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Book Review
Giulia Isetti / Elisa Innerhofer / Harald Pechlaner / Michael de Rachewiltz (eds.), Religion in the Age of Digitalization

From New Media to Spiritual Machines

Religion in the Age of Digitalization: From New Media to Spiritual Machines, edited by Giulia Isetti, Elisa Innerhofer, Harald Pechlaner, and Michael de Rachewiltz, is the newest addition to the Media, Religion and Culture series from Routledge. Functioning as a capstone to two conferences at the Center for Advanced Studies at Eurac Research in Bolzano, Italy, the volume gathers together contributions by scholars from many countries and disciplines, which are grouped here into two sections: the first is a collection of case studies which observe how Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam engage with a trend that this book will call "digitalization", and the second includes more theoretical engagements with this trend and suggestions about what we might expect to see at the border between religion and technology moving forward.

Even though this book's chapters almost never reference each other, the book's insights shine most clearly when it is read all the way through, including the introduction: whether or not the reader is interested in the particularities of each chapter's topic, the whole is indeed greater than the sum of the parts in this case. While each chapter explicates its own definitions for terms like "digitalization", "religion", and "spirituality" as needed, the introduction from the editors is most helpful for clarifying the book's object. It effectively sets the stage by invoking the work of well-known scholars in

the emerging interdisciplinary field of "digital religion", as well as the recent development of this field towards regionally specific explorations of the topic. This book intends to advance this scholarly conversation by providing "a panorama of the latest developments taking place in five major world religions and their engagement with digitalization, more specifically new media and artificial intelligence" (2), as well as some more speculative perspectives about what is possible at the border between technology and spirituality.

The decision to present the case studies of religions engaging positively and negatively with digitalization before presenting the more theoretical perspectives on the future landscape of digital religion contributes to the book's success in two main ways. The first is the demarcation of what is meant by the term "digitalization": on the one hand, quite a bit happens underneath this theoretical umbrella, and on the other hand, this book offers something specific and different from the previous installments of the Media, Religion and Culture series. In this book, the term refers to the process of making social phenomena (religious practices, modes of communication, etc.) digital as experienced by individuals and groups. Given the fluidity of language around contemporary technology and the dynamism of religion's interactions with it, the meaning of "digitalization" is a matter of "show, don't tell", which the case studies do very effectively. Second, the positioning of the case studies before the more theoretical chapters allows the book to demonstrate the importance of its topic in stride, such that by the time the reader has arrived at the contributors' suggestions about what we might expect to see on the horizon of this digital age, a sense that these issues are immanent, not distant, has already been built up.

The case studies offer a balanced depiction of religious engagements with digitalization, ranging from examples of religious motivations to avoid the use of new technology, such as abstinence from the Internet in French monasteries (chap. 5, by Isabelle Jonveaux); to the creation of software programs for facilitating a user's religious practice, such as the app "buddhify" (chap. 3, by Gregory Price Grieve and Daniel Veidlinger); to robots and AI programs, like Mindar the scripture-proclaiming, sermon-preaching, humanoid robot, which actually engage in religious activities such as evangelizing and serving as priests in religious rituals (chap. 7, by Pauline Hope Cheong). These examples color in a spectrum of stances towards technology: they range from a techno-negative attitude that sees digitalization as pulling individuals away from the sacred into the profane, to an instrumentalist attitude that sees digitalization as simply offering new tools for the lived performance of religion, to a techno-positive attitude that sees digitalization as expanding the

realm of the sacred to include new spiritualize-able places and beings. When read in series, these accounts leave the reader with the sense that religion in the age of digitalization is undecided – a fruitful set-up for the second section of the book. As stand-alone explorations, the case study chapters generally do a good job of responsibly pointing out how specific their scopes are, highlighting the unexplored plurality contained within each religion studied. In light of this and the diversity of perspectives displayed across the case studies, there are many trajectories for future research to be found here.

The second section of the book contains theoretical perspectives on what we might expect on the horizon of this age of digitalization. Several of these chapters discuss a theme that did not appear substantively among the case studies: post- and transhumanism. Next to the perspectives presented in the case studies, the discussion of post- and transhumanism is awkward to situate, since (as Boris Rähme's chapter explains) these movements sometimes appear to be a total merger of religion and technology, but also sometimes appear to be a replacement of religion by technology, depending on how the definitional lines are drawn. Rähme is quick to point out that most transhumanists do not consider their movement to be a religion, and the issue is probably best explored when framed within his and Georg Gasser's critical treatment of the secularization hypothesis. Perspectives which might be better described as "techno-cautious", rather than "techno-negative", are offered by Harald Walach and Bishop Ivo Muser. The latter's contribution is found in chapter 9, a short conversation between Bishop Muser and Harald Pechlaner on the occasion of Roland Benedikter's presentation at the "Digital Religion" conference at Eurac Research in 2018. This conversation is indispensable to the book, as it begins to uncover the human reality of the engagement between religion and digitalization: Bishop Muser shares his pastoral concerns about what might be lost in a radically digitized future and his feeling of "rebellion" (115) towards that possible loss functions as a necessary interpersonal moment amidst the rest of the scholarly text.

The perspectives in the second section of the book also include explorations of how questions in ethics (chap. 14, by Peter Kirchschlaeger) and ontology (chap. 11, by Michael de Rachewiltz) are illuminated from the digitalization angle. Once again, these chapters are valuable as stand-alone pieces, but they are best read in the context of the whole book. The ethics chapter from Peter Kirchschläger highlights how the relationship between tech and ethics is not one of proposition and response, but rather an ongoing conversation in which technology and ethics offer opportunities to each

other. While the other chapters are not explicitly cited here, Kirchschläger's position is clearly applicable to the case studies from earlier in the book. De Rachewiltz begins from the promises of transhumanism and asks more ontological questions about the theoretical limits of a synthesis of technology and spirituality, concluding that spirituality is probably dependent on structures of human experiences that might not be replicable by technology.

I hesitate to suggest the inclusion of another interdisciplinary perspective to an already interdisciplinary work, but one note that seemed to be missing from this book about possible futures was a technology-oriented account of the horizon of possibilities for digital technology. While some contemporary pieces of computer software and hardware were described in the case studies, the lack of a voice representing computer science and engineering leaves the reader with a quite foggy and uncertain view of where the tech industry believes itself to be going. Given the prospects of neural interfaces, more advanced machine learning, and gene-editing biotech on the not-so-distant horizon, an account of current technical challenges to those pursuits would have been a welcome addition to this book. In particular, the technological promises of transhumanism (see especially chap. 11) could have been more properly analyzed had they been situated next to a technical description of the actual gap between current tech and those hypothetical advancements by a qualified voice. The absence of such an account inadvertently pushes the reader toward the assumption that technology is literally limitless – that time is the only constraint on technical progress, ignoring issues such as the availability of resources or the bounds of physics.

That said, *Religion in the Age of Digitalization* is still a very valuable contribution to the expanding field of digital religion, especially as it brings together insightful analysis of organic engagements between lived religion and new technologies, speculative discussion about the theoretical possibilities of technology today and in the future, and expressions of fear and excitement about what will happen on the border of religion and tech in the near future. The book is well-balanced in its presentation of the varied positions on new technology from religious perspectives. In their own words, the editors set out to present a "panorama" of the current landscape alongside an interdisciplinary investigation of possible futures. The panorama is clear, wide, and deep, and the speculative work is insightful and conducive to further research in the future. *Religion in the Age of Digitalization* makes for a worthy addition to the literature and would also be a fruitful starting point for scholars taking their first look at these thought-provoking topics.