

SHIFTING AUTHORITY

AIMS

This chapter will introduce you to:

- the concept of authority and religious authority,
- shifting authority as a key characteristic of digital religion, describing how religious authority is understood and functions on social media,
- how religious authority is understood and acted out online, and
- a case study that illustrates how internet-based resources create new opportunities for religious digital creatives to become religious authorities online.

Digital media challenges religious institutions by creating space and opportunities for new religious authorities to form online and providing new ways for religious leaders to exert and affirm their influence over a given religious group. Shifting authority refers to the phenomenon where traditional religious leaders and structures are simultaneously empowered and challenged by the freedoms and tools offered by digital media that allow new religious voices to emerge online.

SHIFTING AUTHORITY AT WORK THROUGH THE INTERNET

Rebecca Lewis, who went by Bex, was an early adopter of Facebook and Twitter. She was known to many people online as @drbexl. She got involved in social media toward the end of her

time working on a Ph.D. in history to break the monotony of writing alone for hours. She quickly saw how social media held new opportunities to show what it means to be a Christian and live out one's beliefs online. She started writing online for herself, then a few friends, and finally, to share daily about her life and faith journey. The more time she spent exploring how the internet could be used to communicate hope to others online, the bigger her circle of friends grew in the online sphere.

By 2009, Bex had established herself as a visible presence within the Christian Twittersphere and blogosphere in the United Kingdom. This led to a job with CODEC, later called the Centre for Digital Theology, based at Durham University, overseeing an initiative called the Big Bible Project. The project aimed to use internet resources to promote biblical literacy in the United Kingdom by creating a supportive online community, developing campaigns to promote Bible engagement, and curating digital study resources. She thrived in this work as she strongly believed in the potential of using digital media for good in the Christian world. Her passion for all things digital meant she could spend her days experimenting with new platforms and ways of communicating about her faith online through her own experiences.

Church leaders and institutions did not go unnoticed the importance of her online presence. In 2013, Tearfund, a British-based international Christian relief and development agency, invited Bex and two other religious and social media experts to travel on a sponsored trip to Uganda. For a week, they would live in one of the poorest communities in the world and were asked to document the work of Tearfund and share online stories about what they saw and experienced. This event increased the readership of Bex's blog and her base of followers, but also her recognition as an important Christian voice online in the UK.

Her digital media expertise led to more opportunities and invitations from other religious organizations asking for her to help them develop their own digital media presence. Over the next decade, she ran numerous "social media for the scared" training sessions for the Church of England and other groups. She aimed to help church leaders develop practical skills in using social media and begin to imagine how internet technologies might be used as a site for digital discipleship. Bex served multiple times as a judge

for the annual *Premier Digital* Christian Media Awards, which recognizes top Christian websites and digital media projects across the United Kingdom.

Even though her Ph.D. training was in history, her hands-on experience and the public visibility of her digital work enabled her to translate her digital skills into a new career. Her growing digital media expertise eventually opened the door for Bex to join the Manchester Metropolitan University as a Lecturer in 2015, later becoming a Senior Lecturer in Digital Marketing. Amidst the new teaching and research demands, she continued to blog, tweet, and share about her life online and offer advice to those doing digital Christian ministry. This led to even more invitations to help religious institutions develop digital media use and creativity strategies.

Sadly, Bex passed away in February 2021 from cancer, an experience she regularly microblogged about for the last four years of her life, using the hashtag “#busylivingwithmets” (metastasized cancer) to talk about her reality. She also created the hashtag “#waitingroomfeet” to showcase the colorful shoes she wore to the hospital during chemotherapy. The hashtag became popular amongst British cancer survivors over the last year of her life and symbolized personal resilience for those facing health battles.

On the day she died, #BeMoreBex trended as the third most popular hashtag on Twitter that day in the United Kingdom. Obituaries and tributes to Bex appeared in various national Christian news outlets, including the *Church Times* and *Premier Digital*. She was described as a “Christian digital expert” and a “pioneer in online ministry” who would be widely missed for her role in helping bring so many churches into the 21st century. Even her death positively impacted the church and faith that she had unofficially served throughout her life by modeling what a digital disciple could look like and the impact such disciples can have on a digitally driven world.

DEFINING SHIFTING AUTHORITY

Shifting authority is a characteristic of digital religion, highlighting that practicing religion online creates many new challenges and opportunities for traditional religious groups and leaders in the digital age. Digital media create space for new religious influencers

to emerge online. Digital platforms such as social media and blogs offer people a space outside the set boundaries of a religious community or organization to speak about their religious beliefs and gain a following of like-minded believers. Shifting authority looks like Bex Lewis, the pioneering social media user whose use of Twitter and blogging allowed her to think out loud about what religious devotion might look like through posting on social media. Her passion for digital media and Christianity drove her to experiment with how spiritually inspired digital media could be used to impact the faith community to which she was committed.

