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Theoretical Frameworks for Approaching Religion and New Media

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Introduction

What counts as “new media” changes as time goes by. The research on media and religion has moved from one-way mass media to networked media, from analogue to digital technologies. The theoretical approaches displayed in this chapter follow the same paths. They all started out with analogue mass media, later trying to grasp digital networked media. The proliferation of these Internet technologies also has an impact on religious practices and beliefs. This chapter aims to provide students and scholars with an overview of key theoretical approaches to the study of religion and media, with a focus on the now dominant and still evolving digital media. It explores the following questions: What are the key theoretical approaches employed in the study of religion and digital media? How do these theories influence questions and topics in digital religion research? This, it is hoped, may work as a lens for interpretation, especially for studies of new media engagement and interaction by religious users and communities.

Religion and (Digital) media: Two Interconnected Elements

Scholarship in the field of religion and media has included explorations of oral transmissions and textual practices within religious traditions, religious-like approaches to media consumption, and representation of religion within media

platforms. This scholarship often considered religion and media as two interconnected elements, in historical as well as contemporary contexts. For example, the establishment of a writing culture within the oral tradition provoked substantial modification in the authority structure of early Christianity, and the printing press had a crucial role in shaping the Protestant Reformation in Europe (Horsfield 2015). At the same time, the introduction of new technologies, such as the telegraph and the press, have also been understood through a religious perspective. James Carey (1992) conceptualized the *transmission* view of communication on the premise that media are vehicles of transportation, and this has religious roots as it is connected to the extension of “God’s kingdom on earth” (16) in times of explorations and religious expansions. The second approach that Carey proposed, the *ritual* view of communication, borrowed from religion the notion that media can participate in the process of social meaning-making, particularly in providing representations of shared social beliefs.

Because of these interconnections between media and religion, and as exemplified by Carey’s work, the field has often assumed an interdisciplinary perspective. Religious studies can benefit from a media studies approach to better understand the production, circulation, and reception of multi-modal media texts, as well as users’ engagement with religion in digital environments. Similarly, media studies can borrow the theories about the creation of symbolic meanings through material and ritual practices from religious studies. This may result in approaches that include both social sciences and humanities, involving disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, psychology, history, theology, and, for what concerns the study of the internet, computer sciences and informatics.

Religion and (digital) media: definitions and implications

This chapter presents theoretical frameworks that draw from various definitions of “digital media” and “religion.” We consider “digital media” as those digitally based communication devices that create, circulate, and store content on computers or mobile devices. The term “internet” indicates a network of computers that help establish communication patterns based on digital media. Today, digital media are often deemed “new media” because of their recent developments (in contrast with “old media” such as radio and television), but also because they change some existing dynamics of communication, for example, creating media practices that blur the boundaries between online and offline actions. Hence, this book’s definition of “digital religion” considers it as a framework for practices that are connected to online and offline environments simultaneously. In this chapter we choose to predominantly use the term “digital media,” but we also mention scholars who choose to employ “new media” in their work, and in this case, we use their preferred terms.

Studies about religion and the Internet have been concerned with the definition of “religion,” which has provided challenges in religious studies and related fields. According to sociologist Emile Durkheim (1995 [1912]), religion is a social phenomenon, “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things [...] which unite into one single moral community [...] all those who adhere to them” (44). Today, religion does not appear as “a unified system”. Offering a different perspective, anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1985) conceptualized religion as a system of symbols that establishes moods and motivations in people. This definition has been adopted by prominent scholars in the field of religion and media as it focuses on

symbols rather than the notion of sacred (Campbell 2007; Hoover 2006). In this chapter, we will describe approaches to the digital that conceptualize the Internet as space where religion can be imagined, negotiated, and lived also outside traditional understanding of religious institutions and traditions.

