

*Book Review*

**Heidi A. Campbell & Ruth Tsuria (Eds.), “Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in Digital Media (2nd edition)”, Routledge, 2022. ISBN 978-0-367-25775-7**

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Article history:

Submitted: 28 Feb 2022

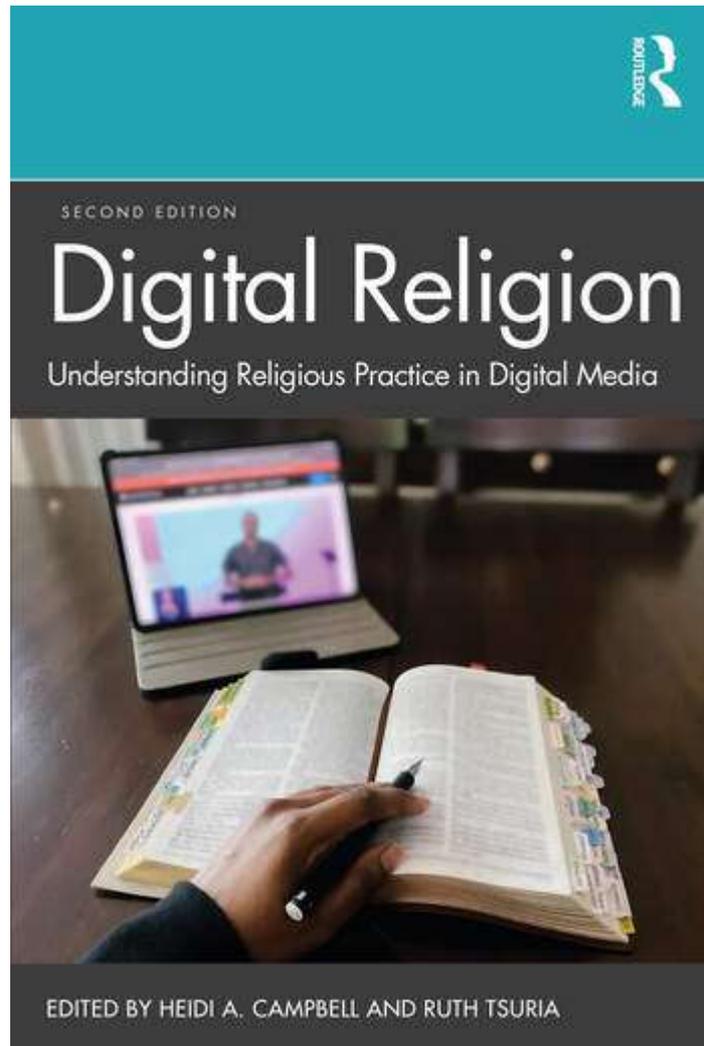
Accepted: 30 May 2022

Published: 1 Dec 2022

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**Abstract:** Digital religion, or issues on religion and digital media, are the expertise of Heidi A. Campbell and Ruth Tsuria. Both are prominent scholars on this topic, and this edited book is one of their latest important works. The review will describe the book entitled “Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in Digital Media” edited by Heidi A. Campbell and Ruth Tsuria. This study developed because of the presence of social media that gave rise to digital cultural arenas such as virtual reality, artificial intelligence, the internet of things, and big data. From here, the digital religion field develops in various ways. In this book review, several notes can be shared to be used as an assessment before reading. This book highlights the dynamics of such research in a variety of topics whose questions come from artificial intelligence and the influence of technological views.

**Keywords:** digital religion; Heidi A. Campbell; internet; religious practice; Ruth Tsuria.



## Book Features

The book shows a semiotic cover through the signs about the substance of the book corresponding to the topic. On the cover is an illustration of a Bible being studied while a laptop shows a presentation person display. It can be said that the illustration represents the substance that exists on the topic in the book as "understanding of digital religion."

The language used is straightforward so that the discussions are easy to understand. The authors also do not use complicated vocabulary but rather place a common vocabulary so that there is no need for non-native speakers to keep the dictionary open. The content discussed in this book is also comprehensive. The author conveys the content about understanding religion in the digital realm with a complete and integrated discussion and has a variety of viewpoints. The author presents the content holistically. In substance, this book is highly recommended for academics or the public who are interested in the study of religion in the digital dimension. The contents of the book strongly describe the phenomenon of religion in the midst of disruptions that occur in the current era.

