

## Part IV: Approaching Religion and Ethics in the Communication Spaces of Documentary Media



## 12. Concluding Thoughts

Each study, this one included, aims to redeem its promise to answer questions posed at the outset. In this final chapter the principal findings of this project are assembled into a single picture composed of details from each chapter. In particular, the discussion here will highlight the consequences of adopting different perspectives on the spaces of communication of religion in documentary media. Its goal is not to be comprehensive. Rather, just as light that has passed through a crystal fractures to reveal the range of the color spectrum, here the questions posed of our subject produce a visible spectrum comprising its component parts. It is those colors we turn to now.

How effectively has this study heightened our knowledge of communication of religion? For, in the words of Roger Odin:

The tools proposed by the semio-pragmatic model don't claim any psychological or cognitive existence. Even if the starting point is phenomenological (one has to start somewhere), as soon as the tools are inscribed in the theory, they become purely heuristic. They are evaluated by demonstrating their efficacy in throwing light on communication processes.<sup>608</sup>

The theoretical basis of this study involved developing the semio-pragmatic model of communication spaces to systematize the interface of documentary media and religion and to understand how religion is reconstructed by documentary media. At the same time the research explored the role of documentary media in the communication and perception of religion in the public and private spheres.

The structure of this final chapter is as follows: first, we revisit the preceding chapters through an overview of the results of the research; then, by evaluating the reading modes worked out in the individual chapters, we

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608 Odin, *Les espaces de communication*, 142. "Toutefois, les outils proposés dans le modèle sémio-pragmatique ne revendiquent pas une existence psychologique ou cognitive quelconque. Même s'ils ont un point de départ phénoménologique (il faut bien partir de quelque chose), une fois inscrit dans la théorie, ils prennent un statut purement *heuristique*. Leur évaluation se fera en fonction de leur efficacité à éclairer les processus communicationnels." Translation mine.

consider how religion and Mormonism are engaged by the sources examined in the study; and, finally, we look again at the concept of religion encountered in this study.

### 12.1. *The interface of documentary media and religion*

The first part of the study presents the semio-pragmatic approach to documentary media in the spaces of communication, so in the spaces of production, representation, circulation/distribution, and consumption. Fundamentally, the approach locates the process of meaning making in the tensions between the space of consumption and the space of representation and as also shaped by the spaces of production and circulation/distribution. In this study the space of representation includes documentaries, television reports, advertisements, corporate films, and reality television shows, all of which are subsumed under the term “documentary media.”

Documentary media offer different reading modes. The most salient is the documentary reading mode, in reference to a real enunciator that communicates a “reality” to which, in an ideal reception situation, reference is made by all the social actors in the spaces of communication. In such a case all those involved are located on the same “axis of relevance”. Another reading mode closely related to the documentary reading mode is the moral mode, which produces values. The audience for documentary media will always ask if what they are seeing is true. Truth in the form of the authentic representation of events is understood as a positive and constitutive value of documentary media. Only if the documentary is credible will it persuade its audience of its moral reasoning.

The social actors in the spaces of communication are central to a semio-pragmatic understanding of documentary media and its connected practices. Religion is therefore approached through its social actors and their meaning-making practices, with religion itself understood as a form of communication. The reading modes in the space of consumption determine how religion is communicated – encoded and decoded by the social actors involved – in the various media practices.

### 12.2. *Spaces of communication under scrutiny*

The second part of the study, chapters 4–6, draws on varied sources and methods to explore the four spaces of communication. The discussion in

chapter 4 shows that although *I'm a Mormon* (LDS, 2010–2015) and *I Am an Ex Mormon* (US 2010–2015) differ in their spaces of communication, the two video campaigns also intersect. The analysis of the communication spaces reveals how the video series are in conversation with each other.

Thus, for example, for both video series displaying the happiness of the social actors is key. In the The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints (LDS Church) campaign the social actors are happy because they are members of the LDS Church; in the counter-campaign the social actors are happy because they no longer are members of the LDS Church. Similarly, the LDS Church has not made it possible for comments to be made on the campaign's webpage, whereas the *I Am an Ex Mormon* webpage facilitates such online discussions. Comment on the LDS Church videos is possible on YouTube. The church has tried to control access to the videos as it seeks to adopt a new face for the institution by avoiding the name "Mormon". The prominence and success of the *I'm a Mormon* campaign, which has left a strong mark in the public sphere, is a complication for this endeavor. The two video series demonstrate that the space of documentary media, and specifically the space of circulation in the Internet, cannot be controlled completely. The *I Am an Ex Mormon* videos are a response to the LDS Church campaign and as a result participate in the LDS Church space of communication. The discussion of the two campaigns in this study has highlighted how religious worldviews are reinterpreted and reconstructed in the documentary spaces of communication that influence, transform, and redefine the practices of religious communities.

