Religion in the Digital Age
RN 356 / AA 356 & RN 656 / AA 656

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Course Description:

How has technology impacted religion? This hands-on course explores how digital technologies like the Internet, social media, gaming, and artificial intelligence have changed the way that people think about religion.

Hub Learning Outcomes:

Writing Intensive Outcome 1

This class will focus on intersections between religion and various modes of digital technologies, using theories drawn from Internet studies, media studies, and digital religion studies. Students will use this information to produce several analytical writings.

Writing Intensive Outcome 2

Utilizing a discussion-based approach teaching model, students will actively engage assigned readings in the pedagogical setting. Additionally, students will participate in a part of the course known as the "share out session". On their assigned day, students will

lead the discussion of one of the readings. This exercise is vital because it provides a litmus test of a student's understanding of assigned reading material.

Writing Intensive Outcome 3

Students will attend four workshops on academic blog writing, digitization methods/ethics, mobile application design/development, and digitally-based analytical writing. Students will use information gained in these workshops to complete three writing assignments. The first is a blog essay, highlighting a digitized artifact from BU's Gotlieb Archival Research Center. The second assignment is a clearly written description of the student's mobile application design. Lastly, students will write a final research paper that demonstrates their engagement of digital religion.

Digital/Multimedia Outcome 1

Students, both in class discussions and in their assignments, will engage with multiple forms of digital technologies to explore the various representations of religion in the digital world. Students will be able to construct arguments for this interconnection between religion and technology using the Internet, mobile application development, and techniques in Digital Studies, e.g. game theory.

Digital/Multimedia Outcome 2

From the onset, students attend a workshop where they will be introduced to ethical issues in the study of religion and new media in the form of digitalization. They will explore unique challenges that researchers face when taking a cultural, digitally-based approach to religion. Specifically, time will be spent discussing digital ethics in relationship to the digitization of historical artifacts.

Digital/Multimedia Outcome 3

Students will create three products using different digital platforms. First, students will write a blog essay using a historical artifact that they digitized in partnership with an archivist in the Gotlieb Archival Research Center. Secondly, students will create blueprints for their own unique religious mobile application. SPARK! and Innovate@BU will serve as valuable resources, providing additional guidance in the process of mobile app design. Lastly, students will interact with a massive digital database in order to collect material that will be used to write a research paper. Accordingly, these essays will be highlighted in the Database of Africana Religions in the US (DARE-US), currently under-development in the department of religion at BU.

Creativity Outcome 1

Students will gain a multidimensional understanding of how emerging digital technologies are shaping religion, specifically through the lenses of digital religion studies, media studies, and Internet studies. Specifically, students will apply this knowledge to create innovative projects. Additionally, student will have the opportunity to build, refine, and improve selected projects, e.g. religious mobile phone application.

<u>Creativity Outcome 2</u>

Students will demonstrate their working knowledge of digital religion—gained through readings, class discussions, and digitally-based practicums—to produce their own innovative products: blog essay, mobile phone app, and research paper.

Course Objectives:

- Using theories drawn from Internet studies, digital religion studies, and gaming theory, students will write two analytical essays in the form of an academic blog and a digital-based research paper.
- Students will attend several workshops designed to explore fundamental elements of digital research writing, ethics of digitization, and mobile application design/development.
- Students will create innovative products (e.g. religious mobile app) to demonstrate their understanding of the relationship between religion and digital technologies, gained through readings, class discussions, digitally-based practicums, and topic-centered workshops.

Course Assignments and Grading Criteria:

<u>Blogging Exercise (20% of final grade)</u>: You will write a blog essay based on an artifact drawn from the *The Martin Luther King, Jr. Collection*, housed at the Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center. You will participate in a workshop on archival digitalization, with a specific focus on ethical dimensions of digitizing historical artifacts. You will employ key principles drawn from the workshop to write a blog essay of a selected digital artifact.

