

The Digital Religion Yearbook

2021

The Network for New
Media, Religion and
Digital Culture Studies

The Digital Religion Yearbook 2021

Compiled by Heidi A Campbell

Editorial Assistance by Sophia Osteen & Avery Alban

(cc) 2021 BY-NC-SA



This Creative Commons license lets others cite and build upon this work non-commercially, as long as they credit this original work and license their new creations under the identical terms. Derivative works may not be sold for profit.

Digital Religion Publications

An Imprint of the *Network for New Media, Religion & Digital Culture Studies*. Visit our website at www.digitalreligion.tamu.edu

The Digital Religion Yearbook 2021

The Digital Religion Yearbook is a new publication compiled and published by the Network for New Media, Religion and Digital Culture Studies. It aims to spotlight important recently published articles, emerging scholars, and outstanding contributions made within the growing area of Digital Religion Studies. This first edition introduces and describes the core sections and their themes to be presented within each following edition of the yearbook. Overall, *The Digital Religion Yearbook* seeks to provide a curated review of current notable works within the study of digital religion, to help scholars and students stay up-to-date on new publications and forthcoming research.

The Digital Religion Yearbook 2021

Table of Contents

- 1) Annual Essay: *A Brief Historical Overview and Introduction to Digital Religion Studies***
By Heidi A Campbell page 4

- 2) Top 10 Articles in Digital Religion Research for 2021**
page 12

- 3) Scholars to Watch**
page 19

- 4) Top Student Thesis & Dissertation in Digital Religion Studies for 2021**
page 28

- 5) Publications by the Network for New Media, Religion and Digital Culture Studies in 2021**
page 32

Annual Essay

A Brief Historical Overview and Introduction to Digital Religion Studies

By Heidi A Campbell

Each yearbook will open with a “annual essay” from a notable scholar in the field of Digital Religion Studies. This inaugural issue features an essay by Heidi A. Campbell, Director of the Network for New Media, Religion and Digital Culture Studies and a leading scholar in the field. This 2021 annual essay commemorates the publication of the second edition of the book Digital Religion by providing a conversational reflection on the key moments within scholarly development of Digital Religion studies, from one of the founders of this interdisciplinary conversation.

A Spotlight on History of Digital Religion Studies from the 1995 to 2021

Over my research career, I am frequently asked to write book chapters or articles that provide an overview and introduction to how and why scholars investigate the relationship between religion and the internet. In early articles, such as those appearing in journals *The Information Society* and *New Media and Society* in 2005 initially took an apologetics approach. In other words, most of my early writing documenting the study of Digital Religion focused on making a case for or justifying why media and internet studies scholars needed to pay attention to analysis religious engagement online, and what this could contribute to broader discourses of the impact of the internet on society.

Next, I turned my attention to making a similar case to scholars in Religious studies about religion and internet research. I argued that one could not fully understand contemporary religious meaning and practice without considering research on religious engagement online. This work is exemplified in the article “Understanding the relationship between religious practice online and offline in a networked society” published in 2012 in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. Here I suggested that studies of religion focused on the internet reveal not only trends in how religion is perceived online, but also echo the findings within sociology of religion describing people’s offline understandings and practices of religion in contemporary society.

These articles opened the door for the invitation to write articles surveying the waves of research on religion and the internet for a number of handbooks and encyclopedias focused on various areas of media and technological studies. This included chapters in the *Handbook on Internet studies* (Oxford 2011), *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences* (Oxford 2012), *Handbook Social Practices and Digital Life-World* (Spring 2020) and the *Cambridge Handbook on Cyber Behaviors* (Cambridge, forthcoming). Over the past two and a half decades, I have authored or co-authored 23 books, chapters, and articles that provide critical reflection of various aspects of the growth of digital religion studies and key themes of scholarly attention to religion online and offline. As we enter a new decade, I see my time of providing such documentation works and scholarly assessment is coming to a close, in order to make room for new voices and interpretations of the subfield of digital religion studies to arise. I am excited to see recent contribution in this area for young colleagues, such as those recently offered by Giulia Evolvi, Tim Hutchings and Ruth Tsuria.

This essay in many ways is my wrapping up of this apologetic, documentary, and critical assessment writing on digital religion. It comes an ideal moment to piggyback on the publication of the second edition of the edited collection of *Digital Religion*. The first edition has become a key introductory text to the study of religion and digital media, as well as an important resource that highlights the leading research and emerging scholars in this area. The second edition continues to explore central research questions on how engagement with digital, mobile and emerging technologies shape ideas related to religious community, identity, authority, ritual, and embodiment in new social and mobile media contexts. I see this edition as demonstrating the validity, acceptance, and recognition of this interdisciplinary conversation in the academy. By collaborating with Ruth Tsuria, Assistant Professor at Seton Hall University and one of my former students, I am symbolically handing off the baton to a new generation of scholars coming into this field, free from apologetic burden of explaining what the internet has to do with religion, and why religion needs to pay attention to technology.

In this essay I offer synthesize of the key moments, themes and stories highlighted in my other articles to offer an informal overview of the development of Digital Religion Studies. While many other publications and events could be highlighted, I believe this essay offers a glimpse at moments and studies that have helped to shape and define this area of scholarship.

While scholars had been investigating and documenting the emergence of religion online since the mid-1990s, examples of religious engagement online could be found as early as the 1980s. Scholars note examples of people practicing and bringing their religious practice online as early as the mid-1980s as computer hobbyists, governmental researchers, and individuals with early internet connections brought their spirituality into online discussion forums, like the document by such scholar as Ciolek in *The Internet Handbook* (Blackwell, 2004). Yet in the 1990s, many scholars in media studies, sociology of religion and religious studies began to pay serious attention to the study of religion and the internet was, in many respects an interdisciplinary conversation looking for a home.

As discussed above, in the 1990s those who wanted to connect the fields of religious studies, media, and internet studies had to convince both sides that combining religious engagement and the online environment was an important endeavor. This promoted many interdisciplinary conversations by scholars required to justify their research in the early history of digital religion studies. Some of those key scholars, who drew attention to the phenomena of doing religion online and make a case of its scholarly attention, are highlighted here.

1990s

- **1995** – Gregory Price Grieve writes about Neo-pagans online, showcasing the internet as a space for religious communities.
- **1996** – Key articles such as O’Leary’s “Cyberspace as Sacred Space” and O’Leary & Brasher’s “The Unknown God of the Internet” serve as high profiled pieces documenting how religion, from Christianity to Paganism, was being manifested in online environments.
- **1996** – Research of cyber-churches and temples suggests a new alliance emerging between computer technology and religion as people experimented with bringing their spiritual lives into cyberspace, as suggest by Michael Bauwens in his article “Spirituality and Technology” in *First Monday*.

This first wave of internet research in 1990s was an era where the terms “internet” and “cyberspace” were synonymous, and the term “cyber-religion” used to describe manifestations of religious worship, gathering, and community popped up in online platforms. The popular notion was that cyberspace is a different space, unrelated to people’s real life. Cyber-religion was used by some to suggest new kinds of religious communities and rituals could be imagined through the new technology of the internet

and mediated virtual environments found within cyberspace. The 2000s opened with this discussion, which led to a need for a new wave of research, focused on more concrete conceptual typologies describing the common ways religion was being practiced online. Scholars and events such as those highlighted below helped draw attention to this new wave.

