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Abstract: This article was originally presented as the keynote address at the 2021 Yale-Edinburgh Conference on "Oral, Print, and Digital Cultures in World Christianity and the History of Mission." It highlights the rise of digital technologies and the resultant development of digital culture, one which scholars of World Christianity are among the most well-suited to study. The article offers vignettes into different ways the Christian message has been translated into digital media, and argues that this transforms the digital space into a divine space, which offers new modes for people to experience and perceive and practice the Christian religion.

Keywords: digital culture; interconnectivity; migration; public religion; translation

What has Jerusalem to do with Athens, the Church with [Plato's] Academy, the Christian with the heretic? Our principles come from the Porch of Solomon, who had himself taught that the Lord is to be sought in

> simplicity of heart…. After Jesus Christ we have no need of speculation, after the Gospel no need of
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> research.[1]

Scholars of World Christianity have failed to heed the advice of Tertullian, the great African apologist. We have researched. We have speculated. We have entertained Christianity's intermingling with the philosophies of this world.

In context, Tertullian, referring to the Apostle Paul, was concerned about philosophy—*philosophia*. This is not simply the modern academic subject taught in universities today. It encompassed ways of perceiving the world, often with a religious inflection—what we may today describe as culture or subculture.

In the last few decades, a digital culture has come into being. If the digital has created a culture, then it reconfigures Christian movement and networks from geographic spaces to digital spaces. If the digital has created a culture, then it translates the Christian message into a new medium. If the digital has created a culture, then it changes the ways people experience and perceive and practice the Christian religion. Scholars of World Christianity are perhaps some of the most well-suited to study this so-called "digital culture."

A Case for Digital Culture

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020, many people—not everybody, but many, have become much more dependent on digital technologies. For work. For school. For church. For the

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[1] Tertullian, *The Prescriptions against the Heretics*, 7. Translated in *Early Latin Theology*, edited and translated by S. L. Greenslade (Louisville, KY: Westminster Press, 1956), 36.

daily news and the daily shopping. Digital technologies have also been key in maintaining public health measures. It is remarkable that the world's fastest-growing mobile app has not been Facebook or TikTok or Pokémon Go, but Aarogya Setu—an app released in April 2020 and designed by the Indian government for contact-tracing, which, after 40 days, accrued over 100 million users. While digital culture has existed for much longer than the advent of this virus called COVID-19, the pandemic has accelerated its spread.

Some of the early research around Christianity and digital culture examined how communities reimagined themselves through email communication and online discussion groups.[2] Others explored more experimental approaches to digital technology, such as the Church of Fools, which enabled worship-goers to use digital avatars to attend a 3D-rendered church, listen to sermons, and sing and pray together.[3] To many commentators, this was closer to science fiction than the Christian religion. But it also overshadowed more subtle Christian uses of digital technologies through online networks, sermon podcasts, blogs, and microblogs.[4]

Needless to say, the Christian use of digital technologies has had its detractors. Some have denounced attempts at "virtual church" as not being confused with "true" or "real" church. On a semantic level, there is a perception that the "virtual" denotes something that is artificial or not real. Part of the problem comes from the computer science use of the term "virtual," which indicates that

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[2] The first major study was perhaps Heidi Campbell's PhD, completed in 2001 at the University of Edinburgh, and later published as Heidi Campbell, *Exploring Religious Community Online: We are One in the Network*, (New York: Peter Lang, 2005).

[3] Tim Hutchings, *Creating Church Online: Ritual, Community and New Media* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 64–89.

[4] This is helpfully demonstrated by Knut Lundby, "Dreams of Church in Cyberspace," in *Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture: Perspectives, Practices and Futures*, edited by Pauline Hope Cheong, Peter Fischer-Nielsen, Stefan Gelfgren, and Charles Ess (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), 25–41.

something is being simulated.[5] This differs from the metaphysical sense, which finds its origins in the scholastic theology of John Duns Scotus well before the advent of digital technology.[6] But this debate between "virtual" and "real" seems to have been somewhat diffused by the pandemic—partly because many churches needed to choose whether to go online or to find another means of running their activities under lockdown measures.[7] While the pandemic-era shift to online may be perceived as less-than-ideal, few church leaders would call this a simulated church. In practice, an online church service that uses microphones, speakers, and cameras is not all that different from the AV system in an in-person church service, especially for churches that broadcast within a large sanctuary or to overflow rooms, or have recorded sermons that were once shared on cassette tape or CDs and now on podcasts. They are real people and real experiences that are mediated by technologies. Perhaps the main difference between an online church and an in-person church is the physical distance.

