Book Reviews

Digital Culture and Religion in Asia
By Sam Han and Kamaludeen Mohamed Nasir
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Reviewer: Denzil Chetty, University of South Africa

Introduction

The rapid advancements of technology (more especially Information and Communication Technologies) and the proliferation of connectivity over the past two decades, have altered the way we see communication in the current era. These advancements have impacted not just the economic sector but also the social and political spaces, which both states and ordinary citizens occupy. With these advancements, the religious scholar finds him/herself immersed in a new research context, which beckons a response to the question of how does digital culture interface with religion and also bring religion to the fore. Much of the research in response to this question has been dominated by studies emanating from the West. Hence, the major contribution of this book by Sam Han and Kamaludeen Mohamed Nasir is that it offers an alternative view on the reconstitution of religion through its interactions with digital culture by drawing examples from Asia.

In their introduction entitled 'Understanding Digital Culture and Religion in/of Asia', Han and Nasir set the context of the book by articulating two important positions. First, Han and Nasir (2016: 2-3) argue that it is a misconception to think of 'new media technologies as somehow still new in the role they play in the discourse and institutional mechanisms of modernity'. They argue that some of the ideals, which we consider to be an 'Internet utopia' can be traced back to discourses emanating in 1990s. They further contend that technology no longer occupies a marginal position among people, it is now part of their everyday lived-experiences. Secondly, for Han and Nasir (2016: 3-5) it is a misnomer to think that religious groups and their institutions treat

technology with suspicion and resist new forms of media technology. To illustrate this, Han and Nasir (2016: 6-7) draw examples from the online presence of Islamic State (IS) in social media sites, which serves as a strong recruitment tool; and the use of social media spaces by Muslim women to negotiate gender-power representations, and resist religious patriarchy. To further illustrate this point, Han and Nasir (2016: 11) draw examples of online *pujas*, in which Hindu adherents in Diaspora communities use technology to mediate a ritual experience in India. Hence, for Han and Nasir (2016: 8) 'religion is not simply then, a set of ideas that have a singular origin and a linear trajectory', it must rather be seen as 'a collection of practices and ideas that are adjusting in concert with other systems, including technological ones'. It is against this background that Han and Nasir set out to analyze the functions and interconnectedness between religion and digital culture.

Structure of the Book and Content

The book is divided into five main sections, which can be theoretically framed as case studies, with the sixth section focusing on the future of religion and spirituality in Asia. The first case study focuses on digital Christianity in Korea. The case study begins by providing the reader with a brief introduction on the history of Christianity in Korea and the ideals of a digital Korea. By drawing on existing research on Yoido Full Gospel Church in Korea, Han and Nasir explore how technology is used to mediate the multi-site church model. While Han and Nasir (2016: 23) conclude that there are many similar traits with mega-churches in the United States, such as integration of social media sites and television broadcasting networks, it is the use of websites that reveals an important feature of Korean Christianity. Websites are designed to revolve around the charismatic figure embodied in the pastor. These websites are designed to capture the biography of the pastor, which traces every miniature aspect of his life, not just spiritual but also struggles experienced in his upbringing, such as family and financial challenges. Hence, the homepage of the church website articulates the testimony of the pastor as well as his philosophy. In addition, websites are used to articulate the 'material' aspects of the theology articulated by the church, i.e. a prosperity gospel. Thus Han and Nasir (2016: 29) argue that 'digital Christianity in Korea is stable enough to be singular and identifiable'.

The second case study focuses on the practice of neo-Shintoism in Japan. In this case study, Han and Nasir argue for religion in Japan to be understood more broadly in terms of 'ritual' and 'religiosity' as opposed to the traditional Protestant emphasis on 'beliefs'. By doing this Han and Nasir (2016: 38) argue that 'contemporary Japanese religiosity retains a unique ontological base', which sees digital religion differing from the West in its manifestations through counselling, fortune telling and divination. Drawing on examples of Shinto sects such as Konkokyo and Tenrikyo, Han and Nasir (2016: 37-40) illustrate how websites are used as points of mediation and proselytizing. Focusing on the digital space of cable television broadcasting, Han and Nasir (2016: 39) explore the TV programs of Hosoki Kazuko in which she acts as a clairvoyant tapping into ancestor worship and Chinese astrology *Rokusei Senjutsu* (a six star astrology system based on the Chinese belief system that people's lives are in a cycle of 12 years).

