Religion

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Ever since the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, which proclaimed the inevitable "secularization" of society, it has generally been assumed that the first of these tendencies would historically supercede the second, that the advance of scientific technology, with its rational rigors grounded in practical experience and material knowledge, signaled the demise of religious authority and enthusiasm based upon blind faith and superstition. Religion, presumably, belonged to the primitive past, secular science and technology to the mature future. *Yet today we are seeing the simultaneous flourishing of both, not only side by side but hand in hand.* While religious leaders promote their revival of spirit through an avid and accomplished use of the latest technological advances, scientists and technologists increasingly attest publicly to the value of their work in the pursuit of divine knowledge. (Noble 1997: 4) [emphasis mine]

The inclusion of the theme of religion in this volume on Communication Technology may seem somewhat oxymoronic as sacred beliefs and traditions are paired with the most popular technological applications of our time. Yet as many historians and social commentators like David Noble remind us, religion and technology are not incongruous developments but are cognate fields, with profound convergences and challenges.

Arguably, as individualized and institutionalized religious practices and movements embrace the Web to improve their reach, religious communication on digital and social media platforms take an increasingly significant role together with more traditional venues for such discourse. It may be, however, that religious enchantment associated with digital media use problematizes established faith rites and the conception of religious identity and community. Changes in forms of spiritual organizing in "the church" and "the temple" can also be

conceived as intertwined with a range of other forms of social and political developments, such that digital media facilitates challenges to the authority of clergy and elites, as well as promotes innovative reconfigurations of church norms and expectations. Furthermore, as "the Internet" is a moving target, there may be past traditions that are enduring as well as new ideas such as church branding or celebrity that are being envisioned and enacted in contemporary social and religious life.

This chapter provides a discussion of religion's dynamic developments alongside contemporary digital and social media connections and appropriations, focusing on the debate and issues surrounding the emergent tensions and challenges in religious authority, community and identity. We are cognizant that prior comprehensive surveys on the topic "Religion and the Internet" exists; indeed, Cheong (in press) provides an overview of the topic Religion and the Internet, in an encyclopedia on *Religion and American Cultures,* and Cheong & Ess (2012) review the relational and hybridizing pathways in religion, social media and culture in the international anthology *Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture: Perspectives, Practices, Futures*. See also thematic contributions in Campbell (ed.) *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (2013), and Arasa, Cantoni and Ruiz (eds). *Religious Internet Communication. Facts, Trends and Experiences in the Catholic Church* (2010). In addition, noteworthy are three special issues on religion in the Journal of Media and Religion (2002), the Journal of Computer Mediated Communication (2007), and Information, Communication and Society (2012).

Against the background of this growing scholarship, this chapter will spotlight key insights from prior reviews, while extending our understanding on this topic by examining the dialectics, i.e. forces of interaction and relational tensions (Cheong et al. 2012) in the relationships between religion and the Internet, involving the latest digital and social media applications. Given our length limitations, insights here will be grounded in examples from

the Catholic Church, the largest religious institution in the world with more than 1.2 billion followers (Vatican Information Service, 2013a), but connections to other religions may be made using the dialectical approach in this topical review.

1.   Research in Religion and Communication Technologies: Waves and Paradoxes

Broadly, scholarship in the field of religion and the internet in the past two decades has proceeded in tandem with the conceptual and methodological developments in new media and internet studies. Scholars are generally in agreement that research on religion and the internet can be characterized by different waves or phases, with different logics underpinning the assumptions and data collection on computer mediated religion (Campbell 2013; Cheong 2013). For instance, it is contended that the earliest phase of research was marked by an emphasis on understanding the then new phenomenon of "cyberfaith", "cyber-religion" and "virtual church", with investigations focused on understanding pioneering paths of access to spiritual information, and an expanding repertoire of religiously inspired text-based and interactive rituals online.

Research following the initial wave of cyber enthusiasm largely echoed concerns voiced in the larger body of internet studies for the need to incorporate the role of history and philosophy to contextualize transformations in wider society and culture. Accordingly, the conjoining of the online and the offline dimensions of religion has surfaced as an important theme in recent years. Against this background, is a reinvigorated emphasis on "networks", including the "rise of the network society" (Castells 2000), and more recently the proposition that social life is being "networked" in light of the trifold "social network, Internet and mobile revolutions" (Rainie and Wellman 2012). Likewise, it has been suggested that digital religion is also being integrated into everyday life rhythms and conduct, weaved in hybridized multimodal connections in contemporary "convergence culture" (Jenkins 2006).

