An Open Source Gospel? Negotiating Religious Authority & Ownership of Sacred Texts in a Digital Age

Current discourse within Sociology of Religion, Religious Studies, and Media Studies often assumes this appearance of new religious authorities online will displace traditional authorities and lead to institutional struggles over affiliation, community identities and gatekeeping of official interpretations. Yet no unified understanding or cohesive scholarly discourse exists explaining how Internet culture influences the different relationships and cultural spaces associated with religious authority online. Using Jon Anderson's essay “The Internet and Islam's New Interpreter's” (1999) as a starting point, and his predictions of how the Internet would facilitate new forms of authority within Islam, I will investigate the specific categories of religious authority influencing offline religious organizations he highlights in his work. These includes “creole pioneers” or tech designers who become unintentional authorities due to being the first to represent their religious community online; “reformer critics” driven by a personal rather than officially-sanctioned agenda to represent their religion online; and “spokesperson-activists” who represents established religious institutions online. In this specific study I will explore how evangelical social media entrepreneurs and mobile media developers have become a new breed of missionaries and Biblical resource creators challenging the work of International Bible Societies and their control over Biblical interpretive practices and copyright holdings are considered.