However, it is not only religious community members who can use digital media to gain more influence online. Shifting authority is a concept that also recognizes that religious leaders can strengthen their position by leveraging digital media in their work. The shifting authority also means digital media, in the hands of individuals who already hold an offline position of authority in a particular religious group, can be further strengthened to extend their voice into new arenas. Religious groups increasingly recognize the need to hire digital media managers and spokespersons that can navigate the world of social media and effectively communicate the identities and perspectives of religious institutions online. So, shifting authority also looks like Bex Lewis, a digital guide employed by the Methodist Church in the United Kingdom and the Anglican Church. Through sharing her digital expertise, she was able to help equip clergy to use digital media in their outreach work and expand their ministry to those outside their church.

This illustrates that many of the characteristics of digital and networked technologies enable the creation of cultures that can empower members and leaders of established religious communities in unique ways. Internet platforms can shift attention away from established authorities by allowing new voices to emerge, a transition that can be pretty uncomfortable for those who see themselves as the true gatekeepers of a religious community. This reality, and the tension it can create, is seen by researchers who have carefully studied religion online over the past three decades and by those who work with digital media within religious institutions. For example, Helen Osman, a former Director of the U.S. Catholic Bishops' Committee on Communications. She recounts one concrete example of how the Catholic Church is being challenged by

the world of dynamic, flexible digital technology, which is harder to monitor and control than previous forms of media.

Over the years, and since the printing press, the Roman Catholic Church has had to adapt to new communication tools to approve teachings and modify its laws to include the use of other mass communication tools, such as radio, television, and now the internet. The church is still struggling to best adapt to new digital communication platforms. For example, in the 2010s, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Doctrine expressed concern regarding the writings of a particular theologian who had a solid online following. The supporters of the theologian began conversations in the digital world questioning the role of the bishops' committee in making official decisions. Meanwhile, the bishops became concerned that they were not effectively addressing these concerns and critiques using their long-established methods, which involved writing long documents and mailing them out via the postal service. Concern was raised about how these digital conversations did not recognize their unique role as bishops, so they were reluctant to engage in the online conversations. This led to the U.S. Catholic Bishops' Committee on Communications being asked to assist with creating guidelines and protocols for the U.S. bishops, addressing how the church may need to modify its thinking about social communication and its role in this new digital space (Osman, 2015, Personal Interview). This story highlights how digital media platforms create tensions within religious communities by shifting members' attention to new interpreters of religious knowledge and away from previous power structures.

When investigating who or what has authority in digital spaces, the question is often asked: "Are digital media and the internet challenging or affirming traditional understandings and practices of religious authority?" The answer is "yes" to both. Digital media BOTH creates novel forms of authority that empower new religious actors AND offers established religious structures and new abilities to exert their power within religious groups. This is described as the "paradox" of religious authority as expressed through different forms of digital media (Cheong, 2013). However, before discussing what this paradox means for religious groups in a digital age, we must begin with a discussion of what the concept of authority means in a religious context.

SHIFTING AUTHORITY BEFORE THE INTERNET

Shifting authority, as discussed in this chapter, is understood as focusing on how digital media and computer networks provide unique resources to community leaders and members that can change power relationships within a given community. However, trends toward shifting authority and the move of influence from institutions to individuals in society did not begin online. Changes in how people see membership and value commitment to traditional religious institutions have been happening for nearly a century.

Grace Davie (2012), a sociologist of religion, made famous the saying “believing, without” to describe people’s loss of faith in religious institutions and their waning commitment to them in post-WWII Britain. She found a historic shift occurring during this time, which heightened people’s loss of faith in public institutions, including religious ones. This marked the start of increasing withdrawals from church membership and regular attendance in the United Kingdom and throughout Europe. While many still believed in traditional religious values, they no longer felt the strong commitment to the institutions from which these came. Similarly, Wade Clark Roof (2001) noted this trend in his study of spirituality amongst American baby boomers. The legacy of the 1960s had instilled the questioning of traditional authority and power structures, which many boomers took with them into adulthood, and their general response to social institutions. This included seeking alternative spiritual communities and religious lifestyles and declining investment in established religious groups.

This movement away from traditional, institutional religion toward individualized, live religion marked a significant undermining of the influence of religious authorities in many people’s faith journeys (Hall, 2020). Putnam and Campbell (2012) further document the decline in participation in religious institutions in the last 50 years as people’s religious identities have become more fluid. These conditions created fertile ground for the rise of new forms of religious community and identities, such as those who describe themselves as “nones,” people without a religious affiliation, or “spiritual, but not religious,” to indicate that spiritual practice or beliefs is not linked to a recognized or official religious groups.

