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## Abstract

Although it seems paradoxical, religion in all its forms and functions is transferring and blending with the digital world. This new relationship is altering how we do religion and also how religion impacts and influences the society and culture. Digital religion is an intermingling of our modern mediated society with contemporary religious beliefs and practices. Digital religion is not just about having "religion" on digital media, rather it is a blending of all of the societal and cultural components we associate with religion with all of the elements we associate with a digital society. Two current theories have developed that seem to be gaining traction in the field studying religion and digital culture. Campbell has developed a theory called "networked religion," and Hoover and Echchaibi are developing the concept of "third spaces of digital religion." By examining several case studies, this chapter will show that each theory has its own merits. Networked religion may be more helpful in examining official religious activity, while third spaces may be more helpful in studying everyday or lived religion.

In a surprise move to many scholars of religion, and even members of their own group, The Family International (formerly known as The Children of God), a highly controversial new religious movement, performed what they termed a "Reboot." By 2010 they had transformed the structure of their religious organization into a virtual religion built upon multiple online net-

worked community platforms. Chapter houses and communal homes around the world were closed and dissolved, and online connection and activity was increased. This radical transformation was tied to a complete overhaul of the group's membership requirements and forced members to restructure their religious identity based upon a new form of community and belonging. As Davis (2015, p. 28) discovered, after the transformation of TFI into "a virtual community lacking clearly-defined or strongly-enforced boundaries for membership commit-

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ment, ritual, or collective purpose," many members believed that as a "virtual community" it was no longer a religious movement. Other members felt that the transformation had lowered the tensions they experienced between themselves and the society, and that the Reboot had allowed them to "exercise self-determination and explore new avenues of personal development and spiritual growth" (Davis 2015, p. 31). This current example highlights the transformations that can, and are, occurring as the digital world blends and merges with religious activities and identities. This was a radical alteration to a religious group and it remains to be seen how this will affect the movement. Initially, there was a significant decline in membership. Whether or not this was an anomalous event, it challenges scholars to think about religion differently, especially if their focus has been on forms of "brick and mortar" religious organizations and the activities that go on inside those buildings.

This chapter will explore the concept of digital religion and contextualize the impact and implications of the wired world on the religious sphere. As Hoover and Echchaibi (2012) have noted, there appear to be three areas where the digital and the religious are overlapping. First, there are new and novel forms of religious activities and practices emerging within digital cultures. Second, traditional religions and traditional religious authorities are clearly establishing strong online presences that are helping to maintain their traditions and their belief systems. However, there is also a third space, a "large, fluid, and evolving category beyond these, where a wide range of old traditions, new traditions, non-traditions, hybridic traditions, and aggressively 'anti' traditions, are finding a place in digital space" (Hoover and Echchaibi 2012, 3). Through several case studies linked to these three activities, I will chart the development of online religion and the scholarship that is exploring the emerging relationship between these two seemingly polar opposite things; namely cutting edge computer technologies and religious practice and beliefs that are as ancient as humankind itself.

## Digital Religion as Lived Religion

The first heuristic classifications used to examine the levels of religious participation occurring through this new form of media were developed in 2000 (Helland 2000, 2002, 2005). This classification recognized a distinction between *religion-online* and *online religion*. In the case of *religion-online*, the Internet was utilized to facilitate traditional forms of religious communication to present religion based upon a vertical conception of control, status, and authority. Here information was presented about religion in a manner that harnessed the Internet to communicate in a one-to-many fashion. Material concerning doctrine, dogmas, polity, and organization was presented but there was no avenue developed for the participants to contribute their beliefs and input. In many ways this could be seen as a form of mass media and a one-sided communication of religious information from a single source to a very large audience.

The second classification, *online religion*, recognized a form of participation that closely mirrored the ideal interactive environment of the Internet itself and allowed for many-to-many communication and interaction. "Web 2.0" is a term used to describe this social and interactive dimension of the Internet. Argued to be a second phase in the development of the World Wide Web, it allowed for greater interaction and collaboration. It also allowed "users" to contribute, create, and interact with online material in a variety of creative ways. This included online ritual, prayer, worship, and even meditation. In these cases, through interactive virtual environments, links, chat rooms, and bulletin boards, the setting allowed for the contribution of personal beliefs and offered personal feedback. This was a much more dynamic form of online interaction that allowed for dialogue, the exchanging of information, and reciprocal engagement. This was the new paradox of digital religion, a network filled with openness, religious enthusiasm, *communitas*, and fellowship alongside forms of traditional religious

chical structure and controlled and limited unication.

the early years of the Internet, it appeared religious institutions were reluctant to op open and interactive areas on the web. where people could interact, share, or about their religious beliefs, or even par- te in online ceremonies were most often ded by non-official and popular religious s or by commercial ventures such as fnet. Religious organizations and institu- were, and are, very conscious of the way websites function. Nothing appears on the net out of chance or by accident; in fact, a fificant amount of time, money, and thought equired to develop an institutional religious site. The manner in which religious groups ture their websites directly influences the of communication and interaction that can r online. As Castells (1996) argues, the net is ideally designed for many-to-many munication, which represents a form of net- ked interaction that is significantly different a the form of one-to-many communication l by centralized hierarchies. The groups that e allowing for online religion were in many s representative of a networked form of reli- is interaction and participation, which is sig- nificantly different from groups that are using the lium to support their hierarchical, "top down" gious worldview. The earliest frameworks for lying digital religion focused upon how peo- "did" religion online, with many of the case lies exploring neo-pagan rituals (e.g., Brasher 1; Grieve 1995; Helland 2000; O'Leary 1996; nji 2001; Zaleski 1997).

n the early years of Internet use, there was a cialness about online religion. It challenged litional academic theories that linked the sec- rization process with developments in moder- / and technology. At the same time, it afforded olars a new environment that could be served, providing insight into the manner in ich religious beliefs and practices adapt to nges in society. However, within a relatively ort period of time, the virtual world has gone m feeling like a wide-open frontier to a wded city. Cyberspace has become a heavily

populated and well-traveled megalopolis, filled with every official church imaginable, live stream religious sermons, and even never-ending free GodCasts. Being online is now a normal part of most people's everyday activities, to the point that not checking your email, Facebook, and vari- ous other online social networks on a daily basis is often the exception.

As Heidi Campbell recognizes, there is an integrating force that bridges and extends online religious spaces and practices with offline reli- gious activity, and vice versa. She suggests that the term digital religion "describes the techno- logical and cultural space that is evoked when we talk about how online and religious spheres have blended" (Campbell 2013, p. 3-4). As Lundby (2012, p. 102) notes in his study of contemporary digital religion and media, the "offline and the online make one reality, one environment. This reality is highly mediated."

