



REVIEW ARTICLE

Digitalization and Religious Life: A Literature Review on Social Media, Digital Religiosity, and the Transformation of Religious Knowledge

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ABSTRACT

The migration of religious practice, authority, and community onto digital platforms has generated a distinct field of scholarship often termed digital religion studies. This paper reviews the development of this field, from early debates over the distinction between "religion online" and "online religion," through the maturation of digital religion as a recognized area of media and religious studies, to more recent research on social-media-mediated religious authority and the transformation of how religious knowledge is produced, transmitted, and contested. The review pays particular attention to research on Muslim digital environments, given the substantial body of scholarship this context has generated, while situating these findings within the broader comparative literature on digital religion across traditions. It finds that digital platforms have not simply relocated existing religious practice into a new medium but have measurably reshaped religious authority, enabling new, often non-traditionally credentialed voices to gain influence while simultaneously creating new mechanisms through which established authorities seek to maintain legitimacy online. The review concludes by identifying underexamined areas, including the algorithmic curation of religious content and its implications for religious pluralism, as priorities for future research.

Keywords: digital religion, religious authority, social media, digital Islam, media and religion

1. INTRODUCTION

The internet's diffusion into everyday religious life has proceeded rapidly enough that scholarship attempting to describe it has had to repeatedly revise its own foundational categories. Early research, dating to the mid-1990s, was primarily concerned with documenting the mere presence of religious content and communities online, treating the internet chiefly as a new distribution channel for existing religious material (Helland, 2000). Over the following two decades, this framing gave way to a more sociologically and anthropologically grounded field, often termed digital religion studies, concerned less with the fact of religious presence online and more with how digital media actively reshape religious practice, community, and authority (Campbell, 2012).

This review traces that development and examines its implications for one of the field's central and most consequential questions: what happens to religious authority, traditionally vested in institutions, credentialed scholars, and established hierarchies, when religious knowledge and practice are substantially mediated through platforms whose logics of visibility and engagement were not designed with religious authority structures in mind. The review draws substantially on research concerning Muslim digital environments, an area that has produced an unusually rich body of scholarship, associated particularly with the work of Bunt (2000, 2018), while situating these findings within Campbell's (2010, 2012) broader, comparative framework for digital religion studies applicable across traditions.

The review proceeds in four parts. Section 2 traces the early conceptual development of the field, including the foundational distinction between religion online and online religion. Section 3 examines the digital religion framework as it matured from the early 2000s onward, with particular attention to Campbell's theoretical contributions. Section 4 reviews research specifically concerned with the

transformation of religious authority in digital Muslim contexts. Section 5 discusses broader theoretical and methodological issues, including the role of algorithmic curation, before the paper concludes with directions for future research.

1.1 Terminological Development: From Cyber-Religion to Digital Religion

The terminology used to describe this field's object of study has itself evolved considerably, and this terminological evolution tracks the field's broader conceptual development discussed in Section 2. Early scholarship, including some of the studies that inform Helland's (2000) foundational distinction, frequently used terms such as cyber-religion or virtual religion, terms that, in retrospect, reflected an early-internet-era assumption that online religious activity constituted a largely separate, bounded space distinct from offline religious life, an assumption Campbell's (2012) later work would substantially revise. As digital and offline religious life became increasingly interwoven, particularly with the shift from desktop internet access to the ubiquitous, mobile, and platform-based digital environments dominant since the early 2010s, the field increasingly converged on digital religion as the preferred umbrella term, deliberately signaling a shift away from treating digital religious activity as occurring in a separate cyber-space and toward treating digitalization as a pervasive dimension of contemporary religious life as a whole, consistent with the mediatization framework discussed in Section 2.2.

This terminological shift is not merely semantic. It reflects the substantive theoretical development traced throughout this review: from Helland's (2000) early distinction between religion online and online religion, through Campbell's (2010, 2012) negotiation-centered digital religion framework, to the mediatization-theoretic account developed by Hjarvard (2008) and Lövheim (2013) in Section 2.2, each successive theoretical development has been accompanied by terminology intended to capture a progressively less bounded, more thoroughly integrated understanding of how digital media relates to religious practice, a trajectory this review's own analysis, particularly the algorithmic curation and platform governance discussion in Section 5, continues and extends.

