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Review

**Rachel Wagner, *Godwired: Religion, Ritual and Virtual Reality*
(Routledge, 2011), 272pp.**

Reviewer: Stefan Gelfgren

What is the relationship between religion and digital media? That is the focus of Rachel Wagner's book "Godwired: Religion, Ritual and Virtual Reality", and she emphasizes that there are several areas where the two are intertwined. Wagner herself is Associate Professor in Religion, Ithaca College, USA, with focus on religion and games, media and virtual reality. Research dealing with the relation between religion and digital media is said to have gone through three different phases (Højsgaard & Warburg 2005). In the early nineties, when internet was relatively new for most users, research focused on the novelty of internet-mediated religiosity and considered "cyberspace" as an almost separate universe. In the second wave previous enthusiasm calmed down slightly and a higher degree of contextualization took place. In the currently ongoing third wave internet-mediated religion is seen as one aspect of religious practices among others. Online and offline activities are now merging and it is no longer relevant to divide the two realms of reality. Online religion and religion online (a divide highlighted by Christopher Helland in 2000 and again in 2005), virtual religion and "real" religion can no longer be seen as separate and competing entities, but rather as complements to each other.

Rachel Wagner's book definitely belongs to the third wave of research, and she convincingly argues that digital culture and practices are integrated parts of contemporary religion. She writes: "The question of where we situate 'the virtual' in relationship to the 'sacred' and the 'profane' exposes the indeterminacy in our own understanding of what religion is, and how we can know it when we see it." (p. 79) Arguing along these lines – and this is one of the true strengths of the study – she sheds a new light on religion itself through the vocabulary and terminology associated with the digital. What is religion if not a form of a virtual reality? People involved and participating in religious faith and activities buy in to, and obey, the rules of their particular religion, even if they are somewhat uncertain about its objective truth. People who play computer games also make such arrangements – you enter and are embraced by a world in which you can live and act for a while, even if one knows it is not the "real" world. We enter the so called "circle of play", whether it is through games or religion, according to Wagner. However, sometimes Wagner seems to overemphasize the similarities between games and religion. Religion may seem like play in many ways and can indeed be expressed through game-like rituals, but there is a difference – for religious people religion is not play. People die for religious convictions and purposes, but very few would do that for a game.

Wagner also convincingly discusses what happens when sacred ritual and text move into digital space through our different devices. Can confession be made through an iPhone app? What happens to prayers sent out into cyberspace? Is a tablet sacred if it contains the Quran? Digital media turns the world like we used to know it upside down. Games and digital virtual worlds open up alternative universes and introduce the player to open-ended narratives, through which one has to navigate and make choices. The virtual worlds of today, which we can move into and out of, contribute to a pluralistic society. Wagner claims that alternative worlds and digital media show us new and different possibilities to relate to traditional linear

narratives we are used to. This encourages and forces us (in the connected part of the world) to choose our path in life. Therefore we are today bound to live in a reality where we can, and do, pick and mix our own choice of religious affiliation.

What I miss, not only in this particular work but also in other work within the field of digital religion and the digital humanities, is how digital developments relate to other social and intellectual processes. On the other hand, scholars outside these disciplines seem to a large extent to be uninformed of what is going on within digital culture.

It is not the first time in history when changes within communication technology have transformed religious patterns and behaviors, a point which Wagner also touches upon. The contemporary situation is not as unique as Wagner seems to want us to believe. It is true that digital media contributes to a more pluralistic situation which encourages picking and mixing various elements of religious faith, but that is not only dependent upon technical achievements. Sociologists Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead made similar claims in 2005 in their "*The Spiritual Revolution*"¹ while studying new forms of religion in relation to established religious institutions. The process of pluralisation is related to the process of modernization and has been continuing at least since the 19th century, an ongoing process in which technology advancements of course is an important aspect. It would have been interesting to see Wagner relate her work to far-reaching processes and concepts such as modernisation and secularisation.

One of the many strengths of this book is how Wagner relates practices within digital culture to religious faith and practices. Personally I think that the understanding and interpretation of religion can be supported with terminology from the digital sphere, and here Wagner's work can give inspiration to seek and find such connections.

¹ Heelas, Paul & Woodhead, Linda, (2005) *The spiritual revolution: Why religion is giving way to spirituality*, Malden, Mass: Blackwell.

Højsgaard, M. T., & Warburg, M. (2005). Introduction: Waves of research. In *Religion and cyberspace*. Eds. Morten T Højsgaard & Margit Warburg. London: Routledge.

Helland, C. (2005). *Online Religion as Lived Religion. Methodological Issues in the Study of Religious Participation on the Internet*. Retrieved August 25, 2010, from http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/frontdoor.php?source_opus=5823&la=en.

Heelas, P. & Woodhead, L. (2005) *The spiritual revolution: Why religion is giving way to spirituality*, Malden, Mass: Blackwell.