VOLUME III
ISSUE 3
2024

R/D

Religion & Development

BRILL | SCHÖNINGH

Religion & Development Contents VOL. III NO. 3 2024

SPECIAL ISSUE
RELIGION IN THE DIGITAL REALM
Edited by Ignatius Swart and Marie-Luise Frost

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ISSN: 2750-7947 E-ISSN: 2750-7955
BRILL.COM/RND

Religion & Development

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Religion & Development is published in collaboration with the International Network on Religious Communities and Sustainable Development (www.in-rcsd.org).

Aims and Scope
Religion & Development publishes peer reviewed research and analyses in the emerging field of religion and development. It seeks to foster critical investigation of the intersection of religion and development in global perspective. The journal is transdisciplinary and welcomes contributions from across the humanities and social sciences as well as reflections from policy and practice.

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Typeface for the Latin, Greek, and Cyrillic scripts: "Brill". See and download: brill.com/brill-typeface.

Religion & Development (print ISSN 2750-7947, online ISSN 2750-7955) is published 3 times a year by Brill, Plantijnstraat 2, 2321 JC Leiden, The Netherlands, tel +31 (0)71 53535000, fax +31 0(71) 5317532.

Subscription Rates
The electronic version of this journal is available in Open Access. Institutional customers can subscribe to the print version of Volume 4 (2025, 3 issues) at EUR 354 / USD 407. Individual customers can subscribe to the print version at EUR 118 / USD 136. Please check our website at brill.com/rnd.
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Religion & Development

VOLUME 3 (2024)

ISSUE 3

Special Issue

Religion in the Digital Realm

Issue Editors

Ignatius Swart and Marie-Luise Frost

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RELIGION & DEVELOPMENT 3 (2024) 317–324

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Religion in the Digital Realm

Editorial

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Published online 24 June 2025

Abstract

This editorial introduces *Religion & Development* Vol. 3, Issue 3 – Special Issue on "Religion in the Digital Realm". The collection of five articles aims to give new recognition to the relevance of digital religion as a conceptual and theoretical focus for the field of religion and development (RaD). Although limited in terms of conceptualising and theorising the nexus between digital religion and development, the collective contribution sheds light on a variety of aspects that should be recognised as relevant for RaD's broad interest in contemporary lived religious practices and phenomena related to contemporary society's ever-intensifying digital realm.

Keywords

digital religion – artificial intelligence (AI) – spiritual influencers – COVID-19 pandemic – (dis)-embodiment – internet churches – *Waz Mahfils*

This special issue on "Religion in the Digital Realm" emanated from an online lecture series initiated through a partnership between the Department of Religion and Theology at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa, and the Research Programme on Religious Communities and Sustainable

Published with license by Brill Schöningh | DOI:10.30965/27507955-00303001
 | ISSN: 2750-7947 (print) 2750-7955 (online)

Development at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Germany, in the period 25 October to 29 November 2021. This was at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic was at a high point, which prompted those involved in the partnership to organise and present the lecture series under the working title "Religion and Sustainable Development: Before, During and After the Corona Crisis."

Indeed, much has been written on the detrimental impact of the pandemic on the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Agenda (see e.g. Mukarram 2020; Lekagul et al. 2022; Sachs et al. 2022; Yuan et al. 2023; Henrysson et al. 2024), which also sets the context for why the respective partners with their common interest in the field of religion and development (RaD) felt it was the appropriate moment to organise an online lecture series on the said topical focus. This led to a total of six paper presentations, spread over the same number of weeks during the mentioned period, by researchers from Tanzania, South Africa, the Netherlands, Italy, Germany and Sweden.

It is unfortunate that for different reasons not all the papers could be converted into fully developed, publishable articles for the special issue. Nevertheless, we are delighted that three of the six papers presented during the lecture series could come full circle as published contributions: the co-authored article by Susanna Trotta, Deborah Iannotti and Boris Rähme, as well as the articles by Claudia Jetter and Nicolaas Matthee. In addition, we are also grateful for two further contributions outside this initial circle of contributions that in their own right enrich the topical focus: the article by Peter Oderinde and the policy note article by Samia Huq, Ratan Kumar Roy, Noor-E-Fayzun Nahar and Sudipta Roy. Focusing on the Bangladeshi context, the last contribution also adds another regional perspective to this special issue.

Against this backdrop, it becomes necessary to comment on the noticeable deviation of the special issue's title from the initial lecture series title. While the focus on the religion – digital nexus has been retained in the title description, sustainable development and the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic have been omitted as the other title descriptors. This is explained by the fact that the collective outcome is one in which the authors do not consistently address (sustainable) development and the pandemic as a combined or intertwined focus in their respective contributions. Thus, it is only in the case of two articles (by Trotta et al. and to a limited extent in the policy note article by Huq et al.) that this combined focus can be found, while in the case of the other articles only one of the two descriptors (the pandemic in the case of the articles by Matthee and Oderinde, and spiritual development in the case of the article by Jetter) constitutes a part of the focus on the religion – digital nexus.

The above-mentioned inconsistencies notwithstanding, we may rightly appreciate the contributions in this special issue's collective thematic focus

on "Religion in the Digital Realm" as of crucial relevance for our journal and its exploration of the religion – development nexus. Together, the five articles not only meet the transdisciplinary scope of *Religion & Development* (Öhlmann et al. 2022, 12–13) but they also do so by addressing a topical focus of crucial importance in the contemporary inter- and transdisciplinary study of religion. As two leading scholars in the field have recently rightly claimed, "digital religion studies" today represents "a well-established interdisciplinary conversation engaging scholars in a wide range of traditional academic fields (i.e., communication, philosophy of technology, theology, etc.)" (Campbell and Cheong 2023, 6). At the same time, it is a dynamic field that continues to unfold and expand into more scholarly themes and areas of academic inquiry (such as mobile media studies, cultural studies, marketing, information science and so on), hence leading to the identification of ongoing waves of research in the field (Campbell and Cheong 2023, 3–8). From this vantage point, it therefore only makes sense for the field of RaD to join the open-ended conversation that digital religion studies is advancing with respect to a contemporary dynamic of religious and social change that is irreversibly changing the face of (traditional) religion (Zaluchu 2024, 288) and by implication "the ways in which religion and spirituality are performed and lived" in contemporary, increasingly digitalised societies (Sadiku et al. 2022, 79; see also Bingaman 2023).

This special issue, as already stated, originated from a lecture series initiative during the coronavirus pandemic, a disease outbreak that undisputedly intensified the rise of digital religion (O'Brien 2020) and from a RaD perspective severely impacted the progress of the SDGs Agenda. Against this backdrop, the special issue and its collection of five articles aim to give new recognition to the relevance of digital religion as a conceptual and theoretical focus for the field of RaD. And, while limited in terms of conceptualising and theorising the nexus between *digital* religion and (sustainable) development, the collective contribution sheds light on a variety of aspects in the broad field under discussion that should be recognised as relevant for RaD's broad interest in contemporary lived religious practices and phenomena (most pointedly in contemporary society's ever-intensifying digital realm) (see Öhlmann et al. 2025).

In the first article, "Religious Actors and Artificial Intelligence: Examples from the Field and Suggestions for Further Research", Susanna Trotta, Deborah Iannotti and Boris Rähme provide an overview of religious actors' interactions with the very important issue of artificial intelligence (AI). These interactions are manifold. On the one hand, religious actors use existing AI tools to share their teachings or to perform rituals, such as specific prayers or blessings. On the other hand, they also engage in the development and dissemination of these tools. Some religious actors shape the content of AI technologies or use their influence to raise ethical concerns and undertake advocacy- and

policy-related initiatives. Others provide education on AI or promote the idea of using AI for good. In the light of these different areas of engagement, the authors see definite potential for a significant contribution to the use of AI by religious actors in sustainable development work and a post-2030 Agenda (i.e. post-SDGs Agenda). The authors argue in conclusion that this calls for further research, inter alia with regard to the cooperation of different (religious) actors in the use and development of AI tools and the need for discussions on intersectional and decolonial approaches to data collection.

Whereas the first article follows a broader approach and thematic interest, Claudia Jetter's contribution "Spiritual Influencers – New Forms of Authorisation in the Digital Age?" focuses on two specific case studies. Jetter analyses the work of Marianne Williamson and Laura Malina Seiler, two contemporary spiritual influencers who share and propagate their (spiritual) lifestyles through websites, social media channels and publications. Drawing on the concepts of the "exemplary man" and the "spiritual wanderer", the analysis serves to explore the mechanisms and dynamics of spiritual development and spiritual authority. The legitimation of these forms of development and authority seems to be fostered both by acts of self-legitimation performed by the influencers as well as by the fact that these acts are accepted and acknowledged by their followers. Jetter shows how spiritual influencers manage to present themselves as fellow seekers who, through their search for spiritual development, have gained more insight and wisdom than others and are willing to share their insight. Their followers can thus identify with them, as they are on the same path of spiritual development, as well as accept them as leaders who hold specific authority.

The next two articles address the topic of (dis-)embodiment in digital religious spaces from different angles. In "Towards an Understanding of Embodiment in Digital Space – A Practical Theological Perspective", Nicolaas Matthee examines changing understandings of digital embodiment. In the light of ongoing digitalisation, the question regarding the role of physical presence and experience has been raised and discussed in different disciplines. With regard to the field of practical theology that deals with the topics of lived religion and digital religion, this question gained even more pertinence during the COVID-19 pandemic. This leads Matthee to adopt the concept of storied bodies to explore how the body is understood in digital spaces. Based on examples of rituals such as online services or sermons as well as of contemporary memorial culture, he argues that the experience of online rituals is as "real" as the offline equivalent for many participants. Thus, as Matthee finds, practical theologians will have to continue to deconstruct some traditional understandings of the body and its role in (online) rituals, notably in the post-pandemic context.

In "Disembodied Congregations: COVID-19 and the Rising Phenomenon of Internet Churches among Pentecostal Churches in Lagos, Nigeria", Peter Oderinde draws on participant observation and interviews with members of Pentecostal churches in Nigeria's most populated city. While so-called internet churches and online services are not new, Oderinde shows how their rise was further fuelled by the COVID-19 pandemic. He studied the consequences of this development on different aspects of church life, such as worship ceremonies or the ability of churches to conduct fundraising. He thereby points out how the turn to digital options increased the inequality between church members who did or did not have access to the internet. Throughout his analysis he also highlights how perceptions of COVID-19 have changed over time and calls on church leaders to work together with the government in order to prevent a new wave of the pandemic.

The special issue contributions close with the policy and practice note article "Religion and Development in the Digital Age: A Policy Note on *Waz Mahfils* in Bangladesh" by Samia Huq, Ratan Kumar Roy, Noor-E-Fayzun Nahar and Sudipta Roy. This article highlights the rising impact of *Waz Mahfils*, i.e. gatherings used by religious leaders in Bangladesh to shape and guide the country's Islamic sphere through their commenting on societal issues and offering of advice for everyday life from an Islamic perspective. A key part of the authors' argument is to point out how online platforms, especially YouTube and Facebook, have allowed these meetings, and more precisely the respective speakers, to increase their reach. This has prompted critics to point to the dual potential of such meetings and their speakers to advocate for intolerance and even violence, but also for positive societal change and inclusion. Against this backdrop the authors offer different strategic recommendations to leverage the transformative potential of *Waz Mahfils* to promote social cohesion and development while at the same time protect and support religious freedom.

The publication of book reviews constitutes an integral part of *Religion & Development*'s mandate to advance inter- and transdisciplinary research in the field of RaD (Öhlmann et al. 2022, 12). We are therefore grateful that we are also able to include two reviews of recent book publications in the final section of this issue. Dealing with topical issues of undoubted relevance to the broad field, the first book reviewed (by Megan Robertson) is Mmapula Diana Kebaneilwe's monograph *The Bible and Gender-Based Violence in Botswana*, and the second (by Jennifer Philippa Eggert) the volume *Contested Concepts in the Study of Religion: A Critical Exploration*, edited by George D. Chryssides and Amy R. Whitehead.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to the following persons who made this special issue possible. Our thanks go first to the authors for their insightful contributions and, not least, for their patience and perseverance during the prolonged review and publication process. We secondly want to thank the two book reviewers and our book review editor, Barbara Bompani, who continues to serve the journal with great distinction. Thirdly, we also extend a special word of thanks to our anonymous peer reviewers, whose feedback has been invaluable in improving and fine-tuning all the articles. Fourthly, another word of special appreciation needs to go to the journal's editorial assistant, Esther Mazengera, and our copyeditor, Daniel Ross, for their dedicated support in making this special issue happen. Fifthly, most special thanks are due to the journal's executive editor, Philipp Öhlmann, who accompanied and supported the whole process from the initial online lecture series to the finalisation of the publication. We are finally grateful to our publisher Brill, in particular to Izaak de Hulster and Juliane Herzer, for their ongoing outstanding collaboration and support.

Issue and Editors

This editorial is part of the special issue "Religion in the Digital Realm", edited by Ignatius Swart and Marie-Luise Frost.

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Research Articles

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Religious Actors and Artificial Intelligence: Examples from the Field and Suggestions for Further Research

Research Article

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Published online 17 January 2024

Abstract

In recent years, the intersection between religion and artificial intelligence (AI) has spurred discussions of a philosophical and theological nature in the academic literature and in public debates. These discussions have often focused on the potential of "general" and "strong AI" to replace God and/or human intelligence. However, this does not reflect the state of the technologies currently in use. We argue that there are several ways in which religious actors interact with existing "narrow" or "weak" AI tools that merit the attention of researchers working on religions and AI. We look at the practical ways in which religious actors use existing AI tools for their activities, while also considering their engagements in terms of education-, advocacy- and policy-related initiatives in the field of AI. Based on a range of examples of how religious actors employ

Published with license by Brill Schöningh | DOI:10.30965/27507955-20230027
 | ISSN: 2750-7947 (print) 2750-7955 (online)

and assess AI technologies within and beyond their religious practices, we present preliminary reflections on these interactions and suggest questions for further research.

Keywords

artificial intelligence – religious communities – religious institutions – representation – information technology – moral and ethical aspects

Introduction

Debates around religion and artificial intelligence (AI) have typically focused on theological and philosophical issues, such as the possibility of the rise of AI systems which could make human intelligence obsolete and even replace the idea of God. While such AI systems are far from being a reality, various task-specific AI systems already have applications that are part of our everyday lives. Religious actors increasingly interact with these technologies. They use them to perform religious practices and rituals, to preserve and disseminate their scriptures. They are also engaged in efforts to shape and regulate their development and use according to their values and worldviews. This paper aims to provide a preliminary overview of these interactions and some initial reflections on how they might connect to wider questions regarding religion and digitalisation, religion and development and religion and ethics.

We use the term "religious actors" to refer to a wide range of different entities, from faith-based organisations to religious communities and leaders, including informal, female and youth leaders. This reflects our approach which, for present purposes, does not focus on a specific geographical context or a particular religious tradition. Instead, we maintain a broad scope. This choice is due to the scarcity of existing scholarship on religious actors and AI and to the fact that it allows for examples from different traditions to emerge. As highlighted in the conclusion, we suggest that further, more context-specific and original studies are needed in this rapidly developing and still under-researched area.

The paper is divided into five sections. The first section introduces conceptual distinctions regarding AI and embeds research on religion and AI within the broader context of debates around religions and digital technologies. Contemporary interactions between religious actors and AI technologies are part of a long history of interactions between religious communities and technologies in general (White 1978; Geraci 2016; Cheek 2018; Alexander 2020). However, given our focus on how present-day religious actors perceive, use, interpret and sometimes shape AI technologies, we choose debates over the

interactions between religions and digital technologies, in particular the internet, as our starting point. The second and third sections focus on the ways in which religious actors use AI technologies to perform their activities, including rituals, religious education and the conservation and dissemination of their cultural heritage. In the fourth section, we give an overview of religious engagements in advocacy, guidance and reflections around AI. We also link some of these engagements with discussions on the role of AI in sustainable development. The concluding section suggests lines of future research in this field.

1 Narratives and Research on Religions and Artificial Intelligence

We use the expression "artificial intelligence" as an umbrella term to refer to a range of different but interrelated and interacting digital technologies, including technologies for automated reasoning and planning, machine learning, machine translation, conversation, machine (sensory) perception, motion and manipulation etc. One justification for using the term "AI" to refer to these different technologies is that they all contribute elements to the development of artificial agents. Artificial agents are software agents or, in the case of robotics, embodied agents that are able to respond to stimuli, learn from their environments, perform tasks, produce outputs and achieve goals in rational ways with varying degrees of autonomy. Autonomy is here to be understood along very simple lines: the less human supervision and intervention an AI system needs to reliably perform its tasks, the more autonomous it is. The dominant paradigm of rationality in AI research and development is that of instrumental rationality. Very roughly, an agent's behaviour is rational if it is in their best interest, given their goals, their range of possible actions, and the information they possess about their environment. In existing AI systems, the goals and interests are set by humans, not by the systems themselves (for the dominant paradigms of autonomy and rationality in AI research and development see Russell and Norvig 2016).

Before turning to recent religious studies research on AI and religions, it is instructive to take a cursory look at how inquiries into the interactions between religions and the internet have developed over the past thirty years.

Like other technologies, digital technologies can become screens for the projection of hopes and desires, fears and anxieties. This was certainly the case with the rise of the internet in the 1990s. As Højsgaard and Warburg (2005) point out, early research on religions and the internet focused on (and sometimes adopted) the assumption of a dichotomous relationship between the daily life-world on the one hand and digital media and virtual environments (the "cyberspace") on the other. Digitally enabled and mediated experience

was regarded as something juxtaposed to, and essentially different from, daily life experience, as something that interrupted and disrupted people's ordinary routines. Researchers took a particular interest in interpretations and imageries that treated the internet as the substrate of an alternative reality which, as such, could serve as a screen for either utopian or dystopian projections and speculations (see the introduction to Campbell 2013). As internet-based technologies became more and more embedded in people's ordinary lives (at least on one side of the digital divide), cooling down the initial grand expectations, research on religion and the internet followed suit and started investigating reality alongside fiction. Studies now began to focus on how religious communities interacted with (adopted, adapted, interpreted, shaped, used and contributed to the development of) digital technologies (Helland 2016). The mainstream of this research continues to be concerned with the impact of the use of social media, digital games and mobile applications on how religions are practised, organised and communicated (for overviews see, for example, Campbell 2013, 2021; Helland 2016; Šisler, Radde-Antweiler and Zeiler 2017).

While today's social media, digital games and mobile apps involve technologies that qualify as AI according to the working account given above, it was only in more recent years that researchers have taken a specific interest in the intersections of religions and AI technologies (e.g. Singler 2018; Krüger 2021; Geraci 2022). An early and pioneering work in this regard is Robert Geraci's book *Apocalyptic AI*. Geraci argues that

> The sacred categories of Jewish and Christian apocalyptic traditions have thoroughly penetrated the futuristic musings of important researchers in robotics and artificial intelligence. Those categories have serious political effects in robotics research, virtual reality/online gaming, and contemporary disputes over the nature of consciousness and personhood, public policy, and theology (all of which subsequently drive Apocalyptic AI deep into legal and social concerns). (Geraci 2010, 7)

Geraci refers to Ray Kurzweil, Hans Moravec, Marvin Minsky and others who, apart from being pop science authors, are (or were, in the case of Minsky) also computer scientists.

Given the precedent of research on religions and the internet, it is perhaps not surprising that existing research on religions and AI primarily focuses on the analysis of narratives that present (and sometimes endorse) utopian or dystopian visions of speculated future developments of AI technologies. Apart from Geraci (2010), authors who have contributed to this line of research

include Tirosh-Samuelson (2014, 2017), Midson (2018) and Krüger (2021), to name just a few examples.

To get a clearer view of what is going on in speculative narratives of AI, and how they draw upon the discourses and vocabularies of various religious traditions, it is useful to recall some broad conceptual and empirical distinctions regarding AI. One conceptual distinction that has become part and parcel of current reflections on AI technologies is due to philosopher John Searle (1980), who distinguishes between strong and weak AI. Strong AI would be AI systems that have a mind, possess self-consciousness and would have the ability to set and weight their own goals. Weak AI systems lack self-consciousness and the capacity to decide whether or not to pursue some given goal. Another distinction, which partly overlaps with the previous one, is between narrow AI and general AI. Narrow AI systems are domain-specific. When they are good, they are good at performing neatly delineated tasks. As opposed to narrow systems, general AI systems would have cross-domain competencies (Floridi 2015). They would not only be able to identify people based on biometric data, say, but at the same time play chess, write a coherent text or compose a jazz tune. A third distinction, which is empirical rather than conceptual, draws upon a simple observation. Presently, there are no general AI systems around, let alone strong ones. So, we can distinguish between existing AI and speculated AI. General and strong AI is a mere speculation, a possibility that may or may not come about. However, it should be noted that some, for instance John Searle (1980), would go further and hold that the distinction between existing and speculated AI is not empirical but conceptual or even metaphysical, because there are good *a priori* reasons for the claim that strong and general AI is physically or metaphysically impossible. In the present paper we do not have to take a stance in this philosophical debate.

Existing AI systems are weak and narrow. They lack both generality and strength in the sense outlined above. At the same time, such systems are often impressively successful (frequently in ethically problematic ways; see AlgorithmWatch 2020), for example in the fields of medical image analysis and medical diagnosis, stock trading, e-commerce, warfare (automated "smart" weapons), recidivism forecasting (informing judges' bail, parole and sentencing decisions), biometric pattern recognition and identification, predictive policing, and board games (chess, Go).

As opposed to existing AI, speculated AI, which plays centre stage in the utopian (or, depending on one's point of view, dystopian) narratives of techno-ideologies such as transhumanism (Rähme 2020), would be general AI systems which, in addition to having universal cross-domain competencies,

would also qualify as strong (Searle 1980, 1) and superhuman, as opposed to human-level (Bostrom 2014). Such imagined AI, which is speculated and sometimes predicted to be the outcome of what pop science author and techno-influencer Ray Kurzweil (2005) calls "the Singularity", would have a mind, consciousness and the ability to set their own goals. An early expression of these ideas can be found in Good (1965). Kurzweil introduces the idea of a "singularity" as follows: "[A] future period during which the pace of technological change will be so rapid, its impact so deep, that human life will be irreversibly transformed" (Kurzweil 2005, 7). Philosopher Nick Bostrom uses the term "superintelligence" to refer to "any intellect that greatly exceeds the cognitive performance of humans in virtually all domains of interest" (Bostrom 2014, 22).

It is not difficult to see why scholars and researchers of religion should have focused their attention on narratives of imagined AI and its intersections with religious discourses. Such narratives are very present in today's cultural landscapes. They are communicated through science fiction novels, movies and video games, through pop science bestsellers, in media commentary, in science and technology journalism and in marketing strategies. They are firmly integrated into techno-utopian ideologies which are gaining traction in today's political and cultural landscapes (Rähme 2021). At the same time, one does not have to look very hard to see that those narratives are suffused with vocabularies and imageries of salvation or damnation, immortality, omnipresence and omniscience which have their historical roots in religious traditions (Geraci 2010; Tirosh-Samuelson 2014; Krüger 2021).

