Religious Use of Mobile Phones

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INTRODUCTION

Religious individuals and communities have historically approached and appropriated new media technologies with as wide a range of responses as secular users and communities, from enthusiastic embrace to skeptical resistance. While this may give the impression that the intersection of religion and technology mirrors mainstream patterns of response and adoption, scholars have noted that religious individuals and communities have very specific and deliberate belief systems, habits, and rituals, which translate to particular ways of going about using new media technologies (Campbell, 2010). This means that the fervor and hesitance they express towards a technology is based on a set of unique factors, which influence religious users' reasons for use, rejection, or even modification of different forms of media. The wide diversity of world religionS means that careful study is required to understand why and how specific groups approach new technologies in specific ways. The rise and proliferation of the mobile phones and apps thus creates new opportunities and challenges for religious communities, and also suggest the need for careful study in order to consider how the nature mobile technologies may create new possibilities or require unique responses from religious users.

This chapter offers an overview of the study of mobile phones and religion. This can be understood as connected to the wider study of "digital religion," which primarily concerns itself with the intersection of religion and the Internet, and questions of how religious groups and individuals negotiate with digital technologies and cultures. Religion has been present and has played an important role in the Internet and digital culture since the 1980s, and continues to thrive online (Campbell, 2013). This engagement has been well document - for example, a Pew study in 2004 found that 64% of 128 million American Internet users had searched out religious information and engaged the Internet for different spiritual matters (Hoover, Clark & Rainie, 2004). More recently a study surveying U.S. religious congregations found that a vast majority used email websites, and 40% even had a Facebook page (Thumma, 2011). As mobile phone use has increased across the globe, scholars have also begun to study how mobile phone may be used by religious groups and speculate on the impact this technology may have on religious culture and communities.

This chapter outlines the current study of the intersection of mobile phones and religion in order to point towards important areas for future research. It is separated into three main sections. The first section offers a description of how mobile phone and digital religion have been researched, to provide a context for their intersection. The second section then highlights three key themes in the study of religion and mobile technology: religious engagement with mobile phones, religious use and design of mobile apps, and religious meaning making in mobile culture. Finally, some emerging questions and future areas for investiga-

tion in regards to mobile phones and religion are noted, with mention of key scholars in the study of mobile phones and religion.

DEFINING THE FIELDS

Mobile Phone Research

Mobile media facilitate communication via devices and technologies that allow users a higher level of mobility than previous technologies. While laptops are designed to be carried around and therefore can, strictly speaking, be considered mobile, Scott Campbell (2013) prefers to call these technologies portable media. He draws the distinction this way:

Mobile communication is possible during transition, freeing the users to connect with others while moving about with and across space. Instead of carrying a device to a location that offers the requisite infrastructure, individuals can use mobile communication in the moment... they are essentially unanchored (p. 10).

Smartphones and other mobile devices allow users to be unanchored in communicating, unlike a laptop which often requires a wireless hotspot. The infrastructures built around mobile communication quite literally allow users to communicate from almost any place. Locales for communicating are, then, no longer fixed points in space but follow wherever the user may be in real time.

In addition to infrastructural differences, there are also social affordances that may make mobile devices distinct. Mobile media have become ubiquitous in the United States and other developed countries, and their social impacts may give impetus for continued study (Smith, 2013). Campbell (2013) echoes this point: "My point here is not so much about whether mobility helps or hinders social relationships. Rather, the point is that distinctive affordances of mobile communication technology and the appropriation of those

affordances, gives rise to this debate in the first place" (p. 10). This notes how behaviors have been altered through the presence of mobile devices.

The growing infrastructure and social impact of mobile media warrants us to take a closer look at this underdeveloped area of study. Jensen (2013) poses two appropriate questions regarding the study of mobile media and communication: "What is the relationship between communication and (other) action in specific social contexts? What is the relationship between media technologies and embodied individuals as they communicate in and across local contexts?" (p. 27). These questions can be narrowed to focus specifically on the religious context. What is the relationship between mobile technology and religion? How do individuals and communities use mobile technology? How, for instance, does mobile technology facilitate communication for religious purposes? How does mobile technology mediate and embody religious experiences, and what sorts of ramifications do these uses of mobile technology have on the various religious contexts, both institutional and personal, around the world? On a simpler, more descriptive level, what religious services and content are provided on mobile technology? The field of digital religion seeks answers to questions like these.

Digital Religion

The study of religion and the Internet has been chronicled in much detail in other works (Hojsgaard & Warburg, 2005; Campbell, 2006a; Cho, 2011; Campbell & Connelly, 2012). Therefore, it is sufficient to give just a brief working definition of digital religion. The study of religion and mobile phones falls under the umbrella of digital religion as a specific subfield of research. Campbell (2013) writes that digital religion:

Describes the technological and cultural space that is evoked when we talk about how online and offline religious spheres have become blended or integrated. We can think of digital religion as a

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