<u>Mobile Application Design (25% of final grade)</u>: You will work with the Innovate@BU Center and SPARK! to design your own unique religious mobile application. You will be required to provide the following details in their design: (1) description of the app's overall goal, (2) identification of need & audience, (3) development of a comprehensive sketch—including blueprint and userflow, and (4) provision of a marketing strategy. Additionally, students will write a detailed description of their app. After submission, you will receive feedback from the instructor. Based on this feedback, you will have an opportunity to resubmit a revised version of their app.

<u>Writing, Digitization, and App Development Workshops (10% of final grade)</u>: You will participate in four workshops. The first workshop focuses on how to construct a blog essay. The second workshop will be held at BU's Gotlieb Center. It will introduce students to digital research and the ethics of digitization. While the third workshop will be held in conjunction with INNOVATE@BU and will center on mobile app design and development. The final workshop dissects digital-based research and writing. Also, you will be provided with a sample of both an annotated bibliography and a detailed essay outline. These documents will aid you in the preparation of their final essay outlines, which will undergo peer review during the twelfth week of the semester.

DARE-US Research Paper (30% of final grade): You will use digitally-based archival material to write a **15-20-page** research paper about an African American religious site located in Boston. Specifically, you will access material from Digital Commonwealth, https://www.digitalcommonwealth.org/. This site, managed by the Boston Public Library, provides access to thousands of photographs, manuscripts, books, audio recordings, and other historical material that have been digitized by a consortium of libraries, museums, archives, and historical societies from across Massachusetts. Your essays will be highlighted in the *Database of Africana Religions in the US* (DARE-US), currently under-development in the department of religion at BU.

Class Participation, Readings, and Attendance (15% of final grade): Attendance at all class sessions is necessary. This is a discussion-based class so participation and in-class exercises are also important elements in this course. Scholarly conversations will be further prompted by "share out sessions," a segment of class dedicated to student-led discussions of selected reading material. Together, attendance and participation will account for 15% of your grade, although if you miss a substantial number of classes your grade is subject to further deduction.

Grading Scale:

A	94-100	C	74-76
A-	90-93	C-	70-73
B+	87-89	D+	67-69
B	84-86	D	64-66
B-	80-83	D-	60-63
C+	77-79	F	59/below

Academic Honesty Policy:

All course assignments and activities must be carried out in accordance with Boston University's Academic Conduct Code. Additional information about this policy can be found at http://www.bu.edu/academics/policies/academic-conduct-code/.

Pandemic Policy:

In accordance with university pandemic policy, classes may be switched to remote at short notice. *Please check Blackboard before each class session.* If you will miss class because you've tested positive for COVID-19, are ill/experiencing symptoms, or because of pandemic disruptions to your caregiving arrangements, please contact me directly. Audio lectures will be available to students who miss class because of pandemic related circumstances.

Religious Holidays:

Students are allowed to make up work missed because of a religious holiday. Please note that arrangements must be made in advance.

Required Readings:

Campbell, Heidi A. and Ruth Tsuria, eds. *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, second edition.

Suggested Readings:

Campbell, Heidi A. and Gregory Price Grieve, eds. *Playing with Religion in Digital Games*.
Cheong, Pauline Hope et al., eds. *Digital Religion, Social Media, and Culture*.
el-Nawawy, Muhammed and Sadar Khamis, *Islam Dot Com*.
Grieve, Gregory Price, *Cyber-Zen*.
Hojsgaard, Morten T. and Margit Warburg, eds. *Religion and Cyberspace*.
Wagner, Rachel. *Godwired: Religion, Ritual and Virtual Reality*.

Additional Readings:

All secondary readings are accessible via blackboard.

Course Weekly Schedule and Readings:

Please note: the instructor reserves the right to make appropriate changes to the syllabus. It is the student's responsibility to keep up to date with course information if absent from class. Readings should be done in advance of the class time listed, in preparation for class discussion that day.

