

How to Communicate in the Age of Web 4.0?: Challenges and Possibilities for Religions in Asia

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Asia today is fast becoming digitalized, as the figures from the Digital in 2017 Global Overview study indicate. More than half of the world's Internet users are from Asia and almost half of the people in Asia are Internet users. As such, in the emerging context of a highly digitalized Asia, this article explores the challenges and possibilities that the Internet offers to the religions in Asia, many of which have begun to use the Internet. Among these is the serious threat of Internet addiction as well as those that come with the specific features of the various stages in the development of the Internet from Web 1.0 to Web 3.0. Finally, it attempts towards a sketch of the coming age of Web 4.0 and what new questions and concerns this can imply for the religions in Asia.

The Internet and social media penetration figures for Asia presented in the *Digital in 2017 Global Overview*¹ are quite revealing. According to the study, Internet penetration in the Asia-Pacific Region has reached 46% (1.909 billion) while social media penetration has reached 36% (1.514 billion) of the population. In terms of Internet usage, the Philippines recorded the highest

¹ *Digital in 2017: Global Overview* is a quantitative study of Internet and social media penetration worldwide jointly made by We Are Social, a marketing and PR agency specializing in social media platforms, in partnership with Hootsuite, a company that specializes in social media integration. In true digital fashion, the report is available online in the form of several hundred infographic slides at <http://wearesocial.com/sg/blog/2017/01/digital-in-2017-global-overview> (accessed 3 April 2017).

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number of hours spent daily on the Internet, with an average of nine hours, closely followed by Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia at the third, fourth and fifth places. In terms of social media penetration, the United Arab Emirates, South Korea, Singapore, Hongkong and Malaysia, occupied the top five places while the Philippines emerged again as the top country when it comes to time spent on social media with an average of four hours per day. Saudi Arabia showed the highest growth in the number of social media users, with a whopping increase of 73% compared to 2016, followed by the United Arab Emirates, India, Indonesia, and Vietnam. Today, more than half of the world's Internet users are from Asia and almost half of the people in Asia are Internet users.

All these figures indicate that while various factors such as cultural and linguistic barriers, lack of infrastructure, and costly telecommunication charges have slowed down Internet and social media penetration in the continent,² Internet use in Asia has been growing rapidly and will continue to grow in the next few years. In fact, the same study predicts that the halfway mark for Internet penetration in the Asia-Pacific region will have been crossed by the latter part of 2017. This makes the Internet a formidable force to reckon with for all religions in Asia, especially with the looming threat of Internet addiction.

“A growing epidemic”

Also referred to as “PIU” (Problematic Internet Use) or “CIU” (Compulsive Internet Use), “internet addiction,” simply put, pertains to “excessive Internet use that interferes with daily life.”³ However, we must note that “internet addiction” as such has yet to gain formal recognition and definition from the field of psychiatry. In the fifth and latest edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) that came out in November 2013, “internet gaming disorder” has been included as a “condition for further study,” i.e. a probable mental disorder subject to confirmation, while addiction to the Internet itself was not mentioned.⁴

² See Peng Hwa Ang and Chee Meng Loh, “Internet Development in Asia” https://www.isoc.org/inet96/proceedings/h1/h1_1.htm (accessed 3 April 2017).

³ Sookeun Byun et al., “Internet Addiction: Metasynthesis of 1996–2006 Quantitative Research,” *Cyberpsychology and Behavior*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (2009): 204.

⁴ See American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th ed., (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013), 797–798.

Nonetheless, addiction to the Internet is becoming even more noticeable. In Western and more Westernized civilizations, this can already be observed in what is called Generation Z or *Post-Millennials*, born around the years 1995-2012. They were the first to be dubbed as “digital natives” who became adept at using cyber technology from an early age. What is even more worrisome in Asia is that according to some studies, Internet addiction may affect Asians more virulently than their Western counterparts. For example, students in China were said to experience a higher rate of Internet addiction than their counterparts in the United States who have been using the Internet for much longer. Many of them now preferred online to offline social interaction and resorted to overuse of the Internet as a means to escape societal pressure.⁵ As such, although Asia has long been on the other side of the so-called “digital divide,” what is happening now in the other side of the globe may be taken by us as an early warning on what can happen soon to our own people, especially the youth:

Addicted to pocket computers, such as smartphones and tablets, anxious teenagers are constantly monitoring their popularity among their peers, tormented by feelings of inadequacy and doubt. Easy access to pornography fosters this paranoia, offering a distorted image of human bodies and relationships. Unchecked, all of this transparent neurosis can lead to a disastrous loss of privacy, to the torture of being bullied, to self-harm and despair.⁶

Interestingly, a psychological study done in 2014 linked Facebook use to depressive symptoms.⁷ Even without any cyberbullying, self-esteems fluctuate as people see the posts of others and the reactions these get and unconsciously compare themselves. In line with this, we also have the phenomenon of “FOMO” or the “Fear of Missing Out,” rooted in the same dynamics of social comparison. “They’re having exciting experiences that you’re not. They attended the hottest concert in town and you didn’t... Person after person is having the time of their

⁵ See L. Zhang, C. Amos and W.C. McDowell, “A Comparative Study of Internet addiction between the United States and China,” *Cyberpsychology and Behavior* Vol. 11, No. 6 (2008): 727-9. For a similar study, see also Cheng-Fang Yen, Ju-Yu Yen and Chih-Hung Ko, “Internet addiction: ongoing research in Asia,” *World Psychiatry* Vol. 9, No. 2 (2010): 97.

⁶ Daniel O’Leary, “Missing the Point,” *The Tablet*, 25 January 2014, 8.

⁷ See Mai-ly N. Steers, Robert E. Wickham and Linda K. Acitelli, “Seeing Everyone Else’s Highlight Reels: How Facebook Usage is Linked to Depressive Symptoms,” *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, Vol. 33, No. 8 (2014): 701-731.

lives. And you? Well, not so much.”⁸ In spite of this, people remain hooked to the Internet and to social media, constantly checking for updates, lest they also miss out on the latest “trending,” thereby ending up trapped in a wide open cage. As Stuart said in the British sitcom *Vicious*, “They make me nervous, all these young people, skittering about like mice, desperate to get back to the Internet.”

If such can be said of Generation Z, what more can be said of the upcoming generation they propose to call Generation A? These are the literal “digital natives” raised by “iNanny” who learned their rudiments from popular online applications such as “ABC Letters” “Busy Shapes” and “E-Flash Apps.” From the onset, the digital world for them has been cradle, home and school. While there may be efforts on the part of some parents and educators to adopt a more analog or at least a mixed approach, the trend is pointing to a progressively wider and deeper influence of technology on this generation that is likely to be even more attached to digital technology than the previous one.

Thus, while formal recognition and definition from experts is pending, Internet addiction has been gaining wide acknowledgement and attention from many clinical practitioners. For instance, Dr. Richard Graham, the psychiatrist responsible for the first rehabilitation center for technology addiction in Britain at the Catio Nightingale Hospital in London, has identified five major indicators of internet addiction, namely: lack of interest in other activities, constant talk or distraction about technology, mood swings, withdrawal symptoms and devious or maladaptive behavior. Among all these, Dr. Graham singles out withdrawal as the clear sign of addiction, evidenced by signs of “severe distress and agitation” whenever separated from the Internet. This is analogous to how drug or tobacco dependents crave a “hit” at regular intervals.⁹ As such, even prior to its formal recognition as a mental disorder in the DSM, many practitioners have begun to recognize and in fact address what the Center for Internet Addiction has already called “a growing epidemic.”¹⁰ Such an alarming and yet at the same time promising phenomenon as the

⁸ Linda Sapadin, Ph.D., “Fear of Missing Out” <https://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2015/10/12/fear-of-missing-out/> (accessed February 28, 2017)

⁹ Victoria Woollaston, “The five signs your child is addicted to their iPad - and how to give them a ‘digital detox’” <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-2479109/The-signs-child-addicted-iPad--digital-detox.html> (accessed February 28, 2017).

