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2. Digital Media and Religion in a Global Context: Perspectives on Identity, Connection and Authority

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Introduction

Religion and media research and more specifically studies of digital media and so called digital religion constitutes, as already indicated in the Introduction to this volume, a fast growing field. The main topics of this research field can be approached from many angels. The main purpose of this chapter is to situate this specific volume and its contributions within a wider field of social media and religion, media, and digital culture research. We begin by providing a brief general overview of previous scholarship on social media. We then proceed by outlining the main theoretical perspectives of the volume: agency and identity construction (e.g. Lövheim 2013), connectedness and connectivity (e.g. van Dijck 2013), and authority (e.g. Cheong 2013). Due to the centrality of issues relating to identity and identity construction in previous research in the area, somewhat more attention will be devoted to this perspective. In order to pave the ground for the more detailed explorations of upcoming chapters, we focus in particular on how these three perspectives can be used to shed light on the present-day role of social media in the religious/spiritual lives of young adults.

Researching social media

Social media has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention in the past decade. This is reflected in a rapidly growing scholarly literature that includes both monograph-length explorations (e.g. van Dijk 2013; Floridi 2014; boyd 2014), broad-scope edited volumes and handbooks (e.g. Noor Al-Deen and Hendrick 2011; Robson 2014; Hunsinger and Senft 2014; Burgess, Marwick and Poell 2017), and specialized journals such as *Journal of Social Media in Society*, *Social Media + Society*, and *Online Social Networks and Media*.

Social media are inherently convergent and characterized by complex "entanglements between commercial, public and personal contexts" (Burgess et al. 2017: 1–2). Globally dispersed platforms like Facebook and Twitter have long ago become firmly integrated into the infrastructures of businesses and the everyday modus operandi of politics, social organizations, and public institutions, to name just a few (Burgess et al. 2017: 1–2). Following these developments, social media has evolved from its previous status as a "niche topic" in Internet, digital media and culture studies into a major field of research across a range of disciplines. In addition to this, following the accelerating general "datafication" of society and the increasing turn to "digital methods," social media has also worked to inspire "significant change in *how* humanities and social science research is done" (Burgess et al. 2017: 1–2). Indeed, as Burgess et al. (2017: 6) point out:

> One of the distinctive challenges of approaching social media as an object of study is finding ways to account for the role of platforms – complex assemblages of technologies, business models and user practices – in mediating and being shaped by the specific and diverse forms of interaction and communication that they support.

These challenges also pertain to the study of social media as an environment of religious/spiritual expression, agency, and identity construction and performance. Evolvi (2018) has introduced the concept of "hypermediated religious spaces" to describe digital media platforms that function to blur or mix previous categories of spaces for social interaction that are located within, outside, or at the boundaries of, established religious organizations. Furthermore, hypermediated religious spaces combine personal and public forms of communication. While situated in particular social, cultural, and technological contexts, they are often used to challenge or "bend" the way these might structure interactions and imaginations.

As was also noted in the Introduction, it is essential to acknowledge notable differences in social media use and engagement across different national, social, and cultural contexts. Just as culture shapes human interaction and relationships offline, it also does so online, meaning among other things that individuals from collectivistic and individualistic cultures respectively often engage with social media in different and sometimes quite distinctive ways. For example, one earlier study that compared social media use in China with that of the United States found that online discussion boards showed "higher levels of information *seeking* by Chinese" and "higher levels of information *giving* by U.S. based participants" (Fong and Burton 2008: 239, emphasis added). Another study on SNSs by Chu and Choi (2011: 275) concluded that American users

> focus more on the extension of their networks by making a large number of remote or loose contacts, whereas Chinese users maintain more tightly knit networks with close ties. Chinese users also place greater trust in their contacts and perceive the relationships as stronger and influential in SNSs than do their American counterparts.