Discussion: Approaches to Media and Religion

This chapter focuses on four theoretical approaches for the study of religion and media, as shown in Table 1. They have initially been elaborated in relation to “old” media, but scholars have later adapted them to digital culture. In respect to the chapter published in the 2012 edition of the book, we also discuss more recent theories that built on these existing frameworks to explain peculiarities of digital culture, described in the table below as “theoretical developments.” Due to space restrictions, we limit ourselves to discussing some significant pieces of work and some relevant authors within each approach (see Table 1 and the recommended reading list below), with a focus on one specific selected case study for each approach. The overview:

Table 1. *Approaches to media and religion turning towards digital culture*

Media studies approach	Relevant author(s)	An exemplary case study that expands the initial approach	Theoretical developments
Media ecology	M. McLuhan J. Meyrowitz	“New media, Wikifaith and church brandversation: a media ecology perspective” (Musa and Ahmadu 2012)	Media environments
Mediation	G. Lynch B. Meyer S. Hoover	“Augmented graves and virtual Bibles” (Hutchings 2016)	Third space; Hypermediation
Mediatization	S. Hjarvard K. Lundby M. Lövheim	“Digitalizing Tibet: A Critical Buddhist Reconditioning of Hjarvard’s Mediatization Theory” (Grieve, Helland & Singh 2018)	Deep mediatization
Social shaping of technology	H. Campbell	“Why Does the Archbishop Not Tweet?: How Social Media Challenge Church Authorities” (Gelfgren 2015)	Mediatized religious design

Given the space limit, the discussion has to be brief. It is important to notice that these approaches can overlap and there are instances where elements from different theories are combined, as we will explore in this chapter. Our focus is specifically on theoretical frameworks, but they also call for reflections on methodologies for the study of digital religion. In this respect, the article *Approaches to digital methods in studies of digital religion* (Tsuria et al. 2017) offers a valid summary of dominant methodologies in the field.

The presentation of theoretical frameworks for approaching religion and digital media will be limited by our own academic horizons. Knut Lundby is a media scholar with a background in the sociology of religion whose work has had an emphasis on Christian traditions in high modern Nordic societies. Giulia Evolvi has a background in media studies and religious studies in the North American academic tradition and focuses on religious change in Catholic southern Europe. Therefore, the context for reflection in this chapter is that of media-saturated societies, primarily Europe and North America. We are aware of the need to adapt and change these theoretical frameworks from a non-Eurocentric perspective, also to account for issues of accessibility, freedom of expression, and media diffusion. It is hoped, however, that the increasing globalizing effect of digital media technologies may make this theoretical overview useful also for scholars focusing on other geo-cultural contexts, and we invite them to critically apply these theories in other religious milieus.

In each of the following sections, we will first present some main works explaining a specific theoretical approach to media and religion; then, we will provide one example of a recent case study explored through the theoretical framework; lastly, we will present theoretical development(s) based on the described framework.

Media Ecology

The media ecology term was coined by Neil Postman. However, the approach is inspired by the media scholar Marshall McLuhan. He became famous for envisioning, early “the global village” of electronic networking. In coining the famous phrase “the medium is the message” (1964) in a pre-digital media era, McLuhan mainly referred to television. However, his work has been adapted to digital media and has influenced

the media ecology perspective (Clark 2009). We will briefly discuss McLuhan's work here as it has been adapted to digital media and has influenced the media ecology perspective. We will also illustrate the example of the work of Bala Musa and Ibrahim Ahmadu that applies media ecology to the study of churches in the digital age.

McLuhan explored the impact of media technologies on people's lives with an approach that has been characterized as technological determinism. After McLuhan's death, this approach was modified in "medium theory", coined by Joshua Meyrowitz (2008) to describe the distinct characteristics of each type of medium, for example, how print and television encourage different modes of thinking and value systems. While McLuhan seldom wrote about religion, there are reasons to think that his Catholic background influenced his theoretical work, especially the mystic Christianity of English writer G. K. Chesterton and the Formal Causality of the Catholic thinker Thomas Aquinas (McLuhan, E. 2010; McLuhan, E. and Szklarek 2010).

Conceptualized in the pre-Internet era, media ecology theory sees media as part of complex technological networks that include technological communications as well as bodies, languages, symbols (Newton 2015). The media ecology perspective has proven useful in addressing hybrid and entangled activist practices that occur between online and offline environments and that are centered around media practices (Treré 2019). Concerning digital religion, communicative ecologies help implement storytelling techniques to brand a given organization as a distinct online voice (Cheong 2017).

Media ecology: a practical example

The media ecology perspective has been applied to the study of digital religion. For example, Musa and Ahmadu (2012) assumed a media ecology approach to describe the phenomena they defined as “wikifaith” and “brandversation.” These two terms refer, respectively, to the development of churches in new and changing environments (“wiki” meaning “quick” and pointing to changes) and to the increasing tendency of churches to perceive themselves as brands. These two characteristics pertain to churches in environments characterized by the presence and proliferation of new media, shifting authorities, and a simultaneous delocalization and multi-localization of religious practices between online and offline venues. By adapting the media ecology approach to digital religion, Musa and Ahmadu offered a theory that accounts for how churches must adapt to new technologies to communicate, while at the same time trying to remain faithful to their core messages.