Chapter 5 considers reality shows (RTV) that depict Mormons and Mormonism and asks about the relation between the binary categories of the private and the public and about how they influence the communication processes of religion. The comparison between the two RTV shows *The District* (LDS Church, US 2006/2012) and *Sister Wives* (TLC, US 2010–2020) demonstrates that both shows apply instructional and entertaining reading modes, if in different forms.

*The District* places the LDS Church institution at the center of the documentary narrative and provides detailed information about its mission activities and the rite of baptism. At the same time, however, the young missionaries' proselytizing experiences also contain entertaining qualities. In contrast, *Sister Wives* keeps the religious institution to which the polygamous family belongs in the background and entertains the audience with the vibrant everyday lives of the four wives, their husband, and their numerous children. The polygamous family uses the show, however, to pro-

vide information about its problematic legal status and advocates in the public space created by the show for the legalization of polygamy.

In both cases, the show's success is measured by viewer numbers. In the case of *The District*, the producers hope that viewers will be open to contact the church, perhaps through missionaries like those depicted, and ideally might eventually present themselves for baptism, as also depicted in the show. In the case of *Sister Wives*, the producers hope that high viewer figures will help sell the advertising space available before, after and during the broadcast of the show. In both cases the social actors are a vital link in a business strategy and religion is part of commodification.

Chapter 6 examines religion in the communication spaces of documentary media with approaches developed in social science. The results of the semio-pragmatic analysis of a sequence from *Meet the Mormons* (Blair Treu, US 2015) were used to produce questionnaires about perceived values, opinions, and attitudes. The study confirmed the effectiveness of the semio-pragmatic tool for scrutinizing the reading modes of a documentary. It also revealed, however, cultural differences between participants in Spain and participants in Switzerland: the former were generally less critical of the depiction of Mormons and Mormonism, but the later expressed greater interest in knowing more about Mormonism. These differences might be explained by the extent of existing knowledge of Mormonism, including prejudices toward the church, or a more positive attitude toward documentary media or religion. The study also disclosed how effectively documentaries can promote a positive attitude toward Mormonism, and thus potentially toward other religious institutions and religion more broadly.

The second part of chapter 6 looks at a series of interviews with LDS Church media professionals that addressed how their religious background interacts with their media work. The evaluation of these qualitative interviews focuses on seven aspects that emerged in these conversations. Firstly, the media professionals note feeling alienated from much mainstream media production and suggest that they are motivated to work in the media as a means of bringing light to this "dark media landscape." Second, they mention their willingness to forego career and money in order to work for the LDS Church, finding their reward instead in being able to contribute to productions in line with their worldview. Third, their professional media work allows them to define Mormonism for themselves and for the audience. Fourth, they produce media for the non-Mormon world but also for Mormons, which included the use or nonuse of an emic communication style that one interviewee called "Mormonese". Fifth, me-

dia productions for non-Mormons are an opportunity to show who the Mormons “really” are by representing “authentic” Mormons. Sixth, media professionals appointed by the church do not feel their professional contributions are controlled by church leaders, but independent LDS Church media professionals value the greater freedom of productions not dependent on the financial backing of the church. Seven, the LDS Church media professionals talked about their faith, highlighting individual agency in determining the truth of *The Book of Mormon* and whether to become a member of the LDS Church, a concept that could be in conflict with the proselytizing efforts of LDS Church missionaries.

Together the audience study and the interviews show how the communication spaces of consumption and production meet in the space of representation. Both studies refer to the documentary *Meet the Mormons*, but in different ways. Notably, the media professionals were sensitive to negative perceptions of Mormonism by non-Mormons, and yet the audience study demonstrated a more positive attitude than their concerns suggest, although the different geographical locations for the two approaches may have contributed to that disjuncture. Broadly, however, the two studies show how documentary media influence opinions about and attitudes towards religion and that greater knowledge does not necessarily mean greater approval. The media can mold the image of a religious group and religion both positively and negatively. This capability is related to issues of responsibility and power relations in the ethical space of documentaries, which are considered in part III of the study.