While the study of religious imageries in speculative narratives of imagined AI is important in its own right, what seems to be largely missing so far is research into the interactions of religious actors with actually existing AI technologies. In what follows we suggest steps that may contribute to closing this research gap.

2 God and AI – Awkward Dance Partners?

On a sunny day in June, Linda Kinstler, a PhD candidate in rhetoric interested in technology and culture, decided to ask an Alexa device a rather peculiar question: "Alexa, are we humans special among other living things?" Shortly after, the device proceeded to give a rather evasive answer: "Sorry, I am not sure." However, this answer changed after Alexa was provided with a script: "I believe that animals have souls, as do plants and even inanimate objects," she said. "But the divine essence of the human soul is what sets the human being above and apart …" (Kinstler 2021). Kinstler was taking part in a qualitative experiment set up by Shanen Boettcher, a former Microsoft general manager

turned researcher. Boettcher's research investigates the question of which values AI technology should take into consideration. In other words, he asks how AI and new technologies might help humankind to deal with questions that permeate the human quest for meaning in life. The project sees the participation of 32 people from six religious backgrounds (Jews, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and non-religious) with the purpose of crafting and adapting Alexa's scripts according to the main tenets of this group of religious traditions. Indeed, to answer that animals have souls, as might also plants and objects, but that the divine spark shines only in the human soul, is a rather standardised answer that well serves the Abrahamic family of religious traditions. In other traditions, such as the family of dharmic religions, the human–animal divide is not stringent but rather porous and, even if a hierarchy is present, the notion of reincarnation of the soul breaks down the stringent categorical barriers between human and animal (Krishna 2010; Kemmerer 2021).

AI is under constant scrutiny when it comes to its use, ethics and morality. AI technologies are deeply embedded in our daily lives: they suggest which street we should take to quickly reach the supermarket, what we might like to buy when we go shopping, and which online news outlets we would find agreeable. Marketing has long realised that AI technologies have a real, and thus monetisable, impact on our daily choices. Even if, as statisticians and engineers usually put it (an analysis of these discourses can be found in Bartholomew 2020), AI is just a chained series of fast mathematical calculations (Skansi 2018), its ubiquitous presence and its predictive capacities make it a semi-divine object of analysis. Indeed, a rather simplistic comparison may naturally come to mind: just as AI systems codify, label and seem to make sense of immense amounts of data, also religious traditions have the role of codifying reality and orienting people.

It is important to stress, however, that all these functionalities that guide our daily lives are based on "weak and narrow AI", while it is the prospect of its evolution into "strong and general AI" that fuels fears and concerns. What, then, is the role of religious traditions in the larger discourse surrounding AI ethics and morals? Artificial intelligence is challenging the notions of personhood vis-à-vis the theological and traditional conceptions of the role of human beings on earth. Specifically, the personhood debate interrogates the Christian and Jewish traditions as regards the theological notions of *imago Dei* and *b'tzelem Elohim*, which stress a deep connection between the created and the creator. In these respects, the answer that Alexa gave to Kinstler seems particularly relevant: if humankind is created in the divine image, then there is a certain uniqueness in the role of humans within creation. If AI reflects the human image, are humans playing God? Herzfeld strongly calls out against alienating and almost idolatrous discourses around the creation and developments of AI:

> If we hope to find in AI that other with whom we can share our being and our responsibilities, then we will have created a stand-in for God in our own image. This is not to say that AI is in itself idolatrous. However, whether or not it is possible to develop, artificial intelligence is bound to be a disappointment if we look toward it to find the I-Thou relationship that will make us whole. (Herzfeld 2002, 313)

Imbuing a machine with the ability to be, allegedly, omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent would automatically create parallels to, and tensions with, monotheistic religions both theologically and teleologically. For example, under a Jewish lens, could a robot or a machine be held responsible in terms of Jewish religious law, which underlines the importance of individual responsibility? Is then a robot able to perform a mitzvah, which is commonly translated as commandment, or ordinance performed as religious duty? Far from the monotheistic traditions, other important questions arise for example within the dharmic traditions. Is it fair, for instance, to create a machine that cannot perform a purification karmic circle? Indeed, in Buddhist traditions, the goal of observance is to overcome suffering and free oneself through the cycle of death and rebirth (Gethin 1998). Buddhism shares with Hinduism the hierarchical view of beings, and also the idea of reincarnation. However, it adds the notion of individual liberation through a path of enlightenment. The main goal for humanity is to end the suffering resulting from the rebirth circle through individual spiritual practice. Is it then possible for AI-powered robots to participate in this circle of death and rebirth? Or to undergo a path of personal enlightenment through the concept of reincarnation? All these questions are part of extensive speculations about the theological implications that AI might provoke in theological studies (Herzfeld 2002, 2009; Rappaport 2006; Labrecque 2017; Rambelli 2018; Gould and Walters 2020; Travagnin 2020; Hongladarom 2021) with the consequent reference to an *imago roboticae* (Kimura 2017).

Religious traditions, then, might have an important role in shaping and regulating the products of AI. As an example of this attempt to contribute to the discussion of ethical concerns regarding AI, it is worth mentioning the initiative AI and Faith,[1] a cross-spectrum consortium of religious actors, businesses and academic institutions. Its mission is to bring the fundamental values of the world's major religions into the emerging debate on the ethics of AI and related technologies. Religious traditions can provide questions and insights within the broader discussion of what AI is and what AI should or should not

1 https://aiandfaith.org/.

be employed to do. Furthermore, they can effectively help to decrease the white, Western-oriented biases which are already present in many widely used AI tools. Indeed, ethical guidelines reflect the values of the people who issue them; most AI ethics guidelines are being written in Western countries and the field is then dominated by Western values such as respect for autonomy and the rights of individuals, but do not take into account the different sets of questions and concerns of other traditions (Adams 2021). We will come back to this issue in section 4.

3 The Use of AI in Religious Practice

In this section, we present a non-exhaustive overview of different ways in which religious actors use AI tools in their daily practices. Far from being a definitive list, these examples are intended to provide a starting point for exploring how religious actors are presently approaching AI-related technologies.

Scholars in religious studies have provided rich evidence of various relationships of religious actors with digital technologies (e.g. Helland 2005; Campbell 2013, 2020; Evolvi 2018; Campbell 2021). Religious actors are no strangers to the rapid trend of digitalisation: it is sufficient to open the app store of one of the major technology companies to find a myriad of apps that are designed to guide believers and practitioners in their daily religious routines (see, for example, El-Sayed et al. 2015).

AI technologies can be seen as another step in the digitalisation trend that started in the early 1990s. They have been described as the staple of the so-called "Fourth Industrial Revolution" (World Economic Forum 2016). The term "Fourth Industrial Revolution" has been used to frame and analyse the impact of these emerging technologies on the overall human development, from evolving social norms to socio-political attitudes towards economic development (Philbeck and Davis 2019).

While many of the challenges and opportunities arising from the use of AI technologies are general, some aspects specifically intersect with religious practices and traditions. For example, AI technologies might provide new and efficient tools to be used for the benefit of religious communities and their members, for instance in the form of simultaneous translation services for sermons and scriptures, virtually opening places of worship to the whole world, and giving access to sacred texts.

Besides being useful tools for the everyday life of religious communities and their practices, AI-related products pose serious questions concerning personhood vis-à-vis theological conceptions of human nature. Each religion and

tradition posit different challenges while acknowledging different aspects of AI and its uses. Indeed, the worldview of each tradition is the result of subjective experiences, and claiming an imposed universalism to all experiences would be intrinsically misleading. By acknowledging and respecting the differences among the many religious traditions, this section will try to present the different approaches to AI that may arise within various epistemic communities.

One aspect that concerns religious actors is the preservation of "orthodoxy", meaning the continuation of creeds and doctrines. In this regard, AI products are starting to be used in different ways. For instance, several projects are devoted to the maintenance and diffusion of scriptures, such as The Bible Project,[2] in which AI-powered technology helps people to get acquainted with the stories of the Bible and relate the scriptural verses to their daily lives. AI scriptural tools may benefit not only communities but also the wider society, since they can foster the dissemination of culturally influential scriptural texts among the broader public. An example of this is the Talmud Project, which uses advanced AI computational linguistics to translate the Babylonian Talmud into Italian and possibly other languages (Giovannetti et al. 2022).

Another aspect that concerns religious actors is the correct execution of practices and rituals, i.e. "orthopraxis". In this context, there are AI-powered tools that may come to the help of communities and individual believers/observants. These include prayer apps or devotional apps which help track an individual's spiritual life or provide support with finding the right way to engage in prayers or rituals, like the observance of Ramadan (El-Sayed et al. 2015) or Shabbat (Phillips 2019). There are also several attempts to build AI-powered robots that can perform religious teaching tasks for the youngest members of the community. One example is the humanoid robot Veldan, which is programmed to teach Quranic prayers to children (McBride 2019). Another one is the theomorphic robot SanTO, whose goal is to help Catholic elders to keep reciting their daily prayers (Trovato et al. 2018). AI-powered robots can also serve the communities in their communal religious practices and rituals. For example, Pepper, the robot Buddhist monk, is designed to perform funeral rituals (Gould and Walters 2020), while Mindar is programmed to give a sermon from the Heart Sutra (Wight 2020). In 2017, the protestant church in Hesse and Nassau[3] unveiled an interactive experiment named "Bless U-2". The experiment involved interactions between church visitors and the "robot priest" Bless U-2, which was programmed to deliver blessings in six different languages. Rather than a real attempt to ontologically rethink the role of pastoral

2 https://bibleproject.com.

3 https://www.ekhn.de/meta/english.html.

care and catechesis within the protestant church or even Christianity in general, the objective of the protestant church in Hesse and Nassau was to gather the reaction of people in front of a "blessing robot" or a "robot reciting blessings" and to stimulate discussion about the role of the church of the future and human–computer interaction from a spiritual perspective (Löffler, Hurtienne and Nord 2021). This experiment thus operates at a discourse level, in a similar fashion to a recent study of social media reactions to the idea of being "blessed by the algorithm" (Singler 2020).

Finally, another sphere that captures the attention of religious actors is the sphere of communion and community-building. Today's mass communication tools have enabled ceremonies and observances to be streamed online, extending access to religion and traditions to a growing number of people on a daily basis. For instance, internet and AI-powered technologies may help to foster online participation for members of religious communities. Witnesstoall[4] employs the Google Earth interface to show in real time the number of people visiting websites that offer multilingual access to the Gospel. Religiously motivated technological interactions of this kind are leading to the emergence of new professional figures, such as online missionaries and spiritual coaches as well as the consolidation of so-called "virtual churches" which can connect and give space to believers who lack an autochthonous church (Butler 2022). AI-related products such as cameras with facial recognition software are being taken into consideration for the evaluation of church or temple attendance.

The engagements of religious communities and actors with AI-related technologies warrant further research, given the major impact they can have on the development of new AI tools which are specifically designed and programmed for the religious sphere and society in general. Because of their different voices, spiritual endeavours and visions of the world, religious communities can play key roles in creating AI which is plural and accessible to all experiences and sensibilities present in our societies.

4 Religious Actors Engaging with AI beyond Religious Practices

This section presents an overview of how religious actors have engaged and continue to engage with AI technologies in ways that go beyond the use of such technologies in specific religious practices. There are many ways in which these engagements could be categorised. In this article, we group them into

4 https://witnesstoall.com/about.

four categories: policy/advocacy engagements; ethical reflections; guidance and education; and AI for good.

4.1 *Policy/Advocacy Engagements*

The development and regulation of AI technologies has been among the most debated policy issues in the EU in recent years. In the framework of the European Union's dialogue with religious and belief actors (European Parliament 2019), including non-confessional, philosophical organisations, which started in the 1990s and was formalised by Article 17 of the Lisbon Treaty, the Commission organised two meetings to talk about ethical and social issues related to AI technologies. In the following two years, continuing the dialogue with the European institutions on these issues, some religious actors also took part in consultations on the *Ethics Guidelines for Trustworthy AI* (High-Level Expert Group on Artificial Intelligence 2018) and on the *White Paper on Artificial Intelligence* (European Commission 2020). These religious actors included Bread for the World, the Commissariat of German Bishops – the Catholic Office in Berlin, Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union, the Conference of European Churches and the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany. As Galassini (2021, 29) summarises, "all actors bring particular attention to the ethical, legal and technical safeguards that should be implemented in order to ensure the safety, trustworthiness and effectiveness of AI technologies. While remaining attentive to these systems' risks and unintended consequences, religious actors understand and support the need to foster the research and development of AI technologies in the EU."

Some religious actors have also started to conduct their own studies and take some initiatives on these issues. For instance, the Catholic Church in the European Union established a working group on the impact of robotisation on human life and societies, and published a document entitled *Robotisation of Life: Ethics in View of New Challenges* (COMECE 2019). The document calls for a nuanced, multidisciplinary approach to the development of robots and other autonomous systems that does not only focus on a cost–benefit analysis but, most importantly, aims at preserving human dignity and pursuing the common good. While this notion will be further discussed later in this article, it is interesting to note here how the idea of "AI for good" – innovation for good in general – is very much linked to and in line with (albeit not explicitly) that of sustainable development, i.e. an improvement of socioeconomic aspects of societies that is respectful of human rights and does not contribute to damaging the environment.

Another interesting example of advocacy engagements is the participation of religious actors as member organisations in the Stop Killer Robots

campaign.[5] Killer robots are fully autonomous weapons that can select and engage targets without meaningful human control. They are not yet deployed (unlike their precursors, i.e. armed drones), but they are being developed in a number of powerful countries, including the US, the UK, China and others. Human Rights Watch is the global coordinator for the Stop Killer Robots campaign, which started in 2013 and has been calling for an international ban on this type of weapon. Soka Gakkai International, Pax Christi Northern California and the World Council of Churches promoted a joint interfaith statement (Soka Gakkai et al. 2021) in support of the campaign, and many other religious organisations signed the appeal. In terms of engagements in the realm of policymaking, during the 2021 G20 Interfaith, one of the working groups, which focuses on Research and Innovation for Science, Technology and Infrastructure, held a workshop and published a policy brief on the "Interfaith Dialogue on AI and the Technology Revolution" (G20 Interfaith Forum 2021).

Perhaps the most well-known example of advocacy engagement by religious actors in the field of AI is the Rome Call for AI Ethics (Pontifical Academy for Life et al. n.d.). This initiative was launched in 2020 by the Pontifical Academy for Life as a result of a workshop attended by representatives of FAO (Food and Agriculture Association), IBM, Microsoft, the European Parliament and the Italian government (MITD – *Ministro per l'Innovazione Tecnologica e la Transizione Digitale*). It is, thus, an initiative built on partnerships between the private sector, governmental and intergovernmental organisations and a religious actor. The main ethical issues of concern for actors involved in the Rome Call for AI Ethics focused on seven areas: Transparency, Inclusion, Responsibility, Impartiality, Reliability, and Security and Privacy (Pontifical Academy for Life et al. n.d.). These coincide with the key issues addressed by most documents on AI ethics, including the European proposal for AI regulation (European Commission 2021).

4.2 *Ethical Reflections*

The next category of religious actors' engagements with AI focuses on ethical reflections and is linked to the previous one. The examples described in this section, however, concentrate on understanding how actors from different religious traditions communicate their reflections on the ethics of AI, according to their worldview. For example, the Church of Scotland has published a report in which they reflect on what the changes brought about by AI can mean for their daily practices as well as what kind of theological approach should be developed in these regards. In their words,

5 https://www.stopkillerrobots.org/a-global-push/member-organisations/.

> The Church has many reasons to celebrate and embrace these technologies, but some difficult questions arise about the implementation of the digital revolution. [...] While robots and chatbots lack inherent spirituality – something that we find in person-to-person contacts or in the relationship between a person and God – and will not replace carers or therapists, they may yet have a beneficial place in helping people to explore their own spirituality in situations where interpersonal contact is difficult. This may be the case in bereavement counselling in areas where no individuals have the necessary training, for instance. Thus there are real opportunities for the Church boldly to explore the use of AI technologies in areas such as pastoral work, counselling, worship, and mission. [...] What the development of AI may demand of us is that we take more cognizance of what it might mean to be made in the image of the Creator, the one who brings into being new forms of life from the dust (and silicon) of the earth and how that shapes our responsibility to AI and those who will be affected by AI. Furthermore, seeing ourselves in the image of the Spirit of God, an altogether different form of existence from that which we experience, may give us insight into what life in a digital age might encompass. Seeing our interactions with technology and our involvement in the development of AI through a relational lens such as that of the Trinity may help us to engage productively with these developments, so that we can help shape AI that God would declare to be good. (Church of Scotland 2021, 9–10)

Several reflections on the ethical dimension of the development and use of AI technologies have come from a range of different religious and spiritual traditions. Hongladarom (2020) provided a reflection on the ethics of AI and robotics from a Buddhist viewpoint, Chaudhary (2020) published an article on Islamic digital ethics, and the Hindu Council of Australia (2018) has discussed how artificial intelligence should be taught compassion and nonviolence. Mhlambi (2020) illustrated how the sub-Saharan African notion of ubuntu, which centres on the relationality of personhood, can provide a framework to address what, in their opinion, are the two major challenges in AI: surveillance and data colonialism.

Addressing the problem of data colonialism, the Indigenous AI initiative outlines fundamental issues that question not only the intersection between AI ethics and indigenous ethics, but also the wider issue of what the purpose of AI is and how we can approach it in a more plural, non-Western-centric way. In a position paper, they ask:

- From an Indigenous perspective, what should our relationship with A.I. be? [...]
- How can Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies contribute to the global conversation regarding society and A.I.?
- How do we broaden discussions regarding the role of technology in society beyond the largely culturally homogeneous research labs and Silicon Valley startup culture?
- How do we imagine a future with A.I. that contributes to the flourishing of all humans and non-humans? (Lewis 2020, 26–27)

This provides a very clear link to the decolonial approach that several scholars and activists call for when it comes to artificial intelligence. The Leverhulme Centre for the Future of Intelligence's Decolonising AI project (Leverhulme Centre n.d.) is a testimony to the urgency of the issue being perceived by major academic institutions, being based at the University of Cambridge, with partners at the Oxford Martin School at the University of Oxford, at Imperial College London and at the University of California, Berkeley. However, this project does not mention religious diversity at all, but rather focuses on ethnicity and gender. It is indeed noteworthy how the religious dimension of the decolonisation of AI is very rarely present in other, non-religious actors' reflections, including academic ones (e.g. Cave and Dihal 2020; Adams 2021). As the 2019 Global Information Society Watch report shows, from a transfeminist perspective, applying an intersectional lens – which includes exposure to vulnerabilities and discrimination due to ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and religious affiliation – to the study of AI technologies, their design and applications might provide valuable insights into how power dynamics translate into data injustice.

4.3 *Guidance and Education*

A more practice-oriented type of engagement by religious actors is taking shape in the form of education and guidance on AI for religious communities. For example, the German Council of the Evangelical Church (EKD) has been very active in this area in the last few years. They have recently developed modules for digital education, including specific modules on AI education in schools and congregations (Evangelische Kirche Deutschland n.d.). The EKD also recently published the ten commandments for the digital age to provide guidance for their community members on how to use and understand digital technologies according to Christian Evangelical teachings (Evangelische Kirche Deutschland 2022). The document includes explanatory sections on

algorithms and automated systems as well as, for instance, how to interpret the ninth commandment "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour" in the context of digital communication and social media, with reference to AI-related phenomena like fake news and filter bubbles (Evangelische Kirche Deutschland 2022, 174–93). The World Association for Christian Communication (WACC), a member of ACT Alliance, works extensively on digital communication rights and on Indigenous communication rights. In particular, they have issued a "Global No-Nonsense Guide to Communication Rights, Civil Society and Artificial Intelligence" (2019), which highlights the ways in which civil society, including faith-based groups, can and should get involved in the development of AI. For instance, according to the WACC, it is necessary for these actors to "develop a new narrative about AI that is based on social justice, human rights, ethics, and solidarity"; "look for ways to dismantle silos in order to share knowledge and expertise, build capacity, and empower new actors to become involved"; "become involved in country-level processes"; and "help to influence donors' agendas in support of civil society involvement in AI" (World Association for Christian Communication 2019). This shows how there is a growing sense of urgency among some religious actors to get more involved in AI-related processes at different levels.

4.4 *AI for Good*

The ethical concerns linked to the development and use of AI technologies have attracted the attention of many scholars (see, for example, O'Neil 2016; Buolamwini and Gebru 2018; Mitchell 2019). At the same time, several institutional stakeholders have tried to highlight the potential of AI technologies to make a positive impact on social and economic development, for example the digital platform AI for Good,[6] which focuses on practical applications of AI to advance the United Nations Development Goals (UN SDGs, UN 2015). Similarly, the World Economic Forum's Global AI Action Alliance (GAIA)[7] builds on a multi-stakeholder approach where governments, civil society organisations and leading businesses strive to create interoperable protocols for the responsible development of AI technology.

Although the definition of "AI for good" or "AI for social good" is still up for debate (Floridi et al. 2020; Foffano et al. 2022), religious actors' initiatives aimed at using AI and other digital technologies to improve responses to local and global issues could be understood as belonging to this category. For instance, some religious actors are offering training in coding and IT to marginalised

6 https://aiforgood.itu.int/about-ai-for-good/.

7 https://www.weforum.org/projects/global-ai-action-alliance.

groups, in an effort to diversify the tech industry. Finn Church Aid's project Code & Create, highlighted as a good practice example by the UNHCR (2019), specifically targeted vulnerable youth, both local and with migration backgrounds. The US-based Skillspire[8] initiative is a coding bootcamp welcoming low-income students, women and minorities, including religious minorities. This is in line with UNESCO's First Draft of the Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence, calling for stakeholders to take "into consideration the specific needs of different age groups, cultural systems, different language groups, persons with disabilities, girls and women, and disadvantaged, marginalised and vulnerable populations" (2021, 8–9). Some religious actors shape and invest in AI technologies as tools to respond to local and global challenges. For example, religious actors such as Kingdom Code (2020) regularly organise hackathons to find solutions for diverse challenges, like facilitating the continuation of church activities during Covid-19. One interesting future line of research could look at the ways in which these actors use AI technologies "for good", i.e. according to which ethical guidelines.

These engagements are relevant to current discussions taking place among many actors in academia, the private sectors and civil society on the existing and potential impact of AI on all SDGs, as well as on shaping the post-2030 Agenda. Vinuesa et al. (2020) have explored ways to assess this – positive *and negative* – impact on the SDGs, and suggested that there is a need to better understand the challenges, risks and opportunities posed by AI and *then* regulate the use of these technologies to make sure that they are beneficial to human and environmental development, what they call "sustainable AI". They also state that this process needs to be participatory. In their words, "all actors in all nations should be represented in this dialogue, to ensure that no one is left behind. On the other hand, postponing or not having such a conversation could result in an unequal and unsustainable AI-fueled future" (Vinuesa et al. 2020, 8). Similar statements regarding the need for a greater engagement of civil society actors in AI have come from different stakeholders (e.g. Stiftung Neue Verantwortung 2020), including the European Union (European Parliament 2019).