¹⁰ See <http://netaddiction.com/>

Internet cannot but cause deep concern for all religions in Asia today, given the rate that Asia has been catching up for the years it has lagged behind in terms of Internet and social media penetration.

At this point, we can briefly mention some of the efforts that have been made to address this. In November 2011, a symposium entitled “Buddhism and Digital Media” was held in California State University regarding the practice of Buddhism in the Internet. In March 2014, a conference entitled “Digital Islam: How the Internet and Social Media are Reshaping the Islamic Marketplace in Central Asia” was held in the University of Michigan. Here in the Philippines, the University of Santo Tomas in cooperation with the St. Joseph Freinademetz Communication Center has held two conferences entitled “The Gospel in Digital Society: Asian Realities and Challenges” and “Sharing Faith in a Modern Age: New Ways of Communicating” in October 2016 and March 2017. All of these efforts manifest a concern on the part of Asian religions to come to terms with the opportunity and threat that is the Internet vis-a-vis their faith communities. However, these initiatives remain scarce and inadequate at present, and largely confined to the academic setting.

From Overcoming to Transforming

In London, Dr. Graham runs a 28-day “digital detox” program for children addicted to the Internet which was worth £16,000 in 2013. It begins with an initial seven-day stage involving an “outright ban on all technology” and also includes therapy sessions, chaperoned trips to retrain the patients to function normally in the real world, as well as “digital hygiene” classes aimed at “finding the root of the problem and *teaching healthier ways* of using the Internet.”¹¹ We note that the “outright ban” is only an initial stage in the program, which then moves forward to a more productive reintegration of Internet and life.

Hence, in contrast with other rehabilitation programs, the difference of treating Internet addiction from treating other addictions is clear. In the case of

¹¹ Gemma Aldridge, “Inside Britain’s first internet rehab for kids where a ‘digital detox’ costs £16k for 28 days” <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/inside-britains-first-internet-rehab-1844778> (accessed February 28, 2017). Emphasis added. In the Philippines, we also have rehabilitation centers that already offer programs for Internet addiction such as “Kaya Rehab Philippines” in Itogon, Benguet. See their website <http://www.kayarehab.com/>

Internet addiction, the goal of recovery is not cessation or quitting but finding a path to a more creative use that does not interfere with but rather enriches life. Such an approach that is more “enabling” instead of “restrictive” has been found even in children to be more effective, empowering them to deal with risks while maximizing opportunities.¹² After all, there is clearly no turning back from the Internet for anyone today, with this technology expanding its influence over us even more, for ill or for good.

The question then is how to harness the power of the Internet in the service of faith and use it as an effective means to promote the dignity and wellbeing of persons. In this regard, it may be helpful here to briefly trace the development of the Internet in its first three stages and the challenges and possibilities that it opens for religions in Asia, while providing some illustrative examples.¹³ Note however that each of these developmental stages builds on the previous stage and usually retains the features and capabilities of its precedents. They are also not mutually exclusive and often overlap. Thus, a specific online platform such as Facebook or Google may exhibit the characteristics of more than one stage since these platforms need to develop to keep themselves updated. Afterwards, we will try to sketch a picture of the horizon before us:

a. The first stage or Web 1.0 has been termed the “web of information connections”¹⁴ or what I would call “informative web.” It consisted mainly of webpages with “read only” content that made the Internet itself not only an immense universal library but a potent “information highway” for sharing

¹² See Sonia Livingstone et al. “Maximizing Opportunities and Minimizing Risks for Children Online: The Role of Digital Skills in Emerging Strategies of Parental Mediation,” *Journal of Communication* 67 (2017): 82-105.

¹³ The framework we are proposing here, which follows the development of the Internet, is to be distinguished from a seemingly similar but very different framework proposed by Lytle, which follows the development of human communication in general. In Lytle’s framework, Faith Formation 1.0 corresponds to oral communication, 2.0 to written communication, 3.0 to mass media and 4.0 to interactive communication. See Julie Anne Lytle, *Faith Formation 4.0: Introducing an Ecology of Faith in a Digital Age* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2013).

