EPISTEMOLOGICAL POLEMICS IN DIGITAL RELIGION: MAPPING APPROACHES IN THE DIGITAL SPHERE

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Abstract: *Digital religion is where religious beliefs meet digital media. Networked technologies have changed how people share, interpret, and practice their faith. These technologies shift authority away from traditional institutions, allowing ordinary people and even algorithms to help create sacred content. Objectives: This study maps and critically analyzes the main debates about religious knowledge online. It proposes frameworks to handle issues of authority, authenticity, and research methods in digital faith settings. Methods: We used a qualitative approach by reviewing scholarly studies, reports, news articles, and online material up to mid-2025. We applied phenomenological and hermeneutic analyses to examine how digital media are changing the production and understanding of religious knowledge, using case studies from multiple faith traditions. Results: We identified important tensions in digital religion: sacred vs profane spaces; reason vs revelation; authority vs authenticity; insider vs outsider viewpoints; mystical vs empirical knowledge; pluralism vs normativity; and transcendence vs immanence. We also highlight issues such as algorithmic influence, digital inclusion, environmental sustainability, and research challenges. Additionally, we explore new debates on topics like colonialism, gender, and diaspora. We conclude that addressing digital religion requires better religious and digital literacy, inclusive dialogue, ethical technology design, and interdisciplinary research to build a strong, inclusive ecosystem of religious knowledge. By*

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combining existing research with current examples, this article provides a broad overview of the changing knowledge landscape in digital religion.

Keywords: *Authority, Digital Space, Epistemology, Literacy, Religion.*

Abstrak: Agama digital berada di persimpangan antara kepercayaan agama dan media digital. Teknologi jaringan telah mengubah cara keyakinan ditransmisikan, ditafsirkan, dan dipraktikkan, mendesentralisasi otoritas dan memungkinkan partisipasi awam serta algoritma dalam penciptaan konten sakral. Tujuan: Studi ini bertujuan memetakan dan menganalisis secara kritis kontroversi epistemologis utama dalam diskursus keagamaan daring dengan menawarkan kerangka integratif yang membahas isu-isu otoritas, keaslian, dan metodologi dalam konteks keimanan digital. Metode: Pendekatan kualitatif digunakan untuk menyintesis literatur ilmiah, laporan, sumber berita, dan konten daring hingga pertengahan 2025. Analisis fenomenologis dan hermeneutik digunakan untuk menelaah bagaimana media digital membentuk produksi dan interpretasi pengetahuan agama, termasuk studi kasus dari berbagai tradisi. Analisis ini mengidentifikasi ketegangan antara ruang sakral dan profan, rasionalitas dan wahyu, otoritas dan keaslian, perspektif orang dalam dan luar, pengetahuan mistik dan empiris, pluralism, dan normativitas, serta transendensi, dan immanensi. Tulisan ini juga menyoroti mediasi algoritmik, inklusi digital, keberlanjutan lingkungan, serta tantangan metodologis, dan membahas perdebatan baru seperti kolonialisme digital, gender, dan diaspora. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa agama digital memerlukan peningkatan literasi agama dan digital, dialog inklusif, desain etis, dan penelitian interdisipliner untuk membangun ekosistem pengetahuan agama yang tangguh dan inklusif. Dengan menyintesis penelitian yang ada dan mengintegrasikan fenomena terkini, artikel ini memberikan tinjauan komprehensif tentang lanskap epistemik yang dinamis dalam agama digital.

Kata-kata Kunci: *Agama, Epistemologi, Literasi, Otoritas, Ruang Digital.*

Introduction

Digital religion names the growing intersection between religious life and digital media. It is more than the appearance of prayers or scriptures on screens; it is a shift in how believers seek meaning, share teachings, and judge what counts as credible knowledge when practices are mediated by networked technologies (Bielo 2018, 35; Campbell 2012, 2017, 45; Campbell and Bellar 2022, 55). Smartphones, social platforms, recommendation systems, and generative models now shape the visibility, circulation, and form of religious expression. In this environment, the boundaries between worship, teaching, debate, and everyday communication blur, and the criteria by which communities recognize truth are reworked in subtle but consequential ways. Building on Lövheim and Campbell's account of a "fourth wave" of digital religion, in which religious conversation becomes decentralized and ordinary users and even algorithms help produce sacred content, this article examines how digital media reconfigure the epistemic foundations of religious life and why these changes generate new forms of argument and contestation (Bielo 2018, 15; Campbell 2017; 2023, 65; Campbell and Connelly 2020,

85).

