In his essay on the creative use of the Internet by Muslims worldwide, Bruce B. Lawrence of Duke University writes that even a casual visitor to this sector of the World Wide Web will encounter a “staggering diversity” in the way that Islamic groups present their faith in cyberspace. While clearly applicable to his specific subject, that phrase might as easily describe the study of religion and media, as demonstrated by this ambitious collection of essays put together by Stewart M. Hoover and Lynn Schofield Clark. The ways in which religion and media encounter one another are numerous indeed. To get a sense of the possibilities, one need only try to imagine multiplying the ways religion is expressed times the available forms of media. This equation must consider, too, the tendency of religious organizations to create their own forms of media, as well as the potential for ritual to emerge as particular media are put to use. Examples described in the book include the use by Protestants of a venerable Christian magazine to critique television when it was a new medium, an examination of how neo-pagans use the Internet to interact with one another, and a study of the ways in which African Anglicans interpret viewings of Pat Robertson’s “700 Club.”

The book’s primary value is in allowing a general reader a wide-ranging look at an emergent field. Together, the essays indicate that if boundaries exist for the study of religion and media, they rest largely with the imagination and enterprise of the scholars drawn to it. Appropriately, the field attracts a broad range of specialists. Hoover and Clark have drawn contributors from art history, communications, history, Jewish history, religious studies, and theology. Their success in so doing reflects the ongoing change within the field. The study of religion and media was once more narrowly defined, with religious (one might well say Christian) considerations dominant, as Clark notes in an overview chapter. But in recent years, the trend has been toward the field’s “Protestantization,” she writes, using that term to signify a historical process toward diverse and independent inquiry. Research on the interaction of religion and media might formerly have been done on behalf of ecclesiastical institutions. But those entering the field place their highest value on academic inquiry, rather than on religious service. In this sense, the study of religion and media follows the path blazed long ago by religious studies departments.

Nonetheless, one can broadly identify the directions scholars are taking. In an introduction, Hoover identifies six “lines of demarcation” that serve to separate research in this field into broad subject areas. These can be defined by such questions as, Does a project deal with a public or private expression of religion? Is it focusing on popular or elite culture? Is it specific to developed or developing nations? The essays in the book are grouped according to the areas Hoover identifies. In the section on media and popular religion, David Morgan (Valparaiso University) charts the growth of the visual culture that developed among American
Protestants in the nineteenth century through production of mass-market images meant to instruct children and (increasingly) inspire adults. The essay includes a reproduction of a portrait of Christ published by Currier and Ives around the time of the Civil War that is remarkable for its lack of accompanying text. Morgan provides evidence that, at a time when anti–Roman Catholic prejudice was running at an occasionally lethal high tide, Protestants were at least beginning to appreciate the devotional power of images in a way that Catholics had long understood. From Morgan, one moves on to an essay by Erika Doss (University of Colorado) on the use of Elvis Presley as spiritually meaningful icon. Her essay, which describes the many ways in which devotion to Elvis is manifested, is refreshingly nuanced and balanced when compared to many treatments of this often highly sensationalized subject. Yes, she writes, there are aspects of “Elvis culture”—home shrines and public rituals—that do suggest that its adherents are involved in religious practice. But Doss also finds that these Elvis devotees make up as decentralized a movement as one could imagine, individuals acting separately in response to their own personal requirements. There is no real church of Elvis, nor does one appear to be needed.

The book contains fourteen other essays. J. Shawn Landres (University of California, Santa Barbara), for example, discusses religious symbolism in public murals in Asian American neighborhoods in Los Angeles, while Michael Berkowitz (University of London) examines the effect that portrait photography had in helping shape a secular identity among American and British Jews in the early twentieth century. Any of these essays could be cited to illustrate the possibilities within the field. But two may be particularly worth mentioning, if only because of the size of the populations under study.

In “The Southern Baptist Controversy and the Press” Mark G. Borchert (Christopher Newport University) describes how fundamentalists within the Southern Baptist Convention succeeded in shaping the way that general news media reported on the fundamentalists’ drive to take control of the convention (with more than fifteen million members, the nation’s largest Protestant denomination), an effort that began in 1979. Typically, the fundamentalists viewed news reporters as hostile to their cause and sympathetic to the denomination’s moderate wing. But when it came to reporting on the issues in the power struggle, Borchert argues, reporters borrowed heavily from the fundamentalists’ language. That should not be surprising: The Baptist Right never lacked an ability to cast its struggle, with black-and-white clarity, as a battle over the authority of Scripture, in which the fundamentalists proclaimed their role as defenders of the Bible’s literal truth. Moderates, by contrast, tended to rely on traditional Baptist locutions (i.e., references to “soul competency” and “the priesthood of the believer”) that defied easy translation for general newspaper readers. Fundamentalists were wonderfully fluent in a language that news reporters could quote, a decided advantage in presenting their case to an essentially conservative Baptist public among the consumers of news.

In the aforementioned “Allah On-Line: The Practice of Global Islam in the Information Age,” Lawrence describes the ways in which the bounds of Islam’s “Straight Path” are tested by Muslim groups and individuals in cyberspace.
Lawrence discusses nearly two dozen Web sites established by political, cultural, and private groups—governments, student associations, Sufi orders, and various sectarians, as well as women and gay Muslims. He cautions that those who define Islam for the vast population of Web surfers do not necessarily represent the world’s billion-plus Muslims but, rather, are voices from select communities (not least because they have the financial means and technological skill to mount a Web presence). But the list of sites he offers, along with a brief commentary on each, should be useful to anyone wishing to gain familiarity with the Islamic Web.

Given the range of subjects covered by these essays, it is difficult to imagine that Hoover and Clark’s collection will not work to inspire and encourage further research. Offering as it does an inviting sense of the possibilities in the study of religion and media, the book should have considerable value to students of this field.

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It is not possible to review this book without also considering the events that have surrounded its publication in India. By any reckoning, the response to James Laine’s _Shirvaji_ has been extraordinary and startling. It has also been deeply alarming to those of us who study Indian history and religion in the United States and has to be even more so to scholars in India. This brief monograph tracing the biographical narratives of a seventeenth-century Maharashtrian warrior and ruler has been withdrawn from publication in India by Oxford University Press and banned by the state government of Maharashtra. A mob attacked and ransacked the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute (BORI), one of the most prestigious Indological centers in the country, because Laine mentioned it in his acknowledgments, and scholars whom Laine thanked for their assistance have been assaulted. So heated were the emotions that Indian Prime Minister A. B. Vajpayee got involved by criticizing the book ban and the assault on BORI, though more recently, with a national election campaign getting under way, Vajpayee warned that foreign authors “must not play with our national pride.” The controversy continues as I write this, with a police commissioner in Pune, Maharashtra, summoning Laine to India for questioning.

So what is all this fuss about? Much of the controversy has swirled around one easily overlooked sentence on page 93 of _Shirvaji_. I will return to this and discuss the events more fully, but first I want to describe the book itself.

James Laine’s _Shirvaji_ concerns a warrior of the Maratha community who through adept military and diplomatic maneuvers was able to establish an autonomous Maratha kingdom centered in Maharashtra at a time of Mughal