ACTIVITY FOUR

Digital Tools and the Study of the History of Religions

SUMMARY
This discussion question requires students to think critically about how the use of digital tools can shape the study of the history of religions. Having worked through previous activities to introduce them to the Database of Religious History (DRH), students should be able to draw on the form and function of this resource as a starting point for consideration. In reflecting on this question, they should show an understanding of digital tools and the structure of databases, as well as theoretical or philosophical approaches to the study of religion.

PURPOSE
In this activity, students will demonstrate the ability to think critically about the use of digital tools while working on a humanistic subject. Digital and data literacy are skills that are vital for research, and are applicable to a variety of professional fields. Becoming competent in the use of online databases and, importantly, being able to critically assess these resources, will help you in your future as a student, and in your subsequent professional career as well.

INSTRUCTIONS
Either independently or in a group, discuss the following question. Be sure to draw in examples from the DRH to support your answer.

Question
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.

• To answer this question, you may want to consider the following
  • Is it possible to discuss a “religious group” while representing each individual? If not, is it still valuable to speak in general terms? Consider how these issues of scale manifest in the DRH and within other forms of history writing (encyclopedias, books, articles).
• Consider the validity of scholarly consensus. Do you think that majority answers should always be presented as true? Should all opposing viewpoints be noted in the DRH, even if they are considered to be minority views?

• Do you trust all the answers given to a query or within an entry? What makes you trust or distrust these answers? What aspects of the presentation of the data make you trust or distrust the entry?