¹⁴ These descriptors are taken from Sareh Aghaei, Mohammad Ali Nematbakhsh, and Hadi Khosravi Farsani, “Evolution of the World Wide Web: From Web 1.0 to Web 4.0” in *International Journal of Web & Semantic Technology*, Vol. 3, No.1 (January 2012) available online <http://www.ftsm.ukm.my/ss/Book/EVOLUTION%20OF%20WWW.pdf> (accessed February 28, 2017), 1.

knowledge even across the globe. Many religions the world over have learned to take advantage of this potential by coming up with their own websites to establish their online presence and make key documents and other important information available to their followers. In the age of Web 1.0, a personal computer or mobile phone can become the faith community's bulletin board or newsletter, which can be accessed more conveniently than its analog counterpart. Making essential information available such as worship schedules, calendars, and current news may seem very basic but they are important not only in keeping our members well-informed but also in building their sense of belonging and community. As Eilers said, "informed people are happier people because they feel part of the Church and/or the organization they belong to."¹⁵ Web 1.0 makes it so much easier for faith communities to achieve that. Another fine example of Web 1.0 faith use is the application *Quran Majeed* which has been downloaded more than three million times. It features text and audio versions of the Koran not only in Arabic but in the other languages, making it more accessible to Muslims whose first language is not Arabic.

However, such a massive and liberal diffusion of information can lead to a "democratization" of access to information, often with little or no direct guidance or mentoring, which seems to pose a threat to established religious authority. Believers who are now more informed can become not only more intelligent but also potentially more critical. After all, anyone who has an internet connection can now have first-hand access not only to primary religious texts but also to other sources of doctrine, commentaries, and theological discussions. There is now in the Internet a veritable theological library for at least all the major religions—better equipped, efficiently searched, and readily available—than the libraries we find in local communities, even those in the local seminaries or training institutes we have for religious leaders. "For the first time, lay people can easily separate religious commands from tradition by looking at holy texts and scholarship rather than relying on local preachers."¹⁶

Thus, the democratization of access to information that came with Web 1.0 often comes with an attendant flattening of the world when it comes to authority. Having the tools of an expert, anyone can now feel like an expert

¹⁵ Franz-Josef Eilers, SVD. *Communicating in Ministry and Mission: An Introduction to Pastoral and Evangelizing Communication* (Manila: Logos Publications Inc., 2009), 180.

¹⁶ "Islam and Technology: The Online Ummah," *The Economist*, August 18, 2012, <http://www.economist.com/node/21560541> (accessed February 28, 2017).

but may not necessarily be one. Gone are the days when dissent was unthinkable and religious leaders held a kind of absolute “magisterium” over the people, being looked up to as experts with dogmatic authority who lead out the ignorant from the cave of nescience to the light of truth. Where Web 1.0 is, no one is ignorant anymore and some people have the impression that the truth is just a click away. In an age of trolls and bots, numbers and trends can give an illusion of credibility which in turn gives an illusion of veracity. How open are we to welcome and how ready are we to address the questions and opinions, even dissenting beliefs, that arise from such democratization? How ready are we also to promote truth and correct error where it occurs in this democratized web, without antagonizing people and driving them away?

b. The second stage or Web 2.0 has been called the “web of people connections” or what I would call “interactive web.” With the addition of a “write” feature, the Internet has become bi-directional and thus more dynamic. People could now upload their own content in various online platforms such as Friendster, Multiply or Blogger—and later in YouTube, Facebook and Twitter. Moreover, other users can now interact with them in different ways such as liking/reacting, asking or commenting. This key development has given rise to online communities or “networks,” societies bonded by what is aptly termed “social media,” bringing together the people we call “netizens” into a virtual “global village.”

On their part, quite some religions did not fail to make their presence felt in these virtual spaces. Many religious leaders and institutions now maintain their own social media accounts, whether directly or indirectly, which allows them to reach and interact with their flock. Web 2.0 is thus the Internet of cybersanghas, online ummahs, virtual “dioceses without borders” and the like, all reaching out to what Pope Benedict XVI has called the “digital continent,”¹⁷ arguably the largest with its 3.773 billion citizens and counting. Thus, the “digital continent” is also the most important mission frontier for any religion today, with more and more of the people in our planet spending more and more of their day online.