Another area of contention has been the use of digital Bibles.[8] In certain contexts, it has now become commonplace to attend a church service and hear the words, "Please take out your phones, tap on your Bible app, and swipe with me to Isaiah 61." The sheer mention of a phone or an app or tap-and-swipe indicates the adulteration of Christian practice by an intrusive digital culture. Positively, the technology is useful for the forgetful: it is searchable, has reminders of Bible reading plans, and has notifications of the "verse of the day." On a smartphone, it can also be a source of

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[5] We see this view asserted by Antonio Spadaro who, while being a major proponent of cybertheology, explains that in Catholic magisterial teaching "There are no sacraments on the Internet" because these "virtual sacraments" have avatars receiving God's grace. Antonio Spadaro, *Cybertheology: Thinking Christianity in the Era of the Internet* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 75.

[6] Michael Heim, *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 132–4.

[7] Low tech alternatives did come about. See Rhoderick John Suarez Abellanosa, "The Church as a Sacrament in a Time of Pandemic: The Philippine Experience," *Studies in World Christianity* 26, no. 3 (November 2020): 261–80.

[8] See Jeffrey S. Siker, *Liquid Scripture: The Bible in a Digital World* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017).

distractions—the latest news or a friend's instant message can disrupt one's reverent spiritual reading. Instead of the digital Bible, many Christians insist on the physical, paper Bible. "Please open your Bibles and turn to the book of Isaiah, Chapter 61. It is on page 751 of your pew Bible." Contrastingly, in Luke's gospel, Jesus is in the synagogue on the sabbath day and was handed the scroll of Isaiah; he *unrolled it* to what we would today refer to as Chapter 61, and read the words of prophecy fulfilled in himself, to "bring good news to the poor" and "let the oppressed go free"—the so-called Nazareth Manifesto (Luke 4:16–21). It is easy to forget that the notion of a bound Bible, mass produced with machine type, paginated, and divided into chapter and verse, is part of a print culture that was completely foreign to the first century. Today, the digital Bible is foreign to those less familiar with digital culture. Yet, while the debate *appears* to be between print versus digital, for some, the concern is actually about material culture—that is, the spiritual power found in the physical Bible.[9]

As a culture,[10] the digital introduces new values and new rules for behaviour—such as video conference etiquette or the impulse to curate the bookshelf that is within view of the webcam. As a culture, the digital engenders new performances—to tap-and-swipe or to raise one's digital hand. As a culture, the digital creates new artefacts—software and hardware technologies—and symbols that shape one's identity. By virtue of the pandemic, there is a versatility in a new language—hashtags and phrases like "Zoom bombing." With microblogs that limit posts to a mere 280 characters, the

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[9] See Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 35–8; Edwin M. Yamauchi, "Scripture as Talisman, Specimen, And Dragoman," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50, no. 1 (March 2007): 3–30.

[10] This discussion draws on Robert Schreiter's three dimensions of culture: ideational, performance, and material. Robert J. Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology Between the Global and the Local* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), 29.

digital preferences pithy hot takes and the use of forms of visual vernacular, from Internet memes to digital hieroglyphs known as emojis.

In creating a culture, the digital raises questions about Christianity's relationship with technology. The Bible highlights negotiations with technologies of material and visual culture—from the advent of clothing for Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:7, 21), to the designs and the crafts involved in the shaping of priestly vestments and instruments, the tabernacle, and the temple and all its furnishings (Exodus 35:4–40:33; 1 Kings 5–7). The Bible highlights the importance of oral culture—God speaks the sun, the moon, and the stars into existence, while psalmists sings songs of worship and the prophets proclaim "Thus says the Lord." Technologies around literary culture are also important—from God writing the covenant law on tablets of stone with his finger, to Christian saints penning New Testament epistles. In the letters of John, we are told of how the author deliberated about technology, as he had "much to write" but would rather speak "face to face" as opposed to using the tools of "paper and ink" (2 John 12; 3 John 13–14). Any technology offers innovations *and* limitations to the experiences and perceptions and practices of Christianity.

