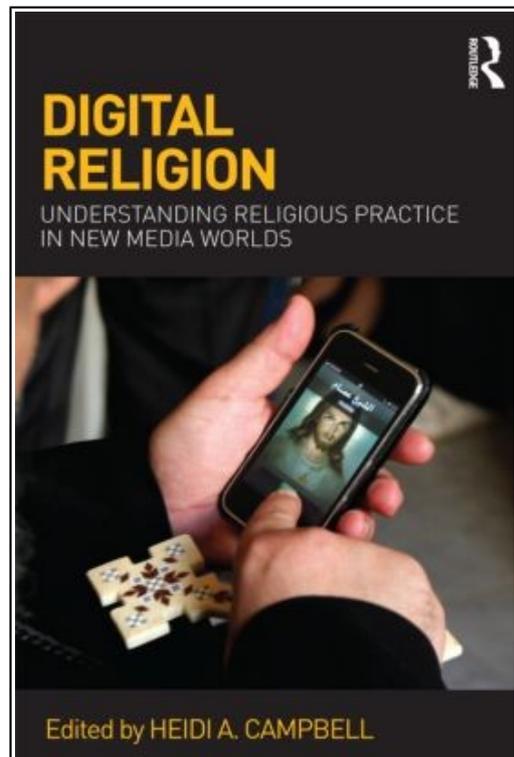




Reviews

Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds, edited by Heidi A. Campbell. London: Routledge, 2013, pp. 276, Paperback, GBP £27.99; ISBN 978-0415676113. Language: English.

The rise of new digital technologies has brought about a shift in the way religion and media relate to each other, and this shift has garnered the interest of scholars across academic disciplines. From Religious Studies to Anthropology, Communications to Political Sciences, academia is taking notice of the new forms of religious experience and the modes of spiritual input and output. Since the early 2000s, the academy has seen a rise in scholarship on these topics, and the creation of centers, such as the Center for Religion and Media at New York University, workshops, and conferences have furthered interest in this contemporary subfield. Scholars such as Faye Ginsburg and Angela Zito—co-directors of the NYU’s Center for Religion and Media—were pioneers in this area research, helping cross-disciplinary scholars such as Jeremy Stolow, who edited the 2013 *Deus in Machina: Religion, Technology, and the Things in Between*, continue to explore the relationships among religion, new materialisms and technologies, and social communication.¹ Scholars are also sharing their work through e-journals and online venues that question how religion (and spirituality) is changing in the face of new technological advancements. The Social Science Research Foundation’s *Reverberations* is one place where scholars (junior and senior) and journalists are beginning to explore how the internet, digital apps, and various forms of electronic communication are shaping prayer formations among



¹ Jeremy Stolow (2013). *Deus in Machina: Religion, Technology, and the Things in Between*. New York: Fordham University Press.

different religious groups.² Another online network that is helping shape the ongoing research is the *Network for New Media, Religion, and Digital Culture*, which was established five years ago through grants from Texas A&M University, and which also happens to be the home institution of Heidi Campbell, the editor of *Digital Religion* and one of the key figures in the formation of the *Network for New Media, Religion, and Digital Culture*.³

Since the late 1990s, Campbell has been at the forefront of the work on digital religion, especially with regards to how the social (or religious) shapes technology. In the *Digital Religion* volume, Campbell's commentary on the history of studies of religion and media is a welcome addition to the other chapters, providing much needed context and background for readers. In the introduction to the volume, Campbell provides an overview of the chapters, and proffers the fundamental question: 'What is "digital religion"?' (1). As Campbell and the other authors note, this simple question belies the complex theoretical paradigms of digital religion. It is this question that each chapter of the volume seeks to address or work out in some way, either through the examination of a keyword or theoretical paradigm or through a case study. One of the most beneficial aspects of the edited collection is the detailed history and scope of religion and media studies that is included in the introduction and the subsequent chapters. The volume is divided into three sections that address the themes of religion and media, case studies, and, finally, the study of religion and media as an academic area of interest.

The opening section delves deeply into the thematic history of the study of religion and media, offering chapters on ritual, identity, community, authority, authenticity, and religion, which are the same themes that are explored in the case studies of the following section. Each chapter in this section provides a trajectory for the way in which these themes have been explored in the study of religion and media. While all of the chapters are beneficial contributions to the volume, Mia Lövheim's work on identity and Kerstin Radde-Antweiler's chapter on authenticity are both exceptionally helpful additions to the volumes. Lövheim's exploration into how communities on the internet help 'shape the formation and presentation of identity' provides an excellent overview of how online identity formation was examined previously. It shows how research on religious identities and the internet has moved from focusing on multiple digital identities to how new media technologies are used to 'perform identity in everyday offline life.' Lövheim also discusses how media is an integrated aspect of 'transformations of religion in wider society and culture', while also pointing to the blurring of online and offline, public and private, and local and transnational through the use digital media (39-52)

Lövheim's argument is crucial, for it speaks to the transformative use and power of technology in everyday life. The broad concept of identity interacts with ideas about gender, religion, immigration, and community, creating larger questions about digital technology, many of which Lövheim addresses in this work and her larger oeuvre. Religious identity and the power of media has become a popular research avenue; indeed, work is being done on Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism, just to name a few. Lövheim's work (here and elsewhere) is significant, because it moves beyond identity in the digital realm,

² The Social Science Research Foundation, 'Reverberations: New Directions in the Study of Prayer,' <http://forums.ssrc.org/ndsp/> (accessed 14 December 2015).