5 Conclusion and Suggestions for Further Research

This article has provided an overview of how religious actors use, react to and reflect on AI technologies. In the first section, we contextualised contemporary

8 https://www.skillspire.net/.

debates on the intersections between religion and AI within the broader debate on religion and digital technologies, in particular the internet. Then, we turned our attention to how religious actors actually use AI tools in their daily religious practices, including rituals and religious education, and in completing their organisational tasks. Finally, we looked at different ways in which these actors engage with AI technologies and their development, use and regulation. Far from pretending to present an exhaustive review of the topic, this paper has focused on a selection of important aspects. Indeed, one of its limitations is that it does not directly address broader ongoing ethical discussions around AI (see, for example, O'Neil 2016; Buolamwini and Gebru 2018; Mitchell 2019). However, it does raise relevant points for further research and discussion, through a specifically religious lens.

In light of the examples illustrated in this article, it is clear that religious actors can provide significant contributions in understanding and orienting the use of AI in development work. Their experiences can help build strong partnerships among them and between them and other stakeholders operating in the field of AI. When thinking of partnerships among and with religious actors in AI, it is fundamental to consider their diversity and the very different ways in which they (as well as other stakeholders) might understand AI and the challenges and opportunities it presents, and why they might be interested or reluctant to engage with it, based on what their priorities are. As many scholars have pointed out more broadly with regards to partnerships with religious actors in development (e.g. Jones and Petersen 2011; Bompani 2019; Marshall 2020; Haustein and Tomalin 2021), there is a need to avoid using their resources and range of influence to pursue the SDGs without fully acknowledging their agency, diversity, context and complexities.

Since this is an emerging field of research, we have mostly drawn on examples from the field, linking them with academic reflection from related fields of research. Future investigations, which are much needed in this rapidly expanding area, could address the following overarching questions:

- How are religious actors using AI tools in their activities?
- What are the roles of religious actors in AI-related advocacy, policy and education/guidance?
- How do partnerships among religious actors and between them and other stakeholders in the field of AI work? What is fostering or hindering them?
- How could religious actors' reflections and experiences contribute to intersectional and decolonial approaches to the development and use of AI technologies?

These questions are broad and should be approached in a contextualised way, in other words acknowledging the diversity of religious actors and the different environments in which they are embedded.

Acknowledgment

The article processing charge was funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) – 491192747 and the Open Access Publication Fund of Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin.

Issue and Editors

This article is part of the special issue "Religion in the Digital Realm", edited by Ignatius Swart and Marie-Luise Frost.

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RELIGION & DEVELOPMENT 3 (2024) 352–372

R/D Religion & Development

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Spiritual Influencers – New Forms of Authorisation in the Digital Age?

Research Article

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Published online 17 January 2024

Abstract

This paper investigates the legitimisation of contemporary spiritual influencers Marianne Williamson and Laura Malina Seiler. The paper argues that spiritual authority is a relational concept that consists of reciprocal ascription processes in which the needs of the followers are just as decisive for generating authority as the spiritual self-authorisation of the leader. Considering the success of contemporary spiritual coaches in the highly competitive digital religious marketplace and the new forms of spiritual practices online, the paper seeks to reflect on the question why this specific form of "weak" leadership is especially resonating with an increasing number of people by drawing on sociological concepts such as Max Weber's concept of the "exemplary man" and Martin Engelbrecht's "spiritual wanderer".

An analysis of spiritual influencers' narration, both online (on social media, blogs, websites) and offline (in books and magazines), reveals a continuing interweaving of autobiographical information, spiritual self-reflection and the use of specific spiritual sub-traditions that continually produce new hybrid forms of spiritual practices. Framed in emotional and personal language and presented on multiple communication platforms, the spiritual advice is rooted in the individual experience of these coaches unto whom followers temporarily submit as they recognise them as fellow seekers with superior and potentially helpful knowledge. By investigating specific narrative and communicative performances, the paper aims to provide a deeper understanding of the dynamic ascription processes between contemporary spiritual influencers and their faithful yet critical followers.

Published with license by Brill Schöningh | DOI:10.30965/27507955-20230024
 | ISSN: 2750-7947 (print) 2750-7955 (online)

Keywords

digital – religion – spiritual – authority – influencer – social media

1 Introduction

In 2022, it is safe to say that the digital world has permeated all areas of everyday life, including most people's personal spiritual life. Besides religious institutions online, individual spiritual influencers increasingly shape millions of people's spiritual practice online and offline. With the rise of the internet, scholars of different fields have therefore begun to ask fundamental questions considering the impact of digital technology on modern spirituality. Especially in the field of digital religion, the challenges for religious institutions posed by new forms of digital communication are scrutinised (Baraybar-Fernández, Arrufat-Martín and Rubira-García 2020) as are innovations of digital spiritual practices (Quilty 2022). Since social media became highly influential during the last decade, more attention has been given to specific kinds of communicative practices by spiritual content creators providing valuable insights into the dynamic interaction with followers (Neumaier 2022).

While most papers in the field of digital religion have focused on specific religious traditions in the digital world, this paper takes a closer look at individual spiritual influencers and their authorisation practices to reflect on contemporary forms of spiritual life development. An analysis of the publications and online communications of two contemporary life coaches, Marianne Williamson (b. 1952) and Laura Malina Seiler (b. 1986), will thereby reveal a type of spiritual leadership that exists beyond traditional structures and does not depend on qualifying educational credentials or institutional authorisation. As this paper will show, there are structural similarities in the ways spiritual influencers legitimise their teachings through specific performances and interactions with their followers and thus authorise themselves as leaders both online and offline (Campbell 2012). As the paper will argue, coaches like Williamson and Seiler present their individual experiential knowledge framed as emotionally narrated autobiographical stories to inspire and lead followers. They present their paths as valuable lessons to their followers in peer-to-peer communication via social media or in print, during speaking engagements or in video-on-demand coaching. And they promote their teachings by supporting their personal and often deeply emotional experiences through references to specific traditions that are acknowledged within their respective discourse communities. Although without official positions of authority, these spiritual

influencers often attract a large yet fluid group of fellow seekers who temporarily submit unto their leadership as their message resonates with them.

The case studies presented here aim to provide a deeper understanding of the dynamic ascription processes between leader and follower by investigating the narrative and performative practices that are applied to establish these "exemplary [wo]men" in a pluralistic and highly competitive religious marketplace. With the help of intertextual analysis, legitimisation strategies and the appropriation of specific spiritual sub-traditions will be highlighted.[1] Considering the success of contemporary spiritual coaches like Williamson and Seiler, the paper seeks to reflect on the question why this specific form of exemplary leadership is especially resonating with an increasing number of people by drawing on Max Weber's sociological concept of the "exemplary man"[2] and Martin Engelbrecht's "spiritual wanderer".[3] As this is only a first glimpse into the fluid area of spiritual authority online and offline and the research is only based on two case studies, the paper makes no claims about larger developments in regard to spiritual practices in the digital sphere but hopes to encourage further research to gather more information about current spiritual practices and legitimisation strategies of contemporary spiritual leaders.

2 Current Research in the Field of Spirituality and Digital Religion

The case studies presented here are independent *spiritual* influencers who are not members of any specific spiritual institution. Since "spiritual" and "spirituality" are vague and even "politicised" terms, as Philip Sheldrake has convincingly argued (Sheldrake 2016), it is impossible to speak about "spirituality" in a generalized sense.[4] Different disciplinary approaches to spirituality, from theology, history and anthropology, thereby, further add to the vagueness of the term (Schneiders 2007). Rather than attempting to deploy a holistic yet vague

1 Intertextual analysis is an analytical tool borrowed from literary studies. It helps detect deliberate compositional strategies (such as quotation, allusion or translation) that shape the meaning of a text or, as in the case studies, lend a text weight by referencing an authoritative tradition (Plett 1991, 19).

2 The Weberian "exemplary man" will be discussed as a specific sub-form of charismatic authority in the methodology section below.

3 Engelbrecht's "spiritual wanderer" as a type of modern spirituality will be discussed in the methodology section below.

4 Sheldrake rightly remarks that the term carries multiple meanings, is shaped by geographical boundaries and specific cultural traditions, transmitted via specific narrators and supported by dominant communities (Sheldrake 2016).

concept of spirituality, Robert Wuthnow suggested to speak of spiritual practices and differentiated between those that are aimed at expressing spirituality (writing, communicating), at enriching a person's spiritual life (participation in weekend retreats, reading) and those that derive from a person's experience with the "sacred" (Wuthnow 2007, 313–314).[5] It is Wuthnow's first category of spiritual practices that will be of interest in our case studies as these expressions will be analysed in detail.

To investigate spiritual practices offline and online, however, the research field of digital religion should be considered here, too.[6] While some scholars have concentrated on broader ramifications of how contemporary forms of religiosity have been shaped by (digital) media (Hjarvard 2008), others have investigated shifts in religious authority that highlighted new possibilities for marginalised groups to establish their own narratives through digital communication (Lövheim 2016). Furthermore, a scholarly focus has been set on the formation of digital communities. As Anna Neumaier convincingly argued, there is not one specific type of religious online community. Instead, she suggested there is "a broad range of online communities that can resemble such traditional forms as the *Dorfgemeinschaft* (village community), as well as more recent types such as 'imagined' or 'posttraditional communities'" (Neumaier 2019, 21–22).[7]

Especially relevant for the case studies presented here, however, is Heidi Campbell's concept of "networked religion" that "suggests 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, 67–68). Campbell emphasises five central traits of networked religion, of which especially one is highly informative in regard to spiritual influencers.[8] She introduced the notion of "storied identity" to describe religious bloggers who often write about their own spiritual practice "by chronicling their spiritual journey,

5 Wuthnow defines spiritual practice as "those activities in which individuals engage in order to become more aware of their spirituality or to enrich and grow in their spiritual lives. Whereas spirituality indicates a transcendent state of being or an ineffable aspect of reality, spiritual practice is a more active or intentional form of behavior" (Wuthnow 2007, 309).

6 To gain a deeper understanding of the field and how it has developed over the past three decades, see Campbell and Evolvi (2019).

7 Neumaier suggests three ideal types of online communities, namely "faith siblings", "forum family" and a "conflict arena", that consist of fluid groups whose members are driven by individual interests (Neumaier 2016).

8 The five central traits common to "networked religion" are: networked community, storied identity, shifting authority, convergent practice, and multisite reality (Campbell 2012, 68).

offering a prophetic voice in relation to a personally defined religious mission", thereby "constructing and performing a specific religious identity online through a process of religious self-identification" (Campbell 2012, 72). Related to this highly personal mode of religious communication, Anna Neumaier's recent article on Christian influencers' performance on social media further adds that although influencers are highly visible, their emotive practices render them authentic and their message as meaningful, thus suggesting a close and trusting relationship with their followers (Neumaier 2022, 174).[9]

2.1 *Data, Methodology and Conceptual Frameworks*

The data for the case studies includes Marianne Williamson's and Laura Malina Seiler's first books, content from their websites (including offered courses) and a selection of social media posts from 2021/2022. In Seiler's case, the material is complemented by content from her blog, her podcast, her magazine *I AM* and a deck of motivational cards. In both cases, I used the first books that have been published by Williamson and Seiler as they provide important insight into the narrative construction of their spiritual identities. To contextualise the material outcome of their experiential knowledge and trace the religious/spiritual traditions they appropriated, I use intertextual analysis.

In order to better describe the ways in which both women legitimise their spiritual authority, the sociological concept of the "exemplary [wo]man" will be introduced. As Campbell has already stated, Max Weber's distinction between different forms of authority is helpful when thinking about spiritual authority online as it helps to focus on the means through which authority is conveyed rather than the expression of such authority (Campbell 2007, 1045–1046). Therefore, I suggest Weber's "exemplary man", a specific subtype of the charismatic leader, as a conceptual framework to better describe spiritual influencers who are not institutionally anchored.[10] According to Weber, "an exemplary [wo]man" leads by

9 Although *Christian* influencers' content varies from that of the contemporary *spiritual* coaches in this study, there seem to be significant overlaps in performative practices and community interaction.

10 As has been shown, the subtype of the "exemplary [wo]man" can be used as a helpful analytical frame to characterise the unofficial and non-institutionalised spiritual leadership of women preachers and other marginalised groups in nineteenth-century America. Jetter argues that the non-licenced evangelical preacher Phoebe Palmer rooted her authority in her spiritual experiences and embedded these within biblical teachings to legitimise her theological innovation (cf. Jetter 2022).

> personal example, demonstrates to others the way to religious salvation, […]. The preaching of this type of prophet says nothing about a divine mission or an ethical duty of obedience, but rather directs itself to the self-interest of those who crave salvation, recommending to them the same path as he himself traversed. (Weber 1968, 263)

Although the digital sphere seems less restrictive in regard to female spiritual leaders than nineteenth-century America, it is noteworthy that contemporary spiritual coaches adopt similar legitimisation strategies as nineteenth-century "exemplary women", as will be shown in the following case studies. An analysis of the spiritual self-authorisation and the performance as experiential leaders may therefore provide interesting insights into authorisation processes in the digital sphere.

To gain a better understanding of the modern seeker-spirituality that encourages many to follow spiritual influencers, it is helpful to investigate the followers' spiritual needs through the lens of what Engelbrecht and Bochinger have dubbed the "spiritual wanderer". As Engelbrecht and Bochinger have suggested, the modern type of the spiritual seeker is the epitome of modern religiosity (Bochinger, Engelbrecht and Gebhardt 2009). The "spiritual wanderer" does not believe in an end of his or her path but believes they remain in a lifelong process of inner development (Bochinger, Engelbrecht and Gebhardt 2009, 34). While some would argue that the "wanderer" is meandering from one spiritual offer to the next, Engelbrecht argues that the "wanderer" does not necessarily search for one teaching or practice to land on for good. He rather continues to explore a multiplicity of spiritual experiences with the consequence of highly individualized and mostly temporary religious participation in larger festivals or intimate weekend seminaries (Gauthier 2014). As the "storied identities" of the two following case studies will show, contemporary spiritual coaches used to be "wanderers" themselves. They became "exemplary women" only after transformative experiences that later built the foundation of their spiritual authority by rendering them authentic and spiritually advanced in the eyes of fellow seekers.

2.1.1 Case Study 1: Marianne Williamson

> *A Return to Love* is based on what I have learned from *A Course in Miracles*. It is about some of the Course's basic principles as I understand them and relate them to various issues that affect our daily lives.
>
> *A Return to Love* is about the practice of love, as a strength and not a weakness, as a daily answer to the problems that confront us. […] This

> book is written as a guide to the miraculous application of love as a balm on every wound. […]
>
> My prayer is that this book might help someone. I have written it with an open heart. I hope you'll read it with an open mind. (Williamson 1992, xvii)

The quote is taken from the preface of the self-help bestseller *A Return To Love* (1992), a reflection on the teachings of *A Course in Miracles* (ACIM).[11] It invites the reader to learn about the experience with ACIM. As the short passage suggests, the narrator has to offer superior spiritual knowledge to those looking for answers "to the problems that confront us". *A Return to Love* was written by Marianne Williamson (b. 1952), influential coach, spiritual advisor to Oprah Winfrey and political activist. Several appearances on Oprah Winfrey's high-profile TV show added to her public career as a self-help author and influential spiritual coach.

A closer look at the writings and online communication of Williamson and other contemporary coaches reveals a type of spiritual leadership that exists beyond traditional structures and does not depend on qualifying educational credentials or institutional authorisation. What made her first book so appealing was its *offer* of spiritual guidance that was intricately linked with her personal life. Here was an autobiography that openly discussed personal failure, substance abuse and spiritual emptiness, while providing spiritual advice to overcome this vicious circle (Williamson 1992, xii–xiii).

A college drop-out without any prospects, Williamson recounted how she tried to immerse herself in various religious and philosophical traditions to find a spiritual light at the end of a dark tunnel. "As my pain deepened, so did my interest in philosophy: Eastern, Western, academic, esoteric. Kierkegaard, the I Ching, existentialism, radical death-of-God Christian theology, Buddhism, and more" (Williamson 1992, xiii). While she believed, there was a universal spirit, she was unable to fully submit unto a tradition, spiritual practice or a religious institution. "I felt like an alien. […] I felt other people knew a secret that I didn't know, but I didn't want to ask them about it because I didn't want

11 *A Course in Miracles* (ACIM) is a self-declared "spiritual psychotherapy", produced by Helen Schucman (1909–1981) between 1965 and 1972 and published in 1975. Schucman claimed to have heard a toneless voice, later identified with the voice of Jesus, who dictated the whole text. The book consists of the "Text", the "Workbook for Students" which includes 365 lectures and a "Manual for Teachers". ACIM teaches a radical non-dualism while declaring anything worldly an illusion fabricated by the ego. This self-study course did not produce a central institution, but a lose network of students and two foundations in charge of publication and teaching. Several independent teachers have emerged from the ACIM community (Schucman and Randow-Tesch 2014). On the production process of the book, see Taves (2016).

them to know I didn't know" (Williamson 1992, xiii). The themes of personal failure, a search for meaning in life and the longing to find a spiritual home, at least temporarily, run through the entire book and portray her "storied identity" as she embedded her spiritual and emotional crisis in the narration of her life before she encountered the teachings of *A Course in Miracles*.[12] "By my mid-twenties, I was a total mess" (Williamson 1992, xiii) was her shorthand for an absolute low point in her life.

Similar to Christian conversion narratives, the deep crisis Williamson describes establishes a (dramatic) build-up to the moment when she first set sight on ACIM in a friend's apartment in New York City in 1977. Although she found the initial sentences rather intriguing, the Christian vocabulary made her feel uneasy and it took "another year's misery" before she "was ready" (Williamson 1992, xiv). When she finally was ready, she began to start reading the text and follow the exercises. Inner transformation followed almost immediately. "I began to have some sense that I could change. Studying the Course unleashed huge amounts of hopeful energy inside me, energy that had been turning darker and more self-destructive every day" (Williamson 1992, xv–xvi).

After experiencing the powerful effect of ACIM on her life, Williamson began to lecture on "the Course" herself. When the small gathering in Los Angeles began to grow, she decided to turn her experiences into a book, believing the material to be relevant "to people throughout the world" (Williamson 1992, xvi). Although she felt a call to teach ACIM even before writing the book, she experienced overwhelming resonance to her words, which confirmed her decision to teach.

The purely autobiographical presentation of her personal journey functioned as an authorising prelude to her interpretation of *A Course in Miracles*. The personal introduction set an informal tone, transforming Williamson's teaching into a peer-to-peer narration which elicits relatability. Like the Weberian "exemplary [wo]man", Williamson thus assumed authority by example while setting an inviting tone that offers her path as *a* potential path to spiritual fulfilment. People responded to Williamson's teaching due to her successful negotiation of exerting spiritual authority through teaching yet doing so in a non-obtrusive manner.

An intertextual analysis of Williamson's text provides us with insights into the rhetorical authorisation strategies besides the narrative framework. Although spiritual self-help books often suggest a break with traditional conventions

12 While Campbell used "storied identity" in regard to religious bloggers legitimising their content production, I would suggest applying it to spiritual influencers more generally as a type of constructing and framing individual spiritual identity in narrative form can be seen in many "unauthorised" spiritual content creators.

and propose a whole-hearted reversal, they nevertheless embed themselves within existing sub-traditions that are accepted within the specific peer group of which the author is part of. It is therefore unsurprising that Williamson's book immediately interweaves quotations from ACIM with her own individual interpretations, often complemented by more autobiographical information. While the communication is always framed as one from peer-to-peer, Williamson simultaneously establishes herself as a legitimate interpreter of an authoritative text.[13] Each of the following nine chapters begins with a quote from ACIM and is followed by a personal contextualisation of Williamson:

> THE HOLY ENCOUNTER
>
> "When you meet anyone, remember it is a holy encounter. As you see him, you will see yourself. As you treat him, you will treat yourself. As you think of him, you will think of yourself. Never forget this, for in him you will find yourself or lose yourself."[14]
>
> Before I read *A Course in Miracles*, I studied many other spiritual and philosophical writings. It felt as though they led me up a huge flight of stairs to a giant cathedral inside my mind, but once I reached the top of the stairs, the door to the church was locked. The Course gave me the key that opened the door. The key, very simply, is other people. (Williamson 1992, 91)

In a way, *A Return to Love* functions like traditional Christian commentary literature as it provides interpretations of its referential work. The quotations authorise Williamson's expounding and suggested practices. Commentary literature, however, presupposes that the author producing it already possesses some kind of influential position – otherwise it is unlikely that the interpretation would be regarded as legitimate. As Williamson had already become an ACIM teacher and had gathered experience in exhorting on ACIM in public, a certain degree of authority had already been ascribed to her prior to the publication of her book in the small informal gatherings in L.A.[15] The publication of the book together with high-profile appearances on Oprah Winfrey's TV show gained her national publicity (Williamson 1994). Speaking engagements

13 On the process of writing and establishing new scripture like ACIM, see Gallagher (2014).

14 The title of each chapter and the text put in quotation are from the original ACIM text followed by Williamson's interpretation.

15 To understand the complex reciprocal ascription processes that first establish a charismatic teacher, sociologist Rodney Stark's concept of "holy families" is a helpful framework. Stark emphasised that not only do these first followers reinforce a leader's spiritual confidence but their testimony also generates faith among other potential converts (Stark 1999, 305).

at large lifestyle festivals then followed in addition to workshops and smaller, more intimate courses.[16]

With the rise of digital media, the possibilities to present her teaching to a broader public multiplied. More recently, Williamson has produced video-on-demand courses that can be purchased on esoteric platforms such as Younity, offering step-by-step coaching sessions like "The Keys to Endless Power" in a pre-recorded video format.[17] On her own website (Williamson 2022) and the related Williamson Institute (The Williamson Institute 2022), a diverse range of mostly pre-recorded seminaries can be purchased. An interesting format further cultivating her role as an authoritative interpreter, is her daily exercise "Mornings with Marianne – Daily Lessons from *A Course in Miracles*". Here, Williamson reads the daily passage from the ACIM scripture before expounding the major themes of the text and how to apply them to daily life. While these pre-recorded sessions as well as the coaching videos offer no opportunities to interact with followers, Williamson simultaneously curates an image of the approachable spiritual leader via social media. On Instagram she regularly posts ACIM quotes and adds some personal spiritual insights to them. In a post on Instagram, Williamson wrote:

> When Moses moved forward in absolute faith, his consciousness gave him power over time and space. It says in *A Course in Miracles* that we are heir to the laws that prevail within the world we identify with. If we only identify with the mortal world, then we are completely at the effect of the mortal world. Yet when we shift our sense of self-perception – moving from body-identification to spirit-identification – we are lifted beyond limits that would otherwise prevail. Our minds become open to clarity, intuition and abilities we wouldn't otherwise experience. We align with synchronistic opportunities that wouldn't otherwise occur. (@mariannewilliamson, November 15, 2021)

These posts not only function as advertisements to gain potential new followers. They also provide Williamson with the opportunity to keep in touch with the ACIM community and refer to current affairs and events. When Judith Skutch Whitson, the last of the founding members of ACIM, died on 19 October 2021, Williamson posted a picture together with the comment: "What an historic picture. Judith Skutch Whitson, publisher, and Helen Schucman Ph.D, scribe

16 On contemporary coaching practices and formats in the self-help market, see Utsch (2011).

17 The course offered on Younity is a German translation and carries the title "Die Schlüssel zur grenzenlosen Kraft" (Younity 2022).

of *A Course in Miracles*. Their bodies have left us but their spirits shine on. 🙏💖🙏" (@mariannewilliamson, October 26, 2021).

