

1 Introduction

The rise of the study of digital religion

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This volume revolves around a seemingly simple question: What is “digital religion”? In the last several decades we have seen significant changes take place in the ways communication technology is influencing how people practice religion. Take for example the birth and evolution of cyberchurches, from broadcast-style web forums to virtual interactive worship environments. Early cyberchurch entities were often websites set up by independent groups seeking to replicate or mirror some feature of church life online through their design or the resources they offered, such as a scriptorium page of religious texts or a place to leave prayer requests (for example the Virtual Church of the Blind Chihuahua, www.dogchurch.org). Then cyberchurches emerged which tried to emulate aspects of offline church services online by using technologies such as IRC, podcasts or RealAudio players to offer sermons, singing, and limited engagement between congregants (for example, First Church in Cyberspace). With the rise of the virtual world many groups are embracing technologies such as Second Life to create an online worship experience that offers an interactive worship via avatars (for example the Anglican Cathedral in Second Life, or the Church of Fools). Now we see the Internet becoming a tool to extend a church’s offline ministry into online spaces. For instance, we see the rise of Internet campuses within many multisite churches, and webcasting of services via iPhone and Facebook apps (for example LifeChurch.tv) becoming common. Thus, rather than being an alternative social space for a few, digital technology becomes an important platform extending and altering religious practice for many.

Yet, while there have been radical changes in communication technology, the terms or frames used to describe these changes and how religion is conceived of within digital culture have not always kept up. The term “digital religion” is used and defined here in order to fill this void, by giving us a new frame for articulating the evolution of religious practice online, as seen in the most recent manifestations of cyberchurches, which are linked to online and offline contexts simultaneously. “Digital religion” does not simply refer to religion as it is performed and articulated online, but points to how digital media and spaces are shaping and being shaped by religious practice. As a concept it allows us to talk about the current state of religion in relation to digital artifacts and the culture in which it is situated. The chapters in this volume address in different ways the

context and performance of digital religion in the twenty-first century, so that we can take stock of how religious practice has been described, approached, and changed in the last few decades.

Cyber, online, and/or digital religion

In order to understand what is unique about "digital religion" as a conceptual lens, we must first investigate how it relates and compares to previous terminology used to describe religious engagement with the Internet. In the mid- to late 1990s "cyber-religion" surfaced as a way to describe the importing of religion to the new frontier of cyberspace, or the not-so-real world created by virtual reality technologies. Initially this metaphorical framing evoked mythical utopian and dystopian images of religion, where religious practice could be freed from traditional constraints and patterns so it could be re-envisioned beyond the screen. "Cyber-religion" was used by some to suggest new kinds of religious community and ritual, and suggested a new alliance was emerging between computer technology and religion as people experimented with bringing their spiritual lives into cyberspace (Bauwens 1996). Over the next decade scholars defined and applied the term "cyber-religion" to a variety of contexts. Dawson used it to specifically identify "those religious organizations or groups which exist only in cyberspace" (2000: 29). Brasher in *Give Me that Online Religion* (2001) uses cyber-religion as a broad concept, one that could refer both to "the presence of religious organization and religious activities in cyberspace" (p. 9) or could encompass the notion of "the gradual emergence of new, electronically inspired religious practice and ideas" (p. 30). Hojsgaard's (2005) thoughtful reflection on cyber-religion as a theoretical concept concluded it was a term "whose contents reflect the main features of postmodern cyberculture ... a solid opposition to traditionally structured religious institutions" and yet as "a phenomenon that addresses the same type of ontological and metaphysical questions that religious institutions and traditions have usually done" (p. 62). Thus the concept of cyber-religion provided a way to explore and call into question traditional assumptions and understandings of religion as it engaged with new cultural and technological contexts. However, due to cyber-religion being an amorphous and broad concept, and the fact that its links to concepts of cyberspace and virtuality often evoked assumptions that it was based on an incomplete or somehow false form of religiosity, meant there were limits to its usefulness.

In an attempt to distinguish the different forms of religion emerging online, Helland (2000) offered another conceptual framing. He presented the categories of "religion online" and "online religion" in order to differentiate religious uses of the Internet on the basis of whether information and rituals are largely based on offline sources and practices or on forms arising from the practicing of religion online. Religion online was lauded for empowering its members to re-form rituals and bypass traditional systems of legitimation or recognized gatekeepers, and the opportunities it provided to transcend normal limits of time, space, and

geography. Online religion represented how the fluid and flexible nature of the Internet allowed new forms of religiosity and lived religious practices online. Though much less common than the occurrence of religion online, online religion demonstrated how the Internet offered a new social landscape for imaging the spiritual contemporary society. These initial categories helped scholars distinguish the type of practice they were studying and the motivations of a given user community. These framing concepts played an important role in many studies of religion and the Internet, allowing scholars to talk in more concrete terms about the traits of Internet-based religiosity (Kawabata and Tamura 2007) and the extent to which traditional religious practices and community could be transported or replicated online (Howard 2010), as well as debate the relationship or overlapping nature of the framings of religious expression and activity online (Young 2004). Helland has gone on to critique his categories as theoretical endpoints in and of themselves, and even to reformulate them in his own work by acknowledging that the separation between religion online and offline is becoming increasingly blurred and blended (see Helland 2007). Yet the distinction between religion online and online religion still serves as an important tool for mapping nuances and different strategies employed by religious groups and users in their online activities.

