

Religions and Communication: Digital Transformations

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1 Introduction

Religions are complex forms of social, cultural, and spiritual meaning production and reproduction. It is impossible to find a universal definition of “religion.” The theologian Vergote (2016) defined religion as “the entirety of the linguistic expressions, emotions, actions and signs that refer to a supernatural being or supernatural beings” (p. 16), while the anthropologist Geertz (1993) used these words:

“system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (pp. 87–125).

Religions are based on communication between men, and also, according to the believers, between men and invisible, supernatural and essential entities (or the true nature of reality), like God in monotheistic traditions. Also, since the very beginning, religions have used all forms of media and communication tools and technologies. As Douyère (2015b, online, translated from French) wrote,

“Religions, formed of the communication and the transmission of dogmatic and ritual information, as well as based on the suggestion that they operate of the presence of the divine, have used all the means of information and communication, from their origin. They [the means of information and communication] helped to build a space of socially shared meaning and to increase the hold of religions, by text, rite, speech and image (or its absence), causing or distancing affects, inviting communication with non-visible beings, contributing, through this diffusion, to a regulation of the social space.”

Digital communication technologies have been used since the beginning of the Internet for religion-related activities, like diffusion of sacred texts and images, prayers, meditations, and religious teaching, and also to accomplish rituals, meetings, discussions concerning religious subjects, etc. For example, Ciolek (2004, online) states that “[r]eligious uses of the Internet began in the late 1970s. These started with tentative interpersonal and group exchanges, followed by more systematic information publishing and gathering, and finally online pastoral contact and computer-mediated religious rituals.”

Different religious traditions have been increasingly using more and more the evolving digital technologies for preaching and spreading faith and for many other activities. In the case of Islam, for example, Larsson (2011, online) stated that

“Muslims from a large variety of ethnic, linguistic, religious, and political backgrounds are using the Internet for discussing Islam and Muslim affairs and for apologetic or polemical reasons. A growing number of Muslim scholars (ulama) as well as established Islamic institutions (for example, the Sunni Muslim Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt) have also started to use the Internet and satellite television to promote their interpretations of Islam.”

The Saudi Islamic preacher Mohamad al-Arefe, for example, has over 20 million Twitter followers, and he is in the top 100 Twitter users by followers, being perhaps the most followed Islamic religious person (and his Youtube and Facebook accounts also have a lot of followers). In the Christian world, Pope Francis is certainly the most followed religious person in the world on Twitter, considering his accounts in different languages (18 million followers just for the English Twitter account).¹ Religion is indeed present on the web today, as these examples

¹ Data come from the website socialblade.com, retrieved on May 8, 2019.

show.

The interaction between digital media and religion is rich and complex. The apparition of digital technologies has changed (partially) the way in which religions exist today; more precisely, these technologies have accompanied and accelerated changes. Religion has not disappeared because of digital technologies, nor has it been totally modified; but religions have changed and are changing (also) because of the digital, in ways that are linked to preexisting, internal patterns and structures of each religious tradition.

This paper presents some knowledge on this complex relation between religions and digital communication technologies, based on the idea that change and revolutionary aspects must be understood against the background of historical continuity. For example, Cheong (2016, online) wrote, citing previous researches and concerning the specific subject of the effects of digital technologies on religious authority, that “a central characteristic of new media in relation to religion is its complementarity with older forms of communication. . . . The newest social media and mobile apps or application software oftentimes play an integral role in concert with existing communication landscapes and media ensembles, to augment and sustain pastoral legitimacy and power”.

If religion is (at least in part) a form of communication and sharing of meaning, it is normal to see that new forms of communication formats and supports (like social media, microblogging applications, or virtual reality websites) create pressure on religious organizations and forms and that they create evolutions and reconfigurations in the religious field. Some authors have expressed this idea in the terms of the “communicative constitutive approaches of organizations,” or CCO, like Cheong (2016, online). In the words of Cheong (2016), “religious organization is constituted through everyday online and offline interactions.” According to Cheong (2016), religious organization “is conceptualized as emerging in communication and living media practices, as discursive exchanges embedded in everyday mediation, transmediation, and remediation processes across different linked, mobile and networked platforms in our present convergence culture.” Communication is not only a tool for religions and religious people, but also a constitutive factor of religion as a social reality. This remark applies also to digital communication.

Again, this does not mean that digital communication totally reshapes or erases religions, or that it is able to create new widespread religions. New “digital religions” exist, like some forms of “digitalism” (“numérisme” in French; see Fischer, 2014) or the Missionary Church of Kopimism in Sweden, but they constitute quite a limited phenomenon. This means instead that religion in general exists through interconnected and hybrid forms and patterns of offline and online communication. Media are not an external, magical force that operate on religion and the social world from the outside; they are instead an internal aspect of their own existence, a social factor embedded in society and in its religious dimension. Digital forms of religion are authentic and real (not “virtual” in any ontological sense), and they constitute a part of the religious dimension of human and social life. As Campbell (2017) says, “the embeddedness of the Internet into the everyday life of many religious practitioners means that digital culture and technologies often bridge, connect, and/or extend online religious practices and spaces into offline religious contexts” (p. 2).

