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Religion in the Digital Space

Exploring its Dynamics with Reference to the Asian Context

G. Patrick

The advanced Information and Communication technologies of the contemporary global era have, among other things, generated not merely the facilities but also the motivation for the practice of 'digital religion.' Differentiated meaningfully as 'online religion' and 'religion online' digital religion not only gives the information but also the possibility for virtually practicing religions. Researches show that an increasing share of population everywhere is taking to Internet and the reality of cyberspace is penetrating into the actuality of life more steadily. The Pew Research Foundation came up in the year 2012 with the finding that the global penetration of the Internet is 46.4%. Such a considerable emergence of the reality of digital experience and particularly of digital religion has crucial implications for the way human beings encounter religions per se, religions of others, and different religious communities in the public arena.

Against this background, this essay proposes to explore the reality of religion in the digital space with particular reference to the Asian context. Needless to say that such an exploration should begin with a look at the Asian reality itself, especially as it relates to digital religion.

Asian Reality of Plurality of Religions

Asia shares much of the global reality today. One may therefore ask whether there is anything specifically Asian that can be treated distinctively as Asian reality. Granting that Asia has become global and its concerns have got

deeply interconnected with global issues, we still cannot ignore those aspects which give a specific face to Asia in the global arena. Among such aspects, the experience of plurality of religions stands head above shoulders.

Religious plurality is thick in Asia. According to the Pew Research Center survey taken in 2010 and published in 2012, the Asia-Pacific region is the most religiously diverse region in the world: Hindus 25%, Muslims 24%, Unaffiliated 21%, Buddhists 12%, Folk Religions 9%, Christians 7%, Other religions 1%, and Jews less than one percent. While the Western hemisphere, including the Latin American and the African continents, experiences the salience of one or two single religious traditions, the Asian continent remains deeply diverse and pluralistic. It is further augmented by the fact that not merely the pan-Asian context as such that is pluralistic, but even individually Asia has some of the most religiously diverse countries in the world. Singapore, for example, has a good multi-religious demography. India, which has the majority of 'Hindus,' also has the second highest Muslim population in the world!

Such a plurality of Asian religions does not present itself pure and simple. It remains merged with issues and dynamics which go with religions in the global scenario. For example, Asia too is experiencing a 'vitalization of religion' in the context of the Western experience of 'resurgence' of religion. While the West experiences the resurgence against the background of the weakening of metanarratives like the secular, rational, etc., the Asian context experiences a 'vitalisation' in terms of popular participation in the practice of religion verging on identity formation and discourse, and this impacts upon the way plurality of religion is experienced in Asia. Closely related to this vitalization is the process of construction of 'world religions' in Asia as it happens all over the globe. The concept of 'world religions' has gained salience in the global arena today and some religious traditions of Asia are involved in constructing themselves to be 'world religions.' The endeavour of constructing Hinduism, 'syndicating Hinduism' as in the words of Romila Thapar, is a case in point. Along with the Abrahamite religions, Hinduism is also projected to be a 'religion' so as to negotiate the field of world religions. Another important dynamics of religion in Asia goes with its symbiotic relationship with social relationship and the resultant dynamics of religion in constructing and negotiating social identities. In fact the plurality of Asian religions has much to do with social groupings and ethnic identities. Yet another dynamics at work in the realm of religion everywhere and in Asia is the emergence of public religion, i.e., religion involved in the processes of the public sphere, especially in the dynamics of

politics. Religious nationalism, negotiating the political space, has become a major religious dynamic in Asia. And the digital mediation of religion does contribute to the negotiation of the political space by enabling intra or inter religious dialogues.

How do these dynamics play out in the digital religious field of Asia is an important line of enquiry? Two bold religious spaces have emerged today: one, the actual concrete religious space and the other the virtual religious space. And the gap between these two spaces is increasingly decreasing, resulting in 'vireality' (virtual + real), a dissolving of borders between virtuality and reality. It would do well to relate this vireality to Asian religions and understand the changes taking place both in Asian religions as well as in associated sites. We begin the enquiry by taking a look at the way digital religion and its dynamics are present in cyber Asia today.