2000s

- **2000** – Helland’s early work “Online-Religion/Religion-Online and Virtual Communities” offers another conceptual framing using the categories “religion online” and “online religion.”
- **2001** – Brasher in “Give Me That Online Religion” uses cyber-religion as a broad concept which could refer either to “the presence of religious organization and religious activities in cyberspace” or could encompass the notion of “the gradual emergence of new, electronically inspired religious practice and ideas.”
- **2004** – Young in “Reading and Praying Online: The continuity of religion online and online religion in Internet Christianity” debates the relationship or overlapping nature of the framings of religious expression and activity online.
- **2005** – Hojsgaard’s book *Religion and Cyberspace* (Routledge 2005) focuses on cyber-religion as a theoretical concept. The author concludes that it is a term “whose contents reflect the main features of postmodern cyberculture...a solid opposition to traditionally structured religious institutions” and yet as “a phenomenon addresses the same type of ontological and metaphysical questions that religious institutions and traditions have usually done.”
- **2005** – Campbell’s “Exploring Religious Communities Online: We Are One in the Network” offers an overview of how religious communities form online and the implications that this involvement has for people’s perception of offline religious community.
- **2005** – Campbell’s “Making Space for Religion in Internet Studies” becomes the first article on Digital Religion published in an Internet Studies focused academic journal, *The Information Society*. The article makes a compelling case for why internet studies could benefit from taking the study of online religion more seriously.
- **2005** – Helland states that any attempt to fully separate religion online from the offline has become increasingly difficult, as people frequently blend their online and offline social networks and interactions in ways that blur their distinction.

- **2007** – Kawabata & Tamura’s “Online-Religion in Japan: Websites and Religious Counseling Offer an Important Comparative Cross-Cultural Perspective” identifies key traits of internet-based religiosity.

By the mid-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 to take control of the internet to regain some authority that they saw as being undermined by internet practice. Within Internet Studies, debates arose regarding whether it encouraged diversity of religious dialogue and could be a place where users could build bridges or if people were gravitating to the same groups online as offline and building religious ghettos and stereotypes. Another debate was whether the internet is a tool for empowerment for individuals, maybe even a threat to traditional, offline authority. Religion online is thus an important case study for understanding how topics such as power, authority, agency, identity, and community are negotiated today.

In addition, in the mid-2000s, some scholars began to push back against the term “virtual religion” that had come to replace the reference to “cyber-religion.” This move was initially meant to emphasize the nature of digital or online environments as one that was unique from offline spaces. However, the use of the term “virtual” became problematic as it linked it to the concept of “Virtual Reality” (VR). VR in the 2000s was used to refer to technologically that created simulated experiences, often by game environments, which are seen as distinct from the “real world.” Virtual Religion thus evoked the assumption that it was a form of religion that was somehow incomplete or a false form of religiosity.

Helland and others sought to differentiate whether information and rituals were largely based on offline sources and practices, or on unique forms of practice arising from digitally born expressions of religion. Religion online was lauded for empowering its members to reform rituals, bypass traditional systems of legitimation or recognized gatekeepers, and the opportunities it provided to transcend normal limits of time and space. The late 2000s was a time of drawing to these common conceptual understandings of religion on the internet and pushing toward a more theoretical attention in digital research in the Third Wave. The third wave brought in more in-depth analytical reflection and traditional theories from disciplines such as Media studies and Sociology to make sense of not only religious practices online, but how engagement in digitally-mediated and internet spaces altered individuals’

notions of religion. Below I highlight key works and scholars contributing to this shift.

2010s

- **2010** – Howard’s article “Enacting a Virtual ‘Ekklesia’” covers the extent to which traditional religious practices and community could be transported or replicated online.
- **2010** – Campbell’s “When Religion Meets New Media” introduces the Religious-Social Shaping of Technology approach to studying religious communities’ engagement with digital media. It marks a turn towards deeper and more concrete theoretical reflection within Digital Religion studies.
- **2011** – Lövheim and Campbell guest edit a special issue of the New Media Studies journal *Information, Communication & Society* on “Religion and the Internet: The online-offline connection.” This is the first special issue of a journal outside of the field of Religious Studies to spotlight Digital Religion research. In 2017, they edit a follow-up special issue in *New Media and Society*, the #2 ranked journal in Communication and Media Studies drawing attention to advances Digital Religion studies in methods and theory.
- **2012** – “Digital Religion” is used as the title of a number of international conferences focused on research on religious practice online (i.e. International Conference on Digital Religion, University of Colorado-Boulder, January 2012; Digital Religion Symposium, Donner Institute in Turku, Finland, June 2012), research initiatives (i.e. the Digital Religion: Knowledge, Politics and Practice project run by the Center for Religion and Media at New York University), and book projects.
- **2012**– Campbell introduces a conceptual framework for studying the relationship between religious practice online and offline in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* through the concept of “networked religion.”
- **2013** – Stewart Hoover suggests in the forward of *Digital Religion* (2013) that the study of religion and digital media has passed from simply exploring the “digitalization of religion,” which considers how digital media force religious groups and practitioners to adapt altering notions of religious tradition, authority, or authenticity, to considering at a deeper level “the actual contribution ‘the digital’ is making to ‘the religious.’”
- **2016** – Digital religion plays a significant part in the 2016 USA elections, the election of PM Modi in India in 2019, and in many other political events around the world. In other words, Digital Religion cannot be isolated as a “unique case study,” but rather

conceptualized as a force that impacts the way people understand their world today.

- **2016** – Grieve, Gregory, Lufts, Wagner, and Zeiler publish a roundtable article in *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion* called “Gaming Religionworlds: Why Religious Studies Should Pay Attention to Religion in Gaming.” The article advocates for the discipline of religious studies to more seriously research expressions of contemporary religion in non-traditional contexts such as digital gaming.
- **2017** – Tsuria, Yadlin-Segal, Virtillo, and Campbell suggest scholars of digital research methods need to consider how the field of Digital Religious Studies contributes to the refinement of using classical research methods online and the implementation of new digitally born research methods in an article: “Approaches to Digital Methods in Studies of Digital Religion” published in *The Communication Review*.
- **2020** – Campbell’s *Digital Creatives and the Rethinking of Religious Authority* offers results from a decade-long comparative study of the rise of religious digital creatives around the world and considers how digital media production and actors challenge traditional sources of religious authority. The book offers a detailed critique of previous discussions of religious authority in Media and Religious Studies.

During the 2010s, this area of research began to mature into a field with more of a focus on theories and methods of the research. It is also the time when the study of religion and the internet in other digital contexts became known as “Digital Religion”. Digital Religion Studies was pioneered through the work of the *Network for New Media, Religion and Digital Culture Studies* established in 2010, which became the leading space for resources in scholarship of the area.