In the last few years a new term has emerged to describe religious practice online, that of “digital religion.” It has been used as the title of a number of conferences (for example the International Conference on Digital Religion at the University of Colorado Boulder, January 2012; and the Digital Religion Symposium at the Donner Institute in Turku, Finland, June 2012), research initiatives (for example the Digital Religion: Knowledge, Politics and Practice project run by the Center for Religion and Media at New York University), and book projects. Cheong, Fisher-Nielsen, Gelfgren and Ess in their 2012 edited collection *Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture* draw together a range of studies which reflect the complex relationship emerging between digital media and contemporary religiosity in a Web 2.0 world. Stewart Hoover (2012) suggests in his foreword to this collection that the study of religion and new media has moved on from simply exploring the “digitalization of religion” – which considers how digital media force religious groups and practitioners to adapt to altering notions of religious tradition, authority, or authenticity – to consider at a deeper level “the actual contribution ‘the digital’ is making to ‘the religious’” (p. ix). In other words, digital religion is religion that is constituted in new ways through digital media and cultures. Hoover highlights that this may lead to a new understanding of religion, one that is rooted in unique understandings and experiences of mediation of meaning via digital technology. This recognizes that the reformulation of existing religious practices has both online and offline implications. It also means digital culture negotiates our understandings of religious practice in ways that can lead to new experiences, authenticity, and spiritual reflexivity.

Based on this I suggest that the term “digital religion” describes the technological and cultural space that is evoked when we talk about how online and

offline religious spheres have become blended or integrated. We can think of digital religion as a bridge that connects and extends online religious practices and spaces into offline religious contexts, and vice versa. This merging of new and established notions of religious practice means digital religion is imprinted by both the traits of online culture (such as interactivity, convergence, and audience-generated content) and traditional religion (such as patterns of belief and ritual tied to historically grounded communities). This echoes assertions made by Hoover and Echchaibi (2012) that discussion of “the religious digital” requires a recentering of our attention on the shape of religion in light of the digital. They suggest that when lived religious practice and digital culture meet a “third space” emerges, a hybridized and fluid context requiring new logics and evoking unique forms of meaning-making. Digital religion as a concept acknowledges not only how the unique character of digital technology and culture shapes religious practice and beliefs, but also how religions seek to culture new media contexts with established ways of being and convictions about the nature of reality and the larger world.

Gregory Price Grieve similarly argues in this volume that digital religion represents a distinct cultural sphere of religious practice that is unique but not dichotomous with other forms of religion. This understanding of digital religion helps scholars push past previous discourses that simply look at religion online as an innovation occurring in a unique media space to consider how religious practice online is a vital expression of the religious in contemporary culture. Digital religion points to a different understanding of religion online and offline, one that is informed by the social structures and cultural practice of life in a technological and information-saturated society. It is with this recognition that this collection, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, emerges, seeking to offer a nuanced reflection on how religion is taking place in a digital environment, and becomes informed by the key characteristics and ideology of new media, which can alter not only practice but the meaning-making process itself. *Digital Religion* is situated within a growing scholarly literature on religious engagement online, spanning three decades. This introduction frames not only this collection, but provides an overview of the birth and development of this area of scholarly inquiry in order to contextualize both the state of the field and the contribution this volume seeks to make to it.

Religion and new media studies: a new scholarly subfield

Over the past decade and a half my scholarship on religion and new media has been motivated by three aims. First, I have sought to produce work that provides an apologetic for this new subfield of inquiry, highlighting how the study of religion and new media is not only a vibrant and valid area of scholarly interdisciplinary investigation within Internet studies, but offers potential broader cultural insights into the social practices emerging within new media culture. Second, I have sought to provide a map to other scholars of key research

themes and questions currently covered in this area, which offers a clear overview of the parameters of the subfield or what can truly be claimed about how the Internet and other digital technologies are shaping religious communities and practice. Third, I have endeavored to carve out a space where interdisciplinary inquiry and interaction could occur for scholars and students, drawing together the work of scholars in various disciplines and cultural contexts in order to demonstrate what each has to offer in relation to the shared questions and concerns emerging about religion and new media. This introduction offers an overview of these endeavors and situates the role *Digital Religion* plays in this vibrant and growing subfield.