For the person practicing religion within our digital culture, it then becomes a question of "how *has* digital religion become part of my lived religious experience?" Digital religion is playing a significant role in what Woodhead (2012) has called a post-traditional religious identity and certainly with McGuire's (2008) notion of lived religion. As Hogan and Wellman (2011, p. 55) recognize, the "shift to a ubiquitous, personal- ized, wireless world fosters personal social net- works that supply sociability, support, and information, and a sense of belonging." For the sociologist studying digital religion, a number of questions arise related to issues of religious authority, belief, identity, community, and the overarching power of religious influence and control. All of these issues are being address by scholars now with significant depth and insight.

### Digital Religion: Defining a Field

In an examination of the impact of media on the development of Christianity, Horsfield (2015) recognizes that digital media has several charac- teristics that make it different than forms of media in the past. This includes the massive amount of information and data storage; hyper-



text and interlinking abilities; powerful new digital data transmission; despatialized personal access to this information; and the decreased size and increased power and mobility of devices that have allowed this technology of information and communication to become insinuated "into almost every aspect and activity of daily life" (Horsfield 2015, p. 262). Digital media is also part of a new form of global capitalism, and as religion blends with this system, it can become commodified, commercialized, and consumer driven.

As Grieve (2013) argues, digital religion can be identified by three unique features. Digital religion is composed of a variety of things including "digital audio, digital video, and computer games, as well as online media such as websites, email, social sites, and multi-player games" (Grieve 2013, p. 108). Due to the way it is created, presented, consumed, and exchanged online, the most unique characteristics of digital religion are its interactivity, hypertextuality, and its method of dispersal. However, Grieve argues, digital religion is not just about having "religion" on digital media. The second component is linked to a technological ideology that "reflects the ways in which technology is linked to economics, politics, and culture.... Digital religion is tied to a similar technological ideology of new media, in that it is seen as more than a new way of communicating, but as new vision for society: its practices are often posed as revolutionary, and tied to the triumph of human creativity and freedom over dogma and blind tradition" (Grieve 2013, p. 109). The third aspect of digital religion, according to Grieve, is that due to the way it is woven within the digital world, it provides a mechanism for dealing with "liquid modernity."

The characteristics of digital technology in many ways imprint and inform the character of digital religion. Yet digital religion cannot be characterized as simply traditional religion packaged in a new media form. Instead, digital religion is unique because it addresses the anxieties produced in a liquid modern world by using new media's technological aspects to weave together religious meta-narratives and the ideology surrounding the digital. (Grieve 2013, p. 110)

In the constantly changing, intensely mediated, and rushed environment many people live in, digital religion allows for flexible forms of practice that may provide temporary creative solutions for religious needs and problems.

With these frameworks in mind, it becomes clear that digital religion is a blend of our modern mediated society with contemporary religious beliefs and practices. Yet, how we define religion significantly affects how we view this relationship. In a study looking at several contemporary theories examining media and religion, Lundby (2013) found that the definitions of religion used by different scholars influenced their views concerning the impact of media on religious beliefs and practices, and vice versa. So much so that Lundby (2013, p. 226) argues "the forms of mediation should actually be regarded as an integral part of the definition of religion. Religions are to a large extent shaped by their dominant means of communication." In a summary of contemporary scholarship on this topic, Lundby finds five different approaches to examining the relationship between media and religion. Each one has a different view concerning the role of digital media and how it is influencing the form and function of religious beliefs and practices.

At one end of his analysis is the concept of the *mediatization of religion*, proposed by Hjarvard (2008). Within this framework, religion is examined from a substantive perspective and media is seen as a powerful force that has its own identity within the culture, yet also becomes integrated and ingrained within other cultural institutions. In the media saturated society, media itself becomes "the primary source of religious ideas, in terms of the bits and pieces of religious text, symbols, and imaginaries that journalists and producers put together when they construct their media stories" (Lundby 2013, p. 229). Media is such a powerful force that religion has to adapt to its functional logic in order to communicate with and engage the society. This influences the content of religion as it is produced and consumed.

Other theories of digital religion rely on what Lundby calls *mediation of meaning*, based upon

"medium theory" that recognizes the reciprocal relationship that occurs between media and religion as they work together and are received by an audience. In this framework, media becomes part of the practice but does not subsume or replace religion; rather, they mutually influence each other (e.g., see Hoover 2006). This form of analysis examines the functional role of religion, with particular emphasis on its cultural impact.

Lynch (2012) has argued that digital religion is a way of mediating the sacred in a very public and prolific way. Lundby recognizes this framework as the *mediation of sacred forms*. All sacred forms are mediated and communicated within a historical context to their believers and it is only through media that sacred forms have material expression. Through digital media people can now interact, communicate about, construct, and maintain the various "multiple sacred forms" that exist within societies and cultures.

The final framework examined by Lundby is the *social shaping of technology*. Campbell (2012) has promoted this perspective in her significant research on digital religion and argues that religious traditions do not sit by and passively allow all forms of new media to impact upon them. Rather, religious traditions constantly shape how new forms of media are used to engage with their religious beliefs and practices. They are actively involved in the "religious social-shaping of technology" and constantly negotiating and adapting new forms of media to meet their needs.

Mediation of religion is now so commonplace that most people simply take it as a given that religion has blended with the digital. One only has to look as far as the apps on your phone to see that religion is being transformed and adapted at an incredible pace (Wagner 2013). For example, Neil Ahlsten (a former Google employee) co-founded Carpenters Code, which built Abide, a smartphone app for guided prayer (abide.is). The app gives you daily "powerful prayers," allows you to choose topics that you would like prayer help with, and provides music to enhance the online experience. The Abide platform also included in-depth teachings about prayer and meditation, step-by-step audio exercises, the ability to con-

nect with a personal prayer mentor, and the opportunity for scriptural discussions. The goal of the company was to bring prayer and the power of Christian faith into the digital environment. This online activity allows the smartphone to become a spiritual tool for the practitioner, and portal for engaging prayer in a deep and meaningful way. Ahlsten (2015) adamantly believes that the digital can help people encounter the divine. Ahlsten and his development team claim that people using the prayer app on their phone were "five times more likely to be satisfied" with their prayer activities than people who did not use the app. After less than a month on the "app market" the product had already been downloaded hundreds of thousands of times and received thousands of positive reviews. This app clearly demonstrates Grieve's point concerning liquid modernity and online technology facilitating spiritual and religious practices in our busy, wired lives. It also supports his argument that we cannot begin to understand something like online prayer activities if we try to view it simply as "traditional religion packaged in a new media form" (Grieve 2013, p. 110).

## Digital Religion as Network and Space

From these frameworks, two current theories have developed that seem to be gaining traction in the field studying religion and digital culture. Heidi Campbell has developed a theory called "networked religion" and Stewart Hoover and Nabil Echchaibi are developing the concept of "third spaces of digital religion." Each theory has its own merits, networked religion may be more helpful in examining official religious activity, while third spaces may be more helpful in studying everyday or lived religion.