The public version of the internet emerged in the 1990s within these conditions: it provided a new space for people to investigate alternative forms of spirituality outside traditional religious structures and oversight. Digital media also enables individuals to find their sacred tribe, experiment with or create new forms of religious practice, and even challenge the work of leaders of their religious community. It could be argued that spiritual seeking online has not undermined traditional religion or encouraged people to leave faith communities. Instead, it magnified and helped facilitate a drift already in place in modern society. The rise of internet technologies was not the cause of shifting authority experienced within many religious communities at the beginning of the 21st century, but the place where the effects on those sources of spiritual power and oversight were made highly visible.

DEFINING AUTHORITY

Before exploring “shifting authority” in more detail, it is essential to begin with an understanding of the concept of authority. This is no small task. This exploration must first consider what distinguishes the concept of religious authority from a general understanding of authority. In Campbell’s early work, she argued that the term “authority” is often used as a broad concept that is not clearly defined, especially in early investigations within internet studies and digital religion research. In her early work, Campbell (2007) argued that religious authority is set apart from the broad concept of secular authority because it attributes the roots of authority to a higher power or a “supernatural referent.” While it may be granted to a human being or a created structure, religious authority is linked at least in part to an acknowledgment of the divine presence at work in the world today. Here, religious authority serves as a vital resource from which individuals or groups derive their unique spiritual practices and ways of life.

Religious authority is commonly attributed to one of four sources. It is commonly linked to the idea of a specific religious leader such as a priest, rabbi, pastor, or guru whom individuals follow. These leaders lead a group of religious followers in a specific set of religious values and practices. However, religious authority does not just come from the teaching or oversight of specific spirit guides and gatekeepers.

It can be tied to a specific sacred or holy text, such as the Quran, Torah, or Bhagavad Gita, which is seen as offering not only spiritual wisdom to believers but as the core guideline for the community of the faithful about what is and is not acceptable in terms of actions and beliefs. A specific religious structure or organization can also establish religious authority. This can be designated by a specific religious denomination, such as Conservative Judaism, Reform Judaism, a specific religious group like ultra-Orthodox Jewish group, or a unique religious ruling body like a Synod or Presbytery of a specific set of churches established rules. It provides oversight for both theological and organizational issues. It can even be a specific rule of life for those who take religious lifestyle vows as a monk or nun of a specific religious order. Finally, authority in an established religious community can be attributed to a specific theology or religious teaching, from the Four Noble Truths within Buddhism or the teaching of reincarnation to a specific interpretive text like the Westminster Confession of Faith or the Apostles' Creed referenced in Christian churches. Therefore, when describing something as having religious authority, it is important to be concrete about what one is attributing authority to, be it a specific role, text, structure, or ideological concept. Making the distinction about what specific kind of religious authority is being talked about in each context is essential.

Online discussions of religious authority have focused on the category of religious roles, discussing how specific religious positions or forms of leadership serve in oversight roles for a given religious community or institution. The work of Max Weber (1978), who identifies specific kinds of authority roles that can be at work in each social context, has been the most cited theoretical work in studies of religious authority online. He sees authority as a type of accepted power, where people agree to follow the rules set out by a specific individual or structure. Weber identifies three main theoretical categories of authority:

- 1 Traditional, where authority is legitimized through a set of long-standing rituals.
- 2 Charismatic, where authority is granted based on a specific leader's personality qualities.
- 3 The *legal-rational* where authority is attributed to the specific office held and not necessarily the persons themselves.

This has centered the discussions of authority online on the extent to which traditional religious roles, such as that of the pastor, priest, or imam, hold the same sway or power within new digital social spaces or what new roles, such as the social media influencer, forum moderators, or webmaster, may replace these as voices of authority online for a given group. So, what is seen as shifting within authority online is the extent to which established authorities can still exert influence or to which newly recognized authority roles have been moved. Instead of authority being earned through individuals obtaining specialized religious knowledge and expertise through their training or leadership roles, authority is granted to those with technical knowledge, digital skills, and the size of their network of supporters online. This means that many traditional pathways to gaining authority are overturned or even ignored within digital culture. Therefore, religious communities and leaders must learn a new recognition system to reestablish their power and voice online.