However, while it is obvious that we need to establish an online presence, we also need to pay attention to some important issues that arise with the emergence of these online religious communities. For instance, there is the crucial question of

¹⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, *44th World Communications Day Message*, 24 January 2010. See also his *43rd World Communications Day Message*, 24 January 2010.

legitimate religious authority, especially for religions that are not highly centralized, and even for those that are. When literally anybody can setup a social media account, the question remains as to who can validly interpret sacred texts for others, who can rightly issue religious and moral prescriptions, who are truly competent to offer spiritual guidance? Whitaker expressed the dilemma that such a situation presents, in the case of Islam:

...For some this introduces an element of democracy; for others, anarchy.

Potentially it opens up the field for all sorts of new and alternative interpretations of Islam alongside the more traditional versions.

Potentially, too, it can open the eyes of Muslims who are entrenched in their local brand of Islam to the diversity of their religion in its global form - though that in itself is highly controversial.¹⁸

Besides the question of religious authority, we also have the serious issue of breeding religious fundamentalism in the Internet at high-speed digital pace. For instance, there is concern over the practice of what has been termed as *e-jihad*, which can range from spreading jihadist propagandas and campaigns online, launching cyber attacks by means such as hacking and cracking, to using the Internet as a means to organize terrorist operations.¹⁹ We also have the rise of online trolls, now known as “Internet Hindus,” who rally under the banner of *Hindutva* and attack websites they deem offensive to Hindu religion and culture.

Also, there are the people who visit the websites of religious communities for non-religious motives such as to gain knowledge, overcome loneliness, to relax, or even to escape reality and isolate themselves from others.²⁰ Would such “profane” and at times also “antisocial” uses of religious websites, particularly of those that can be classified as prayer websites or online chapels and temples, which are considered by believers as sacred space, be acceptable? Besides, not everyone believes that

¹⁸ Brian Whitaker, “Islam at the electronic frontier,” *The Guardian*, 11 August 2003, <https://www.theguardian.com/2003/aug/11/comment.worlddispatch> (accessed February 28, 2017).

¹⁹ See Gary R. Bunt, *Islam in the Digital Age: E-Jihad, Online Fatwas and Cyber Islamic Environments* (London: Pluto Press, 2003).

²⁰ See M.J. Laney, “Christian Web Usage: Motives and Desires,” *Religion and Cyberspace*, ed. M. T. Hojsgaard, and M. Warburg (London: Routledge, 2005), 166–79.

online faith resources and communities can nurture faith and they continue to have a clear preference for offline religion and community. For instance, we find in a study on American Buddhism and the Internet:

Not everyone agreed that Buddhism online offered a spiritual connection to others. One respondent said that they only felt community online as they would with the rest of the world and that the Internet was for information and not communion. Another respondent said ‘I feel a sense of community when I look into one’s eyes.’²¹

c. The third stage or Web 3.0 is known as the “web of knowledge connections” or what I would call “intuitive web.” The Internet having reached more than one billion websites in 2014, the main feature of this third stage is its ability to link, structure and integrate the overwhelming amount of data available online in order to make it more relevant and responsive to its users, precisely by becoming “user-sensitive.” As such, you may or may not be aware that on the basis of standing online activity, search history, and other personal data that you may (or may not even) volunteer to them such as age, gender and location, websites such as Google and Facebook automatically filter, adjust, and refine the contents that it chooses to present to you specifically. In this way, they are already able to determine what pages you will likely find useful and interesting or what things to advertise that you are likely to purchase.

How many of our religious community websites develop or at least make use of the latest algorithms to know their users? Even more importantly, how many of religious communities have adopted a Web 3.0 orientation that emphasizes knowing our followers and adapting our strategies and approaches accordingly? In other words, how open are we to expressing our faiths in the language, medium and context of the people of Asia, today and tomorrow? To begin with, how well do we actually know this language, medium and context? This is a very crucial matter that we can no longer take for granted and it has become all the more urgent and elusive nowadays with peoples’ attitudes, habits and beliefs changing rapidly with rapidly changing digital technologies.