The next section of this paper presents some brief observations on the evolution of research on the relationship between religion and the digital, based on existing research. Then, three other sections introduce a synthetic discussion of some specific aspects: religious rituals and digital communication; community and digital communication; and the religious reflection and theology on digital communication technologies. A short conclusion will sum

up some crucial elements. This paper is not a complete bibliographical report but instead a presentation of some central elements and an introduction for further inquiry.²

2 Research: From “Cyber Religion” to Digital Religion Studies

Campbell (2017, 2017b; see also Campbell, 2013; Cheong, 2016) has presented a synthesis of the history of research on the relation between religions and the digital. According to Campbell (2017a), the first researchers who have studied the use of digital technologies for religious purposes often used the term “cyber-religion,” which was used “to capture how religion was potentially being re-wired through its interaction with the culture of computers” (Campbell 2017, p. 1). Research focused on the impact of the new digital tools on religious cultures and also on the possible emergence of new religions or new religious forms. According to Campbell (2017a), these new forms were supposed to be “spiritually innovative and dynamic, yet highly integrated with and dependent on technology” (p. 1). O’Leary (1996), for example, explored the online experimentation with rituals, as a factor of change and innovation.

The following era was marked by the term “virtual religion”, used by researchers at the beginning of the years 2000 when considering the forms of adaptation of religion and religious practices to new virtual reality technologies like video gaming platforms or MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons) (O’Leary, 1996). This expression was used, according to Campbell (2017b), to emphasize “tensions between ‘real world’ religious structures and new ‘virtual’ forms, implying that these virtual expressions might somehow be seen as incomplete” (pp. 16–17). Some works were done to understand the effects on preexisting religious communities and practices of the apparition of new online Christian congregations (Campbell, 2005), or of Sikh or Buddhist online temples (MacWilliams, 2006).

Lovheim (2005) worked on the use of discussion forums by young religious people, trying to see how “computer mediated communication” can really provide a “transitional space . . . for experimenting with new ways of understanding reality, self and others” that is able to become a “space of growth” also from the point of view of religion, as previous studies have suggested (p. 1). The results of her empirical analysis showed that this role concerning growth can be real, but it depends on different conditions. Young people can use web services not only to “establish an identity independent of religious institutions” but also to “establish coherence and ontological trust in order to handle the complexity and ambiguity they encounter in late modern society, not least in facing different suppliers of religious beliefs and practices” (Lovheim, 2005, p. 17). This quotation shows the attempt to get out of simplistic or utopian (or dystopic) views of digital technologies as a source of radical change and the importance of seeing the embeddedness of online religious experiences that are just a part of individual and social religious experience.

Following Campbell (2017a, 2017b), this embeddedness underlined by Lovheim (2005) has been the major aspect of the subsequent era, marked by the use of the expression “digital religion studies” and by the focus on the integration and hybridizations between online and offline religious forms and practices, more than on competition or opposition of these two entities.

² A list of important scientific journals in this area of research is presented at the end of this article; some recent works (like Campbell, 2017a, 2017b; Douyère, 2015b) give important bibliographical information. This paper will not be able to explore themes at the crossroads of digital communication and politics and religion, including propaganda, radicalism, and radicalization. These themes could be the subject of a specific article, given their importance and complexity.

“Digital religion is imprinted by both traits of online culture (i.e. traits of interactivity, convergence, audience-generated content, etc.) and offline religion (i.e. patterns of belief and ritual tied to historically grounded communities). Digital Religion studies thus pays attention to the online–offline implications of reformulating existing religious practices and new expressions of spirituality online.” (Campbell, 2017b, p. 17)

Different scholars have identified four “waves” in digital religious studies, including the phases of cyber-religion and virtual religion (Campbell, 2017b, p. 17). The first was descriptive (just documenting “what was happening to religious practices on the Internet”). The second produces categorizations, like the distinction made by Helland (2000) between “religion-online” (“importing traditional forms of religion online”) and “online-religion” (“adapting religion to create new forms of networked spirituality”, according to Campbell, 2017b, p. 17). The third wave, defined as the one of the “theoretical turn” by Campbell (2017b), focused on how offline religious communities develop approaches and strategies concerning digital media. Finally, the fourth wave focus on “religious actors’ negotiations between their online and offline lives.” There has been a clear evolution toward an increase in the importance of connections between online and offline realities and embeddedness.