The concept of digital religion also brought with it a Fourth wave of scholarship, emerging in the mid 2010s. As I suggested in the introduction in the first edition of Digital Religion collection, this area calls us to not only investigate the unique ways religion adapts to the online or how the online creates new manifestations of religiosity. Digital Religion seeks to explore the ways how religion online and offline intersect and inform one another. This focus has also called for a further expansion of scholarship into investigating new areas of comparative research and multi-disciplinary collaborations in order to understand online-offline intersections of religion and the religious. This fourth wave also drew attention to understudied themes up to this point such as how

aspects of gender, secularity, death studies, and areas such as diasporic religious communities need to be given greater attention by scholars.

This decade ended with a world facing a global pandemic, causing many religious groups who had up until this point, avoided engaging with technology or seeing the importance of understanding digital culture. The lockdowns of 2020 forced many religious communities to go online and learn how to navigate the internet for religious purpose, as well as reflect on how to connect and balance online religion with offline forms. Yet this new decade of the 2020s also opened with Digital Religion studies no longer seen as a field of research in need of an apologetic to justify its validity or contributions to other areas of disciplinary studies. Digital Religion studies now sits as a well-established interdisciplinary conversation engaging scholars in a wide range of traditional academic fields (i.e., Communication, Philosophy of Technology, Theology, etc.) and newer disciplinary areas (i.e., Mobile Media studies, Information Science, etc.). As the story of Digital Religion studies continues to unfold, I hope to see not only an expansion of the conversation into more areas of academic inquiry and scholarly themes, but a welcoming of action-oriented research that seeks to make tangible the knowledge and wisdom our field has to offer. This is especially needed in new ethical challenges posed by our emerging technologies in areas such as Virtual Reality and Robotics ethics, Dis and Misinformation proliferation online and Information/Data warfare.

Top 10 Articles in Digital Religion Research for 2021

Each yearbook will feature a list of the top scholarly articles published that year, within Digital Religion studies. These articles are selected based on recommendations received from both the NMRDC advisory board as well as select scholars. They represent some of the best and most innovative work in the field. Please note that these articles are presented alphabetically by the author's last name and not in numerical order.

Bhatia, K.V. (2021). Religious subjectivities and digital collectivities on social networking sites in India. *Studies in Indian Politics*, 9(1), 21-36. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2321023021999141>

This article analyses how the infrastructural architecture of social networking sites (SNS) is conducive to the emergence of religious subjects and digital collectivities. I argue that SNS enable social connections, and subjectivities are created to reify discriminatory religious and political practices and discourses online. This study identifies and responds to three critical arguments about SNS and religious subjectivities. First, it challenges the liberal assumptions that advancement in SNS will lead to the creation of depoliticized and more rational societies. I argue that SNS deepens the already existing social segregations in the society through the creation of digital collectivities. Digital collectivities inform functional possibilities (ontology) and discursive modes (epistemology) of enacting religious subjectivities. These collectivities not only shape the ways in which users articulate their religious and political allegiance but also the content of their online presence. Finally, in unpacking the formation and existence of digital collectivities and how they are linked with the emergence of religious subjects, I examine the question of digital ontology—the debate regarding what a religious subject on SNS is and of epistemology—how a religious subject is defined.

Bramlett, B. & Burge, R. (2021). God talk in a digital age: How members of Congress use religious language on Twitter. *Politics and Religion*, 14(2), 316-338. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048320000231>

This article analyzes the use of religious language on Twitter by members of the U.S. Congress (MOCs). Politicians use various media platforms to communicate about their political agendas and their personal lives. In the

United States, religious language is often part of the messaging from politicians to their constituents. This is done carefully and often strategically and across media platforms. With members of Congress increasingly using Twitter to connect with constituents on a regular basis, we want to explain who uses religious language on Twitter, when and how. Using 1.5 million tweets scraped from members of Congress in April of 2018, we find that MOCs from both major political parties make use of a “religious code” on Twitter in order to send messages about their own identities as well as to activate the religious identities of their constituents. However, Republicans use the code more extensively and with Judeo-Christian-specific terms. Additionally, we discuss gender effects for the ways MOCs use “religious code” on Twitter.

Buckley, D.T., Gainous, J., & Wagner, K.M. (2021). Is religion the opiate of the digital masses? Religious authority, social media, and protest. *Information, Communication & Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2021.1971279>

There is a considerable body of research suggesting that social media may be a primary vehicle for both the dissemination of politically dissident information and for organizing protest activity in contexts of weak governance. Researchers are beginning to focus on building a more nuanced understanding of how new media shape these processes. Using original survey data from the Philippines, we offer the first large N individual level study to directly examine the relationship between religion, social media exposure, and political protest. Specifically, we argue that the degree to which citizens support religious leaders’ authority in politics can mitigate the effects dissident flows of information on social media have on their inclination to protest, at least in an environment characterized by hierarchical religious authority structures and limited religious endorsement of widespread protest. The evidence we present supports the theoretical claim that support for religious authority can at times dampen the link between critical social media and public protest. We discuss the implications of these results for the broader study of governance, technology, and religious authority.

Cooper, A.P., Laato, S., Nenonen, S., Pope, N., Tjiharuka, D., & Sutinen, E. (2021). The reconfiguration of social, digital and physical presence: from online church to church online. *Theological Studies*, 77(3). <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i3.6286>

Digital presence refers to technologies that provide communities a shared experience and a sense of togetherness, despite geographical distance. Emerging technologies for digital presence provide the church with both theological questions (e.g., related to the validity of sacraments when administered online) and practical opportunities. Think of the pros and cons for online communion in some churches: is digital presence real presence? The digital realm as a thread of the universe leads to rethinking of the church as a social, digital and physical unity. What kind of new possibilities could digital presence in digital realities provide to spiritual experience, individually and within the worship?

Deguma, J.J., Capuno, R.G., Deguma, M.C., Igot, V.J., & Lumavag, C.G. (2021). Take home and digital Lenten filter ashes for Ash Wednesday: Creative ritual practices of faith during COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Public Health*, 43(2), 360-361. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pubmed/fdab068>

Before the coronavirus disease in 2019 (COVID-19), previous research cautioned that complex and meaningful quotidian rituals involving intimate touch need re-evaluation as these pose a hygienic concern in pandemic culture. Faith-based practices entail human-to-human contact that could inevitably cause the virus infection contagion if not appropriately addressed. In a World Health Organization document, the crucial role of inter-faith collaboration and sharing of best practices to combat the spread of the virus are encouraged. In this correspondence, we assert that taking home ashes and launching digital Lenten ashes filter are non-traditional yet creative ways for the Catholic Church to perform ritual practice in celebrating Ash Wednesday. We argued that such creative ritual practices changed the landscape of faith-based practice and implied trans-local participation of the Catholic community as witnesses of faith while upkeeping public health.

de Wildt, L. & Aupers, S.D. (2021). Eclectic religion: The flattening of religious cultural heritage in videogames. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 27(3), 312-330.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2020.1746920>

Religious icons and representations increasingly appear, in the West, as cultural heritage rather than active subjects of religious practice. While churches become tourist landmarks rather than places of worship; religions' stories and characters – their intangible cultural heritage – survive as rich bases for popular media alongside their traditional use of mediating divinity. This paper studies one form of such popular media – Japanese videogames, using the *Final Fantasy* series as a case study – to ask which religions, folklores, cultures and their divinities are represented in videogames? (All of them, flattened non-hierarchically.) How are these divinities mediated in videogames? (Together, juxtaposed eclectically.) And what are the implications for including what are normally mutually exclusive mediations of divine worship into popular media together? (It re-introduces them to a practice common outside of Abrahamic, protestant conceptions of world religion, by freely combining cultural heritages and religious practices in what are called 'multiple religious belongings'). While these representations of eclectic religion may seem to trivialize traditions by making them interchangeable, it also manages to de-objectivate them and reveal their fictional, artefactual origin as cultural heritage, while leaving them intact as contemporary practices.