HOW DIGITAL CULTURE & MEDIA CHANGES RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY

When we enter a digital realm, what happens to our understanding of these traditional forms of authority? The simple answer is that authority is being shifted in two specific ways: (1) it challenges traditional religious authority figures through the creation of new religious roles, such as bloggers and religious app designers, and (2) it creates a new space for traditional religious authorities to enact their power or control over religious narratives and practices. This may seem contradictory, but both are outcomes of practicing religion in digital spaces. Indeed, in the early stages of internet research, scholars predicted that traditional religious authorities would “lose control over religious materials” (Dawson, 2000). However, as scholars continued to study religion and internet technologies using empirical methods, they have found that while there were challenges to traditional religious authorities, digital media also offers religious figures tools to reassert their authority, as noted above. The tensions created by this contradiction highlight that networked technologies represent a sphere for renegotiating what are considered good sources of authority by certain religious groups. Thus, digital media should be seen as creating a

space of shifting power relations as established and emerging religious authorities are placed on a new playing field where both vie for recognition and influence online. This leads to a more concrete discussion of what the digital environment offers regarding challenges, opportunities, and negotiations with traditional sources of religious authority.

Shift 1: Specific challenges to traditional religious authority

One of the most significant markers of the digital environment is the rise of new actors and systems of influence within various religious communities. The fluid malleability of religious community and identity online has contributed to a struggle between traditional sources of religious authority and new authority figures appearing online. The evolving nature of digital environments poses specific challenges to traditional religious authority structures, roles, and tools. Cheong (2013) calls this approach to religious authority in digital spaces a logic of “disjuncture and displacement” where networked technologies were seen to promote a diversity of religious ideas and promote a multiplicity of voices (p. 74). Religious leaders in this logic are constantly battling new media forms to control the narrative and definitions of religious symbols and practices. The internet, therefore, represents a sphere for the renegotiation and canonization of accepted sources of authority as religious webmasters, forum moderators, expert bloggers, and religious app developers become framed as sources of religious knowledge and therefore are recognized as sources of power.

Scholars of religion and media have noted that the structure of websites and discussion forums offers a platform of influence not available to users offline. It is within the online space that users become interpreters of religious beliefs and culture online. For example, Anderson’s early work on online Islam (1999) identified several new forms of religious interpreters online, highlighting digital media’s ability to create positions of religious power outside of traditional religious power structures. Other scholars have noted how internet platforms facilitate the rise of “instant experts,” allowing people to rise to positions of influence through their perceived expertise online while bypassing time-honored training or prescribed initiation rites to establish their position offline.

When these “instant experts” establish their online religious authority, it often translates to authority offline as well; thus, internet-based resources offer the ability to change offline religious power hierarchies by introducing new forms of governing authority (Herring, 2005). Digital media also create spaces where individuals can enact “playful resistance” toward religious gatekeepers.

In addition to creating new forms of religious authority through individuals and “instant experts,” digital media traits also allow for community discussion outside the purview of traditional religious authorities. Online groups may take discussions usually reserved for institutional administrators into public forums, empowering members in ways not possible offline. In these online groups, interpretations of religious beliefs and practices may differ from official positions, such as members of the Bahia faith who, in the 2000s, used the freedom they experienced in online communities to push back against community policies and oversight (Piff & Warburg, 2005). Because these conversations happen outside of the view of traditional religious authorities and may provide room for alternative theological positions and understandings, these discussion forums and groups become a new source of religious authority using opportunities and positions that the users do not have access to in the offline world (Helland, 2008). For example, Black Women Preachers have found that video platforms and live streams offer them more significant levels of visibility and new ways to build legitimacy for their ministries by working around traditional male-led religious hierarchies (Sampson, 2020). Therefore, internet platforms challenge traditional religious authority by providing a space for discussion and decision-making away from their control.

Newer digital forms, such as religious mobile applications, like prayer or meditation app, also provide a place in which new types of religious authority is formed. Wagner (2012) posits that religious authority is challenged specifically within religious mobile apps because the user has so much choice and flexibility in determining which religion and practices to engage. It is not only the user, but that can also become a new type of authority through their autonomy of app choice and use. Religious mobile app developers have also become a new form of religious authority, as they are the ones who are responsible for interpreting and transforming offline religious understandings and practices into

a digital space (Bellar, 2017). The developers' choices, use of the content, and algorithms recreate religious understandings and practices in a digital environment, which may be different from traditional religious authorities' understandings offline.

Digital spaces are fluid, malleable, and in constant flux. These features of digital spaces give rise to challenges to traditional religious authority and the ability for new religious forms of authority to appear. From early website developers and discussion group moderators to app users and developers, these new forms of authority work outside of the view of traditional religious authorities as they interpret sacred texts, discuss religious rules, and build religious experiences and practices. However, these challenges to traditional religious authority do not go unchecked. While digital media often create complexities for offline religious authorities, it can also provide unique opportunities for them to maintain or reestablish control, as the next section explains.

