

14

RELIGIOUS STUDIES AND DIGITAL HUMANITIES: A SINE QUA NON FOR BETTER HUMAN RELATIONS

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Abstract

This study examines the intersection of religious studies and digital humanities and its impact on improving human relations. Through an in-depth analysis of this complex topic, our research highlights the crucial role that these two fields play in promoting unity and understanding among individuals. By harnessing the power of technology and incorporating it into religious studies, we can bridge cultural and religious divides and foster a more harmonious society. Our findings emphasise acknowledging and utilising the potential within the combination of religious studies and digital humanities. Doing so can pave the way for a better understanding and acceptance of diverse perspectives and, ultimately, create a more connected and compassionate world.

Keywords: Religious Studies, Digital Humanities, Human Relations

Introduction

This paper focuses on religious studies as a social institution, studied by scholars in all fields of human endeavours. Here, the emphasis is not on what religion is, that is, the denotative sense of the word, but on the study of the discipline, by whatever terminology, by various scholars in diverse areas of human art. This paper also examines digital humanities as a grey area of human discipline in the art/humanities and how this could pave the way for a better understanding of religious studies and human relations. This has become a necessity as humanity continues to advance in science and technology, there is therefore, the need for religion to be studied digitally to foster a new sense of human relations in a world characterised by human complexities, hostilities, hatred, religious bigotries, fanaticisms, intolerance, war, the decline in the sense of community, high level of individualism, increase in consumerism without a corresponding desire for productivity, greed, the revival of racial segregations, decline in familiar as well as societal values, human right denials, drug cum alcohol abuse, inhuman immigration laws, high poverty indices, inequality, increase in crime rates, and violence.

Given these observed phenomena and in light of the desire by humanity to acquire scientific knowledge through scientific methodology, the application of digital humanities in the scientific study of religion would further expand the frontiers of religious studies and push for a better understanding of human relations and a more serene, peaceful and humane world. It should be mentioned that digital humanities or humanities computing is the application of information technology in gathering, discussing or analysing data in the Arts/Humanities. It is because of this that Young-Powell (2023) avers that digital humanities aid one by “delving deeper” (p.1) into the studies of various disciplines in the humanities. It is, therefore, the use of computer skills to advance knowledge in history, literature, religion, philosophy and any other discipline in the arts.

Attempting the definition of religion is a broad scope for this single paper. However, suffice it to note that religion is a complex discipline, and, as stated above, the focus of this



paper is to deal with the subject as an academic discipline, which is the concern of those in the arts, social sciences and other fields of human art. So, defining the phenomenon called religion has to be done by looking at the fact that atheists, scientists, agnostics, religious people, humanists, economists, and politicians are concerned with religion. This leads to difficulty in arriving at a unanimously and universally accepted definition of religion.

Therefore, Mbon (1992) asserts that several reasons account for the difficulty in defining religion. For him, one of the reasons is that humankind's religions are varied, with different religious beliefs, practices, structures and organisations. Another reason is that scholars view the phenomenon from different disciplinary perspectives and inclinations (p.4). he further notes that some aspects of religion are empirical while others are subjective (p.4). Barnhart (1977), in addition to what Mbon asserts above, opines that some scholars view religion from a single perspective while others view it from a broader point of view. This makes it all the more complex to arrive at one definition that all can universally accept, one's religious, philosophical, political, economic, and social affiliations notwithstanding. On a general note, therefore, one would agree with Cox's categorisation of the definition of religion into three viz:

- a. Valutive definitions deal with the primary substance of religion. For instance, fundamentalist definitions, which include "Jesus is the son of God and the saviour of the world" and "there is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet."
- b. Descriptive definitions view religion as an observable phenomenon.
- c. Functional definitions deal with the function of religion to an individual and a society at large. Scholars generally agree that functional definitions, for instance, Paul Tillich's definition of religion as "That which concerns us ultimately", is one good example.

On the other, humanities computing is the intersection between digital technologies and disciplines in the arts and humanities. Humanities computing uses digital tools and software to interpret and analyse data gathered through research questionnaires in the arts and humanities. It is, therefore, a new method where technological tools explain data, thereby changing the research results using digital software. Digital humanities aim to facilitate and enhance accurate research in a comprehensive and fully coordinated manner using novel digital technological tools. It, therefore, helps shape the research investigations, methods and research findings.