Farrukh, F., Haidar, S., & Shehzad, W. (2021). Digital media and identity construction: Exploring the discourse of Pakistani vloggers. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 1-15.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/sena.12344>

Negative framing of the image of Muslims, especially after 9/11, has caused numerous Muslim communities to become apprehensive about the way their identity is presented in the mass media. One such community being affected by negative representations based on Islamophobia and other gender-related stereotypes is Pakistan. As a result, these misunderstandings are being addressed through the construction of alternative and contrasting online identities by Pakistani vloggers through digital media. This paper excavates the diversified constructions of vloggers' online identities using two theoretical approaches to explaining identity construction: micro-hegemonies and the investment model. Nineteen Pakistani vloggers were purposively selected for the study, who were observed over a period of two years using online observations, interviews, and email conversations, adopting

a digital ethnographic approach. The investigation found that the vloggers choose to portray their religious practices, Pakistani identity, and local culture and norms while simultaneously utilizing Western norms to indicate their modernity. Moreover, they regularly emphasize that they are normal, regular human beings. Hence, the paper contributes to understanding how Pakistanis present a complex, hybrid identity which counters the dominant narratives in the media.

Gauxachs, A.S., Aiguabella, J.M.A., & Bosch, M.D. (2021). Coronavirus Driven Digitalization of In-Person Communities. Analysis of the Catholic Church Online Response in Spain during the Pandemic. Religions, 12(5), 311. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12050311>

COVID-19 has driven several global offline communities to go online. Restrictions to the free movement of people in response to the coronavirus pandemic triggered a profound rethinking of jobs, products, and services, and among them, the activities of religious communities, which are well consolidated in the offline sphere. In Spain, since the lockdown established by the government in March 2020, the Catholic Church has reinvented its activity, as all the churches and other places of worship have been closed. This constituted a considerable challenge, considering the history and dynamics of the institution. This paper aims to analyze how Catholicism, as one of the most consolidated offline communities, reworked its communication, going online in a matter of days. With this objective, researchers surveyed each and every one of the 70 Spanish dioceses, taking them as representatives of the global Catholic community in the country. Their responses are complemented with an in-depth interview with the Director of Communications at the Spanish Conference of Bishops. The results highlight the huge and unprecedented step towards the digitalization of the community through consistent, creative and efficient action. New methods, platforms and languages have been implemented, even broadening community membership. Despite an offline essence that is still detected in some decisions, this pandemic has brought a new communicative paradigm to the Spanish Catholic community. Digitalization has been consolidated whilst preserving the best aspects of direct contact and action.

**Halafoff, A., Marriott, E., Smith, G., Weng, E., & Bouma, G. (2021).
Worldview complexity in COVID-19 times: Australian media
representations of religion, spirituality, and non-religion in 2020.
Religions, 12(9), 682-701. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12090682>**

In 2020, as infections of COVID-19 began to rise, Australia, alongside many other nations, closed its international borders and implemented lockdown measures across the country. The city of Melbourne was hardest hit during the pandemic and experienced the strictest and longest lockdown worldwide. Religious and spiritual groups were especially affected, given the prohibition of gatherings of people for religious services and yoga classes with a spiritual orientation, for example. Fault lines in socio-economic differences were also pronounced, with low-wage and casual workers often from cultural and religious minorities being particularly vulnerable to the virus in their often precarious workplaces. In addition, some religious and spiritual individuals and groups did not comply and actively resisted restrictions at times. By contrast, the pandemic also resulted in a positive re-engagement with religion and spirituality, as lockdown measures served to accelerate a digital push with activities shifting to online platforms. Religious and spiritual efforts were initiated online and offline to promote wellbeing and to serve those most in need. This article presents an analysis of media representations of religious, spiritual and non-religious responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in Melbourne, Australia, from January to August 2020, including two periods of lockdown. It applies a mixed-method quantitative and qualitative thematic approach, using targeted keywords identified in previous international and Australian media research. In so doing, it provides insights into Melbourne's worldview complexity, and also of the changing place of religion, spirituality and non-religion in the Australian public sphere in COVID time.

**Kiamu, B.N. & Musa, B.A. (2021). Theorizing the Communication of
Digital Religion as Popular Culture in Africa: The Case for
Alternative Epistemological Models, *Howard Journal of
Communications*, 32(2), pp. 139-155.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10646175.2021.1871871>**

The conceptual lens and epistemological models employed by theorists determine their observations and conclusions. This discourse demonstrates how adopting nontraditional conceptual models can lead to better understanding of common phenomena that fall outside the purview of dominant theorizing approaches. Using the metaphors of

theories as lenses, nets, and maps, it articulates the significance of and approaches to theorizing outside the dominant paradigm. It highlights the changing grounds of digital religion and popular culture in Africa as case in point for applying new theoretical tools and epistemological models. It argues for culture-relevant and culture-sensitive theorizing to better illuminate knowledge of cultural phenomena and realities beyond the West. It shows how proper theorizing can account for Africa's changing media and cultural landscape, as well as correct the myth of Africa as being stuck in the pre-Information Age. It recommends non-binary multi-modal frameworks that transcend old-new, sacred-secular, spiritual-physical, folk-popular binary thought systems.

Wilkins-Laflamme, S. (2021). Digital Religion Among U.S. and Canadian Millennial Adults. *Reviews of Religion Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13644-021-00463-0>

Although there is a growing body of research on the nature and content of digital religion, we still know little about the prevalence of digital religious and spiritual practices among different populations in North America. To what extent do digital technologies play a complementary role to in-person religious and spiritual activities only, or do they also reach out to and provide important spaces for new segments of the population removed from more conventional forms of organized religion? The goal is to answer this research question and to explore the prevalence of different types of digital religion practices specifically among young adult Millennials in both the U.S. and Canada. Three contrasting hypotheses are tested: that digital religion practices are prevalent among large segments of the Millennial population and are part of a wider turn towards individual spiritualization (H₁); that digital religion practices are another set of religiosity indicators showing signs of a secular transition among Millennials (H₂); or that both trends are occurring in tandem, in that some Millennials are practicing digital religion, mostly but not exclusively tied to in-person religious activities and socialization (H₃).