Theoretical developments and adaptation to digital culture

Medium theory helps conceptualize media as environments. However, medium theory concentrates on one medium at a time, from one historical phase to the next. Medium theory, thus, misses out on the complexity of several media forms that characterize a digital culture (Krotz 2014). The concept and theory of media ecology goes broader in understanding media environments. “Media ecology is most often defined as both the study of *media as environments* and the study of *environments* – such as situations or contexts – *as media*” (Newton 2015, italics in original). Media ecology helps to understand how media do not simply carry a message, but they create environments where certain aspects of religion develop.

Mediation

The theory of mediation posits that media are tools to create and articulate cultural meanings. As theorized by Jesús Martín-Barbero (1993), mediation refers to the cultural practices of the audience to make sense of media in both local and global contexts. When it comes to the study of religion, this approach usually considers that media are an integral part of religious practice rather than tools that have an impact on religion. We will describe the theory of mediation applied to the study of religion as elaborated by Gordon Lynch, Birgit Meyer, and Stewart Hoover. Then, we will discuss as a case study the work of Tim Hutchings on digital bibles and augmented graves. We will then present the theories of third space and hypermediation, also based on the concept of mediation.

Gordon Lynch (2014) drew from Durkheim's work on religion to theorize multiple sacred forms, which are sacred experiences that go beyond religious expressions. In doing so, Lynch explored mediation of sacred forms, which is described as follows: "The interaction of symbol, thought, feeling and action that characterizes sacred forms is only possible through media which give sacred forms material expression and enables communication about, and interaction with, those forms" (2014: ch. 4). According to this definition, mediation is inevitable. In contemporary societies, mediation of sacred forms occurs specifically with the aid of media technologies, including digital media. In particular, the mediation of sacred forms on the digital media influences how religion is represented within so-called "mainstream" media.

Another conceptualization of religious mediation is offered by Birgit Meyer. According to Meyer (2006), “Positing a distance between human beings and the transcendental, religion offers practices of mediation that bridge that distance and make it possible to experience –and [...] one could say: produce –the transcendental” (12). From this perspective, the term “media” is understood broadly as encompassing all devices that help people experience transcendence. Meyer (2009) defined such items “sensational forms,” to stress the connection between religious experiences and the realm of the sensorium and to assume a material culture perspective. Therefore, images, statues, spaces, and bodily practices, as well as media technologies such as cassettes and videos, may participate in practices of mediation.

The theory of religious mediation has also been explored by Stewart Hoover (2006), who acknowledged Meyer’s mediation by theorizing media as practices rather than conceptualizing them as texts, technologies, or institutions. Hoover focused on what people are *doing* in relation to media across a whole range of situations and contexts. More specifically, the approach posits that “the various media and messages that are accessible to individuals in the private sphere are received, understood, and potentially used in other spheres of social and cultural life” (Hoover 2006: 36). Based on Geertz’s definition of religion and influenced by the Cultural Studies, this perspective posits that cultural contexts account for mediated meanings of given practices. While this approach has often been applied to “old” media such as television, its focus on media use in terms of meaning-making applies also to digital media (Hoover 2016).

Mediation: a practical example

The theory of mediation is explored in the book *Materiality and the Study of Religion: The Stuff of the Sacred* (Hutchings and McKenzie 2016). The book gathers various case studies analyzed from the lens of material culture, defined by David Morgan in the foreword as “The way in which an object participates in making and sustaining a life-world.” (15). The book connects a material culture approach to both the theory of mediation and the study of digital religion. In particular, Hutchings (2016) applies Meyer’s concept of mediation to the study of cases that involve both digital and material aspects: the bible version “Uncover,” for instance, is a printed book accompanied by a series of virtual videos that supplement the reading. This is an example of digital mediation that does not exclude materiality, but is produced, classified, and circulated as happens with “tangible” objects. It helps people materialize the religious experience through multisensorial practices and shows how digital media become an integral part of religion. With this study, Hutchings shows that the material aspects connected to the theory of mediation can be further elaborated to understand digital religion as affecting people’s everyday religiosity and as linked to the physical practice of religion.