Why Machines in the Academic Study of Religion?

Before attempting the question, let us first look at the historical aspects or antecedents of humanities computing. Beecher (2018) writes that historically, digital humanities started as far back as 1965 when the United States of America's Congressional Act created the National Endowment for the Humanities. Thus, the National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act was created. Beecher may have said what he said about the antecedent of humanities computing from an American perspective. Other scholars such as Hockney (2004), Svensson (2009), Stagnaro (2017), Heffernan and Buurma (2018), Wimmer (2019), and Nyhan and Passaratti (2019) all agree that contrary to Beecher's view, the actual origin of humanities computing in the Humanities and Arts started as far back as the 1940s. They all affirm that the pioneering works of a Jesuit scholar, Roberto Busa, in 1946, and the English Professor Josephine Miles, which started in the 1950s, were the true beginning of the marriage of science and disciplines in the Arts/Humanities.

Stagnora (2017), for instance, said that Rev. Fr. Robert Busa will not be forgotten in haste because he taught computers how to talk to us. He (Fr. Roberto Busa) was the inspiration for allowing computers to be used in doing the diverse functions as we have them today. Stagnora further stresses that it was Fr. Roberto Busa who even thought of the use of a keyboard and that all credit should be given to Fr. Busa whenever we manipulate the computer and use it for any function – be it internet, post, e-mail, scan, fax via computer, tweet, or whatever. Fr. Roberto Busa used the computer to search for all the literary works of Thomas Aquinas. Stagnaro notes that the index Thomisticus is considered the beginning of computational linguistics. Fr. Busa, according to Nyhan and Passarotti (2019), was able to convince the Chief Executive Officer of International Business Machines (IBM) to assist him (Fr. Busa) to develop software that could be used to gather and analyse data in the Arts/Humanity. So, with a mouse click, a computer could tell us what we need to know about ancient texts, histories, and more about arts and cultures.

Thus, Fr. Busa is technically the originator of “hypertext.” Before, Ted Nelson saw it as a theoretical construct in 1965, fifteen years after Fr. Busa’s work. So, Fr. Busa is the father of the new cross-disciplinary study called computational linguistics/digital humanities. Thus, he laid the foundation for the synthesis and cooperation between computers and other disciplines in the Arts/Humanities.

With the brief historical background above, attempting to answer why machines should be used in studying religion is not compulsory since religion falls within the domain of disciplines that can be studied scientifically. However, we must have just more than a casual look at why machines are necessary for the academic study of religion. First and most importantly, religion is a social institution that is studied as such. Since it falls within the social sciences and the Arts, using scientific tools or methods in its study is not out of place. Scholars across diverse fields of human endeavour have also studied the phenomenon using scientific apparatuses. Social scientists like Karl Marx, Max Webber, Emile Durkheim, and many others have viewed religion through scientific lenses.

Secondly, the origin of digital humanities shows that computers can be used to analyse text. Religious texts can, therefore, be studied using computational tools and better results can be achieved through this scientific method. Even if the historical aspect of religion that deals with the analysis of text is ignored, how about other aspects of the phenomenon that are scientific? Religion has several areas of specialisation that are scientific. Such areas as archaeology, anthropology, psychology, sociology of religion, comparative study of religion, religion and biomedical ethics, etc., need computational tools to achieve better, more comprehensive and detailed results. In fact, in this increasingly fast-paced and data-driven world, religion also has a place to offer humanity answers to nerve-racking existential challenges faced by humans in this jet age.

Thirdly, religion is studied by scholars across diverse fields of human arts. Thus, applying digital humanities in the academic study of religion is apt and a welcome development. Schafer and Rittgerodt (2022) maintain the view that DH is “an interdisciplinary field, a transversal one. It is a community – or several communities” (p.3). They further argue that DH is not just about the humanities and computers. “It is about networks and shared dialogue” (p.3). This is where religious studies is critical since religious values, to some extent, shape our worldviews/philosophies of life. Therefore, the discipline of religion must be studied using DH tools to explain religious phenomena more concretely and objectively. There is a lot of heterogeneity in digital humanities, and religion

fits in very well even as we talk about digital hermeneutics, which is having a reflective mentality towards data.