### Networked Religion

Networked religion explores the way digital religion functions within a network of interactions. Based upon the concept of a "networked society,"

Campbell found that the massive shifts in how we function as a society and culture related to developments in Internet technology have significantly influenced religion. A computer-networked society functions in a certain way, and if we participate within that society, the shifts in how we interact and communicate will spill over into all of our activities. For the religious aspect, this means that "religion, especially that which is found online, is informed by the technological structures and characteristics of the Internet such as flattening of traditional hierarchies, encouraging instantaneous communication and response, and widening access to sacred or once-private information" (Campbell 2012, p. 68). In effect, online religious practices are tied to the developments of online culture and its influence on the social sphere. However, as Campbell argues, based upon her view of the social shaping of technology, online culture does not create itself, rather it reflects values and systems from the offline world. Online religious practices are not separate and distinct from offline activities, rather they are constantly reflecting and engaging the practices and activities of people's religious activities and identities. As such, online religion embodies the significant changes that have occurred in modern societies as religion has changed with secularization, shifts in religious power and authority, freedom of religious beliefs and practices, and a variety of other transitions.

Networked religion recognizes five central characteristics or traits: *networked community*, *storied identity*, *shifting authority*, *convergent practice*, and *multisite reality*. Each of these components is reflective of a digital culture but focused upon the religious aspect, removing the dichotomy between online and offline religion and instead recognizing the blending of the two. *Networked community* is one of the key components of a digital culture. Rather than being based upon physical locations, such as neighborhoods, networked communities are structured upon social networks of varying levels of commitment and affiliation. Networked communities are not just online communities, rather they are representative of "webs of connection between different social contexts to create a personalized network of relations" (Campbell 2012, p. 69).

*Storied identity* draws from Anthony Giddens and Erving Goffman to examine the religious identity that can be constructed and performed online. Within the digital world, individuals have a variety of resources and social platforms to select, assemble, and present, as their sense of self. As Campbell (2012, p. 69) notes, "it is clear from research that religious identity is not simply absorbed through internet engagement, or is it purely imported from the offline context. Identity is both constructed and performed, as Internet users draw on multiple resources available online."

*Shifting authority* recognizes the transitions that have and are occurring as traditional religious authorities deal with new religious authority figures that appear online. This shifting authority is seen as a threat to traditional structures of power and also as a tool of empowerment for others. Online authority has real world influence and can also allow for the transgression of official religious frameworks. However, as recent research has shown (e.g., Hope Cheong 2013), the reverse can also be true. Traditional religious authority that adapts to new forms of networked religion can re-establish ties with followers and become far more connected with them than they may have been in the past.

*Convergent practices* recognizes the potential of the Internet to shape and shift ritual practices as they are adapted for new media, while also recognizing the fluid nature of the beliefs and practices many people have. This is fostering a "self-directed form of spiritual engagement online... allowing practitioners to select from a vast array of resources and experiences in order to assemble and personalize their religious behavior and belief" (Campbell 2012, p. 76).

Finally, *multi-site reality* highlights the fact that religious practices, attitudes, and beliefs appear within a variety of contexts, both online and off, allowing for a complex integration between the two. This recognizes the intersection between digital media and peoples' ways of being religious. As Campbell (2012, p. 82) observes, the "movement between media worlds and the public sphere means it can be difficult to separate or distinguish which sources most influence an individual's spirituality, as people draw



simultaneously from online and offline contexts for their religious identities”

### Third Spaces of Digital Religion

The idea of third spaces of digital religion was developed by Hoover and Echchaibi as a way of recognizing the emerging space that is created through “the religious digital” as people engage religion within the wired world. The theory accounts for and explores the forms of the religious (or spiritual) that are developing in the in-between-ness of the digital spaces accorded by this new form of media. This digital space has been socially created by the users and the technology, and within it, “individuals use the technical capacities of the digital to imagine social and cultural configurations beyond existing binaries of the physical versus the virtual and the real versus the proximal religious experience” (Hoover and Echchaibi 2014, p. 14). This theory is not trying to downplay or discount the other forms of religious activity that are occurring within our society and culture; rather, it is developing a lens for recognizing a new form of the religious being generated “by diverse practitioners and audiences who flexibly engage in actions within this new space that they inhabit, which is one that they create in their aspirations and their self-understanding and their subjectivity” (Hoover 2013, p. 267).

The goal of this perspective is to move beyond traditional frameworks of religious analysis that evaluate digital activities by “reifying deterministic binaries of old media-old religion versus new media-new religion” (Echchaibi 2014). The third space perspective interprets and analyzes lived religious experiences beyond dichotomous definitions of both religion and media. It privileges an understanding of “religious and spiritual practices in the digital as part of everyday life and the outcome of potentially contested sites. The spatial metaphor of a third space also allows us to visualize the mobility of everyday religion and explore the dynamic ways in which contemporary subjects imagine, produce and navigate new religious and spiritual places” (Echchaibi 2014).

Third space analysis requires a form of ethnography and in-depth examination of online religious praxis as they are negotiated, created, engaged, and maintained by the people thinking about and doing their religion in this space. Case studies show that this space is “between private and public, between institution and individual, between authority and individual autonomy, between large media framings and individual ‘pro-sumption,’ between local and translocal, etc.” (Echchaibi 2014). Third spaces also stand outside of traditional forms of authority and unitary sources of knowledge as they are contested, negotiated spaces that allow for creative and non-conventional ways of being religious.

This theory sets out to explore the lived religious practices of actors as they negotiate their way of being religious within the digital realm. Third spaces are not large public spaces, but rather smaller groups with focused and purposeful interactions. A third space of religion may appear in a bulletin board, a chat room, an online church, a virtual reality game, or even the conversation thread on a YouTube video clip. Case studies being developed for this research are examining online spaces that “reflect on the creative outcomes of this condition of in-betweenness and the emergence of other places of religious and spiritual meaning, particularly as intervening sites of social practice, or even peripheral spaces of power negotiation and social action” (Echchaibi et al. 2013).