Scholars to Watch

Each addition of the Digital Religion Yearbook will feature a list of scholars that are engaged in research projects that likely to make a significant impact of the field by tackling understudied topics or approaching key questions within the field in novel ways. In this first yearbook, projects were selected by Dr. Heidi A Campbell based on abstracts of papers scheduled for presentation at the 2021 ISMRC conference in Sweden, which was cancelled due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. This list represents what she views are the top papers that scholars offered in Digital Religion studies for the conference, and ones that she wished she could have listened to in person at the event. Scholars are presented in alphabetical order by last name, rather than in a numerical ranking.

Arkaprava Chattopadhyay

PhD Student, Central University of Sikkim, India

arkapravachattopadhyay@gmail.com

“Digital Hinduism: A Study of Virtual Congregations and ‘E - Gurus”

Project overview:

India is home to a predominantly Hindu population, where spirituality is an integral part of the daily life of the people. Religious rituals, congregations, and subservience to spiritual gurus, form an integral part of the social, cultural and political landscape of the nation. Thus, in the wake of the global pandemic, as the stringent lockdown measures and social distancing norms abruptly stalled the religious activities at the local temples, a significant facet of the everyday lives of the people, both urban and rural, was affected. As the necessity for a spiritual catharsis grew manifold, suppressed - a void thus emerged, bequeathing abysmal sentiments; unresolved. Strikingly, to maneuver around this challenge, various digital innovations were undertaken that enabled the religious rituals/ interactions to function online. Not just as facilitators of religious contentment, but also as a mechanism supporting the people to mentally cope with the threat and uncertainty of the virus spread. As the spiritual leaders at the local temple were sidelined considerably due to the restrictions, new religious movements and internet based spiritual gurus emerged. To inquire into this, a digital ethnography based methodological approach was adopted, focusing on the digital innovations of these new organizations and their adopted initiatives. Identifying the ‘International Vedanta Society’ as a purposive

representative case, the mediated projection/ framing of their Guru, online, was studied in depth. The research revealed that amongst the various religion-based online services – ‘virtual congregations’ facilitating the interactions with the interpretants/ gurus, in the context of the meta-narratives of Hinduism, emerged as most virulent. An alternative to the previous offline interactions at places such as temples, *ashrams*; amongst others – these emerged as efficient conduits for the mediation of religious meaning in the context of the everyday lives of the people, critical in present times. In fact, utilizing the benefits of the virtual mode, the rise of ‘E – Gurus’ as diverse brands aiding spiritual fulfillment through such interactions, emerged as a major trend resonating/ catering to the needs for catharsis/ contentment as service-based support systems. Thus, the social shaping of media technology considerably enabled an ancient religion such as Hinduism to evolve as per societal needs and circumstances, somewhat blurring the lines separating the online and offline dimensions. An embrace in the contemporary context, nonetheless.

Guilia Evolvi

Lecturer, Erasmus University Rotterdam

evolvi@eshcc.eur.nl

“Make Europe Christian Again’: Islamophobia, Anti-Gender Movements, and Far-Right Narratives on Social Media”

Project overview:

Far-right politicians in Europe often discuss migration, same-sex marriage, and national belonging. These narratives are connected with religion in various ways. First, Christian values are used in some nationalist discourses to reiterate the “Judeo-Christian roots” of European civilization. Second, some politicians use Christianity to oppose Islam, which supposedly threaten European (Christian) values. Third, Christianity may be used to emphasize the importance of traditional family values, and to kindle “anti-gender” protests against same-sex unions. These interconnected narratives are often articulated on social networks and point to a specific type of –white, heterosexual and Christian –national identity. In academic works analyzing these narratives, the notion of “secular” is often left unexplored: what is the relation between secular and Christian values in far-right social media narratives?

This paper analyses the far-right use of Christian values through the case study of Twitter narratives of Matteo Salvini, leader of the Italian Lega

Nord party. The party used to celebrate the alleged Celtic heritage of Northern Italy, even if the majority of the country is Catholic. However, Salvini recently changed this trend by making his Catholic identity public. An avid social media user, Salvini often publishes on his personal accounts images of himself praying and holding Catholic rosaries. In addition, he described his support for anti-gender movements and participation in the 2018 World Congress of Families, and blamed Muslims for allegedly “threatening” Catholic traditions such as Christmas. Through a textual analysis of Salvini’s tweets sent in 2018 and 2019, this paper shows that Christian and secular values often assume different meanings in far-right narratives depending on the issue they refer to. There are two main findings from the analysis: first, social media may offer venues to make Christianity more visible in opposition to what some far-right actors perceive as “secular” trends, such as same-sex unions. second, Salvini’s tweets exemplify a tendency to frame Christianity as compatible with secularism, in contrast with Islam that is allegedly unable to accept secular democracies. Therefore, analyzing European far-right online narratives helps understand the controversial notions of “religion” and “secular,” used as symbolic resources to invoke nostalgia for a “Christian past.”

Nakhi Mishol-Shauli

PhD Candidate, University of Haifa

nakhish@gmail.com

“Orthodoxy in the Digital Age: Social Media Use and Identity Dialectics in Jewish Ultra-Orthodoxy”

Project overview:

Social media is often lauded as enabling open communication, identity play and leisure-laden practices. For close-knit, orthodox religious communities, such affordances raise concern, as they contrast their rigid system of role-identities in which each member holds a single, cohesive, and constant identity. Nevertheless, a growing use of online social networks is evident among ultra-religious and fundamentalist movements, mostly for official supervised applications, both for recruiting new members and coordinating events. However, access to these networks, and their inherent characteristics, enables and even encourages grassroots spontaneous use aimed at leisure and free discussion of views and information. Evidence suggests leadership efforts to prevent the grassroots use have failed, and online social networks are emerging as a new, vibrant arena of ongoing identity discourse among members of bounded religious communities.

Accordingly, I aim to describe how grassroots members of bounded religious communities negotiate and perform their identity via online social networks.

The study focuses on Jewish Ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) men's' participation in online social networks. The focus on men is derived from the very segregated gender roles in Haredi society, which demand different theoretical framing for men and women. While Haredi society is often described as an "exemplary" case of a religious enclave, it is also acknowledged to be experiencing cultural turmoil. Being an ethnic minority fearing cultural disintegration, Haredi leaders supervise media outlets tightly to ensure that Haredi public discourse presents unity and conformity. However, personal contacts suggested that online social networks are an exception to this rule, and that they indeed reflect as well as foster social changes and alterations of communal perceptions in Haredi society. Among all social network platforms, WhatsApp groups have garnered the most legitimacy with an unofficial estimation of 30% penetration among adult Haredi Israelis. Therefore, while also Participating in Telegram and Facebook groups, as well as following Twitter and YouTube accounts, analysis of WhatsApp participation consists of the lion share of this study. In addition to participating in about 70 social media groups and following selected profiles, I have also interviewed 40 Israeli Haredi members of various WhatsApp groups.