Furthermore, a small but growing corpus of recent research studies observe how mediated connections entail multiple opportunities, uneven gains and conflicting tensions in religious information sharing, community building and authority practices. A dialectical perspective to digital media and culture offers unique opportunities to recognize the simultaneous presence of two relational forces of interaction, and accepts as ordinary the interdependence and complementary aspects of seeming opposites. Thinking dialectically about religion and communication technologies helps identify key tensions and paradoxes, which are in need of further exploration, in order to understand the diversity and complexity of contemporary social and religious life (Cheong and Ess 2012; Spadaro 2012).

1.1   Religious Authority: Erosion-Augmentation
A key paradox in religious authority relations is its enervation and centralization of control. Increased access to religious information and interpretations online provide followers with alternative resources and discourse to challenge traditional teachings and disrupt hierarchies. Yet these same online resources may be appropriated by clergy to serve as a source of education for themselves and their laity, while their elite legitimacy is simultaneously enhanced when they move beyond top-down instruction to personal and face-to-face sharing and mentorship practices that influence the interpretation of religious texts, including the publication and dissemination of their own religious materials (Cheong et al. 2011).

Social media make possible more egalitarian forms of communication between laity and clergy, thereby prompting a renegotiation of power and authority. At the same time, religious authority may use the latest suite of communication technologies to facilitate the co-creation of information and expertise under conditions where laity cooperation is elicited by retaining discretionary power among the leadership to determine informational and interpersonal outcomes such that they do not undermine the organization (Cheong et al.

2011). New instantiations of religious authority are evolving. Likewise, the rise of religious branding and celebrification across various media illustrates how religious authority is at once more accessible and banal, and yet more mystical and inscrutable.

For instance, consider the papal authority and adoption of the internet by the Catholic church. On the one hand, there appears to be a more conservative approach to digital and social media amidst various concerns, yet appropriation of novel technological applications by the church and its regional and local leadership evince how authorial relations are changing and may be strengthened by digital media engagement.

In recent times, the Catholic Church's hierarchy has integrated the Internet into the Church's internal and external communications at a practical and a theoretical level. Previous Popes have issued several statements about the Internet, acknowledging and permitting its use (John Paul II 2001, 2002, 2005; Benedict XVI 2009, 2010, 2011, 2013). Even Church documents affirm that "hanging back timidly (from using it [Internet]) for fear of technology or for some other reason is not acceptable" for Catholics (PCSC 2002a: 10). Yet at the same time, there is ideological resistance to endorse the internet as the main or exclusive channel for human relations (for e.g. John Paul II 2002; Benedict XVI 2011; 2013). Thus, the virtual world is seen as complement to, but not a substitute for essential elements of the Christian faith. Accordingly, authorial and community relations may also be virtual but have necessarily a face-to-face component. Pope Francis's recent statement about indulgences (Vatican Information Service, 2013b) illustrate this – his tweet reminded followers about the need of devotion and committed practice connected to the church and theology to obtain them, but nothing was said about obtaining virtual indulgences via Twitter. Similarly, the use of the Confession app was also acknowledged by Pope Benedict XVI but users were reminded that the absolution of sins still required the presence of a real priest in the local church (Cheong and Ess 2012).

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the Vatican has exercised considerable effort to expand its communication repertoire at the institutional or corporate level (e.g. Vatican radio, website, newspaper L'Osservatore Romano, and television production center known as Centro Televisivo Vaticano) and be present on social media (e.g. @Pontifex twitter handle and Vatican YouTube channel), alongside mediations of significant events (like the Year of the Faith through www.annusfidei.va). Nonetheless, its vast use of the internet is primarily for broadcast (through websites especially), with a more conservative approach regarding social media outreach. The dialectic of authority erosion-augmentation is observed for example in the control vs. promotion of the use of Vatican channel on YouTube, which now broadcasts news coverage of the main activities of Pope Francis in multiple languages on a daily basis. The comments section was disabled (Campbell 2012) but comments in some cases are now allowed and appear to be submitted to moderation and thus restricting the type of interactions that take place online. Although practical aspects are involved in that decision (lack of personnel to handle users' interaction), there appears to be apprehension or fear of losing over the representation of the Vatican online.

Moreover, it is important to distinguish between the individual use of digital media by Church leaders and the corporative communication actions of Church institutions or para-church organizations (e.g. dioceses or bishop's conferences, nonprofit faith-based organizations like hospitals or charities, educational institutions like universities or colleges, etc.). Even if all of them deliver the Church's teachings, they may constitute and represent different authority relations as seen in, for instance, the numerous blogs run by Church leaders like bishops and cardinals versus the official stories and updates by the Papacy. As such, the contestation and re-interpretation of Church statements is probably one of the biggest challenges that Church institutions have to cope with as Church teachings and decisions of religious elites are now more firmly embedded in the "society of conversation"

(Verdù Macía 2005), constantly subject to analysis, criticism, denial and debate in the digital realm.