### The Third Space of the Wondercafe

In the very early years of public Internet access, several Christian denominations experimented with creating their own computer networks for online communication and private discussions where they could meet, exchange ideas and fellowship, and develop their theologies (in this section, I draw on Helland 2012). One of the first successful experiments of this nature was developed under the guidance of Dr. David Lochhead. On October 31 (All Hallows Eve), 1984, the United Church of Canada started the United Church Computer Users Group (known as



UCHUG). They originally set up the system for two reasons. The first was to overcome the vast geography of the country—from coast to coast there is a lot of distance between churches within Canada. They needed a “place” where they could easily meet without having to travel thousands of miles. The second reason was to allow for the communication of their “textual information” to church leaders and members. Although there were early structural issues (including limited modem connections) the online network system was successful and it quickly became evident that there was a new space emerging online that had its own dimension of religious engagement. The official religious governing body of the United Church of Canada experienced the amazing potential of using the medium to communicate in a one-to-many fashion. It was a great way for communicating clerical issues and connecting from “office to office.” It was also an extremely effective tool for “closed” discussions among church leaders:

Pastors from the Atlantic to the Pacific can discuss, on a weekly basis, the common texts that will be used as scripture readings on the following Sunday. We are also using UCHUG for a denomination-wide discussion of one of the most divisive issues currently facing the United Church: the ordination of homosexuals. (Lochhead 1986)

At the same time, the online members—which at this time were predominantly community church leaders—were using the system to communicate and discuss issues, as well as sharing their thoughts, feelings, and prayer. In sum, they were developing an online environment that they recognized as a form of electronic community. This varying use of the system worried some of the participants as they saw that there was the potential for this communications medium to subtly shift the traditional organizational structure of the United Church of Canada—potentially eroding any form of centralized authority as local groups could now communicate with each other and meet online without having to go through any central office. This was a new space where the community functioned in a way that was not conceivable before the advent of the digital.

However, this new form of online interaction, this third space of digital religion, was not embraced by everyone within the church as it quickly became a contested space that was in-between traditional structure and a new way of communicating and experiencing “Christian fellowship” online.

One of our concerns is the reluctance of national staff officers to involve themselves in the online community; for many of them, the growth of computer networks in the church holds the threat of the marginalization of hierarchy. By allowing the development of close personal relationships among people in widely separated locations, *computer conferencing is enabling the growth of a community of people who do not rely on the traditional patterns of church communication.* (Lochhead 1986, emphasis added)

“Traditional patterns of church communication” represents a one-to-many, hierarchical method of communicating doctrine, dogma, and beliefs. The United Church of Canada was one of the first religious organizations to fully embrace the Internet and recognize that it could play very different roles within religious organizations and the society at large. For them it was a great tool for developing community and for engaging religion on a popular or grass-roots level. It was a place for their everyday lived religion, not the religion with a capital “R” that went on within the traditional church buildings. On UCHUG for example, there was an online conference called “Dharma and Gospel” that allowed for discussions between Buddhists and Christians. It was definitely something new and special for many members of the community and early engagement with this form of digital religion set the United Church of Canada on a path that would put them at the forefront for creating new environments for engaging faith online.

Based upon the overwhelming positive feedback UCHUG received from the people involved in the project, the United Church of Canada switched to a larger computer system that was hosted in the United States. This system allowed for greater online interaction and what they believed very strongly to be an “online ecumenical community.” The more advanced networked

system was called UNISON and it brought together the United Church of Canada with the United Methodists and United Church of Christ.

This online experimentation continued to develop and by 1986 "Joint Strategy Sessions" and "Action Committees" were formed by several Christian denominations in an attempt to discuss how the new Internet system could be used for church mission activities. Eventually, a number of these groups joined together to form the ECUNET system, creating "the largest ecumenical computer network in the world" (Bradley 1997). This was a "closed" or secure networking system developed so that these Christian denominations could communicate among their membership and also with each other. They had private Bulletin Boards, secure chat rooms, email list serves, and also communal areas where they could meet online and discuss different issues or just share their faith. This was another third space for digital religion, though it was not as open and experimental as the UCHUG network had been.

Digital religion is shaped by two equally powerful forces. One of these forces is the end user. The other is the web producer. There is a unique bond between these two groups. Much like the relationship between religion and digital media, they are not separate individual spheres, but rather powerful forces that meld and blend together to produce the third spaces of digital religion. In a development that was very much in line with the early UCHUG third space, the United Church of Canada created a huge online platform ([www.wondercafe.ca](http://www.wondercafe.ca)) as part of a campaign to reconnect the church with the Canadian population. Online in 2006 and running for almost 8 years before it was closed in September, 2014, Wondercafe was a dynamic online environment that hosted a variety of forms of different online interactions. It allowed for email connections, blogging, friend requests, and a number of other Web 2.0 components.

The site was developed and maintained by an official religious organization; however, much like the United Church of Canada's earlier UCHUG, it was a clear example of a third space of digital religion rather than a website providing data and information about the tradition. In 1986,

UCHUG developer David Lochhead was the first person to use the term "online religion" when he discussed the ecumenical community he had helped create. That same concept—of the online environment as a manifestation of community and non-hierarchical communication between members—resonated throughout Wondercafe.

Wondercafe was not created as a tool for recruitment, conversion, or proselytizing. It was developed to connect the church to the people—where the church believed people were now located, mostly online. The website developed a network; it became a hub for bringing people together into an online environment where, for want of a better description, people could just get together and enjoy each other's company. As their home page introduction stated:

Welcome to the home of open-minded discussion and exploration of spiritual topics, moral issues and life's big questions, brought to you by the people of The United Church of Canada. You'll find lots to talk about in our Discussion Lounge, and you'll get your very own Profile Page for telling others a little about yourself, starting a blog, or sending and receiving WonderMails. So pull up a chair and join in.

Wondercafe was a very complex website and a powerful representation of Web 2.0. On Wondercafe, participants were able to contribute, develop the conversations and themes, and determine how the website content developed. Along with Twitter and Facebook connections, the website also hosted YouTube clips and other places for online interaction. For many of the people participating online, Wondercafe was the space where they could engage with their religion on a daily basis. Aaron McCarroll Gallegos, one of the people responsible for development and maintenance of Wondercafe, found that many people experienced the website as the "sacrament of community" and an important part of their religious and spiritual identity. Although it was developed by an official religious organization, it is a clear example of the third space of religion. So much so, that after it was officially shut down, members created Wondercafe2 ([wondercafe2.ca](http://wondercafe2.ca)) so they could continue engaging this third space of digital religion.

### Networked Religion, Co-Locating the Sacred, and the Case of a Virtual Tibet

The Tibetan Buddhist Tradition in diaspora was also one of the first organized religions to deeply embrace the Internet (in this section, I draw on Helland 2015). They quickly recognized its potential to communicate and connect their people within diaspora and also its power as a form of media to communicate the difficult Tibetan situation to the world. Recognizing the significance and potential of the Internet to support the Tibetan community in diaspora, in 1996 Tibetan Buddhist monks from the Namgyal Monastery used a variation of the Kalachakra Tantra (a sacred ritual) to bless the network and sanctify the newly created "cyberspace" for this purpose. To conduct the ritual, the monks used sacred chants while they visualized the interconnected network of computers that make up the Internet and the "space" created by these networks. An image of the Kalachakra Mandala (which had been created as a complex sand mandala earlier) was digitized and put up on a computer screen. This further helped with the visualization of the Internet as being part of a giant mandala which was now spiritually anchored within the virtual world. The event was timed to coincide with the "24 hours of Cyberspace" program conducted globally on February 8, 1996 to raise awareness of the positive impact the Internet could have on society and culture.

