Religion in the Information Age:
The Modern Religious Experience in New Media and Cyberspace

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Course Description:
In today’s high-tech world, information is everywhere. We live in an age where all the knowledge ever produced, anything you could ever want to know, see, or hear, is available within a matter of seconds. Yet for all this instantly accessible information, it seems there remain questions that can’t be solved by a simple search on Wikipedia or Google. What is life? Why are we here? Is there a higher being? What is the best way to live? These are questions that have traditionally been associated with religion—with philosophy rather than science, with faith rather than fact. In a time when everything is immediately knowable, how does religion retain any sense of mystery? Do the ways of talking and thinking about God handed down to us from the ancient world still have any of their power, or have they grown stale, ossified and ineffective as we transform the universe into easily searchable data, into friendly sound bites and viral memes? What has become of religion in the age of information?

This course focuses on the concept of information as a way to examine the broader question of the role of religion in the modern world. How is religion affected by the exponential advancement of technology? How are traditional concepts like God, belief, or prayer impacted by the discoveries of science? What is the modern religious experience in this new digital age? In particular this course asks whether or not religious discourse—the language of poetry, scripture, and everyday speech—faces new challenges in the modern age.

The course will consist of three units, each designed to build upon the other as we develop ways of approaching the question of religion in the information age. The first part of the course will develop the context for our study, both by examining the roots of a religious confrontation with modernity in western thought and by questioning for ourselves what this “modernity” might entail. To aid in this second task, we will be looking at the concept of “information” both from a historical perspective and with a view towards establishing a framework for discussing religion in what we might consider our modern age.

In the second part of the course we will develop the theoretical tools for thinking seriously about how religious experience might be affected by modern developments in technology, in particular the advent of new media and the rise of the Internet. We will sharpen the central questions of the course through a close reading of Latour’s brilliant work Rejoicing: or the Torments of Religious Speech.

The final portion of the course will draw from a number of new works on religion and media, the Internet, and cyberspace. In discussing these “case studies,” we will pay particular attention to the questions we have been developing throughout, and finally will be able to test out our analytical and critical abilities through a set of debates on selected topics at the end of the course.
**Assignments and Evaluation:**
Each student will be responsible for writing two short response papers (2-4pp), reflecting on the readings and discussions from the first two units of the course. Together with active participation, these papers will constitute fifty percent of the overall grade.

The remaining fifty percent of the grade will be determined by a final analytical paper (5-8pp), which will focus on and develop one aspect of the work done during the quarter. Each student will need to set up a consultation with me in order to discuss the proposed research topic.

**Policies:**
Late assignments will not be accepted without express permission from the instructor. Laptops and cell phones are not to be used during class sessions.

**Required Texts:**
Højsgaard and Warburg, eds., *Religion and Cyberspace* (Routledge, 2005)

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**Course Schedule**

**Week 1 – Introduction**
- Introductory remarks: goals and trajectory of the course; the context of our question in the history of modern western thought
- Nietzsche, modern nihilism and the “Death of God” (selections)

**Week 2 – The Question of Religious Authenticity in the Face of Modernity**
- Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*
  - *The Present Age* cont’d; Dreyfus, “Kierkegaard and the Information Highway”

**Week 3 – Toward a Theory of Information: What and When is Modernity?**
- Gleick, *The Information*
  - *The Information* cont’d

**Week 4 – Theorizing the Problem: Technology and Postmodernism**
- Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology”
**DUE: First response paper**
• Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (selections)

**Week 5 – The Problem of Religious Meaning in the Information Age**
• Landby, ed., *Religion Across Media* (selections), begin reading Latour

• Latour, *Rejoicing: or The Torments of Religious Speech*

**Week 6 – The Mediation of Religion in the Digital Age**
• Byers, *TheoMedia: The Media of God and the Digital Age* (selections)

**DUE: Second response paper**

• Dawson, “The Mediation of Religious Experience in Cyberspace,” from *Religion and Cyberspace*;
• Lawrence, “Allah On-Line: The Practice of Global Islam in the Information Age,” from *Practicing Religion in the Age of the Media*;
• Kim, “Online Buddhist Community: An Alternative Religious Organization in the Information Age,” from *Religion and Cyberspace*

**Week 7 – Constructing Authority and Identity in New Religious Movements**
• Barker, “Crossing the Boundary: New Challenges to Religious Authority and Control as a consequence of Access to the Internet,” from *Religion and Cyberspace*;
• Introvigne, “A Symbolic Universe: Information Terrorism and New Religions in Cyberspace,” from *Religion and Cyberspace*

• Lövheim and Linderman, “Constructing Religious Identity on the Internet,” from *Religion and Cyberspace*;
• Howard, *Digital Jesus* (selections)

**Week 8 – Student Presentations and Debates**
• Presentations of final projects, selection of topics for debates

• Student debates, concluding discussion

**DUE: Final paper due at the scheduled time of the final examination**