

Wired Religion: Spiritualism and Telegraphic Globalization in the Nineteenth Century

Author(s): Jeremy Stolow, McMaster University

If you were asked to identify some key topics under the heading, "Globalization and Autonomy," it is likely that both religion and technology would make an appearance on your list. In fact, it would be difficult to ignore either of these topics when accounting for the socio-economic, material, and cultural transformations associated with the idea of globalization, or their various challenges to individual and collective forms of autonomy. Modern technologies of communication and transportation have played an indispensable role in facilitating new forms of contact and exchange within and among widely dispersed populations, while advanced technologies of industrial mega-projects and genetic engineering have presented unprecedented opportunities and dangers for the environment and its life forms (including humans), on a planetary scale. Religion also seems to play a central role in the story of globalization, as evident from the dramatic public visibility and influence of various religious movements, institutions, communities, and cultural practices within national and international political processes and events, from the reform of civil law to the fuelling of military conflicts, as well as the spread of religious ideas into new forms of entertainment, tourism, and other elements of popular culture.

What is less likely, perhaps, is that you would compose a list of key topics for globalization and autonomy in which religion and technology are directly juxtaposed and inter-related. After all, technology refers to a realm of objects and activities that are "supposed to work," and the failure of any given technology to do so is usually attributed to problems of misapplication or errors of design. Religion, on the other hand, is often defined as precisely that which is *not* supposed to work, at least in the sense that religious actions and perceptions — such as prayers, miracles, sacred commandments, or occult practices — are assumed not to produce any objectively measurable effects, other than to solidify the social importance of "faith" among credulous or otherwise deficient populations. There is in fact a tenacious and widespread assumption both within and outside the academic community that, as societies modernize, religion is supposed to recede into the background of social life, not least because religion is presumed to be incompatible with the habits and ways of seeing the world that accompany technological modernization.

In my research, I have tried to challenge this assumption, and to offer some fresh insight into the ways religion and technology shape, and reshape, our present global circumstance. Rather than supposing that religion and technology are merely coincidentally related to one another (such as by repeating the tiresome observation that nowadays, so many different religious groups make regular use of advanced technologies, such as mobile phones or video recorders), I propose that their relationship is more intimate, more fundamental, and therefore furnishes some deeper insights into the processes and consequences of globalization. My research is informed by a growing academic interest in the ways religions exist as more than simply sacred texts or communities of believers. Recent studies have emphasized that religious practice and religious imagination depend upon the existence of a wide range of techniques, tools, material artefacts, and systems of co-ordinated action, arguing that it is only in and through such technological engagements that religious adherents are

able to proclaim their faith, mark their affiliation, receive spiritual gifts, or participate in any of the countless local idioms for making the sacred present to mind and body. Building on this work, I sought to contribute to the larger goals of the *Globalization and Autonomy* research project by undertaking a historical study that encompassed issues of religion and technology and their global ramifications. My specific focus was the rise of Spiritualism, a major transnational religious movement, and its relationship to the invention and spread of the telegraph, a key communications technology of the nineteenth century. This case study was chosen, not only because it is a significant antecedent to contemporary globalizing trends, but also because it shows how, as new technologies are developed and distributed around the world, they are received, utilized, and made meaningful within various cultural frameworks, including religious frameworks.

From its invention in the 1840s and its eventual spread into virtually every region of the world by the late nineteenth century, the telegraph constituted what we might be tempted to describe as the world's first truly globalizing telecommunications technology. Through telegraphy's capacity for the near-instantaneous relay of messages across vast distances, social relations of time and space were radically altered, affecting everything from the buying and selling of goods to international diplomacy, and from news reportage to correspondence between lovers. In these respects, the telegraph represented a significant harbinger of our contemporary global communications environment, with its proliferating networks of computers and satellites, and the virtual flows of digital information. The very notion of "virtual reality" originates with the telegraph, in so far as it provided both a practical and a conceptual model for the extension, duplication and distribution of human intelligence in an ethereal and invisible world of electrical currents and flows. Thanks to the invention and spread of this technology, diverse commentators were also encouraged to think about how the idea of electrical flow related to the mysteries of human intercourse and the natural order, and above all, the possibility of communication with "a world beyond" the spatially and temporally localized situations of everyday life experience. Telegraphic communication was thus often described through the religious language of miracles and magic, and the technology shared important affinities with religious ideas about progress, transcendence, vitality, social and ecological harmony, and death and the afterlife.

Nowhere were these "religious" dimensions of the telegraph more dramatically evident than in the case of Spiritualism. Spiritualism is the name for a family of religious and parascientific movements centred around the practice of communication with the dead, and with the various benefits accrued from such activities (including personal solace, health, prestige, and even forms of political authority). Spiritualism flourished during the latter half of the nineteenth century, drawing in millions of adherents from every region of the world, from America to England, France, Brazil, Russia, the Philippines, India and Australia, among other places. However, unlike many other popular religions of the nineteenth century, Spiritualism exhibited a striking proclivity for new organizational forms and techniques, and Spiritualists were distinguished for their uniquely intense engagement with advanced technologies such as the telegraph. Spiritualists in fact developed a rich vocabulary for making sense of the telegraph, as well as a repertoire of ritual activities designed specifically to accommodate the telegraph's impact on both public and private life. This included making use of telegraphy to sustain contact among Spiritualist organizations in different parts of the world (from the United States to England, France, and Brazil, among other places), exchanging news and ideas, but also the incorporation of telegraphic devices (such as magnetized cables, pressure gauges or other instruments) into practices of communication with the dead. Spiritualists even argued that the very idea of the telegraph was an inspiration emanating from that "other world": a gift presented to humankind in order to foster social harmony and to strengthen the lines of contact with the dearly departed. As Spiritualist mediums (the "technicians" who controlled access to the spirit world) relinquished control of their own bodies in order to be "possessed" by visitors from the spirit world,

new questions emerged about how such communication was possible, and what challenges it posed for autonomous individuals, who are supposed to remain in control of their bodies and their conscious intentions.

It is in fact an enormous task to document the ways Spiritualists engaged with telegraphic technologies, and the ways these engagements were shaped by regional differences, as well as differences of age, gender, level of education, and social class. My work for the *Globalization and Autonomy* project is only the first step of a longer term effort to study this phenomenon. But why should anyone want to devote their time to such a study? Indeed, from our vantage point in the early twenty-first century, it might sound like little more than an amusing story about superstitious people who did not understand how modern technologies "really worked." It might also elicit a sense of self-satisfaction that we in the present have somehow transcended such "primitive" ideas and forms of conduct. I am not so sure. Rather, I think that the history of the relationship between Spiritualism and the telegraph offers a rather startling and timely perspective on the issue of modern technologies and their place within our rapidly globalizing social order. For one thing, the readiness with which Spiritualists appropriated the telegraph — as a metaphor, as a telecommunications infrastructure, and as the raw material for establishing new forms of otherworldly contact — poses a serious challenge to assumptions about the incompatibility of religion and technology as two discrete dimensions of our social world. But even more relevant to the general aims of the *Globalization and Autonomy* project, Spiritualist engagements with telegraphy invite us to reflect upon the cultivation and preservation of individual autonomy, and even the question of whether autonomy is such a desirable thing, in a world where rapid technological change is redefining the terms of everyday life.