While there exists a wide variety of different forms and types of social media, some clearly become more popular in some national and cultural contexts at certain points in time as compared to others. Social media use will, although to varying extents, also always be contingent upon a variety of broader social, cultural, and economic factors (e.g. Bolton et al. 2013). For example, in order to be able to properly engage with social media, the technologies required will have to be both generally available and affordable to individuals. More generally, social media is also dependent on its functioning on the existence of adequate digital mobile communication infrastructures. Furthermore, access to social media may be varyingly restricted through legislation, while generally accepted and permissible modes of engagement might be more or less strongly prescribed by cultural, social, and/or religious norms and mores (Paslawsky 2012). While recent research has pointed to a gradual narrowing of the digital divide, it still remains obvious both between and within nations (Pew 2018). Previous research thus highlights the need to explore the role of social media in order to be able to adequately understand notable developments on both broader societal and individuals levels as they occur across different national and regional social and cultural contexts.

Identity as constructed and contextualized

The concept or notion of "identity" remains intensely debated across disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. As du Gay et al. (2000: 1–2) argued already two decades ago, "the term identity takes on different connotations depending upon the context within which it is deployed /.../ the term 'identity' often provides only simple cover for a plethora of very particular and

perhaps non-transferable debates" (cf. Joseph 2004: 9–10; cf. Woodward 2002: 2). Essentially, different approaches to the concept or notion of identity take different views on the possibilities and limits of human agency, that is, the ability of individuals to actively participate in forming their own identities across different social and cultural settings and contexts (Woodward 2002, 2–4).

In Western social and cultural contexts, people tend to understand and talk about "identity" as an individual's way of making sense of and comprehending him/herself as a unique, distinct being who has a set of "inner mental states" (Shotter 1993: 5). Or, as Weedon (2004: 8) puts it: "In [Western] commonsense discourse, people tend to assume that they are 'knowing subjects', that is sovereign individuals, whose lives are governed by free will, reason, knowledge, experience and, to a lesser extent, emotion." An "identity" is therefore commonly viewed as stemming from a set of individual characteristics, or a "personality," through which an individual defines him/herself in *relation to* others and is then, conversely, also defined *by* others (e.g. du Gay et al. 2000: 2; Weedon 2004: 8–9; Shotter 1993: 4). Identities are thus always formed in and through social relations and various types of, either direct or indirect, and more or less clearly articulated, types of association, non-association, and/or disassociation with particular "others." Individuals therefore not only form their identities on the basis of their own individual notions or perceptions about "who" or "what" they "are," but in equal measure also in relation to their respective perceptions of "who" or "what" they are *not* (Weedon 2004: 19). Identities are never static or uniform, nor particularly stable and enduring. For example, throughout the course of our daily lives, we find ourselves in various types of situations that encourage us to take on and perform particular types of identities rather than others (e.g. the identity of parent, manager, or parishioner).

On a broader level, identities are also fundamentally intersectional and deeply intertwined with numerous aspects and positionalities of social and cultural life including (but not limited to) ethnicity, gender, social class, nationality, political persuasion, religious affiliation etc. Like identities in general, these types of collective identities – whether they are consciously adopted, ascribed, or imposed – also rely on "active processes of identification" on the one hand, and "conscious counter-identification against institutionally and socially assigned identities, and the meanings and values that they are seen to represent" on the other hand (Weedon 2004: 7). Our ongoing participation in the various types of discourses and practices through which these categories and collective identities are constructed and reproduced results in the forming, adoption, and performance of *multiple*, although always intersecting, identities.

Western understandings of identity also tend to be built around a sense of *continuity*. As "unique personalities" people understand themselves as having a history and a future. For this reason, much previous scholarship on identity and identity construction has focused on the ways and degrees to which identities are constructed and reproduced through *narrative*, i.e. through the various types of stories that people continually tell about themselves (Woodward 2002: 24–25; Burr 2003: 143). The notion of the narrative construction of identity or the "self" constitutes a widely explored topic in contemporary social and cultural theory (e.g. Taylor 1989; Giddens 1991; Lash 1995; Bauman 2001; Beck 2004). This interest has largely been motivated by broader concerns about the social and cultural effects of a gradual but intensifying transition from traditional to post-traditional society in the post-World War II era. As a principal consequence of this general transition, modern post-traditional societies have become increasingly individualistic and come to encompass a plurality of moral frameworks and outlooks on life. No longer as strongly bound by tradition, convention, class, and related categories, identity and identity construction in

post-traditional society has developed into an increasingly fluid, reflexive, and continuous endeavor as people have become ever freer to choose and determine their own identities (e.g. Adams 2007: 7). For example, in his influential and widely debated account, Giddens (1991) framed identity in late-modernity in terms of a "reflexive project of the self," arguing that modern individuals have become continuously engaged in reflexively constructing and revising their own sense of themselves.