Week 1: Introduction to Religion in the Digital Age

 1/20—Class Overview/Introduction to Religion in the Digital Age

Week 2: Defining the Terms / Religion Identity & the Internet

 1/25—Digital Religion: A Definition & Ethical Dimensions
   Reading: Campbell. *Digital Religion*, pp. 1-18.
   Reading: Johns. "Ethical Issues in the Study of Religion and New Media," pp. 238-250.

 1/27—Offline/Online Religious Identity

   Reading: Lövheim. "Identity," pp. 41-56.

Reading: Campbell. el-Nawawy and Khamis. "Islamic Websites: Divergent Identities in Cyberspace," pp. 165-208.

Week 3: Religion in the Blogosphere

2/1—Religious Blogs / Mini-Writing Workshop

Reading: "How to Write An Academic Blog," https://authorservices.taylorandfrancis.com/research-impact/how-to-write-an-academic-blog-post/
Reading: Fader. "The Counterpublic of the J(Ewish) Blogosphere," pp. 727-747.
Reading: Lee. "Cultivating the Self in Cyberspace: The Use of Personal Blog Among Buddhist Priest," 97-114.
Reading: Teusner. "Imagining Religious Identity: Intertextual Play Among Postmodern Christian Bloggers," 111-130.

2/3—Blogging *as* a Religious Practice

Reading: Campbell. "Bloggers and Religious Authority Online," pp. 251-266.
Reading: Cheong, et. "The Chronicle of Me: Understanding Blogging as a Religious Practice," pp. 107-131.

Week 4: Blogging, Digitization, and Religious Artifacts

2/8—Workshop on Digitization and Digital Ethics (BU's Gotlieb Archival Research Center)

Reading: Gold and Klein. *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, selected chapters.
Reading: McKee and Porter. "The Ethics of Digital Writing Research: A Rhetorical Approach."

2/10—Independent Student Research: Selecting a Religious Artifact from *The Martin Luther King, Jr. Collection*.

Reading: Kirsch and Rohan. *Beyond the Archives: Research as a Lived Process*, selected portions.

Week 5: What is Social Media? / The Religious Life of Facebook, part I

2/15—What is Social Media?

Reading: Fuchs. *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*, chapters 1-3.

2/17—Memes, Religious Identities, and Facebook

    Reading: Wan. "Soul Searching on Facebook," *Washington Post*, https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/08/29/AR2009082902400.html.
    Reading: Miller and Mundy. "Faith in the Age of Facebook," pp. 227-253.
    Reading: Yadin-Segal. "Communicating Identity Through Religious Internet Memes on the 'Tweeting Orthodoxies' Facebook Page," pp. 110-123.
    Assignment Due: Blog Piece (upload to Blackboard by 5:00 pm EST)

Week 6: The Religious Life of Facebook, part II

2/22—Monday Schedule

2/24—Facebook and Digital Death (Guest Lecturer: Nicholas Covelski)

    Reading: Moreman and Lewis. *Digital Death: Mortality and Beyond in the Online Age*.
    Reading: Greenspan, "On Facebook, the Dead Will Eventually Outnumber the Living. What Does That Mean for Our Histories?" *Time*, https://time.com/5579737/facebook-dead-living/.

Week 7: Religion in the Worlds of Twitter & TikTok

3/1—What Would Jesus Tweet?

    Reading: Cheong. "Twitter of Faith: Understanding Social Media Networking and Microblogging Rituals as Religious Practices," pp. 191-206.

3/3—A Case Study Analysis of "WITCHTOK"

    Reading: Walker, "TikTok Has Become the Home of Modern Witchcraft," *Wired*, January 11, 2020, https://www.wired.co.uk/article/witchcraft-tiktok.
    Reading: Wylde, "3 TikTok Witches Explain How Spells Can Help "BlackLivesMatter," *Bustle*, July 8, 2020, https://www.bustle.com/wellness/witches-on-tiktok-support-black-lives-matter-with-spells-hexes.

Week 8: Religion and Software Applications, part I

3/15—Religion and Mobile Apps

Reading: Wagner. "You are what you install: Religious Authenticity and Identity in Mobile Apps," pp. 199-206.