2. EARLY CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT: RELIGION ONLINE AND ONLINE RELIGION

Helland (2000) introduced a distinction that would shape the field's early development: between "religion online," referring to the use of the internet to disseminate information about religious institutions, doctrines, and practices in a largely one-directional manner, and "online religion," referring to more participatory and interactive digital environments in which users engage in religious practice, discussion, and community formation mediated substantially or entirely through digital platforms. This distinction proved useful for an early wave of scholarship attempting to categorize a rapidly diversifying set of religious digital phenomena, from static institutional websites at one end of the spectrum to fully virtual religious communities and ritual practices at the other.

Hoover's (2006) work on religion in the media age situates this early internet-focused scholarship within a longer tradition of research on religion and mass media, arguing that digital media intensify, rather than simply introduce, dynamics already present in religious engagement with earlier media forms such as television and print, including the personalization of religious authority and the blurring of boundaries between institutional and individual religious expression. This framing anticipated a central theme that would become increasingly prominent as the field matured: that digital media's effects on religion are best understood not as a wholly novel phenomenon but as an intensification and acceleration of longer-running processes of religious individualization and mediatization.

2.2 Mediatization Theory and Religious Change

Hjarvard (2008) develops the mediatization concept invoked implicitly by Hoover (2006) into a more explicit theoretical framework, arguing that media should be understood not merely as a channel through which religious content is transmitted but as a social institution in its own right, one whose institutional logics, commercial, narrative, and technological, increasingly shape the form religion takes as religious

practice becomes more thoroughly integrated into media environments. Under this framework, what appears to be simply religious content moving online is better understood as religion being restructured according to media institutional logics, including the premium contemporary digital platforms place on brevity, visual appeal, and audience engagement metrics, logics that differ substantially from the institutional logics of traditional religious authority structures examined in Section 4.

Lövheim (2013) extends mediatization theory specifically to questions of gender, arguing that the restructuring of religious practice and authority under conditions of mediatization does not affect all religious actors equally, and that attention to gender is necessary to understand fully how mediatization reshapes who gains visibility and authority in digital religious environments, a theme taken up in greater empirical detail in Section 4.2 below. Read together, Hjarvard (2008) and Lövheim (2013) provide the field's most fully developed theoretical account of why digital religion cannot be adequately studied simply as traditional religious content relocated online, reinforcing Campbell's (2010, 2012) negotiation-centered framework while adding a more institutionally grounded account of the specific media logics driving that negotiation.

2.3 Religious Individualization and Digitally Mediated Spirituality

A related theoretical development, predating but substantially reinforced by digital religion scholarship, concerns the broader sociological literature on religious individualization. Heelas and Woodhead (2005), in an influential sociological study, document a shift in many Western societies away from institutionally anchored religious practice and toward more individualized, self-directed forms of spirituality, a shift they argue reflects a broader cultural turn toward valuing subjective experience over external authority as the primary criterion of religious or spiritual legitimacy. While Heelas and Woodhead's (2005) study predates the social-media era examined in Section 4, their analysis of religious individualization provides an important sociological backdrop for understanding why digital platforms, which structurally favor individually curated, algorithmically personalized content over institutionally mediated content, have proven such a hospitable environment for the kind of self-directed spirituality they describe.

This individualization literature adds a further dimension to the authority-fragmentation dynamic examined throughout this review: where Section 4 focuses on the fragmentation of authority among competing religious voices and institutions, Heelas and Woodhead's (2005) framework suggests a parallel and partially independent process, the fragmentation of religious authority as an external category altogether, in favor of a more individualized standard of spiritual authenticity that does not necessarily require any external authority, traditional or digitally mediated, at all. Digital platforms' capacity to support highly individualized, self-curated spiritual practice, drawing selectively on multiple traditions and sources without institutional mediation, represents a further, distinct pathway through which digitalization reshapes religious life, one that the more institutionally focused authority literature examined later in this review does not fully capture.

By the mid-2000s, however, several scholars, most influentially Campbell, argued that the religion online/online religion distinction, while useful, no longer adequately captured the complexity of religious practice in increasingly convergent digital environments, where a single platform might simultaneously serve informational, participatory, and community-forming functions. This critique motivated the more integrated theoretical framework examined in the next section.

