Religion in the Digital Space

Exploring its Dynamics with Reference to the Asian Context

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The advanced Information and Communication technologies of the contemporary global era have, among other things, generated not merely the facilities but also the motivation for the practice of 'digital religion.' Differentiated meaningfully as 'online religion' and 'religion online' digital religion not only gives the information but also the possibility for virtually practicing religions. Researches show that an increasing share of population everywhere is taking to Internet and the reality of cyberspace is penetrating into the actuality of life more steadily. The Pew Research Foundation came up in the year 2012 with the finding that the global penetration of the Internet is 46.4%. Such a considerable emergence of the reality of digital experience and particularly of digital religion has crucial implications for the way human beings encounter religions per se, religions of others, and different religious communities in the public arena.

Against this background, this essay proposes to explore the reality of religion in the digital space with particular reference to the Asian context. Needless to say that such an exploration should begin with a look at the Asian reality itself, especially as it relates to digital religion.

Asian Reality of Plurality of Religions

Asia shares much of the global reality today. One may therefore ask whether there is anything specifically Asian that can be treated distinctively as Asian reality. Granting that Asia has become global and its concerns have got

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deeply interconnected with global issues, we still cannot ignore those aspects which give a specific face to Asia in the global arena. Among such aspects, the experience of plurality of religions stands head above shoulders.

Religious plurality is thick in Asia. According to the Pew Research Center survey taken in 2010 and published in 2012, the Asia-Pacific region is the most religiously diverse region in the world: Hindus 25%, Muslims 24%, Unaffiliated 21%, Buddhists 12%, Folk Religions 9%, Christians 7%, Other religions 1%, and Jews less than one percent. While the Western hemisphere, including the Latin American and the African continents, experiences the salience of one or two single religious traditions, the Asian continent remains deeply diverse and pluralistic. It is further augmented by the fact that not merely the pan-Asian context as such that is pluralistic, but even individually Asia has some of the most religiously diverse countries in the world. Singapore, for example, has a good multi-religious demography. India, which has the majority of 'Hindus,' also has the second highest Muslim population in the world!

Such a plurality of Asian religions does not present itself pure and simple. It remains merged with issues and dynamics which go with religions in the global scenario. For example, Asia too is experiencing a 'vitalization of religion' in the context of the Western experience of 'resurgence' of religion. While the West experiences the resurgence against the background of the weakening of metanarratives like the secular, rational, etc., the Asian context experiences a 'vitalisation' in terms of popular participation in the practice of religion verging on identity formation and discourse, and this impacts upon the way plurality of religion is experienced in Asia. Closely related to this vitalization is the process of construction of 'world religions' in Asia as it happens all over the globe. The concept of 'world religions' has gained salience in the global arena today and some religious traditions of Asia are involved in constructing themselves to be 'world religions.' The endeavour of constructing Hinduism, 'syndicating Hinduism' as in the words of Romila Thapar, is a case in point. Along with the Abrahamite religions, Hinduism is also projected to be a 'religion' so as to negotiate the field of world religions. Another important dynamics of religion in Asia goes with its symbiotic relationship with social relationship and the resultant dynamics of religion in constructing and negotiating social identities. In fact the plurality of Asian religions has much to do with social groupings and ethnic identities. Yet another dynamics at work in the realm of religion everywhere and in Asia is the emergence of public religion, i.e., religion involved in the processes of the public sphere, especially in the dynamics of

politics. Religious nationalism, negotiating the political space, has become a major religious dynamic in Asia. And the digital mediation of religion does contribute to the negotiation of the political space by enabling intra or inter religious dialogues.

How do these dynamics play out in the digital religious field of Asia is an important line of enquiry? Two bold religious spaces have emerged today: one, the actual concrete religious space and the other the virtual religious space. And the gap between these two spaces is increasingly decreasing, resulting in 'vireality' (virtual + real), a dismaying of borders between virtuality and reality. It would do well to relate this vireality to Asian religions and understand the changes taking place both in Asian religions as well as in associated sites. We begin the enquiry by taking a look at the way digital religion and its dynamics are present in cyber Asia today.

Digital Religion in Asia

Asian countries like Japan (86.2%), South Korea (84.8%), Kuwait (75.5%), and Hong Kong (74.9%) find their prime places among the top 50 countries in the world with high Internet penetration according to a survey conducted in 2013.[1] And according to a survey conducted in 2015, 40.2% percent of Asians are Internet users and in terms of individual countries, Japan has 90.6%, South Korea 92.6%, Taiwan 84.0%, China and India—the most populous countries, 49.5% and 30.0% respectively. This is not insignificant! It is a considerable level of Internet penetration, though this does fall short of western continents like Europe which has 73.5% and the US 87.9%.

40.2% of Internet penetration in Asia has its own impact upon the presence and dynamics of religion both in the actual and virtual religious fields of Asia. When I typed phrases like 'Hinduism in Asia,' 'Buddhism in Asia,' 'Christianity in Asia,' 'Islam in Asia' in Google, I found 1.47, 12, 25.8 and 64.3 millions of hits respectively. These categories are by no means a representative sampling of the presence and dynamics of Asian religions in the digital space, but, certainly, an unmistakable indication of the amazing intensity of its presence. It bespeaks of our mediated age, very much characterized by the digitalized virtuality of human experience, including the religious experience. Needless to say that the explosion of Information and Communication Technologies has heavily contributed to this intense presence of religion in the digital space!

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[1] Internet World Stats. http://www.internetworldstats.com/top25.htm accessed on 08 Jan 2016.

By way of getting an indication of the way the major Asian religions are present in the digital space, I took a quick look at the first nine Google websites under each religion. Following are the entries:

Hinduism

- Hinduism—Wikipedia
- Hinduism Today Magazine—Join the Hindu Renaissance
- 7.5 lakh Muslims and Christians reconverted to Hinduism in the last 10 years
- Sacred Texts: Hinduism
- BBC Religion: Hinduism
- Hinduism Religion Facts
- Hinduism: The World's third Largest Religion
- About Hinduism: Beliefs Practices
- Hinduism URI Kids World Religions

Islam

- Islam Wikipedia
- Philadelphia Police office ambushed in the name of Islam
- BBC Religion Islam
- Islam.com a site worthy of its name
- Al-Islam
- Islam Guide
- Islam the Guardian
- Religion of Islam
- Islam 101

Buddhism

- Buddhism made easy
- Buddhism Wikipedia
- A Basic Buddhism guide
- BBC religion Buddhism
- Buddhism religion facts
- Basics of Buddhism
- What is Buddhism
- About Buddhism
- Religions of Buddhism

Christianity

- Christianity Wikipedia
- Shelter of Forcefully converted Children Raided
- BBC Religion Christianity

- Christianity Ontorio Consultants on Religious Tolerance
- Christianity Religion Facts
- Christianity Faith in God
- What is Christianity
- Christianity for kids
- Catholic Encyclopedia

This very short list of websites of each religion gives an idea of the kind of digital presence these religions are constructing today. Every religious tradition has the maximum websites dedicated to giving information about its tradition, i.e., the religion online dimension of digital religion. And the information given is rich in terms of resources to get to know about the religion as well as possibilities for practicing the religion. It is interesting to note that virtual enablement of actual practice of religion is on the rise today. Many websites aid in the process of performing rituals, privately or in sacred sites. And it is also revealing to note that the virtual presence of Asian religion is not value neutral, but goes with an 'open,' or 'hidden' apologetics. While Buddhism, which presents itself as the religion of the modern mind, goes with a certain restrain, other religious traditions seem to 'propagate' themselves through the websites. Appeals to join the religion or donate to the upkeep of the religious traditions are invariably present in all websites. It is interesting to note that some of the major issues faced today by different traditions find mention in this extremely short list too. Hinduism's neo-renaissance, attempt at re-conversion and the effort to construct it as a world-religion are reported; similarly, Islam gets associated with violence and Christianity with conversion issues. So, a journey through even a very small religious digital presence points to the concrete reality out there.

It would do well to relate some of these dynamics with the way any digital religion or any religion in the digital space operates:

The Challenge of Vi-Reality for Digital Religions

We are increasingly being challenged today to rightly understand and accurately describe the workings of 'digital religion.' 'Religion online' and 'online religion' as mentioned above, has been one outstanding category of understanding which focuses upon the functions of digital religion. While the former stands for the information available on religion in the cyberspace, the latter stands for its practice through the Internet/cyberspace. Anastasia Karaflogka

calls these two categories as, 'on' religion and 'in' religion. Whatever be the names given, these categories are helpful to understand the different types of religious presence in the cyberspace.

There is also an attempt to understand the digital religion in terms of its experiential dimension. How does the 'experience of digital religion' feel like? While searching for data on this aspect, I came across a website which speaks about 'Second Life.' It is a website, with strict membership, which gives a 3D experience of life, self, otherness, and other realities. For example, by way of educating a person to live with a person with disabilities, a person is offered a simulated situation, with experiences very close to realities. It gives a person a 'second life,' a new look at life and reality with emotions and attitudes. It involves transformations of persons. Websites bearing testimonies of healing through religion or of religious conversion are yet another major variety of digital religion. The impact on the viewers is almost actual to the extent it addresses both to the virtual viewer and the actual viewer, and the impact in terms of 'healing' or religious change can be brought bout in the online viewer too. Or websites for conducting prayers, rituals, and ceremonies too are experientially oriented.

Philosophers today speak about what they call 'digital sublime' by which they mean a digital experience of the 'unrepresentable' reality. Francois Lyotard, speaking about the role of language to mediate reality, dwells upon the theme of mediating the 'un-representable' as the modern sublime, the ineffable dimension of reality. Theorists of digital space bring the idea of sublime to bear upon the digital experience too. Some of the visual experiences presented in the digital space are so effervescent and engulfing that they can be presented only as the sublime. One can also speak about a digital religious sublime—an ineffable religious experience presented through the digital space.

There are those who highlight the basic convergence between religion and virtuality produced by a digital experience. Religion, because of its involvements in matters spiritual or metaphysical, is virtual rather than physical. As Saied Reza Ameli would put it, religion "is originated from a 'Trans-empirical' or immaterial which connects one with soul, spirituality, God, and supernatural territories. Then, religious interaction is a kind of process of getting familiar with the comprehension of 'spiritual cause' and a transfer to that world."[2] Considering

religious experience to be one of 'transfer' from material to spiritual world or vice versa, Patrick Maxwell imagines of virtual space, which, though not spiritual but material and industrial, 'transferring' people to another world. He considers 'belonging to the other world' as the common denominator between virtuality and religiosity. Going along with this line of thinking, Saied surmises, "The virtualization of religion represents religion in a new world named 'the virtual world' or 'the virtual-real world' or 'the real virtual world.' The related industries of this new world which can be characterised as 'the alternative world' or 'the secondary world,' try to transfer entire religious sense including religious beliefs, rituals, thoughts and emancipating movements to 'the real-virtual' space."[3] This supposed commonality between virtuality and religiosity, though acceptable in a phenomenological sense, is not accepted by many religious traditions. The other world that religions speak of is eschatological and not ethereal as found in virtuality. Religions would never identify the ethereality with supernaturality.

Another question that is discussed in virtual/digital religion is related to the post-modern sense that is implied in it. Does digital religion promote post-modernism, in the sense of deconstructing the metaphysical world or an ontological reality, by substituting it with the virtual world or reality, and by relativising the religious and ethical absolutes by accentuating the awareness of plurality? Needless to say that the contemporary advanced digital communication is simultaneous to advanced modernity or supermodernity or the hypermodernity. This simultaneity and convergences could be explored fruitfully. "However, it seems virtual space is not necessarily a postmodern phenomenon; it can duplicate physical modernity on a virtual level, so one can argue that by the emergence of a new, virtual world, we are now experiencing new levels of modernity which is a combination of virtual modernity and physical modernity or one can call it 'vi-physical modernity' or 'vi-real religion.'"[4] Saied speaks about three types of virtual religions: the first one is an imaginary and metaphoric view of religion in virtuality— "Virtual-imaginary religion applies image-making and imagination broadly and takes individuals to an "artificial space" which necessarily does not connect significantly with "reality." So, while having connection with real space, the representation of reality occurs on a completely different level,

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² Saied Reza Ameli, "Virtual Religion and Duality of Religious Spaces," *Asian*

Journal of Social Science, Vol. 37, No. 2, (2009), 209.

³ Ibid., 210.
⁴ Ibid., 211.

which is accompanied by contrast and confrontation with reality and so many times, is reflected as "hyper-reality."[5] The second type of virtual religion is that which is shaped by the media, the instrument of virtuality. Various types of media like radio, television, etc., have their own corresponding types of virtual experiences, i.e. auditory, visual, sensual, etc. The third type of virtuality comes in the wake of the digital revolution which endeavours to bridge the gap between virtuality and reality, making 'virtu-real' world. It endeavours to 'drown the netizen in the virtual space' by trying to annihilate the border between the real and the virtual. By this, according to Saied, a kind of 'sameness' of process is produced between virtual religious image and religious objectivity. This third level of virtual/actual integration is that which is taking place in the space of digital religion today.

Because of this near-total identification of the virtual and the actual in digital religion, it is becoming increasingly necessary for different religions to re-envision their processes as well as objects of religious signification. The Catholic Church, for example, in its document *The Church and Internet* makes some pertinent observations in this regard. First of all, it instructs its adherents to accept the facility of internet wholeheartedly. It wants its personnel to utilize this 'areopagus of the modern age' for evangelization. However, it clearly points out that the internet *per se* is not identical with their religious ideals. For example, the meaning and experience of a sacrament, it points out, can never meaningfully occur through digital religion. First of all, the signification of a sacrament takes a believer to the experience of grace from the ultimately transcendent God in triune persons; the metaphysics implied in this understanding of sacrament can never be replaced with a virtual reality. Secondly, the sacrament is meaningful only in an actual communitarian context, where persons face-to-face celebrate the sacrament and experience God. This aspect of the sacrament, transcendental in its signification, communitarian in its operation, can never be obtained in the digital experience of religion.

The Sanskritic Hinduism too has a similar observation to make. When it speaks about self-realisation or realization of oneself as Brahman as the ultimate goal of life, it prescribes a path towards attaining this goal. The path is nothing but sitting at the feet of a guru, learning the method of self-realisation and progress towards the goal. Learning yoga, an important method towards self-realisation, can fruitfully take place only under the guidance of a guru. The Internet religion cannot replace an actual guru, and learning yoga through the Internet may enable us with the

skills of yoga but not the religious dimension implied in yoga. Thus religions are re-visiting their understandings of religious significations in the light of digital religions.

