

Digitization of Religion

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Introduction

In the last few decades there have been significant changes in the way, communication technology, is influencing how people practice religion. With the rise of the virtual world, many groups are embracing technologies to create an online interactive worship experience.

It has also provided people with Freedom of faith, which means that all are free to believe what they choose to believe and that all are free to organize their personal and private lives according to these religious beliefs.

Thus, rather than being an alternative social space for a few, digital technology becomes an important platform extending and altering religious practice for many.

Digitization of Religion

Over the years, there have been radical changes in communication technology, which has resulted as a game-changer to conceive religion within digital culture slowly, as religious leaders found it convenient to spread their teachings. The term “digital religion” depicts evolution of religious practice online, as seen in the most recent manifestations of programs which are aired online and also found in offline contexts simultaneously.

“Digital religion” not only refers to religion as it is performed and articulated online, but points to how digital media and spaces are evolving and shaping up by religious practices. Being a strong medium, it allows to maintain the current state of different religions in relation to digital context and the culture in which they are situated. However, given different contexts and performances of digital religion in

current times, a review can be taken of how religious practice has been described, approached, and changed in the last few decades using Internet, online, cinema, audio-video instruments such as smart phones, tablets and televisions etc.

Evolution of digital religion concept

When developments started taking place in the mid- to late 1990s, “cyber-religion” was considered as a way to describe the religion to the new regimes of cyberspace whereby religious practice was not bound by traditional constraints and pattern. Rather a new relationship began surfacing between computer technology and religion as experiments carried out to showcase spiritual views into cyberspace (Bauwens 1996).

Religious organizations or groups of like-minded people were formed and existed in cyberspace communicating and carrying out activities with each other using cyber-religion as a broad concept with gradual emergence of new, electronically inspired religious practices and ideas.

Thus the concept of cyber-religion provided a way to explore and question traditional assumptions and understanding of religions, as it engaged with new cultural and technological contexts. However, it often evoked assumptions that it was based on an incomplete or somehow false form of religiosity, having limits to its usefulness. Moreover, different forms of religion started emerging online.

Religion online was appreciated for providing empowerment to its members to reform rituals and bypass traditional systems of legitimation or recognized gatekeepers, and the opportunities it provided to go beyond normal limits of time, space, and geography. Online religion allowed flexibility for new forms of religiosity and lived religious practices online and demonstrated how the Internet offered a new dimension to spiritual contemporary society.

“Digital religion” has been the subject title for many conferences, books, research studies, symposiums and meetings held in recent years. Stewart Hoover (2006), suggests that the study of religion and new media has moved on from simply exploring

the “digitalisation of religion” –which considers how digital media force religious groups and practitioners to adapt, to altering notions of religious tradition, authority, or authenticity.

Christopher Helland(2004) outlines how religious practices have been transported online and discusses the implications of ritualized behaviors in online religious environments. Ritual, he suggests, is part of the cultural meaning-making system, such that it can be both a religious and secular act. This means that ritual plays an important role in the human experience. He argues that the study of online ritual has challenged scholars to carefully consider what it means to “do” religion and even to “be” religious in a digital realm. Looking at how and why various religious groups practice religious rituals online can help point towards a broader understanding of what constitutes religion in a digital world.

Heinz Scheifinger(2013), explores in “Hindu Worship Online and Offline,” how puja, the ritualistic worship of a Hindu deity, has been performed online, and compares this with traditional puja rituals that necessitate fully embodied interaction. He carefully considers the extent to which a puja conducted online can constitute a valid form of religious expression and the debates that such online ritual can raise for offline Hindu communities.

Louise Connelly(2013),investigates Buddhist rituals in virtual worlds in her case study, “Virtual Buddhism: Buddhist ritual in Second Life.” Specifically, she focuses on Buddhist meditation as a ritual which incorporates material objects and the use of both voice and text, and the negotiation process between offline and online ritual.

VitSisler(2013), in “Playing Muslim hero: Construction of identity in video games,” analyses how contemporary Islamic video games can offer players a new virtual representation of Muslim identity, as hero rather than victim or villain, as is often seen in popular digital game narratives. Through an analysis of recent games produced in the Arab world he explores how religious identity can be understood, defined, and performed via new media.

After discussing the unique aspects of digital media, Gregory Price Grieve (2013), argues that digital religion, offers a workaround, providing religious Internet users with dynamic opportunities to navigate the problems created by the fluid nature of “liquid modern life,” which challenges previous definitions of religion and traditional patterns of religiosity.

The case study, “Formation of a religious technorati: Negotiations of authority among Australian emerging church blogs,” Paul Teusner(2013) provides a discursive analysis of Australian religious bloggers, showing how religious authority is enacted in the online blogosphere. He suggests that, rather than challenge traditional religious authorities, religious bloggers that emerge as recognized religious authorities may simply mirror the attributes and pattern of traditional religious leaders, thereby highlighting the paradox of the Internet as a platform that simultaneously affirms and undermines religious authority.

Pauline Cheong(2013) provides an analysis of recent studies examining the implications of the Internet for religious authority. Her review highlights early framings of the Internet as a decentralized space lacking hierarchical control, suggesting that traditional religious authority would be disrupted or undermined by digital technologies.

