

Theologians and Philosophers Using Social Media: Advice, Tips, and Testimonials

Oord, Thomas Jay, ed. *Theologians and Philosophers Using Social Media: Advice, Tips, and Testimonials*, 2017. 523 pp. \$25.00 ISBN: 9780578193991.

Thomas Jay Oord begins his introduction to *Theologians & Philosophers* with several musings on Marshall McLuhan's often-quoted phrase, "the media is the message." While Oord believes McLuhan overstates the matter, he does believe that our media, in this case social media, significantly shape the content. In a few words, "media matters" (1). *Theologians and Philosophers* attempts to offer readers a glimpse into how the changing media landscape affects the mode of communication in the titular academic fields.

Remaining true to its title, *Theologians & Philosophers* is composed of ninety-one testimonials of scholars in the fields of religion and philosophy. Each contributor loosely follows a set of guiding questions, posed by Oord, which ask the scholars to reflect on why they entered the public arena of social media, what projects have emerged due uniquely to the nature of social media platforms, and tips for other theologians and philosophers wanting increase their social media presence. In Oord's words, "the essays lean more toward a 'How to' than toward a 'why so'" (18).

Topics covered in the book that the title does not anticipate are blog sites (just about every contributor references their stint with WordPress), open access journals through open source platforms like PubPub (48–62) and massive open online courses as explored by Dr. Christine Helmer (344–52). In these latter two chapters, the authors detail the origins of their projects, their learning process with the technology, and their reflections on the project's impact and what they would do differently if given the chance to do the project over. These two chapters are highly recommended for those interested in communication technologies outside of social media. Moreover, their project-oriented testimonials accentuate their contributions among the banal majority of contributions, which essentially say many of the same things about WordPress, Facebook, and social media practices (more on this below).

There is neither a stated nor an apparent organizational logic behind the arrangement of contributions, short of the alphabetical listing by last name. While the general disciplinary field of each contributor is listed by each name, this designation does not seem to influence the contribution; there are few who attempt to offer musings on social media from the perspective of a "systematic theologian," for example. This makes the addition of each contributor's field seem superfluous.

Reflections by scholars from the fields of "theology & media" and "religion & science" explore the relationship between social media, doctrine, and religious practice. For example, David Dault's chapter reflects on the connection between how people treat others in person and how interpersonal dynamics play out in virtual spaces (188–90). Dault portrays social media as a space which can not only amplify our unsavory characteristics, but can also help us practice social virtues to embody in person as well—virtue ethics through social media!

Within another generation, most students of religion and philosophy will be "digital natives." Religious Studies and Philosophy must explore the implications of these digital horizons. Indeed, the global pivot to telecommuting for everything in 2020 to the vital role of social media platforms in racial justice movements betray humanity's dependence upon communication technologies. Theo-

retically speaking, the greatest strength of the book is providing readers an inside view of how academics in these fields navigate these virtual spaces.

Now, theoretical is the operative word. As alluded to, a majority of the contributions blend together: the author recounts the advent of certain social media platforms and other digital technologies, explains why she or he hones in on one or two platforms (usually Facebook and Twitter), and offers advice on using social media, which more or less pertains to knowing your audience, striving for a healthy balance between your time on social media and your time with people, and being yourself. While hearing a renowned theologian, like Miguel de la Torre, share his social media strategy was exciting, overall the book becomes less engaging as the same formula is followed by scholar after scholar.

This is not to say, however, that all contributions read the same. There are some contributors whose testimonials stand out. Along with the authors already mentioned, there were other contributors whose testimonies were particularly insightful and unique. For example, Bradly Shavit Artson (Rabbinic Studies) not only offers a brief glimpse into the required work of successfully managing multiple platforms to promote and communicate content, but also reflects on what interactions with others on these platforms reveal about this generation's spiritual longings. By engaging new audiences, Artson recognizes that modern communities still desire wisdom that affirms human flourishing. These new audiences have pushed Artson to reimagine what his faith tradition has had to say to such audiences. To grow his audience, he did not have to generate new content, but rather discern how to communicate that wisdom and perspective in a meaningful way for interested audiences. Artson's story with social media goes beyond the rote "know your audience" or "popularize your scholarship" syllogisms in most chapters.

To be fair, the differences between memorable contributors like Artson and the more uniform ones reflects the need for a more intentional prompt (or perhaps more collaboration between editor and contributor). Encouraging the writers to root their chapters in a current project or narrative might have yielded more insightful testimonies. In Oord's words, perhaps a little more "why so" would have increased the value of this book.

On a related note, it would be a mistake to blame the overall uniform nature of this book on the editorial guidelines. The *who* matters just as much as the *what*. In academic fields notorious for being primarily composed of cis-straight, White men, more work needs to be done if one wishes to collect a diverse range of voices in these fields. There is no apparent intentionality shown in this area by the editor. As Grace Ji-Sun Kim, along with other female-identified contributors in their chapters, notes, there "are not many diverse voices in the mainstream religion, politics, society. We must have diverse voices... social media provides such a platform for various voices to be heard and it is good that I can share my voice through such a platform" (434). Unsurprisingly, every contributor coming from a disenfranchised background tells similar stories about finding a voice in hegemonic spaces. As social media experts like Zenyep Tufekci remind us, social media platforms give voices to the voiceless and create momentum for grassroots movements. If another version of *Theologians & Philosophers* were to be published, hopefully it would include more voices who speak to the way social media is changing the social landscape of academic Religion and Philosophy.

Despite its shortcomings, this book still carries value for certain demographics of readers. Scholars in Religious Studies and Philosophy new to the world of social media will find many of these chapters insightful. Moreover, well-established scholars who publish frequently might find helpful tips on using social media to promote their work. In addition to wanting writers with scholarly ex-

pertise, publishers are becoming significantly more interested in a (prospective) author's social media following. As Alexis James Waggoner notes, "nowadays publishers, event bookers, and others who may look to hire me are interested in follower numbers—for good or ill" (629). Even veteran scholars, like Amos Yong, are encouraged by their publishers to increase social media activity (656).

Related to scholarly interest, there are several authors whose reflections might prove helpful for instructors looking to incorporate social media tools into their pedagogy. Some of these authors, like Darren Iammarino, present examples from their classes where integrating social media or other digital communication technologies in the classroom has improved content retention, increased class engagement, and raised students' grades. In the pertinent chapters, authors describe various ways of incorporating these tools in their teaching style: Facebook groups for student discussions, YouTube recordings for asynchronous lectures, blog sites for student reflection (instead of the comments section of their course management system) and more.

A book like *Theologians and Philosophers* is a risky venture. The complexity and functionality of social media and other tools are constantly evolving on social and technical levels. In another decade, these reflections and testimonials may seem archaic to the next generation of theologians and philosophers, indeed all scholars. However, as Oord's quotation of McLaughlin reminds us, our deep, human questions about media never age. Each generation's insight will offer some guidance on the perennial dynamic of the "media and the message." This book is not the end-all-be-all of this conversation, but it does get the conversation going in a few promising directions.

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