It is being claimed that the world will witness a weakening of dogmatism due to the salience of digital religion. Saied, for example, claims that "world society will witness a strength of consciousness and a weakness of dogmatism. Here, universal values which are the common denominators of divine religions would emerge—values such as combating oppression, and advocating social justice in social movements like combating the destruction of the environment, advocating global peace and campaigning against war."[6] The claim made here is that the depth and width of religious knowledge, augmented by the digital space, would result in deeper wisdom, converging on common good, rather than on parochial and sectarian interests. However, it needs be noted that digital religion can also become a facility for treating faith as a matter of intellectual assent, for which, the needed resources are readily available in the internet. A person following a particular religious tradition may easily refer to the content of his/her belief as given in the holy books or commentaries by religious leaders and attune his/her belief to them. This attuning of one's belief to the one given out in the Internet can also easily become a matter of habit and certain rigidity can emerge about the content of the belief. While this facility for attuning one's belief with that of one's tradition through online religion is available, this can facilitate a repetitive religious behavior with the support of the digital space. Repetition, the behavioural aspect of a ritual, can also become an important factor in the production of dogmatism. Therefore, even while one speaks of weakening of dogmatism, we need also be alerted of its possibility.

Religious critiques point out to a certain 'technological determinism' implied in digital religion. Ultimately, it is technology and its tools which create, re-create, un-do the space that we experience as digital space, which is the raw material for digital religion. Some even speak about this raw material, the computer software, as the 'invisible' which tends to replace the invisible deity. Groys Boris would argue, for example, that the digital image that a viewer can see hides behind it the digital programme written by codes, which are invisible, and they are akin to the reality of an icon which stands for the divine in a religious ritual. As any religious activity is premised upon an

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[5] Ibid., 212.

[6] Ibid., 228.

invisible presence of the deity, so too digital space itself is premised upon the invisible software codes, which determine the digital experience. Such determinism goes into the making of digital religion too. As Saied points out, "Virtual religion, in fact, is about the industrialization of religion, religious knowledge and religious practice. Clearly, virtual space is entirely an artificial and industrial space."[7] And therefore, the dissatisfaction over digital religion among the religionists! It is a short distance from here to construct religious fundamentalism through the technological fundamentalism which is ruling the digital space!

The question whether digital religion allows space for intuition is important when it comes to a discussion on the role of religion from a transcendental perspective. Most of the theist religions believe in some form of divine revelation taking place in history. And, according to Saied, one can also speak of 'intuitive ontology' an intuition into the 'principle of being' which informs reality. While ontotheology would limit this experience of intuitive ontology to the reality of being, religions would speak in terms of the divine, a transcendental other. This is perhaps the interstice in the relentless human construction of reality, be it through a grand metaphysics, or a modernist epistemology, or a poesis that integrates imagination and action; and this interstice would be the window to reality and even to transcendental reality which always beckon us to move ahead with confidence and liberative desire. Whether the digital religion is giving us an opportunity for this intuition is an important question to raise today. It would seem, on several counts, that it is doing so: i) by the very fact that it gives virtuality to religion, digital space seems to free religion from its traditional historicist conditionings; ii) by the fact that it provides a plurality of perceptions, it seems to free religion from dogmatism, fundamentalism, bigotry, and so on; iii) by the fact that it draws in wider sections of people into participating in the practice as well as consciousness of religion, it seems to free religion from enclaves and closures attendant upon ascriptive hierarchies; etc. It would seem, on the other hand, that it is also not enabling intuition on several accounts: i) it seems to leave no space un-covered, and attempts to explain everything and even explain-away everything; ii) it seems to work according to the dictates of the commercial impulse; iii) it seems to embody the technological determinism built into it; etc. We need to "divine" the positivity of digital religion, relating it to the particular context of its operation.

Digital Religion in Asia

Digital religion in Asia, in its unique way, enables a wider section of humanity to participate in religion. Asia is a continent with multiple traditional ties like ethnicity, gender, caste, etc., which do not support free participation of persons in common platforms. However, it must be said that internet enables the individual to freely participate in digital religion. As opined by Saied, "…religious individuality has been strengthened in the virtual space and religious choices are made with greater freedom, despite the user being affected by norms that originate from cultural and social traditions, dominant gender, tribal, class norms and cultural values."[8] Though we cannot claim that a full-fledged rational choice has been at the root of selecting one's religion through internet, it cannot be denied that more freedom experienced through the cyberspace with regard to one's religious options.

Digital religion in Asia has "opened up" virtually the sacred space beyond the traditional boundaries. The Indian example is case in point: One of the factors operative in the Indian religious world has been the principle of 'purity and pollution.' Sacred sites are earmarked and restrictions imposed according to this principle. The physical dimension of this principle has generated multiple closures, excluding certain sections of the people from certain boundaries of the sacred sites. For example, up to which space a woman, or a 'lower caste' individual can enter a particular temple, is earmarked as per the adaptation of the principle of 'purity and pollution.' Digital religion dismays these boundaries virtually. A person, regardless of her/his social identity, can book for a puja online and get it performed without having to go through the physical laws of purity and pollution operative in a temple. This facility circumvents the rule, and virtually 'opens' the sacred space to the devotee. This could be considered a facility attendant upon digital religion in the Indian case.

Digital religion has made possible a virtual dialogue of religions. The very fact of presenting the varieties of religious traditions online, even with the facility for virtually practicing them, provides a virtual system of dialogue between religions. The best form of dialogue, according to Raimon Panikkar, a well-known inter-religious seeker, is 'dialogical dialogue' which comprises of an 'intra-religious' as well as an 'inter-religious' dialogue. It would mean that

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[7] Ibid., 219.

[8] Ibid., 223

dialoging with another person from another tradition is preceded by a dialogue within oneself, i.e., within one's own tradition, which takes place in the light of the other's tradition. This is an ongoing process, experiencing both moments of dialogue continually. Such a process is virtually enabled through digital religion. The multi-religious resources available online enables a person to conduct this intra as well as inter-religious dialogue by way of clarifying and getting enlightened upon her/his religious convictions or of choosing to practice a religion.

While these are some of the positive outcomes of digital religion, we are faced with its negativities too in the Asian context:

Digital religion has walked a long mile with the project of religious nationalism in India. The vi-reality of the digital space seems to provide the suitable impulse for Hindutva forces to dominate the cyberspace with its agenda. This could be sensed in the multiple ways in which digital media constructs, supports, and discourses upon the project. Benedict Anderson's historiographical insight of 'nation as an imagined community' works very well in this case of the Hindutva forces constructing a religiously imagined nation for India. An imagination of the past in terms of myths, the present in terms of religious ethical codes and of the future in terms of religious teleology provide the fuel for this imagined nation. Websites which bring together the map of Indian landscape with the mythical goddess of India, Bharat Matha, and imaginatively collapse one into the other, contribute significantly to the project of religious nationalism; social media rooted in Hindutva ideology, branded as Internet Hindu, work out the way for the project in the Internet domain through their postings, vitriolic interactions, threats and abuses. According to a blog, the cyber Hindu is on the rise today. The Internet-Hindu has certain marks of identification: i) angry Saffronist discourse which abuses Muslims and Christians in the Internet; ii) meticulously toe the RSS doctrine; iii) hardcore BJP supporters; iv) support right wing liberal economy and so on. It is no secret that BJP won the last general election, not the least with the consistent support provided by this cyber Hindu segment which canvassed the young voters successfully.

While the cyber Hindu adapts the RSS brand of Hinduism to the Internet, one may notice that even the general Hindu beliefs and practices too, according to Vinay Lal, fit well with the logics and dynamics of the internet, which is the communicative platform of the contemporary post-modern era. Lal observes that Hinduism, by being polytheistic, attunes well to the logic of plurality that informs the Internet. Varieties become the hallmark of the Internet, and so too of Hinduism. Varieties of beliefs, rituals, deities, and the like of Hinduism synchronise well with Hinduism. Lal also observes that the playfulness of signs, which is the linguistic marks of the post-structuralist vision of reality, too is apposite to the Hindu religious world, where even the gods can be playthings.

Is it a "techno-Orientalism," as Christopher Goto-Jones would alert us to, which frames Asia by associating Asia with technology for the purpose of "epistemic distancing and dominating" the Asian continent? In his words, "the association of Asia with cyberspace begins to look like another strategy of epistemic distancing and domination."[9] Is there an attempt on the part of the West to 'stabilize' an object of knowledge so that it can exploit? As Thomas Lamarre suggests subtly, is it an attempt to give a unity to Asia in terms of Cyber Asia/Digital Asia, so that it can be easily manipulated? How about the deeply written differences in Asia even in terms of absence of digital infrastructure and usage? Is it not still the fact that, even according to a western portal, the Internet penetration in Asia is only 40%, and therefore, can we really speak about a category called "Digital Asia"?

One of the salient features of Asian religiosity is the predominance of non-institutional and 'unorganised' religions. While the West had the salience of organized religions for quite a long period of time in history, Asia continued to remain relatively less organized or institutionalized. China, though having the Confucian tradition as its salient 'organised' religion, remained anchored upon its 'ancestral worship' tradition; India, in spite of the attempts at 'syndicating' Hinduism, remains still a land of innumerable religious traditions, anchored upon social groupings and identities. In this context of less organized religious terrain, what is the impact of digital religion? Does it organize religions virtually? If so, is it oriented towards an 'intra-textual' religiosity, or pluralistic?

An important hermeneutical theme that is being discussed in the area of relationship between religions with reference to the public domain is the tensive relationship between the binary of 'intra-textuality and inter-textuality.' Against the force of global presence of religion, every religious

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⁹ Cf. Christopher Goto-Jones, "Asiascape(s): Introduction," in *The Asiascape Collection I: Essays in the Exploration of CyberAsia*. Online journal http://www.asiascape. org/resources/publications/asiascape_collection.pdf. 3.

tradition is said to experience these two orientations today. A strong current of intra-textuality is being seen, and being theorized approvingly within the post-liberal perspective that has obtained during the contemporary era. This orientation delves deep into each tradition, by way of exploring the text, content, experience, dynamics, etc of one's own tradition. And this orientation, when pursued without regard to the outside other, can result in extreme forms of fundamentalism, leading to acts of violence. The other orientation, the inter-textual one, is also visible today, especially among the globally migrating population. They gather multiple identities, belongings, inter-religious experiences, etc. and serve as the base for inter-religious relationship of mutuality, understanding and peace. One would wish for a healthy relationship between 'intra' and 'inter' textual relationship between religions in the public domain. However, the contemporary trend in digital space seems to be oriented more towards intra-textual rather than inter-textual. The examples of websites cited above dwell upon their own religious traditions verging on apologetics. Of course, we do find websites promoting inter-religious dialogue, religious tolerance, etc., but they are hosted independently, and a religious follower of a particular tradition rarely visits them. It would do well therefore that websites of each religious tradition gets sensitized to host matters on inter-religious dialogue in their own websites.

A Virtual Inculturation?

Will religions think of 'virtual inculturation'? What would that mean? First of all, it would mean that religion, or better any religious tradition, takes to the virtual world wholeheartedly; that it learns the art, and participates in it; that it spends time and energy for participating in this culture of virtuality, a simulated culture; that it specializes itself in the Information and Communication technology; etc. Secondly, it would mean that every religious tradition is ready to meet other religious traditions in the virtual world; that it learns about others, even while presents itself to others in the virtual space; etc. Thirdly, it would also mean that every religious tradition relates the virtual world to a real world; that it involves in actions which correspond to their claim in the virtual world; that it organizes the possibilities for the practice of their religion in the actual physical world; etc. Fourthly, it would also mean that every religious tradition prescribes certain ethical way of life, taking into consideration the ethical visions presented by other religious traditions. Considering all these aspects, participating in the virtual world would lead every religion to a certain experience of 'virtual inculturation'.

By Way of Concluding

Digital religion in Asia, it would seem, has engaged with the religiosity of the people of Asia in a significant manner. It has impacted upon such realities as practice of religiosity giving an ethereal dimension to it, challenged traditional hierarchies, shaped up newer identities through digital communities, given a religious agency to the participant especially from the marginalized sections of people, challenged those small sections of Asians who had imbibed a doctrinaire approach to plurality of religions, contributed to construction of virtual nations and nationalism, lent itself for 'idolatry' in the sense of impairing the sacramental sense and producing intransigence to transcendence, and so on. An important dynamic that is at work in religion in digital Asia seems to be the increasing tension between 'stagnation' of religious imagination on the one hand, and agility of faith on the other. Stagnation of religious imagination would imply the multiple ways by which the 'religion online' resource gets tied up to fundamentalism, sectarian identities, ascriptive hierarchies, practice of religious magic, etc; on the other hand, agility of faith would imply the subtle yet substantive ways by which the 'migrant' individual, embodying an aspiration for freedom from socio-economic oppressions, engages with digital religion. The exploring 'migrant individual', as a nomad (in the positive sense) who represents such sections of people as women, marginalized communities (Dalits, for example, in the Indian context), indigenous people seem to straddle between stagnation and agility. The journey continues poignantly.

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Cyber/Digital Theology: Rethinking about Our Relationship with God and Neighbor in the Digital Environment

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ABSTRACT

The digital age with its multifarious technological developments, especially those pertaining to the Internet, has created many changes in human society—from the way we work and go about our daily activities to how we relate to the people and things around us. These changes are significant enough to warrant thoughtful, systematic reflections and analysis regarding its cultural, sociological and theological impact on our lives. This paper attempts to do so with respect to the theological implications of the Internet, particularly in regards to human relationships with God and with one another. While philosophical, spiritual and theological inquiries could be made in regards to any or all religious traditions, this paper chooses to focus only on the Catholic Christian tradition. In addition, references to the Asian context are made in order to highlight the effects of the digital age on theology in the Asian cultural and religious milieu. The kind of theology discussed in this paper, for lack of a better term, is called "cyber/digital theology," which requires some explanations to be clear what this really means. Although the terminology as well as its content remains in a formative stage, cyber/digital theology is an area worthy of more systematic study. This paper addresses the need for such an effort and proposes that the digital age provides new ways for the faithful to search for God, to envision one's relationship with God and with neighbor, and to enter into these relationships.