Rachel Wagner(2013), reflects on how religious mobile applications offer individuals new opportunities to engage in religious bricolage, as the personalization of one’s mobile devices becomes an act of religious identity construction and presentation. Yet such acts raise questions of authenticity. In other words, to what extent does one’s selection of religious apps represent an actual and cohesive religious identity, or does app selection more accurately reflect an individualized religious identity that works against a fixed notion of religious identity or authority?

Tim Hutchings(2013), explores two online Christian churches, St Pixels and Life Church that use digital media platforms for worship, conversation, and proselytization. He shows the different understandings and patterns of “community”

fostered in each group, and how these strategies have implications for local offline churches within this tradition.

Thus in the author's view, digital religion could be described as a religion that is constituted in new ways through digital media and cultures, which may lead to a new understanding of religion and experiences of mediation of meaning through digital technology. Also the author opines that, the reformation of existing religious practices have implications online as well as offline, leading to new experiences, authenticity, and spiritual reflexivity.

Impact of Digital media

Digital religion can offer a critical and systematic religious engagement with a wide range of new media forms for all major world religions, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism and other new religious movements and also can provide detailed review of issues related to religious authority, authenticity, community, identity, and rituals online including a series of case studies or experiences to illustrate and elucidate thematic explorations. Also, theoretical, ethical, and theological issues can be raised and discussed.

Audio-visual: Prior to Internet dominance, audio-visual media was, though still is, a very important interpersonal communication medium to deliver or convey message or video footage to masses and their digital storage and reproduction for repetition. Increased social mobility and geography gave rise to conglomerates of cultural, ethnic and religious diversity. It caused people to reach a certain point of autonomy which affected the religious sphere. Thus, its relationship with the religious and spiritual necessity became more critical, less submissive and more individualistic. The Religious establishments, apparently, began to lose their central role and the individual could decide what to believe.

However, it does have a limitation because commercial privatization of media could affect originally intended truthful religious expressions. In public service, the basic criterion is the presence of society and its institutions and respect for religious and

cultural traditions. However, in private service, the objective is to reach the largest audience in order to obtain the greatest profit.

Cinema, television, radio etc. invade our privacy, and we still do not know the effects that the fragmentation of the image, of information and the manipulation creates a kind of partial 'truth', which prevents authentic communication. The most detestable sort of dependence is not material but spiritual. Once people lose the power to think critically for themselves, they are not able to communicate.

Social media: In present times, people wish to connect and are wanting to find ways of connecting and getting together and social media is enabling that.

The proliferation of digital media technologies in the twenty first century has its impact on mediated communication in the public sphere. In 'global religions' such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Buddhism, digitization has opened up new spaces for the mediation of religious information. The Internet, for instance, has enabled particular religious communities to circulate and publicize their message. The proliferation of religious websites, forums and blogs, e-books and DVDs of religious material came to be known as e-religion.

According to Heidi Campbell(2013), social media is changing the face of religion, as it has become an important way to connect and make your religious experience a 24/7 experience rather than rituals to be on the weekends. It is not uncommon for religious leaders to use Twitter, Facebook and any other social media environment. In fact, it's the latest trend, according to a Twiplomacy Study. Pope Francis is now ranked as the most influential Twitter user based on the average number of retweets he receives from his six accounts in different languages. Pope Francis is listed as having the second-highest number of followers overall among world leaders, right behind President Barack Obama. Herb Scribner (2013).

In recent years, to influence believers, online religious community leaders have started building social media brands to help differentiate themselves from others and try to step out of religious democracy. By posting spiritual thoughts instead of

just scripture, leaders make themselves a part of the conversation and not just a leader. This creates an easier environment for those who aren't usually involved with religion and increases the interest level.

Effects of Digitization of religion

There is freedom for anyone to create their own websites without the need for discussion and 'legitimization. Consequently, freedom of opinion, as practiced on the Internet, functions as the sovereign freedom of private commitment.

The world is experiencing heinous crimes related to religious terrorism, due to wrong interpretations created by digitalized religion. Terrorist organisations through private networks can be, for example, religious, which create a group identity. Lack of trust leads to narrowness; and the external world provokes suspicion. In this context, polarising religious messages can become strangely attractive because they seem to match people's mind-sets and give practical solutions.

Meanwhile, loss of trust in public institutions and the emergence of separate groups carry that loss to the public sphere where people used to experience religious diversity without fear. "Public discourse disappears and negative rumours spread easily", such as a distorted interpretation of religion. In the end, the collapse of a "meaningful intergroup communication" brings society fragmentation.

Conclusion

Digital religion could be described, as a religion that is constituted in new ways through digital media and cultures, which may lead to a new understanding of religion and experiences of mediation of meaning through digital technology. Thus, reformation of existing religious practices have implications online as well as offline leading to new experiences, authenticity, and spiritual reflexivity.

The survival and dissemination of opinions on the global information market is regulated by a law formulated by Charles Darwin, namely, the survival of the fittest.

Ritual, repetition, and reproduction were hitherto matters of religion; they were practiced in isolated, sacred places. In the modern age, however, they have become the fate of the entire culture. Even progress is reproductive; it consists in a constantly repeated destruction of everything that cannot be reproduced quickly and effectively. Thus according to the author, under such conditions, it should come as no surprise that, digitization of religion—in all its various manifestations, seems especially relevant to the survival and success of religions in the contemporary world.

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