
INTRODUCTION

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, emerging instead as an alternate dimension of reality – one that generates unique experiences and produces its own forms of meaning. As Jacques Fontanille states, media, in general, occupy a very particular place in contemporary culture, as they interfere in all private or public practices, determining all genres of discourses.¹

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 this

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.

area, 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 media.⁴ 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, to evolve, offering valuable insights into how religion is constantly transforming and intertwining with other aspects of human culture. Initially, the internet was perceived as a completely separate realm, leading to numerous dystopian and utopian predictions about its potential impact on human 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 build new possibilities of faith or destroy existing religious structures.

The second wave brought a higher level of contextualization, recognizing the digital context as an increasingly normal part of daily life and acknowledging the migration of numerous 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 also people, as active users of digital media. In the third wave, scholars

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,” in *The Third Spaces of Digital Religion*, ed. Stewart Hoover and Nabil Echchaibi (London: Routledge, 2023), 1–36.

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

started to consider the Internet as a meaning-making resource in which users could find religious orientation and formation practices.⁶ Here, religion mediated by digital media was considered one more practice, another aspect of religion; the division between the two spaces - the online and the offline – became less relevant. Heidi Campbell and Mia Lövhheim 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 online.⁷

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 engage.⁹

In this frame, one undeniable aspect of our current times is the growing intertwining of our online experiences with our offline reali-

⁶ Stewart Hoover and Jin Kyu Park, “Religion and Meaning in the Digital Age, Field Research on Internet/Web Religion 1,” in *Belief in Media, Cultural Perspectives on Media and Christianity*, ed. Peter Horsfield, Mary E. Hess and Adán M. Medrano (London; Routledge, 2004), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003063186>.

⁷ Mia Lövhheim and Heidi Campbell, “Considering Critical Methods and Theoretical Lenses in Digital Religion Studies,” *New Media & Society* 19, no. 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,” in *The Third Spaces of Digital Religion*, ed. Stewart Hoover and Nabil Echchaibi (London: Routledge, 2023): 1–36.

ties. Christine Hine builds on this concept by describing the internet as “embedded, embodied, and everyday.”¹⁰ ‘Embedded’, because it is “entwined in use with multiple forms of context and frames of meaning-making,”¹¹ therefore, it represents different things for different people. The internet is ‘embodied’ because virtual selves emerge and are constantly updated concerning the user’s offline condition. It is also ‘everyday’, because it acts as “a mundane, invisible infrastructure” for society.¹² Only when such infrastructure appears evident or when it fails our expectations in a certain way, we are aware of its significance.¹³ Digital religion illustrates these dynamics, as religious actors usually develop innovative and affective strategies to engage with digital environments, showing how interaction with digital technology can vary according to intentions and contexts. Users also embody their practices in virtual platforms, creating interactions that also influence their offline identities. Furthermore, digital media becomes integral to everyday religious activities, transforming traditions in ways that often go unnoticed by communities and authorities. For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic introduced new ways of relating to religion while redefining what it ‘is’ and ‘means’ in ways we haven’t completely recognized.

When talking about everyday religious practices, we are irremediably entering into the sphere of materiality which is ‘the very’ core of religion.¹⁴ Religious materiality is not only about objects, images, or texts, but also about bodies and spaces mediating experiences of spiritual nature. When referring to material culture we are addressing “the way in which an object participates in making and sustaining a life-world”.¹⁵ When it comes to computer media, Evolvi argues that there

¹⁰ Christine Hine, *Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, Embodied and Everyday* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

¹¹ Ibid., 33.

¹² Ibid., 46.

¹³ Tim Hutchings, “Augmented graves and virtual Bibles: digital media and material religion,” in *Materiality and the Study of Religion: The Stuff of the Sacred*, ed. Tim Hutchings and Joanne McKenzie (New York: Routledge, 2017), 86.

¹⁴ David Morgan, *The sacred gaze: religious visual culture in theory and practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

¹⁵ David Morgan, “Material Analysis and the Study of Religion,” in *Materiality and the Study of Religion: The Stuff of the Sacred*, ed. Tim Hutchings and Joanne McKenzie (New York: Routledge, 2017), 30.

are three reasons to approach digital religion practices: 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.¹⁶

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”.¹⁷ The ‘appropriation’ of computational media by users and the effect that digital technology has in religious beliefs create the perfect scenario for a religious evolution; all of them expressions of how our almost symbiotic 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 that highlight the digi-

¹⁶ Morgan, “Material Analysis and the Study of Religion,” 30.

¹⁷ Giulia Evolfi, “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>.

tal as a pivotal component of contemporary religious experiences and imaginaries. Simultaneously, it examines religion beyond mere beliefs, considering how digital media shapes and transforms religious practices, positioning these dynamics as integral to the shared conditions of modernity. Digital religion is more than streaming events or using 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 on the strategies individuals, communities and authorities use for religious expression and communication, as well as for the development of spiritual practices. 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.

Victoria Dos Santos