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## RELIGION ONLINE

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### USING THE INTERNET FOR RELIGIOUS STUDIES RESEARCH: AN INTRODUCTION

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With the creation of the Internet and then of the World Wide Web, access to information and information sharing has developed on a scale unimaginable in the past. Through a computer terminal and modem connection, scholars studying religion now have easy access to primary and secondary resources that may have been unobtainable, or certainly inconvenient to retrieve, only ten years ago. Ancient manuscripts can be viewed in the comfort of your own home now that vast collections have been digitally photographed and placed online by institutions such as the Lund University (<http://laurentius.lub.lu.se/>). A non-Muslim can take a virtual tour of the Hajj and access live video feeds from Masjid al-Haram (<http://www.islamicity.com/>). Archives can be scoured at the Vatican, stacks can be searched at Harvard, and rare and out-of-print books can be downloaded from Google.

Although it appears that there is no end of possibilities for this technology to assist in both primary and secondary source research, there are significant limitations and gray areas on the Web, darkening this electronic illumination. Although the Internet and the Web can function like a library, it is not a typical one. The information is not all edited or reviewed by a press or peers. In the past, academics knew that you could not judge a book by its cover. In the electronic age, it is more apt to say that you should not judge a website by its home page. As Douglas E. Cowan (2004) notes in his research of religious countermovement on the Web, "anyone with a web design program, access to a server on which a page may be hosted, and the (relatively) simple skills required to design and publish a Web site can make the claim to authority. . . . Men and women with little or no formal theological education or academic training . . . are designing Web sites, some of which have a very professional appearance . . ." (256-57).

Sources that may appear to be established and reputable providers of information can contain subject errors and misrepresentations. Perhaps the greatest example of this online is Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia. As any educator knows, despite telling students that this website is not a credible source for an academic paper, it is often the first place where students turn to when they use the Internet to obtain information. In my own pedagogical approach to getting students to understand the problems associated with this source, I will bring up the website in class and begin a research project on Hinduism in Canada. Depending upon the day of the week—literally—the entry will contain some factual information concerning this religious tradition in Canada, or it will be interspersed with anti-Hindu comments, racial slurs, and verbal attacks against this Canadian

minority. The comments will often remain for one or two days until they are edited out. In the case of this entry, the nonacademic and negative information is explicit and easy to spot. In other cases, changes to the information may be subtler, making it much more difficult to distinguish fact from fiction: dates and names may be changed or misrepresented, ritual descriptions and practices altered, and beliefs misrepresented. In the case of Hinduism in Canada information, it is an intentional attack. In other situations, the information could be inaccurate based upon ignorance, unintentional bias, differing interpretations of events, and so on.

Despite the problems with Wikipedia, it can be a useful starting point in a search for online information. Again, in the case of Hinduism in Canada, there are three very useful links at the bottom of the entry. However, researching this topic online can become an academically hazardous undertaking if one is not aware of how the Web is being used by a number of groups to promote Hindutva. These are websites linking Hindu religious beliefs and practices with a nationalist ideology.

This special issue of *Religious Studies Review* was organized to provide accurate, up-to-date information on websites useful to scholars studying religion. Contributors to the issue were recruited if they had an expertise in the area being examined as well as a solid familiarity with the online environment. They were asked two very general questions, posed as though they came from a student or a faculty member without a background in their field: "What are some good websites for getting information about your topic of research?" and "Why are those websites reliable?" In addressing these questions, some contributors selected three or four websites that they believed were the best for this pursuit. In other cases, the contributors recognized themes or categories of online activities related to their field of study and then chose websites that were best suited for that particular theme. In both cases, contributors reviewed some of the most up-to-date and important websites, explaining why they are good sources, what type of information can be found at the site, and also some of the limitations or cautions that should be taken when using the Internet and the Web for their particular research.

Each contributor selected the websites that they felt best answered the two questions. In many cases, it was a difficult choice, and restrictions on the length of the contributions forced them to pick favorites. In no way are the resulting essays a comprehensive review of all the websites available. Rather, they present readers with a solid starting point for researching religion on the Internet.

The categories of the websites reviewed reflect the online environment itself and were based on the most accurate representation of websites dealing with religion and spirituality. The Google Open Directory Project (<http://directory.google.com>) reviews all websites that appear on the Web and places them in a topic category. This system of classification then provides the directory services for the Web's largest and most popular search engines and portals such as Netscape Search, AOL Search, Google, Lycos, HotBot, DirectHit, and hundreds of others. Within the religion and spirituality section, Christianity dominates with over 93,000

websites. Websites related to Paganism, new religious movements, and esoteric/occult are second. Buddhism is third, closely followed by Judaism and Islam. Websites on Hinduism are the next largest category. I chose to exclude the category of Yoga from the review even though it contains slightly more sites than Islam because most of these are commercial websites for teachers and centers. Two extra categories were also included on account of their importance to the study of religion. The first, by Ken Bedell, examines religious affiliation numbers and statistics. The second, by Debra Merskin, examines websites that provide information on religion and media.