Shift 2: Media used to build and support traditional authorities

On the one hand, internet technologies and other digital spaces provide an environment where everyday people can challenge traditional religious authorities. On the other hand, traditional religious authorities also have access to social media and often use it to reassert or maintain their religious authority in new ways. Offline religious authorities can also access online sites, groups, and discussions, and leaders of New Religious Movements and other communities may use this access to monitor members' behaviors to reinforce their authority (Barker, 2005). Other religious leaders, especially of more conservative groups, may develop internet policies or filtering tools to shape acceptable internet use and control the online behaviors of their religious adherents (Campbell, 2010). This is motivated by traditional religious authorities seeking to fortify community boundaries, which creates another online space under their religious control (Barzilai-Nahon & Barzilai, 2005). Cheong (2013) calls this approach a "logic of continuity and complementarity" that evolved as internet technologies became increasingly embedded within the fabric of everyday life. In this logic, religious leaders and structures began to recognize how

digital media could be leveraged to reassert authority in the online world. Therefore, the internet became an essential tool for sustaining authority by providing pastoral oversight to members' online practices and establishing authority structures online.

An excellent example of traditional religious authorities asserting their power and control over digital spaces comes from within Israeli Orthodox Jewish groups. These groups have often debated and debated how digital media can allow individuals to bypass normal community boundaries and religious gatekeepers. The digital space allowed Orthodox Jews to engage with problematic aspects of modernity that are found online, such as access to gambling and pornography. To offset this danger to the community, ultra-Orthodox rabbis in Israel issued bans regarding internet use for their community members (Campbell, 2010). The initial ban, issued by the Belz Hasidic community, was against all internet use, but this was later overturned due to community pressure to approve access for work-related purposes. Even when used for work purposes, members of this community must use tightly controlled filtering software to keep themselves and their community safe from damaging content. In other cases, religious entrepreneurs created a new website for religious dialogue and engagement outside the traditional religious boundaries; offline religious authorities banned that site precisely (Campbell & Golan, 2011). These ultra-Orthodox Jewish religious leaders targeted a specific site to ban their adherents from using. In these cases, we see shifting authority at work, as web admins served as unofficial religious leaders, which provoked offline community officials to attempt to exert control over the online and reestablish their influence and position in the broader community.

Shift 3: Managing tensions between challenging and supporting new forms of authority

As more research on religious authority has emerged, there has been a realization that a third logic of “dialectics and paradox” exists when it comes to shifts in authority online (Cheong, 2013). This speaks to the conflictual reality of internet platforms as spaces where old and new sources of influence find a place to be heard and yet simultaneously experience competition from many other

religious voices. In the logic of “dialectics and paradox,” digital spaces challenge and solidify traditional religious authority while empowering and undermining alternative forms of religious authority. Researchers and practitioners of religion *must* recognize the tensions, opportunities, uneven gains, and ambivalences faced by established and new forms of religious authority online and offline.

Scholars have seen tensions in how religious leaders strategically negotiate their presence and communication in online and offline spaces. For example, Pauline Cheong’s work investigates how traditional religious leaders are learning that they must manage their online and offline performances if they are going to be seen as good leaders in the digital age. At the same time, religious leaders are solidifying their authority, which is challenged in different ways by religious adherents. Cheong discusses how migrants who come from places with religious restrictions are forming new online communities where they become brokers of religious information between their host country and their migrant communities. In these cases, these new information brokers become “proxy information seekers” as they help other community members on the periphery of digital environments and spaces find and implement religious information (Cheong & Poon 2009). These examples show the continuing flux of religious authority in digital spaces as traditional religious authorities seek to maintain their power, and everyday people use digital spaces to assert their understandings and practices.

CASE STUDY: DIGITAL CREATIVES AS NEW RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES

To explore the interactions and tensions between established and emerging sources of religious authority in a more tangible way, let us consider one new type of religious authority that has become prominent in many religious landscapes: religious digital creatives (RDCs). Religious digital creatives are one of these new forms of religious authority that highlight how the shift toward digital expertise often replaces religious knowledge within authority online. This is because digital media has become an integral part of many religious communities and organizations’ work, spreading information and running daily activities. This means an

individual's digital expertise and activities can elevate the visibility of some individuals within a religious group so that both community outsiders and insiders see them as the public face of the religious institution.

A religious digital creative is someone whose religious work involves building tools and resources to promote and publicize the work of a given religious group. This means that digital creatives, in a sense, serve as identity curators, shaping how the community is presented and seen online through their website, social media, and digital initiatives. They also act as cultural interpreters translating the work and beliefs of religious groups to a broader, different digital public and making a case for why religious groups have something important to contribute to contemporary culture. In the book *Digital Creatives and the Rethinking of Religious Authority* (Campbell, 2021), the work of RDCs is explored utilizing a decade of research and interviews conducted with more than 120 Christian digital workers in the United States and Europe. They can be described as RDCs. However, it is essential to note that RDCs are not just found in Christian communities; Muslim social media influencers (Zaid et al., 2022), online Buddhist community moderators (Ostrovskaya et al., 2021), and others also fall within this label of digitally savvy religious internet-users, whose online status and followings can rival their offline counterparts.