Digital Religion in Asia

Asian countries like Japan (86.2%), South Korea (84.8%), Kuwait (75.5%), and Hong Kong (74.9%) find their prime places among the top 50 countries in the world with high Internet penetration according to a survey conducted in 2013.¹ And according to a survey conducted in 2015, 40.2% percent of Asians are Internet users and in terms of individual countries, Japan has 90.6%, South Korea 92.6%, Taiwan 84.0%, China and India—the most populous countries, 49.5% and 30.0% respectively. This is not insignificant! It is a considerable level of Internet penetration, though this does fall short of western continents like Europe which has 73.5% and the US 87.9%.

40.2% of Internet penetration in Asia has its own impact upon the presence and dynamics of religion both in the actual and virtual religious fields of Asia. When I typed phrases like 'Hinduism in Asia,' 'Buddhism in Asia,' 'Christianity in Asia,' 'Islam in Asia' in Google, I found 1.47, 12, 25.8 and 64.3 millions of hits respectively. These categories are by no means a representative sampling of the presence and dynamics of Asian religions in the digital space, but, certainly, an unmistakable indication of the amazing intensity of its presence. It bespeaks of our mediated age, very much characterized by the digitalized virtuality of human experience, including the religious experience. Needless to say that the explosion of Information and Communication Technologies has heavily contributed to this intense presence of religion in the digital space!

¹ Internet World Stats. <http://www.internetworldstats.com/top25.htm> accessed on 08 Jan 2016.

By way of getting an indication of the way the major Asian religions are present in the digital space, I took a quick look at the first nine Google websites under each religion. Following are the entries:

Hinduism

- Hinduism—Wikipedia
- Hinduism Today Magazine—Join the Hindu Renaissance
- 7.5 lakh Muslims and Christians reconverted to Hinduism in the last 10 years
- Sacred Texts: Hinduism
- BBC Religion: Hinduism
- Hinduism Religion Facts
- Hinduism: The World's third Largest Religion
- About Hinduism: Beliefs Practices
- Hinduism URI Kids World Religions

Islam

- Islam Wikipedia
- Philadelphia Police office ambushed in the name of Islam
- BBC Religion Islam
- Islam.com a site worthy of its name
- Al-Islam
- Islam Guide
- Islam the Guardian
- Religion of Islam
- Islam 101

Buddhism

- Buddhism made easy
- Buddhism Wikipedia
- A Basic Buddhism guide
- BBC religion Buddhism
- Buddhism religion facts
- Basics of Buddhism
- What is Buddhism
- About Buddhism
- Religions of Buddhism

Christianity

- Christianity Wikipedia
- Shelter of Forcefully converted Children Raided
- BBC Religion Christianity

- Christianity Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance
- Christianity Religion Facts
- Christianity Faith in God
- What is Christianity
- Christianity for kids
- Catholic Encyclopedia

This very short list of websites of each religion gives an idea of the kind of digital presence these religions are constructing today. Every religious tradition has the maximum websites dedicated to giving information about its tradition, i.e., the religion online dimension of digital religion. And the information given is rich in terms of resources to get to know about the religion as well as possibilities for practicing the religion. It is interesting to note that virtual enablement of actual practice of religion is on the rise today. Many websites aid in the process of performing rituals, privately or in sacred sites. And it is also revealing to note that the virtual presence of Asian religion is not value neutral, but goes with an 'open,' or 'hidden' apologetics. While Buddhism, which presents itself as the religion of the modern mind, goes with a certain restraint, other religious traditions seem to 'propagate' themselves through the websites. Appeals to join the religion or donate to the upkeep of the religious traditions are invariably present in all websites. It is interesting to note that some of the major issues faced today by different traditions find mention in this extremely short list too. Hinduism's neo-renaissance, attempt at re-conversion and the effort to construct it as a world-religion are reported; similarly, Islam gets associated with violence and Christianity with conversion issues. So, a journey through even a very small religious digital presence points to the concrete reality out there.

It would do well to relate some of these dynamics with the way any digital religion or any religion in the digital space operates:

The Challenge of Vi-Reality for Digital Religions

We are increasingly being challenged today to rightly understand and accurately describe the workings of 'digital religion.' 'Religion online' and 'online religion' as mentioned above, has been one outstanding category of understanding which focuses upon the functions of digital religion. While the former stands for the information available on religion in the cyberspace, the latter stands for its practice through the Internet/cyberspace. Anastasia Karaflogka

calls these two categories as, 'on' religion and 'in' religion. Whatever be the names given, these categories are helpful to understand the different types of religious presence in the cyberspace.