In spite of the fluid, reflexive, and individualized character of contemporary identities, identity construction still remains a fundamentally *relational* phenomenon. While we have become ever freer to construct our own identities and sense of ourselves, we still remain "dependent for our identity upon the willingness of others to support us in our version of events" (Burr 2003: 145). Individual understandings of selfhood and the individuation of selves therefore remain crucially dependent on relationships and individuals' embeddedness within broader communities of meaning (e.g. Benhabib 1992: 127–129; cf. Lynch 2007: 87). It is crucial to recognize, therefore, that the stories people use to make sense of themselves and their place in the world remain strongly determined by the broader social and cultural contexts that they occupy and find themselves varyingly embedded and positioned within. As such, peoples' personal narratives are always "deeply colored and structured by the codes of expectable and understandable biographies and identities" of different cultures (Benhabib 1992: 214) and "interwoven with the way stories are socially and culturally situated" (Schiffrin 1996: 168). Moreover, as Schiffrin (1996: 168) observes, stories of the self are situated both globally (i.e. in relation to cultural knowledge and broader cultural expectations) and locally (i.e. in relation to the particular "here and now" in which people are situated).

A social- and cultural context-sensitive understanding of identity and identity construction also needs to remain attentive to the ways in which the stories people tell about themselves may be more or less conditioned by broader dominant social and cultural discourses as embedded in dominant ideology and perpetuated by central social institutions such as political, legal, and educational establishments (Gergen 2009: 51). It is important to recognize, therefore, how dominant discourse may function to set the parameters for, or even to severely limit, the range of "possible life stories" and discursive resources that become available to particular social groups and segments and the individuals who belong to them (Gergen 2009: 68). In some cases, dominant discourse can serve to force certain people and groups into what du Preez (1980) has termed "identity traps," leaving them with few other choices than to construct their own life-stories and sense of selves using the often unfavorable and perhaps even chastising discourses and constructed realities of others (Benhabib 1992: 198). These observations have important implications for how we are to understand and approach collective forms of identity across various social, cultural, and religious contexts. Considering the focus of this volume, this concerns in particular how we choose to approach and understand the (often ambiguous) notion of "religious identity" and how it relates to other forms of collective identity markers such as, for example, ethnicity, gender, and social status or class.

Religious identity

For the purposes of our discussion in this chapter, it is most useful to adopt a relatively broad understanding of "religious identity" and to view it as having to do with the ways in which a particular set of beliefs and practices that are invested with some kind of ultimate meaning or some

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"religious/spiritual," "transcendent," or "otherworldly" significance become a central part of a person's understanding of who he/she is and his/her place in the world (Ammerman 2003). Such beliefs and practices might be varyingly inspired by or linked to certain sets of established belief systems, rituals, traditions, scriptures, mythologies, and modes of experience as found in various so-called religious traditions or religious communal and institutional settings (cf. Joseph 2004: 172). Alternatively, they may also be inspired by other types of notions or practices that an individual invests with some form of deeper existential significance. In this understanding, a distinctive characteristic of religious identity would therefore be that it relates a person's understanding of him/herself to a wider or overarching context of ultimate meaning or significance that is often, although not necessarily, perceived as being of an "otherworldly" kind (Moberg 2009: 37–39; cf. Lövheim 2004: 22; 40). Adopting such an understanding can have far-reaching consequences for how a person comes to understand him/herself both in, as well as in relation to, a range of other social and cultural contexts.

