Book Review


With this work, Campbell puts forward a novel approach for the systematic investigation of religious responses to new media technologies (p. 17). The work focuses on the ways in which the Abrahamic traditions, with their various confessional and faith communities, engage with new technologies, according to their individual and unique interpretations and applications of their faith. She demonstrates the importance of viewing religious communities as ‘active participants negotiating and shaping their technologies in light of their values and desired outcomes’ (p. 17). Her underlying argument is that any attempts at making sense of the approaches of faith communities to new media must seek to grasp how religious groups ‘define and relate to religious community, religious authority, and textual media’, three areas that serve to guide our understanding of different religious communities’ various types of relations to media ‘in general’ and, as she suggests, that provide ‘indicators of how they will approach new forms of media’ (p. 15).

In Chapter 2, Campbell presents the four core areas of her ‘religious-social shaping of technology’ approach for the study of religious responses to new media technologies: first, the general history of the religious beliefs of a given tradition (I); second, the core beliefs and patterns of social values lived out in contemporary contexts (II); third, the negotiation process (III); and, finally, the communal framing and discourse on new media (IV). In the following five chapters, she explores each of these four core areas individually (pp. 60-62).

Chapter 3 analyses the history and tradition (I) of Orthodox Judaism in Israel and various communities’ individual and collective engagement with technology and shows how the nature of engagement and practice with regards to technology is shaped by a community’s understanding and application of the Torah. Chapter 4 turns to the Islamic tradition (e.g. Amr Khaled’s Life Makers TV series, the Gülen movement’s Samanyolu TV and two TV public service campaigns from the Emirates) and examines how a community’s lived core social and religious values (II) can assist the contextualization of the group’s response to new media; hence, a number of core community values and priorities ‘guides patterns of media use’ (p. 90). Next, Chapter 5 investigates the negotiating process (III) (pp. 112-14), to demonstrate how communities can either (a) accept new media (e.g. Internet usage of New Zealand Evangelists, such as Tim Bulkeley and the Evangelical Carey Baptist College), (b) reject (or resist) new media (e.g. Ultra-Orthodox Judaism’s ‘koshering’ of the computer), or (c) reconfigure (even innovate) new media (e.g. the Anglican Cathedral on Second Life and religious software designed specifically for religious purposes). Campbell argues that religious communities engage in complex processes of negotiation (p. 112) that greatly depend on the basis of particular (behavioral) rules and the community’s authority structures (communal or divine right leadership) (p. 15).
Chapter 6 presents the communal framing and discourse (IV) of new media appropriation (potentials and impact) that subsequently occur within the community that decides what constitutes an acceptable use of new technology (e.g. its usage for ‘e-vangelism’) and elaborates a ‘framing’ process to define the official validating and prescriptive discourse (e.g. the Church of England, the Catholic Church or the United Methodist Church) (p. 156). Finally, Chapter 7 applies all of the aforementioned individually studied four core areas to the ‘koshering’ or ‘culturing’ (p. 176) of the cell phone, that is, its usage limitation by community authorities and religious leaders who control the ‘process of value-and-need negotiation’ (p. 163).

In the last chapter, Campbell identifies four patterns of appropriation at the heart of a religious community’s decision-making in response to new media technologies and their usage. New media can be used (1) for the purposes of ‘proselytizing and public proclamation of core beliefs’, (2) in order to ‘facilitate global networking and promotions within religious communities in ways that solidify their membership, identity, and beliefs’, (3) to serve as ‘a tool for community agenda setting and publicizing beliefs’, and, in more innovative manners, (4) to ‘digitize or technologize religious rituals or reminders allowing believers to more easily integrate religious expectations into their daily lives in an information-based society’ (pp. 185-86).

In short, for all those interested in the study of the intersection of new media and religion, Campbell provides an interesting ‘religious-social shaping of technology’ framework for research, the heuristic values of which are aptly illustrated with the case studies she proposes from the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic faith communities’ responses to new media technologies. She does an excellent job at demonstrating the importance of the negotiation process that each religious community undergoes when encountering new media technologies, each being uniquely ‘constrained by a number of social and faith-based factors which inform and guide their responses to the possibilities and challenges offered by new forms of media’ (p. 6). Campbell’s When Religion Meets New Media is thus a must for all those interested in this new, expanding, and quite exciting field of research.

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