Keywords: digital age, cybertheology, digital theology, cyber/digital theology

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Cyber/Digital Theology: Rethinking about Our Relationship with God and Neighbor in the Digital Environment

Anthony Le Duc, svd

ABSTRACT

The digital age with its multifarious technological developments, especially those pertaining to the Internet, has created many changes in human society—from the way we work and go about our daily activities to how we relate to the people and things around us. These changes are significant enough to warrant thoughtful, systematic reflections and analysis regarding its cultural, sociological and theological impact on our lives. This paper attempts to do so with respect to the theological implications of the Internet, particularly in regards to human relationships with God and with one another. While philosophical, spiritual and theological inquiries could be made in regards to any or all religious traditions, this paper chooses to focus only on the Catholic Christian tradition. In addition, references to the Asian context are made in order to highlight the effects of the digital age on theology in the Asian cultural and religious milieu. The kind of theology discussed in this paper, for lack of a better term, is called "cyber/digital theology," which requires some explanations to be clear what this really means. Although the terminology as well as its content remains in a formative stage, cyber/digital theology is an area worthy of more systematic study. This paper addresses the need for such an effort and proposes that the digital age provides new ways for the faithful to search for God, to envision one's relationship with God and with neighbor, and to enter into these relationships.

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There are a number of terms being introduced in theological discussions that reflect the nature of the contemporary age, and they may not always sound familiar or immediately self-evident to the listener. These terms include "digital theology," "theology in a digital age," "cybertheology," "theology of the Internet," and others. While none of them have received acceptance as the official term for what they aim to convey, they all point to an important reality that needs to be addressed: the nexus between theology and the modern age of digital communication and Internet technology. This article is not concerned so much with making a case for any particular terminology because a consensus will eventually come about in due time. It, however, aims to reflect on some theological matters that are provoked (inspired) by the new digital milieu in which terms such as digital age and cyberspace, which once sounded like descriptions of futuristic and otherworldly phenomena, now reflect a real and pervasive reality in human life. Thus, Christian theology which deals with deepest issues and aspirations of humanity cannot fail to consider the effects of digital technology on the important dimensions of human lives, particularly one's relationship with God and with fellow human beings.

It must be stated at the outset that the forthcoming reflections are but a modest effort to contribute to more systematic studies in this area, which Lynne M. Baab says "remains in its infancy."[1] Indeed, a word search of "digital theology" on Google only produces a few entries. Similarly, conducting a search using the keyword "cybertheology" renders only about a dozen entries, more than half of which are book reviews or references to Antonio Spadaro's book *Cybertheology: Thinking Christianity in the Era of the Internet,* published originally in Italian and subsequently translated into English. The same search on Amazon renders two entries, Spadaro's work and a thesis by an Indian scholar Peter Singh entitled simply *Cybertheology*, published in 2009. Spadaro himself lamented in his book about the lack of resources and having to stare "at a blank computer screen with no idea about where to begin or what to write"[2] when he was asked to give a theological speech about religiosity and the Internet. The Jesuit priest and writer found a wealth of information regarding the pastoral dimension of the Internet—its

benefits and risks, its utilization as an instrument of evangelization and so on—but systematic theological reflections were few.[3]

It is also important in this paper to state the reasons why there needs to be a so called cyber/digital theology and what this term fundamentally refers to. Although there is still no official definition of what cybertheology or digital theology (cyber/digital theology) is, the reflections here can contribute to the process of development of its final definition in the future. One of the aims of this paper also is to discuss cyber/digital theology with some references to the Asian context since the theme of the conference is entitled "Religion in Digital Asia." By situating the inquiry in the Asian environment and making the relevant connections, we will see that cyber/digital theology takes on various shapes depending on the context. Thus, the task of this paper is threefold: (1) To discuss the necessity of developing a cyber/digital theology; (2) to reflect on human relationships with God and fellow human beings from a cyber/digital theological perspective; and (3) to briefly situate this reflection in the Asian socio-religio-cultural context.

The Need for a Cyber/Digital Theology

It has been seen in the history of the Catholic Church that its theology has more than once undergone various developments, sometimes willingly but oftentimes being pushed and nudged along by various events that took place beyond the confines of the institutional church. Paradigm shifts brought about by scientific developments such as the Copernican astronomical model of the universe and Darwin's theory of evolution led the church to officially accept the position that the Bible could not be read as a source of scientific information.[4] Technological advances also significantly affected how theology was done. During the Old Testament period, biblical texts were written and transmitted on scrolls. However, a single scroll could only hold so much text; thus, multiple scrolls were needed for various portions of the Bible. However, by the 4th century, after the invention of the codex, the entire biblical canon could fit into a single physical codex with a specific arrangement and relationship to one another. Unlike previously where the idea of the biblical

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[1] Lynne M. Baab, "Toward a Theology of the Internet: Place, Relationship, and Sin," in *Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture: Perspectives, Practices, and Futures*, ed. Pauline Hope Cheong et al. (New York: Peter Lang, 2012): 277.

[2] Antonio Spadaro, *Cybertheology: Thinking Christianity in the Era of the Internet* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014): Kindle edition.

[3] Ibid.

[4] J.F. Haught, "Science, Theology, and the Copernican Revolution," accessed December 1, 2015, https://www.khanacademy.org/partner-content/big-history-project/big-bang/other-materials2/a/science-theology-and-the-copernican-revolution.

canon as a single entity was just a conceptual notion, the invention of the codex helped the reader to envision the canon as a unified entity. Although the earliest printing of a book is credited to China's ninth century production of the Diamond Suttra which helped to spread Buddhism across Asia, a seismic technological paradigm shift took place with the invention of the printing press that gave rise to the text-based culture and unprecedented dissemination of information in the last 500 years.[5]

The development of computer technology in the last part of the twentieth century and in the beginning of the new millennium has taken communication to even more unprecedented heights. The digitalization of information and transmission of information in this form is a unique development that has affected how information is produced, disseminated and consumed. In this new context, books and journals can be published entirely online. "Newspapers" need not make it to the newsstand or even come in printed pages for that matter. Materials for academic research can be found to a good extent on the Internet, and a doctoral thesis theoretically can be completed entirely by doing research online, written on the computer or tablet, saved in a digital format, and sent to the review panel via email.[6]

The Internet as a new and unique form of communication, however, holds a lot more ramifications for human society and for Catholic theology. In the document "The Church and the Internet," (2002) produced by the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, the Catholic Church recognized the power of the Internet in bringing about "revolutionary changes in commerce, education, politics, journalism, the relationship of nation to nation and culture to culture—changes not just in how people communicate but in how they understand their lives."[7] Indeed, with the rise of social networks, communication via the Internet is not just about sharing information, but also about people engaging in relationships with both those who they know offline as well as those whom they only are acquainted with online. Pope Benedict XVI remarked that social networks signified that

People are engaged in building relationships and making friends, in looking for answers to their questions and being entertained, but also in finding intellectual stimulation and sharing knowledge and know-how. The networks are increasingly becoming part of the very fabric of society, inasmuch as they bring people together on the basis of these fundamental needs. Social networks are thus nourished by aspirations rooted in the human heart.[8]

The fact that the Internet in all its manifold forms and applications (email, chat rooms, voice streaming, video streaming, the World Wide Web, Skype Calls, LINE, Viber, online video games, social networks, etc.) has permeated every aspect of modern human society means that this form of communication must be reflected upon not only sociologically but also spiritually and theologically. Here, it is important to make some delineation between Internet and cyberspace. The Internet is a system of networks connecting together billions of computers worldwide, and where information can be exchanged through various applications of the World Wide Web (WWW), electronic mail, telephony, and peer-to-peer networks for file sharing.[9] While it is easy enough to define Internet, what exactly is cyberspace? Sometimes people use this term interchangeably with Internet, but that is not correct. The Oxford Online Dictionary defines cyberspace as "The notional environment in which communication over computer networks occurs."[10] Notice the word notional is used because cyberspace itself does not physically exist. It is a metaphorical space that exists in our minds, especially when we are chatting with friends and feel as if we are meeting them in a particular space. According to Neil Postman, "Cyberspace is a metaphorical idea which is supposed to be the space where your consciousness is located when you're using computer technology on the Internet, for example."[11] Peter Singh remarks that cyberspace has become a generic term to refer to various things associated with the Internet. "In effect, cyberspace can be understood as the interconnection of human beings through

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[5] Ched Spellman, "The Canon after Google: Implications of a Digitized and Destabilized Codex*" Princeton Theological Review* 17.2 (2010):39-40.

[6] Incidentally, the research and writing of this article is over 90 percent done online and with the help of a laptop, a Kindle Reader, and an Ipad 2.

[7] Pontifical Council for Social Communications, "The Church and the Internet," accessed November 5, 2015, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_20020228_church-internet_en.html.

[8] Pope Benedict XVI, "Message for World Communication Day 2013," accessed November 10, 2015, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20130124_47th-world-communications-day.pdf.

[9] Wikipedia, "Internet," accessed November 13, 2015, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet.

[10] Oxford Online Dictionary, "Cyberspace," accessed November 26, 2015, http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/cyberspace.

[11] Sunshine Recorder, "Neil Postman on Cyberspace," accessed November 26, 2015, http://sunrec.tumblr.com/post/73223445766/neil-postman-on-cyberspace-1995.

computers and telecommunication, without physical geography."[12]

An associated but not identical concept that has arisen out of the notion of cyberspace is that of virtual reality, a term that is used often in everyday conversation but also suffers from much misuse.[13] In the field of computer technology, virtual reality refers to a simulation or a clone of physical reality by employing 3D real-time interactive graphics and technological devices that help create environments that are immersive and interactive for the user in that environment.[14] An important point to be made here is that virtual reality is a very specific technology that involves various instruments in order to achieve a certain experience for the user. Whatever can be characterized as virtual reality has to be believable, interactive, computer-generated, explorable, and immersive.[15] However, virtual reality is often misunderstood because people often refer to this term in order to describe situations that do not involve all these factors. Virtual reality has been associated with things such as the World Wide Web and the world of social networks such as Facebook. However, according to Chris Woodford, the fast development of the WWW actually negatively affected the development of virtual reality technology. In fact, the WWW's rise showed that "ordinary people were much more interested in the way the Web gave them new ways to access real reality—new ways to find and publish information, shop, and share thoughts, ideas, and experiences with friends through social media."[16]

In this paper, the term virtual reality will not be used to refer to the modern digital environment because of the various ways that this term has been misunderstood and misused. In everyday speech, virtual often carries baggage that hinders discussion about what takes place on the Internet or cyberspace. Virtual is often associated with something that does not really exist but is made to appear to exist through clever computer programming. Thus, when one applies this notion to whatever taking place on the Internet, whether it is a community or chat group or different relationships, there is a tendency to

use it in a pejorative sense, so that anything that is deemed virtual is seen as inauthentic or unreal. This is not to deny that there is such a thing as virtual reality (especially in the specific sense mentioned in the above paragraph), but virtual reality does not necessarily characterize the Internet, digital communication or cyberspace, which in some sense is very real. As Pope Benedict XVI asserted, "The digital environment is not a parallel or purely virtual world, but is part of the daily experience of many people, especially the young."[17] Indeed, for some gone is the day where they speak of going online or offline as if one sets out the time to take a stroll in some sort of digital wonderland only to return to real life with all of its real world issues and responsibilities. In today's globalized digital world, the Internet is a place we keep in touch with family and friends, meet new people and form new relationships, do business and keep updated on local and international news, search for information on anything from how to tie a tie to how to make *tom yum kung*, and share photos, ideas, and feelings with others on social networks, blogs, or forums. Pope John Paul II compared cyberspace to the ancient Roman public forum "where politics and business were transacted, where religious duties were fulfilled, where much of the social life of the city took place, and where the best and the worst of human nature was on display."[18] In our Southeast Asian context, a comparable image is the large markets where people congregate to work, to socialize and gossip, even to make merit to the monks who make their morning rounds with the begging bowls.[19] In some ways, cyberspace is symbolic of this town market with all the bustling sights, sounds, and colors fused together.

Cyberspace, thus is no longer a place out there but integrally connected to our life so that we are as much attached to our physical environment as to the digital one. No longer is the Internet considered a novelty but part of everyday life for many people.[20] Armed with a smart phone or tablet with a 3G/4G connection, we are able to check in and let people know where we are at any moment whether it is at the airport, at the metro station or standing in line at the supermarket checkout counter. One only needs to take a glance at the

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[12] M. Peter Singh, "An Overview of Cybertheology" (Paper presented at Seminar on Ekklesiology in Cyber Age, Bangalore, June 26-27, 2014).

[13] Tomasz Mazuryk and Michael Gervautz, "Virtual Reality: History, Applications, Technology and Future," accessed November 6, 2015, https://www.cg.tuwien.ac.at/research/publications/1996/mazuryk-1996-VRH/TR-186-2-96-06Paper.pdf : 3.

[14] Mazuryk and Gervautz, "Virtual Reality," 4.

[15] Chris Woodford, "Virtual Reality," accessed November 26, 2015, http://www.explainthatstuff.com/virtualreality.html.

[16] Woodford, Ibid.

[17] Pope Benedict XVI, "Message for World Communication Day 2013".

[18] Pope John Paul II, "Message for World Communication Day 2002" accessed November 20, 2015, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_20020122_world-communications-day.html.

[19] In the Theravada Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia, it is not uncommon to see monks with their begging bowls making the rounds through the markets each morning.

[20] Sam Han and Kamaludeen Mohadmed, *Digital Culture and Religion in Asia*, (London: Routledge, 2016), Kindle edition.

line of Bangkok office workers patiently cueing up at motorbike taxi stations every evening to see how prevalent the Internet is in their lives. At Kasetsart University in Thailand, the administration has even adopted a "mobile phone lane" for phone junkies to use so as not to hinder the path of other students.[21] According to Antonio Spadaro,

> The Internet is therefore not at all a simple *instrumen*t of communication, which one can choose to use, but it has evolved into a cultural "environment" that determines a style of thought, creating new territories and new types of education, contributing also to the definition of a new way to stimulate the intelligence and to tighten relationships. It is a way to live in and organize our world. It is not a separate environment, but it is becoming ever more integrated into our everyday lives.[22]

Spadaro's assertion, however is not new or unexpected. Even as early as 1990, when the Internet was yet widely known in non-professional circles, Pope John Paul II had already foreseen the potential for a cultural paradigm shift brought about by the world of communications in the modern age. In *Redemptoris Missio*, he characterized the new communications environment as a "new culture" with "new ways of communicating, with new languages, new techniques and a new psychology."[23] It is, therefore, unsurprising that Domenico Pompili argues that the Internet is a place with real human presence and qualifies as an anthropological space.[24] This realization forces us to give credence to its existence and its role in shaping our thoughts and feelings, and ultimately our spiritual and theological sensibilities.

