
Book Review

Anastasia Karaflogka, 2006, *E-religion: A Critical Appraisal of Religious Discourse on the World Wide Web*. London: Equinox. 224pp. £16.99. ISBN 1904768849 (pbk).

There is no doubt that online religious activity is a growing and significant phenomenon. Consequently, there is also a burgeoning literature on this topic. Karaflogka suggests that much of the literature on, what she terms, e-religion leaves a great deal to be desired. In particular, she suggests (p. 21) that, to date, 'there is no adequate theory and methodology for studying religion within the realm of ICTs' (information communication technologies). *E-religion* is not so much a text about religion online, but a consideration of how to develop a 'critical and more synthetical approach' (p. 18) to this important phenomenon. Karaflogka rightly points out that both religion and ICTs are multifaceted phenomena, and therefore interact in highly complex ways.

The author suggests that it is necessary to identify a typology of different types of e-religious sites. She begins with a discussion of how she gradually refined her typology as her research progressed. Karaflogka differentiates between religious discourses on cyberspace and religious discourses in cyberspace. Religious discourses on cyberspace are sites which are primarily informational, and are produced by individuals or groups who also have an offline presence. Religious discourses in cyberspace are, on the other hand, totally new phenomena. The author gives the Church of MOO and the Church of Virus as examples of what she calls New Cyberreligious Movements (NCRMs).

Karaflogka observes that any investigation of religious use of ICTs must be grounded in an understanding of the structure of the World Wide Web (WWW). This is mostly discussed in the chapter entitled 'Web Epistemology'. If the WWW is conceived in terms of being an ethnographic field, then she is absolutely right that knowledge of the nature and structure of the (virtual) field must constitute the context for any comprehensive understanding of e-religion. However, much of this chapter is devoted to a discussion of the digital divide, which although an important topic in itself, does not really say a great deal about the structure, or indeed the epistemology of the WWW.

In the following chapter Karaflogka identifies a number of theoretical perspectives that can be utilized in the analysis of religious discourses on and in cyberspace. I have to agree with the author that many of the accounts of online religion to date have been under-theorized. Consequently her overview of a number of communication theories is a good beginning for encouraging a more theoretically rigorous engagement with e-religion. However, as this is fundamentally an overview, there is no substantial engagement with any of the theoretical perspectives indicated in this section.

The penultimate, and most substantive chapter is perhaps the most useful of the book. Anyone who wishes to have some ideas about the methodological issues of researching e-religion, or indeed any type of website, will find this a very useful starting point. The author suggests a clear methodological framework for analysis of religion online. She suggests that research can be spatial and/or temporal. Spatial research can itself be divided into two categories—

namely cartographic and topographic. Cartographic research is a type of meta-analysis which maps different types of online religious discourse, and topographic research involves a close textual analysis of particular websites. Temporal studies, the author suggests, can be either synchronic or diachronic. Synchronic research involves comparative work which focuses on particular issues or concepts. This type of research will, she contends, shed light on various relationships; such as the relationship between religions, the relationship between followers, and the relationship between religion and the state, and so on (pp. 190-91). Diachronic research, on the other hand, is historical and archival in nature and will identify development and changes over time.

Karaflogka provides a useful glossary of acronyms and terminology (particularly useful for Religious Studies' scholars and students who may not be familiar with the techno-jargon of ICTs). The book also comes with a CD, which has live links to many of the websites. However, as Karaflogka acknowledges, given the ephemeral nature of the WWW, it is by no means certain how long these links will remain viable. At the time of writing this review there were a few links which were no longer active, but many which still were. Certainly having the live links saves a considerable amount of time.

Overall this is a useful little book which provides a foundation for a more systematic methodological and theoretically informed approach to researching religious discourses in the context of ICTs. However, it does tend to read as a rather extended introduction to a larger work. I hope that in her next publication Karaflogka will actually apply, in a substantial and sustained way, some of the theoretical and methodological concerns which she alludes to in this book to an actual study of e-religion.

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