Dear jury members, dear members of the International Society for Media, Religion and Culture, dear colleagues,

The message of Johanna Sumiala, chair of the jury, came to me as a huge surprise. I am happy and feel honored. The award carries the name of Stewart Hoover. It is a privilege to have worked with him since early 2000s, way before the founding of the ISMRC. The full name is Stewart Hoover Mentoring award, I can certainly see him as having mentored me, and many other young scholars at the time, and still doing so.

It is perhaps difficult to imagine for you here, as members of this thriving learned society, that there was a time in which the study of religion and the study of media were different fields and worlds apart. Stewart Hoover, Peter Horsfield, David Morgan and Jolyon Mitchell were doing pioneering work, mainly regarding the Western world, but increasingly aware of the need to think about the religion-media-culture nexus against a global horizon. Hence they organized summer schools in places as Basel (Switzerland), Accra (Ghana), Manila (Philippines), Sao Paulo (Brazil) and Hyderabad (India).

With vision and energy, and a remarkable ability to access to funding, they were able to make people join forces. Stewart cum suis displayed a great ability to create synergies, productive research environments dedicated to working out ideas. No rat race here!

For me relevant, and characteristic for Stewart’s foundational work were two lines:

1. The study of how religious institutions negotiate and employ modern mass media – such as TV, radio, film -, asking how to analyze the adoption of mass media by religious actors from a broader sociological angle. Here is located the debate about the potential and limits of the concepts of “mediatization” and “mediation.”
2. The study of how religious institutions are represented and how religious images and ideas are invoked in the media. This is an important field to track religious roots of and afterlives of religious material and visual forms in secularized societies. Here is located the debate about the concepts of “secularization” and “political theology.”

The rise of digital media and the digitalization of all domains of life made scholars stress the urgency to look at religion and media together. Grasping the political implications of employing social media in imagining worlds and communities, with all the perceived benefits for communication and ills of harassing, hate speech and profiling of alternative facts, required enhanced attention.

Your society is well equipped to address these complex issues based on longstanding work and a cool, non-celebratory attitude to either religion or media. This is much needed!

The current theme "Metaphor & Misinformation: Religion in Media-Driven Worlds," which examines the work of metaphors in communication within and about religion as well as the afterlives of religious metaphors in secular communications – advertisement, climate crisis -is very well taken. Metaphor so exciting because by definition it mediates through tangible images something difficult to grasp. Perhaps metaphor is the basic form of the religious? The choice of this theme affirms the vision of your society to address burning issues in our time, which expertise in the study of religion and media can help to grasp and unpack from a historical-comparative angle.

The Center for religious Studies (CERES) at the Ruhr Universität Bochum is a felicitous choice as a venue for your biannual gathering. With colleagues at CERES I have longstanding contacts and share basic assumptions about how – and how not – to approach religion. I find it very nice to receive this award here in Bochum, a city one may start to really like at second site.

Looking at my own work, I would say that I have addressed media on various levels, from a direct study of media such as film and television to broader perspectives on mediation as a mode of (religious) world-making. So my work on religion and media, starting from concrete ways in which religious groups in Ghana adopted modern mass media and the ways in which popular media as video contributed to the pentecostalization of the Ghanaian public sphere, is the base for my approach to religion. My interest in the religion-media nexus has pushed me to develop a material understanding of religion, and I cannot think materiality without media and mediation. This is to say that media-mediation-mediatization have always been at the core of my work, and that I am much interested to engage in further exchanges with you. I am extremely happy that you recognize my scholarship in that respect.

Many thanks once again for having me, and my family here this afternoon, and all good wishes for your future work in these challenging and precarious time.

Birgit Meyer

Bochum, 4 August 2023