# MEDIA, RELIGION AND RELIGIOSITY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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The presence of religion on the Internet is growing globally. This special issue aims at analyzing how religious groups and individuals employ digital media, how religion is represented online, and how new technologies shape the practice of contemporary religion. With articles in different languages focusing on various contexts, this special issue explores religious authorities, practices, communities, conflicts, and spiritualities in the digital age, with a theoretical attention to the field of religion and digital media.

Religion is based on messages circulated among believers and on systems of communication that sustain a certain religious worldview. It is for this reason that religion and media are seen as intrinsically connected elements (HOOVER, 2006). Throughout history, religion has used various media to communicate its core values, including sacred texts, oral speeches, and printed books (HORSFIELD, 2015). However, it is in the 20th century that the growth of media technologies and the diffusion of mass media –such as newspapers, radio, and television –created new conditions to study religion and media.

Scholars interested in the field of religion and media explored, on the one hand, how religious organizations employed media such as television (HOOVER, 1988; PECK, 1993) and radio (ECHCHAIBI, 2011). On the other hand, several studies analyzed how religion is reported in newspapers (COHEN, 2018; HOOVER, 1998; SILK, 1998) and represented in movies (ORNELLA, WESSELY, 2017; SUH, 2015;

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YAZBEK, 2020). Both these perspectives adapted existing theories in the field of media studies to explore religion and media. The theory of mediation, for instance, has been elaborated in the South American context by Jesus Martin-Barbero (1993) to understand how the audience creates values and meanings in relation to media consumption. Mediation has been adapted to the study of religion as a theoretical lens that stresses the role of media in religious practice, and the potential of media to help people experience religious transcendence (MEYER, 2010). Furthermore, the theory of mediatization has been elaborated to understand communication patterns in a media-saturated society (HEPP, KROTZ, 2014). Applied to religion, mediatization explores how people increasingly gain religious knowledge through media, and how media assume some social roles that previously pertained to religion, such as the capacity to gather people around shared values (HJARVARD, 2011; TUDOR, BRATOSIN, 2021). Both mediation and mediatization are theoretical approaches that aim at making sense of the relationship of religion and media in a society where people increasingly use television, cinema, newspapers, and the Internet to discuss and gain knowledge of religion. The articles in this special issue critically discuss these theoretical approaches to contextualize instances of religious mediation and theorize mediatization in relation to digital media.

The advent of the Internet, diffused in private houses starting from the 1990s, urged scholars in the field of religion and media to consider the communication possibilities that the new medium created. Specifically, the transition from a one-to-many form of communication (typical of mass media) to a many-to-many type of interaction (which characterizes the Internet) opened up new possibilities for discourse creation and interpersonal engagement (JENKINS, 2008). With the Internet, the difference between online and offline practices has become increasingly blurred, and digital communication tends to be an integral part of everyday life. For instance, religious experiences such as pilgrimages and rituals are often mediatized through technology (SOUSA, ROSA, 2020). Therefore, Heidi Campbell (2012) coined the term "digital religion" to indicate the types of religious expressions that occur through digital technology, but that have an impact also on religious performances in physical spaces. At the core of this approach is the idea that there is no longer a difference in how

religion is represented in media and how organizations embed media in their practices, because the production and consumption of online religious narratives tend to converge. Examples of digital religion can be found in how people discuss and practice religion on forums (KOLODZIEJSKA, 2018), blogs (EVOLVI, 2018), and social media platforms such as Facebook (ILLMAN, SJÖ, 2015), Twitter (PENNINGTON, 2018), and Instagram (GOLAN, MARTINI, 2019). A growing corpus of scholarship is also interested in the circulation of religious memes (BURROUGHS, FELLER, 2015), religious apps (SCOTT, 2016), religious-themed video games (ŠISLER, 2017), and in the potentials of artificial intelligence for religious practices (CHEONG, 2020).

The diffusion of digital media also compelled reflections on their impact on religious identities, authorities, and communities (CAMPBELL, EVOLVI, 2020). While, in certain cases, established religious organizations and leaders use the Internet to diffuse messages to the community of believers (GUZEK, 2015), digital media also offer the possibility of subverting existing hierarchies and values (CHEONG, 2017), connecting religion with discourses of gender, race, and politics (LÖVHEIM, CAMPBELL, 2017). From this perspective, the notion of "religion" becomes more nuanced, as the framework of digital religion also includes religious-like behaviors and spiritual beliefs. It is for this reason that, in this special issue, we refer both to "religion" and "religiosity," and we include articles that discuss organized and non-organized religious groups. Furthermore, the Internet is increasingly amplifying discourses that happen through mass media, for instance, allowing people to repost news articles or consume films online. It is for this reason that theoretical perspectives associated with the study of religion and media need to be re-thought in the context of a "hypermediated" (SCOLARI, 2015) society where the boundaries between different media are increasingly blurred. This is particularly true during periods of social and physical distancing resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic, which forced religious leaders and congregations to find new communication strategies based on Internet communication (CAMPBELL, 2020). In this special issue, we seek to bring together scholarly perspectives on digital religion that explore various online usages and practices, but also the interplay of so-called "new" and "traditional" media. Hence, we

have collected articles on broadcasting, films, and videos together with works that explore different theoretical perspectives to study religion and the Internet.