Campbell (2017b) underlines the presence in recent years of three different major theoretical approaches in this area of study, at least concerning research published in English. The first, the mediatization approach, focuses on “long-term interrelation processes occurring between media change on one hand, and social and cultural change on the other” (Campbell, 2017b, p. 18). In this perspective, media are crucial socializing tools, and religion must pass through the filter of media to exist, in some extents: Religion is framed and diffused by the media, and media institutions influence religious ones (Campbell, 2017b; see also Hjarvard, 2011; Lundby, 2016). This approach works, for example, on how communication inside religious groups can be changed by digital technologies and how religious authority can be put under pressure or modified as a consequence of the diffusion of these technologies. Traditional authority can be challenged by new forms of “consensus-based authority”: “[R]ather than authority being tied to set institutional structures, authority becomes temporary, personalized, and based on connective actions” (Campbell, 2017b, p. 19; see also Hjarvard, 2013).

The second main approach is focused on “mediation of meaning.” In this case, research—often based on ethnography—is focused on “the way media become key structures for disseminating religion and beliefs about religion throughout the society,” and media are seen as “an important resource helping people negotiate and express religious beliefs and values within culture” (Campbell, 2017b, p. 19). The aim is to understand the meaning that religious people and groups give to new media more than to emphasize the influence of these last ones on religion, as in the mediatization approach.

The last approach, proposed in particular by Campbell, is the “Religious-social shaping of technologies” (RSST). It is focused on “how individuals and groups within particular cultural contexts see their technological choices constrained by broader structural and social elements of their worldview and belief systems” (*Ibidem*, p. 20). The adoption and use of specific digital technologies, and also their justification via narratives, are seen as shaped by values, beliefs, history, and tradition of individuals and groups. For example, Campbell (2010) observes that Islam seems to facilitate the use of technology for religious practices, like in the case of the support for finding prayer times or the identification of the Qibla, the good direction of the Kaaba in Mecca (p. 127).³ She works also on how orthodox Judaism tried to make the Internet

³ She works also on the notion of “digital ummah” (see also Bunt, 2009) and on early attempts to centralize the online presence of Islam, like in the case of the Qatari website Islam Online, launched in 1997.

kosher, the Jews' regulation of the phone, and the importance of digital media to accomplish one's mission in the field of "e-vangelism."

Each one of these three approaches is particularly adapted to analyze specific aspects of the relation between religions and digital media: Mediatization is more appropriate for "macro" (larger societal) analysis; mediation of meaning for a micro, individual approach; and the RSST for a "meso" level (the one of "bounded religious communities," according to Campbell, 2017b, p. 21).

After this global presentation of the evolution of research in the field of digital religion studies, it is time to deepen some crucial aspects of the field.

3 Ritual, Practice, Prayer, and Meditation

Even in partially secularized societies like ours (in particular in Europe and some other parts of the world), "rituals have not died out" (Sumiala, 2013, p. 23), nor have religious ones. As Campbell (2012) writes, with the advent of Internet technologies, independent groups have tried to "mimic" offline religious rituals online by creating born-digital new religions (very few indeed) or by creating Internet-based congregations (see bibliography in Campbell, 2017a). Mostly, more and more, established religious institutions and groups have embraced different technologies (from html and xml websites to podcasts, from IRC to virtual worlds like Second Life, not forgetting social media and social networks) to "create an online worship experience" and to "extend a church's off line ministry into online spaces" (p. 1). Digital technology is "assimilated" into ordinary religious life of a part of religious people, including rituals, and vice versa.

Religious rituals and practices can become (partially) digital, or not. Problems of authenticity and value have appeared, concerning the presence of religious rituals on the web and their mediation by digital technologies (like in the case of legacy media such as TV and radio). For example, there have been and there are still discussions in the Christian world concerning digitalization of sacraments. It is clear that not everything can become digital in the case of rituals that include material aspects, like the water touching the head or the whole body for the baptism, or the consecrated bread in the case of the Eucharist (see Berger, 2018). The seven Catholic sacraments cannot be administrated online, as the Vatican stated in 2002, and other Catholic authorities around the world later made declarations of the same type.⁴ But other religious rituals can become digital, and new religious digital rituals and practices linked to the sacred appear and spread, like streaming of masses; some examples of e-adoration of the Catholic saint Sacrament; the veneration of Christian relics, services, and prayers diffused online; and the possibility of leaving a candle online in a cathedral or at the sanctuary of Notre-Dame de Lourdes (France) or of viewing the grotto of this same Catholic sanctuary and of visualizing all the prayers and services live by "TV Lourdes."

To get out of Christianity, Shabad.org offers the possibility to know when it is time to light Shabbat candles and where to find the place for participating in the service. Many different online services offer the possibility to Muslims to find the Qibla (equibla.com, etc.). Smartphones have become an important technological support for a part of the believers and religious people today; see for example volume 12 of *Online-Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* (2017) and the analysis of the impact of using camera phones during Jewish mass rituals by Schwartz (2010). In the Christian world, churches have been making liturgical and ritual resources available online for a long time, like in the case of the Catholic Missal and

⁴ See the website of the Catholic French journal *La Croix*: https://www.la-croix.com/Religion/Actualite/La-confession-en-ligne-une-interdiction-sans-cesse-maintenue-_NG_-2011-02-21-563836.

the texts for the liturgy of the hours, the Anglican Common Worship liturgical resources, or the supports for local churches activities on life.church (*ibidem*).