There is also an attempt to understand the digital religion in terms of its experiential dimension. How does the 'experience of digital religion' feel like? While searching for data on this aspect, I came across a website which speaks about 'Second Life.' It is a website, with strict membership, which gives a 3D experience of life, self, otherness, and other realities. For example, by way of educating a person to live with a person with disabilities, a person is offered a simulated situation, with experiences very close to realities. It gives a person a 'second life,' a new look at life and reality with emotions and attitudes. It involves transformations of persons. Websites bearing testimonies of healing through religion or of religious conversion are yet another major variety of digital religion. The impact on the viewers is almost actual to the extent it addresses both to the virtual viewer and the actual viewer, and the impact in terms of 'healing' or religious change can be brought about in the online viewer too. Or websites for conducting prayers, rituals, and ceremonies too are experientially oriented.

Philosophers today speak about what they call 'digital sublime' by which they mean a digital experience of the 'unrepresentable' reality. Francois Lyotard, speaking about the role of language to mediate reality, dwells upon the theme of mediating the 'un-representable' as the modern sublime, the ineffable dimension of reality. Theorists of digital space bring the idea of sublime to bear upon the digital experience too. Some of the visual experiences presented in the digital space are so effervescent and engulfing that they can be presented only as the sublime. One can also speak about a digital religious sublime—an ineffable religious experience presented through the digital space.

There are those who highlight the basic convergence between religion and virtuality produced by a digital experience. Religion, because of its involvements in matters spiritual or metaphysical, is virtual rather than physical. As Saied Reza Ameli would put it, religion "is originated from a 'Trans-empirical' or immaterial which connects one with soul, spirituality, God, and supernatural territories. Then, religious interaction is a kind of process of getting familiar with the comprehension of 'spiritual cause' and a transfer to that world."² Considering

religious experience to be one of 'transfer' from material to spiritual world or vice versa, Patrick Maxwell imagines of virtual space, which, though not spiritual but material and industrial, 'transferring' people to another world. He considers 'belonging to the other world' as the common denominator between virtuality and religiosity. Going along with this line of thinking, Saied surmises, "The virtualization of religion represents religion in a new world named 'the virtual world' or 'the virtual-real world' or 'the real virtual world.' The related industries of this new world which can be characterised as 'the alternative world' or 'the secondary world,' try to transfer entire religious sense including religious beliefs, rituals, thoughts and emancipating movements to 'the real-virtual' space."³ This supposed commonality between virtuality and religiosity, though acceptable in a phenomenological sense, is not accepted by many religious traditions. The other world that religions speak of is eschatological and not ethereal as found in virtuality. Religions would never identify the ethereality with supernaturality.

Another question that is discussed in virtual/digital religion is related to the post-modern sense that is implied in it. Does digital religion promote post-modernism, in the sense of deconstructing the metaphysical world or an ontological reality, by substituting it with the virtual world or reality, and by relativising the religious and ethical absolutes by accentuating the awareness of plurality? Needless to say that the contemporary advanced digital communication is simultaneous to advanced modernity or supermodernity or the hypermodernity. This simultaneity and convergences could be explored fruitfully. "However, it seems virtual space is not necessarily a postmodern phenomenon; it can duplicate physical modernity on a virtual level, so one can argue that by the emergence of a new, virtual world, we are now experiencing new levels of modernity which is a combination of virtual modernity and physical modernity or one can call it 'vi-physical modernity' or 'vi-real religion.'"⁴ Saied speaks about three types of virtual religions: the first one is an imaginary and metaphoric view of religion in virtuality—"Virtual-imaginary religion applies image-making and imagination broadly and takes individuals to an "artificial space" which necessarily does not connect significantly with "reality." So, while having connection with real space, the representation of reality occurs on a completely different level,

Journal of Social Science, Vol. 37, No. 2, (2009), 209.

³ Ibid., 210.

⁴ Ibid., 211.