An apologetic for a new subfield

Important to the framing of the study of religion and the Internet as a new subfield within Internet studies, and media, religion, and culture studies has been scholarly work documenting and categorizing the rise of religious practice online. Scholars have noted examples of people practicing and bringing their religious practice online as early as the mid-1980s, when computer hobbyists, governmental researchers, and individuals with early Internetworking connections brought their spirituality into online discussion forums (Ciolek 2004). Rheingold (1993) documents the rise of religious discourse in bulletin board systems (BBSs) in a “create your own religion” thread on the CommuniTree discussion forum. During this same period online religious discussion surfaced on Usenet. It was a time when religious computer enthusiasts began to explore “ways to use this new means of communication to express their religious interests” (Lochhead 1997: 46). Also in 1984 Usenet began to be split into a number of specialized hierarchies, such as “alt.philosophy” and “soc.culture,” to accommodate the growing number of special interest network users. This included such hierarchies as “alt.religion,” “soc.religion,” and “talk.religion.” Helland (2007), for instance, documented how tensions in the general religion discussion forums led to the need to establish specialized religious discussion forums, and the creation of the first religion-specific online community, “net.religion.jewish,” a discussion forum on Judaism and Jewish spirituality online.

In the early to mid-1990s, the Internet was a heavily text-based medium, so we see most of the religious interaction online taking place on bulletin boards, newsgroups, and e-mail lists, spaces where people would come together to discuss religious topics or form religious communities online. For example Ecunet, an ecumenical Christian e-mail listserve (www.ecunet.org), became a very active e-mail-based group seeking to build a conversational Christian community across denominational lines (see Farrington 1993). The rise of websites in the 1990s led to numerous religious websites and even the establishment of various virtual churches and temples. For example the First Church of Cyberspace (www.godweb.org), was established by American Presbyterians in 1992 as the first virtual non-denominational online church, which ran weekly services via a chat forum for over a decade. A key moment came in 1996,

when the *Time* magazine cover story "Finding God on the web" (Chama 1996) documented the impact dozens of religious websites were having on various religious groups, from reviving ancient religions such as the worship of Thor and invigorating minority religions such as the Zoroastrian cyber temple (www.zarathushtra.com), to providing new outreach and proselytizing opportunities such as the website Monastery of Christ in the Desert (www.christdesert.org) and creating new forms of religious practice such as the Virtual Memorial Garden tribute to people and pets (www.catless.ncl.ac.uk/VMG).

In the 1990s many religious traditions migrated online through various users and institutional practices. Buddhists began to experiment with bringing traditional religious practices such as sangha and dharma combat online, and the Dalai Lama's monastery in New York even performed a ritual to sanctify cyberspace for such practices (Zaleski 1997). This raised concerns about the extent to which the Internet could serve as a sacred space for religious ritual. This was further complicated by the rise of pilgrimage sites such as Virtual Jerusalem (www.virtualjerusalem.com) that provided not just access to religious goods and information, such as where to find kosher products online or times for shabbat services in different parts of the world, but allowed you via a webcam and e-mail service to partake in the ritual of placing prayers in the Western Wall in Jerusalem. By the late 1990s, multitudes of different religious online groups and resources began to surface. These were often created by religious individuals rather than institutions, leading to discussion about whether the Internet promotes individualized spirituality over communal affiliations. For instance, sites such as Beliefnet (www.beliefnet.com) sought to create a "multi-faith e-community" offering e-devotionals and access to sacred texts from different faith traditions, allowing individual to "pic-n-mix" between different religious traditions and sources. Online religious communities also continued to rise in popularity, some focused around theological discussion or religious study, others offering prayer and support, and others seeking to provide common ground for affirming religious identity.

By the early 2000s a debate emerged amongst religious leaders about how religion online, especially individualized information seeking and engagement, was changing religious culture. Clergy and religious leaders reflected on the extent to which they needed to adapt: did they need to take control of the Internet and culture in a way that would take back some of the authority they saw as being undermined by Internet practice? Within Internet studies, debates arose regarding whether Internet practice encouraged diversity of religious dialogue and provided a place where users could build bridges, or were people actually gravitating to the same groups online as offline, and building religious ghettos and stereotypes? Another question was whether the Internet was a tool for individual empowerment, and was this going to be a good thing for religion and even political and social culture, or a threat to offline authority? In the 2000s many religious congregations were beginning to see the importance of having a presence online, of being able to connect to spiritual information seekers online. Many religious traditions saw not only the importance of offering an

online presence, but also how the Internet could extend their mission and outreach, with things like online fatwa sites (a fatwa is a juristic ruling concerning Islamic law), and bringing official and unofficial religious leaders together to answer questions generated from religious dialogue online.

This study of religion and the Internet emerged alongside a growing scholarly interest in the Internet as an important object and space for study. In many respects the field of Internet studies is still a relatively new research field, trying to solidify its own identity and contribution to our understanding of digital technologies and culture. It was only in 2005 that Nancy Baym posed the question, "Is 'Internet Research' a Virtual Field, a Proto-Discipline, or Something Else?" as guest editor of a special issue of the journal *The Information Society* (volume 21, issue 4). This issue brought together a variety of scholars to reflect on the extent to which Internet studies could be seen as its own unique field, and how an area of study which transcends multiple disciplines, methods, and theoretical approaches could come together to represent a cohesive scholarly conversation. The works in this collection concluded that Internet studies was indeed gathering a corpus of data, beginning to develop unique methods and approaches, and collecting some common findings about the impact of the Internet and other digital technologies on a variety of social and cultural contexts. Indeed Ron Rice (2005) in his article provided an overview of core research themes frequently investigated by scholars, including issues of community formation, online communication, users' patterns and processes, role and process in e-organizations, and digital media and culture. This special issue also noted that there remained considerable gaps in Internet scholarship, and one of the areas highlighted was the study of religion.