An epistemological lens highlights questions about how religious knowledge is formed, validated, and transmitted. When rituals move to livestreams, when sermons are condensed into short videos, or when prayer becomes guided by an app, longstanding balances between revelation and reason, authority and authenticity, insider and outsider perspectives are renegotiated (Tsuria and Yadlin-Segal 2021, 76; Vitullo and Guzek 2025, 86; Zaluchu 2024, 78).

Clergy and institutions remain influential, yet the social dynamics of platforms elevate voices whose legitimacy rests on lived experience, clarity of presentation, or sheer reach. Metrics such as likes, shares, and watch time become proxies for attention and, at times, for value. This does not mean that popularity is treated as truth, but it does mean that visibility and credibility become entangled in new ways. The shift is not merely technical; it is epistemic, because the pathways through which teachings travel and the signals by which communities assess them are transformed.

Platform design plays a central role in these transformations. Affordances such as comment threads, stitching and duets, livestream chat, and algorithmic curation make religious discourse more interactive and more iterative. Recommendation systems amplify certain styles of devotion and forms of explanation, often favoring material that is emotionally engaging, visually clear, or easily segmented into repeatable formats. Datafication adds another layer: dashboards and streak counters in devotional apps, audience retention curves for sermons, and analytics for online study groups can help leaders refine their messages, but they also introduce criteria of success that may drift from theological priorities. Gamified adherence can strengthen habits of prayer while reframing piety as productivity. In parallel, the rapid spread of generative AI introduces questions about authorship and authority. When an AI system trained on scripture, commentary, and popular discourse produces answers in the voice of a revered figure, users encounter a text that feels familiar yet lacks accountable authorship. Determining what kind of authority such outputs should have—and under what conditions—becomes a practical and ethical task for communities (Moberg and Sjö 2020, 115; Siuda 2021, 45; Tsuria and Campbell 2021, 56)

The opportunities of digital religion are significant. Online worship and study can extend participation to the home-bound, the geographically dispersed, and those exploring faith for the first time. New formats enable pedagogical creativity, cross-tradition dialogue, and artistic experimentation. Case examples already illustrate the breadth of practice: virtual tomb-sweeping ceremonies in China during the Qingming Festival, AI-mediated conversations used as reflective art or informal catechesis, mobile applications that scaffold daily prayer and spiritual guidance,

and short-form videos where preachers and evangelists reach audiences who might never enter a formal sanctuary. Each example, however, also reveals tensions. Memorial rituals may be enriched by digital presence or dulled by commercialization. AI tools may prompt deeper study or blur the line between tradition and synthetic remix. App analytics may help nurture discipline or subtly redefine what growth in faith looks like. Viral success may democratize teaching or flatten doctrinal complexity into soundbites. These are not simple trade-offs, but ongoing negotiations within and across communities (Isetti et al. 2020, 29; Khan and Martinez 2023, 76; Lövheim and Campbell 2017, 68).

This article maps the major lines of argument emerging from these negotiations. Based on a structured review of recent scholarship, high-quality reports, and representative online materials up to mid-2025, it synthesizes how researchers and practitioners describe the epistemic stakes of digital religion, and it distills areas where claims conflict or remain under-examined. The review is comparative in spirit, attentive to differences across traditions, languages, and regulatory contexts. It also takes the role of platform governance—moderation rules, monetization schemes, and transparency standards seriously—in shaping what religious expressions gain traction or face suppression. The aim is not to fix a universal definition of religious truth online, but to clarify how truth claims are made, contested, and stabilized in specific socio-technical settings (Grieve and Campbell 2014, 116; Helland 2016, 165; Hutchings 2015, 170).