Social media performance provides Williamson with the opportunity to directly address her followers. Her posts simultaneously encourage her followers to respond to her, comment on her post or share their own experiences with the mentioned ACIM passage – even if Williamson does not respond to these comments. When an SUV ran into a parade in Waukesha, Wisconsin, on 22 November 2021, Williamson posted a prayer dedicated to those suffering in the aftermath:

> Dear God,
> There's such sorrow and pain tonight in Waukesha, Wisconsin.
> Please send your angels to bring them
> Your peace, Your comfort,
> Your guidance, Your healing
> And Your love.
> Some evil spirit has landed among us.
> Dear God, please cast it away.
> Amen. (@mariannewilliamson, November 22, 2021)

While some followers wholly supported the post by writing "I support u all the way" or a simple "pray", and another follower added the translation of an ancient shamanic blessing, others believed Williamson had misinterpreted the situation, leaving the true ACIM teaching behind as "the Course" teaches a radical non-dualism in which evil spirits do not exist. It is here where we can see best how Williamson's personal, emotional and more direct performances as an authentic "exemplary woman" can be challenged by the self-confident "spiritual wanderer" who feels confident enough to openly criticise the authority. Similarly, the less interactive formats invite spiritual seekers to engage with her teachings and follow her as long as they feel their spiritual quest resonates with Williamson's message without formally submitting unto her spiritual leadership. Williamson acts as an impulse giver, a fellow spiritual seeker, who presents her experience as a potential way to spiritual fulfilment without infringing upon the other wanderers' own self-determined search for truth.

2.1.2 Case Study 2: Laura Malina Seiler

Laura Malina Seiler, "visionary, coach, author" (Seiler 2022) is a contemporary German spiritual influencer and self-declared "mindful empowerment coach" (Xing 2022). The former PR and marketing consultant produces a highly

influential podcast called *Happy, Holy, Confident* that at the time of writing counts 352 episodes and more than 35 million downloads. Seiler received public attention when she published the bestselling book *Schön, dass es dich gibt*[18] (Seiler 2018) and has since published another book (2021) that quickly climbed German bestseller lists. In addition, she has developed different mindfulness courses and is a frequent guest speaker at various spiritual conventions.

Unlike Williamson, Laura Malina Seiler does not explicitly align her teachings with one specific tradition. A quick look at the reference list in the back of her book *Schön, dass es dich gibt*, however, reveals an inclusion of spiritual concepts that emerged from the broader New Thought tradition. Among the books that influenced her own writing, she counts among others Napoleon Hill's *Think and Grow Rich* (1937) and *Loving What Is: Four Questions That Can Change Your Life* (2002) by Byron Katie, the coaching giant of "The Work".[19] In addition to these works other contemporary spiritual coaches are listed as is *A Course in Miracles* (Seiler 2018).

In the tradition of Napoleon Hill's positive mental attitude (Cf. Hill 1983), Seiler promotes the idea that a reversal in thinking and a consequent inward looking will not only result in a more spiritually fulfilling life but will also have a profound effect on all other aspects of life, too. Her courses, books and all forms of digital communication therefore focus on a specific mix of spiritual teachings, meditations and practices to enhance spiritual well-being. Her teachings focus on how to reduce the mental barriers and find strategies that help encounter the "Higher Self" everyone is supposed to reconnect with.[20] Her courses include a syncretistic assembly of practices that are directed at generally enhancing physical and mental health.

Even though Seiler does not explicitly embed her own teaching within a clearly identifiable tradition as Williamson does, her authorisation strategies are remarkably similar to Williamson's. She, too, applies a crisis narrative and a similar experiential language to establish her teachings. In an advertising e-mail, sent to those on her mailing list, for her course "Rise Up & Shine University", Seiler informs the reader of how she had been completely lost, had moved from one unhealthy relationship to another, worked three different jobs, suffered from regular bouts of migraine and always ran out of money

18 English: "It is nice (as in "important") that you exist."

19 On the history and the roots of the loosely connected New Thought movement, see Albanese (2008).

20 Seiler's "Higher Self" course includes, among other things, a workbook, meditation exercises and pre-recorded videos with Seiler as well as exclusive access to the "Higher Self"-community (Seiler 2022b).

at the end of every month. The text has also been used as a post on Instagram (and Facebook):

> Long story short: I was not exactly fulfilled. ;) Fortunately, there was a turning point in my life. When I realised that my problems were MY problems, caused by myself, and when I simultaneously understood that I was the only person who could change my life.
>
> I have turned my inner world upside down and thus changed the outer world, too. […]
>
> I'm incredibly thankful for a wonderful husband, I'm a mother of two wonderful children and I'm blessed with the opportunity to help thousands of people create a fulfilling life. (@lauramalinaseiler, November 15, 2021)[21]

The post has received 7,237 likes on Instagram alone and has probably motivated some to join her coaching class. Like Williamson, Seiler communicated her "storied identity" to her followers, thereby enhancing her authority as she had already mastered overcoming pain and spiritual emptiness. The stark contrast between a woman working three jobs, walking from one failing relationship to the next to a spiritually fulfilled coach with a husband and kids could hardly be stronger. It serves the purpose of transmitting the central message of improving spiritual self-determination to live happily. At the same time, the backstory to Seiler's coaching career also establishes her as a spiritual leader who has been blessed with knowledge through her own life experience and who is willing to provide others with said knowledge. Her spiritual self-authorisation is supposed to encourage her followers to realise their own spiritual potential.

Seiler's book similarly presents us with the peculiar mix of spiritual sermonising, autobiographical content and positive affirmations for the reader who is regularly encouraged to reflect, connect and follow her example. In the first chapter, Seiler recounts a story when she was in a taxi and listened to the driver lamenting over his job when all he ever really wanted to do was to work with animals. Seiler responded by explaining to the taxi driver that it was never too late to change courses and that he could still find a more fulfilling job. It remains unclear whether her motivational speech had an impact on the driver (Seiler 2018, 12–13). The short anecdote, however, served as a practical example to bring across Seiler's central message of recovering true inner power by tearing down mental barriers that prevent a person from realising her or his true potential. References to her parents' divorce and the impact it had on

21 The original text is in German.

her emotionally also function as a recurring theme to illustrate how scarring experiences can lead to emotional self-defence mechanisms that may prevent someone from making a leap of faith in relationships. And her experience as a PR consultant and manager is used to illustrate the shallowness of contemporary working life (Seiler 2018, 35).

Seiler's personal and at times highly emotional communication builds the foundation of her teaching. Every exercise and every piece of advice is somehow linked to personal experience either with the practice itself or with an explanation of how this teaching has been successfully applied and changed her life for the better. The end of the preface thus reads: "I would like to remind you of your way on earth with this book. I would like to remind you it is normal to be afraid and to doubt but that you possess a power in you that is a thousand times stronger than any fear, any doubt" (Seiler 2018, 8). Seiler offers help to those seeking help but always as an experienced friend.

Unlike Williamson, Seiler does not refer to one scripture or a specific spiritual tradition. Instead, she is tipping into the pervasive if imagined tradition of "universal original truths" that borrow from various religious traditions that are currently regarded as authoritative within the discourse community Seiler belongs to. Seiler's "May you be happy" – deck of cards, which includes 30 cards with printed proverbs and motivational sentences, is a suitable example of how Seiler embeds her own experiential wisdom within accepted sources of spiritual authority. In addition to cards that carry her own words in proverbial style, we find cards with inspirational messages from "legitimate" sources of wisdom such as a saying from Buddha on mindfulness, an unspecified "Asian proverb" and an "Ancient Native American saying" (Seiler 2019) which translates as follows: "When you rise in the morning, give thanks for the light, for your life, for your strength. Give thanks for your food and for the joy of living. If you see no reason to give thanks, the fault lies in yourself." (Tecumseh, https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/tecumseh_190018) "– *Ancient Native American Saying*."[22] Similar to Seiler's own teaching, the proverb praises thankfulness on the one hand while emphasising self-efficacy and spiritual empowerment on the other. It thus functions as a shorthand for Seiler's message thereby adding credibility to it by linking her twenty-first-century teaching to the Native American tradition that is regarded as a legitimate source of authority within Seiler's community.

22 The German original reads: "Wenn du am Morgen aufstehst, sage Danke für das Morgenlicht, für dein Leben und die Kraft, die du besitzt. Sage Danke für deine Nahrung und die Freude, am Leben zu sein. Wenn du keinen Grund siehst, Danke zu sagen, liegt der Fehler bei dir. – Altes indianisches Sprichwort."

Another example of authorising her own teaching is her appropriation of the Hawaiian Ho'oponopono ritual to practise forgiveness. In a blog article posted on 6 July 2021, Seiler first explains why forgiving and letting go of hurtful experiences is essential to live a life full of love. In the introduction of the article, she writes:

> When I first encountered the secret power of forgiving and began to practise it about ten years ago, the quality of my life improved in all areas to a previously unimaginable degree.
>
> In this blog article I would like to tell you, what forgiving really means, about one of the most hurtful experiences I have been able to heal with it, what the ancient Hawaiian ritual of forgiveness Ho'oponopono is and what three steps you can take to finally and fully love and live again! (Seiler, July 6, 2021)

The personal story in the blog article has several layers: Seiler first informs the reader about her experience with the Hawaiian ritual and the profound effect it has had on her life. She remains vague about where exactly she practiced it for the first time, only referring to a seminary ten years earlier.[23] She then hits an emotional chord with the reader again when she recounts the time when her parents separated and their divorce left her emotionally wounded and confused. In tune with her teaching of spiritual empowerment, Seiler then displays how the ritual has helped her overcome this early trauma, transforming this deeply hurtful episode into an opportunity to spiritually grow. While the Hawaiian roots are emphasised at different times, the real focus is on her experience with this "secret" (or little known) ancient ritual that she reveals to the reader in a detailed but consumable manner. The cultural and religious context of the ritual, however, is neither mentioned nor explained. Instead, it is decontextualised and appropriated, to be applied to individual use.

The examples so far have already presented various communication platforms, including Seiler's books, her blog, courses such as the "Rise Up & Shine University" or spiritual practice items like the inspirational cards. Larger themes from intuition to overcoming the fear of rejection are central in her courses but also appear in her podcast, to which she frequently invites fellow coaches or celebrities as guest speakers (Seiler, May 2021). The podcast thus

23 In her list of referential books in *Schön, dass es dich gibt*, however, Seiler names U.E. Duprée, another spiritual coach specialising in this ritual, and his ritual as a key to a fulfilled spiritual life. The fact that the Hawaian roots probably work as a stronger legitimisation for the ritual should be noted (Duprée 2016).

serves as an ideal opportunity not only to promote her own work but also to visibly show her spiritual insights in exchange with others – a gesture against any kind of monopolisation – while celebrity guests like Curse or Thomas D add to her credibility as a spiritual coach (Seiler, April 2021).

In addition to her books, the high-quality magazine *I AM* was launched in 2020. Content and design are similar to the carefully designed website. It is therefore unsurprising, that the magazine intends to convey the same air of inner balance and creative individualism, with its different fonts, the colourful yet calming pictures of her in nature, and a variety of motivational nuggets and mental exercises (cf. *I AM by Laura Malina Seiler 6/21*, 2021). As a millennial, Seiler of course is an active social media user and producer. Unlike Williamson, she also interacts directly with her followers, suggesting an approachability well appreciated by her followers. Although she has 312,000 followers on Instagram, she continues to curate the image of the relatable spiritual guide, commenting on their comments or responding to questions. In May 2022, Seiler posted a short proverb, saying: "If you focus on the good (in life), it'll get better" (Seiler, May 11, 2022). A female follower responded: "Yes, we choose, always", to which Seiler immediately responded with an emphatic "yes yes yes ❤️ 🙌". Another follower added a new saying in the comments section: "Energy flows where attention goes 💫" and added the personal comment that this was one of her favourite proverbs. And one that has become her path. To this Laura Malina Seiler responded with "Thanks for sharing 🖤".

In another post, Seiler proposed a new morning routine to her followers that would start the day with dancing to your favourite song in the morning. The post was part of an advertisement campaign for Seiler's "Higher Self" course and accompanied by a video in which she explained why a new morning routine is the perfect ritual to demonstrate a new beginning of a self-determined and spiritually fulfilled life (Seiler, May 6, 2022). When a follower thanked her for the inspiration but remarked that at 4 in the morning he is too tired to dance, Seiler simply replied: "Then you need to dance yourself awake" added by "🤣✌️", to which the follower responded with "Fair point 🥹", Another follower commented on Seiler's post: "Yes, dancing rules, it's what I did this morning in front of the mirror and I celebrated my life 😍😍". Seiler immediately inquired which song that person danced to and added "😍 🙌".

Both posts show how Seiler is interacting on a personal level with her followers, thereby using social media not only as a platform to sell her courses but to directly engage with her followers' responses to the spiritual content and the practical exercises she provides on the platform. While the answers may be short and some comments resemble generic social media responses, Seiler's peer-to-peer communication displays a willingness for reciprocal interaction with her community and other coaches, transforming her into an "exemplary

woman" who leads by experience yet with an openness to receive further spiritual insights from others.

3 Reflections on the Relationship between the "Exemplary Woman" and the Community of "Spiritual Wanderers"

The case studies presented above discussed two "exemplary women" and their communication and legitimisation strategies that established them as spiritual leaders among other "spiritual wanderers". Their overall success as well as the communication on social media also reveal interesting points about those ascribing authority to these influencers.

Followers' self-confident and critical encounter with each spiritual input is seen as potentially beneficial for individual spiritual development as long as these new impulses are presented in the form of an offer rather than a demand to be followed (Engelbrecht 2009, 39). Markus Hero's principle of "Access" can help us understand the limited submission of followers unto external spiritual authority. Hero suggests that modern seekers prefer experiential spiritual leaders (and their offers) to permanent religious affiliation because it enables them to actively discover and experience new spiritual content (Hero 2009) and allows temporary and self-determined interaction. While the wanderer's decontextualisation and liberal appropriation of various practices and teachings from different (religious) traditions may seem disrespectful to outsiders, the resulting combinations carry value in accordance with how they further the spiritual journey of the "wanderer", as Engelbrecht suggests (Engelbrecht 2009, 47). Practically, this means a constant revolt against any kind of centralised spiritual authority as it would interfere with the spiritual self-determination of the "wanderer" (Engelbrecht 2009, 35).

Considering the presented biographical background of Williamson and Seiler, they, too, could be classified as "wanderers". It is therefore unsurprising that their authentic portrayals of "exemplary women" resonates with fellow "wanderers". While Marianne Williamson is not directly interacting with her followers on social media, she has nevertheless managed to create an image of an approachable coach due to the autobiographical narrative framework. And while she does not participate in the discussions in the comment section, it does not prevent her followers from critically (and self-confidently) engaging with her content, as could be seen in the "Waukesha, Wisconsin" post on 22 November 2021. In contrast to Williamson, Seiler emphasises her "exemplary leadership" even more strongly by directly engaging with her followers on Instagram in the comments section. In both cases, however, it is clear that followers value their insights and proposed exercises, thereby recognising the

authority of their interpretations and teachings yet without ever giving up on their own spiritual authority.

4 Conclusion

As the paper showed, the success of Williamson's and Seiler's careers as coaches resides in their authentic portrayal of the "exemplary woman". Yet their peer-like performance through constant interweaving of autobiographical information, spiritual self-reflection and traditional sources of spiritual content into new hybrids is only one part. As spiritual authority is a relational concept that depends on reciprocal ascription processes, the needs of the followers are just as decisive for generating authority as the spiritual self-authorisation of the leader is. Legitimised by experience, these "exemplary women" offer their own path, their personal failures and spiritual crises as valuable lessons to those wandering similar paths and craving the same kind of enlightened life. Over the years, Williamson and Seiler have established themselves as influential coaches with their often practice-oriented and autobiographically legitimised spiritual advice which is communicated across various medial platforms. It cannot be denied, though, that their non-institutional form of authority is limited both in time and in extent. In a highly pluralistic and competitive religious marketplace, their influence depends on how well their teachings resonate with the spiritual needs of potential followers. While the findings presented in this paper offer first insights into the complex dynamics of spiritual authority online and offline, more work needs to be done to better understand the interaction between spiritual coaches and their followers in the digital age.

Issue and Editors

This article is part of the special issue "Religion in the Digital Realm", edited by Ignatius Swart and Marie-Luise Frost.

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RELIGION & DEVELOPMENT 3 (2024) 373–387

R/D Religion & Development

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Towards an Understanding of Embodiment in Digital Space – A Practical Theological Perspective

Research Article

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Published online 6 May 2024

Abstract

This article presents a theoretical exploration of the notion of embodiment as it pertains to practical theology and lived religion. In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, religious communities responded by increasing engagement with digital spaces and digital forms of worship. This necessarily challenges traditional notions around the idea of embodiment and how the body is understood in non-corporeal religious space. Contemporary memorial culture and its ritualised behaviour provides an effective lens with which to observe and study the evolving role and understanding of digital embodiment. This article uses a ritual perspective to deconstruct traditional notions around the corporeal body and explores the role of memory as an important consideration at the nexus of offline-online life.

Keywords

ritual – contemporary memorial culture – liturgy – embodiment – digital religion

1 Introduction and Position of This Article

Being alive during the 21st century means being present in more spaces than just the corporeal. Contemporary life is multifaceted, and ways of being in the

Published with license by Brill Schöningh | DOI:10.30965/27507955-20230034
 | ISSN: 2750-7947 (print) 2750-7955 (online)

world differ greatly from any other historical period. In today's world, life takes place at the offline-online nexus and therefore I agree with Hoondert and van der Beek that it has become largely unnecessary to state that we live in a digital age (Hoondert and van der Beek 2019, 1–2). The dual reality of digital and corporeal are so intertwined that we cannot separate them from each other.

However, from a practical theological perspective it is valuable to critically evaluate both these dimensions of lived life as each has its own unique influence on what we can observe in terms of religious expression (Hoondert and van der Beek 2019, 2). Throughout history, the physical human body has been central to our understanding of religious rituals. Living at the offline-online nexus means that certain elements of religious praxis have migrated from corporeal space to digital space. Or as Teresa Berger titles it, a migration from the upper room to cyberspace (Berger 2012).

With a focus on the praxis of lived religion, the influence of the Covid-19 pandemic is of utmost importance from a practical theological perspective. With lockdowns of varying intensity, the implementation of social distancing, and a general lack of and resistance to physical proximity, people from across the globe had their contexts of lived religion uprooted. For many people, religious praxis revolves around the Sunday sermon and liturgy, which is by its very nature a gathering of people in close proximity for worship and to partake in religious ritual. Because of the Covid-related health risks, these gatherings were not allowed between 2020 and 2022. The result was that people were experiencing a period of liminality regarding how they would ordinarily express their religious convictions and spirituality.

In a South African Dutch Reformed context,[1] congregations were initially closed during early 2020 and then partially reopened as restrictions were gradually lifted. Many of these congregations chose to persist with their online celebrations, only opening the church for funerals and baptismal liturgies with a strict limit on physical attendance well into 2022. The result is that for the majority of worshippers the previous norms relating to their expressions of lived religion have been destroyed (Thomassen 2014, 83). The resulting liminality is a grim companion in their (our) attempts at the reintegration and reformation of values, as we search for balance in the wake of the sudden onset of the Covid-19 context.

The prompt response to the sudden and drastic limitations on physical proximity is not one that is guided by deep theological reasoning, but rather

1 The author is a member of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa and chooses this confessional context as it influences the views and understanding of the praxis of lived religion as well as the understanding of ritual. Within a South African context and due to access or lack of access to different types of technology in Covid-19-related worship, this had an influence on both the experience and observation underlying this discussion.

an example of the rapid evolution of ritual and religious practice to adapt to a new context. This phenomenon is important from a practical theological perspective, as we can pose exploratory questions that engage this new context to shed light on why ordinary people chose digital space as their preferred ritual and liturgical arena. There is of course the argument that digital space is simply the most accessible alternative to the corporeal spaces that worshippers are used to. While I do not disagree with such a statement, it only scratches the surface of the potential meaning and relevance of this behaviour. Worshippers find enough meaning and fulfilment in these digital practices that they persist with them. While this does not provide us with a clear answer to the question of embodiment in digital religion, it does help us explore this complex concept and move towards an understanding that illuminates the discussion.

Within the context of lived religion and digital religion during Covid-19, the core tasks of practical theological interpretation as developed by Richard Osmer is important as a guiding principle to explore the possible interpretations of the body in digital space (Osmer 2008). In this article, specific attention is given to the descriptive-empirical task and to a lesser extent the interpretive task. As mentioned later in this article, it is difficult to deliver an in-depth investigation, but there are enough observable religious expressions in online contexts, especially concerning rituals, meaning that which we observe empirically can be described. These descriptions originate from what I understand as an evolving ritual landscape. This concept refers to the fact that Covid-19 has forced many people to evolve the way they participate in religious and other rituals. The evolution of rituals especially concerning the offline-online nexus of lived religion is not new or unique to the current context, but what is unique is the lack of choice people had during the Covid-19 restrictions.[2] Before the pandemic context, people could choose where, how and in what manner they want to partake in rituals. They had both the richness of corporeal and digital space to choose from. The restrictions on physical proximity drastically changed the options for ritual participation with a much larger emphasis on either taking part in online spaces or abstaining until physical participation was available again. The result is that people experienced liminality regarding their lived religion and specifically the ways in which they partake in ritual. The norms and traditions that defined ritual only a short while ago have been destroyed. In the wake of this destruction some people simply waited for things to return to "normal" once again, while others were actively driving the evolution of the ritual landscape.

2 An evolving ritual landscape is not a new phenomenon and research done by Hoondert and van der Beek (2019), Matthee (2019) and Post and van der Beek (2016) has already explored how the ritual landscape has evolved and is evolving.

2 Practical Theology, Praxis and Lived Religion

The question about how we understand the body in digital space is important in the context of practical theology that concerns itself with the everyday practices of ordinary people. Practical theology that solely focuses on the doctrinal aspects of religious expression would likely reject the possibility of the concept of embodiment or presence in cyberspace, as Ganzevoort and Roeland (2014, 93) note:

> The concepts of praxis and lived religion focus on what people do rather than on "official" religion, its sacred sources, its institutes, and its doctrines. As such, practical theology has much in common with what in disciplines like anthropology, sociology, and media studies, is known as "the practical turn": the turn away from institutes and (cultural) texts to the everyday social and cultural practices of ordinary people.

In other words, the arguments in this article are less concerned with the doctrinal and systematic elements of theology and more concerned with that which is happening in the context of lived religion. By no means does this article aim to diminish the importance of the doctrinal and systematic elements of theological inquiry, but the focus is the offline-online nexus where religion is lived.

2.1 *Digital Religious Expression before Covid-19 as Window into Embodiment in Digital Space*

Due to the still evolving and changing repertoire of religious expression and ritual, this article cannot yet hope to deliver an in-depth and comprehensive analysis of the current religious praxis as it relates to digital space in the context of Covid-19. We can however draw upon observations of current religious expression in digital space and, based on what we already know from previous research on the topic, reflect on what embodiment means in the context of digital religion.