A specific example within the Catholic Church was the public opinion crisis created with the remission of the *excommunio* (excommunication) to the Lefevbrian bishops by Pope Benedict XVI in January 2009 (Congregation for Bishops 2009). Lefevbrians are the followers of Marcel Lefevbre (1905 – 1991), French Roman Catholic archbishop who opposed to the changes within the Church associated with the Second Vatican Council. In 1970, Lefebvre founded the Society of St. Pius X and, in 1988, against the express prohibition of Pope John Paul II, he consecrated four bishops to continue his work. The Holy See immediately declared that he and the other bishops who had participated in the ceremony had incurred automatic excommunication under Catholic canon law, so becoming schismatic and separated from it. That act of indulgence that the Pope desired to have with those considered schismatic for the Catholic Church was portrayed by many as an irresponsible decision, especially when mass media chose to publish an interview with Richard Williamson, one of the four Lefevbrian bishops, highlighting his denial of the Holocaust and other scandalous opinions. A few weeks later, the Pope wrote a sorrowful letter to express his concern over the public reaction and even the aggressiveness within the Catholic Church towards his decision (Benedict XVI 2009b). In that letter, among other propositions, Benedict XVI mentioned the need for the Church's hierarchy to pay more attention to the internet before making or announcing decisions that interested public opinion, setting a lesson for the governance of Church organizations: Church leaders need to be responsive to digital media because of their impact on public opinion and, indirectly, within the Church's internal debate. Yet there are certainly limits on the role of communication technologies, since church doctrine and practices are arguably more influential forces in shaping the episteme in the Catholic tradition, not the popular opinion of the masses. The Pope and bishops are leaders of

the community (universal and local), but at the service of the other members. Hence, decisions and pronouncements are made through processes of discernment and consultation under the governance of the synod. Technologies play an essential role at this level of consultation, but canons and laws cannot – according to church's doctrine – be simply decided by majority vote.

Finally, social media use by the Pope allows the church to communicate its authority. For instance, while mass media coverage offers us a look at the Pope's life, as seen in the coverage of the World Youth day at Rio de Janeiro 2013, where Pope Francis was described as being mobbed by enthusiastic crowds, mainstream media's selective news frames and coverage focused more on his comment on the gay lifestyle, than on his statements about poverty and socio-economic injustices in a globalizing age, which may stem from their slanted and biased interpretation of religion. In these situations, social media facilitates the representation of the church in the way it wants it to be portrayed, potentially bypassing the agenda of the mass media. Even though it is not the Pope himself who tweets, but his collaborators (the Pope limits himself to provide some kind of approval to the messages), his spiritual influence and authority through Twitter is made present or invoked and "presentified" by other followers and on various media (Brummans et al. 2013).

1.2   Community: Global-Local

Tensions in the area of religious community often entail if and how new forms of social and religious interaction constitute a community. In light of mediated networks, social ties may now be more loosely coupled and shared by those beyond one's immediate geographic location and kinship lines. The emergence of new socialities on virtual platforms and immersive digital worlds raise the possibilities for the imagining and operationalization of transnational religious communities. Yet one paradox in the expansion or globalization of mediated religious community is that it often necessarily entails the fostering of local ties.

These ties may simultaneously encompass communal rituals and face to face meetings, even while churches and temples provide more opportunities for individualized practices of accessing spiritual resources online as they establish and grow their digital presence. Therefore, dialectics in the logic of the networked and place-based community may co-exist.

Consider for example how communication technology provides opportunities to foster a sense of transnational community among faith believers. The recent World Youth Day – WYD 2013, was a massive encounter that Pope Francis had in Brazil on July 2013 with 3.8 million youths from all over the world. This mediated event was an opportunity for the Catholic Church to showcase the Pope in face to face meetings, visiting slums, and leading rituals including corporate worship of hundreds of thousands on Copacabana Beach. The events were followed live online via web streaming or watched asynchronously by millions, illustrating the use of digital media as an instrument to unite local communities to a global event.