A religious digital creative can be a digital media designer, content producer, or manager whose media work online grants them unique status and influence within their religious community. RDCs hold webmaster, social media manager, app developer, or digital marketer jobs. A specific religious group or organization directly employs some RDCs to do digital work that supports an institution or represents them in a digital space. Other RDCs are media producers or digital experts who choose to give their time to create digital resources that promote their faith or expand the influence of their religious community's digital footprint. While there are wide varieties, RDCs all have one thing in common: they use their digital skills in concrete ways that promote their faith and religious community. RDCs can serve their chosen religious institutions in official or unofficial ways. This study identified three broad classifications that help describe their primary roles, motivations, and influences within their faith community.

Digital entrepreneurs: Building influence outside traditional religious structures

The first category of RDCs is the digital entrepreneur. These individuals may be digital media professionals or self-taught media designers who are highly innovative and like to think outside the box. They aim to design media tools and content that serve the goals of their religious community and help spread religious beliefs online. Due to their digital expertise, digital entrepreneurs often gain notoriety for their online work, which gives them the profile of being religious or media influencers.

Bex Lewis took on this role early in her journey with digital media. While she did not have official training in using digital media, she developed valuable skills online on her own time. She then began to experiment and learn the most effective ways to use social media and communicate online to get people's attention about the things she was passionate about, especially sharing her faith online.

The more time I spent online, I came across people that not only helped me develop my online skills but informed the ways I think about how the church could use digital media to its advantage. Moreover, because I tweet a lot about Christian stuff online, I have ended up making lots of contacts with other Christians keen to see how we could use the internet in ways that could help the church spread its message.

(Lewis, October 2011)

Digital entrepreneurs can be seen as pioneering creators; they want to use their technical skills and creative thinking to imagine new ways of carrying traditional religious practices like prayer or religious education through digital media. They often become unintentional religious authorities as their experimentation gains the attention of others online, who see them as both media and religious experts. They often describe their online work as sharing digital gifts with their religious community, even if the group does not acknowledge or appreciate it.

This is especially true of a new generation of online missionaries who have developed websites, mobile applications, and online communities to help spread their faith and train others to do so. These internet evangelists have often gone on to form their religious organizations through donations or private fundraising

that function like established denominational mission groups but with a digital frontier focus. RDCs like Eric Celerier, who was once described as the “Billy Graham of France” because of his far-reaching online evangelism efforts via Jesus.net, can use their contacts online to build a global network of partners that do missionary work outside of a traditional religious structure. Because of this digital reach, entrepreneurs are most likely to be seen as competing with established religious institutions because they work outside established institutional structures. They are focused more on living out their religious convictions online, which they see as supporting the work of religious groups, even if it is done outside traditional channels.

Digital spokespersons: Connecting digital media and religious authority

The second category of RDCs is called digital spokespersons, individuals employed by a religious organization to do digital media work. Their job may be to manage a church’s social media profile, build their community website, or serve as an official public liaison between church leaders and the media, which increasingly requires using digital media to promote their group and its message in a positive light. Digital spokespersons essentially serve as institutional interpreters using digital media to present a distinct image of the religious community they work for online.

Bex Lewis worked as a kind of digital spokesperson while employed by the Big Bible Project, the online initiative using different internet platforms to promote Bible reading funded by the Methodist Church in the United Kingdom. Even though the church employed her to do something creative online, she found it was often a hard sell to explain to other church leaders why it was essential to invest time and money on the internet for religious education and outreach.

For years churches have been telling people that they must come in the door and find out what we are about. However, on the internet, it is about making yourself visible to others and showing them you have something to give them, something they need. The church needs to realize this is how things are, that you have to make yourself attractive to people. Moreover, to

make ourselves attractive means being where the people are online and learning how to use the internet to pull people back into conversation with us.

(Lewis, February 2013)

Digital spokespersons are identity curators charged with identifying, presenting, and managing the religious identity of their religious institutions online and in a digitally driven society. It often comes top-down from religious hierarchies which do not understand the medium they work with. So digital spokespersons must not only do the work of re-shaping traditional messages to fit into a new media environment. They must also translate their work for leaders who are often digitally resistant or unaware of what this work entails. This requires dual expertise in the workings and practices of the religious institution they serve and the digital tools they must use. To do this effectively, they juggle multiple tasks simultaneously: utilizing clear communication skills, demonstrating technical proficiency, and providing digital media literacy to those they work for.