Like identities in general, religious identities are never constructed in a social and cultural vacuum. Rather, when explicitly religious, spiritual, or other existential elements come to form essential and integral parts of peoples' understandings of themselves, they do so in particular social, cultural, religious, and relational contexts. The construction of religious identities therefore typically occurs in particular relational, social, and communal settings that center on some types of otherworldly concerns, and of which traditional religious communities constitute clear examples. This is not to say, however, that religious identities would necessarily have to be constructed in any type of direct or explicit relation to some form of clearly defined particular religious/spiritual setting or particular collection of beliefs. Individual religious identities, like all identities, need to be understood as always being constructed in *some* form of, either positive or

negative, direct or indirect, relation to any number of other ways of conceptualizing otherworldly significance in a given society and culture at a particular point in time. Moreover, similar to all forms of identity, religious identities also need to be negotiated through social interaction and communication, and enacted and performed through, for example, rituals, practices, and particular codes of behavior (Lövheim 2004: 40; Ammerman 2003: 213). However, following the increasing general "individualization" of contemporary modes and processes of identity construction more generally, religious identity, too, has become "less ascribed, and more of a voluntary, subjective, and achieved phenomenon" (Roof 1992, cited in Hoover 2006: 53). Indeed, as Hoover (2006: 52) comments, "As the self is the project, the spirituality of the self becomes an important dimension of that project." These observations do, however, largely reflect developments in Western contexts and must not unreflectively be related to other contexts (Nye 2019).

Social media and identity construction and performance online

Technology is now widely acknowledged to have developed into an integrated part of peoples' everyday lives. Conversely, the ways in which our online lives and behaviors are "situated in our offline lived experiences" has also become increasingly recognized (Tagg and Sargeant 2017: 213). In spite of this, it still remains considerably more likely for people to form online connections with people that they retain some type of offline relationships with, typically using "social network sites in great part as a means of documenting and organizing events and activities in their 'offline' lives" (Tagg and Sargeant 2017: 213; cf. Barton and Lee 2013: 80–81). As Tagg and Sargeant (2017: 213) point out, for these reasons, "it is of particular interest to look at the extent to which an individual's diverse 'offline' social roles – as parent, professional, friend and so on—are

enacted or extended online, and how an awareness of one's offline responsibilities and relationships, and the concomitant expectations of those one interacts with, shape behavior /…/ [and require people] to negotiate multiple social roles."

These observations also have obvious implications for how peoples' religious identity construction and performance on and across social media platforms need to be approached and understood, tying directly into previous religion and digital culture research on the correlation between people's "offline" and "online" religious commitments and engagements. As previous research has shown, it is considerably more common among people who lead active "offline" religious lives to also actively seek out and engage with religious content online (e.g. Larsen 2001; Hoover et al. 2004; Dawson and Cowan 2004: 6; Noomen et al. 2011; Campbell 2012: 65). People have also been found to most commonly seek out religious content online that relates more directly to their own religious outlooks and engagements (Larsen 2001; Lövheim 2008).

Social media are not simply to be viewed as environments for social interaction, but rather as environments that directly affect and shape different forms of sociality and interaction and greatly facilitate peoples' construction of extended "networked selves" and performance of multiple social and cultural identities. Indeed, as Quinn and Papacharissi (2017: 353–354) observe, social media platforms "frequently invite acts of expression and connection for the mere sake of doing so, no matter how mundane or ordinary those acts may be. As these acts of expression and connection are performed to audiences, actual and imagined, identity becomes increasingly performative." To conceive of identity as performative refers to identity/the self as "the product of a relational performance, and as co-effected by technological, social, affective and emotional dimensions, situated in a specific context, and coming into being in and with the medium itself" (Lundmark 2019: 14). While social media are typically designed on the basis of basic human social

features and instincts, they also work to enhance and amplify these (van Dijk 2013). We can just think of how concepts such as "liking," "sharing," and "following" have received new meanings through the proliferation of social media. Some have even gone so far as to suggest that "being online has become an identity order in itself, one which should now be discussed along traditional identity orders such as gender, ethnicity, age and so on to inform our understanding of the individual in the world of ICT" (Xinaris 2016: 67).