Findings show offline communal pressures and perceived clashes between religious mores and modern habits raising doubts and invoking internal debate, often curtailing the amount and type of participation though not stopping it. However, these curbing factors were partially countered by online groups transcending local and denominational boundaries, enabling previously separated individuals to create networks based on common interests and shared views. Applying the frameworks of mediatization, religious-social shaping of technology use (RSST) and third spaces, findings show that the discourse characterizing these groups both reflects and propagates tectonic changes within Haredi society. Three of the most noticeable processes are social status elevation of non-elite classes, strengthening of pan-Haredism, and growing identification with the state. This largescale use of social networks by mainstream grassroots segments of an ultra-religious group enables applying these three frameworks in new settings, a midscale between religious institutions and individual pioneering digital creatives.

Sana Patel

PhD Candidate, University of Ottawa

spate161@uottawa.ca

“Religion on Social Media in 'Secular' Times: Experiences of North American Young Muslims”

Project Overview:

This doctoral research project focuses on young Muslims and how they navigate religion in online and offline spaces. How do young Muslims practice their religion in their everyday lives? More specifically, the goal is to examine how hybrid media events like Reviving the Islamic Spirit (RIS) in Toronto, Canada brings together online and offline religions. RIS is an annual convention that attracts over 20,000 Muslims and non-Muslims. This is a popular event because it brings together celebrity Imams, Muslims from all around the world, and creates a sense of belonging and community for many. The intersectionality of religion, social media, and secularism are highlighted in some parts of this research project which aims to answer: what is “the secular”/ “post-secular” and what do these things mean to young Muslims who “do” religion on the Internet? The significance of hybrid media spaces for young Muslims in Canada and the United States showcases how social media acts as a mediator for secular and religious/spiritual cravings. Participants in this study consisted of self-identifying Muslims aged between 18-40. Fifty qualitative interviews were conducted between 2018 -2019 with Muslims who were recruited at RIS. Through the concept of lived religion, participants discussed how they navigate and negotiate their religious beliefs and practices when in online and offline spaces where they encounter secularity on a regular basis. Fieldwork for this research project was completed in April 2020 and the findings are currently being analyzed.

Samira Rajabi

Assistant Professor in Media Studies, University of Colorado-Boulder

Samira.Rajabi@colorado.edu

“#Internet4Iran & #HelpIran: Political upheaval, Pandemics, & Complicated Attempts at Coping among the Iranian Diaspora on Twitter”

Project overview:

This paper uses theories of trauma and digital media to understand how Iranians in diaspora use social media to explore various instantiations of secularism and its accordant geo-politics.

Through a discourse analysis of tweets circulating in the Iranian diaspora after the Iranian fuel price hike and subsequent protests and internet shut off in late 2019, as well as the way Iranians in the diaspora used Twitter to mark anxieties around the COVID-19 pandemic, which hit Iran particularly hard in mid-late 2020. I explore the way members of the diaspora subtly articulate the trauma of exile, of nostalgic relationships to a homeland that no longer exists in the form in which they left it. I also look at the way diaspora communities situate themselves in global, geo-political and religious debates, particularly when it comes to the way the livelihoods of their home-country family and community are able to respond to crisis. With the complicated relationship many in the Iranian diaspora have to Islam, it is interesting to examine how notes of secularism and relationships to Islam manifest themselves in digital mediation, especially in times of heightened tensions due to various crises.

Andrea Stanton

Associate Professor, University of Denver

Andrea.stanton@du.edu

“Lived Islam and COVID-19 in the United States: Assessing the Pandemic’s Digital Turn”

Project overview:

This paper surveys and assesses the online responses by a set of American Muslim communities during the first eighteen months of the Covid-19 pandemic. Dividing the pandemic into three stages, it employs a case-study approach, focusing on mosque communities in four locations - Virginia, Colorado, Texas, and Washington – and examining the evolution of their digitally-based religious worship and community efforts on websites, Facebook, Instagram, and other digital platforms. The “emergency” moment of March 2020 gave way to bursts of celebratory effervescence in spring and early summer, primarily facilitated by the joys of Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr. Mosque communities and other community organizations found creative online ways to mark the spiritual and celebratory aspects of these holidays, promoting them via community websites, Facebook pages, Instagram pages, and by emails. These effervescent events mixed a ‘can-do’ crisis spirit, worship, and community engagement together with early Covid-era practices like drive-through community gatherings and car parades. The new normativity of these events was reflected in the emergence of Ramadan-related stock images and downloadable Zoom backgrounds.

As the pandemic wore into summer, online Muslim community efforts shifted toward local virtual community-building efforts – intra- and inter-religious, often more focused on social connection and education than on ritual worship. These initiatives helped make the mosque communities or other community organizations “go-to” organizations for informative or educational events on a range of issues, most more connected to Covid - with talks on Covid survivor experiences or advice on parenting during lockdowns - than to specifically religious concerns. At the same time, these efforts also focused community members’ attention on global connections, particularly as the hajj season began – captured in videos and photos, and eerily beautiful in its emptiness - in late July.

States and counties across the country modulated restrictions on gatherings from summer 2020 through summer 2021. This paper examines how online Muslim community efforts shifted between organizing virtual, and promoting in-person events and activities. In-person events included worship services, childcare, food distribution, and vaccine clinics, while online events continued to focus on community engagement and support, as well as religious and spiritual engagement. These various events and initiatives also reflect the interplay between mosque communities or other Muslim religious institutions and other groups: community members, non-profit organizations, municipalities, or public health agencies.

This paper closes with an assessment of how American mosque communities’ Covid-19 “digital turn” engages with community members’ expectations for how religion, spirituality, and community might map onto other aspects of their online and offline lives. Like many Americans, American Muslims were accustomed before the pandemic to finding information, community, and support on assorted online platforms and spaces. Given the proliferation of Muslim religious apps and other online community spaces since the early 2010s, the major shift in the Covid-19 era may have been localizing these online efforts by bringing them home to believers’ mosque communities – suggesting the kinds of practices that American Muslims might take forward after the pandemic.

Christopher White

Professor, Vassar College

chwhite@vassar.edu

“Reddit.com and Anomalous, Spiritual Experiences as ‘Glitches in the Matrix’”

Project overview:

It has become commonplace to talk about the Internet as a place of the “return of the repressed”—a place where forbidden or unconventional desires, emotions and viewpoints rise to the surface. In this paper, I consider how the Internet facilitates the expression of unconventional religious or spiritual views that have been repressed in secular modernity. I look in particular at Reddit discussion forums on anomalous spiritual experiences, showing that forums such as r/Ghosts, r/glitch_in_the_Matrix, and r/paranormal constitute a new expressive public space characterized by spiritual questing, irreverent exchange, “spiritual but not religious” anti-clericalism, and playful spiritual commitment. In this paper, I examine how these experiences are cultivated on Reddit by looking at both the aesthetic and the technological features of Reddit’s digital platform. I begin by borrowing from Erik Davis, Stef Aupers and others who have discussed the Internet’s aesthetic of *flow and transmission*, an aesthetic that seems to make more plausible unusual experiences of dissociation, spiritual transformation, otherworldly contact, and other forms of mystical disembodiment. Though the gnostic possibilities of the Internet were embraced with zeal in its early days (i.e., the 1990s), in some ways these ideas still inform the spiritual seeking in evidence on these forums today.