In an article entitled "Making Space for Religion in Internet Studies," I argued that religious practice and user communities needed to be given more scholarly attention (Campbell 2005a). This was not just because religious engagement online is an interesting phenomenon in and of itself, nor that it was an increasingly popular use of the Internet, but also because religion is an important part of contemporary life for many people within an information society. I suggested that paying attention to how scholars of religion and the Internet approach questions of authority, identity construction, and community online could provide important methods and analysis that would benefit the wider field of Internet studies. This article made an important declarative statement within the field of Internet studies, drawing attention to the contribution the study of religion could make to our understanding of computer-mediated communication within a global information culture. It is based on this work that scholars began to speak of religion and the Internet not just as unique phenomenon worthy of attention, but also as an important space for understanding the complexities and characteristics of digital and new media culture.

This scholarly apologetic, highlighting the importance of studying religion within digital culture, has been extended through my work in a variety of disciplines, which seeks to demonstrate how the study of digital religion illuminates the larger impact the Internet is having on society (Campbell 2005b, 2007). Thus a

significant portion my scholarly work has been dedicated to establishing and validating the study of new media, religion, and digital culture as an important new subfield.

A map of the scholarship

Vital to making the case for the importance and validity of this new subfield has been my work seeking to map the variety of subjects, approaches, and questions scholars have engaged with in their study of religion and the Internet (Campbell 2003b, 2005c, 2006, 2011). I have sought to spotlight key questions of how religious community, identity, ritual, and authority are being informed by new media technologies and cultures, and the different approaches taken to the subject. Through these efforts I have sought to offer a number of critical literature reviews mapping the range of topics covered in this growing area of academic inquiry. In these works I have endeavored to provide a guide to key articles and books published on religion and the Internet since the 1990s.

When the literature is viewed as a whole one can see that the approaches taken seem to closely match the categories offered by Hojsgaard and Warburg (2005a) when they describe the development of the academic study of religion and the Internet in terms of three waves of research. In their assessment, the first wave of research focused on the new, extraordinary aspects of cyberspace in which religion “could (and probably would) do almost anything” (p. 8). Internet scholars sought to document and describe these new online phenomena while trying to weigh utopian and dystopian discourses about how the Internet would save or ruin the world as we knew it. Early text on religion and the Internet tended to offer a broad or general survey of religious engagement with the Internet and offer reflections on their potential religious or cultural implications (for example Zaleski 1997; Brasher 2001), positive reflections on how the Internet may reconnect people with spirituality in postmodern society (for example Cobb 1998; Wertheim 1999), or critical analysis of the ethical challenges posed by digital technology (Houston 1998; Wolf 2003). While many of these texts have now become dated due to the quickly evolving nature of technology, they provided important early documentation of the rise of different forms of religion online. These works also pointed to important questions beginning to emerge through this research, such as the nature of religious rituals and community online.

Hojsgaard and Warburg (2005a) noted that the second wave of research focused on a “more realistic perspective,” in which it was understood that it was not just the technology but also people who were generating these new forms of religious expression online. They observed how scholars attempted to provide categorizations and typologies to understand common trends within Internet practice. This type of work is easily seen in the three most cited scholarly books on religion and Internet studies, all representing edited collections drawn from different conferences highlighting various studies of religion online. *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises* (Hadden and Cowan 2000)

was important as the first collection seeking to identify early issues being explored by scholars concerning the impact of the Internet on religious groups and culture, though often reflecting the utopian or dystopian paradigms characteristic of early discussions of the Internet. Dawson and Cowan's *Religion Online* (2004) presented a more diverse and sophisticated collection of studies. Hojsgaard and Warburg's (2005b) *Religion and Cyberspace* presented papers from a 2001 international conference on "Religious Encounters with Digital Networks," held at the University of Copenhagen. Both volumes sought to identify common questions and forms of methodology scholars were employing in this area of study. While all three are valuable works, they represent disparate collections of studies seeking to identify key scholarly studies and their findings, rather than cohesive commentaries on how religious groups and practices as a whole are being shaped by Internet technology and culture. Here questions of religious identity and authenticity of religious practice online began to surface as key concerns for researchers.