Theoretical developments and adaptation to digital culture

The theory of mediation is used as a basis for new theoretical approaches focused more specifically on digital religion. In this respect, Hoover, in collaboration with scholars at the Center for Media, Religion and Culture (CMRC) at the University of Colorado Boulder, conceptualizes the approach of *third space*. Influenced by works in sociology and architecture, the theory of third space focuses on venues for religious practices that exist in-between online and offline experiences. Stewart Hoover and

Nabil Echchaibi (2020) theorize third spaces that people approach as-if they are legitimate venues of religious practice. Drawing from Homi Bhabha's postcolonial theory (2004), Hoover and Echchaibi consider third spaces as hybrid in enabling new approaches to religious practices. This perspective is based on the theory of mediation in exploring the meaning-making function of media, but it focuses also on the generative affordances of internet spaces to create and circulate narratives and aesthetics.

Furthermore, the CMRC explores the concept of *hypermediation*. Similarly to the theory of third space, hypermediation considers digital media as generative of new meanings for religious practices. The theory is based on Martin-Barbero's concept of mediation, as also elaborated by Carlos Scolari (2015), who employs the term hypermediation to describe current media changes dependent on the proliferation of media technologies. As described by Echchaibi (2017), hypermediation is characterized by an increased speed in communication that causes intensification in the practice and understanding of religion. Giulia Evolvi (2018) further elaborates the theory by describing "hypermediated religious spaces" that are characterized by fast and emotional exchanges across online and offline venues. Evolvi's definition of hypermediation draws also from the theories of mediatization and social shaping of technology that we will describe in the next sections, but focuses specifically on media and religious practices, expressed through religious blogs.

Therefore, there are various approaches to the theory of mediation and its adaptation to the Internet age. These approaches have in common a conceptualization of media as enabling (material) meaning-making practices, being integral part of the religious

experience, and conditioning the practice of religion in everyday life. Media can be defined as material objects or platforms that have an impact on people's realities. The approaches of third spaces and hypermediation, which adapt the theory specifically to explore digital media, suggest that mediation can be applied and elaborated for the study of digital religion.

Mediatization

The theory of mediatization responds to the need to theorize the impact of new media on socio-cultural change. As analyzed by Knut Lundby (2014b), mediatization describes “how changes occur when communication patterns are transformed due to new communication tools and technologies, or in short: the ‘media’” (3). This definition embeds three perspectives on mediatization: the cultural perspective, which considers the socio-cultural construction of reality caused by media use; the institutional perspective, which focuses on the transformation of institutions such as politics or religion; and the material perspective, which focuses on the material properties of the technologies that people use. These perspectives lead to an understanding of mediatization as a long-term process that may involve new technological and theoretical developments.

In this section, we will explore the theory of mediatization with a focus on the works of Stig Hjarvard, Knut Lundby and Mia Lövheim, as well as of Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp. We will also discuss the case of digital Buddhism explored by Gregory Price Grieve, Christopher Helland, and Rohit Singh, focusing on mediatization outside of the European context. Then, we will explore how

mediatization has been specifically applied to digital technologies through the concepts of deep mediatization.

The institutional approach to mediatization poses attention to media as social institutions. Media also have impacts on other institutions, such as that of religion (Hjarvard 2011). Social change occurs in an interplay between the media and other institutions in society, where the logics of these institutions meet the logics of the media. The conditions and understanding of contemporary religion are inevitably connected to processes of mediatization (Hjarvard 2013; Lövheim 2014; Lövheim and Hjarvard 2019).

The cultural approach to mediatization stresses the social world as a communicative construction where media communication technologies play a crucial role in ongoing transformations. This “materialist phenomenology” avoids the concept of “media logic”, rather looking for various “figurations” in communication processes. Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp (2017) point beyond the digital as such, to transformations following the “datafication” with automated gathering and processing of data by big players like Google and Facebook.

The term “mediatization” (sometimes referred to as “mediatisation” and called *Mediatisierung* in German) in British scholarship may be used interchangeably with “mediation” to denote the similar processes of social change (Livingstone 2009; Couldry and Hepp 2013). However, “mediation” in mediatization studies is usually understood as the regular communication processes, whereas mediatization is going

beyond mediation in focusing on media changes and conceptualizing media as pervasive in people's lives.

