

Lisa Kienzl

**Book Review. August E. Grant / Amanda F.C. Sturgill / Chiung Hwang Chen / Daniel A. Stout (eds.), Religion Online: How Digital Technology Is Changing the Way We Worship and Pray**

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## Book Review

# August E. Grant / Amanda F.C. Sturgill / Chiung Hwang Chen / Daniel A. Stout (eds.), Religion Online How Digital Technology Is Changing the Way We Worship and Pray

2 volumes, Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2019, 624 pages,  
ISBN: 978-1-4408-5372-2

The edited work *Religion Online: How Digital Technology Is Changing the Way We Worship and Pray* is a comprehensive collection of 35 chapters in two volumes addressing religion and (digital) media technologies. The first volume, *Religion in Cyberspace*, focuses on a variety of aspects of religion and (digital) media technology in general, while the second volume, *Faith Groups and Digital Media*, addresses religious communities and their relation to media. This division structures the books and allows the reader to navigate easily through the comprehensive and differently themed volumes. The extensive collection also allows a discussion of a wide variety of topics, showcases disciplinary approaches, and presents numerous case studies, from thoughts on how religious institutions use social media (vol. 1, chapter 3) to questions of religious authority on specific media platforms (vol. 1, chapter 8) to an analysis of evangelical gamers as further development of the complex relationship between American evangelicalism and popular (digital) culture (vol. 2, chapter 4).

The chapters in volume one focus mainly on the ways religion has been influenced by and connected to (digital) media technologies in the last decades. In the introduction, August E. Grant and Daniel A. Stout provide insight into the multiple perspectives that have contributed to this volume and

highlight the significance of (digital) media technology for religious communities and practices. Digital media are important for religious communities to share information but also to engage in “real-time interactions” (vol. 1, p. 4) with their practitioners, for example when connecting for prayer online despite their different physical locations. In volume one, chapters 2 to 7 focus on technology and religious practices in general, for example how religious communities are using digital media. The next five chapters address specific traditions, such as the use of digital media by Catholic priests (vol. 1, chapter 8) or an analysis of the websites of congregations in the Union of Reformed Judaism (vol. 1, chapter 9), while chapter 13 discusses religious extremism, and chapters 14 to 17 examine “quasi-religious practices from festivals to fandom” (vol. 1, p. 8).

Volume two addresses religious communities and their relation to and engagement with (digital) media, offering insight into a broad variety of religious traditions. The discussion in the introduction by August E. Grant and Amanda F.C. Sturgill makes the selection process for the chapters in the second volume transparent for the reader and reveals the challenges faced when creating such an extensive project. The editors elaborate on their decision about how many chapters would be dedicated to specific religious traditions and explain, for example, that only one chapter deals with Islam because they “found few differences in the utilization of digital technologies” among various Islamic traditions (vol. 2, p. 3). Various Christian communities are discussed in chapters 2 to 8 while the next three chapters deal with a variety of Jewish traditions. Chapter 12 engages with Islam and (digital) media. In chapters 13 to 15, Hinduism and Jainism with their various approaches towards media and technology are examined, while chapter 16 addresses Buddhism outside Asia and its connection to media. The last two chapters focus on new religious movements, Scientology and New Age religions, and their close relation to digital media technology. All chapters contextualize the respective religious traditions and provide general information about them, which makes this volume especially approachable for readers who are not highly familiar with a particular religious tradition or religion in general. Also, the remarks on future research possibilities that appear at the end of each chapter in both volumes open up interesting questions for the development of the field.

The editors pursue the ambitious goal of establishing “the most comprehensive picture available to date of the interplay of religion and digital technology” (vol. 1, p. 8 as well as vol. 2, p. 2). In the introduction to the first

volume, the editors emphasize a broad definition of religion. A discussion of the editors' and authors' understandings of cyberspace (in particular given the volume's title) and the Internet would have been an interesting addition, especially in relation to a more detailed engagement with historical developments and the use of these terms in academic discourses as well as in the field of media and religion. The editors highlight the importance of thinking about varying access to digital media technologies in different places around the world (vol. 1, p. 8). However, a broader discussion of the Global South as well as economic aspects in relation to religion and media technology would have enhanced the volumes' contribution to the existing academic discourse.

Some chapters provide very interesting thoughts on theoretical frameworks that can be used to engage with religion and media technology, such as Joonseong Lee's connection of Foucault and Deleuze as theoretical frameworks for an interpretation of Won Buddhism on the Internet (vol. 1, chapter 12). The author's discussion of his own position in this religious tradition (vol. 1, p. 176) helpfully highlights the necessity for researchers to reflect their own roles within their field of research. The discussions of the role of artificial intelligence (vol. 1, chapter 5) as well as big data (vol. 1, chapter 6) in the understanding of technology as an important part of religious practices and everyday life encourage the reader to think further about the development of technology and its relevance for religious traditions. Particularly, Heidi D. Blossom, Jeffrey S. Wilkinson, Alexander Gorelik, and Stephen D. Perry's discussion of the potential misuse of big data and the challenges posed by small data in polls and statistics emphasizes the importance of contextualizing collected data (vol. 1, p. 77–81). They explain the potential misinterpretation of small data using a statistic by Gallup as an example. This graph shows the number of people who have been members of a church or synagogue since the 1990s in the United States (vol. 1, p. 79). The authors emphasize that the data presented here is problematic, and could be misused, since it is not clear how it was collected, who exactly participated in the survey, or how the data of people affiliated with other religious traditions was handled.

The case studies in both volumes engage with a range of religious traditions and aspects of the interrelation between religion and (digital) media technology on particular levels, running from the challenges of digital media for Roman Catholic liturgy (vol. 1, chapter 11) to in-depth interviews with Jain mendicants to find out more about their understanding and use of

media technology (vol. 2, chapter 15). Because of this broad approach, chapters on very different religious traditions and their relationships to media are placed next to each other, especially in the second volume. This allows readers to easily move between chapters and encourages them to further think about similarities and differences between the presented religious traditions and media. For example, several chapters address the reluctant use or refusal of digital media in religious communities: Jack Turner (vol. 2, chapter 8) discusses the partly hesitant use of media in Orthodox Christianity, Yoel Cohen (vol. 2, chapter 9) gives insights into differences between Modern Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox approaches towards media, while Ian Case Punnett (vol. 2, chapter 6) discusses the Anabaptists' and especially the Amish's ambivalent relationship with media and technology. When the results presented in these chapters are compared, similar arguments within religious discourses, become visible. For example, the notion that the outside world acts as a distraction from a religious life or the view that media might challenge established community structures and authorities. I can only agree with the editors' conclusion that the studies collected here reveal similarities between religious traditions "despite the differences in faith, practices, and beliefs" (vol. 2, p. 8).

In *Religion Online: How Digital Technology Is Changing the Way We Worship and Pray*, the editors and authors provide a comprehensive overview of religious communities, practices, and traditions and of their entanglement with (digital) media technologies that will be appealing to many readers. Young researchers working in the field of religion and media might find this collection helpful if they seek an overview of this topic. Additionally, established scholars will be able to take away impulses for further research, gain new insight into the interrelation of religious traditions and (digital) media technologies, or learn from the results of a specific case study. In particular, the compilation of case studies on similar questions across religious traditions encourages reflection on overall similarities and differences, but also highlights the importance of further multidisciplinary research.