At first glance, it might seem paradoxical that an ancient religion would respond in this way to new media and the social spaces it affords. Yet from the perspective of the monks, cyberspace was not artificial or "virtual" but a space that people were engaging in a very "real world" way. In their view, there was no dichotomy between online and offline activity, rather the new online environment was viewed simply as a place where people could do things. As the monks put it, "We pray to reduce the negative things that may happen in cyberspace and to increase the positive things... The person using the Internet has the choice" (Namgyal Monastery 1996). Despite "geographical" Tibet being subsumed under the

Chinese State, the Tibetan government in exile, official religious organizations, and politically and religiously motivated individuals actively engage the Internet to promote Tibetan sovereignty and maintain their religious and cultural identity.

As the Internet continued to expand, a number of websites were created to promote and support the "Tibetan Situation," while Tibetan communities in diaspora began to develop comprehensive websites that provided information on everything from Tibetan restaurants and crafts to localized political activities and international news. As a diaspora community, they were quickly drawn to using the Internet as a tool to help maintain their already dispersed, networked community. By 2004, Internet use within the diaspora had become so significant that Thubten Samphel (2004, p. 167), the secretary of the department of information of the exiled Tibetan government, wrote:

Tibetans in exile are embracing the Internet just as they did Buddhism more than 1,300 years ago. Like a new revelation, the power of the Internet to create virtual communities has fascinated Tibetans in exile. This fascination is intensified by the fact that the ability to create a cohesive community, across international borders, has been denied to Tibetans in Tibet by an Internet-shy China. And Tibetan exiles, scattered as they are across the globe, are converting this fascination into a rash of cyberspace activities that, because of their power to transmit information instantaneously, are profoundly changing the world of the Tibetan Diaspora and beyond. In the process, Tibetan exiles have created a virtual Tibet that is almost un-assailable, free, reveling in its freedom, and growing.

With the main religious leaders leaving Tibet to live in exile (e.g., van Schaik 2011), they continued to develop and maintain a web of connectedness between themselves and their communities, which were living in a form of "stateless diaspora" abroad or still within the traditional territories that were now under the political control of the Chinese government. As new Internet communication tools became available, the Tibetan religious authorities began to explore, and then develop, these networks to communicate news and information about the Tibetan situation to



both Tibetans and non-Tibetans, and to strengthen the communications between the monastic centers (religious authorities) and the Tibetan diaspora community. Originally relying upon volunteers in Canada, the United States, and Britain, several bulletin boards and list-serves were developed for this activity (Anand 2000; Bray 2000; Brinkerhoff 2012; Drissel 2008; Helland 2007; McLagan 1996).

As this online network for projecting and strengthening Tibetan identity inside and outside of China continued to develop and expand, Internet use within the diaspora community began changing based upon the needs of the community. Referred to as the social shaping of technology and the "spiritualizing of the Internet" (Campbell 2005), the users shifted the emphasis from a fourth estate used for combating Chinese propaganda to an online network that began to significantly strengthen the diaspora community. In many ways this primary shift can be viewed as a change from using the Internet to help create a "media spectacle" to using the Internet for create a multisite reality for their community.

One key factor in this development was the push by the diaspora community to develop Internet accessibility and networked connectivity within "Little Lhasa" or Dharamsala, which had now become the religious and political center for the Tibetans in exile. In a major undertaking, Air Jaldi, a nonprofit organization dedicated to creating wireless networks for the Tibetan community in diaspora, facilitated a meeting in 2006 where they built one of the largest Wi-Fi networks in the world. Using a complex wireless mesh network, they linked over 2,000 computers throughout the Himalayan region of Northern India. This allowed for the Tibetans in the Dharamsala area to be "wired" despite the poor quality of phone services and limited access to computers. In support of the developing network and the Air Jaldi conference, the Dalai Lama welcomed the delegates and volunteers building the mesh network and in a written message prayed "that the fruits of your good work will be far reaching and long lasting" (Helland 2015, p. 159).

As the Internet is a complex environment that provides the ability for diaspora communities to

be both consumers and producers of knowledge and representation, centralized, traditional authorities have difficulty maintaining control over this network (e.g., Barker 2005; Campbell 2007; 2010; Helland 2000; Turner 2007). In fact, the new Internet networks "may represent the first time that diaspora members are able to consider aspects of their identity, question traditional interpretations of religion and culture, and choose for themselves what their identity 'truth' is" (Brinkerhoff 2012, p. 94). As Campbell notes in her theory on networked religion, shifting authority is a key issue all religious groups have to deal with as they and their membership go online. In an attempt to increase and strengthen the representation of the religious authorities of the monastic centers within this online environment, the Dalai Lama's official website (originally online in October of 1999) was transformed in 2005–2006 from being purely an information source that promoted the Dalai Lama to a website that engaged with the diaspora community by providing news, teachings, rituals, messages, and speeches. Monasteries that were being re-established in exile also created websites that increased their networked connectivity with the community.

Within a relatively short time, Virtual Tibet became something far greater than just digital activities used to shape public opinion. It became a form of networked religion that allowed for online connectivity and online community, while it also strengthened the networks used for maintaining a globally dispersed group of Tibetans. This overlap between online and offline community identity is clearly reflective of a networked society where the diaspora group is "culturing the technology... so that it can be incorporated into the community and provide opportunities for group or self-expression" (Campbell 2012, p. 64). By actively engaging the online environment in a number of progressive ways, the Tibetan community in diaspora is socially shaping the technology to meet their unique political, religious, and spiritual needs.

Although there are significant digital divides—particularly between new exiles escaping Tibet and traveling to India and exiles that came to



India between the 1960s to the 1980s, this new form of networked society has become extremely significant to members of the Tibetan diaspora for a number of different reasons. In the contemporary online environment, Virtual Tibet is best interpreted as a multisite network that is structured upon five nodes or spheres of websites. The five nodes making up the multisite network are (1) Tibetan Government in Exile websites; (2) Tibetan News websites; (3) Cyber-Sanghas and comprehensive websites; (4) social networking sites; and, (5) Tibetan Monastic and religious websites.

Each node plays a pivotal role in maintaining Tibetan identity both online and off in what can best be described as a multisite reality. In Campbell's (2012, p. 82) examination of networked religion, she argues,

Connected to the idea of a multisite reality is that the online world is consciously and unconsciously imprinted by its users with the values, structures, and expectations of the offline world. Multisite reality means online practices are often informed by offline ways of being, as users integrate or seek to connect their online and offline patterns of life. It also means that there is often ideological overlap and interaction between online religious groups and forums and their corresponding offline religious institutions.

