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Knut Lundby (ed.), *Religion across Media: From Early Antiquity to Late Modernity*

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Reviewer: Amber Stamper, Elizabeth City State University (USA)

Back when I was writing my dissertation on the mediation of evangelical Christianity in online chat rooms and digital churches, the collection of essays that is Knut Lundby's *Religion Across Media* was the book I always wished existed. A gathering of essays from the heavy hitters among religion and media scholars, this text provides academics with a thorough and detailed survey of the field as well as a variety of case studies and direction for further work. It is, in short, nothing short of essential.

As Knut Lundby states in his introduction, *Religion Across Media's* goals are lofty: to challenge the ideas of both "media" in media studies and "religion" in religion studies, to trace the history and development of these fields and to examine their application to a variety of religious traditions, to explore both historical and contemporary media forms, and to use representative examples from antiquity to the present. In addition, the volume is cross-disciplinary, benefitting from the expertise of scholars in fields from religious studies, media studies, and communication to biblical studies, anthropology, writing, Sanskrit, journalism, and sociology of religion.

The collection begins with a "keynote" essay written by Birgit Meyer, an anthropology and religious studies scholar, who hones in on what becomes a central and resounding theme of the text: religion *must* be understood through material mediations. Indeed, because religion exists to be communicated, the process of mediation is essential to any study of religion. In addition, Meyer argues that it is important to explore how the different media used for religious transmission ultimately change and shape the practice and nature of various religious traditions. Meyer throws out the possibility that religion might be studied without a media perspective, a call to scholarship to which all subsequent essays in the collection respond.

The following chapters deal in particular with different aspects of Meyers's claims, responding to, challenging, and exemplifying them. One major project of the volume is to question the traditional timeline of the relationship between media and

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religion. Biblical studies scholar Terje Stordalen, for example, challenges the notion that our study of media's relationship with religion should begin with the invention of the printing press, delving specifically into the various forms of media used by the Ancient Hebrew religion, including music and dance. Liv Ingeborg Lied takes up this same point in her chapter critiquing the "golden beginnings" of print, noting how studies of media and religion have historically insisted on the 1450s as a watershed time period of interaction between religion and media. However, while the rise of mass media was certainly significant for the dissemination of religion to larger populations and greater geographic realms, such a limited perspective risks entirely overlooking the mediation of religion prior to this point. As an example, she explores Syriac monasticism in the Middle Ages and suggests that perhaps a more fluid and continuous perspective on the history of mediated religion might better serve scholarship, rather than a timeline marked only by the "seminal" moments of print, broadcast, and digital revolutions. Peter Horsfield draws on his writing and communication background to examine the role media played in the ultimate establishment of one particular brand of Christianity among the many varieties that had sprung up in the early Christian church. Horsfield argues that the ability to transcribe a theological system—a skill possessed by the hierarchical organization of bishops that was developing—was essential to certain interpretations of Jesus's message thriving over others.

Other chapters focus on various theoretical approaches that might be helpful for religious and media studies. Though Peter Simonson does not mention the wonderful work done by rhetorical scholars like Averil Cameron on the early church and Roxanne Mountford on the mediated and rhetorical space of the Christian pulpit, he makes a strong case for the value of a rhetorical approach to the study of mediated religion. In particular, he asserts that while rhetoric has often been seen as a purely western theoretical approach, all cultures have some correlate and that any moment of transformation in religious practices can always be analyzed through this lens. Kim Knott further recognizes the value of a "spatial approach" to religious and media studies, examining how the rhetoric of space—language that constructs categories of insiders vs. outsiders, inclusion vs. exclusion, open vs. closed communities—is used to define the borders of religious community and interaction, a rhetoric which points to how religion is located and depicted in different media and how practitioners and seekers are positioned within these locations.

Though diverse in its attention to different media, time periods, religious traditions, and cultures, *Religion across Media* never seems spread too thin. Indeed, one of the greatest strengths of this compilation is the balance Lundby has struck between the inclusion of essays that work through general and theoretical issues in the field and essays dealing with particular case studies and technologies. The movement from big picture to focused exploration provides readers with a real sense of both the depth and breadth of the field. Some of the most compelling essays include David Thurfjell's work on charismatic Christian revivals in Romani communities in Europe and how Pentecostalism has helped these communities form a coherent identity; Nabil Echchaibi's essay on modern media in Islam and how 2011's Arab Spring exemplifies how examining religious uses of broadcast and digital media reveal diverse Muslim

relationships with technology; Ute Hüsken's examination of how, in South Indian Hindu culture, a failure to contest how and why authority is established through the media of the Brahmin temple priests causes us to overlook the challenges these human media face as transitory figures who are both revered as gods and simultaneously relegated to a low social sub-caste position; and Mia Lövhelm's description of young women's blogs as performative spaces where traditional gender roles and positions of authority in religion can be revised and negotiated.

The collection concludes with summative essays by Stewart M. Hoover and Lundby. While I wished that Hoover's essay—a wonderful survey of the history of religious and media studies—had perhaps been positioned at the front of the collection as useful background information, he and Lundby nevertheless leave the reader with a variety of provocative questions to consider for further scholarship in the field. Hoover challenges us to adopt a new paradigm in religious media scholarship, one centered on the “Third Spaces of Digital Religion,” spaces which challenge our traditionally recognized categories of private and public, formal and informal media contexts, with greater emphasis on practitioners as actors and shapers of faith. Lundby challenges us as well, calling on us to build on this thorough exploration of how religion is transmitted through media by delving into the study of how media actually transforms religion. In all cases, the central understanding of religion as necessarily mediated is central.

I cannot emphasize enough the quality of the organization, collaboration, and scholarship reflected in this volume. Despite its humble cover and unassuming title, the contents are a true gold mine of resources. Though there is a perhaps surprising absence of some well-known scholars in the field—Drs. Heidi Campbell, Elizabeth Drescher, and Quentin Schultze come to mind—the impressive work by the academics represented does not lack significance in any way. Whether a reader is new to the fields of religious and media studies or a seasoned veteran, this text offers wonderful food for thought and a fascinating foundation for future work.