### 12.3. *The ethical space of documentaries about religion*

The descriptive-analytical approach to the ethical space of documentaries considers the values and norms that constitute the moral reading mode. As noted at the beginning of the study, the moral reading mode is closely related to the documentary reading mode and influences moral judgements in the spaces of communication. The analysis centers on the interaction between the social actors behind, aka the filmmakers, and in front, aka the protagonists, the camera. This relation is expressed in the space of representation: some filmmakers appear on camera and interact with protagonists; some filmmakers are aurally present only but communicate with the social actors in front of the camera; some filmmakers are completely absent from the narration. The interactions between these social actors are defined by power relations that influence responsible actions, which are

based in turn on specific moral judgements. Power relations and responsibility together define the documentary's mode of moral reasoning. By including the social actors' hermeneutic horizons and the production context, the analysis can scrutinize the ethical principles on which the moral judgements of the social actors involved are based.

The analysis looks in particular at two groups of documentaries: the first comprises six films by Mormon filmmakers who are dependent on the LDS Church and the second comprises four films by independent filmmakers. The modes of moral reasoning in each group are based on different principles. The documentaries produced in the LDS Church context each highlight particular principles: *Sisterz in Zion* (Melissa Puente, US 2006) defends diversity and equality in the LDS Church. *Nobody Knows. The Untold Story of Black Mormons* (Darius A. Gray, Margeret B. Young, US 2008) addresses forgiveness and tackles the issue of how to deal with the racist history of the church. *American Mormon* (US 2005) and *American Mormon in Europe* (US 2006) claim impartiality and that people should know Mormonism before they judge it. *Meet the Mormons* (Blair Treu, US 2014) presents Mormonism as an ethical code in and of itself that generates tolerance, happiness and success. *Journey of Faith* (Peter Johnson, US 2006) champions the ethical principle of historical truth, arguing that (historical) knowledge ought to include religious belief.

The independent documentaries are similarly ethically framed. *Tabloid* (Errol Morris, US 2010) deconstructs truth claims by defending the plurality of perspectives on past events. *Sons of Perdition* (Tyler Meason and Jennilyn Merten, US 2010) speaks out for the vulnerable, advocating on behalf of the weak. *Meet the Mormons* (Lynn Alleway, series *Real Stories*, UK, 2015) is accusatory as it displays Alleway's moral mode of reasoning. The docu-serie *Polygamy, USA* (National Geographic, US 2013) explores openness toward different lifestyles.

Documentaries frame historical facts and events with filmic means; their depiction is not simply what in fact happened, nor is the evidence conveyed plain fact. The audio-visual narrative makes no explicit distinction between fiction, non-fiction, and religious narratives on a stylistic level. Instead, the moral reasoning of the documentary narrative marks the depictions as true and real by linking them with certain values. The modes of ethical reasoning define religion, which is never objectively depicted. As a result, the documentaries largely depict religion in binary categories: good versus bad; true versus ridiculous. A more differentiated middle course is often absent; neutrality is not the aim. This polarization can result in religion's exploitative representation as a hidden and uncontrollable power.



Our depictions are also entertaining, leaving audiences surprised, attracted or disgusted, for example. They are also informative, drawing their audience to accept the moral reasoning of their narrative. Observational, defensive, and rational reading modes provide the audience in different ways with information.

As the analysis shows, the ethical principles of these various documentaries engage the issue of responsibility. The filmmakers are in a privileged position as they control the production process to a great extent. They need to consider their goals and whether the depictions of religion and social actors that they pursue to those ends are justified. The protagonists' reasons for participation may not be evident. Respectful handling of the social actors' private sphere in front of the camera is the responsibility of the filmmaker, even if the loyalties of the two parties do not intersect. The filmmaker may also have a responsibility to provide the audience with an even-handed depiction of their subject, while the audience themselves must make moral judgements about the presentation of religion if they are to be responsible consumers.

#### 12.4. Reading modes of Mormonism in the spaces of communication

The semio-pragmatic analysis of the diverse sources establishes and works through various reading modes of religion. These modes allow for comparison of the aims and effects of the sources, but they also determine how religion and religious lifestyles are positioned within the communication spaces of documentary media. The discussion here now presents these reading modes with reference to the sources analyzed in parts II and III.

The *documentary mode*, introduced at the beginning of the study, is constitutive for documentary media. It has close ties to the *moral reading mode*, considered in detail in the ethical space of documentary media. The two modes reference "real" events in different ways. The documentary mode communicates by means of internal and external reading instructions stories about "real" events and "real" people. The moral mode then combines these narratives about real people and events with credibility and authenticity. The social actors have to be credibly and authentically represented if the audience is to be convinced of the veracity of the events depicted. In the case of documentaries that address religion, such credibility and authenticity cannot be achieved if religion is challenged or even presented as false. The credible presentation of religion is connoted with positive values, whereas a depiction of religion that seems implausible is connected

with negative values that deconstruct religion as false and unauthentic. Further reading modes are applied in the communication spaces of documentary media in support of such goals.