Religion occupies a relevant role among the social institutions affected by mediatization. Hence, Stig Hjarvard (2008) wrote “as a language the media mould religious imagination in accordance with the genres of popular culture, and as cultural environments the media have taken over many of the social functions of the institutionalized religions” (9). Hjarvard adopted a substantive definition of religion, which considers it as supernatural agencies of action that people relate to. This approach is also rooted in the aforementioned “institutional perspective” on mediatization, which posits that the proliferation of media both within and outside religious institutions has an impact on religious organizations, practices and beliefs. Religious institutions need both to adapt to the contemporary imperative of media use, and to understand media logics that involve representations of religion within society at large (Hjarvard and Lövheim 2012).

Mia Lövheim (2014) explained that mediatization causes religion to be more visible in the public sphere. In a chapter in the book *Mediatization of Communication* (Lundby 2014a), Lövheim explored the work of Hjarvard in relation to three transformations of contemporary religion: first, people tend to gather information about religion primarily through the media. Second, media include religious symbols, imaginaries, and beliefs within popular culture. Third, media may provide a sense of community and moral guidance that, beforehand, were functions of religious institutions (551). Therefore, mediatization of religion explores various facets of

contemporary religion, including religious media, representations of religion within journalism, and religious-inspired pop-culture.

Mediatization: a practical example

Mediatization has been primarily explored in the Northern European context, characterized by a high level of secularization and media diffusion. However, Lövheim and Hjarvard (2019) discuss recent developments of mediatization that paid attention to social and religious changes, shifting religious authorities, and mediatization outside of the European context. An example cited by Lövheim and Hjarvard is the work of Grieve, Helland, and Singh (2018) on the digitalization of Tibetan religion, part of the book *Mediatized Religion in Asia: Studies on Digital Media and Religion* (Radde-Antweiler and Zeiler 2018). The authors describe the Dalai Lama performing a ceremony online, which helps members of Tibetan diaspora recreating religious practices outside of Tibet. The authors explain that different cultural contexts and notions of religion urge scholars to “provincialize” the theory of mediatization outside Europe. They also offer a theory of communication from a Buddhist perspective, which takes into account the Buddhist concept of mindfulness and the notion that texts are not regarded as holding universal meanings. The study shows how the theory of mediatization can help understanding digitalization processes also outside highly institutionalized contexts by focusing on the creation of communities and long-distance practices.

Theoretical developments and adaptation to digital culture

The changing media environment got some scholars to expand the theory of mediatization as *deep mediatization*, an approach that aims to address the expansive

proliferation of networked digital technologies (Couldry and Hepp 2017; Hepp 2020). Andreas Hepp, Andreas Breiter, and Uwe Hasebrink (2018) explore the recent changes that urge scholars to assume a new approach to mediatization. They identify five characteristics of deep mediatization: the differentiation of media technologies in a variety of platforms, the increased media connectivity, the omnipresence of media in society, the rapid innovation of media technologies, and the datafication of social life in computer software and platforms. These characteristics result in an approach to mediatization that includes the entanglements of human actors and technologies, and the hybrid communicative practices occurring in the Internet age.

While religion has to still be fully explored in the framework of deep mediatization, the aforementioned book also has a chapter on the Roman Catholic Church (Radde-Antweiler, Grünenthal and Gogolok 2018). The chapter explores how the Catholic Church embeds digital media in its communication strategies and how Catholic authorities may resist the use of digital media. This shows how religious authorities continuously negotiate media use and may decide to employ only certain Internet platforms and spaces, displaying characteristics of deep mediatization in transnational contexts.

Mediatization, therefore, is a theory that investigates media-dependent changes and that may focus on cultural, institutional and material media aspects. When focusing on religion, mediatization research often assumes an institutional perspective and conceptualizes media as a social institution, which has the power to influence other institutions, including religion. However, mediatization has also been used to explore forms of religion that exist outside traditional institutions and beyond the European

context. The theory of deep mediatization, taking into account the shifting and multi-modal character of contemporary communication, offers insights on how to theorize media changes in the recent digital age, a perspective that also includes digital religion.

