

Book Review:

Heidi A. Campbell. 2020. *Digital Creatives and the Rethinking of Religious Authority*. Routledge.

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Abstract

The book Digital Creatives and the Rethinking of Religious Authority makes a valuable contribution to the study of how religious authority is evolving in the digital age. The author synthesizes previous research and introduces a new framework for categorizing types of religious authority in digital spaces. Building upon Anderson's earlier typology, Campbell significantly advances this framework through her original empirical research, which is based on a series of qualitative interviews with Christian religious digital creatives (RDCs). Campbell identifies nine distinct manifestations of RDCs, demonstrating how each type, through their actions, enacts media-making narratives and engages in technological apologetics. Her approach offers a systematic and more nuanced classification and conceptual understanding of diversifying religious authority, reflecting the current plastic religious landscape and setting her work apart from previous studies. The book serves as a useful resource for scholars, offering insights and inspiration for further studies on the transformation of religious authority in new, hybrid spaces.

Keywords

digital creatives, religious authority, church, religious community, Christian

Heidi Campbell is a globally recognized authority in Digital Religion studies, a field she helped establish. In her monography *Digital Creatives and the Rethinking of Religious Authority*, she examines the transformations of religious authority within an environment shaped by the coexistence of offline and digital worlds. In her book she specifically explores the intricate dynamics involved in how religious digital creatives (RDCs) and religious organizations perform, present, and negotiate authority within a religious culture pervasively shaped by the digital realm.

In the first introductory chapters, Campbell analyzes and contextualizes the term *authority*, or more precisely, *religious authority*. She examines its framings as applied within the traditional and new approaches to authority within media studies research (authority as role-based, power-based, relational, or algorithmic–online). She also surveys the treatment of authority within digital religion studies and presents major works on how digital religion addresses the challenges and opportunities the digital sphere poses for religious leaders, communities, and organizations. The opening part of the book gives a reader a comprehensive overview of the understanding of authority and associated notions of leadership, highlighting key conceptual frameworks and perspectives of leading scholars in the research of authority.

Further in Chapter two, Campbell proceeds to lay down major building blocks for her subsequent research by thoroughly defining the group of “religious digital creatives (RDCs)” as individuals involved in digitally creative practices associated with religious communities and institutions. She divides them into three major categories: “digital entrepreneurs,” “digital spokespersons,” and “digital strategists.” Campbell partially builds on Jon Anderson (1999), who views religious interpreters as a new class of authority and who distinguishes between “creole pioneers,” “spokesperson activists,” and “reformer-critics.”

In Chapter three, Campbell outlines her methodology for studying Christian digital creatives, ingeniously using Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical analysis of the self (Goffman 1990), where humans, as actors on a social stage, make choices that present a specific image of who they are and how they want to be perceived, to analyze how they express and define their identity and

authority through their digital work. Campbell emphasizes the significance of analyzing RDCs' media-making narratives and technological apologetics to comprehend in complexity their roles and assumptions about authority in digital and religious contexts.

In Chapters four to six, the reader gets a thorough understanding of newly proposed categories of RDCs: the “digital entrepreneurs,” “digital spokespersons,” and “digital strategists.” Digital entrepreneurs are outlined as individuals frequently involved in a media- or technology-related profession whose expertise drives them to apply their skills alongside their spiritual pursuits, or to assist their religious communities by developing their presence in virtual space. As such they believe in modernizing and transforming their faith-based practices and objectives. Digital spokespersons Campbell defines as those “who serve as digital content creators, moderators or public media liaisons employed by a specific religious organization or community for the purpose of representing that group within the digital world” (p. 101). Digital strategists are affiliated with religious institutions and hold leadership roles, but unlike digital spokespersons, their primary duties do not involve media or technology.

Within each category, Campbell starts by linking it to and discerning it from a corresponding counterpart of Anderson's classification. Taking into consideration the current breadth of professions and types of digital presence of religious communities, Campbell correctly recognizes the need for actualization and a more nuanced categorization of the proposed categories. Therefore, she proposes three distinct manifestations within each category to get a more plastic and accurate representation of reality. We may assume that future developments in the digital realm and technology will lead to further evolution and expansion of these categories over time. Similarly, updates to the proposed category structure might be necessary if analogous research is conducted across different religious faiths with varying organizational structures.

Within each described category, Campbell presents her respective findings out of 120 interviews conducted with a diverse range of RDCs

from various Christian denominations in the USA and Europe, exploring their motivations, educational backgrounds, work tasks, and challenges in depth. Text is accompanied by a plethora of direct citations from RDCs, which provides the reader with a sense of direct experience and a vivid, personal touch.

The work culminates in Chapters seven and eight, where Campbell presents varying understandings of authority across offline, institutional, and online digitally-driven contexts as enacted by each category of RDCs. She explores their unique views on authority and examines how these perspectives shape their approaches to their work and interactions with their respective communities. Finally, she examines the technological apologetics of RDCs concerning their digital work, elaborating on their motivations for work engagement and the challenges they face in presenting it to their religious institutions.

Campbell's book represents a significant contribution to the ongoing discussion on the evolving and diversifying nature of religious authority within today's religious landscape, which is increasingly characterized by the hybrid permeability of the online and offline worlds. The book's impact lies in two main areas. First, it deepens the theoretical academic discourse on religious authority as influenced by the digital realm. Campbell builds upon the foundational theoretical work of leading scholars, advancing it to a new, systematic exploration of religious digital creatives. She supports her perspective with qualitative research that thoroughly considers the narratives and lived experiences of RDCs. Her study focuses on RDCs from a wide range of Christian denominations and geographical locations across the USA and Europe. In this regard, her work opens avenues for further research and for testing the applicability of her approach and findings across other faiths and other geographic locations. Early citations of her book suggest that this opportunity is already being recognized. Furthermore, it will be interesting to test and further develop the concepts she introduces from the perspective of the recipients of digitized content, including those outside the confines of organized religion in the increasingly prevalent space of individualized and eclectic approaches to religion, and even within the realm of non-religious spirituality.

The monograph is also significant for the practical application by religious communities. The Covid-19 pandemic forced even the staunchest opponents of technology in religious contexts to acknowledge the necessity of engaging with the digital space—a space used by their congregants and potential message recipients—and to leverage the opportunities it offers. As Campbell correctly stresses, the adoption of digital media platforms leads to changes in the flow of information and the structure of the organizations. Effective use of technological resources requires more than one-off or uncoordinated efforts; it necessitates the development of comprehensive strategies within religious communities, with clearly defined goals and roles for each participant. Religious organizations will need to establish effective collaboration with a broader spectrum of laypersons who possess new types of skills and abilities. New communication strategies must be also sustainable in a dynamic digital environment that requires continuous adaptation to ongoing changes. A thorough understanding of the work of all actors is a fundamental prerequisite for successfully engaging in this process. Campbell's book is thus valuable not only for scholars but also for practitioners within churches and religious communities who wish to familiarize themselves with the contemporary practices of RDCs, as well as the most significant theoretical framings in the study and conceptualization of religious authority in the digital age.

References

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