To connect the community in diaspora, a strong multisite reality combined with multiple online networks help maintain community identity, common goals and beliefs, and leadership structures. As such, Virtual Tibet represents the new development of a technologically hybridizing community that is connecting deeply rooted traditional structures of power and authority with new social media.

The Virtual Tibet case study also raises an important issue concerning privacy, cybersecurity, and online activism against formal governments. The Tibetan community in diaspora is aggrieved and persecuted. The community is in a constant struggle with China over issues of territory, independence, autonomy, and authority. This struggle is evident in cyberspace and websites such as Phayul.com, Tibet.net, and Dalailama.com, to name but a few, which have been the focus of concerted cyber-attacks and

online surveillance. The Citizen Lab at the Munk School of Global Affairs at the University of Toronto recently identified a cyber-attack focused upon the Tibetan diaspora community that compromised a network of over 1,295 infected computers in 103 countries. Up to 30% of the infected computers were considered high-value targets and include computers located at ministries of foreign affairs, embassies, international organizations, news media, and NGOs (Information Warfare Monitor 2009).

Despite the constant threats and challenges posed by the Internet, for Tibetans in diaspora, networked religion has become an essential and vital component for maintaining their community. Religious belief and practice within the Tibetan culture have always been a key pillar of Tibetan identity. With the rise of "networked individualism" (Raine and Wellman 2012), members within the diaspora community are constantly challenged and influenced by "multiple modernities" (Whalen-Bridge 2011) and alternative and competing networks. This struggle of identity and community maintenance is a constant challenge in diaspora, particularly with second generation members that may focus more on developing new ties, rather than on nourishing or rediscovering old social networks (Ardley 2011; Beyer 2006; Nowak 1984; Tiller and Franz 2004; Vertovec 2009).

Within the Tibetan diaspora, there are three clear benefits derived from being actively online. The first is that it allows for a networked identity within the community itself (Helland 2007). Through the Internet, Tibetans living throughout the world can connect in a deep and meaningful way with other members of the community who may not be living within the same nations or even continents. Non-diaspora people do this as a matter of choice; for the diaspora community it is done as a matter of cultural survival.

The second significant benefit achieved by utilizing networked religion within the Tibetan diaspora is to connect monks and religious specialists with the community through websites and online activity. Websites such as rigpa.org and drikung.org allow Tibetans and non-Tibetans alike the opportunity to connect with important religious

figures in a way that was not available in the past. For example, a member of the Tibetan community living in Calgary, Canada can undertake distance learning with a lama, participate in online courses, and watch ritual events in real time, despite being thousands of miles away. In diaspora, there is also a developing divide between the lay and monastic communities, as the lamas are often affiliated with various Buddhist meditation centers that have an elite group of Western followers. These followers often pay large sums of money to attend workshops and teachings and present a high level of devotion to the teachers. The monks must rely on this livelihood for their survival, but this often means that members of the Tibetan community only have the opportunity to connect with their monks during Losar or special festivals (Mullen 2006). With the power of the Internet, the diaspora community now has unlimited access in a new, albeit different way to their religious specialists.

The third important benefit to the community builds upon the second. This new form of connection with religious authorities has developed into a complex network of online ritual activities that co-locate the most sacred aspects of the Tibetan tradition in a very real and meaningful way with the members of the diaspora. New forms of online ritual activity have been developed and facilitated through websites such as [dalailama.com](http://dalailama.com) to allow Tibetans in exile (and within China for that matter) the opportunity to have a close and powerful encounter with the most sacred component of the tradition. By placing ritual online, the Tibetan community can engage the very fabric of the religion: the teachings, ritual events, and sacred lamas, which are central to the identity and practices of Tibetan Buddhists.

Ritual activities and charismatic authority do not always transfer well into the Internet medium (Helland 2012). What is unique about the Tibetan situation is how well the charisma of the high lamas is perceived by the community to be accessible, tangible, and real, even if it is facilitated through computer networks. There are two key factors that may influence why online ritual seems to work so well for this community. The

first can be explored with "ritual transfer theory" (see Miczek 2008; Radde-Antweiler 2006; 2008). Placing ritual online is a process that requires adaptation and changes within any religious tradition and can be viewed as an ongoing activity that involves the three components of transformation, invention, and exclusion. Transformation is the process of shaping or reshaping a ritual that already exists, changing its content or structure in certain ways so it can be facilitated online. For this process to proceed, there may need to be innovation within the ritual based upon the new media environment, and new aspects or components may have to be invented to allow for the ritual to work online. The final element is exclusion, since certain things inevitably have to be left out of the ritual activity in order for it to take place online. When these three forces act upon the ritual, the people participating are then left with a different ritual than they have previously participated in and they have to decide whether the ritual works or has failed. For many people, the exclusion of being physically present is too much of a change and they will not participate; for others, the difficulty might be the lack of nature, the taste of the wine, or the meal after the ceremony. In any case, the ritual transfer process will fail if these three forces somehow destabilize the ritual to the point that people will not recognize it as an authentic ritual activity. For other participants, the changes and transformations that occur to bring the ritual online will be seen as being within a margin of acceptability, and they will view the ritual as still authentic (Helland 2012).

Within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, many ritual activities transfer well. At a basic level, most of the ritual activities facilitated online are teachings about sacred Buddhist texts. In this case, the online ritual is considered an aid for greater understanding and to gain awareness and spiritual awakening, resulting ultimately in liberation from the cycle of rebirth. However, as these teachings are conducted by the high lamas, their power and "sacredness" is perceived to also be transmitted online when people receive the teachings. In effect, by viewing the teachings, even if you do not understand all of the texts'

complexity, one still gains merit just by being part of the transmission process of the teachings. Due to this community perception, the lamas are not merely a visual sign or "summarizing symbol" for the Tibetan tradition and identity, rather they are iconic representations of the divine. The lama or Rinpoche (Precious One) is sacred and holds spiritual or supernatural power that can be bestowed upon his or her students. This occurs during formal and informal oral transmissions. Although in the past this was done face-to-face, through the Internet it is now also done online. Technologies such as Skype and real time synthetic HD video feeds allow for a new form of contact to occur between the teacher/ritual specialist and the person receiving the teachings and empowerment. As such, the Rinpoche has a powerful effect upon people who perceive his or her charisma in this way.

