

ICR Podcast Transcription

Rogalo: This is Jocelyn Rogalo reporting for WSOU, and today we're with the leading scholar in the field of digital religion, Dr. Heidi Campbell. Thank you so much for joining me today.

Campbell: It's really good to be here, thank you.

Rogalo: Thanks. So what exactly is your role within the realm of the digital space and religion?

Campbell: I am part of a conversation that looks at the intersection of new media technologies, religion and digital culture. I've been studying since the mid-1990s how religious groups use digital media technologies and how religion is being reshaped or informed by a digital presence or digital platforms. Digital religion studies look at how religion is being reshaped in a postmodern society both online and offline, looking at how online trends are influencing offline trends as well as how sociological trends influence how people see media.

Rogalo: And how did you start working on this?

Campbell: It started in my master's program in 1996. I did a short essay as part of my master's thesis on the concept of virtual community. The internet was becoming a virtual public commodity. I had a good friend who was a master's student in library sciences. She sent me this article on the concept of virtual communities, and I began to read about them and think "People are building relationships through this new technology called the internet. How might that change not just our idea of friendship, but our idea of church?" So it began as a kind of hypothesis, and the door sort of opened within the next 12 months for me to do a Ph.D. and pursue that as a topic. And my research has gone from there.

Rogalo: So you really have been with the growth of the internet from the very beginning and the growth of this as a study as well.

Campbell: Yeah, I've been studying this for almost two-and-a-half decades now.

Rogalo: That's super awesome. Well, you've seen a lot of different technological advancements even in those last two decades. How did we start off with the internet and religion and where do you think we are now?

Campbell: Well, I think scholars like myself in the early '90s were really interested in how are these people using these technologies, what are they actually doing, and how might that change people's practices. Then as the internet, toward 2000, became more mainstream and part of the culture, people started saying "Wow, people are not just experimenting. They're starting to live their lives." The e-commerce revolution had come about. People were starting to look at e-government or online government. Online education was emerging. So people started to see how can we describe or map these trends of how people feel about community or identity or social practice that are being redefined within that context. For the next decade or so, the internet became a part of people's daily life. It was embedded in our cultural reality to the point that even if you weren't part of the internet, social media, didn't have a Facebook account, your life was

still being influenced because so much of the world and technology was infiltrating our daily practices and expectations. So scholars like me were following those early questions of what it means to be a religious community, how can you present your religious identity online, looking at how that was influencing offline religious institutions. Then early expressions of people translating religion online began to be replaced by people experiencing religion first in the digital and then bringing those practices offline. So it's kind of come full circle in the last three decades of becoming an embedded technology. How do we see it affecting not just how we live life, but how we see life and see the Other on the screen?

Rogalo: Has the internet impacted how you react religiously?

Campbell: I would say that like many people in my generation and the generation below me, I think all of our experiences have become mediated. I've lived overseas, so most of my friendships and spiritual relationships are mediated through Facebook, email, Skype. People being in the same physical space is often a luxury we don't have in the digital age. We're expected to be diverse, be diffuse, so digital technology allows us to connect and reimagine social relationships.

Rogalo: That's interesting with what you were saying before. People look at religion first through the digital world, and they might want to look for it in more of a social setting. So if you're online and you're craving that personal connection that we don't normally have in the digital world, then they're going to different masses and stuff like that. One question I would really like to ask — it's a big question for me. As Catholics in the Christian community, you're taught to focus on how you're acting. For Catholics, it's more towards the saint-like qualities. You're trying to emulate the qualities of a saint, but a lot of saints didn't have the internet. The most recent saints that were consecrated into the church were Pope John Paul II and Mother Theresa, and they didn't have social media accounts. So when you're looking at how to live your life to the best point as a Catholic or a Christian, you look to the people that emulated these qualities. Do you feel like there's a guide or someplace that we could look to for good representation in social media when it comes to religion?

Campbell: Yeah, I think so. I mean, the Catholic Church, if you look at it over the course of its span, but especially over the last hundred years, the Catholic Church has been innovators in its use of technology. They were the first religious institution to have its own website and experiment with using digital technology. But even though we wouldn't call Pope John Paul [II] a digital pope in any way, his World Communication Day speeches as early as 1996 were talking about how computer networks could be used for the purposes of the church. First off, how do we use it for religious education? What responsibilities do priests have in informing people about religious culture, especially young people? And how do we train young people and parents to be critical consumers? There were several documents put out by the Pontifical Council of Social Communication looking at the internet and ethics and the Catholic Church and their theology of social media and how does that translate to the digital world. The Catholic Church has these documents and conversations that have been going on for over 20 years, which actually makes them the place Protestant communities often go to look at [to learn] how do we evaluate and how do we create a cohesive narrative for our own structures.