It is the position in this article that by observing and reflecting on the lived religion of people in digital spaces, we can seek to understand the role of the presence of the body in their interactions. This means that we will be able to conceptualise or at least explore some theory around how the body is present and understood in digital spaces (Tsuria, Yadlin-Segal, Vitullo and Campbell 2017, 73–97).[3] Whether we find support for the notion of digital embodiment in our theology is, in a certain sense, irrelevant to what was

3 From the perspective of digital religion and the discussion on embodiment in digital spaces, this research falls within the fourth wave of digital religion scholarship. This is characterised

observed in the praxis of lived religion. As discussed in Section 2, people were participating in and experiencing a variety of rituals in digital space, which, based upon their online interactions, had meaning just as real as the liturgies and rituals abruptly torn from their religious tapestries by Covid-19. We are in no position to discount these experiences as being anything other than real and truthful to those that experience them, and as established earlier, we have outgrown the arbitrary approach of equating the corporeal with real/truth and the digital with imaginary/wishful. The thoughts of Johann Meylahn (2017, 9–10) come to mind in his reflection on *doing* practical theology:

> Christ opens such an impossible possible way (kingdom in our midst) that makes this praxis messianic: always towards that impossible space of the kingdom to come and of Life [sic] to come, through the continuous deconstruction of the constricting views through love for the victims of these world views.

In other words, as practical theologians exploring the praxis of lived religion in the context of digital religion, we must be open to deconstructing at least some of our constricting views of the body in order for us to ethically and authentically attempt to understand the body at the offline-online nexus. To move forward with this task,[4] two ritual movements are discussed. Both these ritual expressions (online sermons/liturgy and contemporary memorial culture) have many observable instances and therefore support the building of theory to understand the body in digital space.

2.2 *Online Sermons and Liturgy*

The move of sermons and some liturgical elements from corporeal space to cyberspace was probably the most popular observable reaction to the restriction on physical gatherings. For many congregations around the world this was the logical reaction, as sermons had been recorded and posted online for some time already before Covid-19 struck. The importance of the shift does however reside with the changing of the emphasis from the physical liturgical

by a focus on how "religious actors negotiate relationships between multiple spheres of their online and offline lives" (Tsuria, Yadlin-Segal, Vitullo and Campbell 2017: 79).

4 In the context of this article, ritual serves as a crucial lens to understand and seek understanding of embodiment in digital space. As Helland (2012, 37) states, "This area of study [religious practice and new media] has the potential to shed light not only on ritual and its continuing role but also upon the relationship between technology and society, the social construction of belief, the boundary construction of the sacred, and symbolic substitution and representation."

space as the primary worship space to the online liturgical space being the primary site for worship during the Covid-19 restrictions.

The evolution from physical liturgy to digital liturgy is also not as simple as it seems. While we live our lives at the offline-online nexus, physical and digital space is fundamentally different from each other. They are governed by different rules and limitations, and certain human senses are emphasised in each space. In digital space we are dependent on our sight and hearing for most of the interaction. Current technological paradigms do not yet allow us to smell, physically touch or taste in digital space, while all these senses are used in corporeal liturgy and ritual. While there are many reasons that can be explored in this regard, the primary reason for the difference between the two spaces can be attributed to the absence of the physical body when we participate in digital space.

In the evolution of sermons to engage congregants in digital space as a primary means of worship, there are many changes that occurred to make this possible, and sermons essentially had to be deconstructed down to their individual elements. Each of the elements that could function in digital space had to be engineered to have a new form. Based on the wide variety of sermons available on YouTube, Facebook and other technologies, we can identify two approaches in this regard:

1. The sermon and liturgical elements are recorded in the physical space they would normally take place in, with the bodies of the different actors visible in the recordings. Mostly this included the person doing the preaching and the musical team (Pretoria-Oosterlig 2020).[5]
2. The sermon and liturgical elements are recorded from the homes of those that are involved, with the body of the preacher visible, and in some cases recordings of the musical team (Valleisig Gemeente 2020).[6]

One thing that is notably absent from both these approaches is the bodies of those that come to worship and take part in the liturgy. There are no recordings of them either in the normal liturgical space or their homes, and in many cases their presence is communicated only by a small number somewhere on the screen indicating the number of people participating in the stream. Does this mean that they are indeed not present and part of the liturgy? It is impossible for them to be physically embodied in this space, but does the lack of a corporeally participating body exclude them from having an authentic ritual

5 An example of a sermon, liturgy and sacrament (Eucharist) in the space it normally takes place in: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2sM9TOBmyJA (5 August 2020).

6 An example of a sermon, liturgy and sacrament (Eucharist) in a space different than where it normally takes place: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TspDKkVOQQ0 (5 August 2020).

liturgical experience? I will attempt to engage these questions in Section 4, but first we look at another example of an evolved ritual landscape.

2.3 *Contemporary Memorial Culture*

While the move from physical to digital space in terms of sermons and the accompanying liturgies we currently observed is in large part due to Covid-19-related restrictions, contemporary memorial culture is already quite comfortable in digital spaces. Over the last decade there have been large amounts of research on how death and the related grief and mourning practices have migrated to digital spaces (Beaunover, Torres, Meassen and Guitton 2020, 1–10; Burell and Selman 2020, 1–39; Lipp and O'Brien 2020, 1–26; Matthee 2019, 27–45; Christensen, Segerstad, Kasperowski and Sandvik 2017, 58–72). The body of the participant is a fundamental part of traditional funeral liturgical ritual and plays an important role in the various movements of the liturgy. But despite the position of the body in corporeal-based funeral and memorial expression, people are experiencing and partaking in online rituals and, as the research listed shows, are having valuable, real and lasting experiences. With our previous example of the migration of sermons to online spaces, the traces of the body were evident, but in the context of death- and grief-related ritual in online spaces, the body as a physical construct is mostly absent in representation and concept.

In exploring contemporary memorial culture, it is briefly observed how the function of the body has changed and adapted to fit a digital context. This observation will specifically look at the ritualisation of social media in contexts of grief and bereavement. Grief-related rituals are a prime example of the offline-online nexus and how lived religion occupies this space.

The digital spaces afforded to us by social media have become almost inseparable from our daily lives. During the various lockdowns across the globe, Twitter users have reflected on their social media screen time as reported on Apple devices, mostly in shock. Two users shared their weekly social media screen time, coming to a total of 43 hours and 38 minutes and 36 hours and 40 minutes.[7] This nearly equals and even exceeds the time one would spend in a full-time job. Therefore, it makes sense that digital space has been ritualised as we spend such an enormous amount of time in these spaces.

When looking at the results of research on grief-related practices in contexts of digital religion and specifically social media, we see a strong emphasis on rituals of remembering (Matthee 2019, 119–122; Sofka, Gibson and Silberman 2017, 173–197; Harju 2015, 1–2). In corporeal terms, rituals of remembering may

7 https://twitter.com/OonaRuin/status/1241761016830033920 and https://twitter.com/esinghimd/status/1242115168731041803.

include visiting a grave or wall of remembrance, taking and placing flowers at a grave site, or lighting a candle to remember the dead. Within the context of funeral liturgies it can include the movement of bodies in the liturgical space to remember the dead by moving towards the coffin (or similar representation of the body of the deceased), the movement of bodies to the front to deliver a speech of remembrance, and the support to the bereaved in the form of physical contact. Rituals of remembering are vastly different in digital space and almost no traces of traditional embodiment are visible. Emojis, emoticons, memes and other symbols are used to visualise what would have been visible by observing the bodies in a physical environment. Spoken words, singing and crying are replaced with comments, posts, and likes[8] or shares.

Imposing a traditional understanding of the role of the body in grief-related rituals in the context of digital religion will evidently be futile. To work towards an understanding of how the body influences or is influenced by online experiences, we will need to, at least partially, be open to a deconstruction of the normative function of the body in ritual and religious contexts.

3 Toward Understanding the Role of the Body in Digital Contexts

Up until this point it has been established that when exploring the virtual body from a practical theological perspective, lived religion at the offline-online nexus is where we should focus our efforts. In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, the evolving ritual landscape was briefly discussed with specific reference to the migration of sermons and liturgies to online spaces as well as contemporary memorial culture. These two iterations (Wepener and Matthee 2020; Rossouw 2020)[9] gave us some insight into the challenges of digital space, with specific reference to the changing role and function of the body. With this in mind, Section 3 aims to explore a theoretical approach to understanding the virtual body born from the praxis of lived religion as observed at the offline-online nexus.

8 Likes does not only refer to the traditional "thumbs-up" interaction but to the whole spectrum that is available with each technological platform.

9 It must be noted that there are other prominent expressions of the evolving ritual landscape that are important as this discussion goes forward. One is the lively discussion around the topic of virtual/digital communion. This made headlines early during the South African lockdown as liturgical scholars (Wepener and Matthee) expressed the possibility of virtual communion for as long as the virus kept congregations apart, to which a philosophy scholar (Rossouw) replied that communion and its corporeal elements cannot be realised in digital space. It is not the focus of this article to emphasise the specific developments surrounding the Eucharist, but it is evident that embodiment and space is important in this discussion.

3.1 *Deconstructing Notions around the Corporeal Body in Contexts of Ritual and Worship*

As mentioned earlier, understanding the body as exclusively physical and corporeal is not helpful towards understanding the body in digital spaces. Within current technological paradigms, there is no way to be present in digital space in the same ways we are present in corporeal spaces. Trying to impose the same rules that apply in corporeal space on digital space is again not helpful. As indicated in Section 2, people are partaking in rituals in digital space and having authentic and valuable experiences. Therefore, from a practical theological perspective rooted in the praxis of lived religion, the presence of a corporeal body does not determine the potential for people to have valuable and religious experiences in different digital spaces. This brings us to an important statement made in the work of Barnard, Cilliers and Wepener (2014, 215):

> There is no worship apart from a bodily and corporeally performed liturgy. The notion of embodiment refers to the bodily and corporeal configuration of human existence and culture. Therefore, embodiment is not just a mere reference to "flesh" but it includes the way that a specific culture codes the body; it includes the meanings that are attributed to the body in a specific culture.

While, at first sight, it may seem that this statement discounts the possibility of a virtual body, it provides us with the means to start deconstructing the body for a digital context. The key is found in the second part of the statement, where the authors rightly acknowledge that embodiment is much more than just a reference to flesh. There is a complex process of coding that happens between the body and culture in any ritual setting. Specific cultures (such as contemporary memorial culture and online culture) attribute certain meanings to the body. In digital space, the meanings attributed to the body rarely relate to its physical form or flesh. The focus is rather on how the intentions and actions of the invisible body become visible in the context of the technology.

The second important concept from Barnard, Cilliers and Wepener's statement above is that of the process of coding. From a contemporary perspective, coding is a central concept to society, as that is how we communicate with technology through its software. We write code that shapes the response of the hardware it is connected to. This is a useful perspective, understanding that, at least theoretically, culture and experience in digital space codes us in the ways we are present in these spaces.

In other words, when we strip away the flesh, what are we left with? This statement does not apply in the context of physical space but is central to being embodied in digital space. To answer this question, the concept of storied

bodies (Matthee 2019, 167–180) is used as a lens to understand and reflect on the nature of the body in digital space.

3.2 *Our Bodies as Carriers of Stories*

The concept of storied bodies is not new and forms part of works on narrative theory. This is exactly where we inquire to explore our understanding of the body in digital space. Peter Brooks (1989, 1), in some of the earlier mentions of the concept of storied bodies, states: "The larger context of storied bodies, as a piece of work in progress, concerns the relation of the body to narrative: how bodies come to be inscribed in narratives and narratives inscribed on the body."

While this statement was likely never intended to inform how we think about embodiment in digital space, the concept of storied bodies as understanding the body as something which can be inscribed ("coded" in the words of Barnard, Cilliers and Wepener (2014, 215)) by experience is very helpful in illuminating the context of embodiment in digital religion and digital space.

Returning to the question of what we are left with when we strip away the flesh, it is clear that this question can have many answers, but a grouping that stands out in the context of this article is narrative and cognition. When we take away the corporality of the body we are left with the mind and the stories and experiences inscribed and coded amongst the forest of neurons and neural pathways.[10]

Our cognition is a fundamental part of our existence and plays a central part in how we acquire knowledge, learn and experience things. All of which are important in ritual and religious contexts. Our minds are complex networks of unique experiences which form the basis of our memories, which in turn form the basis of our narratives. The mind is often de-emphasised in discussions of ritual and religious activity, with a focus on the bodily aspects of the experience. In digital space it is necessary to re-emphasise the function of the mind, and understanding the position of the body is much less prominent because of the nature of the space (Matthee 2019, 181–206). The mind is a repository for

10 Digital gaming studies is a helpful lens to explore the concept of embodiment and identity as it relates to different spaces such as online and offline. Rob Cover states, "That is, the conceptual space of the game – which I relate here as a narrative – is consciously understood as being radically different from the narrative spatiality of everyday life; in an era of digital games, it is not that the body is left alone in a space radically separate from the space of play, but that the player is aware of the narrative's difference and yet open to the affective and, subsequently, emotional formations that produce particular responses, articulated corporeally. Gaming, in that sense, may not necessarily disrupt the identity of the subject, but it informs the performativity of that self by adding experiences and perceptions that are simultaneously felt as 'real' in a real bodily sense and as separated from the narrative, cultural and social space in which that body moves and, indeed, must move as part of biological and social existence" (Cover 2016, 12).

all our experiences and memories, and these are fundamental to the actions we take. Our memories and the experiences that constitute them are, as it is viewed in this article, our stories, the very same stories that by means of culture are encoded in our bodies.

> The second key concept emerging from the second cognitive revolution, and taken up in discursive-psychological research, concerns the mind's embodiment. As Andy Clark has argued, in parallel with the introspectionist tradition from which they emerged, certain strands of first-wave cognitive science continued to treat "the mind as a privileged and insulated inner arena" and "body and world as mere bit-players on the cognitive stage". By contrast, second-wave cognitive science resists both the cognitivist hierarchicalization of mind over body and the behaviorist prioritization of body over mind. Instead, it holds that the mind is always and inalienably embodied; minds should be viewed as the nexus of brain, body, and environment or world. (Herman 2007, 317)

Bringing second-wave cognitive science and practical theology into dialogue (Kruger 2018; 2016), we find ourselves at a nexus within a nexus. On the one side we have the offline-online nexus of lived religion from a practical theological perspective, and on the other we have the mind as the nexus of the body and environment as understood from a cognitive perspective.

Figure 1 illustrates the position of the mind as central to understanding embodiment in digital space. This point of view means if the mind is understood as disembodied, the argument is moot. Therefore, in working towards an understanding of embodiment in contexts of digital religion, this article understands the mind as "inalienably embodied" (Herman 2007, 317) and therefore the memories and experiences that constitute the ritual and religious narratives born from digital experiences have the same potential to codify the body as its corporeal counterparts.

3.3 *Summarising the Argument*

Having an understanding of embodiment in digital space that compares to our understanding of embodiment in corporeal space is a long way off. Relatively speaking, we only have a fledgling-like understanding of digital space and even less of an understanding of its dynamics.[11] Therefore, it is not helpful or indeed possible to provide a definitive answer to the question about embodiment

11 Although, from a religious and media studies perspective, scholars such as Heidi Campbell, Christopher Helland and Gregory Price Grieve have done much to develop our understanding of digital religion.

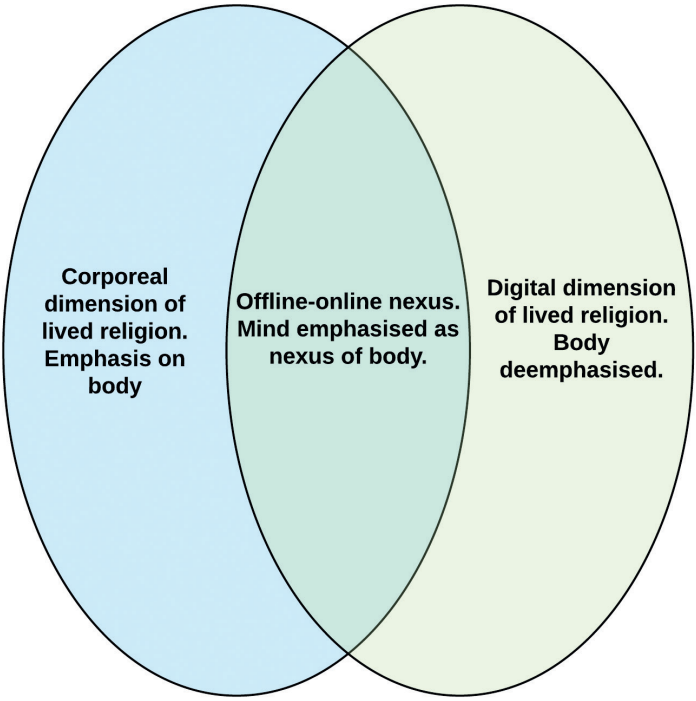

FIGURE 1 Praxis of lived religion

in contexts of digital religion. There are however a few elements that we can establish to help us move to a greater understanding of embodiment in digital contexts (Matthee 2019, 175):[12]

- While the body is physical, it is also a vessel that is encoded by and through different elements such as culture, experience and memory;
- Digital space and the corporeal dimension exist together; one does not necessarily exclude the other. Therefore, the praxis of practical theology is at the offline-online nexus;
- Though different in nature, both spaces are spaces of authentic human expression and experience;
- The mind as embodied is key to understanding how we are present and active in digital space.

For now, we can understand that we are present and active in digital space by means of what we experience and how that affects our memory. These

12 The first three points are adapted from the work of Matthee (2019) with additional and new insights based on the research for this article.

cognitive experiences influence our narrative and life stories (Nünning and Nünning 2013, 61), which in turn encode our physical bodies. This means that participation in digital space can potentially have the same or a similar effect on us as corresponding experiences in corporeal space. Looking back at the evolving ritual landscape discussed in Section 3, we can see that especially in the context of the ritualisation of social media in contexts of grief, the participation in digital rituals has had a marked influence on the physical body and mourning journey (Matthee 2016; Matthee 2019, 138–142; Haverinen 2014, 202–213; Post and van der Beek 2016). By participating and being present and embodied in mind, the stories of those involved were influenced and the results encoded on the body.

4 Conclusion

At the base level of practical theological praxis, people are taking part in digital space where their experiences are actively shaping their stories and memories (Helland 2012, 37), and these are in turn inscribed on their bodies. Therefore, living life at the offline-online nexus means that we are able to draw upon both these synchronous realities to engage in meaningful and authentic religious experience. Whether we have physical bodily participation as has been the case across the ages, or virtually inscribe and code our bodies through our cognitive participation, both are inseparable parts of contemporary lived religion. This does not mean that all rituals and religious experiences are of equal value in the different spaces. In some cases, taste, smell and physical movement are paramount to the performance. The challenge going forward is to expand our ritual repertoire to include the strengths of the entire spectrum of lived religion, and not just the spaces we are comfortable in engaging. Therefore, it is perhaps hasty to declare certain ritual expressions as "impossible" or "invalid", as the concept and reality of virtual bodies and digital participation challenges traditional and normative categories of ritual and liturgy. Daniel Bare (2020), in a short reflection on Covid-19 and Christian corporeality, makes a relevant and probing remark when he asks, "How embodied is the body of Christ?"

Issue and Editors

This article is part of the special issue "Religion in the Digital Realm", edited by Ignatius Swart and Marie-Luise Frost.

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RELIGION & DEVELOPMENT 3 (2024) 388–411

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Disembodied Congregations: Covid-19 and the Rising Phenomenon of Internet Churches among Pentecostal Churches in Lagos, Nigeria

Research Article

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Published online 12 July 2023

Abstract

One could argue that smartphones and computers are an intrinsic part of our daily lives. However, the sudden boom of online fellowships is a recent event in the history of Nigerian Pentecostalism. In the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Nigerian government issued several bans on large gatherings and public religious worship. For example, many Pentecostal churches suspended physical meetings and at first only posted sermons online before turning to Zoom to hold services and, much later, small-group meetings through online applications to serve as the "synagogues". Therefore, many Pentecostal churches in Nigeria were confronted with new problems of organising, ministering and catering for the spiritual needs of their members. This article addresses these challenges by drawing data from a combination of community observation and interviews with mostly Pentecostal church members. To understand the effects of the coronavirus pandemic on religious gathering in Lagos State, 15 semi-structured interviews were carried out through voice-note messages due to lockdown and physical distancing rules.

Keywords

digital religion – internet churches – Covid-19 – disembodied congregations – Pentecostalism – Nigeria

Published with license by Brill Schöningh | DOI:10.30965/27507955-20230009
 | ISSN: 2750-7947 (print) 2750-7955 (online)

1 Introduction

In the year 2020, Christianity witnessed a new dimension across the globe as a result of the novel coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic by showing that such a disruption of normal life can increase the popularity of "internet churches" worldwide. Amidst the pandemic, online religious platforms became the quintessential factor for sustaining the relevance of Christianity in human lives. A major example is the use of online communication and social networking sites such as Facebook, YouTube and Mixlr, while Zoom hosted numerous church services and webinars during the global lockdown. The implications of the current pandemic created enormous opportunities for churches to "go digital" and make their presence felt on the web. This is why scholars working in the field of media and religion urge academia to understand that there is a need to reconsider the concept of "community" in the contemporary world (McIntosh 2015, 132; Oderinde 2019, 2). The online environment is real, and its effects have real consequences on people in relation to specific offline/online worlds. The attempt to monitor the movement of the flu epidemic in 25 countries through Google, where anyone can trace or predict migration of the flu, is an interesting example of online observation carried out by Google Flu Epidemic (Ginsberg et al. 2009, 1–2). It can be argued that a similar approach was adopted during the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. The idea of the Google exposition notification is to publicly track people's travel history and movement through an ambitious application, comprising an automatic contact-tracing capabilities enabled with exposure notification system to monitor traveling and effectively isolate and quarantine any suspected case (Google 2021).

In as much communities operate on the internet, socio-religious communication is existential to computer-mediated environments. Such communication comprises not only the structures of these relationships but also the tools with which individuals access the spiritual space. As a result, online platforms of Nigerian Pentecostal churches were no exceptions in exploiting the opportunity provided by the internet during the pandemic lockdown to drive aspects of Pentecostalism to create economic class structures (prosumer economies) within non-spatial territories (Fuchs 2017; Oderinde 2022). However, a sharp divide emerged between the spiritual "haves" – those church members who can afford internet data – and the spiritual "have-nots" – the church members who cannot afford the cost of digital spiritualities.

Before the coronavirus outbreak in Nigeria, churchgoing was a major part of a social lifestyle to which other mundane activities were ingrained, especially for many Christians (Ter Haar 2011). The concept of physicality in the Christian

community was shattered by the effect of the coronavirus. All my interview respondents agreed that they missed the "Church" as a social gathering. For many Pentecostals, churchgoing activity was an opportunity to "dress well for the Lord" by putting on their best outfit. Attending after-church meetings was also common in Pentecostal churches as many adherents belong to different house fellowships and associations. The internet not only became complementary to the physical church, but it became an exemplar of the real (physical) church during the Covid-19 global lockdown.[1] As a result, the internet was used instead of physical churches – media through which people can express their spirituality. The point of emphasis is that advanced technologies have made information more accessible, enabling multitasking interactions. Hence, "the internet is a place to construct identities, forge new connections, which ultimately enhances the creation of socially produced spaces" (Taylor, Falconer and Snowdon 2014, 138; cf. Ihejerika 2017; Dawson and Cowan 2013). In other words, the accelerated development of online fellowships is a recent event in the history of Christianity in Nigeria (Asamoah-Gyadu 2007; Oderinde 2022). Therefore, the steady increase of "internet churches" among Christian communities during the bans on religious worship was a consequence of the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic.