One must ask the question what then is digital/cyber theology? At Durham University in the United Kingdom, the staff at the CODEC Research Central for Digital Theology writes on their website that one of their foci is theology in the digital age. The group lists the activities in this area as including Biblical literacy, the impact of digital transformation on society, culture and communication, and theological issues related to religious identity online.[25] Debbie Herring administers a website on cybertheology in which she divides the contents into three categories—theology in, theology of, and theology for cyberspace.[26] Peter Singh asserts that "Cybertheology must be understood as the intelligence of faith in the cyber age which influences the way we think, learn, communicate and live."[27] Spadaro also refers to the classic definition of theology to discuss the theological implications of the Internet. He writes:

> Cybertheological reflection is always a reflexive knowledge that starts from the experience of faith…Cybertheology is not, therefore, a sociological reflection on religiosity on the Internet, but is the fruit of faith that frees from itself a cognitive impulse at a time when the Web's logic marks the way of thinking, knowing, communicating, and living.[28]

Cyber/digital theology can also be distinguished from other theologies that focus on or give priority to particular sectors/groups in society, for example liberation theology (the poor and the working class), feminist theology (women), womanist theology (African American women), and Asian theology (Asian men and women). Cyber/digital theology is also unlike various contextual theologies because the case of the digital environment is not simply some sort of special human context that is isolated from the rest of human society. Moreover, cyber/digital theology is not necessarily just about a brand of theology that is found *in* cyberspace, removed from actual day-to-day life. Indeed, the digital environment is becoming increasingly all encompassing in our lives and exerts a great deal of influence on all of life's dimensions. *Thus cyber/digital theology is the systematic reflection on the transformative impact of the digital age on the various dimensions of one's faith life and his/her response to this ever changing milieu.* Theology in any form still takes God

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[21] Visarut Sankham, "Varsity Gets Thailand's First 'Mobile Phone Lane' for Smart Phone Junkies," The Nation, October 22, 2015, accessed November 6, 2015. http://www.nationmultimedia.com/national/Varsity-gets-Thailands-first-mobile-phone-lane-for-30271375.html

[22] Spardaro, Chapter 1, "The Internet". Kindle Edition.

[23] Pope John Paul II, Redemptoris Missio, 37c, accessed January 11, 2016, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.pdf. Incidentally, in the same year, Pope John Paul II also discussed in his "Message for World Communication Day" the importance of "computer telecommunications" and a "computer culture" for the evangelizing mission of the Church. http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_24011990_world-communications-day.html.

[24] Domenico Pomili, *Il nuovo ell'antico. Comunicazione e testimonianza nell'era digitale* [The New in the Old: Communication and Witnessing in the Digital Era] (San Paolo, Italy: Cinisello Balsamo, 2011): 62.

[25] "The CODEC Research Centre for Digital Theology," Durham University, last modified October 28, 2015, https://www.dur.ac.uk/codec/.

[26] Debbie Herring, accessed November 7, 2015, http://www.cybertheology.net/.

[27] Singh, "An Overview of Cybertheology."

[28] Spadaro, "Cybertheology," Kindle edition.

and God's relationship to human beings as its subject matters. Nonetheless, cyber/digital theology is informed by the digital environment with all of its revelations and inspirations. The subsequent parts of this paper will present reflections on the implications for the various dimensions of human lives, in particular one's relationship with God and with fellow human beings. The aim is to see how these relationships may be perceived and maintained within the digital environment that characterize the modern era.

Searching for God in the Digital Environment

Any theological exercise has to begin first and foremost with reflecting on one's search for and perception of God. Traditionally Christians have located God within a temporal and spatial framework as reflected in the "Our Father Prayer" which informs the believer that God is in "heaven." God is also eternal and the supreme ruler of a kingdom that will come in a particular time. As the Psalmist proclaims, "Your word, Lord, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens."[29] The way one grasps what eternity may look like is by imagining a thousand years for God is like a day in our human experience. "But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day."[30] Thus, by imagining heaven as a particular place and eternity as a day multiplied infinitely, it is easier to imagine how and where God exists. Though theologians affirm that heaven is not a physical place, the faithful are also not discouraged from looking up beyond the stars in order to imagine that up there somewhere is God lovingly looking down upon his children and seeing all of their joys and sorrows as well as their challenges and weaknesses. This gives one a sense of direction and assurance. Lavinia Byrne writes, "Nothing makes so powerful a bid to the human heart as the promise that we will live forever, albeit in heaven. Nothing is so comforting as the sense that more time means more of the same kind of time, with regular sunrises and sunsets to measure out our days."[31]

Modern science, however, has done much to intrude on the previously construed notions of God and heaven, at least for those who give serious considerations to scientific development. Science declares that space is, in fact, infinite, thus displacing the possibility of heaven having its own distinctive place.[32] This presents a dilemma for popular spirituality because how then, can God be located in heaven if logically such a place cannot exist?[33] Theologians attempt to deal with this reality by proposing the existence of a spirit world that lies beyond common space or the notion of "sacramental space" within this world or within the Christian community where God's presence is real and could be felt.[34] The digital environment, nonetheless, has presented new opportunities to enrich one's search for God and imagine how God may be present in the world. Lavinia Byrne notes that the universe comprised of observable atoms which cluster together to form things is no longer the only kind of universe which one might hold in conception. With cyberspace comprised of nonphysical digits, we are presented with new dimensions that exist alongside the world of atoms. She asks, "If this digital world is so accessible to our computers, then why not a spiritual equivalent? Suddenly God fits because there is a place for God to live. The idea that angels may indeed dance on the head of a pin gets re-instated, for there is more to space and time than can presently be seen and communicated."[35] According to Singh, the digital world provides a metaphor for God's presence and "ways of imagining things in a new sense of time and space where digits inform our situation,"[36] thus overcoming the challenges presented by science. This metaphor thus presents fresh insights into the question of "Master, where do you dwell?"

While the digital environment with its newfound possibility may help in overcoming former limitations presented by science, it does not promise that one's search for God is necessarily simpler or easier. In the past, people came to figures of authority such as priests and religious for questions related to God and spiritual matters as well as some non-spiritual issues. This is due to the fact that the priest was not only seen as an authoritative figure in such matters, but was probably one of the most educated, if not the most educated person in the town or village. In many parts of Asia, especially in the rural areas, this is probably still largely the case. However, people, especially in developed countries, are increasingly turning to the Internet, television, and other media in order to look for the answers that they need.[37] In the digital era,

[29] Psalm 119:80 (NIV).

[30] 2 Peter 3:8 (NIV).

[31] Lavinia Byrne, "God in Cyberspace," accessed November 7, 2015, http://www.ed.ac.uk/files/imports/fileManager/god%20in%20cyberspace.pdf.

[32] Singh, "Overview of Cybertheology."

[33] Byrne, "God in Cyberspace."

[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Singh, "Overview of Cybertheology."

[37] Philip Clayton, "Theology and the Church after Google," *Princeton Theological*

the role of institutions and individuals functioning as authoritative entities are becoming less prominent.[38] At the same time, there is an excessive amount of information on the Internet that can cause one to be overwhelmed by what comes up before their eyes. A search on Google using the keyword "God" results in over a billion and a half entries. Searching the word "พระเจ้า" (Thai) renders nearly 3 million entries, and "Thiên Chúa" (Vietnamese) also results in approximately the same number of entries. When clicking on the "Images" button, pictures of the Judeo-Christian God and Jesus appear on the screen alongside deities of other world religions, but also graphics of video games. The phenomenon of being bombarded with excessive information has been called information overload. Antonio Spadaro comments, "The problem today is not to find the message that makes sense, but to decode it, to recognize it on the basis of the multiple messages that we receive."[39] Thus, despite the plethora of information, ironically, in the digital era, one's search for God could become an experience that requires a lot of patience and sifting through all sorts of data in order to find what one needs.

Even then one cannot be sure that what one landed upon is authentic and spiritually nourishing. As Pope Benedict remarks:

> Often, as is also the case with other means of social communication, the significance and effectiveness of the various forms of expression appear to be determined more by their popularity than by their intrinsic importance and value. Popularity, for its part, is often linked to celebrity or to strategies of persuasion rather than to the logic of argumentation.[40]

Thus, one's perception of and relationship with God could very likely be shaped by a blog that one follows rather than the Church's officially sanctioned websites whether it be from the Vatican or of the local parish. Internet applications, however, have modeled a way for us to be more focused in the search for God. While Google is essentially what is known as a syntactic search engine, which conducts searches based on specific words within the text and can render innumerable entries, a semantic search engine works from a different logic. A semantic search engine takes into account the intent and

the contextual meaning of the terms being used.[41] It attempts to interpret the thinking of the person requesting the search and provides the information that they might need. For example, when one types the words "Who is Jesus" in the Google search engine, the websites that appear on top are those that most match the keywords employed. However, when the same thing is done using WolframAlpha, a semantic search engine, the result that appears is not a list of websites but a picture and a series of information about Jesus, such as date of birth, place of birth, date of death, and place of death. From the information available on the Web, it also lists important events in the life of Jesus. Unfortunately, while Google often gives too much information, the semantic search engines cannot always provide the searcher with an answer at all. When entering the question "Where is God," WolframAlpha comes back with a small red dot on the map of Hungary, showing the location of a city called God.[42] No answer such as "God is in heaven" can be found. Likewise, asking the question "Does God exist?" results in the following answer: "I'm sorry, but a poor computational knowledge engine, no matter how powerful, is not capable of providing a simple answer to that question." The logic of these two types of search engines models different ways that one may go about searching for God—an effort that is either random and depends largely on happenstance or one that is intentional, concentrated, and focused. The search for God in the digital era thus can be exciting as it is bewildering.

The digital age not only can help with new ways to envision how God may be present in the world, but also provides the means to search for God in ways that do not limit the seeker to simply the traditional channels (i.e. the hierarchy or the local parish priest). In context of Asia, the Internet facilitates the search for God and understanding about God in richer ways beyond the local parish priest or traditional religious figures. In Asia, Christianity forms a tiny minority of the population, constituting only 4.5%.[43] Catholics make up 3% of Asia's population,[44] slightly over 115 million.[45] Over 63% of all

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Review 17.2 (2010):8
[38] Ibid., 14.
[39] Spadaro, "Cybertheology," Kindle edition.
[40] Pope Benedict XVI, "Message for World Communication Day 2013."

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[41] Wikipedia, "Semantic Search," accessed November 9, 2015, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Semantic_search.
[42] Incidentally, Hell is to be found in Norway.
[43] FABC Papers No.131, "A Glimpse at Dialogue in Asia," 3.
[44] Ibid.
[45] James H. Kroeger, "An 'Asian' Dialogue Decalogue: Principles of Interreligious Dialogue from Asia's Bishops," accessed November 27, 2015, http://www.lst.edu/academics/landas-archives/353-an-qasianq-dialogue-decalogue-j-kroeger-mm.

Asian Catholics live in the two countries of the Philippines and East Timor,[46] while in many Asian countries, Catholicism makes up less than 1 percent of the population.[47] In Thailand, there are less than 300,000 Catholics[48] out of a population of 67 million while neighboring Cambodia has a little over 20,000 Catholics[49] out of a population of 15 million. In Asia, searching for God and maintaining close relationship with God is not only challenged by the limited means of the local church but also greatly affected by cultural and religious milieus within which Christians find themselves. Having access to the Internet allows for this search to be facilitated and relationship with God to be nourished in new ways beyond what is immediately available. Catholics in a small remote village can find spiritually beneficial materials that differ from the repetitive homilies given by their parish priest, especially the ones who take time in Mass not only to preach but also to lecture on all sorts of matters in the parish. Seminarians in Laos who have extremely limited resources in their seminary library can turn to the Internet to study the Scriptures and find helpful materials to prepare for reflections that they must present to local villagers in their Sunday ministry.[50] In Thailand, many Buddhists and potential converts to Christianity turn to a web forum set up by a layman to ask questions about matters of faith.[51] With the help of the Internet, God potentially becomes more accessible and immediate while the images of God to which we are introduced become more rich and diverse.

Thus, how Asians search for, perceive, and maintain relationship with God may greatly be influenced by the modern digital environment which facilitates these activities. However, this does not mean that searching for God in the digital age promises easy access to the truth when a smorgasbord of information is available online, and not all leads one in the right direction or provides the necessary nourishment for one's faith life. More than ever, the search for God

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[46] FABC Papers No.131, 3.

[47] Kroeger, "An 'Asian' Dialogue Decalogue."

[48] Udomsarn, "How Many Thai Catholics Are There Really?" accessed January 6, 2016, http://www.thaicath.net/diarybible/cathsuebsiri/word/enew05.htm.

[49] Wikipedia, "Roman Catholicism in Cambodia," accessed January 6, 2016, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_Catholicism_in_Cambodia.

[50] Because of the lack of ordained priests in Laos, Catholic seminarians at the philosophy and theology levels are usually asked to undertake weekend ministry at various churches in which they not only teach catechism but also give reflections based on the Sunday readings.

[51] According to the owner of the forum "New Mana," dozens of people have converted to Christianity partly because of their participation in this webboard. http://www.newmana.com/phpbb/index.php.

and maintaining relationship with God requires self-initiative, prudence, and patience. One's image of and relationship with God can no longer be dictated from above as in the past; in the digital age, one must be more responsible for this spiritual quest, and by virtue of their presence and participation in the digital environment, contributes to how God is seen and understood by fellow searchers.