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#### References

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- COWAN, DOUGLAS E.  
2004 "Contested Spaces: Movement, Countermovement, and E-Space Propaganda." In L. Dawson and D. Cowan (eds.), *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, 255-71. London: Routledge.

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## BIBLICAL STUDIES ON THE INTERNET

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### Websites Reviewed

#### THE NEW TESTAMENT GATEWAY

<<http://www.ntgateway.com>>

#### ITANAKH: RESOURCES FOR ACADEMIC STUDY

<<http://www.itanakh.org>>

#### K. C. HANSON'S HOMEPAGE

<<http://www.kchanson.com>>

#### THE ORION CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS AND ASSOCIATED LITERATURE

<<http://orion.msc.huji.ac.il>>

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**A**mong biblical scholars and the scholarly communities associated with them (Classicists, ancient Near Eastern and early Christian specialists especially), the growth of Web resources and of the "biblioblogging" community has become unmanageable for novices or nonspecialists trying to find their own way. Part of the reason for this situation may be that the use of computers by text-based scholars is long-standing. Important computer-based projects predate the Web or made extensive use of its capabilities early on (e.g., the Center for Computer Analysis of Texts at the University of Pennsylvania, the Perseus Project at Tufts University).

The ease of accessing primary source material through the Internet, however, contrasts sharply to the sense of discomfort one may feel about the reliability of the information one encounters. For scholars of religion, a natural place to turn to are the websites of the various professional organizations (American Academy of Religion, Society of Biblical Literature, North American Patristics Society, and so on), so I have decided to focus on a few select

sites that I would recommend to colleagues or students. Although a large number of scholars maintain exceptionally good websites for their own instructional purposes and for scholarly communications, many of these are linked through the following sites. It goes without saying that there will be few surprises in these suggestions for many specialists and that there are many noteworthy sites that I do not have sufficient space to discuss.

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NT: The New Testament Gateway (<http://www.ntgateway.com>)

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For the study of the NT, the choice is extremely easy. Bart Ehrman (2004) recommends this site in his work *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* as his only Web resource, stating that it is one of the few that "will be around for a very long time and which provides trustworthy scholarly information" (xxix). There is little disagreement on this point. The New Testament Gateway is an exceptionally good resource and can be recommended with very little reservation. Indeed, a section of commendations forms one set of links on the site itself.

Dr. Mark Goodacre, currently in the Department of Religion at Duke University, first created this website when he was at the University of Birmingham. The site is searchable and is topically organized with sections designed for students, scholars, and other interested parties. Goodacre helpfully includes an FAQ section explaining the history of the site, its purpose, and the reasoning behind the link selection. This website admittedly favors the specialist, with the links all determined on the basis of their academic quality, but there are many resources for the student and the nonexpert.

This site is easily the best resource for biblical studies on the Web, even if simply as a gateway to other sites, and it is constantly evolving. Secondary materials are continually being added to the Weblog section, from new issues of the electronic *Review of Biblical Literature* to news of scholarly articles becoming available electronically. The All-in-One Biblical Resources Search page allows searches of various versions of the biblical text (including the Septuagint and the Greek NT) and also contains links to various discussion lists and Web resources about the ancient world. On the home page, materials are divided into topics, literary units, or methodological approaches (e.g., specific Gospels or epistles, historical Jesus, Jesus in film, textual criticism, etc.), allowing for an easy navigation. The only difficulty that one is likely to encounter is one of choice because of the sheer amount of material available.

The recurrent problem with this site, if it can be called such, is that it is ultimately the work of a single person. Thus, "energy" issues are the only shortcoming as the sheer number of links inevitably results in some dead or broken ones no matter how energetic or dedicated Goodacre is. (Some links to the University of Birmingham remain.) Goodacre is a publishing NT scholar with full-time teaching duties and is also serving as the series editor of the *Library of New Testament Studies*. The credentials that make him well suited to create such a site must also make him occasionally wonder about the number of hours available in a given day for what is, all accolades aside, a professional service. The New Testament Gateway is in any case the preeminent website for persons desiring a single place to go on the Internet for information about the scholarly study of the NT, and it sets the bar for all other Web resources.