One of the effects of the disembodied church was the rise of hitherto unpopular internet evangelists or pastors who exploited online social networking sites such as Facebook to render spiritual services such as preaching, praying and counselling. The restriction on religious gatherings encouraged the proliferation of "internet churches" leading to new challenges of maintaining numerous online altars that were established during the coronavirus pandemic. In Nigeria, especially during the period of "stay at home" restrictions, religion remained one of the most popular topics discussed on social media (Nairaland 2021). This article presents these three prominent issues – of organisation, ministration and catering to the spiritual needs of members – that confronted the Pentecostal churches in Nigeria during the lockdown. The discussion begins with a theoretical explanation of disembodied churches. This is followed by presentations of the method employed for data collection, the episode of electronic churches, and analytical results of the effects of the pandemic on embodied worship in Nigeria.

1 The "realness" is in defence of the internet church, which has been criticised for not having the same effect as the traditional church. However, the internet provided an important lifeline for spirituality during the global lockdown.

2 The Disembodied Congregation: A Theoretical Perspective of Internet Churches

Disembodiment is the act of being distant. The body as a medium is the most elementary point for interaction. Embodiment is a critical aspect of corporeal representation and the formation of social life (Oderinde 2019). As the internet becomes an indispensable resource for the world, the body is essential for media communication. In a non-spatial environment, one can either be present (embodied) or non-present (disembodied) (Oderinde 2019). Put differently, as long as modern media embodies aspects of its community by creating passwords, it also disembodies other areas by reducing distance. On the internet, the act of speaking that is not possible in the physical world can be rewound, recorded and remixed to achieve desired spiritual goals. Killmeier argues that any medium that facilitates the separation of communicants or the body from direct intercourse with its world disembodies communication. Therefore, as the body is a medium, the elimination of physical presence disembodies (Killmeier 2009). The internet church disembodies by reducing the physicality of its practitioners but also has the potential to increase the creativity of imagined spiritual online communities through connectivity and data. Therefore, disembodied congregations are non-traditional churches operating in the non-spatial environment such as the internet.

The internet provides a different aspect to disembodiment when a member of an online community "lurks" (Oderinde 2020, 63, 95). This means that the member observes but does not actively participate in discussions in the community. The member may also find it imperative to private-chat with other members of the same assemblage (community) for clarification or observation. The representation of personalities on the internet features gestures and expressions that evidence realness and a sense of being present in both online and offline worlds. For example, "greetings, fasting, daily devotion, expressing opinions, and lurking are rituals in the online environment" (Oderinde 2020, 95). A text message is an example of a form of communication that disembodies. Another example is the use of voice notes during the pandemic. These examples eliminate the pressures of ethics (such as knowing when to and not to shake hands) and other stereotypes (such as stuttering) that are required during physical interactions.

The study of online religious communities makes us understand that the maintenance of an internet church is cheaper than a physical church. However, "place" and the "body" play different roles in the online space (Oderinde 2019, 1–2). This may also account for the sudden boom of internet churches during the coronavirus pandemic. One needs a location for launching into the World

Wide Web and in Merleau-Ponty's conception of embodiment, the body is a means of communication and a medium for the world (Merleau-Ponty 2012). In addition, the body and place are mutually constitutive (Killmeier 2009). On the internet, the performative aspects of embodiment, which involve the act of interactive communication in the physical setting, have been transferred to the non-spatial environment. Nevertheless, disembodiment has both positive and negative implications for internet spirituality.

3 Method of Data Collection

In order to curtail the spread of the coronavirus, the Nigerian Presidential Task Force through the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) issued and reviewed several bans on large gatherings and religious worship in the country (Campbell 2020; NCDC 2020).[2] As a result of these bans, many churches turned towards their online platforms to serve as new spaces for worship as advised by the government. Others stayed tuned to television for live or recorded sermons of their favourite "man of God", thereby becoming members of imagined communities (Appadurai 1996, 35–36). The Covid-19 pandemic occurred at a time when we could hardly imagine social space without the thought of mobile and online media. Hence, the internet became the actual church for many Pentecostal adherents (Christensen, Jansson and Christensen 2011, xii).

This article is limited to the effects of Covid-19 on religious gatherings in Lagos for the following reasons. Firstly, not all Nigerian cities adhered to the protective measures issued by the NCDC regarding religious gatherings. Therefore, there was no uniform conformity to national prohibitions on religious gatherings. In the same vein, church services persisted in the rural areas of Ogun and Oyo states in the south-western part of Nigeria. Secondly, although there were few churches that defied the lockdown rules, restrictions were more acute in Lagos and its environs. This defiance was possible since Lagos State hosts thousands of weekly religious programmes and spiritual tourists. Thirdly, Lagos had the most confirmed cases of Covid-19 in the country (NCDC 2020). In this context, the article addresses the following key question for Lagos churches: can teaching pivot from stressing the importance of in-person fellowship to accommodating the segment of the congregation that prefers to attend services online?

2 Nigeria declared its first lockdown on 30 March 2020. However, by 7 May, the federal government eased the lockdown in Nigeria.

This article draws data from a combination of community observation and interviews with mostly Pentecostal church members.[3] This is to understand the effect of the coronavirus on religious gathering through their lived experience during the lockdown in Lagos State, Nigeria. Most of the respondents were committed workers of various churches, such as choristers, ushers and prayer warriors. The 15 semi-structured interviews were carried out through voice-note messages on WhatsApp due to the lockdown and physical distancing rules. The voice-note method gave the respondents freedom to answer questions over a prolonged period of time. In some cases, feedback took no less than a day and the compartmentalised nature of the feedback received facilitated an easy transcription process for analysis. In addition, information was also collected through informal chats with friends and associates of members of Pentecostal churches.

This research implemented the use of aliases to protect the privacy rights of the respondents. It relied on both online and offline newspaper reports and consulted the websites of the NCDC for Covid-19 updates. The snowball method was adopted to source other individuals to participate in the interviews (Yin 2011). For example, respondents suggested other church members to contribute towards the study. In the aftermath of the lockdown, participant observation in churches was carried out to monitor compliance with the protocol for the reopening of churches by the Lagos State and Federal Governments of Nigeria.

4 The Phenomenon of E-Church in Nigeria

During the pre-Covid-19 era, Nigerian Pentecostal churches provided spiritual services to their diasporic membership and only used online services for members and celebrity pastors who could not be present. For diasporic churches, community-building and spatial encumbrances are some of the motivations for establishing digital churches by online communities in Europe (Oderinde 2022). However, there was no compelling need for non-megachurches to create an "internet church" for their congregations as most church services were conducted in person in Nigeria. In fact, global Christendom never envisaged a Covid-19 pandemic that eventually prevented religious gatherings. Underpinning this absence of foreshadowing was the fact that the Ebola

3 Community observation was carried out within my location since Lagos State is home to thousands of small churches.

experience in Nigeria did not force social, economic and physical lockdown by the Nigerian government in order to curtail its spread.

The Nigerian government encouraged the use of technology in lieu of embodied worship as a strategy for preventing the coronavirus from engulfing the country. As a result, the adoption of various technological applications by home-grown churches during the Covid-19 lockdown was a response to the mandatory social or physical distance rule imposed by the government through the NCDC. Therefore, the effects of the government's restrictions on religious gatherings cannot be overemphasised despite the unpopularity of digital churches in Nigeria before the pandemic. By the second decade of the 21st century, the proliferation of new religious programmes in the non-conventional media space – especially during the Covid-19 global lockdown – enabled the proliferation of disembodied churches. Spiritual programmes, which cut across different religions, such as Islam, African Indigenous Religion and Christianity, can be transmitted through new digital platforms, such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and Livestream, while podcasts and voice message "spirituality" on WhatsApp now exist online. At the same time, the use of Mixlr for church choristers has also become the new norm for some Pentecostal Christians.[4]

Although the sudden boom of digital churches is rather new in the history of Nigerian Pentecostalism, many megachurches of Nigerian origin had earlier developed sophisticated online platforms to cater for the spiritual needs of their diasporic membership (Oderinde 2022, 6). Megachurches in Nigeria such as the Deeper Life Bible Church International (DLBCI), Christ Embassy International, Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) and Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM), to mention a few, have sophisticated internet platforms to preach the gospel by bringing individuals into different online assemblages in lieu of physical churches (Oderinde 2022). These megachurches also have private cable stations and sophisticated internet outreaches, while non-megachurches or smaller churches are comfortable with the reach that Facebook can provide. Due to the centralised structure of the church, DLBCI has for long-established cable services to meet spiritual demands of its global congregation. Pastor Williams Folorunsho Kumuyi, who heads DLBCI, has the prerogative of most altar functions such as prophetic declarations and sermons, which need to be streamed live or recorded to meet the spiritual needs of his vast global membership. Regarding the ways in which Christians adapted their spirituality due to the changes in spatial worship caused by the coronavirus pandemic, the responses by Boy of God, an

4 Midweek services of Covenant Christian Center can be followed on Mixlr.com/covenant. Information culled from www.insightsforliving.org on 15 July 2020.

attendee of Grace Finishers' Assembly, Damizeal of Christ Ministry, and King of Amazing Grace Pentecostal Church Worldwide supported the evidence that online spirituality was an evolving mode of worship for Christians in Nigeria. Boy of God preferred in-person worship for non-megachurch members by lamenting that internet spirituality had a problem with compliance. Damizeal had a similar opinion but raised important theological questions on doctrine, such as the possibility of speaking in-tongues. They respectively opined:

> There are differences between the physical church and the internet church. As a pastor, I get motivated by the crowd. You get an instant feeling when you are not doing well. It is a bit demotivating just to see the camera, perhaps yourself and a few others. In the online world, it is difficult to concentrate especially when no one is there to check. The online setting is demanding in the sense that you have to be disciplined to run a home church. (Interview with Boy of God)
>
> I am empowered in the spirit when I play the drums in the (physical) church. When the choir sings and I play the drums in the physical church, I feel some energy by getting connected to the spiritual realm. There is a synergy that drives my heart and I start to speak in-tongues. I do not do that in online services. So, the ambiance is important, it uplifts my soul when I am worshipping and playing the drums. (Interview with Damizeal)

Boy of God and Damizeal expressed the importance of physical embodiment: feelings, touching and presence that can be obtained differently on the internet. However, Boy of God explained that these attributes of spatial congregations are somewhat difficult in online services if one wants to achieve desired spiritual results. The significance of the adoption of this new worship style rendered many non-pastoral workers redundant. An exception to this redundancy affected by the internet church were the choristers who favoured the Mixlr application to other means of communication to create online communities for rehearsals. Through this means, they could support worship sessions and also supply musical content to online adherents.

The excerpts above reveal some of the challenges and advantages of the internet as a platform for church activities. Damizeal, in the second excerpt above, hints at the act of spoken words (embodiment) when he mentions "tongue-speaking", which is a core identity of the Nigerian Pentecostals. "Tongue-speaking", otherwise known as glossolalia, is the act of speaking in "strange" languages while in prayer. It is believed by the Pentecostals that this style of prayer prevents the devil from sabotaging their communion with

God. He (Damizeal) believes "tongue-speaking" is not effective during online services. In this instance, Damizeal means the act of spoken words that are not mediated through the media but have better connection to the spiritual realm. Another respondent, Sister Hassan, a prayer warrior from the Mountain of Fire and Miracles (MFM) church, mentioned that many audio prayers in the form of voice notes were useful, but also not very effective during the lockdown. In her interview, Sister Hassan explained:

> If there is no internet, the breakdown [of church organisation] would have been more serious. I am not condemning the internet; however, it must not be at the cost of our congregational worship and our meeting. From my own experience, it is not as effective as the physical congregation, but then I think it goes a long way. Many Nigerians are not connected to the internet. For example, I missed my church's Bible study yesterday while reading *Silent Laborers* by Gbile Akanni. I got carried away and forgot to switch the radio on.

In their statements above, Boy of God and Sister Hassan expressed reservations about concentration, discipline and participation in a disembodied church setting. Sister Hassan particularly suggested that the internet is alienating in that internet spirituality comes at a cost and that the user is responsible for data. She found the situation to be unlike the physical churches, where ushers were allowed to caution erring members by ensuring concentration, and responses were monitored. Internet churches have different conformance measures, such as notification for meetings, membership selection, private chat walls (WhatsApp) and the organisation of religious communities in conference call rooms (Oderinde 2022). This development encouraged the mutation of disembodied (non-spatial) churches during the coronavirus pandemic of 2020. For example, Peter of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) added that his congregation used "Mixlr and WhatsApp to communicate" before the pandemic. The fact of the matter is that this does not exclude the use of new applications such as Mixlr for choristers (as previously mentioned), while the use of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube were additionally encouraged as ways of "promoting the gospel" by church members. However, attending internet church services required data and a stable connection, which became a major problem as many people were unable to work during the lockdown, leading to financial strains on the majority of members and their households. In other words, internet churches did not necessarily benefit the poor section of the population during the lockdown. The shifting Pentecostal culture to digital spiritualities alienates poor church members, which makes online religious

communities uniquely different from the traditional territorialised form of religiosity.

5 The Effects of Covid-19 on Fundraising in Pentecostal Churches

The spread of technologies and its accompanying effects encouraged the rationale for many churches to set up several electronic churches (e-churches) during the coronavirus lockdown. This section reports on the measures taken by many Pentecostal churches in order to be relevant in the Nigerian religious milieu during the lockdown in Nigeria. What I describe as disembodied churches are non-spatial churches that became the new norm as directed by the government for conditions to conduct in-person church services. This action was to mitigate the spread of the deadly coronavirus. For this reason, Pentecostal leaders took the opportunity of non-physical gatherings to create motivational and devotional webinars such as the Pentecostal Business Fellowships of The Covenant Nation led by Pastor Poju Oyemade. This forum enabled members of digital (Pentecostal) churches to see themselves temporarily as imagined communities in non-spatial territories. The description of such imagined communities by Benedict Anderson shows that their potential was enhanced through the creation of symbols, rituals and images with which members of online religious communities relate (Anderson 1996; Gould 2015; Wise 2014).

In the pre-Covid-19 era, physical meetings among church members were important for fundraising. This is a strategy employed by churches to redistribute funds among the needy in society. The effect of Covid-19 overstretched the influence of Pentecostal churches to raise funds for palliative support through physical fundraising events. However, what became unprecedented in the history of religious gatherings in Nigeria was not only the sudden accelerated growth of digital church services but the adjustments made to electronic fund transfers of spiritual monies. For instance, the method of organising church remittances posed new questions for inquiry. Over the years, there have been gradual changes in the strategies for money collection during physical church services. In the physical church, the process of collection has a familiar pattern. An example is when congregants dance towards the collection point, where monies are carefully deposited. In another instance, envelopes are passed around for tithe and offering collection, while music plays in the background. As most Pentecostal churches began to expand, such monies had the possibility of being collected through the use of point of sale machines or QR codes with an internet banking option to facilitate the easy transfer of funds. As a result of the coronavirus pandemic, many churches switched from the use of

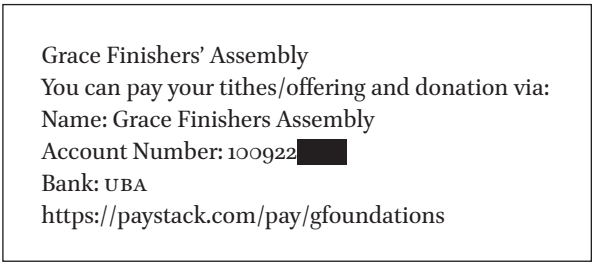

FIGURE 1 Example of a cashless church payment option

point of sale machines, which requires in-person activity, to the convenience of e-money (online) transfers for the conveyance of tithes, offerings, seed money and other forms of pledges during the lockdown. Figure 1 typifies an exemplary method of payment employed by both megachurches and non-megachurches after the government announced restrictions on religious gatherings in Nigeria. Many churches have employed the use of Facebook as a platform to campaign or solicit for funds while continuing to function as a church on the internet. My argument here is that the use of e-transfers of money became popular and generated heated controversy on the social media space such as Nairaland and Facebook.

As mentioned earlier, online services alienate members who cannot afford data to participate in digital church services. This is what Christian Fuchs describes as a "prosumer economy", whereby members of various online religious communities work without necessarily being paid (Fuchs 2017, 73, 92). For example, this happened in the case illustrated by Figure 1, when members of Grace Finishers' Assembly shared or displayed notifications of the church programme on their statuses and walls on WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram. Another effect was the fact that names were attached to the senders' donations. Thus, the church could trace the lowest and highest givers among the congregation. The anonymity concept of giving jettisoned by many churches had significance for the cashless church in such a way that it created risk of being used as a platform for online fraud to launder money in the disguise of fundraising.

6 The Effects of Coronavirus Restrictions on Religious Worship in Lagos

The health regulations adopted by the Nigerian government for the containment of the deadly coronavirus appeared to be similar to the British colonial government's strategy during the outbreak of the Spanish Flu in 1918 (Oluwasegun 2017). The latter government ordered the closure of public

spaces, and interfered with private lives by closing worship centres across the Southern and Northern Provinces of the British Protectorate of Nigeria (Oluwasegun 2017). Amidst the dip in global oil prices in the year 2020, and the power play between Saudi Arabia and Russia, no country envisaged the rate of the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. Nigeria, which had its 2020 budget pegged to oil prices of around $50 per barrel, was badly hit by the fall in global oil prices. By the end of January 2020, the International Health Regulations (IHR) Emergency Committee recommended that "all countries should be prepared for containment, including active surveillance, early detection, isolation and case management, contact-tracing and prevention of onward spread of 2019-nCoV infection" (WHO 2020, n.p.). The directive given to member states was aimed at data-sharing with the World Health Organization (WHO). On 25 February 2020, the first case of the coronavirus in Nigeria was announced by the Presidential Task Force on Covid-19 (NCDC 2020). This led the Nigerian government to suspend its plans to revitalise the economy through its visa-free policy and turn its attention to formulating strategies for containing the deadly coronavirus.

The announcement by the Nigerian government on 31 March 2020 to ban all forms of congregational worship due to the rise in new cases of Covid-19 caused panic among churchgoers and religious leaders across the country. Before the lockdown, most social, economic and religious activities dominated the outdoor environment, while sounds from indoor and outdoor spaces formed a constellation of noise peculiar to Lagos State (Brown, Gjestland and Dubois 2016). For instance, the call to prayer from minarets, the sound of electric generators, loudspeakers from churches, and the ambience surrounding the contestation for socioeconomic and religious space in Lagos became private affairs through a single fiat from the Presidential Task Force on Covid-19. Some churches that contravened the lockdown held services by removing the plugs of their speakers during the period when members should have been in isolation.

The Nigerian government, through the NCDC, issued "protective templates" for the containment, isolation and treatment of Covid-19 cases. In addition, news filtered online and in the national newspapers that members of the Nigerian presidential inner circles had tested positive for Covid-19 (NCDC 2020). The lockdown had a domino effect on the economy and the livelihoods of Nigerians as most physical activities ended abruptly. Many took to social media, such as Facebook and Nairaland, to express their opinions on the pandemic. The subject mostly revolved around "support", "claim of healing" and "Christian charity" to meet the needs of the vulnerable population in times of crisis, such as the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. However, what seemed to be a consolation for citizens was the relief that territorial borders

were shut, meaning the elites and the citizenry were confined to the same "decayed whole". Their concerns were based on a number of issues. This first concerned the genuineness of the NCDC in fighting the pandemic. The scepticism surrounding the capacity of the Nigerian government to provide support for its citizens during the pandemic took a new turn, shaping dire concerns among Nigerians on the state of health care in the country. Many Nigerians became apprehensive of the terrible state of health facilities, labelling some isolation centres as the gateways to the "Sambisa Forest" (Nairaland 2021).[5] The second concern questioned the role of the church during the lockdown (Akukwe 2020). The following excerpts illustrate the opinions of respondents on the coronavirus:

> Coronavirus started in China. It is an infectious disease, and it is spreading rapidly. The coronavirus is more of a spiritual than physical warfare. We might feel we do not need the church, but if the church is left out, we are in for more trouble. (Damizeal)
>
> Covid-19 is a virus called coronavirus. It is a very deadly virus; it has killed a lot of people. It can be contagious when you are in a close distance with someone who has it. The symptoms are coughing, sneezing, cold, feverish feelings like malaria, but I learnt it is worse. Presently in Nigeria, it has killed over 200 people. In the US, it has killed many more people. (Interview with Peter)
>
> We hear Covid-19 is a variant of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). A lot of theories are flying around. What I also know is that it has a resemblance of malaria fever. So, the symptoms of Covid-19 and malaria are very similar and that is why some persons will tell you chloroquine, malaria drugs and treatment can cure Covid-19 in its mildest form or level. But if you have underlying diseases, one is susceptible to death from the virus. (Interview with King)

The opinions expressed in the excerpts above exemplify mixed reactions surrounding the outbreak and spread of the pandemic, since many hardly encountered a Covid-19 patient in Nigeria. Damizeal concluded that the outbreak of Covid-19 was spiritually motivated. King, in turn, likened an infectious disease (Covid-19) to a non-infectious fever such as malaria. At the beginning of the pandemic, prominent Pentecostal leaders did little to orientate their members on the disease but rather engaged the government in a series of battles of words (Ojo 2020). The end of the year is a time when most Nigerian pastors

5 Sambisa Forest, a National Forest Reserve, is the hiding place for the notorious bandits and members of Boko Haram terrorists in Northern Nigeria.

reveal their prophesies to their congregations. However, no pastor correctly predicted a global pandemic and lockdown (Alao 2020).

Amongst the many concerns about the relevance of the church was the question of healing echoed by many Pentecostal pastors such as Bishop Oyedepo of The Living Faith Chapel International (a.k.a. Winners' Chapel), Enoch Adeboye of the RCCG and Apostle Johnson Suleman of Omega Fire Ministries (OFM) (Frost and Öhlmann 2021). Many of these Pentecostal pastors believed that the sick could be healed, regardless of the lockdown, because the example of Jesus in the Bible proves that healing can take place both privately and publicly (Mt 8:16; Lk 9:11 and 1 Pt 2:24). While some other religious leaders such as Tunde Bakare of Citadel Global Church supported the decision of the government to lock down the country, others shared their sentiments against the pronouncement of the Nigerian government to open market venues while religious worship centres remained closed (BBC PIDGIN 2020; DailyLeaks 2020). After all, Pastor Adeboye of RCCG held annual Holy Ghost conventions that attracted millions at the height of the Ebola crisis in 2014 (Akukwe 2020). Therefore, the megachurch pastors and other non-megachurch pastors alike struggled to follow the directives of the authorities while simultaneously antagonising one another.