² Saied Reza Ameli, "Virtual Religion and Duality of Religious Spaces," *Asian*

which is accompanied by contrast and confrontation with reality and so many times, is reflected as “hyper-reality.”⁵ The second type of virtual religion is that which is shaped by the media, the instrument of virtuality. Various types of media like radio, television, etc., have their own corresponding types of virtual experiences, i.e. auditory, visual, sensual, etc. The third type of virtuality comes in the wake of the digital revolution which endeavours to bridge the gap between virtuality and reality, making ‘virtu-real’ world. It endeavours to ‘drown the netizen in the virtual space’ by trying to annihilate the border between the real and the virtual. By this, according to Saied, a kind of ‘sameness’ of process is produced between virtual religious image and religious objectivity. This third level of virtual/actual integration is that which is taking place in the space of digital religion today.

Because of this near-total identification of the virtual and the actual in digital religion, it is becoming increasingly necessary for different religions to re-envision their processes as well as objects of religious signification. The Catholic Church, for example, in its document *The Church and Internet* makes some pertinent observations in this regard. First of all, it instructs its adherents to accept the facility of internet wholeheartedly. It wants its personnel to utilize this ‘areopagus of the modern age’ for evangelization. However, it clearly points out that the internet *per se* is not identical with their religious ideals. For example, the meaning and experience of a sacrament, it points out, can never meaningfully occur through digital religion. First of all, the signification of a sacrament takes a believer to the experience of grace from the ultimately transcendent God in triune persons; the metaphysics implied in this understanding of sacrament can never be replaced with a virtual reality. Secondly, the sacrament is meaningful only in an actual communitarian context, where persons face-to-face celebrate the sacrament and experience God. This aspect of the sacrament, transcendental in its signification, communitarian in its operation, can never be obtained in the digital experience of religion.

The Sanskrit Hinduism too has a similar observation to make. When it speaks about self-realisation or realization of oneself as Brahman as the ultimate goal of life, it prescribes a path towards attaining this goal. The path is nothing but sitting at the feet of a guru, learning the method of self-realisation and progress towards the goal. Learning yoga, an important method towards self-realisation, can fruitfully take place only under the guidance of a guru. The Internet religion cannot replace an actual guru, and learning yoga through the Internet may enable us with the

skills of yoga but not the religious dimension implied in yoga. Thus religions are re-visiting their understandings of religious significations in the light of digital religions.

It is being claimed that the world will witness a weakening of dogmatism due to the salience of digital religion. Saied, for example, claims that “world society will witness a strength of consciousness and a weakness of dogmatism. Here, universal values which are the common denominators of divine religions would emerge—values such as combating oppression, and advocating social justice in social movements like combating the destruction of the environment, advocating global peace and campaigning against war.”⁶ The claim made here is that the depth and width of religious knowledge, augmented by the digital space, would result in deeper wisdom, converging on common good, rather than on parochial and sectarian interests. However, it needs be noted that digital religion can also become a facility for treating faith as a matter of intellectual assent, for which, the needed resources are readily available in the internet. A person following a particular religious tradition may easily refer to the content of his/her belief as given in the holy books or commentaries by religious leaders and attune his/her belief to them. This attuning of one’s belief to the one given out in the Internet can also easily become a matter of habit and certain rigidity can emerge about the content of the belief. While this facility for attuning one’s belief with that of one’s tradition through online religion is available, this can facilitate a repetitive religious behavior with the support of the digital space. Repetition, the behavioural aspect of a ritual, can also become an important factor in the production of dogmatism. Therefore, even while one speaks of weakening of dogmatism, we need also be alerted of its possibility.

Religious critiques point out to a certain ‘technological determinism’ implied in digital religion. Ultimately, it is technology and its tools which create, re-create, un-do the space that we experience as digital space, which is the raw material for digital religion. Some even speak about this raw material, the computer software, as the ‘invisible’ which tends to replace the invisible deity. Groy Boris would argue, for example, that the digital image that a viewer can see hides behind it the digital programme written by codes, which are invisible, and they are akin to the reality of an icon which stands for the divine in a religious ritual. As any religious activity is premised upon an

⁵ Ibid., 212.

