NOTES

BOOK NOTES

BOOK REVIEWS

Religions in the Digital World of Asia:
Some Considerations

Franz-Josef Eilers, svd

Already in the early days of communication research Wilbur Schramm, who is considered as one of the fathers of communication studies, published in 1977 the book "Big and Little Media." The 'big' media were the professional media institutions like radio, TV, press and film whereas the 'little' media were those which could not reach the 'big' level. They were also called "group media" because their 'readership' was usually in small groups where members could see and react immediately with each other. They developed especially in Latin America where the Church promoted them to help alleviate the life of simple people and also to develop a counter-balance to the influence of the "big" mass media which were owned and operated by big financial companies and were in the hands of the financially and politically "powerful."

All this is different now with the development of new ways of communicating where everybody can reach everybody anywhere and anytime with the so-called social media or better social means of communication. Today anybody can also be his/her own editor, announcer or communicator using simple and affordable technical devices for a growing number of people and thus be somehow independent from the still existing 'big' media. Here the range of communication is extended almost without limits. Even the 'old' big media have to extend and adjust to these new technical possibilities if they want to survive.

Franz-Josef Eilers, svd, PhD is the Executive Director of the Asian Research Center for Religion and Social Communication. This article was partly presented during the 9th ARC International Roundtable at Centurion University of Management and Technology, Odisha, India on February 6-9, 2017.

Now the means to communicate are no longer the privilege of a few but can be used by everybody in society and thus are rightly also called "social" media. They often are related to social networks though such 'networks' are not new but existed already since the beginning of humankind whenever people assembled and communicated with each other (Tom Standage, 2013). This phanoenon, however, has taken on an additional meaning in reference to new 'means' and possibilities which can be taken up by almost everybody in a growing way. The word 'Social' indicates also the shift to "*Social* Communication," an expression which was actually introduced in 1963 by the Vatican II document *Inter Mirifca.* This Council decree proposed the expression to be used over and above the usual "mass media," which would just refer to technology but not to a *social process*, a communicative happening between humans within a certain grouping ("social") regardless of the means used.

Looking in this perspective to *Religions in Asia* seems to be quite challenging but is hardly done. Such an attempt might begin with looking first at the *means* used in different religious activities like teaching, preaching but also in religious ceremonies. The predominant concern here might often be the question how to 'use' them in a most effective way from voice/music to environment and other factors but communication as a *process* is easily neglected. In a theater performance the composition and timing for a proper use of different means and persons is important. So it is in religious communication which also has to be considered in its overall "performance" which leads to the experience of the "holy" in the understanding of Rudolf Otto (1923). In communication studies, this is reflected in the ritual communication concept of James Carey (1992) who comes to his insights from the study of culture. He distinguishes between a *transmission* model of communication and a *ritual* model. While communication as *transmission* is concerned about the flow of the message from sender to the receiver and its effect, a *ritual perspective* looks at the overall happening and experience between humans in 'celebrating' a ritual. In a ritual, the participants are not concerned about the means and their effects but rather about a common experience which is also the case in any religious practice and experience transcending the human into the "Divine."

For our Asian situation this could mean *first* to study the 'means' available and where and how they can be used. But a mere listing and even study of these possibilities and their effects is not enough. Following Carey's ritual considerations they must also be embedded in a proper cultural and 'religious' environment with respective meanings and proper communicative dimensions. They further are determined by the history, teaching and expressions of different religions themselves in relation to the people of a given culture.

Thus—here in a *second* step—one might ask if and how far such 'ritual' experiences are met and 'lived' in Asian religions under the perspective and possibilities of a digital world. Special initiatives, however, for such research hardly seem to exist yet. These studies would include an analysis of different elements—from words, songs, books, preaching, images and actions like dancing—but also a vision of the whole process of religious activities: in what way are they related or interrelated with each other and with what purpose and effect? Here the digital element comes in with the general question: if and how far does new digital communication affect in religion and what way?

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The word "digital" refers to digits or numbers and reduces the communication to 0 and 1 as the carriers of any information. Thus: 'digital' refers to new means, ways and structures of communication which enlarges possibilities—over and against the traditional analog—almost limitless: Here the "Death of Distance" (Cairncross 1997/2001) comes in: we can communicate without any limits of time and space as well as content. One has to keep in mind, however, that all this refers only to the transmission but not necessarily the essence of our message or our life-experience. 'Digital' is transmission but only in a limited way also 'ritual' in the understanding of Carey and not to talk about the 'essentials' of life.

