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God as a product and source of national identity

This paper will delineate the connection between God and the media as a source of social identity and community belonging. I will explore religious phenomena through the lens of Cultivation Analysis (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1994) to demonstrate how God has taken the place of an everyday product and one that is established based on individual need.

Introduction

Mankind's standing with God is a relationship that has been propagated throughout the history of the world. Individuals have been on the constant search to try and understand this powerful and ethereal connection. In the middle ages a belief in God is what sustained individuals through the hardships of life. They would gather together weekly to reaffirm their beliefs and be given access to interpretations of the scriptures from priests and preachers. Religion has seemed to dominate communities for thousands of years and offered a sense of purpose. Why then has there been a rapid decline in religious attendance if mankind still has a fundamental need to belong?

Man's relationship with God could today be defined as man's relationship with his own community. Media has taken the place of organized religion and provided another source individuals can look to when trying to establish set norms, beliefs, and patterns. We are social individuals and have a need to relate and be accepted by the group. Before religion provided the key of how to act. Today people find those cues through Television programs and social media. They can access God on their own terms.

God has become a symbol of community and a source of national pride, much like a flag or anthem. The God you choose to worship relates you to a certain community of individuals.

Through the influence of media, a modern conception of religion has turned God from a distant, powerful, and divine being to an iconic and individualized figurehead that fosters a sense of community.

Background

On the first Tuesday in April, Kathy Camp, an American woman living in Spain, stepped out of her small apartment into the brisk morning air. Typically the mornings got off to a slow start where she lived, but today the city was alive and busy as enthusiastic crowds hurried from place to place. It was *Martes Santo*, or Holy Tuesday, the day of the procession in Spain's Holy Week. Thousands lined the streets—chanting, singing, greeting, laughing, and crying—awaiting the start of the 14-hour event. Finally the procession began as hundreds of individuals wearing colored robes and pointed hats walked slowly and deliberately down the street. As they moved in silence the crowd around them erupted in applause. Camp said what she loves most about Spain are these displays of community spirit that bring people together despite different backgrounds and beliefs (Camp, 2010).

Camp is not the only one who has tried to explain Spain's demonstration of religiosity. While the majority of people in Spain profess to be Catholic—more than 70 percent—regular church attendance is often closer to 40 percent (Richburg, 2005). Yet the holy week attracts and persuades thousands of individuals to come together in professing and celebrating their belief in God and Jesus Christ.

A look at Spain's Holy Week gives an interesting idea of what religion means in most modern cultures. Spain's procession is more a demonstration of Spanish culture and the spirit of the country's people (donquijote.org). The events assume an almost celebratory nature because the week, like the Olympics or World Cup, brings together a community of people who share similar beliefs and patterns of living.

In most modern communities belief in organized religion is on the decline. Whether disillusioned by personal experience or through the media, people have turned away from worshipping God in an organized setting. Instead, God by himself is what people turn to. God is a symbol of community, and idea that has largely been created and perpetuated by the media (Pilán, pp. 355). Religion has become more an expression of community rather than a set of practices like reading the Bible or attending church.

Theoretical Framework

The 20th century was not a time of slow progression. With the advent of the factory, industrial living became a reality that shaped the globe. In America the 1900's witnessed two world wars—among countless other conflicts in Asia and the Middle East—the Dust Bowl, and the Great Depression, events that made individuals begin to feel increased sentiments of isolation, anxiety, and mistrust toward authority (McConnell, personal communication, June 6, 2012). These sentiments widely became the themes of media shows and feature articles (McCloud, pp. 214).

The viewing of media is the foremost “sharer” of a certain set of beliefs, ideas, and social customs (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, pp. 43). Television is not simply a form of mindless entertainment; it is a system that distills and communicates the rules and values of a society (Zhang and Harwood, pp. 245). While

media supposedly reflects the values and norms of a culture, the opposite is more often appropriate: media works to create and foster the beliefs and practices of a community.