3. THE MATURATION OF DIGITAL RELIGION STUDIES

Campbell's (2010) study of religious communities' engagement with new media proposed a more integrated framework, arguing that rather than treating digital media simply as a neutral channel through which existing religious practice is transmitted, researchers should examine how religious communities negotiate their relationship with new media technologies, often developing distinctive communal norms, informed by existing religious tradition, about which digital practices are permissible or desirable. This negotiation-centered framework shifted the field's central question from what religion online looks like

to how religious communities actively shape, and are shaped by, their engagement with digital media, a shift Campbell (2012) consolidated in her edited volume formally establishing "digital religion" as the field's organizing concept.

Cheong, Fischer-Nielsen, Gelfgren, and Ess (2012) extended this framework in a comparative volume examining digital religion across multiple traditions and platforms, arguing that while specific practices vary considerably by religious tradition and cultural context, several cross-cutting dynamics recur: the renegotiation of religious authority in more participatory digital environments, the emergence of hybrid online-offline religious community, and tension between religious institutions' desire to maintain doctrinal and communal coherence and the more individualized, exploratory religious engagement that digital environments tend to afford. Campbell and Vitullo (2016), reviewing the subsequent development of the field, note that digital religion studies had by the mid-2010s matured into an established interdisciplinary area drawing on media studies, sociology of religion, and religious studies methodology, while identifying continued need for more systematic, comparative empirical research across traditions rather than the single-case and single-tradition studies that had predominated in the field's earlier years.

Turkle's (2011) broader critique of digitally mediated relationships, while not specific to religion, provides a relevant cautionary counterpoint within this literature, arguing that digitally mediated forms of community and connection, across many domains including but not limited to religious life, can produce a paradoxical combination of increased connectivity and decreased depth of engagement. This critique has informed subsequent digital religion scholarship's attention to the specific conditions under which digital religious community functions as a genuine extension of offline religious life versus a comparatively shallow substitute for it, a distinction later research, discussed in the next section, has approached partly through the lens of religious authority.

3.1 Ritual, Embodiment, and Virtual Religious Practice

A distinct strand of digital religion scholarship has focused less on authority and community than on the more specific question of whether embodied religious ritual can be meaningfully practiced in virtual environments. Grieve (2016), in an ethnographic study of Buddhist practice in the virtual world *Second Life*, argues that participants in virtual Buddhist communities developed forms of ritual practice, including virtual meditation sessions and ceremonies, that they experienced as authentically meaningful despite, and in some respects because of, their explicitly virtual character, challenging assumptions that embodied co-presence is a strict precondition for authentic religious ritual. Grieve's (2016) findings complicate Turkle's (2011) more general skepticism about digitally mediated connection, suggesting that the relationship between virtuality and authenticity in religious practice is more contingent on the specific design and communal norms of a given platform, consistent with Campbell's (2010) negotiation framework, than on any inherent property of digital mediation itself. This body of research on virtual ritual remains comparatively small relative to the authority-focused literature reviewed in Section 4, representing a further area, alongside the algorithmic curation research discussed in Section 5, where the field's empirical coverage has not kept pace with its theoretical ambitions.

3.2 Virtual Reality and Emerging Ritual Technologies

Wagner (2012) extends the analysis of virtual religious practice examined by Grieve (2016) into a more general theoretical treatment of religion and virtual reality technology, arguing that religious traditions have historically incorporated new representational and ritual technologies, from written scripture to architecture to broadcast media, and that virtual and immersive technologies represent a continuation of this pattern rather than a categorically novel challenge to religious practice. Wagner (2012) further argues, however, that immersive virtual environments raise a specific question not fully addressed by earlier media technologies: the extent to which a sense of embodied presence, historically understood as central to many forms of religious ritual, including communal prayer, pilgrimage, and sacrament, can be technologically simulated in a manner that participants experience as sufficient for ritual efficacy, an

empirical and theological question that Wagner (2012) argues will only become more pressing as immersive technologies become more sophisticated and widely adopted.