From this synthesis, the article advances an integrative framework for analyzing epistemological polemics in the digital sphere. The framework traces how scriptural and interpretive authorities are cited and recontextualized in digital formats; how practices of presence, participation, and communal discernment are enacted through mediated interactions; how platform rules and incentives structure the flow of religious discourse and assign weight to different voices; and how ethical concerns including transparency about AI use, consent and privacy in devotional data, attribution of sources, and accountability for pastoral care condition the reception and endurance of knowledge claims.

Rather than treating these dimensions as separate checklists, the framework underscores their interdependence: changes in any one dimension reverberate through the others, making epistemic stability a collective achievement rather than a given. The rapid emergence of AI tools demands careful consideration; religious communities are still figuring out how to use AI responsibly. Some congregations are creating formal policies for AI in religious roles, while many still lack guidance. However, many denominations have not published official directives, leaving individual communities to decide how to handle these new technologies on their own.

Digital Religion and the Fourth Wave

The term *digital religion* encompasses the study of how digital media and religion intersect, including online rituals, mediated prayer practices, religious apps, and the formation of communities through social networks. Campbell and Tsuria identify four waves of digital religion research: the first focused on utopian/dystopian views of cyberspace; the second on online communities; the third on digital religion's mediating role; and the fourth on how digital technology disrupts and decentralizes religious authority (Tsuria and Campbell 2021, 170).

The fourth wave stresses that digital environments blur the boundaries between sacred and profane, collapse hierarchies, and enable lay participation in religious knowledge production. Scholars emphasize that digital religion does not merely replicate offline practices but creates new forms of religiosity that are co-constituted by technological affordances. Digital religion is also defined by the circulation of belief through a wide array of platforms. Live-streamed services, podcast sermons, prayer apps, and discussion forums provide distributed entry points to faith communities. This multiplicity of channels leads to what Bhatt and MacKenzie call *networked pluralism*, in which competing religious narratives circulate simultaneously (Bhatt 2018, 75; Jandrić et al. 2023, 98).

Tolstaya and Bestebreurtje argue that the digital sphere intensifies the clash between transcendent theological paradigms and empirical approaches and call for methodological agnosticism in studying digital religion. Guillory further notes that the porous boundary between sacred and secular becomes evident as chatbots like ChatGPT and Gemini engage in discussions about spirituality. The digital environment thus demands renewed attention to how sacredness is constructed and mediated (Bestebreurtje 2013, 88; Tolstaya and Bestebreurtje 2021, 78).

The fourth wave can be understood as a phase where religious life is increasingly shaped by fast, interactive, borderless digital spaces. The big change is not only that religion "moves online," but that how people judge authority, truth, and religious legitimacy also changes. Traditional religious figures still matter, but they now share space with new voices that grow through networks, communities, and platform culture. In this situation, differences in interpretation become more visible and more intense. One verse, one hadith, or one doctrine can be read in many directions because the content is easy to cut, shorten, and attach to new contexts. As a result, debates that used to develop slowly inside institutions can now happen quickly in open digital publics.

Therefore, the fourth wave should be seen as a period of ongoing meaning negotiation. The challenge is not to decide whether digital religion is "valid" or "invalid," but to help communities build ethical

communication, reliable reference standards, and healthy discussion habits so that speed does not weaken depth.

Privacy, Bias, and Consent

Digital religious platforms collect a lot of personal data, which raises privacy concerns. For instance, online prayer apps and donation sites can track users' spiritual activities, while chatbots like AskCathy log the conversations they have with people. Some platforms even require real-name registration, linking personal identity directly to religious practice. Communities must weigh the convenience of these technologies against potential privacy risks. Another issue is algorithmic bias: if the data used to train AI favors certain groups, the AI may underrepresent minority faiths or cultural practices. Scholars emphasize the need for transparency and informed consent in these digital faith contexts (Ergen 2023; Evolvi 2021, 78; Gao et al. 2024, 56).