According to *Growing up with television: Cultivation Process* (1994), “Television is the source of the most broadly shared images and messages in history.” The power of television programs and media entertainment is that it introduced a clear channel of communication with which to convey sets of messages (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, pp. 44). And it is a channel that is incredibly popular. The average American viewer spends seven hours each day with the television turned on (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, pp. 47). Television is the main source—sometimes the only source—individuals have to look at to pattern their own behavior and actions.

Television viewing is a way to establish national culture and identity because it is a source of social reality (Zhang & Harwood, pp. 246). Those who spend more time watching TV see social reality in terms of network programs and perceive dominant, or mainstream, structures of attitudes, beliefs, and values (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, pp. 18). TV viewing is pervasive. It is always present and always on. Television viewing does more than to build a national culture. It also works to establish and maintain a source of individual character shaping and building. People choose to pattern themselves after characters they see in media.

In the 1970’s media programs took a more serious approach in the United States. Between fighting a war in Vietnam and a struggling economy, many grew disillusioned. Music and television programming took on a darker tone as people began to use those mediums to express reflections and push back against cultural norms. Suddenly it wasn’t

popular to give a clean-cut, simplistic image that life was fine. News coverage focused reporting on political and religious scandals, and many Americans formed a mistrust of large organizations like the government or churches (McCloud, pp. 215).

As a result, religions were typically depicted as subversive and controlling (McCloud, pp. 214). As people grew unhappy with America, that anger turned against all things American, including traditional Christian religions. While coverage of most Christian religions grew increasingly negative in the media, depictions of new age religions grew. People became fascinated with gurus, inner harmony, and personal meditation. It was a way to connect with God without the “taint” of organized religion (Bryant & Austin, pp. 724). The mainstream culture perpetuated through the media, popular television stars, and influential news coverage was that organized religion was out.

A turn to spirituality is a trend that has continued through the years. Today most American college students—even those attending religious universities—express a growing interest in spirituality rather than traditional religion (Overstreet, pp. 238). A recent study reports that almost three-fourths of incoming freshman state a belief in God, but most don’t associate religion with that belief (Overstreet, pp. 239).

In depicting God, media has now taken the place of God. Media is the new religion. Traditional religions fundamentally establish a set of beliefs and practices. Media likewise shows systems of patterns individuals can follow in order to reach goals. Television programming depicts what is popular and accepted in a culture, and people follow those paths of self-improvement religiously. Cultivation Analysis maintains we are social individuals. Before religion provided the key of social identity. Today people

find those cues through Television programs and social media. They can access God on their own terms. God has become a symbol of community and a source of national pride, much like a flag or anthem. The God you choose to worship relates you to a certain community of individuals.

Analysis

There is an interesting trend happening in many modern countries, particularly America, where God is seen more as a product than an actual being accessed through religion. Instead people are looking to other forms of worship. While many report a belief in God, regular church attendance and religiosity is on the decline. For instance, among college students, religious attendance declines sharply during their first year at school, a trend that holds true for most religions except the Latter-day Saints (Albrecht & Heaton, pp. 51).

Throughout history God has been worshipped by communities gathering together to share beliefs and strengthen convictions. For example, in the middle ages people would attend church because it was their only access to the scriptures. We read things depending on our environment. Today many view having a belief in God as something personal and individual. Individuals are “finding God” in their own way. Instead of going to church each week, God can be accessed through events like a sporting match or holy procession. God is a symbol that guides and influences through a person’s own interpretation.

Interpreting signs is a way to decipher cultural meaning (Aslan, 2009). The symbols “G-O-D”, while plain themselves, create a cognitive image in our mind that we can understand and visualize. Repeated exposure to the symbols through media exposure

has made God commonplace, and has made the symbol seem comfortable. Television perpetuates our idea of God and what “He” is. As a result we’ve become immune to God as a person as taught by religions.

Media channels have also had the liberty, until recently, to depict religion in whatever manner that will get ratings and religions haven’t had a chance to counteract. While religions are becoming more adept to using media channels, people are not tuning into them (Richburg, 2005). Most religions and religious believers are depicted on TV as fanatical and extreme, such as TV Evangelists who scream and preach from stadiums or a polygamist family in TLC’s *Sister Wives*. Organized religions are often highlighted when there is something controversial that makes headlines and religious leaders are viewed as distant or corrupt (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, pp. 63). When people’s exposure to organized religion comes through the media, it’s clear to see why they choose to distance themselves.

