
I N T R O D U C T I O N

In recent decades, computational media has significantly transformed how humans interact with all aspects of sociocultural life. These changes not only disrupt and reshape communication processes mediated by virtual platforms but also challenge our understanding of the digital universe and its intricate dynamics. It can be argued that digital media has evolved beyond being a mere tool or artificial machine, emerging instead as an alternate dimension of reality—one that generates unique experiences and produces its own forms of meaning. As stated by Fontanille, media, in general, occupy a very particular place in contemporary culture. They interfere in all private or public practices determining all genres of discourses¹.

In this hybrid ecosystem, new paradigms are being proposed regarding the integration of religious discourses with computer media, altering the way in which individuals relate to their own beliefs in multiple aspects. Such a premise, in fact, would give us a further reflection on how religion and spiritual pursuits are written and rewritten in relation to the social, historical and cultural context in which subjects are inscribed, as is the case of technological innovation. As computer technologies increasingly permeate sociocultural spheres, their unique characteristics distinctly shape and influence religious traditions in online spaces. In this way, digital media have created a kind of faith which is “fluid and evolving, and seeks out new resources, symbols, and experiences to bring into a kind of ‘syncretism of individual experience’”².

When exploring religious practices taking place in online environments, digital religion emerges as that relatively new field of study focusing on that intersection of technology and spiritual pursuits which gained force with the rise of the Internet and online communities. Heidi Campbell, one of the most representative authors investigating

¹ Jacques Fontanille, *Formas de Vida* (Lima: Universidad de Lima, 2018), 161.

² Steward Hoover, “Religion and the Media in the 21st Century,” *Tripodos* 29 (2012): 30.

the field of digital religion, defines it as: “that technological and cultural space that is evoked when we discuss how the religious spheres of online and offline have become increasingly mixed or integrated into our networked society”³. Digital religion is primarily concerned with how religion in its various forms engages with, and is shaped by, digital culture and media⁴. This phenomenon has positioned digital religion as a versatile and non-dichotomous field of research, capable of addressing religious experiences on virtual platforms, regardless of participants’ offline conditions or locations while challenging the reductive connotations that still surround the digital as something artificial.

Having said that, the understanding of digital media’s role in religious traditions has allowed the construction of new interpretations in academic research, efficient to develop a map of how the phenomena of digital religion has been changing through the years. Hojsgaard and Warburg⁵ proposed three waves of research, which continue to grow, and that can help us to understand how religion is continuously changing and intertwining with other aspects of humans’ culture: In its beginnings, the internet was considered as a completely separate universe, so there were a lot of dystopian and utopian projections of the impacts it will have in human’s society. It was also the time when the first religious communities started to find the virtual space as a comfortable alternative to spread their activities and beliefs. Therefore, Internet was seen as a tool to either building new possibilities of faith or destroying the existing religious structures.

The second wave brought a higher level of contextualization, by assuming the incidence of the digital context in daily life as more normal, as well as by accepting the migration of many sociocultural aspects to virtual spaces. Researchers started to find that it was not only the power of technology to generate those types of religious expressions, but

³ Heidi Campbell, “Introduction,” in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practices in New Media Worlds*, ed. Heidi Campbell (London: Routledge 2013) 3.

⁴ Stewart M. Hoover and Nebil Echchaibi, “Introduction: Media Theory and the Third Spaces of Digital Religion”. *The Third Spaces of Digital Religion*, eds. Stewart Hoover and Nabil Echchaibi (London: Routledge, 2023, 1-36).

⁵ Morten Hojsgaard and Margit Warburg, “Introduction: waves of research,” in *Religion and cyberspace*, eds. Morten Hojsgaard and Margit Warburg (London: Routledge, 2005) 1–11.

also people, as active users of digital media. In the third wave, scholars started to consider the Internet as a meaning-making resource in which users could find religious orientation and formation practices⁶. Here, religion mediated by digital media is considered one more practice, another aspect of religion; the division between the two spaces - the online and the offline - becomes less relevant. Heidi Campbell and Mia Lövheim together characterized the third wave of research as a ‘theoretical turn,’ emphasizing its focus on uncovering what is genuinely new in the diverse manifestations of religion online⁷.