The third case study explores how Falun Gong in China uses the internet as a space of religious propaganda to launch an information war on the People's Republic of China (PRC). Falun Gong is seen as a religious group that operates outside of Communist ideology and control. In this case study, Han and Nasir (2016: 54) explore how Falun Gong uses the internet as a space for dissemination of their ideas; the construction of community and identity; and a space to protest against the PRC. Han and Nasir (2016: 54-55) analyze the two main websites of Falun Gong and their functions, vis-à-vis minghui.org, which is used for current believers and falundafa.org, an English website used as an introduction to the Falun Gong teachings and practices – i.e. through introductory content in the form of literature, videos, audios, and local contact details. In addition to the above, Han and Nasir (2016: 55) note that the Internet is used by Falun Gong as a space to share experiences about being a practitioner – i.e. fostering a 'virtual' sense of belonging.

The fourth case study addresses the notion of digital Islam in Southeast Asia. According to Han and Nasir (2016: 64) Islam in Southeast Asia 'has been made to seem rather one-dimensional in trend' – i.e. with emphasis on radicalization, Islamization and homogenization. However, Han and Nasir (2016: 64-65) argue that 'there has been a mushrooming of websites that seek to serve as counter-ideologies to extremist ideas'. This case study thus explores how the interaction of Islam with digital media shapes important issues pertaining to religious authority, community and translocality in Southeast

Asia. With the increasing presence of Islam on the internet, 'Muslims no longer only have access to locally based or state appointed religious scholars' (Han and Nasir 2016: 68). Thus for Han and Nasir (2016: 68) the critical question coming to the fore in Southeast Asia pertains to how the intersection of Islam with digital media is challenging the notions of local authority.

The fifth case study focuses on the notion of 'hyper-real' religions in Asia. Arguing from the basis that all religions operate under a fetish logic, Han and Nasir (2016: 88) define hyper-real religions as the 'mixing' of religious tradition and popular culture. Drawing on examples of video games, manga and anime in Asia, Han and Nasir (2016: 91) contend that within these spaces, one finds the 'stitching of pop-cultural elements and religious thematics and symbols, all of which are aided by digital technologies'. To substantiate this, Han and Nasir (2016: 92-95) draw on two different video games originating in Japan, namely *Okami* and *Pokemon*, both of which exhibit Shinto traits.

The book concludes with section six raising critical questions on how millennials are challenging notions of religiosity in Asia through the rise of individualized spirituality (mediated by technology) as institutional religion begins to decline.

Overall Impressions and Relevance

The book can be well positioned as an introductory piece to the study of digital culture and religion in Asia. Its conceptual framework allows one to get a comparative glimpse of the interface between different religious traditions and digital culture in Asia. The interdisciplinary approach in expanding on the historical, social, political and economic background provides valuable information for the reader in understanding the context of each case study. The choice of case studies are in line with the current discourse trends on religion and digital culture. In this sense the book achieves the objective of being an 'introductory' work to digital culture and religion in Asia. While the book embodies a qualitative interpretivist approach to existing literature, it would have offered a more nuanced approach if it included end user empirical data analysis, i.e. an engagement with actual site statistics in the case studies where websites are discussed. Furthermore, there are critical issues of shaping power relations and the formation of new identities, which are mentioned by the authors but lacks significant interrogation. An expansion of these discourses

would have provided a more in-depth analysis to the actual experiences of the users immersed within these transitioning spaces. However, while saying this, I still maintain that this book offers a valuable resource for students and academics wanting to gain an introduction to religion and digital culture in Asia.

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