Wagner (2012) presents a list of other (already quite old) examples:

“[I]n 2009, a New York Church ‘tweeted’ the Passion play, complete with ‘tweets’ from Mary, the disciples and Jesus, who ‘tweeted’ his last words from the cross. Increasingly around the world, Hindus conduct puja online using digital images of the gods; Muslims and others can conduct a virtual hajj in the online world of Second Life; and the Dalai Lama has approved the spinning of virtual prayer wheels on a computer’s hard drive” (p. 1).

An issue of the *Heidelberg Journal of Religion on the Internet* (2006) already indicated that the Internet was changing the conditions of rituals, with examples from the Iranian Shia pilgrimages and the Indian Sikhism, in which new forms of authoritative word come from the digital. The same special issue showed also that the Internet offers a great abundance of information on rituals, which is at the disposal of people

“for the construction of religious identity and therefore also of rituals. . . . In addition to the potential of the Internet to offer interaction and new processes of communication in the context of rituals – the so called ‘Online-Rituals’ –, this medium also offers much information about rituals and instructions how to perform a ritual, in and outside the Internet” (Introduction, p. 3).

The Internet is very rich in tutorials and other forms of instructions on how to pray and how to correctly manage rituals, but it is also a space for syncretism and invention in this field. There can also be controversies, as in the case of the “Gohozon Controversy” concerning the display on the Internet of sacred Buddhist *mandala* (MacWilliams, 2006). The digitalization of parts of religious rituals can open the way to discussions concerning the sacred and its relations with the profane, as well as the management of the place of the performative agency of rituals. The easiness of access to ritual materials and supports can create tensions, in some cases. But it also offers new resources for connecting to religious ritual actions.

Prayer in traditions like Christianity, Judaism, and Islam has become partly digital, and also mobile. Nowadays, websites like the French-speaking Topchretien.com (Protestant Evangelical) and Notre Dame du Web (Catholic; see Catellani 2014a, 2014b, 2015) and mobile applications like Prie en Chemin (Pray on the Way, Catholic) offer day-to-day support for prayer and meditation, based or not on the Bible and proposing many different forms of prayer guidance and instruction, mobilizing audio, visual, and written supports (see also Douyère, 2011, 2015; Jonveaux, 2007). Specific forms of traditional prayer, like Catholic retreats for Advent and Lent (or retreats in other traditions), find a new presence online. Some religious groups, like some Dominicans, Carmelites, and Jesuits in France (*Retraite dans la ville*, *Notre Dame du Web*, Carmes de Paris) specialize in offering this kind of support for prayer for specific times or subjects or for the day-to-day devotion, by digitalizing specific traditions and forms (like the Ignatius Loyola’s spiritual exercises). Similar apps and websites exist in other traditions, like howdoipray.com for Islam’s beginners (and myriads of other websites and apps supporting Islamic prayer) and the app Smart Siddur for Jewish prayer and audio resources on Buddhane.net. Some websites offer information on a large choice of (offline) retreats, combining wellness and religious retreats of different traditions (retreatsoline.com): The digital increases the possibilities and choices of people, offering together different kinds of “services” (more or less linked to religion).

Digital supports for spiritual life and personal devotion are widespread and follow the evolution of the digital technologies, like the development of the mobile Internet. Praying and meditating in front of a screen or listening to a podcast have become usual religious practices for a part of the believers. Offline environment, religious practice, and community are important to determine how people use religious apps, as Bellar (2017) has showed in the

case of young Evangelical Christians' use of mobile phones. It is interesting to see that this use is highly embedded in their day-to-day life and spiritual practice, and that the affordances and invitations to share one's own experience are not often followed as proof of the non-deterministic nature of our relation to technology. "Religious actors and groups negotiate their relationships and spiritual activities between the multiple spheres of their online and offline lives" (Campbell, 2017a, pp. 2–3).

Digital supports for prayer and devotion offer the ability to connect for a lower psychological cost, without physical direct presence, letting people try experiences that could be more difficult and "dangerous" for their public image in physical life. And, of course, they can give isolated people and groups, or less implicated and observant people, the possibility to practice and to connect. For example, Altman (2017) underlines that a website like Chabad.org offers also to less observant Jews the possibility of connecting to a community online. Electronic devices integrate and improve the "material apparatus," which Michel de Certeau observed around the believers in his book *La faiblesse de croire* (1987). Different forms and tendencies inside each religious tradition, even the marginal ones, can find their expression online.

Concerning specific areas, we should also mention "beginning and end-of-life issues" (Campbell, 2017a), and in particular the rituals concerning death in the digital world. Whitehead (2017) analysed the narrativization by U.S. Evangelical blogging mothers of the loss of a child as a way of creating a shared meaning and space inside a larger narrative and inside a larger community. "Personal religious blogs and their reading publics, therefore, can provide a medium for the ongoing creation of meaning, faith and community in the context of infant loss" (p. 1).