For these reasons, social media has also increasingly started to attract the interest of identity and sociality studies (Miller et al. 2016: 20). Generally, as Marwick (2013, cited in Walker Rettberg 2017: 438) points out, "social media allows people to strategically construct an identity in ways that are deeply rooted in contemporary ideas that the self is autonomous and constantly improving." Moreover, as Tagg and Sargeant (2014, cited in Leppänen et al. 2017: 13) note, "identity performance cannot be discussed in isolation from the communities with which individuals align themselves and the ways in which those communities establish and maintain the relationships that comprise them" (cf. Miller et al. 2016: 20; for an overview of identity online see e.g. Page 2016). This is why, as Miller et al. (2016, 7) point out, the study of social media "is as much one of sociability as of communication." These observations all have important implications for how we are to approach and study the forming of religious community in increasingly social media-centered online environments (Bobkowski and Pearce 2011; Johns 2012).

Processes of performative identity construction in social media take place in environments that are often described as being marked by "context collapse" (Marwick and boyd 2011). This term has been developed to capture the ways in which social media environments typically work to bring together multiple audiences into one single online space, such as family members, friends, colleagues, etc. (Tagg and Sergeant 2017: 211). Indeed, the ways in which social media work to

merge "audiences and relational contexts into a single digital space [often] requires adjustments such as segregating relationships to specific platforms" (Quinn and Papacharissi 2017: 355). As argued by Tagg and Sargeant (2017: 212), the character of peoples' interaction on social media is therefore not adequately understood as being primarily determined by the technical affordances of particular platforms but rather "by users' complex understandings regarding the management of preexisting social roles and their relationships with other users and how this awareness shapes the ways in which site affordances are appropriated and negotiated for social purposes." The effects of the present-day social media sphere on contemporary modes of sociability have, however, been far from unanimously positive. Rather, as social media and their associated platforms and technologies continue to proliferate and become ever more integrated into various aspects of daily life, the "issue of anonymity has reversed into a concern over lack of privacy" (Miller et al. 2016: 11). These developments have resulted in a growing importance of continuous *boundary work*, that is, the strategies and practices that people use and engage in in order to maintain particular types of boundaries between self and others (Abdel-Fadil 2019; Evolvi 2019). As Quinn and Papacharissi (2017: 361) point out, "The boundary work executed within social media entails not only the performance of one's identity, but also the ability to edit and redact it across multiple and converged audiences /…/ [On social media] boundary management extends beyond individual control to become a collective process." (cf. Bobkowski's and Pearce 2011). An illustrative example of this is provided by Kavakci's and Kraeplin's study (2017) of so called "hijabista" – young Muslim fashion bloggers – who construct complex online identities that constantly need to balance between a religious and a fashionable self. Another example is provided by Lundmark's (2019) study of women in the US context publicly performing atheist selves on YouTube. The study shows how these users address the stigma of being an Atheist with regards to dominating

US cultural ideas tying "good" citizenship to an idealized Christian identity. Her study underscores the ambiguous outcomes of performing religious identity for a minority group, where acts of "coming out" as an Atheist on YouTube are characterized by being simultaneously an act of authentic self-expression, being positioned as role-models or screens of projection for critique from various groups of readers, and an act of opening up space for others to express or come to terms with such experiences.

The proliferation of social media has also worked to enhance the narrative dimension of contemporary modes of identity construction, and even to challenge previous theoretical perspectives on narrative identity theory (Romele 2013). As Tagg and Sargeant (2017: 214) observe:

Given the relative disembodiment afforded by sites such as Facebook, where attributes available to speakers in face-to-face contexts – tone of voice, facial expression, gesture, gender, age and accent – are much less salient, if accessible at all, social media participants engage in writing themselves into being (boyd, 2001, p. 119) – where writing is seen as a rich semiotic system that goes beyond the purely verbal. That is, they portray themselves not through physical co-presence but through the use of a set of diverse but largely text-based and visual resources, including moving images such as animated GIFs and videos that involve audible content.

Connectedness and connectivity

Social media sites have, from their very inception, typically been presented and advertised as sites that allow users to connect with other people. Indeed, many early sites and platforms came about through and via people with similar interests wanting to connect and, for example, share images, videos, narratives etc. Reflected in notions such as "participatory culture" (Jenkins 2006a) and "convergence culture" (Jenkins 2006b), it was also common for early research in the area to celebrate social media's potential to bring people together. While social media certainly possess such potential, a more balanced understanding also needs to take its underlying logics to both connect and to polarize into account.