## Religion and the Development of Digital Technology

In this book, studies attempt to understand how religion is defined, developed, and interacted with in a global community network. The book also illustrates the rise of online religion and academic approaches. The earlier study of digital religion can be traced back to the mid-1990s, which can be seen from the emergence of research on online neo-Pagans who use the internet as a forum for religious communities.<sup>1</sup>

Since then, the term cyber-religion has been used to manifest religious rituals and gatherings on online platforms. Cyber religion is used to suggest a new type of religious community connected through internet technology and virtual cyberspace environments. The emphasis is on different, new, and alienated types of traditional religions.<sup>2</sup>

In the mid-2000s, academics used the term virtual religion rather than cyber religion. It emphasizes the digital environment as unique to offline space. However, the term "virtual" becomes problematic because it refers to the concept of "virtual reality." Term then evolved again into "religion online" and "online religion". This term indicates the difference between information and rituals based on practices and sources offline or forms of practice that are present in digital religious expression. Online religion represents the flexibility of the internet to create a new form of religious practice life.<sup>3</sup>

In the 2010s, the study of religion and the internet in a digital context was referred to as "digital religion." This term focuses on online religious practice, research, and book projects. Digital religion can be understood as a religion regulated in new ways through digital media and culture. This leads to a new understanding of religion. This practice has implications in terms of offline and online. Therefore, there is always a demanding need for new characteristics or typologies within this topic.<sup>4</sup>

## Book Sections: Themes, Cases, and Reflections

Broadly speaking, this book consists of three large parts or sections. By the three sections the book is divided into 21 chapters, plus an introductory chapter. In the first section, entitled "Themes in the study of religion and new media," this book describes the most important themes in the field, namely Religion, Ritual, Identity, Community, Authority, and Embodiment.

In the second section, entitled "Thematic Case Studies," are kinds of breakdowns of those themes. There are chapters on Religion, namely "Finding your true self: YouTubing the South Korean temple stay" and "A littler birdie told me something about religion: religion on Twitter." From Ritual theme, there is "A case study in digital religion: That Dragon, Cancer" and "Prayer app rituals: how Islamic participants engage with technological and religious affordances in

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<sup>1</sup> Giulia Evolvi, "Religion, New Media, and Digital Culture," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, 23 Februari 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ACREFORE/9780199340378.013.917>.

<sup>2</sup> Piotr Siuda, "Mapping Digital Religion: Exploring the Need for New Typologies," *Religions* 2021, Vol. 12, Page 373 12, no. 6 (21 Mei 2021): 373, <https://doi.org/10.3390/REL12060373>.

<sup>3</sup> Heidi A. Campbell dan Alessandra Vitullo, "Assessing changes in the study of religious communities in digital religion studies," *Church, Communication and Culture* 1, no. 1 (2016): 73–89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23753234.2016.1181301>; Ruth Tsuria, "Digital Media : When God Becomes Everybody — The Blurring of Sacred and Profane," *Religions* 12 (2021): 110.

<sup>4</sup> Siuda, "Mapping Digital Religion: Exploring the Need for New Typologies."

Muslim Pro.” Then, from the theme of Identity, there are “#EmptyThePews: ex-evangelicals' identity on Twitter” and “The Niqab is a Beautiful Extension of My Face': niqab adoption as meta-conversion in YouTube livestreaming videos.” Community theme consists of "Dual production for dual publics: habad's inward and outward online presence" and "Stillness on the hillside: worship online with British Quakers.” While Authority theme consists of “The passive-aggressive Haredi campaign against the smartphone” and “Maintaining and establishing authority on Facebook: a case study on catholic priests,” the theme of Embodiment provides us with “Gamified embodiment experiences in Indian video games” and "Embodiment: the digital afterlife.”

The Religion chapters discuss how religion is understood in relation to the digital world and the scope of what categories digital religion exists and defines. This chapter describes the complexity of religious learning and how traditional definitions renegotiated in digital relationships. An exploration of how religion is conceptualized and tied down over two and a half decades of research in digital religion.

This relates to the chapter "Religion: finding your true self: You Tubing the South Korean temple stay," in which the author tries to test how "temple stays" are understood as a Buddhist experience and part of an increasingly popular trend in South Korea. Temple stays are understood in Buddhism, secularism, South Korea, and culture in the explanation of the chapter.

Another case study on the religion chapter is also featured in the chapter "A little birdie told me something about religion: religion on Twitter.” This chapter discussed how religion is depicted and spread on the popular social media site, Twitter. This chapter explores hashtags #Christianity, #Islam, and other popular tweets they connect with. The results show how digital platforms open up the possibility of marginalized voices being heard, even reinforcing traditional religious views.

The Ritual chapters underscore how religious practices are shown and the ritualization implications of behavior in the online religious world. Rituals become part of the meaning-making system so that it can become a religious and secular act. Online ritual studies challenge religious activists to consider what "do" religion and even "be" religious in a digital realm mean. This case study was placed in the chapter "A case study in digital religion: That Dragon, Cancer," which shows that "do" religion through the creation of video games. Interestingly, the video game “That Dragon, Cancer” is analyzed and used to discuss the issues of death, graveyard, religion, and hope in the game directly.

The case study on the ritual chapter is also contained in the chapter "Prayer app rituals: how Islamic participants engage with technological and religious affordances in Muslim Pro.” The study used a unique user testing methodology to test how Muslim participants bonded with a mobile prayer app. The study demonstrates the use of digital tools in traditional fashion following orthodoxy rather than religious innovation.