This line of inquiry connects directly to the ritual-embodiment theme introduced through Grieve's (2016) empirical study, while extending it toward technologies, including more fully immersive virtual and augmented reality systems, that have continued to develop substantially since the Second Life-based platforms Grieve (2016) studied. The comparative youth of this specific sub-literature, combined with the rapid pace of change in the underlying technology itself, means that the theoretical frameworks proposed by Wagner (2012) remain considerably ahead of the empirical research base needed to evaluate them systematically, a gap that parallels the broader pattern, discussed further in the conclusion, of digital religion theory outpacing empirical documentation in several of the field's most rapidly evolving areas.

4. DIGITAL RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY IN MUSLIM DIGITAL ENVIRONMENTS

Research on Muslim engagement with digital media constitutes one of the most developed sub-literatures within digital religion studies, associated particularly with Bunt's sustained body of work spanning more than two decades. Bunt's (2000) early study of what he terms cyber-Islamic environments documented the diversity of Muslim digital religious practice already evident in the early internet era, from official institutional fatwa services to more informal discussion forums, and argued that these environments were already beginning to enable forms of religious discussion and authority that did not map neatly onto existing offline institutional hierarchies. Bunt's (2018) more recent study of what he terms "hashtag Islam" extends this analysis to the social-media era specifically, arguing that platforms such as Twitter and Facebook have accelerated the trend identified in his earlier work, enabling individuals without traditional scholarly credentials to develop substantial religious authority and following based on social-media engagement metrics rather than institutional accreditation, while simultaneously providing established religious authorities and institutions with new tools to project their own authority into digital spaces where they might otherwise be marginalized.

Echchaibi (2011) examines a related dynamic in his study of the "delocalization" of religious authority through video and online media, arguing that digitally mediated Islamic discourse increasingly operates independently of the traditional institutional and geographic anchors, such as specific mosques, scholarly lineages, or national religious establishments, that historically conferred religious authority, producing new forms of transnational religious authority grounded instead in media presence and audience engagement. This finding directly extends Campbell's (2010) negotiation framework to the specific case of authority: where Campbell's broader framework describes religious communities negotiating their relationship with digital media in general, Echchaibi's (2011) work describes a more specific negotiation, over who gets to speak with religious authority at all once digital media substantially displace traditional credentialing mechanisms.

Larsson (2011) provides a broader historical and comparative account of Muslim engagement with new media technologies, situating contemporary social-media-based religious authority within a longer history of Muslim communities' engagement with successive media technologies, from print to cassette tape sermons to satellite television to the internet, arguing that each successive technology has produced comparable anxieties about the fragmentation of religious authority, followed by a gradual process of institutional adaptation. This longer historical view is a useful corrective to research that treats social-media-era transformations of religious authority as entirely unprecedented, suggesting instead that the specific mechanisms are new while the underlying dynamic, of religious authority being renegotiated in response to new communication technology, has significant historical precedent within Muslim intellectual and religious history specifically.

4.2 Gender and Digital Religious Authority

Building on Lövheim's (2013) mediatization-and-gender framework introduced in Section 2.2, a distinct body of empirical research has examined how digital religious environments specifically affect women's

access to religious authority and voice, a question with particular salience in traditions where formal scholarly authority has historically been overwhelmingly male-dominated. Piela (2011), in a study of Muslim women's engagement with online religious discussion forums, finds that these digital spaces enabled forms of religious discussion and interpretation among women that were often structurally unavailable to them in offline institutional religious contexts, including opportunities to question and debate religious rulings directly rather than receiving them solely through male religious authorities, while also documenting that these online spaces were not straightforwardly liberatory, since they remained subject to their own internal norms and moderation practices that could reproduce, as well as challenge, existing gendered religious hierarchies.

Golan and Campbell (2015), examining the strategic management of religious websites within Israel's Orthodox Jewish communities, provide a comparative perspective on a related dynamic, finding that religious institutions' digital strategies were often shaped significantly by internal communal debates over gender and modesty norms, with some institutions adopting restrictive digital policies specifically to manage women's visibility and participation online, a finding that extends the negotiation-centered framework developed by Campbell (2010) into the specifically gendered terrain examined by Piela (2011). Read together, these studies suggest that digital religious authority's fragmentation, documented across traditions throughout this review, is not gender-neutral in its effects, and that digital environments can simultaneously expand and constrain women's religious participation depending on the specific communal and institutional context, a nuance that the broader authority-fragmentation literature discussed earlier in this section has not always fully incorporated.