An example of development with this kind of orientation is the first International Congress on Religious Marketing held on April 21-22, 2016 in Madrid, organized by the Order of Preachers, a group of Roman Catholic priests and brothers.

²¹Ally Ostrowski, “Buddha Browsing: American Buddhism and the Internet,” *Contemporary Buddhism* 7, 1 (2006): 99.

The Congress sought to apply the secular techniques of marketing to sharing faith, enlisting the guidance of seasoned marketing professionals on how to make use of such techniques in the religious ambit. Some of the ideas that surfaced during the Congress are as surprising as they are exciting. For instance, one professor declared that the time of “encyclicals” or very long, traditional Church documents has now ended. “The public has changed and because of this, we need to find new ways, not to sell, but to relate with them.”²²

Yet another frontier is the *gamification* of religion, although this is often limited to religious instruction, which is presented in the form of games that are supposedly more attractive to today’s youth and aligned with their culture. However, there are questions as to its propriety as well as to its ultimate effect, which may in fact lead to banalization instead of appreciation, or even prejudice, polarization and aggressive tendencies in the case of war-and-conquest themed role playing games.²³ Another more simple and less-controversial attempt in this direction is the “Alabaster Bible,”²⁴ which consists more of pictures than texts and hopes to connect better with the so-called “Instagram generation,” most of whom belong to Generation Z who are characterized by shorter attention spans and a preference for video and images over text.²⁵ One more popular online medium nowadays is the “meme” which has been used widely by many religious social media accounts. It consists of a combination of evocative pictures and compact texts which are not only attention catching but thought-provoking. In all these attempts and initiatives, the real challenge is not only to transfer our faith to new media but to translate them in a “language” that is attractive and comprehensible to our public and at the same time faithful and rooted in our religious traditions.

Sharing Faith in Web 4.0

Having laid down in perspective the first three stages, what now is in store for us with regard to the future of the Internet? What will Web 4.0 look like and what

²² José Lorenzo, “¿Adios al tiempo de las encíclicas?,” *Vida Nueva*, 21-27 January 2017, 20.

²³ Míriam Díez Bosch, «La religión digital, ¿es cool para los jóvenes?,» *Vida Nueva*, 21-27 January 2017, 29.

²⁴ See their website in <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/519726203/alabaster-the-bible-beautiful> (accessed February 28, 2017).

²⁵ See “Step Aside Millennials: Gen Z Has Arrived” <http://www.ideasindigital.com/step-aside-millennials-gen-z-has-arrived/> (accessed October 7, 2016)

threat or promise does it hold for religions in Asia?

As early as now, we find emerging capacities, evolving from Web 3.0's increasing capability to link, structure and integrate data, but this time not only online but offline as well, with the Internet establishing and consolidating its influence more and more in the real world. Businesses, industries and households will now be run more online than offline. For instance, we now have *Uber* and *Grab* for transportation, or *Airbnb* for hotels. The operation of these giant global companies are purely online and they only need to network with actual vehicles and lodgings without directly managing them. Also, with the advent of Siri and other similar apps, anyone who has a tablet or smartphone can get a rather intelligent virtual secretary who is able to note, remember and analyze their habits and preferences, and from this data, to intuitively manage not only their day-to-day activities but more and more aspects of their lives.

In this way, Aghaei et al. envisage that the coming Web 4.0 will become a “web of intelligence connections,” or what I would call the “integrative web.” According to their forecast, it will be a symbiotic and not just semantic web that will be characterized by a much more permeable and seamless “interaction between humans and machines in symbiosis.”²⁶ The walls will blur between online and offline and there will be a “fusion of horizons” between the Internet and the world outside of it. Where will the religions of Asia be in the midst of this merging? Is God online or offline?

Meredith Gould, an expert in the faith use of social media among Christian denominations, has suggested that the distinctions between real and virtual worlds that were helpful when social media was still in its early stages are not helpful anymore. According to her, “online communities of faith are *real* to members who have come to rely on them for inspiration and support...”²⁷ Moreover, she mentions that in their September 4, 2012 #ChSocM Twitter chat, participants have begun to stop the use of the acronym IRL (in real life) and there has been a suggestion to replace it with ITF (in the flesh).²⁸ In other words, online human interactions, inclusive of the religious type, may not be physical but they are personal: involving real people and fostering real relationships.