Social Shaping of Technology

The theories of mediation and mediatization, with their differences, focus on how media shape religious practices and institutions. A slightly different approach is that of Social Shaping of Technology, which considers how people use and negotiate technologies. Heidi Campbell, editor of this book, applied the theory to the study of religious groups, deeming it the religious-social shaping of technology (RSST) approach. Instead of looking at media impact on religion, RSST explores how religious groups shape media use and focuses specifically on digital tools and new media. This approach considers media in their technological structures, which also hold a cultural layer in encouraging forms of interaction. We will here explore Campbell's conceptualization of RSST and her more recent work on religious authority. We will also discuss the work of Stefan Gelfgren about the Twitter account of the Bishop of the Church of Sweden, and we will then talk about the adaptation of RSST in the mediatized religious design (MRD) approach.

The Social Shaping of Technology is one of the models in the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS), which aims at grasping the relations between social patterns and technology. Going against technological determinism, this field stresses the role and potential of human action in shaping technology through designers' and

users' choices. These choices may not be deliberate but are outcomes of social interaction with the technology (Williams and Edge 1996). This approach also considers how people and communities, often because of cultural, ideological, or religious motivations, reject some aspects of technology. This is the case of the Amish, who find strategies to embed the telephone in their lives while following community rules against the use of this technology (Zimmerman-Umble 1992).

Drawing from this theoretical background, Campbell conceptualized the RSST approach in the book *When Religion Meets New Media* (2007). This theory posits that “Religious communities are unique in their negotiation with media due to the moral economies of these groups, and the historical and cultural settings in which they find themselves” (58). It is for this reason that Campbell looked at specific qualities and constraints of religious groups to understand their use of technology, with a focus on “historical life practice, interpretive tradition, and the contemporary outworking of their values” (41).

RSST looks at religious communities' negotiations of technology from four perspectives. First, *history and tradition of a religious community*, which includes rules from sacred texts on the use of technology and previous media use of the community. Second, *core beliefs and patterns of a community*, involving values that are mirrored in media use. Third, *negotiations with new media*, exploring how a community should use, reject, or negotiate a given technology. Fourth, *framing and discourses on new media*, groups' strategies to make sense of media use, including identity narratives about how religious communities wish to see themselves represented. Campbell explored these four perspectives by focusing on religious

organizations' use and control of media through analyzing Jewish, Muslim, and Christian communities.

RSST: a practical example

Various scholars employ the theory of RSST to address cases of digital religion and negotiations of technologies by religious communities. Gelfgren (2015) assumes the RSST approach to describe the creation of the Twitter account of the Archbishop of the Church of Sweden. The case gained attention within the religious community when it was discovered that the person managing the Twitter account was not the real Archbishop, but an impersonator. This kindled debates about the authenticity of digital media, religious authority in the digital age, and the necessity of the Church of Sweden to become more public. Gelfgren claims that the RSST approach is useful to understand how the history and tradition of the Church of Sweden affected its (slow) online engagement. However, Gelfgren also explains that the RSST benefits from a greater focus on the context of narrative production, in this case the mediatized and secularized Nordic European context. This case study shows how the RSST can be adapted and applied to different religious communities with different degrees of acceptance of the technology. Even in contexts where engagement with institutional religion is decreasing and new media are highly diffused such as Sweden, knowledge of religious communities' characteristics helps understand how they approach new communication channels.

Theoretical developments and adaptation to digital culture

Drawing from her previous works, Campbell discusses RSST in relation to religious authority and digital media in the book *Religious Digital Creatives as Christianity's*

New Authorities (2020). In this book, Campbell talks about Christian Religious Digital Creatives (RDCs), figures who employ their skills to create and spread religious narratives online and hold unique roles within religious communities because of their ability to use the Internet. The fourth stage of RSST, *framing and discourses on new media*, leads to the creation of the technological apologetic, which is a narrative that offers a story about a given religious community and its use of technology. This community's technology talk informs the positions and actions of Religious Digital Creatives. Therefore, the RSST approach can help to understand the performance of authority of Internet experts by kindling discussions and negotiations of technologies within given communities.

Furthermore, Tim Hutchings (2017) draws on RSST to elaborate the *mediatized religious design* (MRD) approach. Hutchings combines the theory of mediatization, and its focus on media logic, with Campbell's RSST approach. The book explores five case studies of Christian churches that established certain types of online communities and practices. The perspective of MRD posits that there are specific negotiations behind the creation of online spaces but actualizes RSST by claiming that religious discourses about technologies are often heterogeneous, competing, and conflicting. From this perspective, MRD seeks also to address the influence of existing media logic and explores how original technological negotiations of a given community often encounter the resistance of different projects and viewpoints.