Further, digital is definitely more than just only technology—like some of the older communication means. By now it is very much a way of life though it probably does not penetrate the core and essence of a person and even religion in the 'real' experience of the "holy" beyond any 'outside' and possibly somehow 'superficial' "happening"… Here one might ask further questions like: How far and in what way does 'digital communication affect our personal life and relationships, insights and 'acting' with others? Our visions of life and work? Our ways of expressing ourselves in community?

But also how far do they affect our own character developments and our communicative abilities and possible 'ethics' flowing out of all this? The way we communicate is not only determined by technical means but also by our 'personality' influenced by our upbringing and other life experiences.

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Any deeper study of digital communication in *Asian religions*, however, must also consider the culturally already existing communication means and processes of respective cultures since religion is intimately related to culture. They are not only expressions of human life and history but also of beliefs or what Luzbetak calls the '*ideational'* part of culture.

Physical culture which is expressed in visible signs like buildings with their proper architecture, positioning, decorations and tools is to be followed by *societal needs* which are reflected in the ways how people live and relate with each other. The *ideational* is expressed in beliefs which are reflected and communicated in ceremonies and practices from where religious traditions follow: may it in the Buddhist way of 'listening' to the Buddha and his teachings or the Qumran with its sayings and texts or in Christianity's relation to a personal God who became human in Jesus Christ.

Social communication tries to enter into all of this and to study the origin, flow and effects of communication not just as 'rational' knowledge but as a celebration of human and divine life and community. Here the concern is less the individual communication experience via the so-called social media like Facebook or Twitter to satisfy my own 'needs' and longings but rather a living of the actual experience of community, being 'social' in a given religious practice and celebration. All this seems to be, however, broader and more than just a 'digital' way of transmission which might be temporarily considered more as a tool than the 'essence' of the experience of life.

The dictionary tells us that 'digital' is an adjective and "displaying a read-out in numerical digits rather than by a pointer like at a watch. It is "relating to/or using numerical calculations or data in the form of numerical digits" but also stands for "using computer and computerized technologies, including the Internet." What does this mean for religions and especially religions in Asia?

Looking at this reality of *digital communication*, theologian and communication scholar Robert S. Fortner (2007) asks if the 'digital' which is a numerical unit (0-1) without a before and after also means for a digital world that there is no 'before' and 'after' any more but only just 'presence'—that we live in a society without history and similar relations… where therefore "everything goes"?

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What does all this mean in our world, which is determined not only by the 'hardware' of technology but also by shaping slowly but surely the minds of people, the behavior of society and the public atmosphere?

After the "millennials," young people who were born after 1991 (the 'birth' of the world wide web) are called "*digital natives.*" They experience life different from the "digital immigrants" who were born earlier. What does this mean for personal and communal religious life? How can they be readily prepared to live, maintain, develop and 'translate' religious traditions of the past in the same or similar way as those who lived and developed the "holy" before them? How far does the "digital revolution" change the lives and convictions of people in general? Are there possible new expressions also of and for 'eternal' concerns? With the great variety of Asian cultures, populations, and also religious convictions and social developments will there be a difference in pace and space in different the parts of Asia? Does digitization already now give some directions for specific developments in the practices and even convictions of religious communities? There are already now "digital" Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Confucian, Daoist communities: how are the new developments reflected in and with them? How are they treating 'digital life' experiences? Are 'beliefs' adjusted to a digital shape? Do religious teachings and practices change in a digital way?

Another important question for Asia is also if and how far a digital landscape can help towards a fruitful *interreligious dialogue* and possibly develop more easily common exchanges to be facilitated and even consolidated between religions in a digital way?

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The distinction between "Religion Online" and "Online Religion" exists already since quite some time: How does religion present itself online or is religion itself practiced online? The Dawson/Cowan book *Religion Online, Finding Faith in the Internet* (2004) is one of the early publications in this perspective. It contains one article each on Islam and also Buddhism: *'Rip, Burn, Pray': Islamic Expression Online* by Gary R. Bunt and *The* Cybersangha*: Buddhism on the Internet* by Charles S. Prebish. Both authors, however, describe their findings and considerations from an American/Canadian academic perspective but not from an Asian point of view, though in the Prebish article on Buddhism lists some relations in Japan, Taiwan but not more. These articles do therefore not really reflect the Asian situation as such. The presentation on Islam asks for example in general how the Qu'ran and Muslim prayer life is reflected in the Net and portals. In addition, the Buddhist presentations pose similar questions from a more general and Western academic point of view.