The *performative reading mode* invites audiences to perform specific actions, be it to get in contact with the LDS Church or to resign from the LDS Church. This mode often includes religious social actors in the space of representation. They perform their values, worldviews, and lifestyles in self-portraits and ask the audience to become like them. The *advocacy mode* involves convincing the audience of the film's cause and asking for ideological support, and sometimes financial support, as in the case of *Sons of Perdition*, where the end credits refer to Holding Out Help, an organization that supports people who have left polygamous groups. The LDS Church also applies the advocacy mode when its logo appears at the end of each *I'm a Mormon* video, signing off on its message. The *interventional mode* in which the filmmaker takes concrete action is rare but can be very effective. The filmmaker Lynn Alleway applies it when she asks to see miserable young missionary Josh Field in *Meet the Mormons*. She feels responsible and seems worried when she has not heard from him for some time. Her aim, the audience is told, is not simply that this documentary should be made, for she also feels a personal need to respond to Field's condition. The interventional mode is heightened when she meets one of the church officials and asks if Elder Field may be allowed to call his mother. The audience is invited to participate all three modes, performative, advocacy, and interventional.

The *emotional mode* engages the audience's emotions to draw them into a cause or strengthen the argument. While, as we have seen, reality shows are particularly liable to apply this reading mode, we readily find it in other sources too. Emotionality is often involved in the depiction of family and children. It may provoke a physical response from the viewer.

The *advertising mode* is embraced when the producers want to sell a product, in this case usually Mormonism is presented as an outstanding lifestyle. We have seen this mode in particular in the context of the *I'm a Mormon* campaign produced by the LDS Church. The campaign's aim was to shape the church's image. The social actors in front of the camera are remarkable individuals who are willing to step forward for the sake of an institution to which they are deeply loyal. For the advertising mode to be effective, the religious actors must appear sincere. The advertising mode achieves increased recognition for its product by means of film style, for although stylistic strategy risks reducing the credibility of the representation, it can be vital to the effectiveness of the advertising mode.

The *identity mode* divides the audience into in-groups and out-groups, which in this study means Mormons and non-Mormons. Media produced by the LDS Church often distinguish between these two groups by constructing boundaries between “us” and the rest of the world. This insider perspective differs from an outsider perspective on Mormonism and Mormons that may be more critical toward Mormonism but addresses both Mormons and non-Mormons. Critical representations of Mormonism do not specifically exclude Mormons from their audience, but many Mormons might feel alienated by such accounts of their church, as the audience survey and analysis of online discussions showed. The identity mode requires the audience to take sides in order to be included in the narrative.

The *informational*, *instructional* and *factual modes* convey background knowledge about Mormonism and the Mormon/non-Mormon social actors who are part of the narrative. With their references to facts and figures, these modes are effective tools for generating credibility and authenticity. The information they provide may in fact not be accurate, but it is framed in these modes to be believable. The informational mode provides background knowledge indirectly. For example, when Kody Brown’s first three weddings are discussed in the RTV show *Sister Wives*, pictures from each event are inserted, conveying information about the dresses his wives wore and the nature of their wedding receptions. In the voice-over each wife describes how her marriage was celebrated. The sequence provides information about the biographies of the three wives, about fundamental Mormonism, and about reasons for living this religious lifestyle. The instructional mode is applied during the baptism scene in *The District*, which is depicted in detail that involves even underwater shots. It provides instructions, with future candidates and missionaries in mind, about how a Mormon baptism is performed. The commentary in the voice-over explains the meaning of baptism to the virtual audience. The factual mode refers to figures and facts and is a basic ingredient of historical documentaries.

In documentaries, the *entertaining mode* is often combined with the informational and instructional modes and serves to keep the audience watching. It is related to the fictional mode in recounting a consistent and closed story that is not necessary part of the real events recorded by the camera. The entertaining mode aims to distract from concerns about the veracity of the events displayed. We hear it, for example, in the extradiegetic music that echoes the editing rhythm in the opening sequence of *The District*. We see it in *Tabloid* and *American Mormon in Europe* when graphic signs are inserted as humorous commentary on statements made by partic-

ipants. These filmic means do not add anything to the credibility and authenticity of the social actors but as diversions they bring momentary pleasure as sheer entertainment.

The entertaining mode is intensified by the *sensational mode* or *spectacular mode*. In the examples in this project, these two reading modes entertain the audience by conveying the extraordinary or dramatic in the depiction of religion and religious individuals. The reading modes of such portrayals can be at the expense of a social actor, who might be unaware of the effect or consequences of such filmic means. For example, *Sons of Perdition* uses a hidden camera: the social actors probably did not know they were being filmed and would likely not have agreed to being filmed, so secret filming is ethically problematic. The boundary between an ethically justified representation of religion and an unjustified representation of a social actor is easily crossed in this reading mode.