Religious-social shaping of technology, to sum up, is an approach that explores how people choose to use and adapt existing technologies within religious communities.

This approach mostly focuses on media as technologies, whilst also rejecting

technological determinism and taking into account people's agency. RSST describes specifically religion and digital technologies. The theory is useful to account for various aspects of digital religion for example, online religious authority and the emergence of Religious Digital Creatives. RSST has also been employed to create the approach of MRD, which seeks to capture the current complexity of Internet communities and the competing religious discourses behind technological designs.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we presented theories that assume different approaches in conceptualizing the relationship between religion and media use. Media ecology explores technology by focusing on the distinct characteristics of each medium. Mediation considers media as practices and, sometimes, assumes a focus on materiality. This perspective sees media and religion as entangled, because religion is shaped by processes of mediation. Mediatization explores transformations in the interplay between changes in the media and changes in other parts of society and culture, like religion. RSST conceptualizes media as technologies, with a focus on human agency. In this case, religious groups shape and negotiate the use and function of media.

These theories tend to see religion in its institutionalized and organized form, focusing mainly on Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, but they also leave space to analyze non-institutional forms of religion, including religion as a cultural practice (mediation), as embedded in pop-culture and the mediated social construction of reality (mediatization), and dependent on new forms of Internet-based authority (RSST).

Each of these theories captures some facets of digital religion, and they can sometimes be combined or adapted to explore the increasingly interconnected and multi-modal forms of communication that characterize digital exchanges. Hence, various theories draw from media ecology, mediation, mediatization, and RSST to explore recent examples of digital religion. We have here mentioned media environments, third space, hypermediation, deep mediatization, and mediatized religious design (MRD). There are two remarks about these theoretical developments. First, these theories often combine various approaches and theoretical perspectives to offer a more nuanced understanding of how digital religion is created and evolves. In this respect, MRD represents a promising perspective to explore online authorities and communities as it combines mediatization and RSST, and it can be applied to case studies involving creative uses of the Internet by religious institutions. Second, these approaches tend to stress the connections between online and offline spaces, also explored by previous theories, by focusing on materiality, technological developments, and spaces of practice. For example, the theory of third spaces is useful in describing how religious groups can find online venues permeated with religious meanings. This perspective is particularly apt to describe quasi-religious phenomena and cases of digital religion not directly connected to organized religious groups.

The developments of these theories show how scholars continuously try to find new theoretical approaches to explain all the facets of digital religion, such as the influence of secular and post-secular feelings on digital religion, the emergence of artificial intelligence and algorithm logic, and the relevance of posthumanism and augmented reality. Moreover, this chapter has the limitation of mainly focusing on theories

applied to the European and Christian context, but there is a need to adapt existing theories and create new approaches to analyze religion in different contexts, also concerning minorities, gender, race, and ethnicity. Therefore, the challenge for scholars is to explore possible future directions and theoretical developments to capture the rapidly changing and fluid characteristics of digital religion.

Selected recommended readings on media and religion

Media ecology:

McLuhan, E. and Szklarek, J.(eds.) (2010) *The Medium and the Light. Reflections on religion, Marshall McLuhan*, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers [1999].

A posthumous collection of Marshall McLuhan's public and private reflections on religion related to his famous works on the media as extensions of human senses and the media themselves being the message.

Mediation:

Hoover, S.M., and Echchaibi, N. (eds.) (2021) *The Third Spaces of Digital Religion*, London: Routledge.

This edited book reflects on the qualities of Internet venues that become "third spaces" where religion is practiced, imagined, and negotiated. The different case studies help contextualize the theory of mediation in relation to digital culture.

Mediatization:

Lövheim, M., & Hjarvard, S. (2019) The Mediatized Conditions of Contemporary Religion: Critical Status and Future Directions. *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture*, 8(2), 206–225. Available at <<https://doi.org/10.1163/21659214-00802002>>

This article discusses the status of research on mediatization of religion, primarily with an institutional approach. The article opens doors to studies outside the dominant North-European context for studies on mediatization of religion.

Social shaping of technology:

Hutchings, T., (2017) *Creating Church Online: Ritual, Community and New Media*, London: Routledge.

This book analyzes five online Christian churches and employs these case study to develop the theory of mediatized religious design, which draws from mediatization and religious-social shaping of technology

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