

Reflection on Networked Religion Module
What Religious Practice Online Can Teach Us about How Religion is Perceived in Digital Culture

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Module Description:

The purpose of this module is to provide a framework for discussing how religion is practiced on the Internet and through other digital media, in order to consider the broader shift in how people conceive of and practice religion in digital culture. The concept of networked religion is introduced as a way to discuss some of the dominant patterns and assumptions shaping popular belief and practices related to religion both online and offline within contemporary popular culture. These traits of networked religion have important ethical, theological, and practical implications for people involved in pastoral care, religious education, and spiritual development.

Objectives:

- 1) Introduce the concept of networked religion as a way to talk about trends in religious practice occurring in society both online and offline.
- 2) Consider the impact the Internet and digital culture are having on religious practice and perceptions of religion in contemporary culture.
- 3) Provide a framework for discussing significant shifts in everyday religious practice in order to consider the broader implications these have for religious groups.

Recommended readings:

Campbell, Heidi. (2012). Understanding the relationship between religious practice online and offline in a networked society. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. 80(1), 64-93.

Campbell, Heidi and Garner, Stephen. (2016). *Networked Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic. [Chapter 3]

Networked Religion is presented as a concept that helps describe how religion, in general, is being practiced by people in online spaces and through networked technologies in many parts of contemporary culture. Using the metaphor of the network, it suggests our religious relationships, identities, and understanding of religious rituals are being transformed as we engage with newer technologies such as the Internet. These technologies encourage less rigid religious affiliations and less formal or static adherence to traditional authority structures and hierarchies.

Networked Religion is defined by core 5 characteristics, identified through the synthesis of two decades of research conducted by scholars who study the intersection of digital media, culture, and religion. It highlights the key ways people practice on the Internet, and it suggests these are increasingly becoming characteristics that define people's expectations and understandings of religion in offline culture as well. According to the article "Understanding the relationship between religious practice online and offline in a networked society," these characteristics can be defined and described as follows.

Networked community suggests communities function as loose social networks with varying levels of religious affiliation and commitment. This transforms notions of membership in fixed, geographically-bound community to highlight the fact that people live simultaneously in multiple social networks that are emergent, varying in depth, fluid, and highly personalized.

Storied identity offers an understanding of the religious self which is malleable rather than fixed, yet unified through connecting to a select narrative. Individuals are able to assemble and perform their identity online in new ways through digital resources which are also used to connect this identity to a common group or experience to solidify meaning. This reflects changing perceptions of the nature of the self within wider society.

Shifting authority notes that there is a shift occurring within traditional religious power structures through the institution of new gatekeepers and authority roles and structures online. This means authority within a networked structure creates challenges between new and old authorities, as offline leaders seek to solidify their position and control in the face of newly empowered sources, raising issues of legitimacy, authenticity, and status within the social sphere.

Convergent practice outlines the blending of religious rituals and information from multiple sources in ways that build a self-directed form of spiritual engagement online. Here networked interaction creates new possibilities for highly individualized and hybridized traditional/innovative forms of practice and modes of knowing.

Multi-site reality suggests that the online world is consciously and unconsciously imprinted by users' offline values, so online ways of being are informed by patterns of life offline. This means there is a strong interconnection and potential movement between online and offline contexts, expectation, and behaviors. This ideological overlap guides individuals' network interactions. (Campbell, 2012, pg. 91-92)

The next page offers a discussion guide, summarizing the 5 characteristics of Networked Religion highlighted in the recommended readings. It provides a short definition of each characteristic along with an example of how this trait can be observed within Internet and social practice. It also offers questions that can spark discussion about the implications these have for religious groups within contemporary society.

Discussion Guide on Networked Religion

What is Networked Religion?

It is a concept that suggests traditional structures and boundaries within religious communities are perceived by people to be dynamic and flexible, so connections to previous community or institutional affiliation becomes less important as individuals have more freedom to re-define orthodox religious practices in ways that fit in with their digitally mediated lives.

Networked Religion is defined by five core concepts.

Convergent Practice

The Internet allows people to personalize their religious behavior and belief by seeking out information and guidance through multiple resources online. This means religious practice becomes more individualized as people blend information and rituals from different sources online to create their own collection of digital wisdom.

EXAMPLE: Mobile phones enable you to assemble your own spiritual formation routine, by signing up for online devotionals delivered daily via email and by downloading apps that offer bible reading programs or other prayer resources.

CHALLENGE: What does it mean for religious groups if individuals see drawing spiritual wisdom and practices from multiple sources and even traditions as normative in digital culture?

Multi-site Reality

As the Internet has increasingly become part of many people's everyday lives, their online and offline connections, practices, and friendships become entwined and interconnected. This means people no longer see the online and offline as separate spheres of engagement, but blended spheres of engagement in social, work, and religious activities.

EXAMPLE: Our friendships and connections with other church members have increasingly become digitally-mediated, as we stay in contact via text message, email, phone, and social media throughout the week—often more regularly than face-to-face connection.

CHALLENGE: How do we respond to people who now see the church or religious community simply as one of their many spheres of spiritual engagement and input? What impact will it have if online spaces and relationships are perceived as more vibrant spaces for religious interconnection than traditional offline communities and gatherings?

Networked Community

The Internet creates and supports new forms of community. This means rather than community being defined through family, geographical, or institutional connection, people see communities as something they create for themselves through personal social networks that are often highly mediated by technology.

EXAMPLE: Facebook allows you to build your own networked community by choosing what people, groups, and interests you connect to. This creates a community of personal, social connections you largely control.

CHALLENGE: What are the implications of membership and commitment if faith communities are based on spiritual preferences and relationship ties over institutional or “parish”

commitments? What does it mean to understand the body of Christ as global and networked rather than simply local centered?

Storied Identity

Online platforms allow people to construct their religious identity through the choices they make about how they present their spiritual selves and beliefs online. Choosing specific labels and/or connecting to specific groups or websites becomes an act of identity performance. This new level of personal control and public display can encourage people to experiment with their presentations of their religious self online.

EXAMPLE: Social media profiles, like those found on Instagram or Facebook, allow individual to select specific identifiers and titles to describe themselves and creatively express their beliefs and convictions—not only through the words they post, but through images, videos, and links as well.

CHALLENGE: When a person’s religious identify becomes seen as something to be created and as a personal rather than a communal act, what impact does this have on wider understandings of what it means to be Christian, or part of a specific Christian group?

Shifting Authority

The Internet provides individuals unique opportunities to influence others in ways that challenge religious leaders and authority structures. Digital media also enable traditional leaders to publicize and reinforce their views and positions. This means the Internet challenges and empowers established religious authority simultaneously.

EXAMPLE: Twitter offers a platform both where previously unheard voices within religious communities can gain a hearing and public prominence, and where pastors can amplify their already established positions and beliefs.

CHALLENGE: What are the implication for people who primarily receive their religious education and theological instructions from online thought leaders, some of whom may not have the accountability or oversight of traditional religious leaders and sources?

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