



Christianity and the Mass Media in America: Toward a Democratic Accommodation (Rhetoric & Public Affairs)

Quentin J. Schultze

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The mass media and religious groups in America regularly argue about news bias, sex and violence on television, movie censorship, advertiser boycotts, broadcast and film content rating systems, government regulation of the media, the role of mass evangelism in a democracy, and many other issues. In the United States the major disputes between religion and the media usually have involved Christian churches or parachurch ministries, on the one hand, and the so-called secular media, on the other. Often the Christian Right locks horns with supposedly liberal Eastern media elite and Hollywood entertainment companies. When a major Protestant denomination calls for an economic boycott of Disney, the resulting news reports suggest business as usual in the tensions between faith groups and media empires.

Schultze demonstrates how religion and the media in America have borrowed each other's rhetoric. In the process, they have also helped to keep each other honest, pointing out respective foibles and pretensions. Christian media have offered the public as well as religious tribes some of the best media criticism—better than most of the media criticism produced by mainstream media themselves. Meanwhile, mainstream media have rightly taken particular churches to task for misdeeds as well as offered some surprisingly good depictions of religious life.

The tension between Christian groups and the media in America ultimately is a good thing that can serve the interest of democratic life. As Alexis de Tocqueville discovered in the 1830s, American Christianity can foster the “habits of the heart” that ward off the antisocial acids of radical individualism. And, as John Dewey argued a century later, the media offer some of our best hopes for maintaining a public life in the face of the religious tribalism that can erode democracy from within. Mainstream media and Christianity will always be at odds in a democracy. That is exactly the way it should be for the good of each one.

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