I next show that the structural features of Reddit subs themselves foster paranormal sensations and perceptions. Taking seriously Nietzsche’s notion that “our writing tools are working on our thoughts,” I identify three ways in which these discussion forums structure a new kind of spiritual subjectivity. First, these forums make visible entities that are usually invisible: Ghostly specters caught on CCTV, lights turned on and off by departed spirits, UFOs buzzing overhead, and other incredible phenomena. Like older religious media (e.g., rituals and scriptures), these online forums deliver messages from distant presences and “beyond” spaces. One difference between the old and the new, however, is that these new media deliver what we might call higher levels of *visual credibility*. In other words, these online forums provide a new, more credible type of experiential access to the transcendent.

Second, forum rules discipline conversations in certain ways so that the focus is trying to explain anomalous experiences with scientific and diagnostic categories (such as hallucination or apophenia) *while failing to do so in whole or part*. In this way, the sub allows people to experience the limits of secular understanding and thus evokes feelings of awe, wonder and the supernatural. The third and final way that these forums structure a new kind of subjectivity has to do with how we touch and interact with the Reddit app and website. The sociologist Mark Paterson has argued in an important book on sensory and affective experience that touching electronic technologies every day changes us in certain ways. We associate touch with contact, proximity and sensations of “feeling-with.” How does habitually touching apps or websites reshape our experience of seeing, touching, and believing in the supernatural online? For instance, we point at, click on, grasp, start and stop, move, and control ghostly videos and images on the Reddit platform. We do not touch ghosts directly, but we touch the thing that touches the ghost—and we are intimately familiar with that thing because we finger it in our lived space all day long. So daily computing leads to a re-calibrated sensorium that is attuned to keys, trackpads, buttons, and interactive screens, all of which somehow deliver (among other things) ghosts that we can see, hear, touch and (sort of) therefore “grasp.” Thus, if we have reformatted media devices to be touched, media devices have reformatted us so that we touch and thus grasp/know things in new ways.

Thus, for these and other reasons related to the structure and aesthetic of the Internet, these Reddit forums allow people to cultivate spiritual sensations and perceptions that have been repressed in other modern, discursive settings.

Top Student Thesis and Dissertation in Digital Religion Studies for 2021

Each edition of the yearbook will draw attention to outstanding student projects in Digital Religion studies completed in the past year. These will be selected by the NMRDC research team. This year, we draw attention to two exceptional students, one who completed her undergraduate thesis, and another who defended his PhD dissertation in 2021.

Undergraduate Thesis

Esmé Lily Katherine Partridge, BA, SOAS-University of London
(awarded May 2021)

esmepartridge9@gmail.com

Partridge, E.L.K. (2021). Digital Spirituality: Technological Re Enchantment in 2020/1? An exploration of Witchcraft and Reality Shifting on TikTok as (post)modern spiritualities existing in Wouter Hanegraaff's 'mirror of secular thought [Bachelor of Arts dissertation, SOAS University of London].

Abstract

Resurgences of spirituality in the contemporary West - though often appearing to embrace non-naturalistic metaphysics and other remnants of a pre-Enlightenment worldview – have historically tended to reflect the discourses of disenchantment, with the psychoanalytic and New Age movements being widely thought to exist in what Wouter Hanegraaff has dubbed 'the mirror of secular thought' (1996: 412). New forms of modern spirituality, however, have been evolving and potentially transgressing the boundaries of secular modernity in tandem with the development of technology. The social media app TikTok in particular has become home to two alternative spiritual movements, namely witchcraft ('WitchTok') and 'reality shifting'. Their rapid growth warrants an investigation into whether they too reflect secular modernity and thus disenchantment, or whether they in fact indicate a revival of the sacred. That they have come into fruition through the digital medium renders this question especially pertinent in light of claims that technology itself has become imbued with the potential for re-enchantment, despite this contradicting Max Weber's original secularization thesis in which technological advancement correlates with disenchantment. Also relevant to this inquiry is the question of postmodernity and its implications for the secular modern.

Drawing on a number of case studies that represent the general trends of digital spirituality on TikTok in 2020/1, this dissertation will critically evaluate whether the postmodern and potentially magical fluidity of cyberspace offers the potential for transcending the limits of secular modernity, or whether it is destined only to *reflect* it.

Lessons learned about Digital Spirituality

My dissertation investigates recent trends in digital spirituality - specifically, the practices of witchcraft and 'reality shifting' on the social media app TikTok - and to what extent they can be thought to reflect the regnant discourses of secularism in Western modernity and thereby extend Wouter Hanegraaff's thesis that 19th and 20th century occult movements existed 'in the mirror of secular thought'. Analyzing a range of case studies, I find that these spiritualities tend to remain largely faithful to the doctrines of the European Enlightenment (such as individualism, rationalism and skepticism towards religious institutions). I also probe the possibility that these spiritualities may also, by way of being *postmodern*, have the potential to 'melt the metanarratives' of secularism itself, considering also the potentially re-enchanting qualities of the internet and how they might affect this.

Key contribution to the field of Digital Religion Studies

My research undertakes the task of critically examining new online movements along similar lines of reasoning to those of Wouter Hanegraaff; that is, tracing their relationship to Western secular modernity and considering how, though appearing to defy modern disenchantment, they are largely a product of that same disenchantment. It is relatively unique in this respect, as previous examinations of digital spirituality (e.g. Christopher Partridge) tend to see them as more 're-enchanting' phenomena. It is also unique in that it focuses on perhaps the most recent waves of digital spirituality on TikTok, which (to my knowledge) have not yet been the subject of any other rigorous academic studies.

Graduate Dissertation

John Borchert, PhD, Syracuse University (awarded May 2021)
Lecturer, University of North Carolina, Greensboro
jwborchert@uncg.edu

Borchert, J. (2021). Immanent Technologies: Posthuman Digital Religion in America. [Doctor of Philosophy Dissertation, Syracuse University].

Abstract

This dissertation offers a posthuman theory of the digital mediation of religion, divided between theoretical chapters on posthumanism, ritual, and new media before two case studies: one on death, one on play. First developing conceptual relationships between posthumanism and religious studies and methodological connections between new media and ritual theories, it then asks questions in the playful and experimental ritual spaces of video games and the profoundly material and ecological spaces of digital mourning objects. For example: how do digital readouts on the health of a plant fed by cremains reposition living and dead bodies? Or, how do video games that ritualize death change how we think about playing with technology? By offering an emergent, embodied, networked, and ecological sense of ritualization and digital media this dissertation avoids logocentric, genderless, and disembodied theories of both religion and the digital while bringing a posthuman epistemology to religion, death, and media studies.

Key Research Findings on Immanent Technologies

Immanent Technologies: Posthuman Digital Religion in America showed me that digital death rituals are a functionally posthuman practice. The research places religion itself as a practice of mediation and looks to passages between the living and the dead where this mediation is particularly posthuman (a way of speaking about the human condition while working against anthropocentrism) to think of human being as an emergent set of relations between human and non-human agents. Two significant theoretical investments ground the work: one in a history of posthuman thinking and the other in media theories as sharing investments with theories of ritual. The case studies then utilize this posthuman approach to new media: an urn-cum-planter that feeds a sapling tree using human cremains monitored via a phone app exemplifies the ritualization of new media objects as place-making, intensifying, and performative, while the video gaming practice of No-

Death Runs (playing through a game without failure) is a ritualized negotiation of death through the manipulation of a media form.