The Identity-related chapters investigate how the internet is framed as a site of identity construction, negotiation, and appearance that presents unique challenges and opportunities for individuals and religious groups. The results showed that online religious identity differs from religious identity in pre-Internet society. Digital media provides space to express religious

identity and helps connect online and offline to discover and negotiate personal meaning every day.

Two case studies related to this are in the chapter "#EmptyThePews: ex-evangelicals' identity on Twitter." This chapter explores the relationship between religious identity and social media. In this case, social media is used to negotiate religious identity. For the second case study, there is the chapter "The Niqab is a Beautiful Extension of My Face": niqab adoption as meta-conversion in YouTube life streaming videos." This chapter uncovers a YouTube narrative regarding the conversion or adoption of an Islamic veil called the niqab. The chapter explains how self-re-religious identity and narratives are not separated from each other and how digital platforms open up civic engagement, navigational inequalities, and individual subjectivity performance.

The "Community" chapters describe the rise of online groups and how early they were seen as a community. The rise of online communities creates new possibilities for the discourse of interaction and social challenges of the community for many religious groups. The study of vigilance of online communities is driven by changing conceptions of how communities are formed and their function in digital media culture.

In "Dual production for dual publics: Chabad's inward and outward online presence", discussed how Chabad's online community utilizes the internet. The chapter shows how digital spaces are not used to increase offline participation, but are more focused on online presence. Meanwhile, "Stillness on the hillside: worship online with British Quakers" explained how online worship within the Quaker community presents theology, uses media and finds stillness in a virtual setting. It shows that a community can exist using communication technologies even the practice is silence.

In the chapter "Authority," the internet impacts on religious authority are being studied. The chapters suggest that traditional religious authority would be disrupted or undermined by digital technologies. It proposed that the internet highlights paradoxes of authority online. Authority online can empower and challenge new and traditional forms of religious authority.

In the case study featured in the chapter "Maintaining and establishing authority on Facebook: a case study on Catholic priests," the chapter examines the way Catholic priests use the theoretical frameworks of Weber, Lincoln, and Hofstede. The results showed how pre-pastors who used Facebook might disseminate and consume information, build identities, and develop new relationships with other pastors.

In the chapter "embodiment," the book show debate on what is considered the real and the virtual context. Embodiment was defined as "a way inhabiting the world as well as the source of personhood, self, and subjectivity, and the precondition of intersubjectivity." It relates to our spiritual bodies as well. This chapter showed the distinction between online and offline bodies by considering people's experiences, and digital bodies can be considered authentic online.

The case study of the embodiment can be applied in the chapter "The Digital Afterlife." The chapter discusses the ways in which we live online even after we die. It illustrates how the digital afterlife exemplifies existential, religious striving. Meanwhile, in "Gamified embodiment experiences in Indian video games," the chapter shows how digital embodied experience can foster religiously and emotionally enhanced encounters for the player.

Finally, in the third section, entitled "Reflections on studying religion and digital media," there are three chapters discussing theoretical framework, ethical issues, and theology issues. They are "Theoretical frameworks for approaching religion and new media," "Ethical issues in the study of religion and new media," and "Theology and the new media."

The theoretical framework in the study and evaluation of digital media cannot escape an engagement with four approaches, including media ecology, mediation, mediatization, and religious shaping of technology. Besides conducting research in digital media contexts, one has to be aware of the ethical challenges encountered in studying such questions of identity, community, and authority online. Last but not least, it is also pivotal to reflect on how digital culture impacts theology and how it connects to technology and the internet. It concludes that theology can seek understanding in the world of the internet and digital media.

## Conclusion

This book attempts to provide fresh, formed interdisciplinary research in terms of the study of religion and the internet presence in everyday life. Literature studies show a correlation between digital religion and science, such as sociology, psychology, architecture, and more. This book contributes theoretical and substantive data that impacts the technology in various people's lives. Academics, students, and practitioners from various studies can use this book to foster a reflection on the nuances of how religion takes its place in a digital environment.

In the study of religion and digital media, there have been various ways over the past few decades. It is divided into various waves of research subfields. In the first wave, the focus was on the extraordinary aspect of cyberspace, where religion can do anything. This phenomenon is reflected in the digital world. The second wave focused on a balanced approach that not only focused on technology but could become a new form of online religious expression. The third wave characterized the return of interpretive and theoretical research. Academics seek to identify methods and tools for analyzing data in the discovery of a larger theoretical framework. The fourth wave explores everyday religion using digital technology with a focus on identity, community, and religious authority. The fifth wave, in addition to continuing the fourth wave, also tracing the new discoveries.

These waves show how the dynamics of research methods and approaches are growing over time. Therefore, the study of digital religion also has the phenomenon of scientific studies that continues to process the same as other studies. This book seeks to present a good research map for the process of scientific, scholarly development.

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