The field of digital religion studies also has its limitations. For example, the theories of mediation and mediatization have often been applied to the North American and European contexts, and scholars usually approach them to study Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. Because of this focus on locations characterized by digital media proliferation, scholars in the field of digital religion have sometimes failed to critically assess the digital divide that results in individuals and communities having reduced access and skills to use digital technologies. Hence, digital religion needs to be understood also outside the so-called "Western developped world", as various scholars have already underlined (HUTCHINGS et al., 2020).

In terms of theoretical developments, Hjarvard and Lövheim (2012) reflect on the application of an institutionalized approach of mediatization to non-European contexts. While the theory of mediatization has been articulated with the highly secularized and protestant Northern European environment in mind, several works show how it can be adapted to other contexts. For instance, Staehle (2018) explores mediatization in Russia by analyzing the digital media strategy of Patriarch Kirill, which shows the Orthodox Church's imperative to adapt to media logic. Furthermore, the book "Mediatized Religion in Asia," edited by Radde-Antweiler and Zeiler (2018), seeks to adapt mediatization to various Asian religions and countries In the Brazilian and Latin American context, theoretical elaborations of mediatization theory also have been developed and used to analyze media and religion. (GOMES, 2010; GOMES et al, 2013; FAUSTO NETO, 2004; CUNHA, 2019; MARTINO, 2015; SOUSA, 2021a; SOUSA, 2021).

In this special issue, while not having a specific geographical focus, we chose to publish multi-language articles. By welcoming submissions in Portuguese, French, and English, we aimed at giving voices to scholars from different contexts, and at encouraging works on countries, such as Brazil, whose academic production deserves to be better known in the international scenario. In the following section, we will present an overview of articles within this special issue, and we will offer a summary of their main theoretical and methodological points.

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The special issue contains 20 works, including 18 articles, an interview and a review. Based on the themes, the texts were divided into five sections: 1) Theoretical reflections on media and religion; 2) Religious practices and experiences in digital media; 3) Religious speeches and representations of religion; 4) Politics, media and religion in digital media; 5) Media, religion and entertainment in digital media.

The first session begins with an interview with doctor Stefan Bratosin, professor at the Paul Valéry University of Montpellier 3, conducted by Marco Túlio de Sousa. Bratosin emphasizes the importance of the symbolic in communication research and stresses that even in highly secularized societies, such as France, religion has never ceased to be present in the public sphere. Mediatization has not only highlighted this issue but is also an integral part of a process by which "the religious becomes public again, the social becomes spiritual again and the political desecularized". It is in this scenario that a new way of being religious emerges, the "post-neo-Protestantism", an interreligious logic that cuts across different religions. Bratosin also addresses the concepts of mediatization and mediation.

Similarly, Carlos Eduardo Souza Aguiar discusses in the article "Technological imaginary and the religiosity of digital networks" the existence of a "technological religiosity". Focusing on cyberspace, the author identifies the emergence of mystical imaginaries articulated with digital technologies. At first, PCs and computer interfaces lead to an emphasis on the transcendent. Subsequently, wireless networks and mobile devices (tablets, smartphones) resulted in a "reticular environment", referring to New Age spirituality. According to Aguiar, there is a re-enchantment of the world that articulates the archaic and the technological.

Three texts are part of the section "Religious practices and experiences in digital media". In "Emulation of Umbanda Liturgy in Online Giras", Maurício Ferreira Santana starts from the concepts of sacred space and mediatization to analyze the mediatization of an Umbanda ritual (the Gira) on two YouTube channels. By "emulating" the Gira in the digital environment, the author observes that there is a rupture in the communicational process characteristic of the ritual since there is no incorporation. Thus, the Gira is not carried out completely, as in the terreiros.

Juliane de Souza, Juliana Simões Bolfe, and Mônica Cristina investigate the phenomenon of "virtual candles" in the Catholic Church from the websites of the Santuário de Nossa Senhora Aparecida (Aparecida, São Paulo, Brazil) and the Santuário de Nossa Senhora do Perpétuo Socorro (Curitiba, Parana, Brazil). The authors address the symbolism of the candle in the Catholic context, the concept of Cybernetics of Semantics, by Norbert Wiener, and argue that despite the adaptations in religious practice, the meaning of the candle remains in its virtual form.