This means digital spokespersons who serve as media officers or members of the technology team for religious institutions often spend as much time doing media advocacy and education in their workplace as they produce digital media resources or content. While many religious organizations for decades have employed a communication director to create and manage media messages for their group, some leaders do not realize how drastically these roles have changed in the last two decades. The immediacy of digital media news production means communication directors often have only minutes or hours to respond to requests for information from media sources or to comment on a media event impacting their community, rather than days to follow up with an official press release characteristic of the mass media age. For example, Ronnie Convery, Communications Director of the Catholic Church diocese in a large city in Scotland, recounts having to hurriedly put out official Church responses on Facebook and Twitter in 2011 and then again in 2016 following the Catholic Sexual Abuse Crisis when church leaders failed to respond to email requests from the press. This created tensions between him and the leaders, who felt that they should take time to offer a carefully crafted response and did not recognize or understand the implications of their silence online. Digital spokespersons such as these can

be seen as undermining the traditional religious gatekeeping process when they are called to curate the messages of their faith community in new ways in digital outlets. So, the job is both hand-holding and teaching their community to adapt to a new communicative environment where the church is just one of many voices speaking to digital culture.

Digital strategist: Creating cross-over authority between tradition and emerging culture

The third category of RDCs identified is the digital strategist. These individuals are also employed by a religious institution or community but hold roles that are not traditionally associated with media work or skills. This could be a director of religious education, a religious leader like a pastor or priest, or an individual who holds a religious vocation such as a monk or nun. Because these roles have a vital communication component, this often encourages them to search out contemporary techniques and tools to help with these tasks. This may include investigating how social media might help them reach a larger public with their religious messages or how a digital platform might offer new opportunities for building stronger community ties with their current members. Exploring and incorporating new digital media tools into their traditional ministries also expands their realm of influence and even helps them reimagine who is part of the community that they serve.

In the later part of her life, Bex Lewis served as one type of digital strategist, employed by several religious organizations to do digital media training and consultations based on her previous work with churches. By running “social media for the scared” workshops for religious leaders and modeling what digital discipleship could look like through her use of Twitter, she sought to lead by example, showing what digital ministry and community-building could look like. As she explained:

Churches are realizing now that “we need to know how to do this internet thing.” The tools are there to put in people’s hands to build new ways of serving members and taking the church beyond its walls. Rather than the church being scared of what

this requires, they need to see the potential to build an active group of people who are going to meet the people where they are online, to buy into the potential that the digital can bring to the church's life and ministry.

(Personal Interview, September 2019)

Digital strategists may come in unexpected forms. While the study of theology is typically not known for its innovations and embrace of technology, a new generation of theologians is beginning to change this perception. In the past two decades, there has become a rising trend of "Theologians Who Blog." The instantaneous nature of blog publishing allows them to test ideas with a public audience outside the slow, arduous process of academic publishing and scholarly review. It allows them to experiment with new styles of writing, enabling them to learn how to translate better their often deep, technical knowledge to a more public, less specialized audience. Theological bloggers often hold teaching positions in a seminary or religious, educational institution, like Matthew Tan, now dean of a theological college in Australia, who has been blogging online for over a decade. At the same time, he was only a Ph.D. student. This has allowed him to reimagine doing theology as a collaborative approach rather than a solitary one. His blog has become a conversational space that has changed how he writes and challenges how he communicates his theological concepts. His online experimentation led to the book "Redeeming Flesh: The Way of the Cross with Zombie Jesus," in which he used the metaphor of zombies to explain concepts such as immortality and communion. This shows how digital strategists can be highly inventive. They understand how digital media tools and platforms can be valuable resources that enable them to connect and communicate their convictions within contemporary culture. They often become unofficial spokespersons for their community because of their online prominence and the creative ways to reimagine their religious ministry and move outside their traditional realm of influence through media use.

These three categories illustrate how RDCs can explicitly or implicitly act out new understandings of religious authority in a digital age. Digital spokespersons seek to build a bridge between online and offline spaces where authority resides. Digital strategists try to blend the authority associated with the

traditional roles they hold in their religious community with new levels and spaces of influence achieved through their digital experimentation. Digital entrepreneurs represent a complex merging of traditional notions of religious authority as they function outside the boundaries of traditional institutions and leverage their expertise to gain success within digital spheres of influence. This brief case study demonstrates that religious authority in a digital age requires knowledge of online and offline cultures. It also indicates that building and maintaining authority in professions focused on religious communication requires recognizing the complex ways online and offline spaces interact with and inform one another.

