion, but it also offers potential bridges and links to it.

For religious education in school and church, this means that even children and adolescents who come from a secular family background cannot and should not be considered innocent and ignorant in relation to religion. They may not have been socialized by the religion of their family or by the church, but one can assume that the majority of them have been socialized by media religion. And even for those young people who do have a religious family or church background – which can be said for about half of the interviewed teenagers and about one third of Germany's adolescents – media influences still may modify, transform, or supplement their religious beliefs and attitudes. Some of the studies mentioned show that this is not only verified for young people but also for adults. Consequently, professionals in the field of religious education, as well as in other church-related work, must be enabled to realize and evaluate these developments within the framework of practical-theological hermeneutics of popular culture.

Second, religious socialization by the media that takes place in the informal area of leisure activities and entertainment among adolescents clearly has the character of *"self-socialization"*[39] on the one hand. On the other hand, it implies tendencies of cultural formation. The discussion about the degree of autonomy and the degree of formation or even manipulation that children and adolescents (and also adults) experience in media socialization is controversial and should receive more attention within practical theology. Jörg Herrmann, for instance, draws attention to the fact that quite a few of his interviewees were not feeling comfortable with having to seek for really "valuable" media products by themselves and finding very few.[40] This could be one argument why professional religious educators and church workers should see their task in accompanying and supporting young people and others in their self-socializing processes. This also implies

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39   See Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, Adolescents' Use of Media for Self-socialization, in: Journal of Youth and Adolescence 24, 1995, 519–533.

40   Herrmann, Medienerfahrung und Religion (n. 36), 314.

the need for them to strengthen their ability to reflect critically on the media and on humane forms of religion and spirituality. In both respects, the Christian tradition and Christian theology have much to offer, especially when they draw on their own experience with various links between the media (in a wide sense) and religion (e. g. the theological disputes about religious images, or the Christian way of dealing with "media violence" in the Bible). In all such educational efforts, religious education and media education can and should go hand in hand, as both media competence and religious competence are needed to develop a *reflective* and really *self-determined* kind of self-socialization in the use of media.

Third, religious socialization by the media constitutes part of the *basis or precondition of conscious religious learning.* Popular media culture may thus be seen as a possible common ground for communication about religious topics in the classroom or in churches. Its basic and most popular elements can be seen as a kind of *lingua franca* between secularized young people and religious educators, as well as between young people from different religions and world view backgrounds.[41] In order to use and refer to this "language" competently and to take young people and their media socialization seriously, practitioners in religious education and church work need to know more about it. One intention of the reported study is to make a modest contribution to this end.

Zusammenfassung

Ausgehend von religionssoziologischen Theorien und praktisch-theologischen Perspektiven wird in diesem Beitrag eine quantitative empirische Studie vorgestellt, die am Beispiel des Fernsehens Zusammenhänge zwischen Mediennutzung und religiösen sowie para-religiösen Glaubenshaltungen nachweist. Ihre Befunde unterstützen die These, dass populäre Medien einen Einfluss auf die Religiosität ihrer Rezipienten haben bzw. von diesen als Quelle religiös-weltanschaulicher Orientierung in einer teilweise säkularisierten Gesellschaft genutzt werden, so dass von einer *religiösen Mediensozialisation* gesprochen werden kann. Die ‚Medienreligion' enthält einen beträchtlichen Anteil an Transformationen traditioneller Religion; sie kann somit sowohl ersatzreligiöse Funktionen übernehmen als auch Brücken zur institutionalisierten, traditionellen Religion anbieten, an die in religiösen Bildungsbemühungen und anderen Bereichen kirchlicher Jugend- und Gemeindearbeit konstruktiv und kritisch angeknüpft werden kann. Voraussetzung dafür ist eine aufmerksame praktisch-theologische Hermeneutik der populären Medienkultur.

Abstract

Coming from theories of sociology of religion and perspectives of practical theology, this research report presents quantitative empirical research that, using the example of tele-

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41 See Pirner, The Media Culture Approach (n. 9).

Manfred L. Pirner

vision, shows the relations between media use and religious or para-religious convictions of belief. Empirical findings corroborate the hypothesis that popular media influences the religiosity of its recipients and is used by them as a source of religious orientation in a partly secular society; thus, one can speak of "religious media socialization." Media religion includes transformed elements of traditional religion, which allows it to perform functions of surrogate religion and build bridges to institutionalized traditional religion. The links between media religion and traditional religion can be built constructively and critically through religious education in schools and in youth and parish-activities of the churches. This requires attentive practical-theological hermeneutics of popular media culture.