²⁶ Aghaei et al., “Evolution of the World Wide Web: From Web 1.0 to Web 4.0”, 8.

²⁷ Meredith Gould, *The Social Media Gospel: Sharing the Good News in New Ways*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015), 30.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

It may still be an issue for digital migrants but it seems that digital natives no longer find it hard to see the reality of online relationships and their value, with many families and friends in global diaspora who remain connected through various Internet platforms. For them, the Internet is not only a “tool” but a “space” where people can meet and love each other. Can this also apply in the religious use of the Internet? Can it be more than just a tool but a space, a real and not just analogous “sacred space” where one can encounter and relate with the Divine? And if it was truly possible, how much religion can be authentically practiced online? Can religious rituals, prayers or sacraments for instance be done virtually?

For example, we now find websites that allow Hindus to order *pujas* through the Internet from an actual Hindu temple. Traditionally, a *puja* has three main components: seeing the deity in the sacred shrine (*darshan*), *puja* itself or offering worship in the form of food, and afterwards obtaining the blessed food and consuming it (*prasad*). In the virtual *puja*, the temple webcasts the *darshan* live on the Internet, the worshipper provides for the offering to be made through an online payment facility, and the *prasad* is shipped from the temple directly to the worshipper. Roman Catholics have also had a similar practice of televising and now streaming Eucharistic celebrations, at times with the consecrated bread brought afterwards, albeit always personally and never shipped. Such new practices that somehow break away from tradition do not come without questions and issues. How valid and efficacious are these online rituals for believers who avail of them? Are they equally valid and efficacious as those rituals performed and participated in physically? Is there a difference between celebrating a sacrament, or receiving a blessing “in the flesh” as compared to via online streaming? If Roman Catholics believe that a blessing can be received via radio, television or online broadcast, can they also validly confess to a priest via Facetime or Viber call, noting that the sacrament in its present form does not seem to require physical contact or face-to-face interaction?²⁹ Cannot the grace of God be mediated digitally, or perhaps yes, but not in its most important forms?

There are also other concerns which although more practical are no less replete with theological implications. In a *puja* for example, where “cleanliness”

²⁹ The Catechism of the Catholic Church, in paragraph 1448, identifies “two equally essential elements” in the structure and celebration of the sacrament that has undergone many changes over the years. The first element is conversion on the part of the one confessing with three subcomponents: contrition, confession, and satisfaction. The second element is pardon on the part of God through the intervention of the Church.

is traditionally very important: “What if that same computer screen had been used fifteen minutes earlier to watch pornography? Can one ‘clean’ the computer, and erase all traces of one’s activity?”³⁰ Will making religion online not worsen the dichotomy that already exists between religion and life? If people can already practice religion online, what will be the place of offline religions in the future? As an interesting footnote, one study found that despite such developments as the online puja, local sites of Hinduism have not necessarily declined in importance but instead there has been “an interpenetration of the local and the global as a result of online Hinduism.”³¹

These are all emerging questions that our faith communities need to confront seriously and answer convincingly without falling into either of two extreme tendencies. On the one hand, there is the extreme tendency to always insist on physical, offline presence and play down the reality of non-physical online presence. On the other hand, there is the equally extreme tendency to overemphasize the reality of non-physical online presence and deny all distinction from physical, offline presence.

Beyond method

After briefly laying down the various stages in the development of the Internet and exploring the challenges and possibilities that it offers to religions in Asia, we now ask: how can religions in Asia continue to share their faith in the dawning age of Web 4.0, not only using Web 4.0 technology but with a truly Web 4.0 ethos that can connect with the Web 4.0 generation? In conclusion, allow me to propose three trajectories that I sense from my study and reflection:

1. The age of mere “information banking” which characterized Web 1.0, although it retains its basic value, is now insufficient. In fact, what we have to deal with now, more and more, as Pope Francis warned in *Laudato Si’*, is not lack of information but “information overload.”³² This of course was brought about by Web 1.0 itself by hosting and making accessible this vast and overwhelming amount of

³⁰ Jason Overdorf, “India: Meet the ‘Internet Hindus,’” *PRI/GlobalPost*, June 18, 2012 <http://www.pri.org/stories/2012-06-18/india-meet-internet-hindus> (accessed February 28, 2017).