Following some authors, the massive phenomenon of online video games offers examples of "rituals" that can be sometimes religious, or at least they can be seen as having a function comparable to religion for people. "Both video games and ritual may be doing some similar things for the people who use them, performing . . . 'religious work' even if they aren't explicitly or traditionally 'religious'" (Wagner, 2012, p. 5, citing a work by David Cidester; see also Servais, 2015a, 2015b, on religious dimensions of video games). This area of research is an example of the exploration of interactions between religion and the digital outside of explicit religious forms and groups, concerning how religious symbols and frames appear and are used elsewhere in our societies as supports for meaning production and life. Researchers should consider "how Digitally Lived Religion is morphing and even creating new contexts of meaning with new constituencies" (Campbell, 2017a, p. 5).

4 Community, Networks, Belonging, Identity

Digital and connected media are able to influence the internal forms and dynamics of already established religious communities, and online interactions can create new forms of network and community or solidarity (see Rota & Kruger, 2019). The digital is also one factor of the evolution of the sense of belonging to religious tradition and of reshaping of religious identities. It is clear that the digital has not *caused* secularization, nor the evolution toward individualization of religious self and religious belonging (see Thomas Luckmann's *The Invisible Religion*, 1967), nor the apparition of "posttraditional communities" (see Evolvi 2019; Rota & Kruger, 2019). But its presence inside religion is an accelerator of changes and evolutions, or at least an important factor of these same changes and evolutions concerning communities and belonging. As Gauthier and Uhl wrote (2012),

“television and the Internet act to catalyze religious mutations in the way of individualism, self-realization, personal growth, emotional and experiential religion, soteriological immanentization, and deterritorialization. By imposing the importance of aesthetic and sensory dimensions to the detriment of faith contents, for instance, electronic media and the Internet construct ‘faith brands’ that normatively shape what religion is today, consecrating the break from traditional institutional regulations and the shift to a radically different immanent regulation of the symbolic and constitutive of consumer society.” (p. 54)

This catalytic role has to be analyzed in detail, in order not to be simplistic: It is clear that traditional authorities are not wiped out by digital culture, and that different types of evolution take place in a situation in which offline and online blend and integrate more than oppose one another. As Campbell (2017a) writes, “religion in the broad sense is transformed as traditional notions of religious communities as tightly bounded institutions transition into more loosely bound social relations that are highly individualized,” in which, for example, syncretism and a “pick and choose” attitude concerning religious beliefs and practices increase (p. 4). Religion in a “networked society” evolves, as do religious communities, identities, and sense of belonging.

A lot of research has been done on the relationship between digital media and religious communities. In 2004, Dawson asked a crucial question: “[W]hat are we to make of the possibility of religion in cyberspace? Can individuals communicating by computer from the comfort of their homes practice their religion? . . . Have real communities emerged online?” (pp. 75–6). The answers are complex and often influenced by normative and ideological positions. As Rota and Kruger (2019) remember, the first scholars were sometimes idealistic—or ideological, overestimating the influence of the Internet as a source of democracy, freedom and diversity, and a deep challenge to traditional hierarchies, opening a space for dialogue between people inside and outside religious communities, linked to the new individualized environment (p. 5) (see also Campbell, 2017a). Other scholars, from the point of view of the mediatization paradigm, have theorized the influence of the digital as an increase in secularization (Hjarvard, 2011; Lundby, 2016), a disruption of local, traditional communities and a strong push towards “deterritorialization” (Rota & Kruger, 2019, p. 6). Religious contents would be replaced by “banal” values and practices like magic, and traditional communities by shallow, weak forms of “liquid” and instable links.

These approaches (positive or negative, seeing the media as a source of progress or disruption and disease) show that many scholars are still influenced by the idea of an opposition between religion as “ancien regime” on one hand and media as an entity that is going to replace religion on the other hand. They show also that these scholars tend to ignore the existence of religious people and groups as “media actors.” Rota and Kruger (2019) identify also another implicit presupposition, the one of a supposed “clash” between religion and medias, based on “a Christian – in particular Protestant – skepticism toward all mediated forms of the divine” (p. 10). Religion is not per se opposed to technologies and media, even if forms of opposition can appear all along history. “Rather than seeing these research trends as a battle over whether digital religion facilitates secularization or a postsecular turn, scholars should note that information communication technologies can encourage both trends” (Campbell, 2017a, p. 4).

As Campbell (2010, 2012) remembers presenting the “religious-social shaping of technology” approach, technology and media have to be “domesticated” and spiritualized by religious groups in order to find a place inside religious communities and worldviews.

“Social shaping approaches to technology . . . provide interesting conclusions about how religious groups may culture a technology such as the Internet so that it can be incorporated into the community and provide opportunities for group or self-expression within these boundaries” (Campbell, 2013, p. 64).

Different responses are linked to the very identity of religious groups: “[O]ne’s beliefs towards religious text, authority, and community also plays a significant role in determining one’s position about the nature of the internet” (Campbell, 2010, chap. I).