Beyond the ritual transfer theory, the second way that online ritual has such a significant impact upon the Tibetan community in diaspora is that the lamas, and particularly the high lamas (e.g., Dalai Lama, Karmapa Lama, Sakya Trizin), are already viewed by the community as being between worlds, both as spiritual beings (bodhisattvas) or incarnate deities and as human monks. This sacredness is conceived as a focus of transcendence, which can rupture normal time and space. It transfers well online because the Internet itself disrupts normal time and space on a regular basis. What makes this online activity more than just a form of "long-distanced" ritual practice (which is very common within Hinduism) or virtual pilgrimage (which is very common within Christianity) is the "co-location" of the sacred through the Internet. Members of the Tibetan tradition in diaspora feel a genuine, authentic, and powerful encounter with the lamas when they engage with them in online ritual activity.

Co-location was first presented as a theory in relation to online ritual activity by Pinchbeck and Stevens (2006). They argued that virtual reality has a number of common features similar to ritual, and that through the liminality of the online environment people could feel like they were having an authentic experience when they were

online. In this case, it was the perception of the participants that gave them a sense of being there or a sense of presence in cyberspace. The second use of the term co-location was developed by Hill-Smith (2011), who argued that through co-location, sacred pilgrimage sites could be authentically replicated online. In this situation, it was the sacred place that was co-located in cyberspace and people who went on virtual pilgrimage felt a true sense of connecting with the real place despite its being an online simulacrum of the authentic sacred site.

What makes the co-location that occurs in Virtual Tibet different from the other two cases is that first and foremost, the people engaging in the ritual are not in a virtual reality environment. They are in diaspora, which is a liminal space in its own right, but it is in the real world at a computer. For example, recently an elderly member of the Tibetan diaspora community watched the Dalai Lama's teachings and ritual activity broadcast live from the Main Tibetan Temple in Dharamsala. The ritual conducted in "Little Lhasa" was a teaching on Tsongkhapa's "Three Principal Aspects of the Path" and included a very special ritual called the White Tara Permission. The Dalai Lama stated during the live online broadcast that this ritual was taken from the "Secret Visions of the Fifth Dalai Lama," which he received in Tibet from Tagdrag Rinpoche. To receive the White Tara Permission from the Dalai Lama, who had received it from a very important lama in Tibet, is a very fortunate and auspicious event for a Tibetan Buddhist. The fact that the person was participating online, in diaspora, rather than at the temple in India was not seen as a great loss. Rather it was viewed as a great benefit and a valid connection between the practitioner and the Dalai Lama. The person participating in the online ritual and teaching lit incense, placed offerings and flowers in front of the computer, and intensely watched the high definition broadcast, listening to the teachings and reciting the proper mantras when instructed by the Dalai Lama.

The second feature that is different from the other two theories of co-location involves the question of place. With virtual pilgrimage, there



is a feeling that the sacred place is authentically recreated in cyberspace in such a way that people genuinely feel they encounter the liminal, sacredness of the site. Lourdes in France or the Western Wall in Jerusalem are good examples. Within the Tibetan diaspora, there is a deep sense of loss and frustration concerning the Tibetan territory. However, the online representations of Virtual Tibet are not focused as much on the traditional land (or trying to virtually recreate it) as they are focused upon maintaining the Tibetan Buddhist tradition and Tibetan identity itself. In many ways this is similar to the conception of a networked community that maintains its "place" through interconnectedness, rather than just traditional territorial or political borders. As Massey (1994, p. 154) argues, "What gives a place its specificity is not some long internalized history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus." Within Virtual Tibet, the locus and center maintaining the network are the High Lamas.

In the case of Virtual Tibet, co-location occurs in a three-step process that begins online with a ritual activity that is perceived by the community to work. If the community accepts that the ritual can be facilitated online with a level of authenticity that is acceptable within the tradition, then the online ritual "space" creates a liminal environment that the participants can encounter. This liminal space is in-between worlds and shrinks the real-world distance that separates participants from the ritual activity. It may be that a person is in New York City, sitting at his or her desk looking into a computer screen. But due to the liminality of the online ritual event, the participant is in the present, encountering the transcendent element of the tradition, even if the ritual is being conducted 3,000 miles away. What makes co-location different from just watching a ritual on television (which can be a powerful experience in its own right) is the networked community or the multisite network. Participants are engaged within a web of connectedness when they go online for the ritual. It may be that they are going online to the Dalai Lama's website, or a monastery website, and there they will encounter the

network used by the community for maintaining their identity.

The final aspect that makes co-location tangible to the participants is the icon and "sacred center" around which the ritual is structured. Much like an icon within the Christian tradition, there will be members of the community who do not view the representation (icon, lama, etc.) as something that is divine or spiritual. In many ways this is a good indicator of insider and outsider relationships to the group. An iconoclast will not participate in the rituals associated with icon reverence or worship and will feel no sense of the sacred in the object so revered by the icon-worshipping community (Morgan 2011). However, for the believer, it is an encounter with the divine. For example, for the Tibetan people, the Dalai Lama is the single most important figure around which Tibetan identity circulates. As a personification of the protector deity, he is the primary symbol of Tibetan unity (Kolas 1996, p. 57). For the vast majority of community members, the Dalai Lama has an "aura of sacredness" and a level of charismatic authority that is both institutionalized within the structure of the monastic tradition and sanctified by the community itself (Weber [1922] 1978; Smith 1998). Any opportunity to have an intimate or close encounter with the Dalai Lama is seen as being a profound and significant event. Through these new digital networks, the monastic orders are socially shaping Internet technology to provide their community in diaspora with the opportunity to experience the ritual activity and charisma (or sacredness) of their leadership in a new and dynamic way. This is reaffirming, maintaining, and strengthening the bonds between the monastic centers and their communities, wherever they are located.

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### On a Tweet and a Prayer

When it comes to digital religion, what a difference a Pope makes. Benedict XVI, who served as Pope of the Roman Catholic Church from 2005 until he resigned in 2013, had a Twitter account and all the web resources the church had to offer



at his disposal. Yet he never engaged with social media in a way that successfully connected with the masses. He was aware of its impact and importance, and for the 47<sup>th</sup> Annual Communication Day in 2013 his message was, "Social Networks: portals of truth and faith; new spaces for evangelization." In this regard, he saw new media as a tool for communicating Catholic values and beliefs to the rest of the world. He called online space "a new 'agora', an open public square in which people share ideas, information and opinions, and in which new relationships and forms of community can come into being" (Benedict XVI 2013). However, he did not envision it as the digital agora others had. For example, Bishop Jacques Gaillot developed an early online community for his diocese of Partenia. Partenia was a territory in title only and was given to him as a form of demotion. Rather than viewing this as a limitation, Gaillot created an online space that he considered an agora (Zaleski 1997). Here anyone could login and participate in fellowship, debate, and dialogue. It was not a space being used to convert people to Christianity, or even support dominant Catholic dogma. Rather, it was an open and engaging "third space" used for digital religion.

