Fall 2005

Give Me That Online Religion (Book review)

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Recommended Citation

Title:Give Me That Online Religion
Source:*Journal of Religion and Popular Culture.* 11 (Fall 2005):
Document Type:Book review
Full Text: COPYRIGHT 2005 University of Toronto Press
http://www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/
Full Text:

Brasher, Brenda E. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001. 194 pp., $24.95 (USD). ISBN: 0-7879-4579-X.

[1] As a marketing professor with an interest in religion in general and with on-line religious delivery systems in particular, I looked forward to writing a review of Brasher's Give Me That Online Religion. Based on my interests and the title of the book, I had expected that what I would be reading would be a book dealing with how religious institutions, including those within various Protestant denominations in particular who regularly use the internet as a proselytizing tool, are using the internet and advancements in streaming video to enhance the manner in which today's evangelists reach their congregations. These presuppositions were based solely on my particular interpretation of the title. What I encountered, however, was a book that was almost a primer on the philosophy of Internet use in the context of religion and cyberspace regardless of one's faith. This was not all bad.

[2] In the eight chapters comprising the book, Brasher covers a wide range of topics dealing with the growth and movement of electronic religion, but not in the way one might think. In the broadest sense. the chapters deal not with any one religious movement in particular, as I had initially hoped, but with the entire scope of online religion-where it has been, where it is going, and its impact on religion in general. Brasher discusses a wide variety of issues, including religion in cyberspace, (cyber)space and sacred time, virtual pilgrimages, and (for the more philosophy-minded) virtual prophets, existential doubt, and whether or not cyborgs have souls. She states her intentions early, writing, "The temple itself is gone. The heavy smell of flower and fruit offerings has vanished. In sum, the transition from temple to screen, a radical alteration of the sense stimulation integral to Hindu worship has silently taken place. Consequently, the religious experience itself has been altered" (4). This is representative of the direction the book then takes, directing the reader along a journey through religious cyberspace.

[3] Brasher's chapter introductions provide the reader with a clear sense of the breadth of the volume. One chapter discusses what a profoundly different experience it is to interact via computer with an online Hindu temple ("A Revolution in the Making"). Another explores how religionists are seeking ways to apply universal values such as good and evil to virtual space ("Cyber-Virtue and Cyber-Vice"). A third examines the first (now-seemingly prophetic) non-military use of electronically linked computers for an impassioned discussion between Star Trek fans ("Virtual Shrines and the Cult of Celebrity").

[4] Overall, Brenda Brasher has put together a highly readable book that takes the reader through various dimensions of the online religion phenomenon. Different readers will experience this work in different ways; nonetheless, after reading it they will have difficulty not identifying Brasher with the many influences the Internet has had on our lives, on our ways of thinking, and

more specifically, on our experiences of religion-where it has been and, more importantly, where it is going. Cited by the Christian Science Monitor as one of the best books in religion in 2001, Give Me That Online Religion is definitely a book for anyone even slightly interested in the development of religion via new delivery systems. If you are one of these people, then by all means read it.

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