Social media's potential to connect is also regulated by laws and norms. Some states regulate, and sometimes directly restrict, the use of social media, thus making some forms of connections problematic or difficult to establish. Conversely, social media platforms can also provide environments for forming connections that would otherwise be difficult or even impossible to establish. This does not, however, detract from the fact that the push towards an increasing interconnectedness and convergence of different social media platforms is motivated by an array of different interests, ranging from those primarily related to the commercial to those primarily related to issues such as social control and surveillance (van Dijck 2013; van Dijck and Poell 2013; Ma et al. 2011; Elwell 2014: 235). It is for these reasons that van Dijck and Poell (2013: 8) argue that *connectivity* rather than connectedness should be regarded as the central aspect of social media logic. They define connectivity as "the socio-technical affordance of networked platforms to connect content to user activities and advertisers" (van Dijck and Poell 2013: 8). The notion of connectivity thus highlights how social media connections are always mediated by, more

or (usually) less, noticeable operations and algorithms. The notion of connectivity thus also emphasizes "the *mutual shaping* of users, platforms, advertisers, and, more generally, online performative environments" (van Dijck and Poell 2013: 8). van Dijck's and Poll's notion of connectivity therefore primarily highlights the ways in which different types of social media work to shape and influence interaction. The notion of connectivity highlights the precariousness of the performance of identity through digital media due to the centrality of visibility and in relation to the vast amount of information users generate about themselves. In order for an individual's identity to be perceived as authentic it must be recognized by and/or negotiated with his/her various audiences.

While social media platforms and the groups and networks that are formed on and around them frequently overlap, most individual platforms nevertheless tend to become more strongly associated with certain forms, genres, and norms of communication that users view as appropriate for that particular platform and the particular groups that they engage with there (Miller et al. 2016: 5–6). As Tagg and Sargeant phrase it:

> the social media context is shaped by users' shifting perceptions of the site's social norms and by users' awareness of their various social roles and their potential audience (as this audience is opened up by the affordances of the online context), as well as their existing relationships with, and responsibilities toward, the different individuals and groups that make up this imagined audience (Tagg and Sargeant 2017: 231).

Religion too can play a part here as religious groups can choose to support and use certain platforms rather than others and also come to shape platforms to fit their needs and interests. This

is reflected in the explosive increase in various types of social media, apps, and platforms specifically tailored for religious groups and interests (Campbell et al. 2014).

As was noted in the Introduction, from around 2010 onwards, communication and interaction through social media increasingly happens though the use of smartphones. This development has changed the entire digital media landscape in a range of notable ways. For example, the increasing affordability of smartphones with advanced in-built cameras and cheap data plans during the past decade has served to elevate the importance of *images* and *audiovisual* elements across social media (Walker-Rettberg 2017: 435). Smartphones has also served to propel the development of new types of social media such as WhatsApp or WeChat that are primarily designed for the formation of smaller, more private groups. The development of such platforms have especially affected the communication habits of younger people and increasingly come to replace voice-based phone usage (Miller et al. 2016: 2). As reported by Burgess at al. (2017: 5) in 2017, 50% of worldwide overall "internet traffic is mobile, and 88% of social media users access social media sites and apps using mobile phones /…/ Overwhelmingly, smartphone owners use their phones to access social media; to decouple social media from mobile use is impossible." In short, smartphones allow people to remain simultaneously and constantly connected to any number of online groups and networks of people.

Another way that social media has come to shape the way we connect and socialize is by challenging or reshaping notions and perceptions of the public and the private, and the relationship between the two (e.g. Lundmark 2019). This has remained a much debated topic since the early days of social media (e.g. Gurak and Antonijevic 2008). A key concept in scholarly debates on the topic has been "networked individualism," that is to say, how communities, due to developments in communication technologies, have changed from being densely-knit, linking people in close