Religious authorities can filter and regulate the adoption of new technologies of communication inside the community, as in particular in the case of sects or very homogeneous and secluded groups (like ultra-orthodox groups concerning the use of cell phones; see Campbell, 2010, pp. 162–78): Adoption can follow exclusion after a process of negotiation of meaning (see also Jonveaux 2013, 2019, on the case of Catholic monasteries). But authorities do not always control the use of technology, they do not always state on them, and the admonitions and norms can be non-coincident with concrete practices of members, like in other sectors of life (economic, etc.). “Individual and collective agency with respect to media practices is diversified and can vary depending on the setting, adjusting, for instance, to family, peers, and professional frames” (Rota & Kruger, 2019, p. 9). Also, the relation between communities and media can evolve, as in the case of the relation between the Internet and the Jehovah’s Witnesses: Twenty years have been necessary to pass from admonitions on dangers to a pragmatic integration into day-to-day religious practice (Rota, 2019). “Changes in the interpretation and use of media can be the outcome of theological disputes and pragmatic or economic considerations within religious communities, as well as of general trends in media use in certain societies or milieus” (Rota & Kruger, 2019, p. 10).

“New media” and Internet production and use can be managed by central institutions inside churches and religions, but also by specialized groups or individuals, who feel a spiritual engagement concerning media as a mission. Degrees of control and freedom can vary widely from one situation to the other. It is the case of the founder of the Christian protestant evangelical website Topchrétien, Eric Célerier, and of many other cases inside milieus like the Christian Evangelical churches and movements, but also of the so-called “Church tech” movement inside the French Catholic Church (egliseetinnovation.com), that they are not created or controlled in a strong way by the central authorities of existing churches. Serving his/her own church, congregation, or movement through digital media production and distribution—and innovation, of course—can become a strong way for people to engage and to mobilize their own personal background and profane resources in a religious way. Spontaneous movement and individual contributions are important parts of the relation between religious groups and the digital. Media contents are produced in specific milieus and circulate among religious people, participating in the creation of new forms of authorities and celebrities (religious e-fluencers, Youtubers, bloggers), and also in the modification and evolution of networks and communities. For example, Topchrétien is clearly addressed to and consulted by Reformed and Evangelical Christians of different denominations, and by other Christians.

Specific forms of solidarities can appear among religious people while they use digital technologies like social networks in reaction to important events. Aeschbach and Lueddekens (2019) analyze a specific case of “communalization” on Twitter, that of British Muslims who mobilized using the hashtag #WhatBritishMuslimsReallyThink in 2016 to express their opposition to an article published in the *Sunday Times* newspaper. They base their analysis on the notion of “online community” as characterized by a “minimal level of interactivity” (like retweets and other actions) and a “sense of community,” and they find that “the hashtag was used by a variety of communicators to interact, and that they established a ‘sense of community’ by communicatively expressing and affirming a shared identity position as well as a range of mutually shared emotions” (Aeschbach & Lueddekens, 2019, p. 125). This (temporary) online community gives an example of how social media like Twitter can become

a “place” in which religious identities are expressed and shaped, and of how they can create collective agency. Another example is the fire in the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris and the use of hashtags like #NotreDame by French Catholics, both ordinary people and e-fluencers (like Father Grosjean). Similar research was done by Howard (2011) concerning the constitution of a “virtual ekklesia,” an online community of U.S. Evangelical Christians based on exchanges on different digital supports (starting with email lists and “Usenet” groups, back in the 1980s, to the online forums of the 2000s). This participative and “prophetic” community is created through online interactions, without an external institutional form, and without links to traditional forms of authority.

More recently, Evolvi (2018) describes the use of digital media by different religious or atheist groups in Western Europe based on the notion of “hypermediation” (Scolari, 2015). This term “describes the contemporary media moment where the proliferation of digital technologies intensifies human interactions in terms of speed and emotions” (Evolvi, 2018, Introduction), in the context of the “convergence” between old and new media (Jenkins, 2008) and of fragmentation of media, supports, and practices. Evolvi (2018) identifies the actual situation of religion in postmodern, media-saturated societies, like the ones of Western Europe, as characterized by two tendencies. The first is speed and “social acceleration,” to which digital technologies contribute widely, creating also resistance like disconnection campaigns. The second is emotion and the creation of the so-called “digital affect culture” and “affective networks”: this second character too is deeply influenced by the digital world. Hypermediation offers to religious groups new spaces for developing shared meaning and increasing agency. Concerning speed, for example, “religious groups discuss media use in terms of intensifying either their engagement with society at large or resistance to the speed of modernity, thus creating practices that are aimed at accelerating or slowing the pace of life” (*Ibidem*, chapter I).