Digital spaces provide an ever-changing environment for reexamining religion and religious authority. The term shifting authority seeks to capture how understandings of what constitutes authority, how it is earned, and how its practices have changed, impacting religious authority in online, offline, and hybrid spaces of spiritual interaction. As technologies evolve, scholars, practitioners, and everyday people must understand how digital environments influence how we engage with content, what we deem to be accurate and valid, and what we question and reject. We will see the contradictions of challenge and support play out in the case study in the next section of this chapter, which explores how digital creatives, who develop social media to serve their religious communities, become religious thought leaders that challenge traditional religious communities' structures.

SUMMARY

Shifting authority is an essential characteristic of digital religion because it emphasizes that those in traditional authority roles and structures are challenged and empowered by digital media in unique ways.

Authority is defined differently within a digital culture than in traditional religious contexts.

Typically, *religious authority* is defined as holding a specific leadership role or being given oversight of a specific religious institution

based on one's religious training, credentials, and divine selection. Online authority is granted to individuals regarding their influence and digital footprint, determined by the number of followers or "likes" their content generates. This new way of building authority is called "algorithmic authority."

This shift of authority that happens in digital spaces happens in two ways.

First, traditional and established religious leaders are challenged as digital media allows individuals inside and outside their groups to arise as alternative interpreters and influencers through online opportunities such as blogging or creating a website or online community. Second, digital media also enables the creation of new spaces for traditional religious leaders to enact and affirm their power or control over religious narratives and practices, such as by developing a solid social media following.

The idea that authority is shifting online is a paradox.

New "authority" occurs when members are given, or take, this power in religious settings because of their creative savvy and ability to navigate technology well. However, established authorities can also strengthen their influence by utilizing digital tools to amplify their voices in new digital spaces. This demonstrates the power of digital media to empower new voices and traditional ones at the same time. This creates both opportunities and tension.

Religious digital creatives are one example of the new classes of religious authority emerging online.

For these individuals' technology skills and knowledge are viewed as having equal value as religious expertise and wisdom when creating influence online. There are three primary forms of religious digital creatives: 1) *digital entrepreneurs* who build influence outside of the traditional religious institutions or structures, 2) *digital strategists* who draw on authority obtained through technical experience and religious standing, and 3) *digital spokespersons* who connect and leverage digital media to help solidify traditional forms of religious authority.

FURTHER READING

The concept of shifting authority emerges from the dual ability of the internet to both challenge and empower traditional religious authorities. Many early studies of religious authority and the internet focused on the new voices of influence that emerge within religious communities, especially from marginalized religious groups due to gender or race, in ways that compete with traditional authority leaders (see Bunt, 2000; Kim, 2005). However, more recently, we see attention placed on how the internet can also empower religious leaders in new ways. Studies to consider include Busch's (2011) investigations of Buddhist web producers and forum moderators and how they affirm traditional boundaries to promote religious orthodoxy and Singh's (2014) study of how young British Sikhs have engaged online in ways that may affirm traditional sources of religious authority.

To further explore the concept of shifting authority begins with considering the cultural conditions created by the internet and specific design or technological features of digital media begins by considering the ways this both challenge and affirm traditional understandings of religious authority. Mark Chaves's work (2003) identifies standard definitions of religious authority and how living in a modern, media-driven age requires us to reexamine these categories. Another good starting point is Bryan Turner's article (2007) which considers how religious authority in print culture differs because it situates people and structures in new ways. In contrast, in digital culture, authority moves to information access and flow issues. His ideas compliment the early research on changes happening within Islam in Eickelman and Anderson's book, *New Media in the Muslim World* (1999). This work considers how the proliferation of media in the last few decades has redrawn the boundaries of who and how religious education and identity are being defined within Islam. Both echo Stewart Hoover's more recent edited collection (2016) about how media use is being used by various religious groups and leaders around the world to reaffirm the traditional spaces of religious authority while seeking to respond to a wave of new religious interpreters empowered by user-driven media.

In *Digital Creatives and the Rethinking of Religious Authority* (Campbell, 2020), Campbell offers the most extensive investigation and theoretical overview of how religious authority is seen and enacted in digital media contexts. Her book offers an in-depth analysis of different approaches that have been taken to investigate religious authority considering the social and cultural impact of mainly digital media on religious groups. She draws on the work of Cheong (2013; 2021), who has classified studies of authority online in terms of three different logics that highlight how religious leaders are undermined, empowered, and conflicted about the possibilities digital media offer both them and others to define the boundaries of their community and beliefs. Campbell also draws on the work of Lovheim (i.e., Lövheim & Lundmark, 2019) when she argues that the narrative of authority as relational may be a more suitable and dynamic way of understanding the movement between traditional and a new source of algorithmic online.

DIGITAL RELIGION

THE BASICS

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