Media, Religion and Culture: An Introduction

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The book of 176 pages comprises 16 chapters by different contributors. The structure of this book is innovative, since it is divided into three parts, and each of these has three sections. Each of these sections has an introductory chapter by Jeffrey H. Mahan, followed by two reflections written by the contributors. Among these contributors, there are directors, professors, assistant professors and doctoral students from the fields of religion, theology, media, journalism, information technology, communication, and Islamic Studies.

The tripartite division allows for three different main themes and two sub-topics for each section. The three parts are: "Religious identity in

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1 The information is acquired from the webpage of Iliff School of Theology, Denver, http://www.iliff.edu/learn/your-faculty/jeffrey-h-mahan/ (accessed 16 August, 2016).

media culture" (pp. 1-50), "Religion in the midst of change" (pp. 51-102) and "Ethics and esthetics" (pp. 103-146).

These three parts offer a diverse range of articles addressing the themes of religion, media, and culture. The complex structure of the book also allows for consideration of various subjects relevant to the field.

The first part consists of three sections:

a. "Relating media, religion, and culture" (pp. 3-20)

b. "Making and articulating religious identity" (pp. 21-35)

c. "Believing and practicing in a digital world" (pp. 36-50)

This chapter aims to present religion, media, and culture as inter-related entities rather than individual concepts. Kathryn Lofton in "Consuming Oprah's products, Consuming Oprah's spirit" (pp. 17-18), presents how consumption of certain goods centers around buyers' belief. Famous media celebrities develop the particular religious attitude of a customer. The chapter illustrates the connection of religion with media in a particular culture. "Telegraphing as spirit" by Jeremy Stolow (pp. 19-20) explains the concept of spirituality in current media and discusses the lives of believers in American society. The present individualization of religion in the form of secularization explains how religion is practiced or not practiced in personal identification. Peter Wald's "When Gods fall (of their bike)" (pp. 32-33) explains the importance of celebrities in the life of people and how their failure in their career or personal life can affect the perception of these celebrities in the public eye. In "Digital storytelling and narratives of identity: Abel's story" (pp. 34-35), Lynn Schofield Clark indicates the value

of digital storytelling and narratives of identity. The third section focuses on the aspect of the passive and active use of media for religious activities. Deborah Whitehead in "Mom blogs and the religion of everyday life" (pp. 47-48) and Grace Chiou in "Online puja and puja online: believing and practicing in a digital world" (pp. 49-50) reflect on religious blogs composed by mothers and features of online puja.[2]

The second part comprises the following three sections:

a. "Old and new media" (pp. 53-68)

b. "Stability and change" (pp. 69-85)

c. "Organized religion in the age of digital media" (pp. 86-102)

The existence and fatality of religion at the individual and the institutional levels is treated in all three sections by examining the role of the media. The first section studies the change in the patterns of media by comparing traditional and latest media sources. Rachel Wagner in "Gaming the end times" (pp. 65-66) and Michael Hemenway in "Codex to Kindle" (pp. 67-68) explain the presence of religion and religious texts in video games and Kindle e-books. The next section looks into the change in a religious biosphere by examining the role of media. It also describes the consumers' resistance and acceptance of the authority of new media. In "Altmuslim: media spaces for a modern Muslim voice" (pp. 82-83), Nabil Echchaibi reflects on the blog altmuslim.com that deals with critical perspectives on

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2   Puja is the act of Hindu believers to show reverence to a god, a spirit, or another aspect of the divine through invocations, prayers, songs, and rituals.

Muslims' lives, politics and culture. The author demonstrates how religious discussion is used to explore religion in media. "Religious tracts in the eighteenth century" (pp. 84-85) by David Morgan reflects upon the use of media in Christianity in the eighteenth century. The last section presents the location and relocation of religion in the digital age in two chapters. Sarah M. Pike's "Wicca and religious freedom networking in the digital age" (pp. 99-100) and Benjamin Thevenin's "Advertising that 'I'm Mormon'" (pp. 101-102) show the importance of media in spreading knowledge about sensitive religious aspects of symbols and saints.

The three sections of the third part are

a. "To censor, shape, or engage with media and the arts?" (pp. 105-122)

b. "Reading, listening, watching" (pp. 123-139)

c. "Case studies" (pp. 140-146)

This part treats the presence of religion, media, and culture in morality and esthetics. The first section presents how religious leaders and institutions accept or decline the use of media for religious morality. Heidi A. Campbell's examination "Koshering the cell phone" (pp. 119-120) illustrates how the ultra-Orthodox American Jewish community uses the cell phone to sharpen the boundaries between the sacred and the secular world. They accept the use of the mobile phone but without text messaging, video and voice mail applications. In "Muslim monsters" (pp. 121-122), Sophia Shafi deals with a Hollywood venture, namely the movie "300" released in 2007, which presents Muslims as monsters. Her contribution demonstrates how the history of religion is depicted inaccurately in cinematography,

altering the portayal of events and characters. The next section treats moral representation of religion in media as material texts. In "Creating mythology through cinematography" (pp. 136-137), S. Brent Plate talks about the off and on presentation of known mythical religion in cinema followed by Dan Clinton's chapter "Katy Perry's Fireworks" (pp. 138-139) on the representation of Christian and Jewish religious texts in a famous pop song. The last part of this section consist of "Case studies" (pp. 140-146) on controversial issues like cartoons on Muhammad, Pentecostal films and the 'PostSecret' project where people post their secrets mostly on homemade postcards.

The particular style of this book, the inclusion of short reflections and illustrations, engages readers. The book is also useful for teachers in their classrooms because it gives key points and discussion questions after each section. The detailed bibliography helps to explore the standard works and research in the fields involved.

Overall, this book deals with contemporary topics related to religion, media, and culture and makes the complexity of these areas transparent for its readers by illuminating paradigms. Due to compact explanations of complex issues, this book can be used as a reference point for a deeper understanding of the current representations of religious culture in all different kinds of traditional and new media.

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