Reimagining Christian Communities

For World Christianity, we must ponder the ways digital culture interacts with the many other cultures of this world. For instance, it is often said that technology accentuates an individualistic orientation. With the rise of print during the Protestant Reformation, the widespread ownership of the Bible brought about a transition from public readings of Scripture in the congregation to private

readings in the home.[11] This is even more so the case with the rise of digital technologies like personal mobile devices. When a person reads a print Bible held in their hands, it offers a public symbol of Christianity to those around them. In contrast, a person using a mobile device can be reading a digital Bible or checking their social media profile—or both. The public nature of the Bible is no longer found in the physical object. It may not be lost, as the sharing of Bible verses on social media presents a new form of public spirituality. It is also no longer just textual, as Bible verses may be presented against an image of a scenic backdrop or be part of an audio or video recording. Hence, the rise of digital results in reorientations in the public expressions of Christian faith and practice.

Some have noticed the collectivistic orientations of certain societies have been reshaped in the use of digital technologies. In Pauline Cheong's study of New Creation Church in Singapore, she describes how the church has tried to use social media to highlight aspects of church cohesion. Instead of the individual-oriented "selfie"—that is a photo one takes of oneself—the church has encouraged group-oriented photos called "wefie" or "usie," with the hashtag #gracerevolution. As opposed to egocentric representations of the "selfie," Cheong explains that these allocentric representations highlight the underlying Asian cultural collectivist values that are translated into digital culture. Of interest to scholars of World Christianity, Cheong also makes an appeal for research on digital culture to grow beyond its current focus on American and European perspectives.[12]

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[11] Andrew Walls, "The Translation Principle in Christian History," *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 41.

[12] Pauline Hope Cheong, "Church Digital Applications and the Communicative Meso-Micro Interplay: Building Religious Authority and Community through Everyday Organizing," in *Mediatized Religion in Asia: Studies on Digital Media and Religion*, edited by Kerstin Radde-Antweiler and Xenia Zeiler (New York: Routledge, 2019), 116.

Digital technology can also foster group cohesion by the inherent interconnectivity it provides. In the 19th and 20th centuries, technological innovations related to print, transit, and telegraph facilitated the international awareness and spread of Christianity.[13] In the 21st century, technological innovations in digital media have phenomenally increased the speed of communication. Some churches in the Philippines have long used video conferencing platforms for small group and discipleship networks, with one even describing it as "Skypleship."[14] According to one commentator, digital communication technologies have been important for the African church in promoting "Ubuntu solidarity since they foster the crossing of social divides and the maintenance of social networks."[15]

The interconnectivity offered by digital communication technologies facilitates a major hallmark of World Christianity: namely, the global movement of Christians. Digital technologies have been used by diasporic Christians to send and receive prayers, blessings, and inspirational messages with those in their home countries and home churches, or by migrant workers in restrictive countries who otherwise would not have been able to attend worship services or mass if it were not conducted online.[16] Even more than ever, we must speak of "Korean Christianity" or

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[13] Melissa Wei-Tsing Inouye, *China and the True Jesus: Charisma and Organization in a Chinese Christian Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 72–77; Emma Wild-Wood, *The Mission of Apolo Kivebulaya: Religious Encounter & Social Change in the Great Lakes c. 1865–1935* (Woodbridge, Sufolk: James Currey, 2020), 18–19.

[14] Rei Lemuel Crizaldo, "Digital Theology: Practising Local Theology in an Age of Global Technology," in *Missio Dei in a Digital Age*, edited by Jonas Kurlberg and Peter M. Phillips (London: SCM Press, 2020), 66.

[15] Castor M. Goliama, *Where Are You Africa? Church and Society in the Mobile Phone Age* (Bamenda, Cameroon: Langaa Research and Publishing CIG, 2011), 74.

[16] J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, "'"Get on the Internet!" Says the LORD': Religion, Cyberspace and Christianity in Contemporary Africa," *Studies in World Christianity* 13, no. 3 (December 2007): 239–40; Agnes M. Brazal and Randy Odchigue, "Cyberchurch and Filipin@ Migrants in the Middle East," in *Church in an Age of Global Migration: A Moving Body*, edited by Susanna Snyder, Joshua Ralston, and Agnes M. Brazal (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 187–99; I Sil Yoon, "Korean Christian Student's Adaptation and Integration in British Society: Their Identity Formation and Negotiation Processes," *Studies in World Christianity* 26, no. 2 (July 2020): 148; Briana Wong, "Longing for Home:

"Filipino Christianity" or "Ghanaian Christianity" in transnational terms. We need expansive imaginations to appreciate particular expressions of World Christianity beyond the limits of geographic locales.