Privacy issues in digital religion are important because religious data is often deeply personal. Activities like prayer, donations, spiritual counseling, or community membership can record the most vulnerable parts of identity and life. Therefore, data leaks or misuse in religious contexts may cause heavier social and psychological harm than many other types of data.

User consent also needs to be treated seriously. Consent is not just a formality; it should clearly explain what data is collected, how it is stored, and whether it will be shared with other parties. Without transparency, users do not truly control their spiritual footprint in digital spaces.

Bias appears when platform systems and data structures more easily support majority traditions, dominant languages, or expressions that fit market logic. This is not only a technical problem, but also a knowledge justice issue. Ethical approaches should involve minority communities so that digital representation does not repeat older inequalities in new forms.

Environmental Sustainability

The digital infrastructure of religion also has an environmental footprint. Data centers that run streaming services, power virtual reality platforms, or train AI consume a lot of energy and rely on rare minerals. This activity generates greenhouse gases and electronic waste. Some technologists in faith communities are beginning to pay attention to this impact. For example, the developers of AskCathy published information about its energy use to raise awareness (Ergen 2023, 88; Gao et al. 2024, 67; Grieve and Campbell 2014, 56). Many religious teachings emphasize stewardship of the Earth, which motivates communities to advocate for green computing and "digital minimalism" (using less energy-intensive technology). In this way, sustainability has become a new concern in the

digital faith ecosystem.

Digital religion has environmental consequences because it depends on technological infrastructure that uses large amounts of energy. High-quality streaming, massive data storage, and growing online activity produce a carbon footprint that is rarely discussed in religious debates. Yet many religious traditions see care for the Earth as part of faith and moral responsibility.

It is helpful to distinguish between ecological commitment as moral messaging and as real practice. Communities can begin with simple steps: choosing more energy-efficient digital services, reducing unnecessarily heavy content, and designing online programs that are more efficient. In this way, religious values about responsibility and balance become concrete technological policies.

The idea of "digital simplicity" can also become a new ethical language. Just as religions teach moderation in consumption, believers can consider forms of online worship and preaching that remain meaningful without wasting resources. This helps digital religion align with ecological awareness without rejecting technology.

Disinformation and Extremism

Online platforms can amplify disinformation and extremist ideologies that use religious themes. Conspiracy theories and pseudo-religious narratives often spread through social networks. Algorithmic curation can magnify sensational or apocalyptic content because it attracts attention. Scholars argue that addressing religious misinformation requires cooperation among technology companies, religious leaders, and educators. Tailored digital literacy programs can help members of faith communities critically evaluate sources and resist manipulative or misleading content (Khan and Martinez 2023, 36; Lövheim and Campbell 2017, 58).

Religious misinformation often uses emotions, fear, and moral claims that sound extremely certain. Selective religious quotations, dramatic testimonials, or apocalyptic narratives can attract attention easily. In digital spaces, such patterns may spread faster than scholars or credible leaders can respond.

The problem is not only the content but also how attention works on social media. Slow, nuanced explanations often lose to short, harsh, sensational messages. As a result, people may think something is "most true" because it is "most viral," not because it is most responsible.

Therefore, community responses should include literacy and verification strategies suited to the digital era. For example, easy-to-access official references, fast clarifications when issues go viral, and critical education for youth on source evaluation. These steps strengthen community resilience without killing healthy discussion.

Gender, Sexuality, and Inclusion

Digital religion intersects with issues of gender and sexuality in complex ways. Feminist theologians and LGBTQ+ religious activists use social media to challenge patriarchal and heteronormative interpretations of faith. They create inclusive liturgies and supportive online communities. Hashtags like #WomenInMinistry and #QueerChurch amplify these voices. At the same time, digital spaces can still reproduce problems like misogyny and homophobia. For example, women clergy or LGBTQ+ believers sometimes face harassment online. These dynamics show that the digital world can both empower and endanger marginalized groups, highlighting the need for an intersectional perspective in studying digital religion (Tsuria and Campbell 2021, 28; Tsuria and Yadlin-Segal 2021, 25; Vitullo and Guzek 2025, 234).