Rogalo: I think that's a big point, too. We shouldn't be fighting against social media. It's so prevalent in our society. You can't walk away from it, especially as a youth. And it's important to learn how to integrate that into your style of religion and thinking.

Campbell: Yeah. One of the big fears that people have is that with digital technology, people are just going to be so drawn to the digital age that they're going to log in, plug in, and drop out of real-world church and offline church and society. But research has shown that the internet is not just the only space people go to, but it's part of a continuum. People kind of live in this hybrid space between online and offline activities. People don't just live online. You can't email someone a plate of chocolate chip cookies when they're having a bad day. You want the real experience. But at the same time, we live in a world where our communication and our travel patterns don't allow us to have that kind of face-to-face reaction all the time. So it's kind of thinking in a continuum. How do we live in an in-between space with a foot in both worlds and live ethically? I think the Catholic Church is having a lot of conversations with different groups of theologians trying to reflect on what does it mean to be human in this digital space.

Rogalo: So through your studies, what have you found to be the best practices that either the Catholic Church has done thus far that's a good example or something that you see is popular with people that you're studying?

Campbell: Well, I think a lot of people are having the conversation of who is my neighbor. This is a conversation that's been going on at the Vatican level, small groups and even in Protestant groups that I belong to. I wrote a book with a colleague called *Networked Theology* and we talk about who is my neighbor in this digital age? It's identifying that what it means to be a neighbor has expanded. It's not just the person across the street, on the other side of the hallway in your apartment. We have a broader understanding of who our relationships are affecting. So how do we treat those people ethically? Digital culture often kind of encourages people to be very focused on themselves. Social networks are all about my digital presence, my voice, my friendship networks. But people are being challenged to say "Well, there is still a role for community and a social responsibility to treat the Other as you want to be treated in a communal way." So how do we not just do what's best for me, but also help the broader community, my faith community, and the world as a community. So not just saying "Who is my neighbor?" but also "How do I treat my neighbor?" and "How can I use digital technologies in ways that build friendships and build altruism and not just build myself?"

Rogalo: That's fascinating, too, because social media makes the world feel so much smaller. Like you were saying before, you've studied abroad before, you've been abroad, you've lived abroad. And you've been able to hold these connections with people across the ocean. It makes the world feel so much smaller, but at the same time it also desensitizes people to the fact that there is a person on the other side of the screen. So it's not only fostering those relationships but realizing that they're not imaginary relationships. They're real people. What's also interesting, too, is what you were saying about the Catholic Church being a big proponent of using social media to their advantage. Pope Francis has an Instagram account where he posts in different languages, and also in 2016 for the World Youth Day that happened in Poland they released Popemojis. In spaces like World Youth Day where there are so much youth involved, do you

think that there's more of an opening to start the conversation on social media and religion in those kinds of spaces where it's such a big gathering?

Campbell: I think young people live in that world. Getting back to the conversation we were having before, it used to be that people understood religion because they went to church, they got through catechism and then those ideas and assumptions about how you worship and how theology works and how religion works — they bring that to the internet. But this generation, their first interactions of how you create a friendship, how do you become socially active or religiously active — it's starting online. There's a different transportation of ideology. So there's a need to go to the spaces where people already are. And the Catholic Church has a responsibility because no longer are they the first port of call, i.e. the offline Catholic Church for people forming values and then bringing them into that digital space. You have to go to the digital space and be there for them, to engage them. Even if it's Pope emojis so they show “We understand digital technology. We know how you're using it. And we can engage it not just in a playful way, but in a serious way of looking at how we want to be here to inform and imprint our religious values and our social ethic on this space so you can take that into the new experiences both online and offline.” I think it's very important.

Rogalo: That's so important — showing that you're there, and showing that you're there offline too. Do you think that there are new advancements on, say Instagram for example, or Facebook?