Yet although the Catholic community may be united by temporal, physical and mediated events or what may be understood as "media spectacles" (Kellner 2003) like the World Youth Day, Catholic believers are also instructed that their spiritual ties extend beyond physical events or digital links (what theology denotes as the "communion of saints") which is historically rooted in a specific deity (Jesus), born in a specific period (2000 years ago), in a particular place (Palestine). In this sense, the internet affects local Catholic communities in their regular practices (government, internal communication, diffusion of teaching, etc.) but it does not shake the sense of global community already existing within the faith (it is pertinent to note here that *catholic* means universal). However, it is important to recognize that the main aim of the Church is the salvation of souls through the preaching of the Gospel and the distribution of the Sacraments, and both necessarily happen through personal contact and community engagement. According to Pope John Paul II, the internet is "a unique

supplement and support in both preparing for the encounter with Christ in community, and sustaining the new believer in the journey of faith which then begins."(John Paul II 2002: 3), but "electronically mediated relationships can never take the place of the direct human contact required for genuine evangelization" (PCSC 2002a: 5). Correspondingly, religious community is necessarily embodied by local residents, even while technology affords global affinities and fealty.

1.3   Identity: Stable, modernist-Ephemeral, multiplex

It is often said that we are witnessing a shift in the sense of identity to more relational selves, facilitated through the multiple communicative possibilities of new media (Ess 2011; Gergen 2011). Digital and social media platforms provide new avenues for individuals and collectives to self-represent their identity, with heightened visibility and oftentimes accompanying expectations of candid intimacy through the creation and sharing of personal profiles, updates and Facebook timelines. Yet, digital media also facilitate online interactants' capacity and autonomy to track, tailor, continuously update, privatize and even monetize and sell their personal profiles. The hybrid notion of "networked individualism" (Wellman 2001) for instance, highlights modernist notions of the individual self-affiliated with literary and print as media technologies, and postmodern notions of multiple, fluid and ephemeral selves affiliated with dynamic electronic media connections.

Consequently, a paradox of religious identity in our networked age concerns how one's religious identity represented through communication technologies becomes simultaneously more authentic and accessible, as well as more edited and polished than in face to face settings. And this dialectic has several implications for religion. Many declare themselves as followers of a religion and are explicit about their faith beliefs in their online personal profiles. This heightened publicity of spiritual piety and devotion in their bios and social media updates may raise the relevance and significance of the church or temple to their

friends. Yet some believers also do not hesitate to discuss, act and speak contrarily to the moral standards and doctrinal principles of their confession, which may, in turn, mar and distort the organizational identity of their church or temple.

Challenges in light of the stable, modernist-ephemeral, multiplex identity dialectic may be illustrated by the perennial issue of determining the "catholicity" of a website (or any other digital initiative) and, therefore, the Catholic identity of its contents. In the case of the possible confusion of Catholic identity, advisory boards of the Holy See have proposed that people responsible for websites make a clear distinction between Catholic doctrine and personal opinions as well as participate in the voluntary requirement of certification by Catholic officials regarding sites with doctrinal and catechetical material (PCSC 2002: 8). Yet on top of the practical problems and lack of resources to comply with the advice by the Holy See, catholicity is not easily definable since online content is highly dynamic and ever-changing. Therefore, sites that could be considered within the orthodoxy at the initial point of approval may offer content which does not fit with official guidelines at a later time. Consequently, Church teachings are now necessarily generic in their approach, appealing to the freedom and responsibility of Catholic individuals and organizations to represent what they deem to be a scripturally inspired or authentic Catholic identity in the digital arena.

Furthermore, religious identity construction and enactment may encompass more rationally oriented decisions as well as more emotive aspects as online users potentially engage a more complete human sensorium – fostered by textual, oral, visual and kinesthetic capabilities of digital and social media. This mediation of identity performances, however, may be limited by multiple meso and micro level digital divides, in terms of personal choice and preferences, as well as structural barriers constraining internet access based on one's identity in terms of age, gender and class.

2.   Conclusion

We began this chapter with Noble (1997)'s sage observation and now we want to close the chapter with a related observation of our own regarding the simultaneous flourishing of science and religion. It is interesting to note how "ubiquity" was originally a theological position maintaining the omnipresence of Christ yet it is remarkable how we increasingly refer to the ubiquity of the internet and communication technologies in our wired environments today. Yet even as technical innovations advance the portability and (in)visibility of our communication devices, it is important to focus not just on media-centric developments but also consider the communicative dialectics even as both technology and religion thrive in our contemporary age. For while this encyclopedia is titled communication and technology, our discussion makes clear that the relationship between religious communication and technology is a profound and intertwined one, co-mingled with relational tensions and conflicting visions of authority, community and identity, attesting to its passel of future research possibilities.

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