Fourthly, there is no better alternative left for us scholars in religious studies than the use of DH in explaining not just religious texts, digital hermeneutics, etc. Our rich cultural heritages and artefacts need this new interdisciplinary approach – digital humanities, to describe reality more scientifically because the contours of the phenomenon called religion need more than the traditional approaches and methods. It is, therefore, in this light that Kirschenbaum (2010) opines that the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations (ADHO) was formed to explain phenomena in the arts from a multi-disciplinary perspective (p.3).

Finally, the marriage/use of artificial intelligence (AI) in research cannot be carried out in our present age without discussing critical issues in religion. Humanities computing is, therefore, a necessity in religious studies as we see a paradigmatic shift in the methods of research and tools used in gathering and analysing data in various disciplines. The epidemic – COVID 19 proved to the world that computers can aid humanity achieve a whole lot of things with ease. AI has aided virtual worships, conferences, thesis defences, workshops/seminars, robotic services, virtual teaching and learning.

Religion, NUC CCMAS and Digital Humanities: The Nexus

The National University Commission (NUC) was empowered by section 10(1) of the Education (National Minimum Standards and Establishment of Institutions) Acts, Cap E8 Laws of the Federation of Nigeria 2004, to establish minimum standards for all Universities and other degree awarding institutions of higher learning in Nigeria. It is in line with this act that the Federal Government approved Minimum Academic Standard (MAS) documents for implementation in Nigerian Universities. Thus, the Core Curriculum and Minimum Academic Standards (CCMAS) was given the nod by the Hon. Minister for Education upon assumption of office in 2016 in the last Buhari-led administration. The programme was designed to cover all areas of human endeavours from Arts to Sciences, Management Sciences, Law, Education, Medicine, Engineering, Computer Science and others. The Arts programmes were also designed to cover religious studies and other areas in the humanities.

What, then, is the Nexus? The connection is that religious studies have been captured by the Nigerian University Commission's Core Curriculum and Minimum Academic Standard – CCMAS programme. NUC has also approved Digital Humanities since it aids research in diverse ways in the humanities. DH helps in research; thus, teaching and learning can be made easy with computational tools. Besides, the Nigeria University Commission has approved the take-off of the Digital Humanities Programme as a compulsory programme for all year two students in the faculty of Arts/Humanities in all Nigerian Universities. This innovation implies that disciplines in the faculty of Arts will be studied more scientifically with the aid of computers or computational tools.

Therefore, scholars in Religious Studies can not afford to ignore this new innovation since religion is also a discipline within the Humanities. Religious studies stand a better chance of benefitting from this novel opportunity. It must also be emphasized that since the Federal Government has insisted the CCMAS be implemented in the 2023/2024 academic session with full inclusion of Digital Humanities as a compulsory course for all year two students, the DH is, therefore, relevant to the scholarly study of Religion in the following ways:

Using computational tools applied in humanities computing aids scholars in religion in discarding false stories about our religious heritages. This is more important as we are now more tech-savvy. No longer can one tell stories such as those told by voyagers like Christopher Columbus about most parts of the world that were false. Computational tools can help in religious studies, especially digital hermeneutics and other statistical tools that could explain religious phenomena. More scientific methods can, according to Quiroz (2017), “eradicate boring and repetitive stories about life” (p.2). Digital humanities dispel doubts about previous research that may not have been investigated using advanced scientific or computational tools.

Digital humanities brings more empirical insights during research. Using digital humanities in carrying out research would bring about a lot of empirical insights into the research. For instance, how would the researcher feel when the details of a particular respondent during fieldwork are filled into the computer, and the complete profile of the respondent comes up on the computer screen? Would that not be exciting? It would reduce the several research encumbrances that have hitherto hindered quality and objective research. Planinc, Krevs, Rebermik, Sillat, Khulbe and Donert (2020) further add that digital humanities tools aid researchers by providing objective information that could not have been accessed if computational tools are not applied. Furthermore, Oza (2020) states that DH has helped research in the humanities by reinventing some aspects of humanities, thereby improving our knowledge base.

