Research Review

A Call to Action: Considering Technology and the Future of Spiritual Communities

April 28, 2025

This forum explores themes emerging from the “Digital Technology and Online Spiritual Communities” workshop hosted by the SSRC in November 2024. The aim of this workshop—chaired by myself and Nabil Echchaibi of the University of Colorado Boulder —was to bring together leading scholars in Digital Religion Studies who are interested in the increasing reliance of spiritual communities on digital technologies. Digital religion is a growing area of research that examines how religion is practiced both online and offline and what occurs when religious groups connect these spaces through innovative spiritual practices. While the COVID-19 pandemic initially prompted many religious groups to use digital media for the first time, their continued investment in these technologies raises important questions about the long-term impact of digitally mediated spirituality on the future of religion.

The workshop focused on identifying common ways religious communities use digital media, their motivations for engaging with these technologies, and the ethical and spiritual implications of sustained use. Fourteen scholars shared insights from their research on the use of digital media among Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Muslim, and New Religious Movements. They described the emerging sphere of digital religion as a space of both community and contradiction—marked by flourishing and fear,

misinformation and meaningful memories, and justice-seeking alongside discourse suppression.

Through a topic analysis of participant comments, aided by ChatGPT in identifying prominent themes, the workshop leaders distilled several recurring issues raised in discussion. This process led to the drafting of a “Call to Action and Reflection on Technology and the Future of Spiritual Communities,” which highlights major concerns about the nature and dominant traits of our emerging technoculture, particularly as they pertain to religious groups. This forum presents the call to action as a succinct summary of the workshop’s key discussions while also underscoring the ethical challenges within our technological ecologies that scholars and religious practitioners must closely examine.

The forum invites continued dialogue around this call to action with contributions from four workshop participants. Ruth Tsuria of Seton Hall University examines issues of religious authority, agency, and accountability in digital spaces. Margarita Guillory of Boston University investigates the complexities that arise for established communities when sacred rituals occur in technologically mediated settings. Elonda Clay of the Methodist Theological School in Ohio explores the impact of “one-size-fits-all” technologies on diverse religious institutions and communities. Finally, Gregory Price Grieve of the University of North Carolina Greensboro reflects on the possibilities and limitations of technological design in terms of historical and cultural religious practices. Together, these essays offer a starting point for deeper reflection on the nature of our technologies and the cultures they cultivate.



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A Call to Action and Reflection on Technology and the Future of Spiritual Communities

As scholars and thinkers from multiple disciplines, we believe technology does—and will continue to—significantly impact spiritual communities, as well as their cultural perspectives, communal work, and communication practices. We offer this call to action as a starting point for critical reflection and future conversations on pressing issues facing spiritual communities in relation to our world's current and emerging technological ecologies, particularly the new challenges created by artificial intelligence technologies and cultures.

We affirm the following beliefs about the nature of technology:

● **Technology Is a Tool:** It is neither inherently good nor bad but is profoundly shaped by human values, culture, and design. It mediates experiences, relationships, and ways of knowing.

● **Technology Shapes Human Experience:** It influences how we perceive ourselves, interact with others, and engage with our communities—including spiritual ones.

● **Technology Is Embedded in Power Structures:** It reflects and amplifies existing social, economic, and cultural dynamics, which must be critically examined.

● **Technology Is Transformative:** It creates opportunities for innovation, connection, and expression but also brings risks such as social disconnection, commodification, and the exploitation of humanity.



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We identify the following areas where religion and technology intersect and call for deeper theoretical and critical reflection by scholars on the following issues:

● **Community Formation and Transformation:** Technology, especially social media, facilitates the creation of new spiritual communities and enhances existing ones, yet also risks fragmenting traditional community structures and rituals.
● **Ritual and Representation:** Digital platforms provide spaces for shared religious practices and the dissemination of sacred knowledge but may also commodify, distort, or misappropriate these practices.
● **Authority and Agency:** Technology decentralizes authority, empowering individual expression but challenging institutional structures. This raises questions about the authenticity and legitimacy of spiritual guidance in digital spaces.
● **Sacred and Secular Intersections:** The blending of sacred and secular conceptual and ritual elements in technologically mediated spaces complicates the perceived and established relationship between traditional religious practices and digitized expressions of religion, which must be carefully considered.



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Proposed Ethical Principles and Discussion Points for Evaluating Technology's Impact on Spiritual Communities

We advocate that the following principles guide ethical reflection and conversation on

the growing role of technology in the work of spiritual communities and the increasing integration of AI into society more broadly:

1. **Transparency:** Technology systems should be designed to operate in ways that offer clarity and insight into their processes, limitations, and goals, ensuring users understand their function and impact.
2. **Complicating Institutionalized Legacies (of Equity and Inclusion):** Technologies should be designed to serve all people and must avoid reinforcing systemic biases or excluding marginalized voices.
3. **Respect for Sacred Practices:** Technologies must honor the sacred aspects of religious practices and knowledge, avoiding commodification or trivialization.
4. **Sustainability:** The design and use of technologies must account for environmental and social sustainability, ensuring that technology benefits future generations.
5. **Accountability:** Developers, users, and institutions must share responsibility for the societal and ethical consequences of technology, ensuring it serves the common good.
6. **Fostering Authenticity:** Digital and AI tools must prioritize genuine human connection and community, resisting trends toward superficial engagement or performative interactions.
7. **Dialogue Between Tradition and Innovation:** Ongoing dialogue is needed to ensure that technological adoption respects and learns from historical and cultural religious practices rather than undermining them.
8. **Ethical Labor Practices:** The often-invisible human labor behind technology (especially AI systems) must be recognized and fairly compensated, ensuring fair working conditions and respect for workers' rights.

CALL TO ACTION

We believe this call creates a space for fruitful conversations between scholars, spiritual leaders, technologists, and religious practitioners about where our future with technology is leading—especially for spiritual communities. This call is open to all individuals who wish to critically and collaboratively reflect on the social, cultural, and spiritual implications of religious communities' engagement with current digital media, emerging technologies, and their potential long-term impacts. We recognize that this call does not address all the issues and complexities that emerging technologies create for spiritual communities. However, we believe these principles offer a valuable starting point for groups to consider how technologies might be used and designed to enhance individuals' and communities' ethical, social, and spiritual well-being.