BOOK REVIEWS


Normally, the head of Israel’s broadcasting authority would see the Chief Rabbi only on key dates such as when the latter was invited to appear on television at the Jewish New Year. So when a somewhat nervous, if not frantic, Chief Rabbi called the authority head at his home at the end of the Sabbath, it was clear something unusual had occurred.

The Chief Rabbi related that during his sleep on the Holy Sabbath he had had a vision from Almighty God, in which God told the learned rabbi that He wished to speak to the Jewish people, indeed to mankind, through an interview on Israel Television. (preface, ix)

With this anecdote, Yoel Cohen begins the present monograph, which seeks to explore “the interplay of media and religion in the Israeli Jewish context.” (11) In his opening pages, Cohen chronicles the reactions of Israeli Jews of various streams to God’s proposed appearance, and the preparations for the big event by Israel’s broadcasting authority—then the resulting embarrassment for Israel Television and the Chief Rabbinate when, in the presence of the Chief Rabbi, the Minister of Religious Affairs and representatives of all the faiths in the Holy Land, God fails to appear to answer the studio interviewer’s questions. The chief rabbi and broadcasting authority appear to be hopelessly naïve in agreeing to the interview, and God himself capricious, justifying the religious doubt of Israel’s secular population (xi); predictably, the story ends with the resignation of the broadcasting chief.

As s/he had probably suspected, the reader learns four pages later that this anecdote is entirely the fruit of the author’s imagination. Nevertheless, rather than “illustrat[ing] nevertheless how mass media and Jewish religious identity intertwine today” as Cohen suggests (xii), this anecdote—one of relatively few in-depth case studies presented in the book—serves to raise questions about why a scholar who seeks to further the understanding of Jewish religious identity in the mass media age should choose to open his book with an anecdote so seemingly unsympathetic to those it portrays. Unfortunately, for the present reader these reservations were only deepened by the body of the book, which
while interesting in its subject matter, is problematic in both presentation and critical engagement.

Seeking to rectify an absence of engagement with religion in the academic literature concerning media in Israel, the thirteen chapters of Cohen’s book encompass a wide-ranging approach to this subject area, summarizing a range of Jewish legal opinions pertinent to modern media, and discussing the reporting of “religion” in the mainstream Israeli media, non-mainstream Jewish media including strictly Orthodox and diaspora Jewish newspapers, and ideology in reporting religious news in Israel. Most of the research cited here is quantitative, based on surveys and questionnaires undertaken by the author, including a two-month survey of the coverage of religion in various Israeli religious and secular media (49), combined with figures compiled by other individuals and institutions, and material cited from Israeli newspapers. While this information does paint a variegated portrait of media practices pertaining to religion in Israel and the Jewish diaspora, highlighting episodes ranging from rabbi scandals in the mainstream Israeli press to the foundation of independent ultra-Orthodox magazines, a number of problems detract seriously from the overall value of this volume.

First, Cohen never adequately interrogates the terms in which he presents his research. Whilst the diversity of contemporary Jewish belief and practice is acknowledged throughout the book, “Judaism” is frequently constructed as a monolithic entity, with little attention to the texture of religious opinion presented, which ranges from biblical citations to the opinions of major and lesser known rabbinic figures. Much of this material appears to be cited secondhand, with virtually no references to the sources of the religious opinions cited; sweeping statements about the “endless Hegelian-type struggle between loyalty to Judaism and to the modern world of science” among modern Orthodox Jews (96) or about the role of Israel in constructing diaspora Jewish identity (186) are problematic and need more serious critical engagement.

Second, more information is needed about the research methodologies employed by the author. For example, Cohen discusses his survey of the coverage of “religion” in the Israeli news media at length – but without specifying what, in his eyes, constituted a “religion” story. While he excluded theological exegesis, it is unclear, for example, whether he included general political material in which religious Knesset parties were involved. Similarly, while Cohen rates each piece of this news coverage on a scale of 1 to 5 (negative to positive) and thereby asserts that “the media did not strengthen stereotypes and were inclined to be neutral” (125), he gives no examples or explanation of his rating system, without which it is difficult to read much into the detailed statistics he presents.
Third, while much information is presented in this volume, beyond a general statement that the subject matter is worthy of interest, there is little sense of sustained argument or analysis. It is unclear what this book is trying to say, or what Cohen sought to find when examining the impact of “media” and “Judaism” on each other. Too frequently, opportunities for serious analysis are skated over in favour of broad-brushed assertion. “Judaism” is uncritically assumed to be in a conflictual relationship with “modernity”, represented by the (secular) media; the ways in which media might contribute to the construction of religious meaning are not adequately explored, “virtual communities” (184) are left untheorised, and while Cohen observes that “there are certain theological differences between Judaism’s and Christianity’s perceptions of mass media and their social role – which make the Israeli model a contrasting case (sic) from the US model,” (12) the nature and impact of such theological differences are not explored—not to mention other problematic assumptions implicit in this sentence. In place of substantial engagement with scholarly debate, the reader is too frequently left with clichés: “The search for God has become an Internet surf of spiritual discovery” (4), or unsubstantiated statements: “News media play opposite roles for religious communities and for the secular Israeli population.” (118)

Finally, this volume would have benefited from much tighter editing. The English syntax is often problematic, Israeli Hebrew terminology has slipped into the English, and a number of sentences are either difficult to parse or do not make sense. Typos are frequent: for example, the name of the Haredi newspaper Yated Neeman appears several times as ‘Yetad’ (eg. 79), and the religious feminist organization Kolech becomes ‘Kollek’ (60).

In the past couple of decades, abundant scholarly work has theorized the construction of religious subjectivities and alternative modernities, the creation of communities via the internet, and the creative harnessing of technologies and new media by religious communities; likewise, a wide body of research has critically analysed Jewish subjectivities and identity formation. While the subject matter presented here is certainly worthy of interest, it is difficult to justify both the absence of critical analysis here, and Cohen’s choice not to engage with the wider scholarly debates in which the material he presents is situated. A wider frame of reference and more secure theorizing would have turned this volume into a valuable contribution to the scholarly bookshelf. As it stands, however, the serious shortcomings of this book leave the academic reader disappointed.

Dr Abigail Wood, Joe Loss Lecturer in Jewish Music, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London