Digital spaces can give marginalized groups opportunities to find support, develop new theological language, and build safer communities. Many women and gender minorities use online platforms to create solidarity and share religious experiences that may not receive enough space in formal institutions.

However, access does not always mean safety. Verbal violence, harassment, and stigma can appear as new forms of social control. In some cases, coordinated attacks push vulnerable groups to stay silent, delete content, or withdraw, reducing diversity of voices in religious public spaces.

Therefore, inclusion research needs a broader and more context-sensitive lens. Gender and sexuality intersect with class, ethnicity, disability, and geography. This approach avoids simplistic stories of either full liberation or total oppression and supports fairer platform policies and community ethics.

Youth and Religious Identity

Younger generations are especially active in digital religion. Afanas'eva finds that digitalization shapes how young people form religious identity: they often see faith as a fluid network of beliefs and communities. Online spaces allow them to explore spirituality, build global communities, and engage in activism. This can foster resilience and new ideas, but it also exposes youth to misinformation and potential exploitation. Educators and spiritual mentors emphasize the importance of nurturing digital literacy and supporting positive online engagement for younger believers (Lövheim and Campbell 2017, 187; Moberg and Sjö 2020; Siuda 2021, 223).

Young people's religious identities are now formed in very global, fast-moving spaces. They learn religion not only from teachers or family, but also from peers, online communities, and popular figures. This

creates more open learning patterns but also demands stronger skills for evaluating sources.

Youth religious expression is often both personal and public. Short posts, visual symbols, and religious trends can be sincere acts of faith and forms of social identity. These two dimensions can exist together, but guidance is needed so reflection and ethics are not lost.

Effective mentoring should warn or forbid. Communities can offer safe dialogue spaces where young people can ask questions, doubt, create, and search for meaning. With this support, digital exploration becomes healthy spiritual growth rather than shallow religious content consumption.

Political Economy of Digital Religion

The economics and power behind technology also influence digital religion. Ambasciano warns that corporate and philanthropic agendas affect what research is pursued and which religious narratives are promoted online. For example, tech platforms might prioritize content that generates profit, potentially marginalizing dissenting voices. Researchers must consider how funding sources, platform algorithms, and power imbalances shape the digital religious landscape. Building an equitable digital faith ecosystem requires transparency about sponsors, collaborative platform governance, and attention to marginalized communities (Bielo 2018, 167; Campbell and Vitullo 2016, 155; Lövheim and Campbell 2017, 165).

Platform economics shapes how religion appears and survives online. Content that is attention-grabbing, easily shared, and market-friendly often gets more visibility. This can encourage a style of religiosity that is shorter, more emotional, and more branding-focused than long, careful argumentation.

This dynamic may influence theological discourse. When funding, sponsorship, and popularity incentives help decide what topics rise, the boundaries of "mainstream" religion can be shaped by market logic. Authority then shifts not only from institutions to individuals, but also from scholarly spaces to attention industries.

There is also a global inequality dimension. Moderation standards, monetization rules, and platform design are often set by economic centers that may be less sensitive to minority traditions or Global South contexts. Digital justice in religion should be discussed as a structural issue, not only a personal moral issue.

Methodological Considerations

Studying religion in digital spaces requires innovative research methods. Digital ethnography often means multi-sited fieldwork across social media, apps, and virtual worlds. Researchers also face new ethical

questions: How do we obtain consent in online spaces (which may be public or private)? How do we protect anonymity and respect cultural norms? Murchison and Coats suggest following the same participants across different platforms to capture the full breadth of their digital religious lives. Scholars have also developed tools to study algorithms and platform policies. Methods like network analysis, discourse analysis, and Netnography can reveal how AI shapes religious content and communities. Reflexivity and collaboration across disciplines—such as theology, media studies, computer science, and anthropology—are essential for understanding the complex phenomena of digital religion (Ergen 2023; Gao et al. 2024, 170; Lövheim and Campbell 2017, 171).