For all of us, the Internet has changed and developed considerably also within the Asian countries themselves. It means that many more detailed local studies on the activities, experiences and consequences of digitization of religions in Asia are needed asking for example:

1. Is there no history in 'digital'? If yes, what are the consequences?
2. Can digital communities 'substitute' physical communities? Are they the same or how are they different, with which consequences?
3. Are there any special Asian ways or responses to a digital challenge? Is "Puja" or the lighting of a candle through digital devices acceptable/or even the same like in real presence?
4. How far can spiritual experiences be reflected in a digital world? Is there also a "holy" (Rudolf Otto) in the digital world? When? Where? How?

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To give a concrete example of research approach from the West: Heidi Campbell has in her seminal book *When Religion meets New Media* (2010) studied for America and Europe Western Jewish, Muslim and Christian communities but not any of the Asian communities. Howeverm her findings and reflections could also help in general to develop similar approaches also for Asia and religions in Asian.

She describes religious communities as "groups who share a common ideology and theology and can be identified by distinctive patterns of practice and circulating discourse which support and justify their experience of the sacred and every day" (p. 8).

After a first chapter on religious communities and the Internet and considering a "religious-social shaping of technology" she presents in her book the following chapters which might up to a certain point also be considered in Asia:

1. History and media tradition: discovering baselines for religious approaches to new Media.
2. Community value and priorities: contextualizing responses to new media.
3. Negotiating with new media: to accept, reject, reconfigure and/or innovate?
4. Considering communal discourse: framing new media appropriation.
5. Studying the religious shaping of new media: the case of the 'kosher' cell phone (in Jewish culture)
6. Insights from the religious-social shaping of new media.

In the course of her presentation she sees some positive and negative patterns for a new media choice by religions (p.185 ff).

As *positive points* she lists:

1. Media which can be utilized for proselytizing and public proclamation of core beliefs.
2. Technologies which facilitate global networking and promotions within religious communities to solidify membership, identity and beliefs.
3. New media for agenda setting and publicizing beliefs, especially if it is supported by a discourse.. new technology as tool for highlighting core communal values.
4. New media technologies for innovative ways to digitize or technologize religious rituals or reminders…to more easily integrate religious expectations into daily life, like e.g. times for daily prayer of Muslims..

For *negative points* she enumerates:

1. Avoid technology features which allow access to secular content.
2. New Media might undermine established authority structures and gatekeepers, therefore forms of monitoring like filtering software.
3. How New Media influence the identity management of the community.
4. New Media messages are fluid and transitionary rather than fixed like traditional media on a text: E-vangelism comes with responsibility.

She calls for an analytic frame in the shaping of religious-social technology which should ask for "the spiritual capital of the community… as families of users who frame their choices on their underlying religious ideology."

She further sees *four layers* for a proper investigation of the history and tradition of the community in relation to media:

1. Identify core values and essential priorities.
2. Base immediate interaction on these foregoing points.
3. There is a need for a communal discourse to frame the technology and its prescribed use: prescriptive, officializing and evaluation discourses.

Authority and identity management of the respective communities are to be considered for a network of interactions in a "networked religion" (p. 193).

Her research might contribute to a similar study on the role and impact of digital communication for religions in Asia: are there similar common elements in Asian Religions? How far are they determined by different cultures? Are there common elements of 'Asian-ness' which have a special relation to religion like e.g. silence, meditation, ascetism, view of the cosmos, human relations like age groups (parents, older generations, filial piety)?

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Digitization seems to change our ways of communicating completely. This is reflected in some developments like the following:

1. Former printed matters are now digitized and in the Net and 'cloud' paper seems not to be needed anymore..
2. Radio and television with text and picture (sound and image) are now at the free will and decision of the consumer who decides what and where s/he wants to 'go.'
3. Fixed broadcasting programs will in a growing way not anymore be needed because everybody becomes his/her own program director In selecting what s/he wants to see and hear.
4. For transmissions long, medium, or short waves are not needed anymore. All is available through streaming. Here again, who decides which kind of program s/he wants to see?
5. *As a consequence*: It is the *consumer* who decides what, when and where s/he receives programs—also religious ones. Thus it depends on his/her personal interest and needs…which indicates also his/her interests and personal disposition… (What are the criteria for such decisions by the consumer? Any consequences for 'education' and religious formation?)
6. There are no boundaries anymore for interpersonal communication in digital ways, but there still is and will always be a difference between (physically) direct "person-to-person" communication and the ones mediated by a transmission instrument.
7. Personal communication means (cellphones, tablets etc.) are multiplying and in a growing way available and accessible to more and more people: like in the Philippines where there are more cellphones than the total number of inhabitants. Thus the 'digital divide' will become smaller and smaller.
8. Where is in all this a/the religious need and communication of persons and communities? How will digital *communitas* and religion tomorrow look like? Do they still have a *role* to play? How? When? Where?

If religion is essential for any human being and society it must be also be reflected in the digital world of Asia. Our question, however, is: where, when, how, with which consequences for individuals and communities—including the academic community… is this (to be) realized?

The digital way of living actually refers to new means, ways and possibilities of communicating which affect *all* areas of life but do not

reach to the essentials of our human being. With the "Death of Distance" (geographically, mentally, time-wise) these outside experiences do not, however, fully reach and change the essentials of our life: We are not conceived, born or die digitally but really which also holds for deep personal relations! Thus, beyond or even before any digital experience there is already the "real" or "analog" of our lives which cannot just be 'thrown away'. In fact, while our ways of change with new technical possibilities (digital) our personal needs and realities as human beings are not discarded which also includes religion as an essential dimension. In the same way as our needs for concrete bodily touch and love are still existing also in the digital world, also our relation to the "holy" is lived beyond the digital in the reality of religion. Basic human needs are not something which can be changed or thrown away like a cloth—to change to digital—also religion has to be seen as essential to any human existence. Digital communication changes our ways and possibilities for communicating completely—no limits in reaching and communicating with people from all corners of the world—which widens our horizon and develops new relationships and experiences. But at the core of our lives we are still the same human beings with our own needs and experiences which also the digital world finally cannot fulfill. David Sax (2016) comes in here with his well researched book *The Revenge of Analog* where he also reports on (analog) meditation centers in the Google headquarters and similar enterprises in Silicon Valley where, according to him, spiritual masters and gurus are in high demand (p. 205 ff.). Consequently, despite all the digital hype there is still the analog reality from where we live and might reach out digitally. Here religion comes in: live analog but act digital which this way 'flows' out of our analog reality which not only includes religion which might be even considered as the core of everything we responsibly do and from where new communication possibilities become a 'new' dimension!

In a way we might say that religions are in their core 'analog' while the digital dimension helps to more deeply understand this reality of life! Thus for example in Christianity sacraments like Baptism are not just digital but 'real' (analog) with the concrete water flowing the ceremony. While digital communication can help to better understand and appreciate the reality which, however is analog. Here the reality of God is not just digital but analog. He is not only present *online* but acts rather *offline* as one of our 2016 research conferences at the University of Santo Tomas (UST) in Manila said in one of their presentations.: Religion is not just digital but also "real" in its core.

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Religion in the Virtual Public Sphere:
Nature and Dynamics
A Study Based on Selected Social Network Sites

G. Patrick

Relating religion to 'virtual public sphere' has been a concern not only for communication research but also for religious studies and political science for quite sometime now. As we live in an era wherein we witness to increasingly growing involvement of religion in the processes of public sphere or in various aspects of public life, it is fitting that we continue to explore this interface. Virtual space, unique to our times, offers an unmistakable domain to this interface.

Public Sphere

The public sphere, as we know, is a category that relates itself to the practice of democracy. Theorising on it is generally referred to the research done by Jurgen Habermas[1] who understood it as 'a discursive realm between the civil society and the state, involved in creation of public opinion, which weighs upon political decisions or participates in the process of decision making on matters concerning public life.' He thought of three types of public spheres: 1) public spheres in the political domain (a domain which is proximate and yet different from the state, preparing individuals for statecraft); 2) public spheres in the 'world of letters' (discussion and debates in the domain of literatures, academia, press, clubs, etc., which, with its relative independence, debates upon the state as well as the courts); and 3) public spheres in the 'town' in coffee houses, salons, 'table societies', etc. which cultivate the general

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[1] The attribution begins with Jurgen Habermas' research-based publication, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*

*G. **Patrick**, PhD* is assistant professor and head of Christian Studies at the University of Madras, Chennai, India.