Interpersonal Relationships in the Digital Age

Ever since the creation of what has since been referred to as Web 2.0, which takes the users from experiencing the Web as passive viewers of content to being able to generate content and interact and collaborate with other users,[52] the focus has been not just on receiving or exchanging information through the Internet but on human relationships. Unlike the traditional text-based websites, newsgroups, and mailing lists which do not highlight the relationship dimension of its users, social networks aim to put relationship at the center. According to Spadaro, "The key concept is no longer merely *presence* on the Web but *connection*. If we are present, but not connected, we are alone" (italics in original)[53] Indeed, on Facebook, one has the option to be either a "friend" of another user if the person has a profile page, or to be a "fan" of a particular user if he or she has a fan page. Though Facebook and Twitter are the most well known, all over the world, there are numerous other social networks based on different interests, hobbies, and ethnic backgrounds, etc.[54]

Relationships mediated by the Web are always necessarily limited because the full extent of the relationship will somehow be "flattened" by the nature of the technology. Thus, on Facebook, your classmate, grandmother, pastor in real life, as well as people on the other side of the world that you have never met are all collapsed into the category of "friend". On Twitter, all the people who are connected to you are your "followers." In some ways, these words not only ignore the true nature of the relationship between you and a particular person with whom you are connected to, but it also distorts the meaning of what it means to be "friend" or "follower." Brett McCraken writes:

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[52] The term Web 2.0 was coined by Tim O'Reilly and Dale Dougherty at the O'Reilly Media Web 2.0 Conference in 2004. Examples of Web 2.0 include social networking sites, blogs, wikis, folksonomies, video sharing sites, hosted services, Web applications, and mashups

[53] Spadaro, "Cybertheology," Kindle edition.

[54] Wikipedia provides a list of active as well as defunct social networks worldwide. Accessed November 11, 2015, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_social_networking_websites.

In the world of Facebook, our "friends" are almost destined to become collectible commodities and status symbols, things we collect to adorn the "walls" of our own online environs. We strategically "friend" people on Facebook or "follow" them on Twitter, and then we post things on their wall or tag them in a post to publicly consummate the relationship.[55]

McCraken asserts that the way people put their relationships on public display in the online world, sharing openly information that otherwise should be reserved for the "inner circle," and micromanaging these social relationships with posts on their own walls or on someone else's status constitute "performative" acts that cheapen relationships.[56] Pope Benedict warned in his Message for the 2009 World Communication Day, "True friendship has always been seen as one of the greatest goods any human person can experience. We should be careful, therefore, never to trivialize the concept or the experience of friendship."[57] In the same message, Pope Benedict also warned of the dangers of investing time and energy in online relationships while failing to nurture the other relationships in one's life:

> It would be sad if our desire to sustain and develop on-line friendships were to be at the cost of our availability to engage with our families, our neighbours and those we meet in the daily reality of our places of work, education and recreation. If the desire for virtual connectedness becomes obsessive, it may in fact function to isolate individuals from real social interaction while also disrupting the patterns of rest, silence and reflection that are necessary for healthy human development.[58]

This perspective is founded on the thinking that truly nourishing relationships require a dimension of personal and physical contact that cyberspace cannot provide. Both Pope Benedict XVI and his predecessor Pope John Paul II emphasized the significance of direct human contact in one's day-to-day

relationships with others in their messages for the World Communication Day during their papacies.[59] Pope John Paul II remarked, "Electronically mediated relationships can never take the place of the direct human contact."[60]

Despite the perceived limitations of the Web's mediated relationships, the reality and the prevalence of such relationships require that we not dismiss them categorically but attempt to recognize their existence as well as to see how they may help expand present parameters for what it means to be in relationship with someone or what it means to call someone a neighbor. Although both Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict have been quoted above to be wary of online relationships, both leaders know full well the reality of the situation as well as the opportunities that these relationships may engender. Pope Benedict stated that this form of "spreading information and knowledge is giving birth to a new way of learning and thinking, with unprecedented opportunities for establishing relationships and building fellowship."[61] This not only facilitates people coming together, but also helps with the work of evangelization. Pope Benedict called on priests who are standing "on the threshold of a new era as new technologies create deeper forms of relationship across greater distances, they are called to respond pastorally by putting the media ever more effectively at the service of the Word."[62]

The online relationships do not always necessarily represent a desire to escape real life relationships but in a way symbolic of the deep human desire to communicate with others. The various Internet applications that help people engage in building relationships, sharing information, exchanging ideas, creating new forms of entertainment can persuasively be said to reflect the desire for interconnectedness that are rooted deep within the human spirit.[63] They also manifest fundamental human needs to be open to others and to seek

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[55] Brett McCraken, "The Separation of Church and Status: How Online Social Networking Helps and Hurts the Church," *Princeton Theological Review* 17.2 (2010): 26

[56] Ibid. 27

[57] Pope Benedict XVI, "Message for World Communication Day 2009," accessed November 12, 2015, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20090124_43rd-world-communications-day.pdf.

[58] Ibid.

[59] Pope Benedict XVI, "Message for Worl Communication Day 2011," accessed November 11, 2015, https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20110124_45th-world-communications-day.html.

[60] Pope John Paul II, "Message for World Communication Day 2002," accessed November 12, 2015, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_20020122_world-communications-day.html.

[61] Pope Benedict XVI, "Message for World Communication Day 2011."

[62] Pope Benedict XVI, "Message for World Communication Day 2010," accessed November 11, 2015, https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20100124_44th-world-communications-day.html.

[63] Pope Benedict XVI, "Message for World Communication Day 2013."

communion with others, an act which helps to realize our own humanity.[64] The digital age and the type of relationships available through this environment force a re-examination and redefining of what it means to be a friend and neighbor. The parable of the Good Samaritan told by Jesus proposes that to consider someone as a neighbor is not based on ethnicity or social status, but on one's own disposition towards the other. In the parable, a Jewish man was violently attacked and robbed on his way from Jerusalem to Jericho. However, as he was lying half-dead on the side of the road, both the priest and the Levite who passed by ignored him and walked on. Eventually, a Samaritan man came upon the hapless victim and gave him the necessary care to rescue him from a grave situation. In Jewish society, Samaritans were looked down upon and forming relationships with them were considered taboo. On the other hand, priests and Levites were highly respected, well-educated and powerful people. Nonetheless, in the parable, they failed to come to the aid of their fellow man. The Samaritan, on the other hand, displayed mercy and compassion towards the victim far beyond anything expected of him.

The parable of the Good Samaritan presents a paradigm of relationship not restricted by artificial boundaries imposed by cultural, social, ethical, or religious norms. Moreover, it emphasizes the relational possibilities presented by a heart imbued with charity, mercy and compassion. Even though this story was told by Jesus two millennia ago, the relationship paradigm that Jesus proposed through this story has not lost any of its relevance through all the ages, including the present digital age. If anything, the digital age with its new opportunities and limitations have helped us to be able to reflect on this relationship paradigm in new ways. Cyberspace as a place where people all over the world with their diverse cultural, religious, and social contexts can come together and engage in mutual exchange, sharing, and even support reinforces the idea that human need for communion can and ought to surpass any hindrances. If relationship ought not be restricted by culture, gender, or social status, they must also not be held back by any distance, whether physical or virtual.

The digital era highlights the human need for a neighbor no matter what age we live in. Some people may claim that preoccupation with online relationships hinders one from getting to know the people in their own physical neighborhood, even those living very next door. However, one needs to ask the question: Does the preoccupation with online relationships cause distance with offline neighbors or is it a reflection of a society in which it is quite common to not know a neighbor's name despite years of living next to them, and one is thus forced to find nourishment in relationships that do not depend on physical proximity? This is sort of a chicken-and-egg problem. In the latter years of the last decade, the location-based social networks Foursquare and Gowalla were released. Foursquare is an application that through the user's own description of their interests and reporting of places frequented as well as feedback of other users gives recommendations for places to go in a current location.[65] Gowalla, which was born in 2007 and closed in 2012, was an application that allowed users to check-in on various locations that they were visiting.[66] Gowalla would eventually be acquired by Facebook,[67] whose check-in feature is one of its most popular functions. Checking-in on social network effectively reveals to all your "friends" of your presence in a particular place, which facilitates not only online encounters but physical ones as well.[68] Thus, checking-in could lead to people who would otherwise be greatly separated by physical distance or by lack of information to come together for coffee, a movie, or even a date. Antonio Spadaro raises the question, "What is encouraging people to continually violate their own personal privacy and to communicate their own movements to their digital worlds?"[69] Spadaro answers his own question by stating, "This, of course, expresses a need for proximity, that is, a desire to carry the world of their own relationships to a *real* level of contact" (author's italic).[70] Indeed, the location-based social networks and the check-in feature on various applications is a manifestation that in the contemporary culture, the deep seated need for meaningful relationship and communion with others continue to direct our technological developments. In some ways, these technological advances help us cope with and compensate for a situation in which the opportunities for stopping in the front yard to talk to a neighbor or meeting up friends and family regularly after work or on the weekends are becoming increasingly rare.

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[64] Pope Benedict XVI, "Message for World Communication Day 2009."

[65] Wikipedia, "Foursquare," accessed November 13, 2015, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foursquare.

[66] Wikipediate, "Gowalla," accessed November 13, 2015, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gowalla.

[67] Ibid.

[68] Spadaro, "Cybertheology," Kindle edition.

[69] Ibid.

[70] Ibid.

The relationship paradigm in the parable the Good Samaritan makes an important reminder, which is to be a neighbor demands that one must behave neighborly. To be neighborly obviously speaks of something more profound than physical proximity or engagement in social and physical contact. It speaks about how people treat each other, especially in times of difficulty and calamity. The digital environment not only helps us to be able to keep in touch with a much greater number of people than we could imagine in traditional society. It also helps us to be more informed about the lives of an even more vast number of people in the world. Recently the term "viral philanthropy" came into existence to describe charitable initiatives, whether planned or spontaneous, that took off in the online world and raised vast sums of money for the aims of the project. In 2012, Max Sidorove, a Reddit user, used this social network to raise money for an abused bus monitor named Karen Klein. An initial campaign to help "Give Karen Klein a Vacation" with a goal of 5,000 USD turned into 703,833 USD by its conclusion on July 20, 2012.[71] Reddit users have also raised money for other causes (100,000 USD to protect the Faraja Children's Home in Kenya, 212,000 USD for Doctors Without Borders, 50,000 USD to help a three-year-old with medical treatments for a rare blood disease).[72] The money raised by this social network's users is far from unique and one can cite hundreds and thousands of efforts that benefit from online publicity.

While the digital age proves the power and the possibility of neighborliness, it has yet to be able to fulfill the relationship paradigm that Jesus put forth. In the story, before the Samaritan took out his wallet to pay for the expenses of the room in the inn for the victim to recover, the story tells us that the Samaritan "saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him."[73] Thus, being neighborly is much more than being willing to shell out cash. In fact, money does not even come first in the order of things. Being neighborly, in Jesus' paradigm, means recognizing someone's presence and seeing his pains and suffering, and feeling compassion towards the other. Moreover, it requires a physical dimension, which in the parable, is

exemplified by the acts of *going to*, *bandaging* the wound, *pouring* oil and wine, *lifting up* onto the donkey, and *taking to* the inn. These concrete, up-close and personal actions imply that real relationships require the aspect of embodiment in addition to other dimensions that may be described as emotional and spiritual. According to Pope Francis, it is indeed the image of the Samaritan tending to the injured man that communicates the true sense of neighborliness.[74] Pope Benedict reminds us that "It is important always to remember that virtual contact cannot and must not take the place of direct human contact with people at every level of our lives."[75] This is so because only in direct human contact can one pour oil and wine over the wound of another as in the case of the good Samaritan and the Jewish victim, or pouring water over the feet of someone, as in the case of Jesus and his disciples at the Last Supper. Thus, the emotional and spiritual connections between individuals mediated by the digital environment must be supplemented, concretized, and realized to their fullest potential in embodied manifestations in the physical world.

As we can see, despite the fact that the digital environment introduces new dimensions to interpersonal relationships, there are real limitations to how these relationships play out in our lives. Moreover, relationships that heavily depend on the development and availability of technology will always mean that there is danger of unequal access to that particular technology, thus causing a gap between the rich and the poor. In this digital era, this gap in access, known as the digital divide, is a real problem in the world as well as in Asia itself. It is estimated that as of May 2015, the number of Internet users reached three billion worldwide; however, this means that there are still over 50 percent of the world population who still do not have access to the Internet.[76] Reasons for not having access to the Internet include not having 3G coverage, not being able to afford the service,[77] and not having content produced in a language that users can understand.[78] Asia is said to be the most digitally divided region in the world.[79] While the Republic of Korea

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[71] Wikipedia, "Bus Monitor Bullying Video," accessed November 13, 2015, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bus_monitor_bullying_video.

[72] Matt Petronzio, "Viral Philanthropy: The Impact of Crowdsourced Compassion," accessed November 13, 2015, http://mashable.com/2012/07/11/viral-philanthropy/#Dvw.x3Z7qmqr.

[73] Luke 10:33-34 (NIV).

[74] Pope Francis, "Message for World Communication day 2014," accessed November 13, 2015, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/communications/documents/papa-francesco_20140124_messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html.

[75] Pope Benedict XVI, ""Message for World Communication day 2011."

[76] Internet Society, "Global Internet Report 2015," 119.

[77] In many countries, the cost for Internet service exceeds 5 to 10 percent of the average per capita income. Internet Society, 122.

[78] Ibid.

[79] UNESCAP, "Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway Maps," accessed November 27, 2015, http://www.unescap.org/our-work/ict-disaster-risk-reduction/asia-pacific-

has 37.56% fixed broadband penetration, Myanmar has only 0.01%.[80] Overall, only 7 percent of people in the Asia-Pacific region have fixed broadband access.[81] While Singapore ranks first in the world in terms of making the most of the digital age, with Japan ranking 10th and Korea following closely at 13th place, countries like Myanmar and Nepal find themselves in the worst group on the Networked Readiness Index.[82] Not only is there a digital divide across the population, there is also a large gap with respect to gender. Only one in five females in Asia have access to the Internet, and 2 out of 3 females who are unconnected come from the region.[83] The gender digital gap is not only caused by poverty but also due to socio-cultural and institutional attitudes and constraints that restrict women's exposure and access to the Internet.[84]

The statistics mentioned above show that interpersonal relationships formed through and maintained by digital technology have social justice implications because division in society becomes manifested in a new form—those with access to the technology versus those who cannot afford it. The digital divide is also the gap between the "information rich" and the "information poor." Thus, if technology is the primary mediator for our interpersonal relationships, chances are we are only engaged with people who are socially and technologically similar to ourselves. The digital "have nots" become people out there that one may know something about through reports and news feeds, but do not have a chance to get to know on a deeper personal level. Consequently, the digital divide hinders the potential for the Internet in bringing people of all kinds of backgrounds together, especially on the continent of Asia.