⁶ Ibid., 228.

invisible presence of the deity, so too digital space itself is premised upon the invisible software codes, which determine the digital experience. Such determinism goes into the making of digital religion too. As Saied points out, “Virtual religion, in fact, is about the industrialization of religion, religious knowledge and religious practice. Clearly, virtual space is entirely an artificial and industrial space.”⁷ And therefore, the dissatisfaction over digital religion among the religionists! It is a short distance from here to construct religious fundamentalism through the technological fundamentalism which is ruling the digital space!

The question whether digital religion allows space for intuition is important when it comes to a discussion on the role of religion from a transcendental perspective. Most of the theist religions believe in some form of divine revelation taking place in history. And, according to Saied, one can also speak of ‘intuitive ontology’ an intuition into the ‘principle of being’ which informs reality. While ontotheology would limit this experience of intuitive ontology to the reality of being, religions would speak in terms of the divine, a transcendental other. This is perhaps the interstice in the relentless human construction of reality, be it through a grand metaphysics, or a modernist epistemology, or a poesis that integrates imagination and action; and this interstice would be the window to reality and even to transcendental reality which always beckon us to move ahead with confidence and liberative desire. Whether the digital religion is giving us an opportunity for this intuition is an important question to raise today. It would seem, on several counts, that it is doing so: i) by the very fact that it gives virtuality to religion, digital space seems to free religion from its traditional historicist conditionings; ii) by the fact that it provides a plurality of perceptions, it seems to free religion from dogmatism, fundamentalism, bigotry, and so on; iii) by the fact that it draws in wider sections of people into participating in the practice as well as consciousness of religion, it seems to free religion from enclaves and closures attendant upon ascriptive hierarchies; etc. It would seem, on the other hand, that it is also not enabling intuition on several accounts: i) it seems to leave no space un-covered, and attempts to explain everything and even explain-away everything; ii) it seems to work according to the dictates of the commercial impulse; iii) it seems to embody the technological determinism built into it; etc. We need to “divine” the positivity of digital religion, relating it to the particular context of its operation.

⁷ Ibid., 219.

Digital Religion in Asia

Digital religion in Asia, in its unique way, enables a wider section of humanity to participate in religion. Asia is a continent with multiple traditional ties like ethnicity, gender, caste, etc., which do not support free participation of persons in common platforms. However, it must be said that internet enables the individual to freely participate in digital religion. As opined by Saied, “...religious individuality has been strengthened in the virtual space and religious choices are made with greater freedom, despite the user being affected by norms that originate from cultural and social traditions, dominant gender, tribal, class norms and cultural values.”⁸ Though we cannot claim that a full-fledged rational choice has been at the root of selecting one’s religion through internet, it cannot be denied that more freedom experienced through the cyberspace with regard to one’s religious options.

Digital religion in Asia has “opened up” virtually the sacred space beyond the traditional boundaries. The Indian example is case in point: One of the factors operative in the Indian religious world has been the principle of ‘purity and pollution.’ Sacred sites are earmarked and restrictions imposed according to this principle. The physical dimension of this principle has generated multiple closures, excluding certain sections of the people from certain boundaries of the sacred sites. For example, up to which space a woman, or a ‘lower caste’ individual can enter a particular temple, is earmarked as per the adaptation of the principle of ‘purity and pollution.’ Digital religion dismays these boundaries virtually. A person, regardless of her/his social identity, can book for a puja online and get it performed without having to go through the physical laws of purity and pollution operative in a temple. This facility circumvents the rule, and virtually ‘opens’ the sacred space to the devotee. This could be considered a facility attendant upon digital religion in the Indian case.

Digital religion has made possible a virtual dialogue of religions. The very fact of presenting the varieties of religious traditions online, even with the facility for virtually practicing them, provides a virtual system of dialogue between religions. The best form of dialogue, according to Raimon Panikkar, a well-known inter-religious seeker, is ‘dialogical dialogue’ which comprises of an ‘intra-religious’ as well as an ‘inter-religious’ dialogue. It would mean that

⁸ Ibid., 223

dialoging with another person from another tradition is preceded by a dialogue within oneself, i.e., within one's own tradition, which takes place in the light of the other's tradition. This is an ongoing process, experiencing both moments of dialogue continually. Such a process is virtually enabled through digital religion. The multi-religious resources available online enables a person to conduct this intra as well as inter-religious dialogue by way of clarifying and getting enlightened upon her/his religious convictions or of choosing to practice a religion.