A similarly thin line defines the *intimate reading mode*, during which the camera shows highly personal moments. Film makers may develop a close relationship with their subjects during the production process, but they retain a responsibility that is heightened by their position of power. Using the intimate mode for entertaining purposes can exploit social actors who share their stories with the person behind the camera. This mode is applied in Lynn Alleway's *Meet the Mormons*, where the young missionary struggles with home sickness. Alleway is the only person with whom the missionary is in contact beside his mission colleagues and church officials. The filmmaker's engagement in the intimate mode seems honest and careful. Her aural presence in the narration also supports the moral and documentary modes because it increases the narrative's credibility and authenticity.

As demonstrated the reading modes of documentaries engage their audiences in discourses about Mormons, Mormonism, religion and religious lifestyles. The viewers do not simply passively consume these audio-visual depictions, for they are active participants in the process of consumption in light of their insider and/or outsider perspectives and their hermeneutic horizons.

### 12.5. Religion through the lens of documentary media

Approaching religion, religious lifestyles, and a religious community through the lens of documentary media and its spaces of communication provides access to a realm where religion takes place in manifold ways. The

media not only report, distribute, and mediate religion but also produce, shape, influence, and transform it. Some of the documentary media sources explored for this project hold up positive depictions of Mormonism, while others aim to show a harmful side to Mormon communities. Both approaches construct stories and formulate arguments whose veracity is dependent on the plausibility of their narration and the quality of the information they present. Religion provides a rich fundus of stories that characterize a religious lifestyle and are communicated, and thus shaped, by the media. Yet not only is the communication of religion determined by the media, but the media in turn is defined by the religiously colored message.

Documentary media reference the factual world of religious beliefs, religious actors, religious lifestyles, and religious communities in various modes that aim at credibility, authenticity, and the communication of values. Most of the sources present a coherent image of religion and religious ideals within their narrative. Conspicuous differences exist, however, across the sources and their understanding of religion. The value coherence of the religious lifestyle (a concept discussed in the introduction, chapter 1.1 Religious lifestyles in the media) presented by each narrative is shaped by the filmmakers' and social actors' ideas of religion. The religious worldviews of traditional institutions are expressed in such productions. Documentary narratives thus provide source material that expresses a diversity of religious lifestyles. This argument can be taken further: the manifold religious lifestyles presented in the media provide value coherence that is in competition with traditional religious values.

Value coherence in documentary media therefore forms on two levels: It plays an elementary role in the credible depiction of religion and religious lifestyles, and it is also central to the media's search for credibility and authenticity. Religion becomes a tool used to achieve a narrative worthy of being believed. The relation between, on the one hand, the interactions of the director and social actors in front of the camera and, on the other, how the narrative is shaped by the filmic means (as extensively discussed in part III) is at the core of the effective documentary narrative. On that score, documentary media can be deployed to influence the meaning and function of religion, which is a heterogeneous formation. Documentary media and their makers present various ideas of what religion and Mormonism are, and the spectators add their own understandings. Religion is thus a versatile concept for the semio-pragmatic endeavor that is this study: Within the tension between, on one hand, the spaces of production, distribution, and representation and, on the other, the audience, the approach tak-

en by this study situates religion as scientific concept with a variety of reading modes.

In the world constructed by the spaces of communication, the boundaries between religious traditions, religious institutions, religious groupings, and religious individuals are blurred. Each film focuses on a narration that it seeks to convey as sincere, no matter the aspect of religion it addresses. The depiction of religious facts or fiction, religious social realities, or religious narratives is not distinct. No filmic aesthetic convention dictates some single correct way in which to depict religion. The social actors, who may include scholars of religion, convey their own knowledge, ideas, and agendas. The audience will variously appreciate the reading modes depending on the extent of their critical engagement with the sources. Extra effort has to be invested if the reading mode of a documentary is to be challenged, and knowledge of religion can certainly help in resisting an intended effect.

This semio-pragmatic study demonstrates the complex processes of religious communication, where inside and outside perspectives cannot be clearly discerned and no perspective is necessarily unbiased. The only way to decode the diversity of reading modes of religion is to put the source's spaces of communication and the social actors involved under the microscope. People, communities, and institutions engage in the mediatization of religion. They construct religion. Here the reading modes are just as diverse as the representations of religion. The scholar of religion is one of those social actors within the space of consumption and oscillates between reading modes to establish meaning and effect.