According to Hojsgaard and Warburg (2005a), the third wave was only beginning to surface in the mid-2000s as a "bricolage of scholarship coming from different backgrounds" (p. 9). Third-wave research was characterized by a turn towards theoretical and interpretative research, where scholars sought to identify methods and tools for analyzing data and assessing findings in light of larger theoretical frameworks. In this era, the study of previous questions related to ritual, community, and identity were explored in more detail, to look at how the embeddedness of the Internet in everyday life was influencing religious digital practice. Scholars sought to draw conclusions about how examples of religion online – such as religious rituals (for example Helland 2007; Krueger 2004), community (for example Cheong and Poon 2009; Campbell 2010), and identity (for example Lövheim 2006; Cowan 2005) – were impacting religious communities and organizations as well as mirroring practices in a broader offline context. New research themes were noted – such as how the Internet challenged established religious authorities (for example Barker 2005), empowered new religious leaders (for example Campbell and Golan 2011), and provided new opportunities for traditional leaders to re-assert influence online (for example Barzalai-Nahon and Barzalai 2005) – were given significant attention. We also see the beginnings of theoretical and methodological frameworks, as some scholars seek to provide systematic interpretive tools for analyzing offline religious communities' negotiation patterns with new media (Campbell 2010) and gaining nuanced understanding of authority negotiations online (Campbell 2007).

These three waves – the descriptive, the categorical, and the theoretical – have become an important typology, used as a tool and applied by various researchers, including those in this book, to describe the progression and development of research in religion and Internet studies. The metaphor of waves is often used to describe how research methods and approaches to various research questions have matured over time, as our knowledge of the implications of Internet technologies on various social and cultural processes has increased.

Some scholars are also beginning to suggest that a fourth wave of research into religion online is emerging, offering further refinement and development of methodological approaches, as well as the creation of typologies for categorization and interpretation (Campbell and Lövheim 2011). This is seen in new methodological models being offered to assist scholars, such as those provided in a study of religious ritual in virtual world environments (Grieve 2010). This current wave of research also seeks to provide a basis for longitudinal studies on the relationship between religions in online contexts. This requires a careful study of “the social and institutional implications of practicing religion online; and what impact, if any, this will have on the construction of identity, community, authority and authenticity in wider culture” (Campbell and Lövheim 2011: 11). It is in this current wave of research that this volume seeks to make an important contribution.

Creating space and bridging interdisciplinary inquiry

Over the past decade and a half my research program has also sought to offer a thematic analysis of the study of religion and the Internet for scholarly audiences in specific disciplines, including sociology (Campbell 2003a), media studies (Campbell 2005b, 2005c), religious studies (Campbell 2012), and psychology (Campbell and Connelly 2012). This aim has been further solidified in an article published in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* in which I argue that one cannot fully understand contemporary religiosity without understanding the traits of religious practice online and how they reflect larger trends in religious beliefs and practices offline (Campbell 2012). The interdisciplinary study of religion and the Internet highlights the growing recognition that new media has become embedded in our everyday lives and a common platform for spiritual engagement.

In an era marked by social media we see that religious self-expression and representation has become an accepted part of religious identity and practice. Through the network Jesus has his own Facebook page, the Buddha tweets, and you can download a variety of religious mobile phone apps that can help you pray towards Mecca or connect with the Pope. We also see religious groups leveraging the advantages of social media but seeking to avoid the problematic moral content it can relay, creating religiously framed versions of various social media applications for their specific communities, such as GodTube.com, a Christian-filtered version of YouTube, and Salamworld.com and MillatFacebook (www.mymfb.com), Muslim versions of Facebook. So as new media have become infused into our daily patterns, technology helps extend our abilities to integrate spirituality into our everyday lives in new ways. These new social media opportunities continue to raise a number of core questions related to religious practice online and digital environments of interest to scholars in a variety of disciplines, including area studies, communication, human-computer interaction, philosophy, political science, religious studies, sociology, and theology, to name just a few. While coming from different theoretical and

methodological perspectives, scholars often raise similar or overlapping questions. For example, how is religious practice being transferred and transformed online? How does the way religious individuals leverage new media enable them to perform or constitute their religious selves online? What are the social and cultural implications of such moves? How are religious institutions and globalized cultures responding to or being impacted by such developments? Are religious authorities undermined due to religious practice online, or can they leverage new media to maintain influence in their communities? Questions such as these, along with the range of religious practice online, continued to evoke interest and debates among both scholars and practitioners, leading to vibrant scholarly conversation.

Over the past decade we have seen increasing interest in researching the role religion plays in online and digital contexts. This is illustrated by a number of scholarly initiatives, including the study of ritual online spearheaded by the Ritual Dynamics Project at the University of Heidelberg, explorations of the role digital media plays in religious social and political transformations by New York University's Center for Religion and Media, and investigation into where in the digital media realm religion is found as part of the current work of the Center for Media, Religion, and Culture at the University of Colorado. Such initiatives highlight the growing interest in digital religion from various disciplinary areas. Over the past few years I have similarly been working to create an online resource center for scholars studying religion and digital culture within a variety of contexts. This has involved pulling together a network of scholars in media studies, religious studies, and sociology of religion to help think through the state of research, and to identify notable gaps in current scholarship and what is needed to help this area further develop. In the course of putting together the Network for New Media, Religion and Digital Culture Studies (digitalreligion.tamu.edu), which was officially launched in early 2012, and of working with the advisory board of established scholars in this research area, it quickly became evident that, while a growing literature has emerged in the past decade, few cohesive or comprehensive survey texts exist which provide a clear overview of this emerging field and are targeted at both scholars and students. Based on this, the advisory board and I saw the need for a text providing a clear and thorough overview of the variety of forms of religious use of new media and a rigorous analysis of key questions raised by religion online. Based on efforts to offer a scholarly apologetic, a map, and an interdisciplinary frame for the study of religion and new media, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* seeks to provide a full overview of the terrain of this subfield, and the direction in which it is currently moving.