4.1 New Media and the Reconfiguration of the Islamic Public Sphere

Anderson (2003), in an early and influential analysis of new media's effects on Muslim public discourse, argues that digital media have contributed to what he terms a reconfiguration of the public sphere of Islam, in which a new generation of "interpreters," often technically trained professionals without traditional seminary credentials, have gained the ability to participate in religious discourse in ways previously reserved for formally credentialed scholars ('ulama). Anderson's (2003) analysis, developed prior to the social media era examined by Bunt (2018), anticipates the authority-fragmentation dynamic that later research would document empirically in social-media contexts specifically, and situates it within a broader argument about the changing composition of who participates in Islamic public discourse at all, not only about how existing participants use new tools. This distinction between changes in who participates and changes in how existing authorities communicate is a useful analytical clarification for the broader literature reviewed in this section, since Bunt's (2000, 2018) and Echchaibi's (2011) findings on authority fragmentation can be read as documenting the continued unfolding, under conditions of increasingly participatory and algorithmically mediated platforms, of the reconfiguration Anderson (2003) first identified in the early internet era.

5. ALGORITHMIC CURATION AND EMERGING RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

A theme that has become increasingly prominent in recent digital religion scholarship, though it remains less developed than the authority-focused literature reviewed in Section 4, concerns the role of platform algorithms in shaping religious content exposure. Unlike the earlier, comparatively open web environments studied by Helland (2000) and Bunt (2000), contemporary social media platforms actively curate which content users encounter through recommendation algorithms optimized primarily for engagement rather than for any religious or informational value, a dynamic with potentially significant implications for religious authority and pluralism that had not been substantially theorized in the field's foundational work.

Bunt's (2018) analysis of hashtag Islam gestures toward this concern, noting that the same platform dynamics that enable non-traditionally credentialed voices to gain religious influence also mean that algorithmic amplification, rather than either traditional scholarly credentialing or organic community

consensus, increasingly determines which religious voices reach the largest audiences, a dynamic that is not specific to Islam but that Bunt's research documents in particular empirical detail within Muslim digital contexts. This observation connects digital religion research to the broader, largely secular literature on algorithmic curation and its social effects, suggesting a productive but so far underexplored point of connection between digital religion studies and the platform studies and critical algorithm studies literatures developing in adjacent fields of media and technology research.

5.2 Methodological Challenges in Studying Digital Religious Practice

Beyond the substantive research gaps identified above, the digital religion field faces distinctive methodological challenges that shape what kinds of questions it has been able to answer with confidence. Cheruvallil-Contractor and Shakkour (2015), in a volume specifically addressing digital methodology in the sociology of religion, argue that many of the field's foundational studies, including several reviewed in this paper, have relied heavily on qualitative case studies of individual platforms or communities, an approach well suited to generating the kind of rich theoretical insight found in Campbell's (2010) and Bunt's (2000, 2018) work but poorly suited to establishing how representative or generalizable specific findings about religious authority, community, or practice are across the much larger and more diverse universe of digital religious activity. Cheruvallil-Contractor and Shakkour (2015) further note that the rapid pace of platform change itself poses a distinctive methodological challenge largely absent from more traditional sociology of religion research, since findings based on a platform's specific technical affordances and user base at a given point in time may not transfer even to the same platform a few years later, let alone to different platforms entirely, a concern directly relevant to the algorithmic curation research gap identified above, given how substantially platform recommendation systems have changed even within the period covered by the literature reviewed in this paper.

Radde-Antweiler (2008) raises a related methodological concern specific to the study of online ritual, discussed in Section 3.2, arguing that researchers studying digitally mediated ritual practice face a distinctive challenge in determining appropriate criteria for evaluating ritual efficacy or authenticity in virtual contexts, since the participant-observation methods long established in the anthropological study of offline ritual do not straightforwardly transfer to virtual environments where the researcher's own mode of presence and participation is itself mediated in ways that may shape what can be observed. These methodological challenges, taken together, suggest that the field's continued theoretical development, evident throughout the literature reviewed in this paper, has in some respects outpaced the development of methodological tools adequate to test that theory's claims with the kind of empirical rigor and generalizability more established in adjacent fields of sociology and religious studies, a conclusion that directly informs the future research priorities identified in the conclusion below.