Contemporaneity can be seen in the following fourth stage, where “media practices have become a seamless part of religious groups and individuals’ everyday lives. (...) The online-offline contexts are no longer described in terms of space distinction, but as a continuum of experience which all humans, even the religious, must engage.”⁸ Also, the strategies emerging from the digital context allow spiritual considerations to open the possibility of religious discourses belonging to the virtual universe and providing other ways of religious inter-connections and new expressions of practices and emerging beliefs. In words of Campbell:

This wave continues to emphasize the connections between online and offline aspects of life and practice, considering how this new era of hypermediation, where there is no distinction between mediated and non-mediated spaces, shapes our outlook and humanity. The online-offline context is no longer described in a terms of space distinction, but as a continuum of experience which all humans, even the religious, must engage⁹.

When talking about everyday religious practices, we are irremediably entering into the sphere of materiality which is ‘the very’ core of

⁶ Stewart Hoover and Jin Kyu Park, “Religion and Meaning in the Digital Age Field Research on Internet/Web Religion”

⁷ Mia Lövheim and Heidi Campbell, “Considering Critical Methods and Theoretical Lenses in Digital Religion Studies,” *New Media & Society* 19, n. 1 (2017): 5–14.

⁸ Heidi A. Campbell, “The Dynamic Future of Digital Religion Studies,” *BRILL eBooks*, (2023): 316, <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004549319>.

⁹ Stewart M. Hoover and Nebil Echchaibi, “Introduction: Media Theory and the Third Spaces of Digital Religion”. *The Third Spaces of Digital Religion*, eds. Stewart Hoover and Nabil Echchaibi (London: Routledge, 2023): 1-36.

religion¹⁰. Religious materiality is not only about objects, images, or texts, but also about bodies and spaces mediating experiences of spiritual nature. When it comes to computer media, Evolvi argues that there are three reasons to approach digital religion practices considering: a) digital artifacts and technological devices can be addressed as material objects that can embody the religious experience; b) digital media can facilitate visual culture which can also help to materialize religion by providing a ‘sacred gaze’; and c) certain characteristics such as the platform’s aesthetics, coding and interfaces make possible to rematerialize the digital by enabling certain actions and performances. Having said that, it is essential to study the material attributes of virtual platforms where religious practices take place, the strategies users propose to interact with them, as well as the ways in which religious traditions start embracing certain media which are inherent of digital culture, such as AI or extended realities. As David Morgan assess:

The trajectory of material analysis runs from the physical properties of a medium and the production of artefacts to the classification of its function and reproduction determined by its relation to other things like it, to the dynamics of circulation whereby the object acquires value and helps to construct a people’s sense of community and shared reality.

As the current fourth wave gravitates more around the experience of religion online, researchers should prioritize how these practices influence users’ relationships and understanding of computer technology, as well as how religion is being reshaped in broader, interdisciplinary ways. To do so, a study of religious materiality manifesting online requires the evaluation of “the different affordances of the platforms (...) [and] the actions and relations that digital practices make possible”¹¹. The ‘appropriation’ of computational media by users and the effect that digital technology has in humans’ beliefs create the perfect scenario for a religious evolution; all of them expressions of how our almost sym-

¹⁰ David Morgan, *The sacred gaze: religious visual culture in theory and practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

¹¹ Giulia Evolvi, “Religion and the Internet: Digital Religion, (Hyper)Mediated Spaces, and Materiality,” *Zeitschrift Für Religion Gesellschaft Und Politik* 6, no. 1 (19 October 2021): 14, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41682-021-00087-9>.

biotic relation with the digital technologies is transforming the human condition.

Following such complexities, this special issue aims to explore the different theoretical and practical approaches which position the digital as an important element of religious experiences and imaginaries nowadays and, at the same time, address religion as something more than mere belief and that consider practice and religious transformation through digital media. Digital religion is more than streaming events or the use of social media for religious communication. It goes beyond a simple migration from one platform to another. Instead, it contemplates even more complex processes such as other forms of experiencing and expressing religious traditions as well as new ways of relating with the sacred and a daily spiritual life. By focusing on performances, objects and imaginaries, we are addressing religion as something more than theological debates and the digital as an environment where religious traditions can, indeed, manifest.

The questions, therefore, should no longer be directed on whether they are real or not, but that hat strategies individuals, communities and authorities use for religious expression and communication, as well as for the development of spiritual practices. It's not a question of other 80. In these cases, technology affirms religious life, enabling or inspiring communities of believers to carry out certain activities, influencing the 'online' self, as well as its religious traditions.