

REL 320

Instructor: John W. Borchert

Digital Religion

Description:

Religious practice is shaped by technology. Technological practice is shaped by religion. Since the early 1990s, this parallel formation has become visible through the internet and other digitally networked technologies, as the perception of a barrier between the digital and the non-digital dissolves. Fully rendered 3D temples and churches, prayer and confession apps, digital shrines and offerings, virtual graveyards, and online pilgrimages are a selection of the intersections between digital and specifically religious practices. The emerging study of religion and digital technologies immerses itself in this rapidly changing landscape.

How does digital technology change religious practice? How does religious practice change digital technology? What is religion online? What is online religion? How has the study of religion and the digital changed as technology changes? These questions will help us interact with and analyze examples of religious practice and digital technology.

Aims:

Through this inquiry, we will learn to ask about religious practice, technology, and the interactions between the two. We will read texts from various locations and traditions (both religious and otherwise), raise critical questions, and consequently write and create from a more informed and mature position about both how religious and digital practices interact and inform each other, and how the study of religion and digital culture is changing.

Texts:

ALL Texts Available Via BlackBoard

Class Policies

To build and foster an environment of discussion based learning

For me, as the instructor, this means knowing that I do not hold all answers. It means that I am here to learn. It means the questions we are interested in lie somewhere between us all. For you, as a student, this means being responsible for the learning that takes place in the time we have together. It means being prepared for class by reading, annotating, and questioning the texts for each class session. It means investing in this time as ours. More than two unexcused absences will begin to affect your participation grade, at one point per absence.

To respect the learning of others

Within our learning environment we will encounter ideas and opinions that are sensitive and, at times, personal. In order to assure the learning of others takes place in a safe environment, this means understanding difference even if we are yet to understand our differences. This also means respecting the time we have set aside to learn with each other. Punctual attendance, remaining in class for the whole period allotted, and refraining from using electronic devices for non-course related activities is part of ensuring this respect.

If you believe that you need academic adjustments (accommodations) for a disability, please contact the Office of Disability Services (ODS), visit the [ODS website](http://disabilityservices.syr.edu)– <http://disabilityservices.syr.edu>, located in Room 309 of 804 University Avenue, or call (315) 443-4498 or TDD: (315) 443-1371 for an appointment to discuss your needs and the process for requesting academic adjustments. ODS is responsible for coordinating disability-related academic adjustments and will issue students with documented Disabilities Accommodation Authorization Letters, as appropriate. Since academic adjustments may require early planning and generally are not provided retroactively, please contact ODS as soon as possible.

To practice and maintain an environment of academic integrity

Academic integrity goes beyond issues of cheating and plagiarism. It means investing in and respecting the environment built by way of the policies and promises above, and ensuring an atmosphere of respect for the instructor, the students, and the material. Late assignments will not be accepted for credit.

Students should understand that it is their responsibility to learn about course-specific expectations, as well as about university-wide academic integrity expectations. The presumptive penalty for a first instance of academic dishonesty by an undergraduate student is course failure, accompanied by a transcript notation indicating that the failure resulted from a violation of academic integrity policy. SU students are required to read an online summary of the university's academic integrity expectations and provide an electronic signature agreeing to abide by them twice a year during pre-term check-in on MySlice. For more information and the complete policy, see <http://academicintegrity.syr.edu>.

Learning Activities:

Participation (20 pts)

Show and Play (20 pts)

“Term” Papers (20 pts)

Research/Presentations (40 pts)

Participation

Our class is just that - *ours*. This means we are all responsible for coming prepared to class having read and thought about the material for that day. Participation means more than speaking in class. It means being in class in a way that enhances the discussion and learning. This could mean being a frequent conversation partner or it could mean speaking once a week. The emphasis in participation is on quality rather than quantity. Staying enrolled in this class means you aim to participate.