The official position of online religious activity advocated by Benedict, by contrast, was to use the medium to evangelize and engage Christians and to promote the Church's position on theological matters. He also felt it was to be used as an important tool for getting people to come back to the brick and mortar church. "In our effort to make the Gospel present in the digital world, we can invite people to come together for prayer or liturgical celebrations in specific places such as churches and chapels," Benedict declared. "There should be no lack of coherence or unity in the expression of our faith and witness to the Gospel in whatever reality we are called to live, whether physical or digital. When we are present to others, in any way at all, we are called to make known the love of God to the furthest ends of the earth" (Benedict XVI 2013).

Ancient tradition and modern communication appeared to work together when the new Pope was elected in Rome in 2013. According to tradi-

tion, white smoke signaled that a new pontiff had been selected. Shortly afterwards, the papal Twitter account (which had been eerily quiet over the previous two weeks) announced to the faithful: "*HABEMUS PAPAM FRANCISCUM*"—or "We have Pope Francis." The capital letters may have captured the excitement of the occasion, but they also struck a gauche note on Twitter, especially in contrast to the earlier silence of the Pope's twitter account. With a "business as usual" approach, the former pope failed to recognize the radically different way people interact online.

Pope Francis viewed new media in a very different way. This influenced how he began to use it as Pope and also what role he felt it should play within the Catholic Church. He clearly understands its power and does use social media to increase his online authority (Guzek 2015); however, he is also using the online environment to encourage people to engage in third spaces of digital religion. Perhaps the greatest example of this can be seen in how Francis released his encyclical on the environment. There was a lot of hype and anticipation surrounding the document and when it was finally released, Pope Francis tweeted: "The Earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth" (Francis 2015). Within hours, his tweet was shared more than 30,000 times and it was quoted and referenced in more than 430,000 news articles. Throughout the day, the Pope continued to tweet short statements from his 183-page text, inundating the online world.

Pope Francis's use of social media to communicate his message was not accidental or unintentional. Most people will not read the entire document, but if they do, they will find that he sees new media as a potential tool for doing good in the world (although he also recognizes that it often a distraction that can lead to social ills and information overload). Francis' online activity mirrors his own concern that "efforts need to be made to help these media become sources of new cultural progress for humanity and not a threat to our deepest riches" (Francis 2015). In this case, the Pope was practicing what he preached.

Pope Francis' use of new media may also be the easiest and most effective way for the Catholic

Church to communicate beyond its membership, with people of other faith or even no faith at all. The encyclical was addressed to more than just Catholics; it aspired to "enter into dialogue with all people about our common home" (Francis 2015). Francis was initiating a third space for digital religion. He encouraged and allowed for people to interact with the material he was presenting, to go online and engage in conversation about the important role of faith in environmental stewardship. As a leading religious figure of a church with well over one billion members, the Pope has a guaranteed audience. Yet the position he is presenting on the environment does not resonate with all of his followers. In fact, many Catholics in the United States express doubts about the very existence of climate change. In a detailed study for the Public Religion Research Institute, Gendron and Cox (2015) found that, overall, 47% of Catholics surveyed agreed with Pope Francis on climate change issues. However, 24% disagreed and many as 20% were not familiar with the Pope's position on the environment. A large number of Catholics had also not heard his encyclical explained or talked about by their clergy in the church. By opening up the conversation and creating a third space for digital religion, the Pope bypassed the mediating structure of the pulpit and engaged directly with his flock.

The Pope's encyclical was about more than just the environment. In effect, he was presenting a critical assessment of "short-sighted approaches to the economy, commerce and production" and the obsession many have with a lifestyle based on over-consumption and a disregard for others' well-being. Although some conservative Catholics have downplayed the document, shifting attention away from the economic, ethical, and social aspects of the papal position, his statement resonated with a large portion of the global population that is deeply concerned for the planet's long-term future. In many ways, Francis was initiating an online conversation on a grassroots level, challenging people of all faiths and belief systems to become engaged with this issue. The easiest place for that to happen is online, through Twitter posts and reposts, chat rooms, Facebook pages, online forums, and any other space that

has been created to allow people to engage in discussion.

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## Future Directions

The future of digital religion is certain. Religion in all of its forms and functions will continue to blend into the online environment. Digital religion is not something that appeared *ex nihilo*; it represents and reflects religion in our contemporary society. Official religious organizations are adapting their structures to adjust to the digital world. This means they are developing clear strategies that take advantage of online networks and are using them to increase their authority among followers, to strengthen their networks and connections with their churches, temples, or mosques, and to present their dogma, beliefs, and practices on a global scale. Sacred sites are being wired, important rituals are live online, and religious specialists can be friended on Facebook. Despite this activity, unofficial religious use of the Internet is also flourishing. Individual forms of spirituality and syncretic religious practice are thriving online. People are engaging with beliefs from different faiths, meeting online to share common concerns and values, and participating in the new third space of digital religion.

A close examination of digital religion clearly demonstrates the blending of religion and religious activities in many people's everyday lives. Religious content permeates the online world, yet how it is used, engaged, and incorporated by the end user is a significant component of digital religion. By studying how people are engaging digital religion with their phones, their computers, and their tablets, scholars may now have the greatest opportunity to explore everyday lived religion on a massive scale. Many of these activities are surprising, such as the role of religion in online games (Campbell and Grieve 2014; Geraci 2014), religious influences in online crowdfunding (Copeland 2015), and 3D virtual reality goggles being used to experience the "eight phases of enlightenment." Digital religion offers an opportunity to explore how people choose to do religion on their own terms in our contemporary society.

However, this activity will always occur within a structure that is dominated and controlled by the media itself. Google, IBM, and Facebook (for example) are not passive players; they dominate how we engage the online world. End users always play a role in the equation, but the structure created by these corporations (and governments) heavily dictates and channels people's level of digital religious activity. For instance, when the Chinese government bans YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, how easy is it for people to engage in third spaces of digital religion? Official religions are also aggressively dictating how new media is to be used by their membership. There are constant struggles of religious authorities online for control over the beliefs and practices of their followers in the digital world. In this case, studying digital religion can clearly show how dominant groups adapt media to meet their needs and influence the culture. As technological and substantive developments of the Internet race ahead, more scholarly work needs to be done in all of these areas.

The good, the bad, and the ugly of digital religion are here to stay. Religious content and online activity is flourishing. Religion in all of its forms and functions is becoming transformed and adapted to blend with societies and cultures that are now constantly online. As people become more and more wired, they adapt their religious practices and activities to function within the increasingly wired world. There is an intrinsic double-aspect to this cultural activity. In order for the religious beliefs and practices to function and be engaged by people within the digital environment, they too must adapt and be transformed. This cycle and relationship between media and religion will not end and clearly demonstrates that religion continues to play a significant and relevant role within our world.

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