ACTIVITY FOUR

Digital Tools and the Study of the History of Religions

Target Audience:
- Advanced undergraduate Religious Studies / Religious History students
- Graduate Religious Studies / Religious History students

Activity Type:
- In-depth discussion question (for extended discussion or individual essay assignment)
- Digital activity – computer and internet access required
- Critical thinking exercise

Activity Goals:
- Encourage students to use the DRH for research
- Improve students’ digital data literacy skills
- Encourage critical consideration of the subjective nature of knowledge construction

This activity can be used either as a group discussion question, an exam question, or as a prompt for a term paper. The question prompt is as follows: “Digital tools enable researchers to gather, organize, communicate, and interpret data. How does the use of the digital affect the approach to studying the history of religions, and the possible conclusions a scholar may draw? Use the Database of Religious History to backup your arguments”. Additional questions to consider follow the main prompt. These ask students to consider the scale of analysis, the validity of scholarly consensus, and why or why not they consider expert answers reliable.

For the validity of consensus question, we have asked the students to consider whether all viewpoints should be published on the database, even if they are considered to be minority views. We hope that through this prompt students will consider the benefits and drawbacks of the online, public nature of the DRH. While this gives new voices the opportunity to add their perspectives, it also opens up the possibility of harmful views used for racist or political agendas. Instructors may want to discuss this point in more detail with students, as an important element of digital media literacy.

Overall, the goal of this assignment is to have students reflect on the methodology used by the DRH. They should consider the online, digital function of the database, and other digital resources, and consider how this affects the study of religion, particularly in light of other religious study philosophies. If they have completed the other short activities, or have otherwise been introduced to the structure of the database, students should be able to comment on the
Here are a few recommended sources that relate to this question:

Asprem, Egil and Ann Taves

Jensen, Jeppe Sinding

McCutcheon, Russell T.

Riis, Ole Preben

Slingerland, Edward and Brenton Sullivan