3/17—Application Demonstration: Ifa Divination Mobile App & Buddhify Mobile App

Reading: Ajayi. "Ifa Divination: Its Structure and Application," pp. 113-124.
Reading: Harvey. "Buddhist Practice: Meditation and Cultivation of Experience-Based Wisdom," pp. 318-332.

Week 9: Religion and Software Applications, part II

3/22—Design a Mobile Application

Reading: Matellio. "How to Develop a Mobile App?"
https://www.matellio.com/blog/how-to-develop-a-mobile-app/
Dissecting Samples—Students will be presented three religious mobile apps developed by students during my Spring 2018 course: *PrayWithMe*, *Utofa*, and *ReligionChat*.

3/24—Religious Mobile Apps Design Workshop: Innovate@BU Office Hours. Students will hold one-on-one office hours with SPARK! team specialists to discuss the sketch development of their religious mobile app.

Week 10: Writing Workshop / Religion and Gaming, part I

3/29—Writing Workshop: Digital-based Research and Analytical Writing

Reading: Galgano et al., *Research and Writing in the Digital Age*, chapters 5 and 6.

3/31—Religion and Gaming: Playing [with] God(s)

Reading: Bainbridge. *eGods: Faith Versus Fantasy in Computer Gaming*, pp. 57-82.
Reading: Masso and Abrams. "Locating the Pixelated Jew: A Multimodal Method for Exploring Judaism in *The Shivah*, pp. 47-65.

Week 11: Religion and Gaming, part II

4/5—Game Demonstration: Shadow Man

Reading: Fandrich. "Yoruba Influences on Haitian Vodou and New Orleans Voodoo," pp. 775-791.

4/7—Religion, Avatars, and Race

Reading: Straarup. "When Pinocchio Goes to Church: Exploring an Avatar Religion," pp. 97-111.
Reading: Everett. "Serious Play: Playing with Race in Contemporary Gaming Culture," pp. 109-146.
Assignment Due: Mobile Application Design (upload to Blackboard by 5:00 pm EST)

Week 12: Religion and Robotics

4/12—Artificial Intelligence and Religion

Reading: *Religion in the Age of Digitalization*, chapter 7 and 11.
Reading: Geraci. *Apocalyptic AI: Visions of Heaven in Robotics, Artificial Intelligence, and Virtual Reality*, selected chapters.

4/14—Case Study: Way of the Future (WOTF)

Reading: Harris. "Inside the First Church of Artificial Intelligence," https://www.wired.com/story/anthony-levandowski-artificial-intelligence-religion/
Research Paper Outline Due: Instructor will send students assigned outlines for blind peer review by 5pm EST the same day. Comments are due by April 19.

Week 13: Religion and BIG Data

4/19—What is Big Data?

Reading: Perdersen and Wilkinson, "The Promise, Application and Pitfalls of Big Data?"
Reading: Stephens-Davidowitz. "Googling for God," https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/20/opinion/sunday/seth-stephens-davidowitz-googling-for-god.html?_r=0

4/21—Office Hours with Instructor: Students will be assigned a time to meet with the instructor to discuss in greater details comments provided on their outlines via the peer review process.

Week 14: Pushing the Boundaries of Religion

4/26—Biotechnological Human Enhancement: Challenging Religious Boundaries

Reading: *Religion in the Age of Digitalization*, chapter 10.

Reading: Herzfeld. "Must We Die? Transhumanism, Religion, and the Fear of Death," pp. 285-299.

4/28—Technological Branding as a Form of Religion

Reading: Campbell and La Pastina. "How the iPhone Became Divine: New Media, Religion, and the Intertextual Circulation of Meaning," pp. 1-17.

Week 15: Digitalizing Religions of Boston

5/3—Student Presentations: Digitizing Religions of Boston

5/10—**Assignment Due: DARE-US Research Paper (upload to Blackboard by 5:00 pm EST)**