Conclusion

This article delved into two fundamental dimensions of cyber/digital theology by discussing one's relationship with God and with fellow human beings, and how these relationships are informed and transformed as a result of the digital environment. Our reflections show that the Internet and cyberspace allow for the perception of God's presence in a metaphorical sense that neither confines God to time nor space. While science with its discoveries about time and space seem to have displaced any possibility for heaven as a place out there and renders ingrained popular religiosity illogical, the new technology with its nonphysical digits inform us that presence is possible even without physical qualities demanded by traditional science. The image of God for those who desire to seek God has also become enriched by the fact that how God is perceived is not necessarily handed down by any single official church document or dictated by the pedagogical method of a single local pastor, but by a myriad of sources both official and unofficial. One's perception of and relationship with God, in additional to the traditional figures, can be also influenced by the writings of professional theologians and amateur bloggers, Papal tweets as well as a friend's testimony on Facebook. Just as the digital age confirms the fact that God cannot be confined to any particular realm, it also makes it ever more difficult to confine God to any particular creed or set of doctrines.

Similar to how the boundaries, whether real or imaginary, placed on God are greatly done away with by the digital environment, traditional boundaries for interpersonal relationships are also transformed. While Jesus' paradigm for what it means to be neighbor is not done away with by any means, the digital age informs us that neighborliness not only transcends social, cultural, and religious conditions, it can also transcend physical space and can manifest itself in cyberspace in very real and meaningful ways. It is undeniable that truly nourishing interpersonal relationships must also include some levels of embodiment. The digital environment, as it has been proven, when poorly utilized, isolates people and facilitates a form of escapism; however, when wisely used, becomes extremely effective tools for people to live out our deepest aspirations to be in communion with one another.

In the Asian context, for the people of this continent, the digital environment has the potential to affect their relationship with God and with others in some profound ways. As part of a tiny religious minority on a vast continent of major world religions, living primarily among people of different

information-superhighway/asia-pacific-information-superhighway-maps.
    [80] Ibid.
    [81] Ibid.
    [82] Thierry Geiger and Attilio Di Battista, "The Top Ten Nations for Bridging the Digital Divide," accessed November 27, 2015, https://agenda.weforum.org/2015/04/which-nations-are-top-for-digital/.
    [83] Internet Society, "Can Mobile Internet Bridge the Gender Digital Divide? Lessons from our APrlGF Workshop," accessed November 27, 2015, http://www.internetsociety.org/blog/asia-pacific-bureau/2015/07/can-mobile-internet-bridge-gender-digital-divide-lessons-our-aprigf.
    [84] Ibid.

faiths, Asians' search for God and perception of God will be enriched by what the Internet can offer to them, in addition to the present conditions that form their faith and spirituality. However, Asians must struggle to overcome the challenge of the digital divide that separates the rich and the poor, men and women that threaten to diminish the potential of interpersonal relationships. Instead of facilitating the erasing of boundaries existing among individuals, the digital divide can represent a replacement of one form of separation with another.

Reflecting on the various theological dimensions inspired and pertaining to the digital age is still a rather new exercise, perhaps due to the fact that most of us have not fully grasped the implications of what the digital environment holds for us in the present as well as in the future. Understandably, many of us are still trying to become acquainted and comfortable in this new environment as "digital immigrants," while the so-called "digital natives"[85] may not have come of age enough or equipped with the necessary tools to reflect deeply on the new social, cultural and spiritual milieu brought about by the new technology. Notwithstanding, this article attempted to contribute to this process of systematic reflection by discussing how the digital environment created by technology has become irrevocably integrated into human life, thus calls for and legitimates the effort to create a cyber/digital theology or something akin to it.

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[85] The terms "digital natives" and "digital immigrants" were coined by Marc Prensky in his seminal article "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants," On the Horizon, 9.5 (2001):1-2 to differentiate between the generation who was born and grew up after the rise of digital technologies and those who were born before the advent of digital technology.

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Oral Tradition of Jainism Discourse in the Wake of Digital and Social Media[1]: A Communication Study of Jain Mendicants and Lay Persons

Komal Shah

The aim of the paper is threefold: a) to discuss the prevalence and use of digital and social media by Jain mendicants for discourse and propagation, b) how digital and social media use is adding, replacing, and substituting the ancient means of *Pravachan* (sermon) or face-to-face oral discourse tradition and c) study the opinion and views of mendicants and lay persons about the use of digital and social media in religious discourse. For this purpose a research study was conducted among Jain lay persons and Jain mendicants to have an insight into the digital and social media adaptability by them for religious discourse and sermon. The paper attempts further elaboration and analysis to discuss various degrees of involvements and expectations of Jain lay persons and mendicants in the process of religious discourse and sermon. In doing so the paper will provide an in depth religious and philosophical debate and discussion about the desirability and utility of digital and social media use in the discourse and propagation of Jainism. The attempt is to analyze the views and concerns of the Jain mendicants, on the use of digital and social media for religious propagation and likely impacts on Jain lay persons.

Study

The study was carried out in the city of Ahmedabad as most Jain are concentrated and live in urban setting and business centres of India.

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[1] By Digital and Social Media, the author here refers to the New Media which is Internet based

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Ahmedabad being one of the largest business centres of the country having dominant presence of Jain within multi religious city; and a great deal of social interaction with the Hindu in social, economic and religious domains of the city; though numerically small.

The two websites selected for study were *parasdham.org*[1] and *jainismsimplified.org*.[2] Both websites are being run under the direct and able guidance of prominent *Acharya* (Jain mendicants of higher order) of different Jain sects. The websites are well connected with various social media sites like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Soundcloud were content analyzed. In addition to these two websites, opinions of selected eminent Jain mendicants were sought to understand their views and concerns on the use of digital and social media for the discourse and propagation of Jainism.

A survey was carried out amongst smartphone owning adult Jain lay persons of both gender during July 2015. The objective of the survey was to study (a) the religious understanding of Jain lay persons across age groups and gender, their religious bend of mind and influences of formal education, (b) to analyze the use of digital and social media for Jain religious reading, learning and understanding of Jainism, and (c) to map out how digital and social media are being used to add, replace and substitute the ancient face-to-face oral sermons and discourses.

A stratified random sampling method was followed for the selection of 400 adult Jains above 18 years of age in the city of Ahmedabad. The 400 respondents (Jain lay persons), were equally divided (or 25 per cent each) in the age groups of 18-25; 26-35; 36-45 and 46 and above.

Theoretical Perspective of Religion on Digital and Social Media

There has been considerable amount of research being carried out to understand as to how digital and social media is transforming the religious lives of young men and women (Campbell, 2012). At present, these religious movements operate primarily through the Internet and earlier it was through radio, television and video cassettes which were sold in video stores (Groys, 2009). Use of video was found most popular among different religious groups. Traditionally, the standard medium was written text as script, a book, a painted image or sculpture apart from face to face oral discourse and sermon.

The question then arises as to what constitutes the difference between oral, textual and digital and social media reproduction of religious messages? Importantly do these differences affect the fate of religion and its likely impact on the followers in twenty-first century?

Digital and social media data whether image or text have the propensity to regenerate, multiply and distribute themselves almost anonymously through the open fields of digital and social media. The origin of these images or pictures is difficult or even impossible to locate. At the same time, digital and social media socialization seems to guarantee a literal reproduction of text or an image more effectively than any other known technique. Naturally, it is not so much the digital and social image itself as the image file, the digital and social data which remains identical through the process of its reproduction and distribution.

Today, smartphones boasts of 'apps' that can do everything from finding convenience stores to matching stars of prospective bride and bridegroom. Software developers have even designed programs on apps that bring age-old religious practices into the digital and social world. These apps contain full texts of religious scriptures, hold recorded sound files of religious *mantras* (a word or sound repeated to aid concentration in meditation) and calculate the exact time of sunset and sunrise of a particular place, book *pooja* (rituals) and *Brahmin* (priest) for devotees for an important and prominent religious temple. Moreover, now one can even offer coconut and fruits through these apps. Digital and social media have provided multiple channels of access and has encouraged discursive interaction on blogs, Facebook, Twitter, mobile applications to bring about de-centralization and democratization of religious communication and knowledge (Groys, 2009).

Jain Philosophy in Midst of Digital and Social Media

Jainism is one of the oldest living ancient religions of the world originated in India, it began somewhere near the 6th century BC. Jainism emphasizes *ahimsa* (non-violence) and the ascetic life. The term *Jain* means the devotee of *Jinas* (spiritual victors). *Jinas* are called so because they have won victory over passions of attachment and aversion that defile the soul. As a result a Jain attains omniscience and supreme bliss. *Jinas* are enlightened human teachers. They are also called *Thirthankaras* (Ford-makers) whose words and teachings

help living beings to cross the ocean of misery or transmigratory existence (Desai, 2008).

Jainism preaches amity towards all beings, compassion for the miserable and detachment towards possessions. The values of Jain religion are based on five vows[3] viz- non-violence, devotion to truth, non-stealing, celibacy and non-possession. The entire life of the Jain *Shravak* (lay person) and the Jain *Sadhu* (mendicant) emanates from these vows. Out of these vows the foremost is non-violence. In contrast to other world religions, the basic virtue of Jainism has been scrupulously scientific when it was propagated and was thoroughly integrated with the main doctrine of Jainism.

Jainism aims at the welfare of all living beings and not of humans alone. Jainism maintains that living beings are infinite and are present all over, in an empty space too. The Jain dictum *parasparopagraho jivanam* (living beings render service to one another) offers an endearing alternative to the Darwin theory of 'survival of the fittest.' The life of a living being is a life of mutual cooperation and assistance. "All humanity is one" is one of the fundamental teachings that Jainism offers (Desai, 2008).

The three distinct contributions of Jainism to the Indian civilization include *Sama* (equality), *Shama* (self control) and *Shrama* (dignity of labour). The three jewels of Jainism, namely Right Faith, Right Knowledge and Right Conduct depend on the principle of equality (Desai, 2008). These three jewels advocate living a balanced life by keeping away from anger, hatred, wailing and complaining. Jain ethics specify five minor vows – *anuvrata* (small vows), three social vows– *gunvrata* (qualitative vows), and four spiritual vows–*shikshavrata* (training vows) to be carried out by any lay person and householder. Similarly there are twelve minor vows known as *anupreksha* (reflections). By observing these vows, the lay person and householder comes to possess all of the twenty one qualities that a fully developed human being must possess.

Social service is a prominent outcome of Jain ethics. It prescribes six daily duties for every lay person or householder, viz. *Jina* (deity) adoration, *Sadhu* (mendicant) veneration, study of Jain literature and scriptures, practice of self discipline, observance of fasts and the curbing of appetites and giving of charity. Jain ethics are directed towards the liberation of individual human

beings. The ethical code of Jainism is blend of *Achar* (conduct) and *Vichar* (reflection) (Desai, 2008).

A Jain *Sadhu* (mendicant), in order to acquire the rightful status, has to study Jain scriptures and also the scriptures of other religions. By and large, Jainism is considered progressive and Jain are spread across the globe.

Appearance of Digital and Social Media in Jainism

Digital and social media first seems to have been used around the end of 1994 in Jain religious discourse and propagation (Shah, 2001). Thus bringing about the next major transition in Jain religious discourse and sermon. The ancient method of oral Jain religious discourse and sermon in the past has been hierarchical, unitary, and authoritative in its tradition. Many believe that digital and social media have become a boon for Jains all over the world. In the past, Jains were a scattered and miniscule minority with no identifiable community which supports each other as a religious group. It seems digital and social media has helped Jain lay persons to form a community wherever they live in various parts of the world including India. The Jains have adopted and embraced digital and social media to increase their access to these religious sites for discourse and sermon. The other important role of digital and social media could be observed in the lives of young Jains, who are often utilizing digital and social media as an important means to reaffirm, reconfirm and reach to a decision, especially when there is a question of observing fast on an auspicious day, which is very important for a Jain.

Sadhu (mendicant) Views of Digital and Social Media

In total ten Jain mendicants were interviewed to get their opinion on the use of digital and social media for religious discourse and propagation. The analysis of case study of *Sadhu* (mendicants) indicated varied opinions expressed by mendicants who belonged to various Jain sects. A few supported the use of digital and social media for religious discourse and sermon while others totally rejected use of these "materialistic things" which according to them are the root cause of suffering in the world today.

PP Acharya Shri Rashmiratna Surishwarji M.S[4] and PP Acharya Nitiratna Vijayji Maharaj Saheb,[5] both Shwetamber Jain monks, were of the strong view that mendicants as well as Jain lay persons should not use digital and social media for religious learning, discourse and sermon or for that matter any other purposes. As Jainism does not believe in publicity therefore no discourse or sermon of the religion is required. Jainism believes in quality and not in quantum of religious followers. It does not matter if the number of followers reduce but the religious knowledge should always be imparted through a *Guru* (Jain mendicant). Digital and social media sites hold many more things other than religious knowledge which can distract Jain lay persons from the spiritual path of salvation; thus digital and social media is an inappropriate platform to propagate or discuss religious issues. The Jain *Sadhu* (mendicant) should not use digital and social media since the mendicant has already accepted the vow of detachment from worldly pleasures.

On the other hand, PP Muni Shri Heetrati Vijayji Maharaj Saheb,[6] a Shwetamber Jain monk, and PP Sadhvi Labdhi Shriji M.S.,[7] a Terapanthi Jain nun, were of the opinion that the *Guru* (Jain mendicant) is central in any religion. However in today's world, the use of various media too should be allowed for religious discourse and sermon. It is essential in present times to have such means of discourse and sermon between the *Sadhu* (mendicant) and the *Shravak* (lay person) for the spread of Jain religion in the right direction.

Acharya Tulsi, the ninth Acharya of the *Terapanth Sangha*, had promoted religious education for nuns to make them learned and add a new category between nun and lay woman (*Shravika*); S*amani* (*Saman* order) which is a strong base of asceticism. These S*amani* are exempted from a few vows of asceticism and can use transportation as well as media to reach out to the Jain lay persons.