spatial connection, to being loosely-knit, linking people independent of space (Wellman 2001). An additional aspect regarding the connection or connectivity provided by social media relates to directionality. While a connection is traditionally understood to be more or less bi-directional, this is not always the case with social media. For as Quinn and Papacharissi (2017, 356) argue, "Among social media platforms, relationships can be mutual/ bi-directional, with both individuals consenting to the creation of the connection, or unidirectional, initiated by one individual and not reciprocated by the other." Social media is therefore arguably transforming, or at least challenging, received understandings of what it means to be connected to someone. While social media typically explicitly invite interaction by providing opportunities to "comment," "like," "follow," etc. (Quinn and Papacharissi 2017), this does not always take place. As is often highlighted, while social media do indeed provide people with new opportunities to connect, they do not necessary work as a bridging devise that would serve to bring people of very different interests, backgrounds, and social positions together (Ellison et al. 2007). But in spite of this, social media has been shown to mostly enhance bridging forms of social capital (i.e. social capital generated out of connections that transcend social divides and categories such as e.g. social class, ethnicity, or religious persuasion) between already existing networks of people. For those outside a network, social media therefore do not necessarily provide a pathway in (Baym 2011). This applies equally to various types of religious networks on and across different social media. Recent religion and digital culture scholarship has also introduced new analytic and heuristic concepts designed to better capture the changing character of religious and social interaction across interactive digital platforms. For example, Lövheim (2011; 2013) has highlighted the ability of bloggers to create "ethical spaces" that provide spaces for open discussions about sensitive, existential subjects and facilitate the expression of "values of similarity and mutuality between bloggers and readers"

(Lövheim 2013b: 3). For the purposes of conceptualizing the increasingly fuzzy divide between the on- and offline, and between the private and public, Hoover and Echchaibi (2016: 8) have introduced the concept of "third spaces" to describe online "conceptual projects of meaning-making [that] act as though they have produced spaces of constructive action." In her analysis of the ways in which vlogs function as arenas for negotiating tensions, Lundmark (2019) has, in her turn, used the concept of "co-effected third space" to describe modes of practice and content production that enable religious minorities such Atheist wo/men on YouTube to engage in re-negotiations of hegemonic conceptions about religiosity in particular contexts.

Authority

Scholarly treatments of religious authority have traditionally relied on the conceptualization and categorization originally presented Weber (e.g. Gifford 2010) that distinguishes between three main sources of religious authority: scripture (corresponding to Weber's rational-legal source of authority), tradition, and charisma. Following significant modern-era changes and transformations in the religious field, several scholars of contemporary religion and alternative spiritualities (e.g. Partridge 2004; Heelas 2012) have also identified and explored an additional and increasingly common fourth main source of authority grounded in personal experience. As Sutcliffe (1995: 41) puts it, the modern era has witnessed a more general shift in sources of religious authority "from the ratiocinative to the emotive, from the cerebral to the somatic, from the systematic to the pragmatic, from the differentiated to the holistic." Traditional and received structures of religious authority have also been affected by a general and progressive weakening of traditional modes and frameworks of religious socialization (e.g. Klingenberg and Sjö 2019).

The proliferation of the Internet and digital media has received highly varied responses across different types of religious communities and generally prompted an equal amount of both enthusiasm and concern. On the one hand, the proliferation and increasing democratization of the Internet and social media offers people previously unforeseen opportunities to come across, search out, and engage with virtually any existing religious or spiritual teaching, idea, or practice. Digital media therefore also provide religious communities with a range of new possibilities for communication and proselytization. But the Internet and social media also simultaneously provide people with multiple ways of challenging and circumventing traditional and received forms of religious authority, hierarchy, and community structures (Campbell 2012; Cheong 2013). While neither the optimistic (e.g. Brasher 2004) nor skeptical (e.g. Holmes 2005) predictions presented in early research about how the spread of the Internet would come to affect the maintenance of traditional religious authority structures have become realized, it nevertheless remains beyond doubt that the Internet has had a profound, although highly varied, impact on traditional religious authority structures.

The possibilities and challenges brought by the proliferation of digital media have been differently perceived and dealt with across different broader religious contexts. For example, various types of Christian churches' engagements with the internet started to increase markedly already in the mid-1990s and early 2000s as part of many churches' expressed efforts to keep pace with broader social and technological developments and remain in touch with the sensibilities and communication habits of modern individuals. As a result, since at least the mid-1990s, "Christian use of digital media has been heavily infused with a pro-technology discourse that encourages particular forms of engagement" (Campbell (2010: 136). This has been particularly clearly observable among long-established traditional Christian churches who are struggling to maintain

their previous social and cultural positions, but who also possess the resources needed to successfully engage with the present-day media environment on a broad front (e.g. Moberg 2017; Lundby et al. 2018: 225).