An overview of *Digital Religion*

Digital Religion seeks to provide a critical survey of the study of new media, religion, and digital culture for both students and scholars new to this area, by

introducing them to the central areas of research inquiry emerging from fifteen years of scholarship on religion and the Internet. It does this through a detailed review of major themes in the study of religion and the Internet, and by reflecting on how these apply to the broader study of religion and new media. Through my previous scholarly literature reviews and conversations with members of the Network for New Media, Religion and Digital Culture Studies, a number of key research areas and questions were identified, including how new media shapes our understanding of authority, authenticity, community, identity, and ritual, and even our notion of how religion is defined. Thus the text offers critical literature reviews of each of these core themes, written by recognized experts in the study of religion and the Internet whose work has helped pioneer and define these areas of inquiry. These essays seek to map how each of these research topics has emerged and is currently developing so that readers are provided with a fuller understanding of how religion online relates to and influences religious culture as a whole.

These themes of authority, authenticity, community, identity, ritual, and religion are further explored through focused research case studies linked to each of these themes. Case studies are written by both established and emerging scholars doing significant work in this field; these works demonstrate how different religious traditions are engaging with a variety of new media forms (blogs, cell phones, Second Life, video games, websites, etc.) and how focused studies can illuminate larger themes and research questions in the subfield, when presented in a systematic format. *Digital Religion* is also the first systematic, structured, and analytical review of research on religion and the Internet addressing all five of the major world religions (Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism), as well as select new religious movements. *Digital Religion* thus offers a comprehensive survey of the variety of technologies, religious contexts, and core questions explored within this unique subfield of scholarship.

Digital Religion starts with a survey of themes in the study of religion and new media. Part I offers six thematic chapters providing an overview of key research topics within the study of religion and the Internet in the past 15 years. Each chapter corresponds with two case studies, found in Part II, which explore these themes through concrete examples illustrating the different approaches taken to these core topics. Chapter 2 begins with the theme of ritual. Christopher Helland outlines how religious practices have been transported online and discusses the implications of ritualized behaviors in online religious environments. Ritual, he suggests, is part of the cultural meaning-making system, such that it can be both a religious and secular act. This means that ritual plays an important role in the human experience, and so considering ritual online becomes essential for understanding how people culture online environments with familiar patterns of practice to incorporate them into their systems of meaning-making. He argues that the study of online ritual has challenged scholars to carefully consider what it means to "do" religion and even to "be" religious in a digital realm. Looking at how and why various

religious groups practice religious rituals online can help point towards a broader understanding of what constitutes religion in a digital world.

This overview of ritual online is paired with two case studies of Asian religions' ritual practice online. Buddhism and Hinduism online have until recently been little studied within religion and Internet studies, and so these chapters offer an important contribution, illustrating this emerging work and how it extends our understanding of religious ritual online. In "Hindu Worship Online and Offline," Heinz Scheifinger explores how *pūja*, the ritualistic worship of a Hindu deity, has been performed online, and compares this with traditional *pūja* rituals that necessitate fully embodied interaction. He carefully considers the extent to which a *pūja* conducted online can constitute a valid form of religious expression and the debates that such online ritual can raise for offline Hindu communities. Louise Connelly investigates Buddhist rituals in virtual worlds in her case study, "Virtual Buddhism: Buddhist ritual in Second Life." Specifically, she focuses on Buddhist meditation as a ritual which incorporates material objects and the use of both voice and text, and the negotiation process between offline and online ritual. She suggests the practice of Buddhism online has ramifications for Buddhist doctrine and practice both offline and online, which are in need of further exploration.

In Chapter 3, "Identity," Mia Lövheim investigates how the Internet has been framed as a site of identity construction, negotiation, and performance, offering unique opportunities and challenges for individuals and religious groups. Within the study of identity a key concern is how individuals link their online and offline identities in the ways in which they use digital media. Lövheim suggests that scholars need to contextualize claims about religious identity on the Internet within broader understandings of the processes of social and cultural transformation at work within late modern society. She concludes that scholarship demonstrates that religious identity online is not that different nor completely disconnected from religious identity in everyday offline life. This means that, while the Internet enhances the possibility that individuals may practice religion outside institutional contexts, digital media also provide a space for anchoring one's religious identity and helping one connect the online and offline in order to find and negotiate personal meaning in everyday life.

To further consider the possibilities and challenges new media offers religious individuals in their construction of identity, two case studies are presented which explore how different digital mediums provide opportunities for re-presenting religious identity online. Vit Sisler, in "Playing Muslim hero: Construction of identity in video games," analyzes how contemporary Islamic video games can offer players a new virtual representation of Muslim identity, as hero rather than victim or villain, as is often seen in popular digital game narratives. Through an analysis of recent games produced in the Arab world he explores how religious identity can be understood, defined, and performed via new media. He suggests that, while one cannot assume that Muslim-created video games which offer alternative Muslim identities will cause an ontological shift for the gamer, such narratives are worth exploring to consider the potential implications they have for religious identification.