"Digital religious praxis in pandemic times: the catholic case", by Moisés Sbardelotto, also discusses actions of the Catholic Church in digital media. The author analyzes 82 publications on the website of the Conferência Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil (CNBB) from March to December 2020 that deal with religious practice in a digital environment during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on this material, he reflects on the shift of these practices to online and positions himself against a perspective that sees in this movement a mere "virtualization of faith".

Allan Novaes and Erick Lima open the session "religious speeches and representations of religion". The authors analyze the discourse on games in the Seventh-day Adventist Church from several texts published in media recognized as official by the institution. In general, the church has a conservative and negative view of games, especially concerning those that supposedly pose risks to physical, mental, and spiritual health. Positive mentions are more recent and are limited to analog media due to their potential to "promote social and family interaction".

William Costa da Silva has as object of study the comedy character Pastor Jacinto Manto, a Pentecostal pastor played by Vini Rodrigues on the YouTube channel Tô Solto. Working with netnography, the author approaches in his investigation both the construction of the character and the interactions of the audience. The usage of humor deconstructs the figure of the Pentecostal pastor, but the audience does not always accept this. Five groups are identified among internet users who interact with the videos in different degrees of adherence to the content.

In the aftermath, Tiago Franco de Paula peruses the representations of suffering in the discourse of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God through a set of texts published on the institution's website. Four narrative models are used: testimonials, self-

help, news, and advertisements. Despite the different formats, suffering is treated in a similar way. The transcendent aspect is undervalued and focuses on everyday problems. Evil spirits would cause such problems and their solution implies the insertion of the person in the church.

"The internet pastor and the digital mediatization of religion", by Odlinari Ramon Nascimento da Silva and Luciana Miranda Costa, addresses the media-religious representation of Pastor Deive Leonardo. Based on the theoretical perspective of mediatization, the authors analyze an interview with Deive on the television program The Noite, presented by Danilo Gentili. For them, the recognition of the evangelical influence as a pastor is a typical phenomenon of the mediatization of religion in the digital age.

The article that closes this section brings a current contribution on the relationship between misinformation, religion, and the pandemic. Based on 75 audiovisual materials published on the YouTube channels of Pastor Silas Malafaia and the Plinio Corrêa de Oliveira Institute, Michele Goulart Massuchin and Marcela Barba Santos sought to identify the main narratives and argumentative elements related to the pandemic. Prevail in religious discourses conspiracy theories and negative references to the press that associate it with the panic caused in the population, in addition to criticizing the excessive attention given to the topic by the press.

Under the pressure of the accelerating development of media and new digital technologies, but also fallen prey to their own intrinsic performance needs in the field of communication, politics and religion are making profound social transformations in favor of a new order. Internet, Facebook, Youtube, Instagram, Linkedin, Pinterest, Tweeter, WhatsApp, tablets, smartphones, etc. are changing not only the way of doing politics, the way of practicing religion, or the rules which organize the relations between politics and religion, but also the very contents of politics and religion, by imposing a new framework to democracies and other regimes.

Religion and politics, with the advent of media (old and new) share a common media culture, that is, forms of organization and basic institutional arrangements, practices and similar professional goals (TUDOR, BRATOSIN, 2021). This is exactly what the "Politics, media and religion in digital media" section primarily is about. More

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precisely, it is about the interconnections of the religious with politics and media in the larger context of digitalization, sweeping across several countries and continents.

Spencer Greenhalgh's opening article endeavors to highlight the memetic role of Mormonism in American politics which, seizing the strong symbolic power of this American denomination in and for the American society, used it in pre-electoral and electoral strategies. And post-election of 2016. This study conducted from a corpus composed by 258 Twitter accounts sponsored by six governments as part of their information operations against the United States shows that the triad of religion, politics and (new) media raises questions that transcend the boundaries of established ways of thinking.

Emanuel Freitas da Silva and Kerolaine de Castro Oliveira are interested in the political participation of religious actors, owners of media empires, and digital religious influencers in this case of evangelical Pentecostals in Brazil. Specifically, the authors delve into the language, the ethos of one of the most important Brazilian pastors and influencers, Silas Malafaia, during the election campaign for the 2020 municipal second round elections. The article shows how the evangelical leader, using "overthrow" rhetoric, reconsiders the relationship between subjects of political interest and religious subjects. The weight of religion outweighs politics and this in the context of a preeminence of media logics over other logics. The authors show that the phenomenon of mediatization of the society offers wider possibilities for the actors in society, including those in religion, to act in all societal spheres.

