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Review

Heidi A. Campbell,
When Religion Meets New Media
(New York: Routledge, 2010).

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Heidi Campbell's *When Religion Meets New Media* is the fourth volume in the Media, Religion and Culture series published by Routledge. It builds on Campbell's previous exploration of religious community in online environments, broadening that engagement by developing a religious-social shaping approach that examines how communities of faith

negotiate the adoption and adaptation of new digital technologies. In particular, she focuses on newer digital and mobile technologies, such as the Internet and mobile phones, as the site of her engagement.

Campbell challenges the assumption that religion is inherently hostile towards new technologies, and uses that notion to generate a number of questions that frame her research. Firstly, what happens when religious users encounter technology? Secondly, are religious communities inherently hostile or suspicious towards new technologies? And lastly, is the natural response of communities of faith to reject new forms of media? Campbell argues, rightly in my opinion, that the answers to these questions must involve the complex negotiation that takes place within religious communities, by individuals and authorities, as they encounter and appropriate new technologies and media. Some religious groups do maintain an overly critical stance towards technology, but most groups, she contend, have a much more complex relationships with it.

In order to explore these complex relationships, and to highlight the various processes of negotiation and narration that take place in those contexts, Campbell examines examples drawn from Jewish, Muslim, and Christian communities. These communities, the ‘People of the Book’, having identities and practices derived from their historical relationships with particular religious texts, and as such, continually negotiate issues surrounding those media. This connects to the heart of the book, which asserts that these religious communities are not inherently anti-technology, but in the face of challenges and opportunities that new forms of media offer, there are a number of social and faith-based factors that shape their responses.

The early chapters of the book see Campbell laying out the landscape that the work is situated in, as well as her methodological approach. Here she articulates the social and faith-based factors that she thinks guide media negotiation: (1) issues of interpretation of core beliefs and practices define community identity; (2) the significance of past interaction with sacred texts; and (3) the nature of religious authority within those communities. These get picked up explicitly in the four-fold analytical framework she develops to engage with the case studies. She clearly identifies that she is interested in religion within the context of its expression, practice

and lived experience within particular religious communities, as opposed to an examination of religion as broad cultural system. New media is also defined, being seen as two-fold: media that has not been engaged with by a community previously; and newer forms of digital, networked technologies. Both aspects are picked up in the book, but the latter is more prevalent.

Examining different approaches to the study of religion and, Campbell proposes that the approach that sees media as a social institution is a helpful starting point for connecting to the expression, practice and lived experience within the particular religious communities. This involves examining both the values that went into producing media and the way in which people receive that media's form and content. This leads into her appropriation of a 'social-shaping' approach to technology common in sociology of technology and in science and technology studies, and which offers a basis for studying how religious communities negotiate their uses of technology and media for their own purposes. Campbell augments this approach, arguing that the nuances found within religious communities, such as historical life practices, interpretative traditions, and contemporary outworking of values, all have significant parts to play in understanding religious engagement with new media. She names this a 'religious-social shaping' approach comprising four components: (1) history and tradition; (2) core-beliefs and practices; (3) negotiation processes; and (4) communal framing and discourse.

Campbell explores each of the components of her approach in the middle sections of the book, through examples of encounter and appropriation of new media within particular religious traditions. In looking at history and tradition, she focuses upon examples drawn from the Orthodox Jewish community that demonstrate how past negotiations with media shape things like the such as the use of technology on Shabbat, the adaptation of technology to fit with the Halacha, and the creation of online texts such as instructions for a Seder meal. Similarly, in examining core beliefs and practices Campbell draws upon examples from Islamic communities that demonstrate how tradition is recontextualized in new socio-historical-cultural situations, such as how new media is used to promote messages of how to live in a world of new media guided by particular religious and social values. In investigating the negotiation and discourse components she broadens the scope to look at how examples from all three traditions

demonstrate how traditions and core values guide the process of adopting and adapting technologies and then defending those choices. The entire ‘religious-social shaping’ approach is then further reinforced by a specific case study on the use of cell phones in a Jewish context.

Overall, Campbell’s approach to engagement between religion and new media is to be commended. She offers a framework for engaging with complicated and contested situations in religious communities’ negotiation and appropriation of new technologies and media. She rightly frames that within a discussion that demands that both historical and contemporary factors need to be accounted for. Her use of examples from a range of traditions and geographic locations moves the work towards a global context, and articulates the diversity within religious traditions that is critical for constructive engagement. The focus upon ‘people of the book’ means that readers looking for engagement with religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism will find less direct connections here. It would also be interesting see to a demonstration of the methodology in relation to religious and cultural groups that are not oriented around particular written texts. In spite of those minor concerns though, the book is a very useful contribution to the field of religion and media and would serve well as a resource in both undergraduate and graduate courses.