By contrast, in many Islamic contexts, the proliferation of the Internet and digital media has raised a greater deal of concern, and especially relating to the many challenges that digital media pose for the maintenance of traditional Islamic authority structures (e.g. Bunt 2018). Such concerns have, among other things, emerged following the emergence and proliferation of online *mujtahid*, i.e. persons who claim or are vested with the authority to engage in the interpretation of the Koran or Hadith (*ijtihad*) or issue online *fatwas* (a ruling on some issue based on Islamic law) (e.g. Anderson 1999; Bunt 2000: cf. Campbell 2010: 32-33; Wan-Chik 2015). Continued concern has also been expressed about the dissemination of "misleading information" about Islam online (Wan-Chik 2015). While the past couple of decades have witnessed an explosive growth in the presence of Islamic actors and Islamic content across various types of online environments, including social media (Bunt 2018), much Islamic discourse on the internet nevertheless still remains marked by a certain degree of unease with the technology (e.g. Campbell 2010; Bunt 2018).

Questions relating to religious authority and the proliferation of new media have also constituted a central topic of inquiry in scholarship on the so-called "religious-social shaping of technology" (RSST) (Campbell 2010). Building on previous debates on the "cultured" character (Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai 2005) and social shaping of technology (SST), the RSST approach has served to open up new avenues of research on the often complex processes of negotiation involved in religious communities' own adoptions of new media technologies. RSST views the relationship between the social and the technological as a mutually affective one. In the words of

Campbell, the approach "suggests that a technology is shaped by the setting in which it lives and by the agents who utilize it. The community, in turn, is changed through its adoption of the new media as it appropriates and adapts it to its culture" (Campbell 2010: 58). While the RSST approach extends well beyond issues of authority, it serves to highlight the most important ways in which religious communities' adoptions of new media technologies relate to their respective particular understandings of religious community, religious authority, and different forms of textual media (Campbell 2010: 15).

As has been explored in detail by Campbell (2010), the more specific ways in which particular technologies become perceived, adopted, and used within particular religious settings tend to be contingent upon three main processes of discursive "communal framing." When a religious community adopts (or considers adopting) a new technology, it typically engages in a "prescriptive discourse" aimed at highlighting the ways in which a particular technology can be seen to be supportive of the established values and practices of the community in question. This tends to be followed by an "officializing discourse," the purpose of which is to set certain boundaries for a particular technology and to delineate proper forms of usage (including considerations about the potential effects of such usage). Lastly, religious communities might then also engage in a "validation discourse," whereby the affordances of a given technology are considered in relation to the ethos of the community in question and "what kind of community practices it enables or facilitates" (Campbell 2010: 156–157). Issues relating to religious authority typically assume a central role in relation to all three of these main forms of communal framing.

While authority and social media constitutes a complex topic, it is also a topic worthy of continuous investigation. This is not least since young adults tend to be more active users of social media, and more skilled in social media use, as compared to older generations (Pew 2018). As

religious groups begin engaging more actively with and on social media, this opens up new possibilities for younger individuals and marginalized groups to assert a stronger influence on developments within the religious communities, including on issues that relate to established authority structures (e.g. Illman and Sjö 2015).

Bringing it all together

The various theoretical perspectives presented and discussed above are essential to an adequate understanding of the role of social media and media more generally for contemporary religion and religious life and practice. In the chapters contained in the second part of this volume, each of the perspectives discussed above will be explored, elaborated upon, and critically interrogated in more detail in relation to more specific perspectives and data from different contexts around the world. Above all, upcoming chapters highlight the importance of situating various forms of interplay between various technological, social, cultural, and religious aspects into their proper context. Different media landscapes and general religious environments offer different ways of relating to and using social media for religion-related purposes that tie into questions of identity, connectedness, and authority in sometimes highly distinctive ways. Only when acknowledging these contextual variations can a greater understanding of the interplay between media and religion be achieved.