In accordance with the NCDC regulations, many churches eventually limited their services to 50 congregants (Akukwe 2020). Amongst the many conspiracies of the Nigerian megachurch pastors surrounding the existence of Covid-19 were the claims by Pastor Chris Oyakhilome of Believers' Love World (also known as Christ Embassy), who suggested that the introduction of the 5G (fifth-generation) wireless network was responsible for the outbreak of the pandemic (Egbunike 2020). Sister Hassan, a physical solo evangelist, on her part submitted that the pandemic was a plague and an attempt to silence the church. Sister Hassan lamented the fact that the lockdown in Lagos State prevented her from executing her mandate to preach the gospel freely to those she regarded as the "lost ones". With her submission below, there is a link between the outbreak of Covid-19 and eschatological (end times) preaching when she argued that:

> I board two buses on my way to work every day and I must minister in these two buses. So, I sat down yesterday and said to myself: will I not be able to minister in the bus again? In fact, they [passengers] will ask you to keep quiet! I consider it as another device of the Satan trying to silence the church. The life of those who are supposed to receive salvation through the message are in jeopardy. Satan has devised a mean by which Christians will no longer be able to preach. (Interview with Sister Hassan)

Contrary to megachurch pastors, King disagreed that the government's policy on the coronavirus was a sabotage of the gospel but nevertheless rejected the appellation attached to worship centres as "non-essential". King pointed to the disobedience of some pastors in his interview, labelling them as irresponsible:

> When it comes to religion, I am always blunt. I will say this without any iota of bias that it was irresponsible of those pastors and the followers who attended those services knowing that there was a lockdown, contravening the rules and regulations of federal government. For me it is very irresponsible on the part of the religious leaders.

King also suggested that the government's policy was more of a "protective measure" for citizens irrespective of their creed, ethnicity or religion. In a similar line of thought, Brother Majo of the Christ Redemption Bible Church dissected the tension between religious leaders and the Nigerian government around the appellation "non-essential" attached to the church by the government. Many churchgoers became irate at the label "non-essential", in that Christians saw the church as a place of worship that forms an integral part of their spirituality and lifestyle. Brother Majo submitted:

> Some felt the lockdown was a mandate to insult the church. Although the church buildings were not permitted to be open, we can minister online. So, the gospel was never constrained. The building is not the church, the people are the church. That is my opinion, but I feel they felt they should not call the church non-essential. For every minister, pastor or religious leader who disobeys the government, how do you want your followers to obey you? The Bible says we should respect the people in authority. We [must] abide by any directive given by the federal government.

As more information on Covid-19 became widespread, public opinion on the authenticity of the virus became divergent. Furthermore, many followers of Pentecostal churches with whom I interacted opined that the decision of the government to put the country in lockdown was a major setback for the informal economy. However, Sister Hassan submitted that the lockdown posed a threat not only to the "here but hereafter". This meant that people who were not saved would not only be punished "here" by the coronavirus but would also be condemned to "Hell" in the "hereafter". Megachurch pastors openly criticised this decision of the Nigerian government to put the country in lockdown by tagging it as an "attack on the church". The implication of the pandemic sparked serious debates on the relevance of especially the Nigerian

Pentecostal churches, the preponderance of faith healers, and the question of tithing among Nigerians on social media chat forums such as Nairaland and Facebook.

I share Brother Majo's sentiment, adding that there was a misconception about the role of the church during the pandemic. Brother Majo opined that the church should direct its attention to its members rather than focus energy in debating the rationale for lockdown. Fikayo Olowolagba quoted Poju Oyemade's comment on his Instagram page that "closing the churches does not in any way mean the closure of the anointing of the Holy Spirit from working…" (Olowolagba 2020). Pentecostal churches in Nigeria were confronted with new multifaceted problems of organising, ministering and catering to their members during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown. After the lockdown, Bishop Oyedepo openly rejected the idea of taking doses of the vaccine due to his belief in the healing power of Jesus. This meant that his belief in God would protect him from the disease. For many of his followers but also other Christians, Oyedepo's position on the vaccine was the only acceptable one, culminating in the belief that the anointing oil served as a substitute for the coronavirus vaccine (Haruna 2021).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the Federal Government of Nigeria reviewed the ban on religious gatherings twice. The first ban (effected on 30 March 2020) shut down the states of Lagos, Abuja and Ogun and limited congregations to 50 people. However, this restriction was soon reviewed and limited religious gatherings to 20 congregants. These restrictions were vigorously monitored by the State and Federal Task Forces and arrests of religious leaders who contravened lockdown orders were made. The ban brought about changes to the Nigerian religious milieu both in the spatial and non-spatial environments. In addition, the ban revolutionised churchgoing by encouraging new formats for online devotion in Nigeria. The Lagos State Government recognised its duty to protect its citizens, and therefore made significant strides in information-sharing by maintaining strict adherence to the bans of the NCDC. However, the approach of the state government was reactionary rather than proactive. For example, a poor attempt at door-to-door community contact-tracing was made. In the process, I declared to the Lagos state officials that I came into the country from Switzerland two weeks before the lockdown with the hope that I would be properly tested and monitored, but that never materialised. Many megachurches were forced to break into smaller groups of not more than 50 persons at a service. Most that decided to return to in-person church services demonstrated their readiness to cooperate with the government directives by rotating their congregants. Other protective protocols such as hand sanitiser, soap and water were equally in place to ensure compliance.

7 The Challenge of Ministering to Members

A significant change in the Nigerian religioscapes was the rise of solo evangelists, in particular online preachers whose online personas were well decorated through pictures and posts of bodies that were imagined as embodying the quality of saints. This brought both believers and non-believers into their assemblage through comments on different social media platforms (Dias 2003, 37). Observation shows that morning evangelism persisted in various communities in Lagos State during the lockdown. These sets of Christians continued preaching even when Lagos State witnessed a new security threat in the infamous "One Million Boys".[6] They did not only preach, but also participated in the distribution of palliatives in the form of food items and monies for their various church organisations. Many of my respondents also mentioned that they evangelised within their neighbourhoods by independently preaching the gospel during the lockdown. Other respondents such as Don Mark of the Refinery Church International explored the internet platforms for evangelism. In addition, the faith programme of Rev. Harrison Ayintete provided spiritual succour amid turbulent times. Don Mark explained the advantage of internet use for his church and offered the following description of his "man of God":

> During the lockdown period, we were able to invest such money into the media. Secondly, we came up with programmes. For instance, we have 30 minutes of faith programme with Rev. Harrison Ayintete, which occurs during the day and night. For that period, we were able to inject faith in people when fear was spreading. We would not have paid attention to the studio if not the lockdown. We invested and we were able to reach people from the internet, and over time we got better!

Some churches, including the Refinery Church International (a non-megachurch), did not change their belief in congregational worship (cf. Mt 18:20), organising their members in small numbers, resulting in clusters of smaller gatherings of worshippers for specific reasons.[7] Firstly, the implication for online worship provided a solution for churches which did not have an online presence to continue their spirituality while observing the government's directives of staying at home. Secondly, a shift to virtual worship brought about

6 A group of young men known as the "One Million Boys" terrorised different communities in Lagos State, ravaging many homes in their path.

7 Despite the ban on religious gatherings, some churches and mosques opened their doors to religious worship. Nevertheless, the government took measures to arrest culprits to serve as a deterrent to others.

increased visibility on the internet for the non-megachurches. Thirdly, most respondents acknowledged that Facebook is used for live messages while WhatsApp is preferred for information-sharing. A close examination of the motive for Pentecostal churches to set up internet churches during the pandemic lockdown was primarily staying in the vocation of (salvation) serving the Lord. At this point, it is apt to revisit the guiding question of this article: can teaching pivot from stressing the importance of in-person fellowship to accommodating the segment of the congregation that prefers to attend services online? This question speaks to the challenges of a post-coronavirus pandemic world. Reverend Sam Adeyemi of the Fountain of Life Church expressed a sentiment in an interview published by an online newspaper that it is possible for megachurches to lose a significant number of memberships after the Covid-19 lockdown (Ojo 2020). This indicates that many people are currently attending online services since they do not have to be physically present (BBC Yoruba 2020). While his (Sam Adeyemi's) observation lacked scientific findings and data, his submission suggested that most megachurches would lose physical membership due to the increasing availability of digital churches.

Further research is needed to understand whether there is a changing pattern in physical church attendance due to the Covid-19 lockdown. The reason is that the internet is a product of secularisation (Beyer 2007; Armfield and Holbert 2003; Buddenbaum and Stout 1996), hence promoting individuality and a certain level of freedom but also challenging issues of control, authority and compliance by members. All these factors are important for megachurches in that many are centrally controlled, and physical gathering is quite important for the maintenance of the church's hierarchy. Contrary to Adeyemi's opinion, the proliferation of the internet may not pose a significant threat to physical membership as witnessed by the increasing "demise" of the church population in Western Europe (Adogame 2010, 1; Freston 2010, 1; Burgess 2008, 29–63). The resilience may be attributed not only to the effervescent existing religious culture in Nigeria, but also the mode of African church worship that requires physical participation such as deliverance sessions, singing and dancing processions. Online sacramental performances accompanied by religious rituals such as the sharing of "Holy Communion" raise doubts about conformance unlike in the physical settings, where the pastor prepares and conducts the ritual on behalf of the congregation. This priestly role reserved for pastors may be performed at home by ordinary members of the church. As for Peter:

> Holy Communion can be done without being in the church building. You can be in your house to partake in the holy communion. You can do it

> with your brethren. During the lockdown, I bought "bread and Maltina", bless both and use them. To me that is normal, I do that sometimes. There are no restrictions from doing that if we are Christians.

Every year, the Easter period is an iconic celebration that commemorates the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This makes Easter an important festivity for Christians around the world. For Nigerians, 2020's Easter season was celebrated during the pandemic. As a result, church services were conducted via the internet and the effect encouraged the democratisation of sacramental rites that were previously part of priestly functions. Laities other than pastors could prepare and sanctify "malt and bread" for the performance of Holy Communion. Furthermore, it was a special time for Pentecostal families to bond by spending more time in home fellowship. Most of my respondents mentioned that the dynamics of prayer focused on the family rather than attending the church building.

8 Conclusion

The scientists who predicted a world where the internet dominates almost all human activities were proved correct during the Covid-19 pandemic global lockdown. It is equally interesting to note the role played by tech-giant companies such as Google in facilitating easy identification and tracking of travellers to assist in the battle against the spread of deadly diseases across the globe. Conjecture surrounding the Covid-19 outbreak, lockdown and policies related to lockdown and the reopening of churches led to an acrimonious relationship between the Nigerian government and some megachurch pastors such as Bishop David Oyedepo of Winners' Chapel International. A major schism between both stakeholders arose when the former labelled the church as "non-essential". Further research is needed to understand the nexus between "healing" and "immunity" in the use of anointing oil amongst Nigerian Pentecostal Christians. An example is the claim by a section of Christians in the country that the anointing oil is a substitute for the coronavirus vaccines.

This article argued that the use of the internet for church purposes is not a new phenomenon, especially among Nigerian megachurches, but only became widespread during the coronavirus lockdown in Nigeria. In as much as churches around the globe closed their doors to congregational worship due to the bans imposed by governments, the accelerated growth of internet religion was no exception in giving rise to the recent disembodied congregations. The social media church is available for Christians who choose to be spatially

absent, but non-spatially present with the option of a "cashless church". In Nigeria, the result encouraged a spirituality that comes with a token that widened the gap between the spiritual "haves" and "have-nots" and an online spirituality that is susceptible to fraud and identity theft. Although the respondents mentioned that social media church is not more effective than "actual" in-person church services, it provided an alternative means of worship for new entrants into social media religiosity.

Many churches responded to the lockdown by providing economic palliatives "in cash and kind" to their members. In the aftermath of the lockdown, non-megachurches do not struggle with overcrowding, unlike their megachurch counterparts. Megachurches continue to maintain their online services but rotate physical membership to avoid congestion of worshippers. The coronavirus pandemic brought disruption on a global scale, forcing churches worldwide to immediately move to the internet if they were to survive. The Nigerian Pentecostals were adept at implementing the change, thereby securing their future in both the offline and online environments.

In the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic, religious leaders must work with the government in providing information to their congregations on the effects of a pandemic such as Covid-19 on large gatherings rather than sabotaging the efforts of the government in fighting the pandemic. By so doing, the church can contribute to the discourse of preventing the spread of a new wave of Covid-19, especially in a crowded space such as the church environment. The church also needs to critically have discourse on the question of "vaccine and healing" as this may lead to a decrease in church attendance. It may also affect the reputation and influence of the church in the Nigerian political milieu if it chooses to oppose the vaccination programme of the Nigerian government.

Issue and Editors

This article is part of the special issue "Religion in the Digital Realm", edited by Ignatius Swart and Marie-Luise Frost.

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Policy and Practice Note

BRILL | SCHÖNINGH

RELIGION & DEVELOPMENT 3 (2024) 415–429

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Religion and Development in the Digital Age: A Policy Note on *Waz Mahfils* in Bangladesh

Policy and Practice Note

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Published online 29 April 2025

Abstract

Bangladesh is witnessing a significant transformation within its religious landscape, particularly through the influence of digitally available *Waz Mahfils*. As digital media platforms like Facebook and YouTube extend the reach of these gatherings, they have grown in popularity, offering avenues for spiritual guidance and community development. However, this growth is not without its challenges. *Waz Mahfils* have been criticised for sometimes promoting religious intolerance and violence, highlighting the need for careful moderation and authentic leadership. Historically, the integration of religious perspectives into development practices has been limited, yet the unique

Published with license by Brill Schöningh | DOI:10.30965/27507955-20230044
 | ISSN: 2750-7947 (print) 2750-7955 (online)

platform provided by *Waz Mahfils* for engaging in discussions on crucial social issues suggests the potential for a more inclusive approach to development. This policy note focuses on harnessing the transformative potential of *Waz Mahfils* to foster social cohesion, development and a more inclusive society in Bangladesh. By outlining strategic recommendations that may leverage these religious gatherings for the broader good, the policy note seeks to ensure that religious expression serves as a cornerstone for progress and unity, contributing positively to Bangladesh's development trajectory.

Keywords

Waz Mahfils – development – digital media – religious freedom – social cohesion – Bangladesh

1 Introduction

Bangladesh is experiencing the rise of an "Islamist public sphere", where religious movements and ideologies are becoming increasingly visible (Al-Zaman 2020; Rahman 2018; Riaz 2013). This sphere includes various Islamic movements, madrasas exerting influence over societal views of Islam, and political parties' projects aimed at Islamisation. These elements are coalescing to form a distinct Islamic space within the country's traditionally secular public sphere. Rather than outright challenging secular norms, they are creating a parallel discourse that offers a different viewpoint based on Islamic values and beliefs (Rahman 2018).

Rahman (2018) suggests looking at this development through two lenses. First, Bangladesh's secular identity is itself a mix of diverse religions and cultures, contributing to a unique Bengali Muslim identity. However, there has also been a push towards a more conservative Islamic practice, aiming to distinguish a "purer" form of Islam from the region's historical blend of beliefs. This push for a distinct Islamic identity has gained traction, challenging the syncretic Bengali Muslim identity (Rahman 2018). Secondly, the construction and popularity of this Islamic public sphere involve educational bodies, media and political organisations. Some contribute to its development, while others seek to benefit from its influence (Rahman 2018).

In Bangladesh, religious leaders from both Qwami and Aliya madrasas use *Waz Mahfils* to shape and guide the country's Islamic public sphere. Despite some scepticism about their depth, these gatherings have become key in interpreting Islam for everyday life (Rahman 2018). The speakers at these events

have a profound impact on their audience, often emphasising the consequences of the afterlife, which aligns with the cultural emphasis on mortality and what follows. Over time, *Waz Mahfils* have shifted to not just focus on religious teachings but also to comment on societal issues, positioning themselves more towards ideology rather than strict theology. This shift allows these gatherings to challenge secular views and debate women's rights, aiming to reinforce traditional Islamic values within society. This development marks a clear stance against the secular and liberal norms prevalent in Bangladesh, establishing a discourse that contrasts with modern public discussions (Rahman 2018).

Waz Mahfils are gatherings for Islamic sermons delivered by religious leaders to large audiences. *Waz*, meaning "giving advice" in Arabic, focuses on guiding people on Islamic culture and practices. The term *Mahfil* means a "gathering" or "meeting". *Waz Mahfil* events are often set up in open spaces like playgrounds or after-harvest paddy fields in rural areas, or in public spaces in cities, typically during winter. They start in the evening and go on until midnight. The talks are delivered by *mufassirs* (experts in interpreting the Quran) or *ulemas* (Islamic scholars), with the main speaker presenting last (Ahmed 2024). Preachers typically visit several locations in a day, possibly delivering two to three sermons (Rifat et al. 2022). The stage, slightly raised, hosts the speakers and distinguished guests, including sociopolitical leaders. Men sit on the ground on mats, while women are in separate tents, divided by a curtain. The audience size can range from hundreds to thousands, varying with the speakers' popularity (Ahmed 2024). These events are pivotal in the social, political and religious realms, fostering community cohesion and addressing critical issues like life, culture, economics and politics.

In this policy note, we explore the transformative potential of *Waz Mahfils* within the sociopolitical and religious landscape of Bangladesh, emphasising the importance of incorporating religious freedom into the nation's development agenda. We propose strategic approaches to utilise *Waz Mahfils* not only as platforms for spiritual guidance but also as powerful tools for community development, social cohesion and the promotion of a more inclusive society. Acknowledging the complex dynamics at play, this policy note outlines the strategies aimed at leveraging these religious gatherings to foster development while ensuring the protection and promotion of religious freedom. Through a nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities presented by *Waz Mahfils* as expressed through digital media, we offer insights into how this public form of faith-based activity can contribute positively to Bangladesh's development trajectory, fostering an environment where religious expression serves as a cornerstone for progress and unity.

2 *Waz Mahfils*: Religious Freedom, Public Religion and Development

Based on empirical research online, this policy note aims at a nuanced exploration of the complex dynamics between religious sermons, societal values and legal frameworks of *Waz Mahfils* in Bangladesh. *Waz Mahfils*, characterised by the compelling oratory of Islamic speakers, play a pivotal role in the cultural and religious tapestry of Bangladesh. These gatherings, whether in physical spaces or online platforms, have the power to influence personal and communal beliefs, often touching on aspects of personal development, family life and community-building. While the sermons primarily aim to echo Islamic teachings such as monotheism, the teachings of the Quran and the importance of community and social justice, their reception varies widely among audiences, reflecting the diverse interpretations and responses shaped by differing Islamic sects and denominational perspectives.

Historically, Islamic teachings have served as guidance for ethical living and kindness towards others. However, the application of these teachings in the contemporary context raises debates around issues like gender equality and women's rights, challenging traditional norms in light of Bangladesh's legal commitments to equality. The influence of *Waz Mahfils* extends to shaping social contexts and power relations, with the potential to both reinforce traditional values and advocate for societal change.

Despite their beneficial role in fostering community and spiritual guidance, concerns over the propagation of extremist ideologies, misinformation and gender discrimination through some sermons underscore the need for a balanced approach to religious expression. The popularity of speakers like Maulana Azhari[1] on digital platforms reveals the profound impact of *Waz Mahfils* in motivating and inspiring listeners, demonstrating the vast reach and potential of these gatherings in shaping public religion and development (Selinger 2004; Stille 2021).

The Government of Bangladesh has however undertaken measures to monitor *Waz Mahfils* closely, aiming to curb communalism, militancy and speeches that could incite violence or spread hate, notably through the enforcement of laws like the Digital Security Act of 2018 (renamed Cyber Security Act in

1 Maulana Mizanur Rahman Azhari is a Bangladeshi Islamic scholar and orator who has gained popularity over the years for his interpretations of the Quran and Hadith. The Bangladeshi government accused him of spreading "extremist ideology" and cancelled some *Mahfils*. He left Bangladesh in 2020, stating his desire to pursue further education. He continued with his sermons online from Malaysia until his return to the country after the fall of the Awami League regime in August 2024.

2023).[2] These political measures reflect the delicate balance between safeguarding freedom of expression and preventing the adverse effects of harmful rhetoric. There is widespread criticism that a delicate balance has not always been achieved.[3]

This policy note, against the above backdrop, calls for a thoughtful engagement with the content and conduct of *Waz Mahfils*, advocating for a discourse that supports religious freedom online while promoting societal well-being and development.

3 *Waz Mahfils* in the Digital Age

The advent of social networking sites and digital media platforms has amplified the reach of digital religion, especially through Facebook and YouTube, facilitating broader dissemination of sermons, thereby contributing to the popularity of these religious gatherings. The application of social networking sites and the dissemination of Islamic knowledge has become a global phenomenon that scholars have examined from the frameworks of inter alia Hashtag Islam, Digital Islam, Cyber Islam/Muslim and the Cyber-Islamic environment (Bunt 2018; Elfenbein 2022; Rozehnal 2022). YouTube in particular has risen as an important platform for sharing socioreligious content, particularly *Waz Mahfils*. This shift towards digital platforms has been partly due to the challenges of organising in-person events, including lack of support or obstruction from government bodies (Riaz 2021; Stille 2020, cited in Ahmed 2024).

Since it started in 2005, YouTube has grown incredibly and is now the biggest site for sharing videos worldwide, boasting 2.5 billion users globally as reported in 2022 (Ahmed 2024). Daily, people watch 5 billion videos, spending a total of 1 billion hours on the site, making it the second most frequented website after Google. YouTube allows users to watch videos as well as live streaming on their mobile phones without any paid subscriptions. It also offers community features like creating and subscribing to channels, as well as commenting on others' videos. By 2022, YouTube hosted over 51 million active channels and offered localised versions in more than 80 languages. Over 70% of the time

2 In November 2022, the Parliamentary Committee of the Ministry of Public Administration instructed the police to monitor the content of *Waz Mahfils*, and in 2019 the Ministry of Home Affairs also circulated some recommendations on monitoring sensitive content of *Waz Mahfils* (*Dhaka Tribune* 2022).

3 The interim government that came to power in August 2024 in Bangladesh decided to revoke the Cyber Security Act as it was being used to curb press freedom and suppress political dissent (Mustafa 2024).

spent watching YouTube is accounted for by mobile devices (Ahmed 2024, 46). In Bangladesh, YouTube is the third most used social media platform, following Facebook and Twitter usage rates (StatCounter 2021).

The presence of Islamic content on YouTube has seen a significant increase, doubling from 6.04% in 2011 to 13.11% by 2019, highlighting a noticeable trend over eight years (Al-Zaman 2022, 3). This uptick is particularly striking in the most recent years, aligning with the social mediatisation theory of religion (Hjarvard 2008, 2011; Lövheim 2014). This theory suggests that social media plays a critical role in both the creation and consumption of Islamic content, thereby transforming traditional Islamic practices (Al-Zaman 2022).

Gray Bunt (2018, 2022) shows how the digital turn has altered the forms and styles of religious discourses of Islam, particularly the articulation of faith and authority and their role in determining practice. The evolution of Muslim digital worlds is forged with the emergence of digitally literate religious scholars, alternative approaches to the flow of information beyond traditional practices, the immediacy of responding to diverse follower networks, and real-time commentaries. Consequently, people who watch Islamic videos on platforms like YouTube tend to like these videos more than they dislike them. Also, the length of the videos does not significantly affect how much viewers engage with them. This behaviour indicates a generally positive and supportive response to Islamic content online (Al-Zaman 2022).