Show and Play

At the end of every week, we will spend informal time together questioning and looking at examples of the intersections between religious practice and digital culture. These can be news articles, websites, apps, games etc. It is your responsibility to submit a piece of material with discussion questions, and present the material and facilitate a discussion of your questions during class time (7 minutes total). You are responsible for doing this two (2) times a semester, starting in Week 4. Please post a link to the material and your questions to Blackboard by Tuesday 9 AM of your week in order to receive credit. You will be evaluated both on your ability to complete this task and how deeply your questions reflect the current scholarship we are engaging with.

“Term” Papers

The study of religion and digital practice is still an emerging field, and as a class we are re-shaping ways we think and talk about religion and digital practices. As a result, vocabularies and key terms are always shifting. It is important that we have working definitions so we can all speak together. Your task here is to make an argument for your definition of a key term from our discussion – some weeks throughout the semester these terms will be assigned as reading for the class. Starting Week 3, you are responsible for submitting a 250 word argument for your definition of a key term from the previous week’s discussion due every Saturday by 9 AM to BlackBoard.

Research/Presentations

This semester of work together takes place both in and out of the classroom. The most significant project outside of our time together is your own research on an intersection of religion and digital practice of your choosing (in consultation with me by the end of Week 6). Your research and presentation are the culmination of the skills you have been developing through both the “Term” Papers and Show and Play. This project is on-going, and begins from the moment you select your point of research until the end of your presentation in Week 14. The depth of your engagement and familiarity with your subject should reflect the amount of time given. This project culminates in a 2,000 word research paper and a 7 minute presentation, both due at the beginning of Week 14.

ORIENTATIONS

Week 1. Introductions

W 1/18: Welcome, Orientations

Week 2. Approaches to the Study of Religion and Digital Culture

M 1/23: "Cyberspace: First Steps", M. Benedikt

W 1/25: "Religion: Some Basics", M. Nye

Week 3. Cyberspace as Transforming Religion?

M 1/30: "Cyber-Religion", Morten Hojsgaard

W 2/1: "Cyberspace as Sacred Space", S. O'Leary

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Week 4. Religion Online or Online Religion? Pt. I // BEGIN Show and Play

M 2/6: "Popular Religion and the World Wide Web" Christopher Helland

W 2/8: "Popular Religion and the World Wide Web" Christopher Helland

Week 5. Is Religion Online a Utopia or a Dystopia?

M 2/13: Selected Utopic News Clippings

W 2/15: Selected Dystopic News Clippings

Week 6. Routinization of Digital Technical Practice and Religion //RESEARCH Topic Chosen

M 2/20: "Negotiating with New Media", Heidi Campbell

W 2/22: Selected "Term" Papers

Week 7. Religion Online or Online Religion? Pt. II

M 2/27: "Constructing Religious Identity on the Internet", M. Lovheim and A.G. Linderman

W 3/1: "You Are What You Install", Rachel Wagner

Week 8. Cataloging Religious Experience Online

M 3/6: "The Cybersangha: Buddhism on the Internet" Charles S. Prebish

W 3/8 : "The House of Netjer: A New Religious Community Online" Marilyn C. Crough and Brooke Ashley Pillifant

//SPRING BREAK//

NEW OBSERVATIONS

Week 9. The Hybridization of Religion and “Social” Media

M 3/20: “Religion 2.0? Relational and Hybridizing Pathways in Religion, Social Media and Culture” Pauline Hope Cheong and Charles Ess
W 3/22: Selected News Stories

Week 10. Religion and Digital Technologies as Co-Productive

M 3/27: “Religion, Technology, and the Things in Between”, Jeremy Stolow
W 3/29: “Religion, Technology, and the Things in Between”, Jeremy Stolow

Week 11. Religion Online or Online Religion? Pt. III

M 4/3: “Authenticity”, Kerstin Radde-Antweiler
W 4/5: Selected News Clippings

FUTURE INVESTIGATIONS

Week 12. New Directions in the Study of Religion and Digital Technology

M 4/10: Posthumanism (Selections)
W 4/12: Science Fiction

Week 13. Remaining Questions

M 4/17: Alternate Reality Games/Virtual Reality (Selections)
W 4/19: Selected “Term” Papers

Week 14. Presentations

M 4/24: Research Presentations
W 4/26: Research Presentations