5.1 Platform Governance and the Moderation of Religious Content

Gillespie (2018), in his study of platform content moderation, argues that social media companies function as de facto governors of public discourse, making consequential decisions, largely opaque to users and often inconsistently applied, about which content remains visible and which is removed or algorithmically suppressed, decisions that Gillespie shows are frequently made under commercial and political pressure with limited input from the communities most affected. Applied to religious content specifically, Gillespie's (2018) framework raises questions that the digital religion literature reviewed in this paper has only begun to address systematically: platform moderation policies developed primarily to address concerns such as misinformation, harassment, and extremist content can have significant, often unintended, effects on ordinary religious speech and practice, particularly for minority religious communities whose practices or terminology may be misclassified by moderation systems calibrated primarily to majority-context norms. This governance dimension complements the algorithmic-curation concern raised earlier in this section, since both point toward the same broader conclusion, that platform companies' commercially motivated design and policy decisions, rather than either traditional religious authority structures or user communities themselves, increasingly shape the conditions under which

digital religious life unfolds, a conclusion with significant implications for the future research agenda outlined in the conclusion below.

6. IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

The literature reviewed across this paper carries several implications for how digital religion research and religious-institutional practice might develop further. First, the authority-fragmentation dynamic documented throughout Section 4, following Bunt (2000, 2018), Echchaibi (2011), and Anderson (2003), suggests that religious institutions seeking to maintain relevance and legitimacy in digital environments should focus less on simply establishing a digital presence, the concern of much earlier religion-online scholarship discussed in Section 2, and more on actively cultivating the kind of platform-specific engagement and perceived trustworthiness that Bunt's (2018) research suggests increasingly determines digital religious influence, independent of formal institutional credentials. Second, the gender-focused findings of Piela (2011) and Golan and Campbell (2015), discussed in Section 4.2, indicate that religious institutions' digital strategies are rarely gender-neutral in either design or effect, implying that institutions developing digital engagement strategies should explicitly consider how platform choices and moderation policies affect different community members' access to religious participation and voice.

Third, the platform governance concerns raised by Gillespie (2018) in Section 5.1 suggest a specific advocacy priority for religious communities and organizations: engaging directly with platform companies and, where applicable, regulatory bodies to ensure that content moderation systems designed primarily to address secular harms do not inadvertently suppress legitimate religious speech and practice, particularly for minority religious communities whose terminology and practices may be poorly represented in the training data and policies underlying moderation systems. Fourth, the methodological challenges discussed in Section 5.2, following Cheruvallil-Contractor and Shakkour (2015) and Radde-Antweiler (2008), point toward a clear research-infrastructure priority: the field would benefit substantially from more systematic, comparative, and platform-diverse empirical research designs, potentially including collaborative, multi-site studies that could address the generalizability limitations of the largely single-case, single-platform studies that have dominated the field's empirical base to date, a limitation directly comparable to the underrepresentation of contexts beyond well-resourced settings noted in this issue's companion reviews of AI and climate change education.

7. CONCLUSION

This review has traced the development of digital religion studies from its early conceptual foundations in the religion online/online religion distinction (Helland, 2000), through Campbell's (2010, 2012) more integrated negotiation-centered framework, to the substantial body of research on digital religious authority in Muslim contexts developed particularly by Bunt (2000, 2018), Echchaibi (2011), and Larsson (2011). Across this literature, a consistent finding emerges: digital media do not simply relocate existing religious practice into a new medium but actively reshape religious authority, enabling new voices and forms of authority while prompting established institutions to adapt their own strategies for maintaining legitimacy. The comparatively underdeveloped literature on algorithmic curation of religious content represents a significant opportunity for future research, particularly research that connects digital religion studies more directly to the broader platform studies literature, in order to understand how the specific engagement-optimized logics of contemporary social media platforms, as distinct from the more open digital environments of the field's foundational studies, are reshaping religious authority and pluralism in the current media environment.

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