
BOOK REVIEW

Cheruvallil-Contractor, Sariya and Suha Shakkour (eds) 2016. *Digital Methodologies in the Sociology of Religion*. London: Bloomsbury. xxvi + 227pp. ISBN: 978-1-4725-7116-8 £65.00 (hbk); ISBN: 978-1-4725-7115-1 £21.99 (pbk); ISBN: 978-1-4725-7117-5 (ePDF); ISBN: 978-1-4725-7118-2 (ePub).

Coats, Curtis D. and Monica M. Emerich (eds) 2016. *Practical Spiritualities in a Media Age*. London: Bloomsbury. xiv + 275pp. ISBN: 978-1-4742-2316-4 £65.00 (hbk); 978-1-4742-2315-7 £28.99 (pbk).

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Keywords: digital research; lived religion; online religion; religion and media; spirituality.

These two edited volumes of essays are very welcome additions to research on religion and the media. Scholars are at long last becoming increasingly aware that in order to understand religion it is critical to investigate the ways that religiosity is mediated. We are living in an era in which there have been significant changes in the media environment, and the essays in these volumes address a range of important issues that pertain to religion in this new media context. As Tristram Hooley and Paul Weller indicate (in Cheruvallil-Contractor and Shakkour, p. 13) “the internet has penetrated into all aspects of religious life”. However, both these books go beyond simply looking at the internet and also investigate the increasingly significant developments of apps, social media, and digital games.

The essays in *Digital Methodologies in the Sociology of Religion (DMSR)* are concerned with the intersections of media, religion, and everyday life. Likewise, the essays in *Practical Spiritualities in a Media Age (PSMA)* are interested in unpacking the complex convergences of religiosity, media and the everyday, albeit focused on spirituality rather than the more established religious traditions that are the main emphasis of *DMSR*. Both these books are of interest to any researcher interested in fieldwork. *DMSR* looks at the problems that researchers face in fieldwork in digital contexts, and most of the chapters in *PSMA* involve ethnographic fieldwork.

As the title indicates, *DMSR* is primarily concerned with methodology. While the title would seem to indicate a rather dry volume, all the essays are in fact fascinating. Each of the authors writes from their own experiences of researching religion and digital communications. The book is divided into four parts: (1) Digitizing Religion in the Sociology of Religion; (2) Social Network Sites; (3) Digital Communication, and (4) Virtual Reality. Consequently,

the essays cover a variety of digital environments, and flag the diverse ways that religious groups respond to the development of digital technology. For example, there are chapters on YouTube, video conferencing, digital games, apps, blogs, and so on.

The introduction, by Heidi A. Campbell and Brian Altenhofen, provides a useful overview of the developments of digital research methods in the study of religion since the late 1970s. All the subsequent chapters take a case study approach. Although the authors give a brief description of their research, the main focus of each chapter is their methodological approach. The authors have used a wide variety of methods in their various research projects, from online surveys to netnography. Consequently, the reader can get a good sense of the variety of ways that religion in digital contexts can be researched. Each of the case studies details how the author(s) has gone about their research and problems that they have encountered. Many of the chapters for example indicate the ephemeral and fast-moving nature of digital environments and the issues that this raises. Each of the chapters includes one or two highlighted tips for digital research. Many of these tips are quite obvious, but are good reminders for experienced researchers and provide very useful practical advice to researchers and students new to digital research.

A very welcome aspect of these case studies is a reflection on the ethics of digital research. I agree with the editors of this volume who state in their introduction: “There is an urgent need to develop new thinking and new ethical guidelines to underpin research that is being conducted on-line” (p. xxi). Many of the authors for example reflect on the ethical dilemmas raised by the blurring of the boundaries of the private and the public domains in online contexts. Other important ethical issues that the various authors touch on are: informed consent, data security, anonymity, and behaviour in online sacred spaces.

The chapters in this volume also cover a reasonably wide range of religious traditions including Buddhist, Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Muslim and Sikh groups. There is also a useful chapter by Chris Allen on the use of Facebook by opponents to the building of a mosque in the West Midlands in the United Kingdom. Stephen Pihlaja’s chapter focuses on an argument between an atheist and a Christian carried out on YouTube. These chapters are a reminder that online environs can also be the context for controversy and conflict. William Sims Bainbridge’s chapter focuses on his research on invented religions in Massive Multiple On-Line Role Playing Games (MMORPG) such as *World of Warcraft*. However, this is the only chapter that really focuses on—to use a contentious term—non-mainstream traditions. If I have one slight criticism of this otherwise excellent collection of essays, there is a general lack of mention of New Religious Movements (NRMs) or alternative spirituality.