Digital Tools or Digital Space

On a basic level, digital technologies are tools to be used by Christians and churches. We see this with how Christian leaders responded to the rapid turn towards online services in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many churches witnessed a significant growth in online viewership when compared to their pre-pandemic physical attendances. These viewers were often geographically dispersed and included an international audience that would not have previously attended in-person services. For these novices in digital church, this garnered an awareness that a digital shift creates new possibilities for mission and evangelism beyond the limits of space.[17]

Contrast this with Christians with much more experience and conscious engagement with digital technologies, especially as found in more evangelistically-oriented or Pentecostal-charismatic churches. In his study of African Pentecostalism, Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu explains that,

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The Impact of COVID-19 on Cambodian Evangelical Life," *Studies in World Christianity* 26, no. 3 (November 2020): 288–93.

[17] Alexander Chow and Jonas Kurlberg, "Two or Three Gathered Online: Asian and European Responses to COVID-19 and the Digital Church," *Studies in World Christianity* 26, no. 3 (November 2020): 311–13.

> For the contemporary [African] Pentecostal movement, [digital] media offer something much more than
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> just serving as an instrument for evangelization or mission. This is a movement that believes it has been
>
> called to literally dominate or occupy global space.[18]

The Internet is much more than a tool. In the case of these African Pentecostal and charismatic churches, it is a digital space in which a theology of dominion can be practiced. It is a digital arena of spiritual warfare, in which God's presence can sanitise and diffuse the influence of Satan, and the Christian can take authority, in Christ, to dominate and influence.[19]

We may also consider the case of Reformed churches in China, in which their use of digital technologies has occurred within one of the most sophisticated and restrictive Internet censorship systems in the world—the Great Firewall of China. In many ways, Chinese digital culture, like a millennium of print culture before it, has been architected as part of a propaganda system to build and to sustain state orthodoxy. Reformed Christians in China have negotiated this restrictive digital space through online magazines, blogs, and microblogs to promote theological rationale for change in the society and the state, testing and challenging the digital boundaries for public discourse.[20] This has involved a seemingly futile cat-and-mouse chase, often with the censoring of online posts and the closing down of social media accounts. While the Chinese government has developed legal frameworks to exert what it calls "Cyberspace Sovereignty,"[21] these Reformed Christians would

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[18] J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, "'We Are on the Internet': Contemporary Pentecostalism in Africa and the New Culture of Online Religion," in *New Media and Religious Transformations in Africa*, edited by Rosalind I. J. Hackett, and Benjamin F. Soares (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2015), 163.

[19] Ibid, 162; Asamoah-Gyadu, "Get on the Internet," 228.

[20] Alexander Chow, "Public theology behind the Great Firewall of China," in *Digital Humanities and Christianity*, edited by Timothy Hutchings and Claire Clivaz (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), 319–37.

[21] National People's Congress, "Cybersecurity Law 2016," Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (November 7, 2021) http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2016-11/07/content_5129723.htm. An English translation can be found at https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/en/2016-cybersecurity-law/.

likely argue that Divine Sovereignty has ultimate control over the digital space.[22] To adapt the words of one Calvinist theologian, "There is not a square inch—not a *computer byte* in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over *all*, does not cry: 'Mine!'"[23]

These are examples of the "translation of the message" into digital culture.[24] In the case of African Pentecostalism, we see the dynamism of an oral culture that has produced a theology of deliverance and dominion translated into the digital. In the case of Chinese Reformed Christianity, we see the public intellectualism of a print culture that has produced a theology of public engagement translated into the digital. In both, the digital space is now sacralised as a divine space, which God has ultimate authority.

Reconfigurations of Authority

The Internet is often applauded as a platform for democracy. Yet, such an ideal where all citizens have equal access and equal proficiency in Internet technologies does not exist in any society. Nevertheless, we need only recall events such as Arab Spring, or the recent social unrest in Hong Kong or Myanmar, to understand why government entities have had anxieties over what the masses can do with the power of the Internet. Furthermore, digital culture complicates traditional civil and religious authority by introducing algorithmic authority, in which social trust is "garnered from informational tools and rankings," resulting in individuals who "emerge as thought leaders and

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[22] I make a similar case for this in Alexander Chow, "Public Faith, Shame and China's Social Credit System," in Kurlberg and Phillips, eds., *Missio Dei in a Digital Age*, 236–56.

