

## Is There Such a Thing as Digital Religion?

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Campbell, Heidi, ed. (2013). *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*. (272 p.). London and New York: Routledge. (pbk). ISBN 978-0-415-67611-3

In the introduction, editor Heidi Campbell introduces the reader to the aim of the anthology, and writes that it is centered on the question “What is ‘digital religion?’”. By the end of the book, the reader has received a good introduction to the field. The introductory chapter is followed by six thematic chapters focusing on the concepts of “ritual”, “identity”, “community”, “authority”, “authenticity”, and “religion”, and how these concepts relate to digital religion. A variety of cases are then presented to illustrate and highlight the aforementioned themes.

Digital religion has, just like what we usually refer to as digital humanities, evolved over the years – from the early years of use and high hopes until today when our everyday life is intertwined with the digital and we hopefully (my personal opinion) have a more nuanced view of the digital world and how it affects our lives. All the thematic chapters have their starting point in this progression, and show how research has gradually evolved within each theme.

Digital religion as a phenomenon dates back to the early 1980s, when people were beginning to use discussion forums and email lists to exchange religion-related thoughts and experiences. In the mid-1990s, when

the first web browsers had begun to appear, churches and different religious communities began to set up websites and experiment with how to transfer religious expression and practices to the web. Research that studied religion during this period, the so-called first wave of research, focused on the new possibilities that the internet gave. It seemed conceivable that new forms of religion would grow out of what was happening online. In the second wave of research, around the year 2000, researchers began to nuance the picture, becoming more interested in how and in relation to what aspects people engaged in religious matters online. From the mid-2000s, a third wave of research emerged, during which researchers developed theories and tools while studying the interrelation between online and offline religiosity.

According to Campbell, a fourth wave of research is developing today, further refining methods, tools, and interpretations, a development that this book aims to be a part of. The book “seeks to provide a full overview of the terrain of this subfield, and the direction in which it is currently moving”, as Campbell puts it (11).

In the following chapters, the reader is introduced to the lively, growing and developing field of digital religion, both in terms of research and online practice, by some of the most well-known scholars in the field. The complexity of digital religion is shown throughout the thematic chapters and the different case-based chapters. Cases deal for example with how Christian communities are created through online churches; how the Ultra-Orthodox Jewish community convinced the market of the need for a kosher cell-phone; how Muslim identity is played out in computer games; the relation between online and offline Hindu rituals, and so on. Articles in the concluding section also highlight some general issues such as ethics and theoretical approaches in relation to religion and the internet.

The overall impression is that the novelty of the internet has faded over the years and nowadays the internet and religious expression cannot be seen as something separated from what is happening offline – the two

realms of reality are indeed intertwined, and what happens online is related to and mirrors the offline world and vice versa. Early predictions of how digital religion “competes” with traditional religious faith and practices have eroded, and they have instead been replaced with more modest and nuanced claims. The internet has increasingly permeated our everyday lives, through for example a higher degree of internet access and more mobile devices, and thereby also the religious sphere is affected along similar lines. The articles also clearly show for example the duality of digital religion. On the one hand, the internet can be a means to overthrow established and often hierarchical structures – which has obvious implications when it comes to religion and its institutions – but, on the other hand, the internet both strengthens traditional structures and creates new ones. The internet provides the user with a variety of religious and non-religious views, and at the same time anyone with a particular niche can find a community with like-minded people. In that way, the internet can simultaneously strengthen both pluralist and fundamentalist conceptions of religion.

The book excellently illustrates and analyses the complexity of digital religion and how the digital is integrated into our lives. However, I cannot help asking myself one question (and this is a question that concerns the whole growing field of digital humanities): Is digital religion (and the humanities in general) really a subfield within a larger field? When will the step be taken to consider digital religion as merely expression of contemporary religion, or that what is studied within digital humanities is an integrated part of contemporary human culture (studied within the humanities)? I consequently look for a wider discussion on how processes related to digital religion are related to large social processes such as secularization and modernity to give an even fuller picture. But maybe that will come in a fifth wave of research.

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