The rise in the production and sharing of Islamic content on digital media platforms could be attributed to growing religious engagement among social media users. Initially, this rise was enabled by the digitalisation of Bangladesh since 2009. In order to bring order in the digital spheres, the government introduced various surveillance mechanisms and content filtering through regulatory frameworks such as the ICT Act 2013 and the Digital Security Act 2018. Many cases were filed against Islamic preachers and some were jailed for spreading controversial content online. However, such control mechanisms by the state machinery could hardly curb the growth and popularity of digital *Waz*. Fan groups of the Waz speakers opened multiple outlets or diverse digital media platforms, with many such pages operated from overseas.[4]

In recent times, there has been a more visible presence of Islamic practices on these platforms, such as sharing Quranic verses, hadiths and sermons, indicating a robust interaction with Islamic materials (Al-Zaman 2020). Additionally, there has been a surge in social media usage in Bangladesh, with nine million new users between 2020 and 2021. This brings the number of

4 For a feature report on how Waz speakers have taken hold of digital media platforms, see Billah and Mithu (2021).

social media users to 45 million, representing 27.2% of the country's population. This growth has positioned Bangladesh eighth globally in terms of social media user growth, with a rate of 25% (Nafiu 2021; We Are Social UK 2021). This increase in social media engagement may also contribute to the heightened visibility and proliferation of Islamic content (Al-Zaman 2022). Needless to say, the Covid-19 lockdown dramatically impacted the landscape of the production and consumption of digital religion globally (Kühle and Larsen 2021). It not only forced Muslim communities to adopt digital platforms but also pushed Islamic preachers to reach out to their target audiences (Akmaliah and Burhani 2021). The popularity of online *Waz Mahfils* has accordingly grown to the point where they are rivalling mainstream media channels in Bangladesh in terms of viewership (see Ahmed 2024, 47-54).

Thus, in contemporary Bangladesh, digital media contributes heavily to popularising *Waz Mahfils*, with platforms like Facebook and YouTube giving rise to a new wave of popularity and appeal for Islamic sermons. Sermons that are uploaded online are typically delivered by tech-savvy speakers who use social media and other modern platforms to reach a wider audience, often focusing on more contemporary issues and using less formal and more relatable approaches to deliver their message. In addition, various channels have been set up and operated by the youth followers of popular speakers. The fan pages of particular Waz speakers are organised vibrantly and maintained regularly with catchy thumbnails or visual-textual content. The engaged participation of women, youth and people from all walks of life is reflected in the form of views, likes and comments. This indicates that a religious public sphere is emerging in the digital space.

The presence of *Waz Mahfils* on YouTube has significantly extended the reach of religious discussions, allowing access for both women and men who traditionally might not attend these events due to social and cultural restrictions (Ahmed 2024, 55). This shift from in-person to digital forums has not only broadened the audience for religious sermons but also had a considerable sociopolitical effect in Bangladesh. The move online has facilitated political Islamists and other groups in spreading their message to a wider audience, circumventing government regulations and overcoming geographical and cultural barriers. This development poses concerns for those advocating for secular values in Bangladesh, as it allows for the spread of specific ideologies without the constraints of physical presence or direct oversight (Ahmed 2024, 55).

Thus, *Waz Mahfils*, despite their potential to offer positive insights, have increasingly come under scrutiny for their perceived and perhaps unintended negative aspects. They have been linked to the fostering of religious

intolerance and, in some cases, violence. Furthermore, the connection of *Waz Mahfils* to political Islamists and extremists, who possess communal and aggressive objectives, raises concerns.[5] Whether the government's attribution of militancy to *Waz Mahfils* is warranted and was done on the basis of proper tracking of trails of militancy and whether due processes were followed before charging a speaker are empirical questions that merit investigation that we did not carry out. However, from our exploration of *Waz*[6] in the digital space, we have found some patterns of inciteful speech as an inextricable part of *Waz*. As an example, a sermon by Azhari advocates the chopping off of hands or being hanged for sins committed, including insulting the Prophet of Islam. Azhari's grounds for punishment are rooted in Islamic/Shariah law.[7] He further suggests that such punishment should be telecast live in front of everyone at Baitul Mukarram (National Mosque in Dhaka). In another *Waz*, Maolana Golam Rabbani speaks disparagingly of employed women trying to balance professional and familial life because this would prevent them from carrying out their duties towards their husbands and families properly. He criticises women who ride a motorbike or a cycle or pay bills. Additionally, he also asked husbands to be violent if their wives were disrespectful in any way, and he sanctions raising hands against women to keep them under control. Such stances on matters of law, punishment and gender relations may be part of certain Islamic interpretive frameworks. However, these views do not complement the constitutional ethos of law, mechanisms of punishment and gender relations. Thus, inherent in the assertion of such Islamic frameworks made against the backdrop of views ideally espoused by the state are contestations of interpretation as well as that of authority and power.

Consequently, the state extends its surveillance mechanisms to keep a check on the *Alems* (expert scholars) and their addresses to the public on issues of sociopolitical import. Furthermore, a majority of speakers are educated in religious educational institutions called madrasas that teach them certain perspectives on equality, the Muslim self and non-Muslim other, and the constitution of punitive action that often contradict with values held by the state

5 The alleged intolerance propagated by *Waz Mahfils* justifying their subsequent securitisation was identified in a report prepared by the Home Ministry of Bangladesh in 2019 (see Kallol 2019).

6 We use *Waz* without *Mahfils* from this point onward to discuss the digital sermons and not necessarily the public events or gatherings, as we explained before. *Waz* refers to "sermon" or "advice" and *Mahfil* means "gathering".

7 Source: video uploaded to YouTube titled "Mystery of Human Creation" (in Bengali) by Maulana Mizanur Rahman Azhari. See: https://youtu.be/roRB-GPuHBI (accessed 14 January 2025).

and its legal and ethical framework. Studies have shown that the worldview taught in madrasas, especially around questions of women, gender and inclusion, is not in the same spirit as secular schools, not that the latter do not have their own shortcomings. This uncomfortable if not acrimonious gap between the world of madrasas and secular schools has been made even wider in recent years as Islamic quarters have demanded changes to curricular content in secular schools (Roy et al. 2020). Thus, the rhetoric of *Waz* and the suspicions and policing they generate are to be located at the intersections of the state, education, religion and development nexus in which contests for authority and legitimacy are embedded.

If *Waz* is to live up to the potential of speaking to the "development" of Bangladesh, certain concerns about the interplay of religion and development must be contended with. First of all, development practices have seldom integrated religious perspectives due to concerns over imposing outsider views, potential conflicts and the secular–sacred dichotomy prevalent in Western thought. The inverse is also cause for concern, whereby developmentalising religion can lead to the homogenising of religious voices and the flattening out of their authentic demands (Zakiuddin 2015). With these caveats stated, *Waz Mahfils* offer a unique platform for engaging non-elite populations in development conversations, touching on governance, empowerment, gender and identity – essential components of Bangladesh's development narrative. Their widespread popularity and role in shaping public religious expression underscore the importance of incorporating religious dialogues into development discourses. The challenge lies in balancing the constructive contributions of *Waz Mahfils* to social inclusion and development against the risks posed by intolerant narratives and the need for authentic religious leadership.

In the last section of this policy note we outline some strategic recommendations that may leverage the *Waz Mahfils* for the collective well-being, anticipating the transformative potential of digital *Waz* to foster social cohesion, development and inclusive society in Bangladesh.

4 Strategic Recommendations to Utilise *Waz Mahfils* for Development in the Digital Age

Incorporating religious freedom into Bangladesh's development strategy, particularly through the utilisation of *Waz Mahfils*, necessitates a nuanced approach that acknowledges the complexities of religious expression, societal impact and government involvement. Based on the content analysis of the selected videos of popular Waz speakers in Bangladesh as well as critical

discourse analysis of the themes and audience engagement with the content, we propose two clusters of recommendations that could contribute to framing strategic policy guidelines on digital religion, faith, social cohesion and development in contemporary Bangladesh. We find useful Seiple's (2012) two-pronged strategy for integrating religious freedom, a public one which he refers to as "outside in" and a private one referred to as "inside out". The public strategy seeks to liberate religious adherents from oppression and even imprisonment on the grounds of their religious identity, conviction and propagation, and the private strategy entails multi-stakeholder engagement and bridge-building so that the contours and content of religion and religious engagement remain capacious, deliberative and therefore pluralistic. In the context of Bangladesh, there is scope for official, legalistic advocacy as well as bridge-building initiatives that can take place at many levels of society. Therefore, we apply Seiple's framework to online *Waz*, whereby religious freedom aims at processes that are simultaneously public and private and hold the potential to be impactful both at the level of state and society.

4.1 *Advocating for a Public Process from the "Outside In"*

This cluster of recommendations involves creating awareness about religious freedom violations and fostering a safe space for thoughtful engagement. It aims to address issues from an external standpoint, encouraging societal and international scrutiny to promote change. While this approach is effective in highlighting areas of concern, its direct challenge to governmental practices can lead to resistance from state actors, potentially hindering collaborative efforts for reform. We recommend the following adaptions for *Waz Mahfils* from the "outside in" perspective that will foster a public process of religion and development.

- *Legal and policy framework adjustments*: Conducting a thorough review of existing legislation regarding religious content online, especially live-streaming of sermons via social networking sites. This should lead to the desired policy reform for constructive use of digital *Waz* in line with national development objectives and religious freedom.
- *Awareness campaigns*: Launching campaigns that emphasise the importance of religious freedom and the constructive role *Waz Mahfils* can play in society. These campaigns can highlight positive examples of religious sermons online that contribute to community development and social harmony.
- *Enhanced digital engagement*: Fostering partnerships with digital platforms to promote sermons that emphasise inclusivity, tolerance and themes of development and social cohesion ensuring a broader dissemination of

positive content. Simultaneously there should be the formation of a rapid response unit for identifying provocative content fraught with misinformation and hate.
– *International collaboration*: Engaging with international bodies and human rights organisations as well as global platforms working on digital literacy and safe online culture to share best practices and gain support for promoting religious freedom through *Waz*.

4.2 *Building a Private Process from the "Inside Out"*

This cluster of recommendations focuses on engaging government officials and religious leaders in dialogue and cooperation. It seeks to foster a steady transformation within a restrictive environment by leveraging religious traditions as a conduit for positive societal change. The risk, however, is the government's potential to co-opt these efforts, presenting a facade of harmony and progress without addressing deeper issues. We recommend the following adaptations for *Waz Mahfils* from the "inside out" perspective to foster public–private collaboration processes in the domain of religion and development.
– *Religious leadership and government official engagement*: Facilitating closed-door dialogues between religious leaders, government representatives, development practitioners and digital experts to discuss the role of *Waz Mahfils* and other online religious content in promoting development and religious tolerance.
– *Multi-stakeholder monitoring mechanisms*: Establishing oversight bodies to review content, involving government representatives, religious leaders, civil society and digital media experts. This body would not only monitor but also provide endorsements, fostering a culture of accountability and constructive messaging.
– *Capacity building and education*: Offering training programmes for religious leaders on topics such as peaceful coexistence, gender equality and the importance of religious freedom in fostering a prosperous society. In addition, educational campaigns should be directed towards government officials on the benefits of supporting religious freedom and the constructive potential of *Waz Mahfils*, but also towards content creators regarding copyright laws, privacy policies and the ethical use of digital platforms. This would help reduce copyright infringements and encourage respect for intellectual property rights.
– *Digital literacy and content creation workshops*: Organising workshops by various government bodies in collaboration with religious leaders and digital content creators to improve digital skills and literacy. These workshops could include sessions on ethical content creation, emphasising the

importance of avoiding content that incites violence, discriminates against women or spreads misinformation.
- *Digital platforms for inclusive discourse*: Leveraging digital media to amplify pluralism through a variety of religious perspectives as well as including the voices of female religious scholars and leaders/preachers who focus on inclusivity. Thus, by building champions who speak about values of equality and pluralism and by creating and promoting content that highlights a variety of perspectives on religious and societal issues, digital platforms can serve as an alternative or complementary medium to traditional gatherings, reaching a wider audience and fostering inclusivity. Moreover, introducing awards, recognitions and financial incentives for content creators who consistently produce and promote content that upholds cohesive values and contributes to social development and harmony may create incentives for positive content creation.
- *Public–private partnerships for resource provision*: Partnering with private tech companies to provide resources such as software, hardware and training materials to content creators in marginalised and faith-based communities. This would help them to produce high-quality digital content that aligns with the values of promoting social harmony and ethical-moral teachings of religion.

By carefully navigating the challenges and leveraging the strengths of the various strategies, Bangladesh can harness the power of *Waz Mahfils* as a platform for advancing religious freedom, social development and national cohesion.

5 Conclusion

By adopting strategies that combine "outside-in" advocacy with "inside-out" engagement, and integrating the suggested enhancements, Bangladesh can effectively utilise *Waz Mahfils* as a platform for development incorporating religious freedom, especially in the digital space. This approach acknowledges the significant influence of these gatherings and seeks to direct it towards fostering a more inclusive, tolerant and developed society. Through concerted efforts across government, religious communities and civil society, *Waz Mahfils* can embody a public sphere where religious expression and developmental aspirations harmoniously converge, contributing to the nation's progress and the well-being of its people.

Beyond Bangladesh, this model of strategic religious engagement offers valuable insights for global development initiatives, particularly in contexts where religious actors play pivotal roles in community life. By localising

development ideas within culturally resonant frameworks, such as religious gatherings, nations can enhance the impact and acceptance of their initiatives. This approach underscores the importance of recognising religious institutions not merely as social actors but as strategic partners in the localisation of development agendas. As such, *Waz Mahfils*, and similar religious forums worldwide, can be leveraged to promote social cohesion, advance sustainable development goals and uphold religious freedom in increasingly digitalised public spaces, setting a precedent for integrating faith-based and secular approaches in the global policy development discourse and practices.

Acknowledgements

The authors acknowledge the collaborative research support by the Centre for Peace and Justice, BRAC University, Dhaka, and the World Faiths Development Dialogue, Georgetown University, Washington D.C., which underpinned this policy and practice note.

Issue and Editors

This article is part of the special issue "Religion in the Digital Realm", edited by Ignatius Swart and Marie-Luise Frost.

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Book Reviews


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RELIGION & DEVELOPMENT 3 (2024) 433–437

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The Bible and Gender-Based Violence in Botswana, by Mmapula Diana Kebaneilwe. Abingdon, New York: Routledge, 2024. Pp. 100. Hardback: £39.99, ISBN 9781032101927.

The Bible and Gender-Based Violence in Botswana presents a critical and contextual examination of how the Bible can be read in response to pressing social issues, specifically gender-based violence (GBV) in Botswana. The book bridges the gap between ancient Biblical texts and modern social challenges, offering a thoughtful exploration of the intersection between scripture, culture, and violence against women.

The first chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the political, legal, cultural, and religious landscape of Botswana. The author, Mmapula Diana Kebaneilwe, links gendered Setswana proverbs like "A woman is [like] a baboon worth only the deeds of her hands" and "Women are [like] cows and cannot lead" to prevailing beliefs about women and GBV. This connection between cultural proverbs and beliefs about gender roles and attitudes highlights the influence of entrenched cultural norms on legal frameworks, policies, and societal attitudes towards women.

The second chapter delves into the extensive research conducted by scholars on the Bible and GBV in Southern Africa. Kebaneilwe highlights the potential the Bible holds for driving more liberative and critical messages about gender and sexuality in Bible-believing contexts as evidenced by innovations such as Contextual Bible Study and other feminist strategies championed by community and research centres such as the Ujamaa Centre and scholars such as Sarojini Nadar and Madipoane Masenya. This previous work illustrates the importance, especially for Southern African contexts plagued by high rates of GBV, of moving away from essentialist interpretations of Biblical texts. These strategies of engaging the Bible in dialogue with contemporary lived experience offer ways to critically engage with the Bible, providing tools to name and confront the crisis of GBV.

In the third chapter, Kebaneilwe offers an inter-reading of Biblical texts with real-life events based on news reports in Botswana. The author emphasises how the Bible, saturated with hegemonic masculinity, male chauvinism, and misogynistic attitudes, impacts female characters in Biblical stories and, by extension, women in contemporary society. Four Biblical narratives are examined in depth:

1. The creation stories of Genesis 1–3: The creation narrative is critiqued for establishing hierarchies, with Eve's punishment sexualising her and

Published with license by Brill Schöningh | DOI:10.30965/27507955-20230041
 | ISSN: 2750-7947 (print) 2750-7955 (online)

reducing women to objects within marriage. This is connected to the Setswana proverb likening women to cows, reinforcing women's roles as peripheral in society while legitimising rape and invisibilising its occurrence within the institution of marriage.

2. The rape of Tamar in 2 Samuel 13: The story of Tamar, who is overpowered and raped by her brother, is compared to the legal landscape in Botswana, highlighting the widespread nature of GBV and child sexual abuse, exacerbated by social and political factors such as during the Covid-19 pandemic.
3. The Book of Esther: The narrative context of Esther is compared to contemporary Botswana, emphasising how both cultures normalise violence and the relegation of women to roles controlled by men. Vashti's resistance and Esther's complex relationship with power are symbolic of the struggles faced by Batswana women.
4. The brutal treatment of the Levite's concubine in Judges 19: The treatment of the concubine highlights how women's bodies are often rendered disposable, serving male interests and compensating for perceived failures of masculinity.

The final chapter emphasises the need to amplify Biblical stories that showcase women's agency and resistance, challenging the spiritualisation of violent texts that render the Bible an unquestioned authority. Kebaneilwe calls for readings that highlight the value of women beyond being objects for consumption, encouraging the Bible to be read as a tool for liberation rather than oppression.

While *The Bible and Gender-Based Violence in Botswana* is deeply rooted in feminist Biblical scholarship, in a certain way it struggles to make a vast contribution beyond its contextual examples from Botswana. The inter-reading of Biblical texts with news headlines could have been more robust, potentially offering transformative insights. Nonetheless, the book's merit lies in its call to action against the normalisation of GBV, urging Christian church leaders, media, politicians, and everyday readers and believers of the Bible to boldly name and critique rape culture both in the Bible and in contemporary Botswana. This book serves as a valuable resource for scholars and activists alike, providing a solid foundation for further research and grassroots work. It underscores the importance of religion in shaping societal norms and the potential for critical engagement with Biblical texts to challenge and transform deeply ingrained cultural attitudes towards gender and violence.

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Contested Concepts in the Study of Religion: A Critical Exploration, edited by George D. Chryssides and Amy R. Whitehead. London: Bloomsbury, 2023. Pp. 183. Paperback: £20.69, ISBN: 9781350243804.

Contested Concepts in the Study of Religion offers a discussion of twenty-four key concepts of religious studies. Organised alphabetically, the book covers concepts ranging from "belief", "diaspora" and "fundamentalism" to "new age", "prophecy" and "superstition", written by various authors. The editors stress that it was not their intention to write an extended glossary or "keywords" book. They explain that a "'keywords' book is one that defines basic terms for the beginner, who may be unfamiliar with terms [...]" (p. 2). This edited volume, in contrast, aims to "critically explore the variety of uses and misuses that certain terms invite, and why. The target reader for this book, then, is one who is already familiar with such concepts, but recognises the problems that arise with their use" (p. 2). While a "keywords" book may be perceived as oriented to a beginner audience, the editors suggest that their edited volume is for more advanced students and scholars. This was arguably successful, and the book is likely to be relevant to diverse audiences with varying levels of pre-existing knowledge. Each of the chapters addresses five key questions: "*1. Why is this concept problematic? 2. What are the origins of the concept? 3. How is it used or misused, and by whom? 4. Is it still a legitimate concept in the study of religion and, if so, what are its legitimate uses? 5. Are there other concepts that are preferable when writing on religion?*" (p. 3).

One of the clear strengths of the book is its accessibility. The chapters are short, between five and six pages long, and each chapter is further divided into subsections. This makes it easy to find, and take in, relevant information. Considering how inaccessible a lot of academic literature tends to be, this is a refreshing approach. The chapters also generally avoid extensive use of jargon, which is always welcome in academic publications. The chapter themes are generally relevant and cover key debates in theology and religious studies of the last decades. The fact that each chapter covers the same key questions, and that many of them therefore follow a similar structure, makes this book a very coherent edited volume. There is a clear connection between the twenty-four chapters and a clear purpose to the book in its entirety.

Unfortunately, the book also displays several weaknesses. A main criticism of the book would be the extent to which it does justice to its claim of providing a "critical exploration", as the subtitle promises. If criticality is understood as a focus on, and attempts to challenge, existing power dynamics, then the volume's overwhelmingly white, Western and culturally Christian group

RELIGION & DEVELOPMENT
Published with license by Brill Schöningh | DOI:10.30965/27507955-20230040
 | ISSN: 2750-7947 (print) 2750-7955 (online)

of authors raises questions, as does the fact that many of them write about black, brown and indigenous communities that they are themselves not part of. This is not to say that scholars must never write about communities they do not belong to. But if there is a pattern of people from dominant groups writing about marginalised communities, with the latter excluded from such discussions, then this should raise questions – from an ethical point of view, but also in terms of the quality of the work. There are too many chapters in this book, such as the one on "prophecy" (pp. 99–103) or the one on "religion" (pp. 105–110), that are presented as "generic" discussions of a "universal" term – yet focus on Western Christian understandings only, as if there were not detailed debates on the same terms in other faith traditions.

I was also not convinced by the editors' decision to explicitly exclude discussions of gender and race from the volume, with no chapters being dedicated to the topics. In fact, in the book as a whole, only six of the twenty-four concept-focused chapters even mention gender, and race only comes up in one. In the introduction to the volume, the editors explain:

> We have also made the deliberate choice not to commission chapters on wider concepts such as "gender" and "race". We recognise the necessity of debate on these areas, and there is much more important scholarship that has been done [...]. However, such discussion generates issues, and not clarification of concepts, and matters of gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity and race extend considerably beyond the study of religion. (p. 2)

Is this singling out of gender and race as "generating issues" rather than "clarifying concepts" helpful? Is it justified? Can the same not be said about other concepts which the editors have chosen to include in the volume? Is it helpful to exceptionalise gender and race in this way? Is it in line with a "critical" agenda? Also, is it really just debates about gender and race that "extend considerably beyond the study of religion" as the editors claim? Looking at the list of terms included in the book, the same could be said about "diaspora" and "violence", possibly also "charisma" – yet these terms were included.

The list of concepts in the book does not include terms such as "antiracism", "decolonisation", "marginalisation" or "positionality", "postcolonialism" or "power" – yet an engagement with these issues would have significantly added to the book, by highlighting the many inequalities, injustices and power dynamics that continue to dominate the field of religious studies. In fact, perhaps the issue here is by design: a book that claims to offer "clarification" on the "uses and misuses that certain terms invite" will always risk failing when it comes to providing a satisfying answer to the question of "uses and misuses

according to whom?" Would scholars writing from a decolonial or antiracist perspective have written different entries? How about researchers in or from the Global South? Would they have seen the crux of a matter with regards to these concepts in the same way? Would they have even identified the same issues? In this instance, we will never know, as their voices were simply not included.

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