[23] James D. Bratt, ed., *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 488.

[24] Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2009).

hence, cultural authorities, for particular communities."[25] Perhaps scholars of World Christianity now must speak of benevolent and malevolent bots, as they have of benevolent and malevolent spirits.

While some human and non-human voices insist on promoting subversive messages, the digital can and should also be a context for the common good.[26] Marcella Althaus-Reid demonstrates this in her study of websites that highlight stories of the excluded within Argentinian society, explaining:

> The gathering of these contemporary voices in the web produces much more than an archive. It emerges
> as a eucharistic gathering, for it shows the presence of God manifested in people's praxis of solidarity (and
> amongst people who have nothing to share) while encouraging us towards a praxis of love and justice
> inspired by the project of the Kingdom of God, and the hidden *poiesis* or creativity of the everyday of the
> excluded.[27]

In such a way, the digital creates a space where those who have had no authority and no voice are offered a platform to speak. It also creates a community that brings together the weak and the powerful to share in the experience of God's presence in the world, through online discussions and activities that impact offline realities.

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[25] Heidi A. Campbell, *Digital Creatives and the Rethinking of Religious Authority* (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2021), 49.

[26] Peter Ferdinand, "Cyberpower: Only the Power to Disturb?," in *Cyberspace – Cyberethics – Cybertheology*, Concilium 2005/1, edited by Eric Borgman, Stephan van Erp, and Hille Haker (London: SCM Press, 2005), 27–35; Agnes M. Brazal, *A Theology of Southeast Asia: Liberation-Postcolonial Ethics in the Philippines* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2019), 145–79; Calida Chu, "Social Media as a Tool of Social Activism: Public Theology of the Umbrella City Cyberchurch," in *Christian Social Activism and the Rule of Law in China*, edited by Yang Fenggang and Chris White (Lanham, MD: Lehigh University Press, 2021), 167–83.

[27] Marcella Althaus-Reid, "Becoming Queens: Bending Gender and Poverty on the Websites of the Excluded," in Borgman, van Erp, and Haker, eds., *Cyberspace – Cyberethics – Cybertheology*, 104.

Conclusion

What does Jerusalem have to do with the Internet, the Church with Zuckerberg's Facebook, the Christian with the social media influencer? It goes without saying that digital culture should not be met with unbridled optimism. Along with the direct challenges it brings, we are confronted with indirect obstacles as well. Digital technologies accentuate hierarchies of resourcing. What exists only in the digital leaves behind those who do not have the right access or right abilities, resulting in a world of digital haves and digital have-nots, digital rich and digital poor. We may also consider how, with the rise of digital culture, especially in a post-COVID-19 world, humans have collectively invested in new gadgets and new habits. If computer scientists Gordon Moore and David House are correct, computer chip performances double in speed every 18 months, leaving us with significant ecological costs. How do such demands compare with the call to seek *Shalom* in creation?[28]

The digital, indeed, creates a culture. This digital culture translates other cultures—those that develop out of human societies such as Confucian, Hindu, postmodern, or various indigenous cultures, as well as technological cultures from the most natural instruments of vocal cords and body language, to the most unnatural instruments of pipe organ and printing press and microprocessor. As the boundaries between the online and offline become blurred, these translations go in multiple directions. Digital culture reflects and encounters and changes people's day-to-day lived situations. Through this newcomer "digital culture," we are reintroduced to multiple streams that animate Christianity, now in a digital key.

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[28] Randy S. Woodley, *Shalom and the Community of Creation: An Indigenous Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012).

Scholars in media studies tend to prioritise the medium, encapsulated in Marshall McLuhan's dictum, "The medium is the message." While many Christians are preoccupied with the sanctity of the message—the *Logos* or the Word—others are preoccupied with the medium of that message—that is, the flesh, through the Incarnation. Yet it is not only about the Christian message conveyed through particular media, but also the new modes that digital culture and all other cultures enable. They offer new ways for people to experience and perceive and practice the Christian religion. The mode is also the message.