Campbell: Yeah, I think a lot of people are developing not just mobile games but digital games where people are beginning to see that digital spaces focused on play can be important teaching tools, whether it's teaching important religious values or teaching religious history. We see a lot of religious motifs and symbolism in religious games as well as mainstream games. And I think a lot of times we say “Play is not serious” and “Video games are violent; they're this hypothetical context, so we shouldn't take them seriously.” But gaming, I think, is important because as you're playing, you're practicing certain beliefs. If you can show how religion can be integrated in this playful way, it can teach you behaviors, outlooks that can be modeled into broader things. Like “Oh, well, this form of communication worked when I had to collaborate in this gaming environment and do this. Wow, that can actually work offline.” So I think the church is beginning to see that we don't just need to teach theology in just traditional spaces. We need to go into the spaces where people are learning social values and behaviors and engaging that.

Rogalo: Another thing, too, is that they recently created 3D Israel, which is the recreation of Israel hundreds of years ago. And that brings an element of history to people who normally wouldn't be able to acquire it either from a historical standpoint or a religious standpoint. If you're looking to go see what Israel looked like at the time of the Biblical era, you're able to now go see that. But it also ties into the point you said before, where you can come at it for the first time from a digital space and start questioning things on more of a personal level in terms of religion, which is really fascinating.

Campbell: One of the trends within digital religious studies is looking at to what extent can technology use or just aspects of contemporary culture be kind of framed as religious-like. If you use the definition that religion is based on something greater than the human experience, that's transcendent, that it ties to these core beliefs and values, and those beliefs and values are worked

out in certain kinds of rituals and practices — that’s a pretty broad religion. And so a lot of scholars in religion have looked at a lot of fandom studies, popular media studies. Anything from football to *Star Trek* to Harry Potter can be seen as a religious practice — anything that’s giving people meaning. Henry Jenkins, who’s a media scholar, talks about how digital media creates participatory culture. It encourages people to come into congregation because they are not only consuming the media — the films, the *Star Trek* — but they also can create these narratives. And through that creation, they can create a community of value, of purpose, and say “Hey, this gives meaning to my life.” A lot of these things started playfully like the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, and some of them become more serious. Anything that gives someone identity and purpose in their life can have a religious-like value. And I think that’s what a lot of scholars are looking at, whether it’s the internet giving them value or these fan communities giving them a sense of identity and meaning in the world.

Rogalo: So out of the areas that you’ve studied thus far, what is the area that you find most fascinating, whether it’s the fandoms or the social media or the gaming community?

Campbell: I’m not sure I’d say most fascinating, but I think the most crucial area is... It’s easy to study the techno-paganism or these new cults or ideas that are coming out of religion online, and it’s fascinating to look at religions that can’t be studied online very easily like paganism. So you can go into these kind of spaces. But I think that the spaces that are really important are studying religion in social media spaces. I’m doing a big project right now where I’m looking at religion in internet memes and meme culture. How do internet memes communicate through humor and what kind of messages do they send? It’s there that we begin to see what are the popular notions — especially in American culture — about how people see the Catholic Church, how people see Judaism, how they see Islam, how they see even their own religious identity. People thought the internet was going to tear down all these barriers, give us all this sense of equality. And it has this great potential. But unfortunately people are often drawn to their own tribe online, whatever their belief system or ideology they have. And so we have a lot of tribalism and a lot of extremism and a lot of problematic populism online. And so I’m looking at memes that are not just these little humorous images of condescending Wonka and a sarcastic message about the Catholic Church or Bad Luck Brian and “Oh no, he missed the boat on reincarnation.” They’re saying something about how people see religion in popular culture and how religious communities need to engage maybe better with the younger generation, whether it’s to provide a corrective on what these religions actually stand for or actually show that a lot of the assumptions that people have and are circulating and promoting online are based on these problematic stereotypes that have been around for centuries, really. There is a sense that there’s nothing new under the sun and that digital culture becomes a space to turn the mirror on ourselves to see what is the good, what is the bad, and what is the ugly and how can we leverage these technologies to maybe correct or address these issues rather than just keep replicating religious bias.

Rogalo: The area of humor with religion is an area that people do not touch. A lot of times you see comedians just completely not acknowledging religion, or it’s very rare to see a comedian who is religious expressing jokes about that because that’s an area where people have not yet intersected the two. So that’s interesting to have the intersection of not just the internet and faith, but also humor. How have you seen people react to those kinds of memes?