The collaboration between digital humanities and religious studies will open grey areas in research since the marriage will benefit scholars in the arts, the behavioural sciences, computer science, and other disciplines. Oza (2020) affirms that this collaboration will “augment non-computational research methods, which can be bewildering as it is often difficult to decide where to start” (p.49).

The Application of Digital Humanities in Religious Studies as a Sine Qua Non for Better Human Relations

Religion’s role in human relations is never undermined as a social institution. Though religion gives human beings who live in any given society a better understanding of the meaning and purpose of life, it also has negative and positive functions. Because of religion’s role in human relations, Dehghani (2016), Iheanache (2016), and Ugorie (2017) all agree that religion plays a significant role in human relations and that it gives humans a sense of belonging, identity, and unity. Dehghani, for instance, further affirms that religion’s role in human relations extends far beyond interpersonal relations in formal worship centres such as shrines, temples, churches or mosques. It extends to international religions as countries with the same or similar religious idiosyncrasies appear to relate better and exchange ideas, technologies and good policies than countries with different religious affiliations. Nwadiakor (2016) argues that although religion has obvious unfavourable functions, it could also serve as a tool to foster ethno-religious harmony in Nigeria. Applying DH in religious studies would also bring about better human relations since there will be a generally accepted research method, that is, the scientific method. This scientific method has already been in use for a long time. Bringing this computational approach to DH is, therefore, nothing new. Instead, it would encourage interpersonal, inter-disciplinary human relations in a manner that knowledge will be mixed and more intuitive apprehension of the inner nature of any study/research would be made.

Suppose sophisticated and advanced computational tools are used in research on religious studies. In that case, it will encourage other scholars in various disciplines to appreciate that religious studies are not just studying African Indigenous Religion, Hinduism, Islam or Koran, Bible or Christian studies or Theology. Digital hermeneutics could help scholars in religious studies to understand, more objectively, the sacred texts of scriptures when computers are used. Romele (2020) and Fickers and Tatarinov (2022) affirm that difficult areas, such as sacred text interpretations, have been made possible and easy with advanced technological improvements in computer science. (Remember Fr Roberto Busa above, who interpreted Thomas Aquinas' writings using computers). By implicating digital technologies, it sheds more light on ontological and methodological issues in digital hermeneutics. Thus, this could bring about interpersonal human relationships between the researchers in religious studies and those in computer science.

Herck (2022) also confirms that beyond arts and humanities, especially historians, computers and those in the field of computing can rewrite our histories more objectively and, thereby, bring about human relations. Since digital hermeneutics is a platform for debates on interpretation in times of big data, it brings scholars in the hermeneutic tradition together with those in computer science and other statistical sciences. This, and in several areas of religious studies, we can unambiguously say that it will bring about better human relations across disciplines and beyond academic circles.

Conclusion

This paper discussed religion as a purely scientific discipline, though domiciled in the Arts/Humanities in most institutions of learning. The paper argued that as a social institution studied by various scholars across the disciplines of human endeavours, DH can and should be used to study this phenomenon. The chapter further examined digital humanities as a specialised area of scholarly activity with the intersection of computing or digital technologies and the disciplines of the humanities. The history of digital humanities was briefly stated in the introductory section of the chapter since it is seen as a systematic way in which digital resources in the arts, as well as the analysis of their applications, are inclusively arranged in a way that involves collaboration for a more objective result during research. Digital humanities, therefore, bring digital tools into research, making the study more exciting and rewarding.

It was also noted that humanities computing uses new applications and technologies, easing learning, teaching, and research. It was further discussed that the use of machines in the academic study of religion will go a long way to authenticate research carried out since it is, itself, a science studied by other scientists in different disciplines of human endeavour. The chapter concluded by examining the new Nigerian University Commission's Core Curriculum for Minimum Academic Standard (CCMAS), approved by the Federal Government of Nigeria, to commence the teaching of digital humanities as a compulsory course for all year two students in all the facilities of Arts/Humanities across all degree awarding higher institutions of learning in the federation. Given this, therefore, we recommend, intensely so, that digital humanities with all its computational tools and methodologies should be applied in the academic studies of religion in all Nigerian Universities and beyond since this will bring about good human relations at personal, professional, regional, national, as well as global levels.

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