In contrast, there are liberal thoughts emanating from a few *Sadhus* (mendicants) who feel that use of media is not a sin for the lay person or the mendicant if it is done with good intention. Rashtra Sant Pujya Gurudev Shree Namramuni M.S.,[8] a *Sthanakvasi* Jain monk, says that "knowledge needs to be spread whether with or without technology. To wash away negativity from the earth, it is essential to spread this knowledge which Jainism has. People who say it is improper to use media for religious discourse and propagation need to first get the knowledge of the media and then give their opinions. One needs to change with times. Social media is like chocolate in today's era which can be easily consumed and liked by one and all."

Jain Lay person's Opinion of Digital and Social Media Use

Profile of Jain lay persons: The literacy rate of the respondents (laypersons) of either gender was found to be way higher than the national average; they all seem to be living in material comfort (Table 1). The respondents have television, air conditioner/cooler and motorcycle in their households.

Table: 1 Socio-economic characteristics of respondents by gender (in percent).

Age Group	Male (%)	Female (%)	Sample (400)
18-25	58	42	100
26-35	60	40	100
36-45	50	50	100
46 and above	62	38	100
Education			
No formal Education	0.00	0.50	2
Below High school	0.50	0.75	5
Below 12th Grade	7.50	4.50	48
Undergraduate	17.50	13.00	122
Graduate	20.50	19.75	161
Technical/ Professional Degree	12.25	3.25	62
Profession			
Business	31.75	2.00	135
Service	20.50	3.50	96
Housewife	0.00	35.00	140
Student	5.25	2.00	29
Marital Status			
Unmarried	15.25	8.50	95
Married	36.00	27.00	252
Widow/Widower/Divorced	6.25	7.00	53
Household Amenities			
Television	67.50	32.50	400
Air conditioner/Cooler	67.50	32.50	400
Motorcycle	67.50	32.50	400
Car	24.50	11.25	143
Internet	27.75	6.75	138

Religious understanding/following (in percent)

The respondents (lay persons) were asked about their visit to Jain temple and/or *Upashray* (religious place), their daily ritual practices and time allocated by them for furthering their knowledge on Jainism. The highest duration of time spent was found to be on religious reading, learning and understanding by the respondents in 36-45 age groups (Table 2). Further, female respondents were found to be the most regular while visiting temples (100 percent of females visited the temple as compared to males 93.9 percent of males visited the temple). Relatively an opposite situation was found in case of visits to mendicants for salutation (35.3 percent of females as compared to 60.9 percent who visited mendicants) (Tables 3 and 4).

Table 2: Time spent for religious reading/ learning/understanding by age group (in percent).

Age Group	Time spent: One hour/ more than one hour in a day	Occasional/ during free time
18-25	14	86
26-35	21	79
36-45	36	64
46 and above	51	49
Sample (400)	122	278

Table 3: Visit to temple by gender (in percent).

Gender	Once/ more than once in a day (%)	Occasional/ on special days (%)	Don't visit (%)
Male	56.95	36.96	6.09
Female	48.24	51.76	0
Sample (400)	**213**	**173**	**14**

Table 4: Visit to mendicants by gender (in percent).

Gender	Once/ more than once in a day (%)	Occasional/on special days (%)	Don't visit (%)
Male	28.70	32.17	39.13
Female	21.18	14.12	64.7 1
Sample (400)	**102**	**98**	**200**

Use of Media for Religious Learning

The active participants in use of media for religious studies and learning were found to vary a great deal (only 13 percent used media a great deal while 17.5 percent used much and 28.5 percent used somewhat). On the other hand 15.5 percent reported having not used media and as much as 25.5 percent of respondents were not in a position to say in what manner could they use media for religious understanding. It may be mentioned that older respondents in the age group of 46 and above were found to be highest users of media. It could be because they have more time at their disposal and some of them lead a semi-retired life (Table 5). Further print media consisting of books, magazines and pamphlets, top the chart of choice for religious reading, learning and understanding (39.25 per cent) (Table 6).

Table 5: Use of Media for Religious Understanding by Age Group (in percent)

Age Group	Very Much	Much	Somewhat	Not at all	Cannot say
18-25	4	23	28	19	26
26-35	12	12	28	15	33
36-45	5	16	37	17	25
46 and above	31	19	21	11	18
Sample (400)	52	70	114	62	102
Sample (%)	13.00	17.50	28.50	15.50	25.50

Digital and Social Media Use in Relation to Oral Sermon

In Jainism, oral religious discourse, propagation and sermons have been in existence since the inception of the religion in the 6th century B.C. All the *Tirthankaras* too have had addressed their followers through oral discourse, propagation and sermon, and that too in a congregation of followers. At that time, no need was felt to have external means or method to address the followers by the mendicants and at the same time no such electronic gadgets were in vogue. It should be clearly mentioned that in Jainism any external means and methods for religious discourse, propagation and sermons were forbidden. Use of any mechanical equipment was forbidden as per the vow of non-violence stated in the scriptures. However, a few Jain mendicants approved their use in the recent time with a plea for change as per the changing times.

In the last century and moreover in the last 10 years, many Jain mendicants of various sects have been using microphone and projection screen during their discourse, propagation and sermon. A few mendicants have started spreading their religious messages through use of mobile phones, Twitter and Facebook as well. Many mendicants get their discourse and *pravachans* (sermon) streamed live on television and the Internet too.

In the present survey the respondents indicated limited use of digital and docial media (26.75 percent of respondents selected digital and social media as their first choice for choice of media for religious reading, learning and understanding). Only few (26.75 percent) chose to use Internet and Mobile app for religious reading, learning and understanding. According to Table 7 no more than 21.0 percent used What's App and 16.0 percent used Facebook. Other digital media was found to be extremely limited (Table 7).

Content Analysis of Jain Websites

A detailed content analysis was carried out of Jain websites. The content analysis indicated that there were nearly 50 + pages on Facebook with the search word 'Jainism'[9] and 20 + sites dedicated to Jain mendicants of various sects. The highest number of likes was for Facebook page on 'Jainism religion'[10] with 92,320 likes. There were around 25 + Twitter accounts with the search word 'Jainism'[11] and three Twitter accounts of Jain mendicants. The Twitter account titled 'Jainism News'[12] had the highest number of followers (5822). There are unlimited YouTube channels and What's App group on Jainism and it was difficult to state their exact numbers. The use by lay persons as indicated in Table 7 is a clear indication of very limited use of digital and social media. Hence it is not surprising that none of the respondents mentioned any other

digital and social media use for religious reading, learning and understanding. Hence, content analysis of websites and survey of lay persons support the view that websites, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and What's App are though best choice for Jain religious discourse, propagation and sermon, at present it was found to be of limited use.

Table 6: Choice of media for religious reading/ learning/understanding

Choice of Media for Religious reading/ learning/ understanding	Rank 1	%
Pravachans **(Face to Face discourse)**	88	22.00
Print Media (Books, Magazines, pamphlets etc.)	157	39.25
Television	34	8.50
Video/ CD	14	3.50
Internet	48	12.00
Mobile App	59	14.75
Sample	**400**	

Table 7: Current Use of Digital and Social Media by Lay persons* (in percent)

Current use of Digital and Social Media		Per cent
Websites	21	5.3
Facebook	64	16.0
Twitter	12	3.0
What's App	84	21.0
YouTube	17	4.3

* Multiple choice questions without reaching 100 percent

Conflicts in the use of Digital and Social Media

Oral discourses not only simply encourage a specific image of humanity, but it tries to incorporate different notions with the aim to transform practices and legitimize its management of religious matters. The classical formulation of religious authority is maintained in everyday interactions between mendicants and Jain lay persons who acknowledge the asymmetric and consequential nature of their exchanges. While the digital and social media has amplifying capabilities and here religious authority is constructed via "strategic arbitration." The digital and social medium elicits discretionary power among the mendicants to shape

informational and interpersonal outcomes, and it is solely dependent on the discourse and propagation competencies of mendicants (religious leaders) to connect interactively across media. Everyday interactions on online and offline locales can make Jain mendicants present and mobilize their sayings to influence the unfolding of spiritual practices. Thus a new sect of "tech and touch religious discourse and propagation" is emerging in Jainism. It is only in the future that one would come to know if these mix of virtual and physical interactions would help in the alleviation of human suffering and conflict on local and global scales. On one hand the mendicants believe that this would be a compromise with the spiritual influence of religion while on the other hand the modern Jain mendicants look at it as an organized humanitarian practice for social change.

One of the best examples to cite here would be Deepesh Shah's digital film on *soul* (Ek Cheez Milegi Wonderful),[13] which is a product of this "tech and touch religious discourse and propagation" development in Jainism. It is neither a dominant discourse nor a product of power relations. The medium of the artistic film, the artistic quality of his work, its presentation on the digital medium deemed 'modern' made it possible for PP Jainacharya Shri Yugbhoosan Suriji "Pandit Maharaja" to explore Jain teachings on the digital medium in an acceptable manner, while also permitting the audience to retain his/her 'personal' religious belief.

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NOTES

[1] http://parasdham.org/

The website is being run under the able guidance of Rashtra Sant Pujya Gurudev Shree Namramuni Maharaj Saheb – a 45 years young Jain Muni of Sthanakvasi Gondal Sampraday, born at Nagpur, Maharastra. He accepted sainthood (*Diksha*) at the age of 25 years and has acquired basic education till 12th standard. He is a revolutionary Saint who has touched the heart of Jain and Non Jain across the globe and has brought about life changing experiences in them.

[2] http://jainismsimplified.org/

The website is being run under the able guidance of Panyas Chandrajeet Vijayji Maharaj Saheb, and is being inspired by his eminent Guru and personality, H.D.H. Panyas Shrimad Chandrashekharvijayji Maharaj Saheb. He established several religious and sociocultural organizations. He founded two schools which professes Indian cultural education, Tapovan Sanskardham at Navsari and Tapovan Sanskarpith near Ahmedabad. He was also considered as one of the best orators among Jain monks.

[3] For spiritual evolution Jain aspirants are required to observe five vows of non violence, truthfulness, non stealing, celibacy and non possession. The five prime vows are:

1. Abstinence from injury to life
2. Abstinence from falsehood
3. Abstinence from stealing
4. Abstinence from sexual activity
5. Abstinence possessions or attachment

The following are the seven supporting vows householders are required to observe:

1. Vow of limiting the area of one's activities
2. Vow of limiting quantity of things one uses
3. Vow to abstain from purposeless harmful activities
4. Vow of remaining completely equanimous for a fixed period of time
5. Vow of reducing for a limited period of time the limits of the area set forth by the vower himself in the sixth vow
6. Vow of observing fast and living like a monk for certain days
7. Vow of sharing with deserving guests

Jain philosophy refers to the 3 major processes, or modes of development, that all living beings pursue in order to become more pure, and eventually reach their purest form (*moksha*).

Mahavir demonstrated to the world the way we could liberate ourselves from the bondage of Karma and attain Moksha or liberation of the soul. This could be accomplished by encompassing three simple beliefs—Right Knowledge, Right Faith, and Right Conduct. In order to acquire these, one must take the Five Great Vows: 1. *Ahimsa* (non-injury) 2. *Satya* (truth) 3. *Asteya* (non-stealing) 4. *Brahmacharya* (celibacy) and 5. *Aparigraha* (non-acquisition). By following these five vows, each and everyone of us can develop and lead a good life and follow the path of Jainism and attain *Moksha*.

Enlightened Worldview- this is called *Samyak Darshan* (enlightened/rational worldview/perspective). According to Jain philosophy, living beings should develop an enlightened and rational perception of the universe. The "universe" includes a) one's own self, b) other living beings, and c) the material aspects of the universe such as space, time, and matter. Ultimately, things must be understood as a whole.

Enlightened Knowledge- this is called *Samyak Gnana* (enlightened/rational knowledge)
  Jain philosophy states that our enlightened worldview should evolve into detailed and specific knowledge of life and the universe.

Enlightened Conduct- this is called *Samyak Charitra* (enlightened/rational conduct/action)
  Enlightened worldview and knowledge leads one to enlightened conduct, but this also works the other way. For example, if we realize that animals have a soul and feel pain, then we are more likely to be vegetarian. The word "conduct" includes all of our thoughts, words, and actions.

[4] PP Acharya Shri Rashmiratna Surishwarji M.S - a Shwetamber Jain monk, 45 years of age, born at Surat, Gujarat. He accepted *Diksha* (sainthood) at the age of 12 years and has acquired basic education till 6th standard.

[5] PP Muni Shri Nitiratna Vijayji M.S. – a Shwetamber Jain monk, who was born in Sthankwasi sect of Jainism and accepted *Diksha* (sainthood) at the age of 15 years. He was born in Belgaum, Karnataka, India and has acquired basic education till 8th standard

[6] PP Muni Shri Heetrati Vijayji Maharaj Saheb - a Shwetamber Jain monk, 37 years of age, born in Vishakhapatnam, Andra Pradesh, India and has acquired basic education till 7th standard. He accepted *Diksha* (sainthood) at the age of 23 years.

[7] PP Sadhvi Labdhi Shriji M.S – a Terapanthi Jain nun, 60 years of age, born in

Ahmedabad, Gujarat and has acquired basic education till graduation in BA. She accepted *Diksha* (sainthood) at the age of 39.

[8] Rashtra Sant Pujya Gurudev Shree Namramuni Maharaj Saheb – a 45 years young Jain Muni of Sthanakvasi Gondal Sampraday, born at Nagpur, Maharashtra. He accepted *Diksha* (sainthood) at the age of 25 years and has acquired basic education till 12th standard. He is a revolutionary Saint who has touched the heart of Jain and Non Jain across the globe and has brought about life changing experiences in them.

[9] https://www.facebook.com/search/str/jainism/keywords_top as accessed on 6th October 2015

[10]https://www.facebook.com/pages/Jain/105758209464743?ref=br_rs&rf=108107602544527 as accessed on 6th October 2015.

[11]https://twitter.com/search?f=users&vertical=default&q=jainism&src=typdas accessed on 6th October 2015.

[12] https://twitter.com/JainismNews as accessed on 6th October 2015.

[13] http://www.ekcheez.com/about-movie.html

A JYOT India presentation, Conceptualized by his Holiness Jain Acharya Shri Yugbhoosan Suriji "Pandit Maharaja", Directed by Deepesh Shah'Ek Cheez milegi Wonderful' is a journey in itself. From the world that craves and celebrates the physicality of happiness, this leads us to the core of the meaning and essence of being Happy. In the era where movies are made for 'Mass appeal', with the commercial aspect as the focus, this focuses on appealing to the mass in a different way.