“Hypermediated religious spaces,” like Muslim, Christian, and atheist blogs analyzed by Evolvi (2018) (or Twitter hashtags studied by Aeschbach and Lueddekens, 2019), are digital places in which peoples and groups express and discuss religion in the context of our fast and emotional digital culture, relatively out of the direct control of traditional religious authority or of dominant media narratives, contributing to the evolution of religion itself. Examples are the digital videos and narratives created by some groups of young European Muslims after the 2015 terrorist attack, in order to express emotion and solidarity, gain visibility, discuss the principles of the French “laïcité”, etc. These digital forms of hypermediation offer new spaces for specific groups to express and negotiate their identities, including religion, outside of dominant (legacy media’s and public opinion’s) representations and narratives, and also to gather and create a “counterpublic.” For example, they can help in “normalizing the presence of Islam in Europe” and “in articulating hybrid Muslim identities that are compatible with European culture” (Evolvi, 2018, chapter 3), with political implications.

Hypermediation and the interaction between legacy and new digital media can explain also the nature and features of controversies concerning the presence of the crucifix in Italian public schools, animated by atheist and laic groups: Hypermediated spaces are very fast and easy-to-use venues for elaborating and sharing an “atheist religion” and fight against the “re-publicization” of religions. The homogeneous readership of these atheist blogs helps to form “an active atheist counterpublic around the same texts and ideas” (*Ibidem*, chapter 4). Anti-gender theory groups in the Catholic world also use digital spaces like blogs to “discuss sexual and gender norms in contemporary Europe, resist certain aspects of secularism and modernity, and find strategies to make religious identities more visible in the public space”

(*Ibidem*, chapter 5). The model of “hypermediation” can explain a part of the actual shape of digital media use by religious groups, at least in some parts of the world, like Western Europe.

As a conclusion, we can adhere to the model proposed by Rota and Kruger (2019): Media production, use, and interpretation can evolve inside each religious community, and each of these three dimensions presents internal dialectics among opposite poles. Media production can be more controlled by a central authority or more left to individual initiative. Media use sees a tension between collective expectations and individual practices. Finally, the interpretation of media can be based on complex theological and moral elaborations, or not: “[M]ost religious communities will treat media as mere practical utilities; the concrete appropriation of a medium, thus, will be a matter of individual preferences” (*Ibidem*, p. 13).

On the other side, even if we can reject a deterministic approach of what the digital does to religion (destruction, or transfiguration, as we saw in the case of early “cyber religion” normative approaches), we can think that the digital is an accelerator of all kind of dynamics concerning religious communities and belonging, from individualization to the creation of new communities in some specific cases (like the “hyper-real religions” studied by Possamai, 2005), passing through the intensification of existing solidarities. Vitullo (2019), for example, has underlined that the Internet can allow the member of a non-denominational Christian multisite church, LifePoint Church, to intensify solidarity and identity within a church spread in different continents.

5 Theology and Interpretation of the Digital: The Case of Christianity

As we saw in the last section, religious communities can develop more or less elaborate reflections on digital media. In the case of Christianity, one can talk about a “theology” of the digital and digital media, developed by professional theologians of different churches and denominations. This reflective effort finds its origin in the perception of a “gap,” to use the words of the Christian (reformed) theologian Cloete (2015), concerning “the religious response to the use of technology.” Theologians have worked, for example, on the effects of digital information technologies on theology (Soukup et al., 2001). Garner (2013) and Cloete (2015) find two areas of theological reflexion to be developed: “what it means to be part of a church in a digital age and what the implications are of digital media for the wider society” (p. 3).

Cloete (2015) indicates the need to work on digital media not only as tools, but more deeply as a culture, a “way of living.” He finds “spiritual formation in a digital age” and “the training of religious leaders of specifically offline or traditional congregations” as important areas of theological study, in order to prepare leaders for an environment in which people can easily get access to information on religion or to religious practices online, and in a context of individualized online connexions and of “networked individualism” in which people experience online and offline religious experiences together (Cloete, 2015). It is a “digital age” in which “there is much believing without belonging in the traditional sense” (Cloete, 2015, p. 5). Cloete (2015) also identifies a major point concerning Christianity as the religion of Incarnation and of God becoming flesh in relation to the digital: “What constitutes embodiment in a digital age that is characterised by bodily absence?” (Cloete, 2015).

In the Catholic Church, the most known example of an answer to this “gap” between theology and the “digital continent” (to cite Pope Benedict XVI in his document published in 2010 on social communication today) is the work of the Jesuit Antonio Spadaro, and in particular his book *Cybertheology: Thinking Christianity in the Era of the Internet* (2014), presented by the author as a response to questions asked by Pope Benedict XVI in 2011 in a

speech to the Pontifical Council for Social Communication: “[W]hat are the challenges that the so-called ‘digital thought’ puts on the faith and on theology? What questions are needed?” (p. ix). He develops a sophisticated theological reflection considering the web as, “at least in its power, a space of communion,” and analyzing many different aspects of the relation between faith, church, and the net. In a similar vein, the religious order of the Dominicans has recently launched OPTIC, a research network “focused on the ethical concerns of disruptive technology” (optictecnology.org).

