Heidi Campbell and Stephen Garner


In *Networked Theology,* Heidi Campbell, a media studies scholar specialising in digital religion, and Stephen Garner, a theologian with a background in computer science, attempt to ‘map out and provide readers with a framework for identifying an authentic theology of new media that relates to their faith communities’ (2). The phrase ‘networked theology’ sums up their interdisciplinary method, drawing on the network metaphor as an encapsulation of digital culture, placing it in conversation with theological discourse. As the authors say in the introduction:

We argue that new media technologies are situated in a unique cultural context, described by scholars as the network society, that frames how we understand the social world and raises important theological issues for people of faith (3).

But the authors set out to do more than raise theological questions in light of digital culture; they wish in part to make an ethical impact, to ‘engage Christians in their faithful living’ (14), to enable ‘us to live wisely in our networked world’ (17), to ‘understand the gospel’ and ‘faithfully communicate that understanding in both word and deed in this networked world’ (12).

Chapter 1 proceeds to introduce a ‘theology of technology’. The following explanation of “technology” is offered:

Technology is, first and foremost, a human technology that is carried out within the context provided by God for human beings to exercise their creativity and agency... Technology includes the artifacts that are produced and the special knowledge and processes that produce those artifacts, as well as the people, practices, and values in a particular time and place. Technology in this way is the environment in which we live (23).

Notwithstanding this very broad definition, the authors are most interested in *media* technology, and they focus on examples of media (e.g., books, codices, print) in their discussion of the historical impact of technology upon the church. Christianity’s approaches to technology are categorised, following Barbour, as optimism, pessimism, and instrumentalism. The three approaches described above, as well as an ‘ecological’ (or environmental) approach to technology—following Vicki O’Day—are presented. While these historical
approaches to technology are suggestive in understanding what the authors mean by a ‘theology of technology’, a full articulation of that phrase would strengthen the chapter. Such an articulation might address the question, ‘What counts as theology and how is it different than history and ethics?’

Chapter 2 provides an overview of media theory and outlines the way that new digital media facilitate a particular culture, including social practices and expectations. Key distinguishing features of new media are summarised under the descriptions of numerical representation, modularity, automation, variability, and transcoding, after which new media on the web are explained in the familiar stages of ‘1.0’, ‘2.0’, and ‘3.0’, respectively. What appears to be the real burden of the chapter follows, namely to discuss the cultural practices and values engendered by New Media, such as ‘remix culture’, the ability to break down and reassemble data; ‘constant contact’, the nature of the individual who is constantly connected to the network; ‘individualized control’, where the networked individual is at the centre of the network (as opposed to the centrality of a household or group); and ‘publicized privacy’, a blurring of the line between public and private life. At times I wondered to what extent these features of New Media are affecting the culture, especially in ways that are truly distinct from analogue media and digital media before the rise of the ‘networked society’ we now know (at least since Web 2.0). However, the authors end the chapter with some helpful qualifications, first, by suggesting that the chapter is about ‘cultural beliefs that these technologies seem to promote’ (p. 58, emphasis mine), and second, that influence of the technology upon culture is not inevitable.

In Chapter 3, the authors consider the effect of technology, especially web technology, on practices and values in the religious sphere. That effect, in a phrase, is what the authors call ‘networked religion’, which ‘presents religious practice and culture online in terms of a network approach, where relationships, identities, and realities are shaped through loosely bounded affiliations established by individual user preferences and connection over traditional tightly bounded relations established through hierarchies’ (77). Unsurprisingly, the characteristics of ‘networked religion’ correspond to those of a ‘network society’ introduced in the previous chapter, including fluidity of relationships in multiple social networks, a ‘malleable’ sense of self-identity, non-traditional authority structures, and the complex mixing of users’ online and offline values.

In Chapters 4 to 6, the book features more intentional theological and ethical reflection. The subtitle of Chapter 4 echoes the parable of the Good Samaritan by asking, ‘Who is my neighbor in digital culture?’. The burden of this chapter’s argument—an argument that I found to wander a bit—is to