³¹ See Heinz Scheifinger, “Hinduism and the Internet: A Sociological Study” (PhD Thesis, University of Warwick, Coventry, England, 2006).

³² Francis, *Laudato Si’*, 47.

data on the Internet. Nevertheless, and this is what I propose as the first trajectory, the Internet was able to move forward from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 by allowing greater *participation*.

Can we also apply this pattern to sharing faith by moving from a hierarchical “proclamation” model analogous to uploading content online, to a networks “conversation” model that proceeds by way of dialogue as a humble, hand-in-hand search for the truth? Franz-Josef Eilers proposed “From hierarchy to networks” in last year’s conference in the University of Santo Tomas that we mentioned earlier? How can we make our faith sharing not only “informative” but “interactive,” since after all our express aim is not merely the transmission of religious doctrine but facilitating encounter with God? After all, these doctrines are already available online and our followers have these information practically at their fingertips, but do not necessarily see their value and understand their true meaning. How do we equip them to appreciate and make sense of these teachings? How do we respond to their questions, deal with their confusion, and address any dissent? How much room can we make for lay members to participate freely, without giving in to tyrannical corruptions of democracy or insisting on antiquated models of hierarchy?

2. Secondly, from Web 2.0 to Web 3.0, what spelled the difference for the Internet is its new way of configuring the vast available knowledge, arising from its sensitivity to its audience. This in turn translates into new ways of communicating the given material in a more responsive and relevant way, which, I propose, is the next trajectory: from being “interactive” to being “intuitive.” Do we know how to listen? Are we willing and ready to allow audience “reception” or feedback to impact on the content and shape of the way we understand and practice our faiths? After all, if we really want to apply marketing techniques to make our religions more relevant today, we should know that market research is the foundation of marketing science. Must the content and shape of our faiths remain static or are we able to “link, structure and integrate” our religions in new ways without violating their integrity, especially in the context of a rapidly emerging and evolving digital Asia?

3. Lastly, I propose that we trace the lines of our third trajectory based on the emerging direction from Web 3.0 to Web 4.0—from being “intuitive” to being “integrative”—towards greater convergence and “symbiosis” on many levels: online and offline, virtual and real, digital and analog, religious and secular...

Perhaps we can reflect this too, not only in integrating religion sharing with the latest technology, but integrating faith itself with our lives, and our faith, technology and life in all its aspects, all together? With the grave danger compounded by the Internet and especially by Internet addiction of having a split-level existence, online and offline, how can we avoid the fatal dichotomy between religion and life? How do we integrate and consolidate our own online and offline presence as religions in Asia to help our people integrate and consolidate their own online and offline existence?

In the time of Web 4.0 and a rapidly digitalized Asia, religions cannot afford to stay offline. As early as 2005, a study observed that Internet penetration and evangelical Christianity tended to converge in certain Asian societies while tending to be absent in others. In these digitalized societies, effective use of the Internet in turn has tended to privilege these evangelical Christian groups, at the expense of more traditional religions like Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism that used to dominate Asia. Hence, the religions that knew how to use the Internet are the ones that ended up thriving in more communicative and “open” Asian societies while the other religions that did not tended to become more and more isolated in the societies at the other end of the techno-cultural spectrum.³³ Given now that Asia and its peoples are fast becoming digitalized, where our own religions will be within that techno-cultural spectrum will greatly depend on our capacity and creativity to change, for as Confucius rightly said, “Only the most intelligent and the most stupid do not change.”³⁴

³³ See Robbie B. H. Goh, “The Internet and Christianity in Asia: Cultural Trends, Structures and Transformations,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 29, 4 (2005): 831-848.

³⁴ *Analects*, 17:3.