Digital religion research needs methods that capture lived experiences and the structures of technology that organize them. Digital ethnography, network analysis, and textual studies can complement each other. This supports your broader claim that changing authority and meaning cannot be explained by one discipline alone.

Research ethics are also more complex. The boundary between public and private online is often unclear, especially when faith experiences are sensitive. Researchers should consider strong anonymization, layered permission practices, and careful presentation of data that does not harm vulnerable communities.

Future research can be stronger through cross-field collaboration. Sociologists, theologians, anthropologists, and media scholars can build shared frameworks to understand how religious practice is influenced by platform design, user culture, and institutional change. This keeps digital religion studies empirical while maintaining conceptual depth.

Future Directions

Looking ahead, scholars anticipate that emerging technologies such as brain-computer interfaces, quantum computing, and bioengineering will further transform religious life. Brain-computer interfaces might enable direct neural stimulation during prayer or meditation, raising profound questions about agency and autonomy. Quantum computing could accelerate AI's capacity to process theological texts, generating novel interpretations at unprecedented speed.

Bioengineering might extend human lifespan, intensifying debates about transhumanism and eternal life. Virtual and augmented reality will become more immersive, making digital rituals indistinguishable from physical ones. To prepare for these developments, interdisciplinary collaboration is crucial. Theological reflection must engage with science and ethics, ensuring that technological innovation serves human flourishing and respects the sacred. In summary, digital religion encompasses a vast array of phenomena and debates. While this review has highlighted many pressing issues, the field continues to evolve

rapidly. Scholars, practitioners, and communities must remain vigilant and imaginative as they navigate the opportunities and challenges of religion in the digital sphere.

The future of digital religion will likely become more immersive and more integrated into everyday life. Rituals, learning, and community may move toward more interactive and personalized experiences. However, this will raise classic theological questions in new forms: about the body, presence, authority, and what counts as a legitimate spiritual experience.

Therefore, an anticipatory approach is important. Communities and institutions can develop ethical guidelines early, rather than waiting for crises. These guidelines may cover identity verification, reference standards, and boundaries for online rituals so that technological change stays within moral responsibility.

Social inequality must also be prioritized. Advanced technologies may help diaspora communities and people with disabilities strengthen their spiritual connection. But without fair policies, they may create a two-tier religious world: those with full access and those left behind. The future of digital religion should be framed as an inclusion project, not only an innovation project.

Conclusion

Digital technologies have transformed religious life by breaking down old authorities, amplifying diversity, and creating new ways of worship, ritual, and spiritual guidance. The main debates in digital religion revolve around tensions like sacred vs profane, reason vs revelation, authority vs authenticity, and insider's vs outsiders. New developments—such as AI chatbots, algorithm-driven content, and virtual rituals—add new layers to these debates by introducing new forms of authority and experience.

Our case studies (AskCathy, the AI Jesus, virtual tomb-sweeping, virtual pilgrimage, and social media clergy) illustrate how digital religion takes shape in different contexts. At the same time, digital religion raises urgent ethical and social issues, including fair access to technology, algorithmic bias, environmental impact, privacy, misinformation, gender and youth dynamics, and the political economy of tech. From these findings, it is clear that we need better religious and digital literacy so that practitioners and believers can navigate the online spiritual world thoughtfully.

Religious institutions, technologists, and policy-makers should work together on inclusive dialogue, ethical platform design, and strong guidelines that protect diversity and personal freedom. Interdisciplinary research with multiple perspectives can further illuminate how knowledge is produced in online faith communities. As digital technologies continue to evolve, the question of what counts as religious knowledge will remain contested. Ongoing conversation and innovation will be necessary to build a resilient and inclusive ecosystem of religious knowledge for the

digital age.

Digital religion is a meeting space of tradition, community, and platform systems that shape how people understand truth and authority. Meaning and legitimacy do not disappear but are renegotiated more openly and more quickly.

The practical implication is the need for literacy and a responsible reference culture. The goal is not to restore old hierarchies rigidly, but to build discernment mechanisms suitable for digital environments: fast, networked, and vulnerable to distortion. A strong community maintains intellectual ethics while understanding platform dynamics.

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