While these are some of the positive outcomes of digital religion, we are faced with its negativities too in the Asian context:

Digital religion has walked a long mile with the project of religious nationalism in India. The vi-reality of the digital space seems to provide the suitable impulse for Hindutva forces to dominate the cyberspace with its agenda. This could be sensed in the multiple ways in which digital media constructs, supports, and discourses upon the project. Benedict Anderson's historiographical insight of 'nation as an imagined community' works very well in this case of the Hindutva forces constructing a religiously imagined nation for India. An imagination of the past in terms of myths, the present in terms of religious ethical codes and of the future in terms of religious teleology provide the fuel for this imagined nation. Websites which bring together the map of Indian landscape with the mythical goddess of India, Bharat Matha, and imaginatively collapse one into the other, contribute significantly to the project of religious nationalism; social media rooted in Hindutva ideology, branded as Internet Hindu, work out the way for the project in the Internet domain through their postings, vitriolic interactions, threats and abuses. According to a blog, the cyber Hindu is on the rise today. The Internet-Hindu has certain marks of identification: i) angry Saffronist discourse which abuses Muslims and Christians in the Internet; ii) meticulously toe the RSS doctrine; iii) hardcore BJP supporters; iv) support right wing liberal economy and so on. It is no secret that BJP won the last general election, not the least with the consistent support provided by this cyber Hindu segment which canvassed the young voters successfully.

While the cyber Hindu adapts the RSS brand of Hinduism to the Internet, one may notice that even the general Hindu beliefs and practices too, according to Vinay Lal, fit well with the logics and dynamics of the internet, which is the

communicative platform of the contemporary post-modern era. Lal observes that Hinduism, by being polytheistic, attunes well to the logic of plurality that informs the Internet. Varieties become the hallmark of the Internet, and so too of Hinduism. Varieties of beliefs, rituals, deities, and the like of Hinduism synchronise well with Hinduism. Lal also observes that the playfulness of signs, which is the linguistic marks of the post-structuralist vision of reality, too is apposite to the Hindu religious world, where even the gods can be playthings.

Is it a "techno-Orientalism," as Christopher Goto-Jones would alert us to, which frames Asia by associating Asia with technology for the purpose of "epistemic distancing and dominating" the Asian continent? In his words, "the association of Asia with cyberspace begins to look like another strategy of epistemic distancing and domination."⁹ Is there an attempt on the part of the West to 'stabilize' an object of knowledge so that it can exploit? As Thomas Lamarre suggests subtly, is it an attempt to give a unity to Asia in terms of Cyber Asia/Digital Asia, so that it can be easily manipulated? How about the deeply written differences in Asia even in terms of absence of digital infrastructure and usage? Is it not still the fact that, even according to a western portal, the Internet penetration in Asia is only 40%, and therefore, can we really speak about a category called "Digital Asia"?

One of the salient features of Asian religiosity is the predominance of non-institutional and 'unorganised' religions. While the West had the salience of organized religions for quite a long period of time in history, Asia continued to remain relatively less organized or institutionalized. China, though having the Confucian tradition as its salient 'organised' religion, remained anchored upon its 'ancestral worship' tradition; India, in spite of the attempts at 'syndicating' Hinduism, remains still a land of innumerable religious traditions, anchored upon social groupings and identities. In this context of less organized religious terrain, what is the impact of digital religion? Does it organize religions virtually? If so, is it oriented towards an 'intra-textual' religiosity, or pluralistic?

An important hermeneutical theme that is being discussed in the area of relationship between religions with reference to the public domain is the tensive relationship between the binary of 'intra-textuality and inter-textuality.' Against the force of global presence of religion, every religious

⁹ Cf. Christopher Goto-Jones, "Asiascape(s): Introduction," in *The Asiascape Collection I: Essays in the Exploration of CyberAsia*. Online journal http://www.asiascape.org/resources/publications/asiascape_collection.pdf. 3.