In "Digital storytelling and collective religious identity in a moderate to progressive youth group," Lynn Schofield Clark and Jill Dierberg consider religious identity construction through digital storytelling. They suggest that digital media, especially video, offer new means for religious groups to construct their religious identities, as video sharing sites offer enhanced means of social interaction and public self-representation. They conclude that "the digital storytelling process enabled young people to write themselves, and their community, into being in a way that was fresh and meaningful for them" (p. 148). Thus new media forms offer a platform for the public performance and reimagining of religious identities which can help shape individual and communal narratives in a new public space.

Chapter 4 addresses the theme of community. I offer an overview of the rise of groups online and how they began to be viewed as communities. The emergence of online communities created both new possibilities for social interaction and challenged traditional notions of community for many religious groups. I suggest the exploration of online communities through the lens of social networks, which presents community in terms of fluid social interactions rather than notions of shared geography and familial ties, and highlights a distinctive understanding of how community is lived out online and offline in contemporary society. Thus the careful study of community online points to a shift in the conception of how community is formed and how it functions in new media culture.

The implications of an online community functioning as a network of loosely bounded social relations that may challenge the beliefs of and relationship to traditional religious communities are explored in relation to Jewish ultra-Orthodox and Christian communities online. In "Charting frontiers of online religious communities: The case of Chabad Jews," Oren Golan considers how new media culture and the spiritual marketplace of the Internet offer contemporary religious communities opportunities to enlist new members and expand their influence. By looking at the Chabad, a Jewish ultra-Orthodox community which has had an Internet presence since the 1980s, he shows how online groups can help a religious community consolidate its transnational religious identity while simultaneously challenging traditional community boundaries and patterns. In "Considering religious community through online churches," Tim Hutchings explores two online Christian churches, St Pixels and Life Church, that use digital media platforms for worship, conversation, and proselytization. He shows the different understandings and patterns of "community" fostered in each group, and how these strategies have implications for local offline churches within this tradition. Both case studies demonstrate that the question of community online does not simply concern how community is lived out online, but also how these practices connect to and have implications for offline religious communities and institutions.

In Chapter 5, "Authority," Pauline Cheong provides an analysis of recent studies examining the implications of the Internet for religious authority. Her review highlights early framings of the Internet as a decentralized space lacking

hierarchical control, suggesting that traditional religious authority would be disrupted or undermined by digital technologies. Such studies suggested that the Internet might facilitate changes in the personal and organizational structures by which religious leaders operate, requiring religious leaders to negotiate such tensions and more tightly manage their online representations. Yet other studies have shown that religious authorities are developing strategies online that enable them to regain their legitimacy in and oversight of the religious sphere. Thus she proposes that the Internet highlights paradoxes regarding authority online, suggesting it can simultaneously empower and challenge new and traditional forms of religious authority.

These tensions and possibilities created by the Internet in relation to the enactment of religious authority are explored through discourses surrounding the creation of the kosher cell phone in Israel and the role played by Australian emerging church bloggers as religious authority figures. In "The kosher cell phone in ultra-orthodox society: A technological ghetto within the global village?" Tsuriel Rashi investigates the rhetoric generated by rabbis of several Israeli Jewish ultra-Orthodox communities when they declared a ban against cell phone companies between 2004 and 2007. The ban represented an attempt by religious leaders to assert control over this technology, which they viewed as allowing secular and sinful content into their closed community. Identifying arguments voiced by community members against uncensored cell phone use highlights key concerns established offline religious authorities have regarding how new media technologies may allow users to bypass traditional community gatekeepers and boundaries. Investigating how the Internet may give rise to new classes of religious authority, Paul Teusner considers the extent to which institutional religious authority is reflected, reinforced, or challenged in online settings of social interaction. His case study, "Formation of a religious technorati: Negotiations of authority among Australian emerging church blogs," provides a discursive analysis of Australian religious bloggers, showing how religious authority is enacted in the online blogosphere. He suggests that, rather than challenge traditional religious authorities, religious bloggers that emerge as recognized religious authorities may simply mirror the attributes and pattern of traditional religious leaders. Thus these case studies highlight the paradox of the Internet as a platform that simultaneously affirms and undermines religious authority.

Chapter 6 explores the theme of authenticity. Kerstin Radde-Antweiler investigates the distinction between online and offline, and debates about what is considered the real and the virtual in Internet contexts. She approaches this analytical distinction by considering whether people's digital experiences and bodies (i.e. one's textual body or avatar), can be considered authentic or real, and the extent to which the Internet or "cyberspace" can be considered a "real" place that can function as a sacred space. In highlighting these debates over what constitutes the "real" versus the "virtual" online she concludes that a binary view of the online space or body seen as either authentic or as mere simulation is problematic, as such judgments are often made without face-to-face contact,

so “the Internet requires different criteria for judging whether other users are trustworthy” or credible (p. 98).

