Some authorities on the subject use media in the singular; others treat the word as plural. There is the media, as in “the enemy of the American people,” and there are media of diverse sorts, noticed and unnoticed, that co-organize our lives of meaning-making. The study of media has this two-faced quality in common with the study of religion. Each field entertains the possibility that it bears a theory of everything, for perhaps everything is in some sense religion or everything is in some sense media.

I began my fits-and-starts academic career in religious studies and, years later, found myself teaching in a department of media studies. While I have had much to learn about my new field’s idiom and wisdom, its style has been on the whole familiar. Religious studies can be about the beliefs and practices of various world religions, while media studies can be about journalists, broadcasters, and audiences. But both waver between these specific and maximalist interpretations of their domains. Both hold Oedipal anxieties about their mystic founding fathers—say, Mircea Eliade and Marshall McLuhan, among others—who, from studying a set of institutional particulars, sought to access transcendental knowledge. Despite these figures’ more professionalized and empirical successors, in neither field have transcendental aspirations fully evaporated.

Thus it was not surprising, but thoroughly satisfying, to discover in my newfound field such books as John Durham Peters’s *The Marvelous Clouds*. It outlines a theory of “elemental media” that extends the metaphor of “cloud” employed by a company such as Google to include as media actual, meteorological clouds. (The book is also religion-rich.) *The Marvelous Clouds* is of a kind with a work like Kathryn Lofton’s (media-rich) *Consuming Religion*, which probes such elemental religions as office-furniture design, the social media performance-labor of the Kardashians, and the sect-like personas of corporate self-presentation. Well before those books, scholars such as Jeremy Stolow and Stewart Hoover laid groundwork for talking about religion as media and media as religion. Perhaps it was inevitable that the fields’ totalizing imperatives would encompass each other.

My particular line of work has had me puzzling about the ownership of the media—specifically, the companies that run big internet platforms. Scratch around the ownership of media organizations for a while, I’ve found, and you start to notice qualities of ownership that resemble media. Owning involves transmitting messages and meanings. Who owns what, and what that ownership means, is not so tidy as the words colloquially imply—which is why lawyers call it “a bundle of rights.” Owning a home comes with different rights than owning a cat, much less holding a convertible note from investing in a startup or tokens of a cryptocurrency. Ownership involves fixed codes of law but it is also a semiotic terrain, a medium both pliable and constrained.

Religious traditions bear reminders that the dynamic nature of ownership is no digital-age novelty. One of many possible points of departure is a doctrine that appears in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the “universal destination of goods.” According to the Catechism, “God entrusted the earth and its resources to the common stewardship of mankind,” yet “the appropriation of property is legitimate for guaranteeing the freedom and dignity of persons”; further, “The ownership of any property makes its holder a steward of Providence.” Everything is common; the world after the Fall requires property; owners must act as if their property is ultimately the property of everyone. This doctrine
—which likewise appears in Gratian's twelfth-century Decretum, a founding document of Catholic canon law—presents legitimate ownership as a challenge of meaning-making. Virtuous owners must signal that they manage their property with an eye toward its true, underlying, common nature.

Various religious practices have helped with transmitting these sorts of signals. They meanwhile generate economic innovations by layering fresh meanings on ownership relations.

The tithe, for instance, derives from references in the Hebrew Bible to an expectation of turning over a tenth of a person's portion to religious purposes—typically interpreted in Jewish and Christian contexts as a levy on income. The parallel expectation in Islam, zakat, is a claim on a percentage of total wealth for almsgiving; notably, the word itself means “purification” in Arabic, implying that through giving this part of one's wealth, the remainder is purified and legitimized.

In premodern forms, such mechanisms undergirded corporate entities. The Islamic charitable foundation, or waqf, has long enabled donors to grant property in perpetuity to the provision of public goods, such as mosques, schools, and social services—protected from private appropriation by the understanding that such property has become divine property. Meanwhile, the medieval European guilds emerged as explicitly religious institutions, often chartered by a local bishop, as a kind of monastery for the urban economy. From these contexts, to the first modern insurance systems under the guise of fraternal societies, to early parish-based credit unions, rituals and shared beliefs have enabled new forms of joint ownership to arise.

Within the corporate-capitalist order, some of the most creative, subversive forms of media ownership have emerged among religious communities. The cooperative business tradition, for instance, owes some of its most important achievements to religious ingredients, such as in the Desjardins cooperative banking system in Quebec, the Mondragon worker cooperatives in Basque Country, and the Israeli kibbutz movement. Religious institutions, particularly Catholic women's orders, have been instrumental in inventing the use shareholder activism as a technique for social change.

The contemporary media firms that I study and teach about inscribe in their media of ownership a spirit that is allegedly secular, rational, and value-neutral. No religion to see here! Their platforms purport to be open and empty until their users fill them—free of politics, dogma, or any barrier to immediacy. Meanwhile, tech CEOs rush to the Nevada desert to carry out Burning Man, their ritual of propertylessness that purifies their considerable stockholdings. In phone-free retreats at Esalen, they cultivate sufficient transcendence so as to devise apps for the next world order.

Here, again, the particular and the transcendent circle around each other. Just when you thought you had your phone in a box, its logic fills your brainstorm. Just when religion seemed defined and dispensed with, a new kind of salvation beckons. The more religiosity and mediation disappear from view, the more they diffuse into everything.