But what is religion? Some define religion as “a shared system of belief, principles or doctrines related to a belief in and worship of a supernatural power . . . regarded as [the] creator . . . of the universe” (Bryant, pp. 728). For most being religious means coming together regularly to share this set of beliefs. To be spiritual, on the other hand, is to “have the spirit of God dwell within . . . to learn how to live in a community with one another [that] calls us to love, reconciliation, and generosity (Bryant, p. 729). Spiritual individuals are “believers” but not “belongers” (Roof & McKinney, pp. 21).

As previously mentioned in this paper, the theory of Cultivation Analysis, Television is the source of the most broadly shared images and messages in history, the mainstream of the common symbolic environment. As the media has turned away from

depicting traditional religion and embraced either controversy surrounding organized religion or embraced ideas of inner harmony and meditation from foreign religions like Buddhism and Confucianism, people follow suit. Media has sculpted individual beliefs and worked to create a mainstream community where God is seen on a spiritual rather than religious level.

The simple symbols of “G-O-D” have become a community in and of itself. It is nationalism, a source of cultural identity that gives pride and binds communities. God is unifying. Like the flag, the cross has come to symbolize being American. Identifying a belief in God equates with believing in the American ideas of freedom and liberty (Aslan, 2009). People make claims like: “you can have your God and I will have mine, but as long as we believe in something we can coexist”. An individual will find community acceptance as long as that belief is there on some level. You can find God anywhere, but only come to know Him on your own. We can “worship” Him through holy processions, but those events have taken on more a form of community bonding and identity than religious action.

We understand ourselves individually on a group level. Human beings are fundamentally social and have a need to relate to others (Pilán, pp. 355, own translation). We identify ourselves with certain groups based on their beliefs (Pilán, pp. 359, own translation). “God” is a binding tie of humans, and being spiritual is a way to escape the flaws and imperfections of religion as shown through the media. Rituals serve to reaffirm our own part in a group. We feel unity, community, and a sense of belonging. Identifying with believers of God during Santa Semana, for example, is a way to reaffirm your place in a community (Pilán, pp. 370, own translation).

Coca-Cola is a consumer product that has taken on religious tones. Whether it's the ritual of passing down a secret recipe or the joy it brings to those around the world, some claim the beverage is their religion (Chidester, pp. 749). Why? Not because the product can compare to omnipotent, omniscient being. Coke can't "know" you, or answer direct prayers, or grant salvation. But coke binds communities, a product people can love in a similar and individual ways that helps them to relate to each other. The ritual act of drinking a coke reaffirms your status in that community. Likewise God binds communities and while everyone may worship on his or her own, having that belief provides a way to relate and connect. Where Coke is an example of a consumer product being built up to the status of religion, through commercialization and exposure to media, religion has come down to the level of a commercialized product.

The search for God in modern societies is really a search for community. It is a statement and need to belong to a group. God provides that sense of belonging, not through anything He does personally, but as a symbol. People can identify with God like they would any other product, and devote themselves to Him on a level they feel comfortable.

Conclusion

People have a need to connect to others around them. We are social beings, and fostering a sense of community within us is an important part of our development. Previously religion was a way to fill this need and provide the guidelines for how to act around each other. Today that need is met in broader terms.

The media is a strong source of perpetuating shared beliefs and customs. More than a reflection of community, media shapes communities and provides communities.

The Internet fosters groups coming together and sharing their own beliefs. People are influenced by who and what they see on Television and use it to find their own truths.

Media is an ever-present source for people to look to.

Organized religion no longer fills a need in individuals, and often it is depicted as something strange and extreme. Instead people can find God in their own way. Just as drinking coke or watching baseball is a way to identify with a group, believing in a type of God is a way to belong to a community. There is no longer a need to belong to an organized church; people do not visit the Church of Coca-Cola, but they find meaning in identifying and relating to others with those same likes. God is now a similar product used to foster a sense of cultural meaning and identity instead of a living being one can have a personal relationship with.

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