Right from its conceptualization to presentation on screen, every frame is crisp, well presented and thought provoking. It strikes the emotional chord too, at the right places. As the story progresses, it becomes more gripping. The plot though, very simple, keeps the curiosity and interest till the very end. At the end, it culminates as a rich and wonderful experience. Watching ' Ek cheez ...' is something like sipping lime juice, the taste distinctly felt, but none of its ingredients makes its presence felt. Though based on Jain principles, the message has been woven in such a scuttle way that the essence of it is omnipresent but not visible. No direct mention. No labels attached.

Sanatan Dharma and Digital Media: The Process of Adaptation, Absorption and Assimilation in Hindu South Asia

Binod C. Agrawal

Introduction

Sanatan Dharma (Hindu religion) within the living civilization of South Asia that includes modern India believe in the transmigration of un-destructible, un-flammable and non-wet able *Atma* (human soul), re-birth and appearance of gods and goddesses as *Avtar* (appearance of god on the earth) from time to time to reduce human suffering and reduce prevailing sinful activities on earth. By means of oral methods and techniques in largely non-literate South Asia, the concept of transmigration of soul as one of the fundamental tenants of *Sanatan Dharam* continue to be entrenched in Hindu psyche and accepted practice for giving "rational" explanation for individual human misery and misfortune. In the long and meandering oral history of *Sanatan Dharama* it remained an inseparable aspect within the Indian civilization. Among many conceptions of *Sanatan Dharma* in the day-to-day oral discourse, discussion and speculation about *Atama* (soul) and *Parmatama* (god) and its relationship with self and god remain a paramount point of self expression for acceptance of current human condition and inequality in the Indian Civilization.

The quest to answer the question of human self and god continues within a multi-religious South Asia where many world religions appeared and lost sheen as continuing process of growth and decay of religious beliefs. Contemporary emphases on the notion of individualism, privacy and freedom have added new set of discussion and discourse in *Sanatan Dharma* fueled

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by growing acceptance and influence of digital media across South Asia especially in the democratic, hierarchal and multi-religious India.

It is believed that humans have innate and unique ability of self expression in a variety of ways. It is depicted in the ancient rock paintings of Bhimbedka in India that captures creative human genius (Behl [1998] 2005). Modern graphic arts are also human self expression in other mediums. So is digital media in 21st century. The common thread in all forms of creative self expression is human imagination, intellectual ability and desire to express. Cultural configurations, religious beliefs and expressive cultural conditioning help shape self communicative urge that leads to verbal, non-verbal and symbolic expression through a variety mediums including plastic art and material culture. Dynamic social organization helps channelize the inner desire of self expression. Self expression is a process as well as product of conceiving and creating new forms and reshaping the existing material or idea while adding new symbolic and cultural meanings to the dynamic expression over time.

The theory of "self expression" relates to basal human instinct of achieving social recognition within and outside one's culture and asserts sense of unique self worth. Self expression permits some imaginative, special and unique ability, characteristics and trait often enhanced by digital media. For many, it is a method personal satisfaction to impress peer group and others within socio-cultural boundary of language. The theory of self expression helps explain why digital media as product are being used for individual sharing and exchanging of information including religious learning.

In the past and even now, religious learning and preaching is largely highly collective and congregational practice especially in *Sanatan Dharma*. The term digital media in the present context is conceived as an electro-mechanical device having power and ability to store, view, create, distribute, modify, read and reproduce information in a verity of forms. In South Asia, it seems the ubiquity of digital media has brought about multiple changes in the canvas of cultural, entertainment, economics, and political governance including religions dissemination and practices like elsewhere in the world. In over billion population multi-religious South Asia the digital media have opened up "tight lip" individuals to become nonstop talking heads around the clock (Agrawal 2015a). Societal implications are yet to be fully analyzed, realized, and understood. Observations support the view that digital media have forereaching

influences on the social structure, l human relations and in blurring national boundaries that might change the content, meaning and method of preaching religion.

Study

In the light of these initial comments and observations, an attempt has been made to show how digital media product of information and communication technology (ICT) has accentuated religious self expression within the theory of self expression.

The paper is based on part data of a survey conducted in the city of Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India among adults above 18 years of age of either sex who owned or had access to mobile phone and or television. The sample consisted of 211 Christian, 300 Hindu and 200 Muslim respondents who were administered a pre-tested English closed ended questionnaire by a team of seven field researchers. Snowball sampling technique was used to select the respondents. In order to improve the response rate, field investigators made several trips and persuaded the respondents to return the questionnaire after filling it. The data collection was spread over two months from February to April 2015. Data checking, cleaning, entry and analysis were carried out from May to June 2015.

The original sample consisted of 711 respondents who belong to three religions (42.2 percent Hindu, 28.2 percent Muslim and 29.6 percent Christian). Since sample was drawn using snowball technique, sample consisted of digital media owners and users. In the present paper, only 300 Hindu respondents have been taken into consideration for analysis.

Analysis

All 300 Hindu respondents in the sample belong to both sexes (male 60.8 percent and female 39.2 percent, Table 1). They are educated (50.0 percent graduates). All respondents have mobile phone and television at home. They largely belong to the young age category of below 25 years (53.0 percent, Table 2). As much as 50.0 percent are educated with a Bachelor's degree (Table 3). Table 4 shows that 42.7 percent are students, 32.3 percent and 14.3 percent respectively are in service or business (Table 3). In this respect, the

sample represented a selected group of mobile and smartphones owners and users urban educated "middle class" of Ahmedabad, India.

Table 1: Sex Distribution of Respondents

Sex	Percent
Male	60.8
Female	39.2
Total	100

Table 2: Age Distribution of Respondents

Age	Percent
Below 25 Years	53.0
Above26 Years	47.0
Total	100
Mean Age in Years	25.2

Table 3: Education Distribution of Respondent

Age	Percent
Below 10th Grade Pass	1.0
10th to 12th Grade	21.3
Bachelor's Degree	50.0
Master's Degree	20.0
Professional Degree	7.0
Total	100

Table 4: Present Occupation Distribution of Respondents

Occupation	Percent
Student	42.7
Service	32.3
Business	14.3
Housewife	10.0
Retired/ Unemployed	0.7
Total	100

Digital Media Access and Use

Almost all respondents (96.0 percent) had access to direct-to-home (DTH) or cable television in which four out of five or 81.0 percent watch television for entertainment regardless of gender (Tables 5 and 6). These respondents spend one hour and thirty-six minutes every day watching television or using digital media (Table 8). Half of them or 49.0 percent also had access to radio though little is known about radio listening or specific religious use of radio by them (Table 7).

Table 5: Television, Radio Access*

Access		Percent
Television		
	Yes	96.0
	No	4.0
Radio		
	Yes	43.0
	No	57.0
Total Sample	300	

*Multiple responses

Table 6: Current Digital Media Use*

Use	Percent
Entertainment	81.0
Knowledge	70.
Professional	34.7
News	35.0
Religious	13.3
Total Sample	300

* Multiple responses

Digital Media Access and Use

Ownership and access of digital media is presented in Table 7. On the whole, 90.7 percent of Hindu respondents have access to smartphone, 86.0 percent have access to the Internet and 63.7 percent have access to laptops. In addition, in 60.7

percent of homes computer is available to the respondents. It should be mentioned that almost all respondents who were in business or service had computer in work place as reported by 39.3 percent respondents. Consequently, the use of digital media through smartphone, Internet, desktop and laptop is fairly (Table 7).

Table 7: Digital Media Access

Access		Percent
Smartphone		
	Yes	90.7
	No	9.3
Internet		
	Yes	86.0
	No	14.0
Laptop		
	Yes	63.7
	No	34.3
Desktop Computer at Home		
	Yes	60.7
	No	39.3
Desktop Computer at the Office		
	Yes	39.3
	No	60.7
Other		2.3
Total Sample		300

Table 8: Average Time Spent for Digital Media (in minutes)

Digital Media	Time spent
Television	69.3
Website	262.2
Whats App	123.3
YouTube	15.7
Twitter	3.0
Facebook	33.8
Instagram	0.5

Skype	0.4
Total Sample	300

Multi-Lingual Digital Media

The unique genre of television and radio in South Asia and India represents a multi-lingual, multi-religious and multi-content telecast and broadcast. Several hundred satellite exclusive television entertainment, education and news channels are telecasting around the clock seven days a week received in South Asia and India beyond their national boundaries. To a large extent the same can be said about the FM radio. In addition, public service broadcasting television and radio in several languages continue to broadcast which are accessible across the nation and beyond. They are spread over about two billion viewers and listeners within South Asia and India. Broadcast in major languages are having more the 100 million viewers and listeners in languages like Hindi, Urdu, Bengla, Punjabi, Telugu, Tamil, Marathi apart from English and many other languages. The focus of television telecast is to provide entertainment, education, religious programs and news around the clock. The same holds true for radio. Smartphones carry both television and radio signals apart from print news.

Analysis presented in Table 6 provide a glimpse of the pattern in which entertainment remained the most dominant attraction of the viewers and listeners. Both men and women regardless of their religion largely wedded to entertainment as indicated the large survey (Christian 82.5 percent, Hindu 81.0 percent and Muslim 78.5 percent), apart from knowledge gain, news and information. It should be mentioned that as much as 52.0 percent Muslim and 46.9 Christian viewers watch television for religious gain and information whereas only 13.5 percent Hindu do so (Table 6) thereby showing clear differences between Hindu and two other religious groups in digital media use for receiving religious television. Significant differences tend to point out differential and extensive religious use of television between Hindu on one side and Christian and Muslim on the other side.

Possible explanation for the differences can be found within the core of religious doctrine and philosophical beliefs of these religions. For example, in *Sanatan Dharma* (Hindu religion) live enactment of various incarnations of Gods and Goddesses are common. Symbolic visual performances are carried

out by "actors" and "actress" who remain in state of "liminality" during the period of festivity and hence are treated as incarnation of God or Goddess. Such a performance has been in vogue for several millennia in the sub-continent of India and elsewhere in Asia. On the other hand, there is a little evidence in Islam and to a large extent in Christianity except in Latin America of somewhat similar practices. Hence, it is author's contention that 'self expression' through visual medium of television is receiving special attention among the non-Hindu viewers of "monotheistic" religions more than "polytheistic" S*anatan Dharma* (Hindu religion).

Qualitative analysis and observations support the view that 'self expression' was highest among Hindu as compared to Christian and Muslim. Historical analysis of folk theatre, drama and satire amply supported the view that peoples' descent, opposition and resentment in the past during feudal and British rules were humorously performed by way self expression without major and serious social repercussions like *Bhavai* (a satire in which men and women ridicules the ruling class by song and dance performance) in Gujarat and similar forms in other parts of India. The author had also witnessed similar social satires against government and local elites in Madhya Pradesh during his field work in 1967-68 and ealier in Uttar Pradesh. Digital media are another technological extension that has opened up a new flood gate for 'self expression' especially in social media e.g. Facebook and Twitter. For a large majority social media have provided space to vent suppressed view and opinions for better democratic governance of the Indian Sub-continent. In addition, digital media in the form of social media has other innumerable possibilities of 'self expression of the evils of *Sanatan Dharma* (Hindu religion) in a highly asymmetrical, hierarchal and multilingual South Asian civilization. Visual 'self expression' for pan-national communication is gaining a great deal of popularity in all forms of digital media. Inter-religious differences in self expression have seen sudden explosion that can largely be explained in digital media expansion and liberal existing democratic fabric of the Indian civilization and emerging democracies like Nepal and socio-economic and religious beliefs within *Sanatan Dharma* (Hindu religion). The repercussion of digital media adaptation can be experienced in increased religious and   socio-political tension in self expression on social media and in "... humanizing elements of religious order" (Mishra 2015:74).

Given the visual well established tradition of *Natyashastra* (Indian treasure of drama) digital media have been absorbed in the religious fold as it has helped like cinema in the past, depicting religious miracles, mythological stories and power of supernatural and gods and goddess. Almost all Indian television channels are continuously telecasting such religious programs apart from exclusive Hindu religious channels.

It is the contention of the author that digital media in the process is getting assimilated while refining religious program production. New techniques of production have created modern characters of mythological heroes in the Hindu religious telecast though such telecast seems to have limited effects (Agrawal 2012). Further, digital media for many have become an essential method and means of self expression in personal, professional and political arena. Apart from reporting cases of injustice, expressing views and opinion on almost every social, economic and political issue are common occurrence on different digital media. Digital media are also being used for sharing appreciation and expressing displeasure. Today, the competition can be observed among political leaders, film actors, social elites and Hindu religious leaders about the size of digital and social media followers and how often they are on Twitter or on Facebook. Privacy is in public glare. It has touched new heights regardless of one's religion, gender and personal ambitions.

Given the rapid and revolutionary changes in digital media, it is difficult to predict the direction and pace of change in social, religious and political arena. At the same time, it is firmly believed that digital media have been adapted, absorbed and getting assimilated in the unbroken continuity of cultural visual tradition of 'self expression' in *Sanatan Dharma* (Hindu religion). Digital media have strengthened the process Hindu religious propagation over a period of time. It is a view of the author that digital media will take centre stage to play a critical role in 'self expression' of *Sanatan Dharma* (Hindu religion) preachers, saints and priests in the near future. This view is supported by Singh (2015:51-68) who observed that *Ramlila*--the traditional method of dramatic presentation of *Ramcharitmanas* the most revered mythological *magnum opus* of the poet Tulsidas is losing its importance in the wake of digital media. According to Singh (2015:55) "The development of mass media [digital media], particularly television soap operas, however, is leading to a reduction in the audience for Ramlila plays, which are losing their principal role of bringing people and communities together." At the same time, the telecast of Ramlila attracts very large audience no matter how many time it is telecast and through which medium.

Concluding Comment

Based on the analysis presented so far, the contention of the author is to highlight and explain the theory of self expression; the innate human desire for 'self expression' in which digital media, it seems, have played an important role. At the same time, the digital media have helped to accelerate the process of religious doctrine its adaptation, absorption and assimilation of *Sanatan Dharma* (Hindu religion) in a multi-lingual and multi-religious South Asian especially the Indian civilization.

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