

# introduction

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**F**aith, belief and religion as a theme for a conference of the Society of Phenomenology and Media might seem to suggest the possibility that a mass medium—say television—can suspend the natural world to enable us to be in

faith, to experience the lived reality of belief. When I offered to convene a conference at Brigham Young University, a private institution owned by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), a theme based on faith and belief seemed to suggest itself and even to set limitations; and yet I wished not to discourage phenomenologists of other faiths, or those in disbelief, from presenting papers. The goal was to examine the “something” of our consciousness, the lived experience of “faith,” “belief,” “religion” and their meaning.

Keynoter John Durham Peters evoked a compass for our discussion in his address inspired by Paul of Tarsus: “So Many Kinds of Voices in the World: The Voice and Modern Media,” in which he described voice as “the center par excellence for the phenomenological study of the media.” The voice has always been a medium, and singing, the alphabetic, and writing are some age-old ways to protect it against loss and disappearance. John reminded us that in Deuteronomy: chapters 4 and 5, God appears as voice and as writing, but not as a visible sight. The oral word is central to both worship and study in monotheistic religion. The mediated voice raises questions about beauty, identity, power, art and religion. Animals and machines have voices; so may the stars. What does it mean that voices have become so abundant and so strange in our world today?

Chris Nagel tells us in “Media Critique and Perceptual Faith” that critical analyses of media messages, especially those presented as television news, typically focus on message content. Such criticism has failed to make a difference because it ignores the most basic and crucial feature of media messages: the perceptual experience. Drawing on Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, particularly the latter’s notion of perceptual faith, he presents a method of perceptual critique of media messages as well as possible limitations. Paul Majkut’s “Eidetic Elvis” takes a satirical view of the religious experience evidenced by the cult that has formed around Elvis Presley. The faithful within the Elvis cult “share many of the beliefs, enthusiasms and behaviors associated with traditional religious experience,” he notes, which for him results in a double-deception. I argue more conventionally in “The Consolation of the Book of Mormon: a

Hermeneutical Perspective.” I propose that scripture, produced in the form of mass media, including the Bible and the Book of Mormon, are conjunctions of the historical-Aristotelian mythos, which is speech, fable and plots taken together—and mimesis, which seeks to reveal both the logical structure of events and also their meanings. The meaning of the will of God is not a mental idea, but “an ideal object that can be identified and reidentified, by different individuals in different periods, as being one and the same object” (Ricoeur HS 84). Scripture is *poiesis*, an imitation of human action that depicts plot in history: a union of contingency and consecution, of chronology and configuration, of sequence and consequence. Scriptural narrative opens today’s reality toward possible values of the past. Kierkegaard was the first to suggest the task of contemporaneity as that of bringing together two non-concurrent moments, “and yet so totally mediate them that the latter is experienced and taken seriously as presents (and not something in a distant past).” For Kierkegaard, the thinker without paradox is like a lover without passion. . . and the ultimate paradox of thought is to want to discover something that thought itself cannot think. Third Nephi in the Book of Mormon contributes to the paradox of the cross, which forces the intellect to choose between its own autonomy and sovereignty and that of God. In one’s yielding to God, a new epistemic state emerges—that of faith that is “by virtue of the absurd.”

Dennis E. Skocz asks the question, in “Evangelism and the Media,” Is modern mass communication the perfect instrument for carrying out the New Testament injunction to carry the gospel to the world? At first it would seem so; television and radio, in particular, appear to be ideal for reaching millions of potential converts around the world with a powerfully conveyed message able to induce faint commitments among viewers and listeners. However, an articulation of the onto-epistemological premises of radio and television as information theory reveal that the dialogic and holistic event of evangelization and conversation is reduced to an alienated and unidimensional process that falls short of the purposes of evangelization and risks distorting the very meaning of initiation into the Christian faith.

“Incredulity” is Dave Koukal’s treatise on the resistance of belief. Whereas credulity is a readiness to believe even in the absence of evidence (“Belief is knowledge of the unseen!”),