Theological analysis of technology in general, and the digital in particular, is part of a global movement to “domesticate” and make sense of crucial parts of our contemporary world by individuals and groups who have an institutional role as “intellectuals” in charge of nourishing the decisions of religious authorities and the formation of believers (and also of showing the modernity of religion), even if these efforts can be limited to small groups and specialized publics.

6 Conclusions: Religions and Digital Communication Technologies as Mutually Embedded Realities

Relations between religion and digital communication technologies are complex, and no simple direct causal links can be identified. As Campbell (2017b) states, “media themselves do not determine the role of religion; rather, media institutions, discourses, and environments can shape people’s response to and understandings of religion” (p. 22). Changes in technologies and their acceleration, in relation to the global social evolution (Rosa, 2015), are one of the factors that influence the evolution of religions today.

The panorama of digital religious studies today is rich and quite diversified, and involves different social and human sciences (sociology, communication studies, semiotics, etc.) that go beyond the field of “Digital Religious Studies.” Research on the relations between digital technologies of communication and religions is published in different languages,⁵ and many different religions and spiritual traditions have been studied, even if a Western and Christian predominance can be easily observed. Cheong (2016, online) states that “much of existing scholarship in this domain [relation between new media and religion] is nourished by studies rooted in the North American and European spheres.”⁶ This author invites work more on other contexts, in which “group solidarity and social harmony remain sufficiently important for religious communicative practices to support the familial and communitarian status quo or abide by government regulations or censorship of various media content about religion.”

This seems to be a crucial remark. In some parts of the West (with big variations among countries), there has been a crucial social change, starting in the 1960s, theorized by some authors, like Stolz et al. (2015) in the case of Switzerland, as the passage from the “industrial society” to the “regime of the society of the ego.” Following this theory, in the new regime, the individual is the last instance for all type of decisions; religions are no more markers of the

⁵ See, for example, Douyère (2015) for many French references (see also Duteil-Ogata, Jonveaux, Kuczynski, & Nizard, 2015). The volume edited by Campbell in 2013 collected different contribution on religions like Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Japanese traditional religions, and Hinduism. Vol. 13 of *Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* shows other examples of inquiries in traditions like quigong or Tibetan Buddhism.

⁶ The author continues, saying that “the lion’s share of cited research related to the mediatization of religion is articulated within the contexts of post-protestant western experiences and tendencies toward accelerated individualism, erosion of established religious traditions and skepticism of authority and its institutions, within democratic environments where media can or has served as the primary sources of information about religious issues in society.”

collective identity but of the individual one, and each individual can choose among different types of (secular or religious) identities and meaning offers. Secular and religious offers of meaning are competing for the adhesion of these individual actors. Among the factors that influence this concurrence (like state or social regulations, socio/demographic variables, etc.), we can cite also media technologies and forms that “accompany the development or recession of certain religions; at the same time, they modify their visibility and their representation” (Douyère, 2015, online).

The enormous acceleration and increase of information offered on religions and other meaning sources produced by the Internet (including research engines, videos, social media, etc.) has an impact on how people frames their own religious and spiritual activity and practice. The work by McLure (2016) on the effects of the use of Facebook by young adults in the U.S. on their religious approach is very interesting in this sense, concerning the situation in the West (and in the U.S. in particular). This work introduces interesting nuances. The author finds that

“emerging adults who use SNS [Social Network Systems] are more likely to think it is acceptable to pick and choose their religious beliefs, and practice multiple religions independent of what their religious tradition teaches, but they are not more likely to believe all religions are true” (McLure, 2016, p. 818).

In other words, “SNS users are more inclined to condone religious syncretism but are not any more likely to be religious pluralists.” These technologies appear to favor attitudes of “spiritual tinkering” and “bricolage,” in tune with the era of the ego and “liquid society” (Bauman), but not a simple turn to pluralism.

Digital technologies are both factors and fruits of the regime of the ego (this is clear if we have a look at the history of the web and of its origins), and practices like “spiritual tinkering” are perfectly in tune with the actual evolution of (parts of) the Western world. But they have become widespread in other parts of the world and in other social contexts, in which conditions of individuals and religions are sometimes very different, like Cheong (2016) stated. Also, as we saw before, digital media have been seen both as factors of secularization and of a “postsecular turn” by different authors: This means that complexity has to be taken into consideration, and that a narrative of an inevitable secularization effect of digital technologies (and in particular of social media) has to be criticized.

Social interpretations and uses of digital technologies can vary from a social and religious context to the other: Even if some basic affordances can exist, no unique “meaning” or effect can be attached to these technologies, and they are at the disposal of believers and social actors for the construction of new practices and individual and collective religious activities. As McLure (2016) says, “although changes in our collective religious thinking may occur because of the technological innovations that nurture ‘spiritual tinkering’, technology always exists in a dialectical relationship with those who use it” (p. 831). Religions and digital media combine and interact in different ways in human concrete lifeworlds. This means that their interaction is a reserve of meaning and of possibilities of invention of social forms. Social and human sciences have the task to uncover and interpret this richness.

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