However, the focus of *PSMA* is alternative spirituality, although the term used in this volume is “practical spirituality”. The volume includes a number of everyday practices, such as hula-hooping and the jam band scene that intuitively we would not classify as spirituality. As Florence Pasche Guignard in her essay on baby-wearing indicates, the volume is not simply about “‘What is practical about spirituality?’ but also ‘What is spiritual about a particular practice?’” (p. 18). For example, in their chapter Jenna Gray-Hildenbrand and Martha Smith Roberts cite one of their informants who described hula-hooping as “my church” and “where I commune with God” (p. 70). Lucas F. Johnston in his essay indicates that experiences in the jam band scene are often articulated as miraculous.

The editors indicate that the term “practical spirituality” captures the somatic and everyday practices that are articulated in terms of spirituality. Coats and Emerich suggest that spirituality is “physiological—fermented in the vessel of the flesh through everyday practices” (p. 3). All the authors refer to the way that these practical spiritualities

are mediated. Overall these essays offer a significant counter to the commonly held view that spirituality is characterized by narcissistic, individual disembodied practices that are divorced from the realities of everyday life. As many scholars in religious studies are now concerned with religion and the everyday, in what is variously called lived religion (see Meredith McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* [2008]) or vernacular religion (see Marion Bowman and Ülo Valk, *Vernacular Religion in Everyday Life* [2015]), this volume addresses the issues of lived/vernacular spirituality. The case studies focus on the popular discourse encapsulated by the phrase “spiritual but not religious”. Ruth Ann Ritter and Jeffrey Mahan in their chapter “Spirituality at Work” note that people who articulate this spiritual-but-not-religious discourse “are one of the fastest-growing demographics in the United States” (p. 39). All the chapters in this volume evidence the ever-growing significance of the idea of spirituality in a wide variety of arenas.

An important theme in these essays is the interplay between the individualized subjective experience and the formation of alternative communities. Jeremy Garber in his essay about Another Way (a small group, primarily from a Mennonite background, who met to discuss art and spirituality) observes that there is a tension between “the desire for community” and “a sense of self as subjective individuals” (p. 91). While all the authors refer to the personal experiential and potentially therapeutic and transformative aspects in their case studies, they also discuss the inter-relational aspects of lived spirituality. All of these case studies indicate that spirituality is not simply about accessing the inner authentic self, in what has sometimes been referred to as the “inward turn”, but as the authors of these essays remind us, everyday spirituality is not only embodied, but also relational. In other words, as Graham Harvey, in his essay, “Food, Sex and Spirituality”, argues, interiorization and the quest for the inner-self does not entail social atomization. Spirituality also has a social dimension and entails a range of different relations and the formation of communities.

These essays all emphasize the relational aspects of practical spiritualities—not only relationships with others, but also relationships with nature, places, and material objects. For example, Marion Bowman explores the mutually reinforcing relationships between spirituality, material culture and consumption in creating a strong sense of community in the town of Glastonbury. The identification of the relational aspects by the authors of practical spirituality entails that many of the chapters indicate that the concept of community is important. However, the various communities of practical spirituality are new, tend to be less hierarchical and the boundaries between insider and outsider are often attenuated. These alternative communities tend to be supported and maintained by new media forms. Gray-Hildenbrand and Roberts observe: “Community happens online and virtual exchanges are an authentic way for hoopers to connect” (p. 75).

The authors in both of these collections, while dealing with a wider range of issues, indicate that if one wants to have any understanding of lived religion and spirituality, as it is experienced and practiced in contemporary everyday life, it is critical to have an understanding of the digital environment. Rachael Liberman and Stuart Hoover, in their chapter in *PSMA* on the *PostSecret* community (an online site that invites people to anonymously share a secret), assert that “the digital sphere is today an important context for the exploration of the meaning of spirituality” (p. 160). In the introduction to *DMSR* Cheruvallil-Contractor and Shakkour suggest that digital communication technologies have “changed both the way that people experience, as well as crucially the way that they interact with and express their faith” (p. xvii). Consequently, both these volumes provide, with a slightly different emphasis, a critical understanding of lived religion/spirituality in contemporary society.

The chapters in both edited volumes cover a very diverse range of case studies, and adopt different methodological approaches. This is both their strength and weakness. It is a strength because both volumes provide an overview of the multiple ways that religion and spirituality is understood, experienced and practiced in the digital age. This diversity is a weakness, as some issues are not fully developed and inevitably the chapters are selective. My main quibble with both these volumes is that they are almost exclusively focused on the Western world, particularly the UK and the USA. While I acknowledge that there is a digital divide between “the West” and “the Rest”, practical spiritualities and digital communications are significant in other parts of the world, such as India. Nonetheless, all of the chapters in both books, without exception, are fascinating and make a substantial contribution to our understanding of lived religions and practical spiritualities in the digital context. Both books are accessible for students, yet also have sufficient methodological and theoretical depth to be useful for experienced researchers.