incredulity—more fundamental than skepticism—is the visceral resistance to certain appearances, events or utterances. It is the polar opposite of embracing a creed. Incredulity occurs when a phenomenon ruptures experience in such a way that a consciousness intuitively resists the veracity of this phenomenon—as was the case of the 9-11 disaster. Incredulity resists belief even in the presence of evidence (“I can’t believe my eyes!”). Charles Harvey argues the case for media’s expression of belief in “Phenomenology, Film and Religious Belief: *Babette’s Feast* as an Exemplary Instance.” He claims films to be the primary producers of the meanings via which consciousness constitutes the world. He invokes the possibility of *epoche*; watching a film and studying some of its effects upon us can be understood in terms of reduction and constitution. *Babette’s Feast*, for example, shows how a single film might revitalize and perhaps even reorient our senses of ‘sacrament,’ ‘transubstantiation’ and ‘resurrection,’ demonstrating the reality-generating potency and the constitutive power of film in the contemporary world. Jonathan Weidenbaum also found phenomenological support for film as a conveyor of distinctions between existentialist, faith-centered spirituality of the faiths of Abraham, and the more contemplative and mystical kind. In “I Call You Jesus, You Call Me Sonny; Watching *Pi* and The Apostle with Soren Kierkegaard and Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav,” the thought of Soren Kierkegaard and Hasidic Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav stand as perfect examples of this tendency within the contexts of Christianity and Judaism respectively. While the distinctions between the two styles of spirituality are often too complex to convey to students of world religions, Jon has found cinema to be of great assistance in their illustration. He illustrates how two of his favorite films have accomplished that. The educator’s perspective is also taken by Matti Itkonen, who believes that film can be understood through lived-experience, not critical judgments in “Experience and Existence: Something Essential in Philosophical Education in Film Art.” The film, the living imagery, traces out its legend before the eyes of the viewer seated there in the darkened space and in his consciousness becomes a lived spectacle, an interiorised impress of experience. It takes up its abode in him and he falls in step with its movement, merging with the stream of its narrative. In this there evolves an aesthetic-existential situation—of

one, many; of one, a qualitative multiplicity is born, and with it the experienced essence of the unique, the inimitable. On this same, the critic pronounces judgment—as often as not his verdict—on this spectacle which he—and another—has beheld; that individual, original experience is thus now couched in words, petrified on paper. Something of the essence must indeed be said by way of inculcating a more philosophical appreciation of film. Or does even this carry in it a seed of that same totalization, a burgeoning aspiration to erase whatever is unique? He who reads will know, will feel it.

Contrarily, in “Media: Spirituality and the Abyss,” Dana Ulveland begins with Gabriel Marcel’s insights on ontological need and the necessity of wonder and participation in an attempt to recollect the spiritual attitude. He

then cites Merleau-Ponty in relation to his claim that one’s engagement with media encourages the loss of spirituality, then examines, phenomenologically, how one’s engagement with media displaces wonder and mystery, creating a spiritual abyss. Thus, this becomes an examination of the empty spaces that arise when engaged with particular mediums.

Owen Kelly also finds the term “virtual world” misleading in “Ghost Towns and Virtual Worlds.” When the students at Arcada were asked to look at various online “virtual worlds” they responded by saying that they seemed empty in some way. They resembled stage sets more than places. Important clues as to why this should be so can be found in the work of Heidegger, in which he argues that *Dasein* experiences the world as ‘equipment’ that reveals itself as a kind of readiness-to-hand. Arguably, we do not perceive the world as a series of shapes and spaces but as a set of ready-to-hand tools amid a present-to-hand background. Kelly and his students redefine a more useful category: “virtual environment” that may include “virtual rooms,” “virtual landscapes” and “virtual worlds.” Using arguments drawn from (among others) the work of Heidegger and Michael Heim, they argue that a virtual world must, by definition, include a history and a culture which appears as though made by its inhabitants.

We asked in the beginning: Is the noematic, especially the spiritual, expressible in media forms? Voices, perception, simulation in its various modalities, potentially extend our gaze as we take in what it means to be human. As philosophers we all reflect on life as a whole from time

to time. Our biographical pasts are the horizon of all that comes next. Quotidian life may seem meaningless when taken as random activities and projects. Belief in something—even a reincarnated Elvis—might shape a life from chaos. Media portrayals of the ordinary as configurations of meaning potentially organize events. Texts—in whatever media form—meant to configure life as spiritual have caused some among us to write our autobiographies as untold possibilities. For others spiritual conversion, brought on in part by the gaze extended through media, results in a revision of our pasts to become a part of a whole world we had not imagined.

Or, if our fundamental faith that there is a world comes into question, if philosophy is the perceptual faith questioning itself about itself, as Merleau-Ponty has said, perhaps the mediated interrogation adds to our doubt-and our incredulity. If our lives are continuous curiosity about who we are and what time it is—a quest for our situation in the simultaneity of the world—media that enlarge our perspective might at least suggest the meaning of our questions.

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