Hannah Romã Bellini Sarno questions political Islam and more specifically the use of digital platforms in the recruitment process of the Islamic State (ISIS) as a vehicle of propaganda and activism. The challenge is to show how ISIS is putting tension on Muslim cultural identity in Europe through media jihad on digital platforms. The original contribution of the article is based on the analysis around the notion of cultural and religious identity of Muslims given that Islam represents a very strong religious identity marker for these communities generally constructed in opposition to the European Union identity which nevertheless remains a political construction, even if the article does not present it as it is.

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In the geopolitical and militant lands of Iran, Luiza Muller questions the normative nature of the discourse on the veil of the movement against the hijab My Stealthy Freedom in connection with the specificities and codes of the digital media that has become mainstream. The author analyzes the online protests available on social media from the centrality of the theme of freedom of choice in the practice of religious identity. At the same time, she shows that the logic of the network, in this case Facebook, wins over the logic of freedom. That is, Facebook as a control mechanism transforms My Stealthy Freedom into an enunciative reproduction machine, a vast database, where, for example, new uncritical ideologies are woven like that of the free Western savior. Henceforth, the social media becomes the set and not religion and politics.

Carolina Falcao's contribution is unprecedented since it addresses the communicational visibility of evangelicals from the perspective of dissemination (leadership) and the network (protagonism) by relying on the concept of antagonism developed by Laclau and the discourse theory of Mouffe. Based on a case study, the videos of Pastor Henrique Vieira, the article provides a contribution on the transformations of the religious authority under the impact of the digital media.

Luiz Signates and João Damásio close this section with a study on leftist progressive Spiritism in Brazil. This contribution has the main merit of broadening the field of definition of religion and the relationship between media, religion and politics. The article presents a cartography of the progressive leftist collectives of Brazilian Spiritism that highlights the changes in the institutionalized religious authority of mainstream religions and brings out new lines of inquiry into the crisis of identity control generated by mediatization.

If religion is associated with politics, it is no less associated with entertainment. The products of popular culture are being questioned here in particular. There are many examples: movies, games, series, music, etc. The contributions of the section "Media, religion and entertainment in digital media" focuses in particular on films, music videos and web series.

Carlos Magalhães's article opens this section with a paradigmatic case study to account for the evolution of the relationship between institutionalized religion and the

film industry, in this case the cinema. By studying Seventh-day Adventists' perceptions of the influence of films on spirituality, he explains how this neo-Protestant church went from rejection to acceptance and even to the production of films and how even non-religious film became a popular and institutionalized product among Brazilian Seventh-day Adventists constituting a resource for strengthening spirituality and a tool for evangelization, for the propagation of the faith at a time of massive democratization of digital media as media of popular culture.

Rafael Pinto Ferreira de Queiroz analyzes the sound, words and visual representation of the video of the Bahian singer Xênia França through the cultural analysis of the video crossing the tools of mediatization, African womanism, Candomblé and yoruba culture. An essential work to open a dialogue between epistemologies and religions from different cultures in the current context where we question at length intersectionalities on a planetary scale given our hyper-mediatized societies, intersectionnalities, which at the same time reveal and hide a powerful cultural core linked to religion, mixing the "civilizational" religious and "popular spiritualities" religious.

João Paulo Hergesel, Miriam Cristina Carlos Silva and Isabella Pichiguelli's article closes this chapter in the web series register, the -10 series | Life is not a game. This contribution shows how the media narrative is articulated according to and with the religious language, the mediatization of religion becoming prevalent since it rests above all on a discursiveness specific to the pulpit. What prevails in the narrative is therefore the mediatization of religion, since it operates with a language that takes the fictional form of any conventional narrative, traversing it through an authoritarian discourse, typical of the pulpit. This article is paradigmatic for how the narrative logics of the religious impose themselves on those of the media.

This thematic issue ends with a review by Eduardo Ruedell. This is a text that looks at the book "La médiatisation: nouveaux défis pour les sciences et la société" (TUDOR, BRATOSIN, 2021) published by the l'Harmattan in 2021. Eduardo Ruedell shows that Tudor and Bratosin produced a book which, in a coherent and understandable way, questions, challenges and sheds light on different conceptions of mediatization through an irreproachable state of the art and concrete avenues for

empirical research. The book, according to Ruedell, has the merit of creating meeting points between the research developed by different authors both in the European context and in the Latin American context, as well as this special issue of the journal Tropos.

It is precisely what the guest editors of the present issue wish to provide readers with – space that creates a dialogue between innovation, openness and integration about the ardent issues, both theoretical and empirical, in connection with the media and religion in the age of digitalization.

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