Issues of what can be considered or judged to be authentic online are explored in more detail through two case studies looking at how new media can be used to present one’s religious identity online. Nabil Echchaibi explores how an online forum for progressive Muslims can act as a transformative space for presenting a new Muslim identity. In “Alt-Muslim: Muslims and modernity’s discontents” he examines the site’s attempt to function as an alternative to conventional authority in Islam and the veracity of its claims that it creates a counterculture for Muslims around the world. In “You are what you install: Religious authenticity and identity in mobile apps,” Rachel Wagner reflects on how religious mobile applications offer individuals new opportunities to engage in religious bricolage, as the personalization of one’s mobile devices becomes an act of religious identity construction and presentation. Yet such acts raise questions of authenticity. In other words, to what extent does one’s selection of religious apps represent an actual and cohesive religious identity, or does app selection more accurately reflect an individualized religious identity that works against a fixed notion of religious identity or authority? Both these case studies reflect on the extent to which the Internet provides online resources that build new forms of religious identity which may be seen as inauthentic because they encourage personalized over traditional or institutional religious identities.

In Chapter 7, Gregory Price Grieve tackles the theme of religion, considering how religion can be understood in relation to the digital realm, and to what extent the category “digital religion” exists and can be defined. He argues that “religion” is a complex concept with many different interpretations, and offers a thoughtful investigation into what he sees as the essential features of religion (worldview myths, rituals with mythic significance, and faith or beliefs) in order to reflect on how those features are translated or lived out when applied to digital media. After discussing the unique aspects of digital media he argues that digital religion, or religion that is lived out and practiced online, offers a work-around, providing religious Internet users with dynamic opportunities to navigate the problems created by the fluid nature of “liquid modern life,” which challenges previous definitions of religion and traditional patterns of religiosity. His overview of how digital religion has been studied illuminates the complexity of studying religion and how traditional definitions may need renegotiation in relation to new media contexts.

The complexity of studying and defining religion in new media worlds is then explored in relation to the engagement of new religious movements (NRMs) with the Internet. In “Japanese new religions online: Hikari no Wa and ‘net religion,’” Erica Baffelli discusses the use made by Aum Shinrikyô, a Japanese NRM, of the Internet. Through this study she demonstrates how a group’s understanding of religion and the role of religious leaders are negotiated online when the incorporation of digital media, such as websites and social networking services, inform and extend the practices of a community. Nadja Miczek details the meaning New Age practitioners attribute to their Internet use in “Go

online! said my guardian angel': The Internet as a platform of religious negotiation." She argues that New Age practitioners actively go online to present their religiosity because of the unique opportunities the Internet provides for creating a personalized assemblage of their spiritual beliefs. She suggests this shows that the Internet offers an important opportunity for users to make visible their people's religiosity, since modern media usage allows them to create unique, dynamic presentations of traditional religious beliefs and formations. Both case studies highlight the freedom of and new opportunities for expression that the Internet offers, allowing NRMs flexibility to present unique religious patterns and meanings to the public.

In the final part of the book, "Reflections on studying religion and new media," three chapters highlight several key research themes concerned with how religion and new media are approached and investigated. In Chapter 20, "Theoretical frameworks for approaching religion and new media," Knut Lundby surveys the dominant theoretical approaches commonly used in the study and evaluation of new media. These include five dominant approaches to religion in new media: technological determinism, as seen in the work of Marshall McLuhan; mediatization of religion, developed by Stig Hjarvard; mediation of meaning, as discussed by Stewart Hoover; mediation of sacred forms, highlighted by the work of Gordon Lynch; and the social shaping of technology approach, developed by me. His survey addresses how these theories have been employed in the study of media and religion generally and how they have begun to be applied to the study of new media in relation to religion.

In Chapter 21, "Ethical issues in the study of religion and new media," Mark Johns provides an overview of key ethical issues which arise when conducting research in new media contexts. He details the ethical challenges encountered in studying questions such as identity, community, and authority online, and notes that key methodological issues must be considered by those wanting to pursue research of religion on the Internet.

Then, in Chapter 22, "Theology and the new media," Stephen Garner considers what theological discourses and approaches add to the study of religion and new media, an area which has previously been dominated primarily by religious studies, sociology, and media studies approaches. He addresses the question of how theology can influence thinking in the technological age, on what role it can or should play in informing and interpreting religious negotiation with new media.

Finally, in Chapter 23, Stewart Hoover reflects on the common questions and issues raised within this volume, and the different frames used by scholars and practitioners to respond to the "changed realities resulting from the digitalization of religion and spirituality" (p. 266).

Together these essays seek to contribute to a new wave of research, which expands previous conversations, looking primarily at the Internet alone as the site where digital religion occurs, to include reflection on other digital spaces and technologies. It also seeks to consider how this new, digitally mediated context creates not only new spaces for religiosity to be constituted but a lens

for meaning-making that may transform our conversations about what it means to be religious in a digital, mobile, augmented reality.

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