Primary contribution to the field of Digital Religion Studies

The work as a whole establishes a methodology for understanding death and media practices as ritualization through a posthuman lens. In other words, this posthumanism helps religious studies think about new media through the human and non-human by allowing in shared etymological, temporal, and conceptual histories that ground digital rituals in these shared spaces. Moving beyond digital death to broader reaches in religious studies, posthumanism and digital religion help understand religion as mediation, as embodied and as in direct relation to death. These three insights: mediation, embodiment, and death, both fortify established and secure new areas of study or interest in the discipline. Attending to religion as mediation frees scholars from a functional/essential dichotomy and instead looks to religion as that thing in between. Attention to performances of embodiment has a stronghold on the discipline, and this work expands that into the digital and posthuman spaces for what counts as a body. Alongside this, thinking religion in direct relation to death moves the world of death studies closer into an established circle of scholarship around ritual.

Publications by the Network for New Media, Religion and Digital Culture Studies in 2021

Finally, each yearbook will highlight key works produced by the NMRDC director and members of the research team, to showcase the ways in which they seek to exemplify the continuing advancement and promotions of Digital Religion Studies into new areas.

Campbell, H.A. & Tsuria, R. (2021) *Digital religion. Understanding religious practice in digital media*, New York: Routledge.

This is the second edition of what has become the central critical and systematic survey of the study of religion and digital media. Key contributors of this volume make up the advisory board of the NMRDC. It covers religious engagement with a wide range of digital media forms and highlights examples of new media engagement in all five of the major world religions. From mobile apps and video games to virtual reality and social media, the book provides a detailed review of major topics including ritual, identity, community, authority, and embodiment. It includes a series of engaging case studies to illustrate and elucidate the thematic explorations; and considers the theoretical, ethical, and theological issues raised. This unique volume draws together the work of experts from key disciplinary perspectives and is the go-to volume for students and scholars wanting to develop a deeper understanding of the subject area. This new edition provides a comprehensive overview of this fast-paced, constantly developing, and fascinating field with new case studies and in-depth analyses of recent scholarship and developments.

Campbell, Heidi A.; Osteen, Sophia (2021). When Pastors put on the “Tech Hat”: How Churches Digitized during Covid-19. Available electronically from <https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/handle/1969.1/194959>

This is the first research report from the Tech in Churches During Covid-19 research project (<https://www.techinchurches.org/>), which investigates the role digital media has played in churches over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim of this study is to explore in detail the technological decision-making process churches and leaders have undergone during this time of great institutional change and adaptation impacting religious communities in unique ways. Report one analyzes and reports on key themes emerging from 50 Tech Talk sessions with 478

church leaders hosted online by the Center for Congregations of Indianapolis, Indiana in 2020 and 2021. Sessions focused on pastors and other church leaders discussing their technology choices and use during the pandemic, and the challenges and opportunities this created as they transitioned, often for the first time, into digital worship. This report centers on five key questions that help explore different church's choices regarding implement digital media, and the technological demands they discovered in moving from traditional offline church, to online and hybrid forms.

Campbell, Heidi (2021). Needed but Lacking: Impact of Pastors' Technology Background During the Pandemic. Available electronically from <https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/handle/1969.1/195017>

“Needed but Lacking: Impact of Pastors’ Technology Background During the Pandemic” is the first in a series of white papers which identifies specific areas of technological knowledge and digital media experience church leaders needed in order to successfully transition to online worship services during the pandemic. Needed but Lacking, draws its conclusions from the analysis of 50 Tech Talk sessions with 478 congregational leaders hosted by the Center for Congregations in 2020 and 2021, exploring their tech challenges and problem-solving strategies when implementing digital media. The paper explores three key takeaways from the Tech Talks about how pastors will adapt to online streaming: (1) pastors need to learn the basics of how to use media equipment, (2) pastors should have a general understanding of how the internet works and its effects on churches, and (3) pastors need to know how to problem-solve technological problems as they arise. Tech Trend papers provide a concise, but in-depth analysis of key themes raised in research reports coming out of the Tech in Churches During COVID-19 project (<https://www.techinchurches.org>). Needed but Lacking offers a response to the report “When Pastors Put on the ‘Tech Hat’: How Churches Digitized during COVID-19” released by the Tech in Churches project in November 2021.

Campbell, Heidi A., and Zachary Sheldon. (2021). "Religious Responses to Social Distancing Revealed through Memes during the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Religions* 12(9): 787. Retrieved from <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/12/9/787>

This article reports on the findings of a research project from the NMRDC conducted in 2020 called "Social Distancing in a World of Memes." It examines the emotive narratives surrounding the "new normal" of social distancing practices during the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic, as revealed by religiously focused Internet memes. In March 2020, many people were introduced to the concept of "social distancing" for the first time via news reports and media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic which led to the first lockdown. As the year progressed, social distancing discourse was combined with discussions of the practices of masking and quarantining, all of which became part of many countries' normal routines as a public health management strategy. Over time, social distancing has become a widely used public health strategy impacting many social groups, including religious adherents and their places of worship. Memes became a discursive space where practices of social distancing and religious attitudes towards these practices were expressed and debated. By examining memes centered on American Christianity, this study reveals that memetic narratives in the early months of the pandemic indicate a positive framing of behaviors intended to help reduce the spread of COVID-19, and a negative framing of the attitudes of religious individuals and organizations who seem to privilege the cultural practices of their belief over the core values of the Christian faith.

Campbell, Heidi A; Shepherd, Troy (2021). What Should Post-Pandemic Religion Look Like? Digital Religion Publishing & OakTrust-TAMU Libraries Available electronically from <https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/handle/1969.1/192408>

This eBook provides a summary of research conducted by the NMRDC in 2020 about trends emerging from how churches engaged with technology during the pandemic. It presents these findings in terms of ten lessons that religious leaders need to seriously consider to cultivate resilience in their work and ministry related to technology during the COVID-19 global pandemic. We draw these specifically from ideas shared in a series of three eBooks that Dr. Heidi Campbell compiled in 2020 on how religious communities and their worship was being shaped by technology and the conditions of the pandemic.

Campbell, HA (2021). *Revisiting the Distanced Church*. Texas: Digital Religion Publishing & OakTrust-TAMU Libraries. Available electronically from <https://doi.org/10.21423/revisitingthechurch>

This eBook provides a follow-up conversation with key contributors from the eBook *The Distanced Church* which was published in April 2020 by the publishing arm of the NMRDC, Digital Religion Publishing. *The Distanced Church* explored how church leaders were responding and adapting to the necessary move online of traditional services during the first lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Revisiting the Distanced Church* offers a "then and now" reflection on how pastors and scholars see the evolving relationship between the church and digital media one year later after the global migration of the church online. It also provides a unique look into the long-term implications of these technology choices and experimentation on the church, how leaders and scholars are reflecting on the present-future of digital ministry, and the areas that need further theological reflection due to these changes.