tradition is said to experience these two orientations today. A strong current of intra-textuality is being seen, and being theorized approvingly within the post-liberal perspective that has obtained during the contemporary era. This orientation delves deep into each tradition, by way of exploring the text, content, experience, dynamics, etc of one's own tradition. And this orientation, when pursued without regard to the outside other, can result in extreme forms of fundamentalism, leading to acts of violence. The other orientation, the inter-textual one, is also visible today, especially among the globally migrating population. They gather multiple identities, belongings, inter-religious experiences, etc. and serve as the base for inter-religious relationship of mutuality, understanding and peace. One would wish for a healthy relationship between 'intra' and 'inter' textual relationship between religions in the public domain. However, the contemporary trend in digital space seems to be oriented more towards intra-textual rather than inter-textual. The examples of websites cited above dwell upon their own religious traditions verging on apologetics. Of course, we do find websites promoting inter-religious dialogue, religious tolerance, etc., but they are hosted independently, and a religious follower of a particular tradition rarely visits them. It would do well therefore that websites of each religious tradition gets sensitized to host matters on inter-religious dialogue in their own websites.

A Virtual Inculturation?

Will religions think of 'virtual inculturation'? What would that mean? First of all, it would mean that religion, or better any religious tradition, takes to the virtual world wholeheartedly; that it learns the art, and participates in it; that it spends time and energy for participating in this culture of virtuality, a simulated culture; that it specializes itself in the Information and Communication technology; etc. Secondly, it would mean that every religious tradition is ready to meet other religious traditions in the virtual world; that it learns about others, even while presents itself to others in the virtual space; etc. Thirdly, it would also mean that every religious tradition relates the virtual world to a real world; that it involves in actions which correspond to their claim in the virtual world; that it organizes the possibilities for the practice of their religion in the actual physical world; etc. Fourthly, it would also mean that every religious tradition prescribes certain ethical way of life, taking into consideration the ethical visions presented by other religious traditions. Considering all these aspects, participating in the virtual world would lead every religion to a certain experience of 'virtual inculturation'.

By Way of Concluding

Digital religion in Asia, it would seem, has engaged with the religiosity of the people of Asia in a significant manner. It has impacted upon such realities as practice of religiosity giving an ethereal dimension to it, challenged traditional hierarchies, shaped up newer identities through digital communities, given a religious agency to the participant especially from the marginalized sections of people, challenged those small sections of Asians who had imbibed a doctrinaire approach to plurality of religions, contributed to construction of virtual nations and nationalism, lent itself for 'idolatry' in the sense of impairing the sacramental sense and producing intransigence to transcendence, and so on. An important dynamic that is at work in religion in digital Asia seems to be the increasing tension between 'stagnation' of religious imagination on the one hand, and agility of faith on the other. Stagnation of religious imagination would imply the multiple ways by which the 'religion online' resource gets tied up to fundamentalism, sectarian identities, ascriptive hierarchies, practice of religious magic, etc; on the other hand, agility of faith would imply the subtle yet substantive ways by which the 'migrant' individual, embodying an aspiration for freedom from socio-economic oppressions, engages with digital religion. The exploring 'migrant individual', as a nomad (in the positive sense) who represents such sections of people as women, marginalized communities (Dalits, for example, in the Indian context), indigenous people seem to straddle between stagnation and agility. The journey continues poignantly.

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Cyber/Digital Theology: Rethinking about Our Relationship with God and Neighbor in the Digital Environment

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ABSTRACT

The digital age with its multifarious technological developments, especially those pertaining to the Internet, has created many changes in human society—from the way we work and go about our daily activities to how we relate to the people and things around us. These changes are significant enough to warrant thoughtful, systematic reflections and analysis regarding its cultural, sociological and theological impact on our lives. This paper attempts to do so with respect to the theological implications of the Internet, particularly in regards to human relationships with God and with one another. While philosophical, spiritual and theological inquiries could be made in regards to any or all religious traditions, this paper chooses to focus only on the Catholic Christian tradition. In addition, references to the Asian context are made in order to highlight the effects of the digital age on theology in the Asian cultural and religious milieu. The kind of theology discussed in this paper, for lack of a better term, is called "cyber/digital theology," which requires some explanations to be clear what this really means. Although the terminology as well as its content remains in a formative stage, cyber/digital theology is an area worthy of more systematic study. This paper addresses the need for such an effort and proposes that the digital age provides new ways for the faithful to search for God, to envision one's relationship with God and with neighbor, and to enter into these relationships.

Keywords: digital age, cybertheology, digital theology, cyber/digital theology

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