³ Network for New Media, Religion, and Digital Culture, 'Home Page,' <http://digitalreligion.tamu.edu> (accessed 14 December 2015).

showing how digitally impacted identities are performed offline. This contribution is a helpful addition to the field, and a much needed one.

Also housed within the first section, Radde-Antweiler's chapter on authenticity focuses on definitions of what is authentic when it comes to the digital realm, raising questions about how 'the relationship between the offline and online body can be defined, and whether online bodily experiences can be judged to be as authentic as offline experiences' (93). In sum, Radde-Antweiler stresses the importance of examining the question of authenticity in relation to religion and media, since digital formations of religion can have real world impacts on participants and or observers. This is particularly important given the ontological and phenomenological questions that have surfaced around the rise of new materialisms, especially new digital technologies. Radde-Antweiler's work on authenticity and the digital is part of an ever-expanding subfield devoted to phenomenological questions (many of which deal with new materialisms). Another scholar who deals with authenticity online is Alexandra Boutros, whose work explores authenticity and identity in Haitian cyberspace. In a similar fashion to Radde-Antweiler, Boutros investigates what authenticity means in the digital world and how participants judge something to be truly authentic and legitimate.⁴ Radde-Antweiler adds to this conversation on authenticity by moving the examination to the offline world. In the same vein as Lövheim, Radde-Antweiler is concerned with showing the offline effects of digital religious participation. For this reason, Radde-Antweiler and Lövheim's chapters stand out as examples of how religion and digital media can (and should) be examined within the larger social and communal context.

The second section, which is comprised of short case studies, proves to be the most problematic portion of the volume. The brevity of the case studies is detrimental, for it does not allow for a thorough assessment of each theoretical idea in conjunction with ethnographic research. While the sheer number of case studies—twelve—is impressive, perhaps fewer (but more extended) studies would have been more helpful in presenting the six themes—ritual, identity, community, authority, authenticity, and religion. The brevity of this review prevents a full exploration of each essay, but there are important theoretical points to be taken from this section of the volume. Heinz Scheifinger offers a comparative consideration of Hindu ritual worship online and offline, suggesting, through a discussion of these two types of *puja*, that rituals performed in the online sphere still hold deep sacrality and efficacy for practitioners, even though the events are symbolic in nature (126). Scheifinger's work is comprehensive despite its brevity, and it calls for more research and focus on how ritual practices are performed in relationship to digital technologies. Lynn Schofield Clark and Jill Dierberg, through their discussion of digital storytelling, provide an examination of the relationships among identity, narrative, and articulation, highlighting the creative process as both an exclusionary and galvanizing social and communal force among youth (153). Tim Hutchings also looks at community in his piece on digital churches, showing how both online and offline churches are interested in new ways of creating theologically and socially relevant spaces of worship for believers, while concomitantly shifting the discourse that surrounds the creation and formation of churches (170). While the inclusion of these twelve case studies show the range of subjects in religion and media studies, the studies often feel truncated,

⁴ Alexandra Boutros (2012). 'Virtual Vodou, Actual Practice: Transfiguring the Technological' in *Deus in Machina: Religion, Technology, and the Things in Between*, edited by Jeremy Stolow. New York: Fordham University Press, 239-260.

leaving the reader curious about the larger impact of digital technologies on religion and spirituality. However, despite the short nature of most of the chapters in the section, many stand out as theoretically challenging contributions that push readers to think more deeply about the connections between religion and media.

The final section of the volume provides reflections on the theoretical frameworks and ethical and theological issues surrounding the study of religion and media, while also offering a commentary on the need for more nuanced and comprehensive work on the digital. Knut Lundby provides a helpful foray into the various theoretical frameworks for approaching the study of new digital technologies and religion, noting how the field of religious studies should turn to analyses of communication and media as a means of better understanding how religion is mediated by multimodal forms of the digital (225). Communications and Media Studies is not the only field that can help scholars better understanding the interplay between religion and technology. Stephen Garner looks at the relationship between theology and technology, stressing the need for scholars to pay close attention to how each affects the other (262). Finally, in the concluding chapter of the volume, Stewart Hoover calls for an investigation into how new technologies (such as the internet) are generative spaces for religion (267). Thus new work, such as this volume, can help scholars make sense of the complex relationship between religion and media.

Despite a lack of highly developed case studies, *Digital Religion* provides a compelling examination of past and current work at the intersection of media and religion. This edited volume is a welcome addition to the fields of religious studies, anthropology, communications, and media studies. Give its systematic survey of key theories and ideas in the study of religion and media, this work is ideal for use in undergraduate classes and seminars. The volume is also a highly recommended read for those who conduct research on any aspect of religion, spirituality and new technologies, particularly those focusing internet communities, blogs, vlogs, and various forms of social media.

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