Campbell: Well, I think you get two kinds of responses. One is people are like “Oh, isn’t this funny?” because there is humor in it and there’s a hint of truth to it and maybe there’s this popular narrative pulling on a movie or a celebrity, and so people identify with it. But they don’t realize that by just circulating that online or posting it on a Facebook account, they’re actually kind of circulating a bias that can be really detrimental in our society and culture. And I think a lot of religious groups don’t know how to deal with humor because I think a lot of it is tied back with the Danish cartoon with the picture of Mohammad. For some religious groups, certain kinds of images are very profane, derogatory, and problematic. And so, instead of addressing humor as a conversation space, either we embrace it for the negative or ignore it because it’s too problematic. But I think humor is a place to kind of show how the emperor has no clothes — to turn on yourself saying “This is what we really are — the good and the problematic.” And I think we can find both the positive values that people have, especially when you have religious individuals using memes to kind of highlight the popular or positive characteristics of their faith or say “Hey, this is who we really are and what we stand for.” That can be a critical conversation about those stereotypes that we blindly see in the background.

Rogalo: What is healthy meme usage for those who are trying to refrain from just instilling bias but also enjoy that level of humor?

Campbell: I think part of it is having a conversation about these memes. So if you’re laughing, what are you laughing at? Is it because I identify with the stereotype or because I identify with the humorous element? Because memes can be so easily remixed. If you go to something like a meme platform or meme generator, you can make your own version within less than a minute. So I would say using memes as a way to have conversations by creating alternatives as well as using them in religious education is important.

Rogalo: So look within yourself and see where you’re coming from with that. What area of this intersection do you feel is lacking the most in social media or just the media in general? What needs to improve the most?

Campbell: I think that — going back to what I was saying a few minutes ago — interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance are things that unfortunately, on the internet in the conversational space created, people don’t gravitate toward. It’s easier to gravitate toward “Oh, these are my opinions, this is my tribe, this is my voice” rather than saying “Hey, I’m going to use this as a teaching environment, a learning environment or a space where I’m uncomfortable, but I’m going to learn and maybe educate others.” So I think people advocating and creating these conversational spaces across political backgrounds and across religious backgrounds is important, but it’s something you have to cultivate. When you have one-on-one relationships and they put something up that’s offensive to you online, do you attack them or do you try and have a conversation with them? Or how do you create a space through a platform like Instagram where you’re giving alternative narratives that are more positive and uplifting? When we’re faced with criticism, our first reaction is to be negative and fight back. But how do you turn the other cheek and do it with grace? That’s a harder position to take. But I think that’s what’s needed, especially in our uncivil, intolerant discourse that we have going on — especially in social media these days.

Rogalo: Yeah, and like we were saying earlier, Facebook opens the world up to so many other opinions, but it also dehumanizes our ability to have empathy towards people behind the screen because we're not seeing them as people. And I think, too, what you were saying about the climate right now online is stressful. You'll see people saying "Stop being offended by everything" but then not having a conversation or dialogue. And I think right now we're having a little bit of a spin back to trying to get there. I think people are tired of just fighting. And I do see a little bit more online, but it's a slow process. We're kind of in this weird realm of social media that we haven't yet uncovered.

Campbell: Yeah. To confront with care takes a lot of emotional energy, and it's easier to ignore those kinds of conversations than to actually have them. But I think we need to let people who are trained in educational establishments and in churches to have those conversations — to say "OK, I'm going to go online to be an advocate and to show another way to communicate that models grace and truth and love rather than being adversarial and right and prideful.

Rogalo: You're at Seton Hall to do a master class with the students. What do you hope to accomplish through this master class?

Campbell: In the master class I'm going to be talking about my research looking at how the field of digital religious studies developed and some of the question areas that have emerged from that. And then I'm going to introduce a theoretical concept I call networked religion, which comes out of research that I've done into how people have practiced religion online and what scholars like myself have been able to say, like "These are the dominant trends of how people practice religion online, and to what extent are those trends happening offline?" Because people are saying "Oh, the internet is the one that is changing culture." But in many ways the internet is just magnifying and putting on speed drive changes that have been happening in our society related to moving away from institutions into more personalized relationships and moving toward a more narrative form of identity vs. a more institutional identity. What they will see is that the internet highlights these new ways of being religious in the 21st Century, but the internet didn't start the trends. They started way before the internet.

Rogalo: Is there anywhere online that people can go to find out more information about your research if they're interested?

Campbell: Yes, I run the Network for New Media and Digital Culture Studies. If you Google basically "digital religion" and "Heidi Campbell" or go to digitalreligion.tamu.edu you'll come to my research website, which is a repository of news articles, research sources and press releases on the most recent work on religion and digital culture.

Rogalo: Great, thank you so much for joining me today.

Campbell: It was my pleasure. Thank you.