THE SOCIAL MEDIA AND RELIGION – NEW CHALLENGES

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Abstract: In this paper we analyze the relationship between social media and religion. The subject of the research is to identify the power and the practical relevance of two spheres which are of utmost importance for more adequate understanding recent reality. According to Stewart Hoover '' religion and media seem to be ever more connected as we move further into the twenty – first century '' (Hoover, 2006:1). Today, social media increasingly become part of our daily lives; people will find new ways to interact with religion and spirituality. The main goal is to explore the power of social media, and attend to the ways in which these digital technologies are reconstituting and transforming the religious practices of the modern humans. Increasingly, people are religious or spiritual or inspired by religious texts, but only because they have chosen to plug in and engage with social media. The paper emphasizes the role of social media to represent a new challenge to individuals and institutions. This new challenge will create a networked religion, a networked community; convergent practice; and a multisite reality.

Keywords: social media, religion, changes, new challenge, network

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Introduction

The interest for studying the relationship between the social media and the religion in the social sciences is relatively recent. In the past, the focus was mainly on the issues of whether media change the religion or religion changes media? In that light, David Morgan notes that 1970 has led scholars to frame the study of religion and media in terms that decenter religion and media from traditional, institutionally dominated definitions, refocusing on the intersection of institutions, authorities, and productions with popular practices, circulation, and reception (Morgan, 2008: xiii). Such change in the treatment of the issue of media and religion is one of the most important re-organizations of the theoretical thought of social thinkers. This turning point was a result of the tendencies of the social sciences to give critical examination to their traditions, as well as to innovate their theoretical and methodological approach, and of course, it was influenced by the global changes in the past several decades. Stewart Hoover, the most renowned author in the field of research of the relationship between the media and religion, states that it is no longer possible to think of religion and media as separate spheres. The two are now converging on one another. This convergence is being brought about by important changes in "religion" and in "media". The issue is more complex than only how the media frame religion or how religions and religious people use media. He points out two traditions concerning these issues. The first one concerns the religion in the media as a study of the main institutionalized religions (Roman- Catholicism, East Orthodoxy, Protestantism, Islam) and their discourse as represented in the media and the effects created on the individuals, religious institutions and the society (Hoover, 2008: 4). The second tradition concerns the media as a religion, as Hoover finds them to be inter-connected and do not exclude each other. He notices that the media and the religion occupy the same spaces, serve very similar purposes and give life to the same activities of the late modernism (Hoover, 2006: 9). These standings clearly indicate the conclusion that the relationship between the media and the religion is very complex and mutually conditioned, and therefore it is necessary that these issues are studied integrally.

1. The relationship of the social media and religion

Social media and religion are phenomena that mark almost every modern society. In the last decades social sciences mark increased interest in both, especially the science of sociology. Sociologists see these phenomena as a dynamic relationship built on their mutual connection and interdependence and use them to explain the changes that occur in certain socio-cultural realities. This relationship is recognized in the McLuhan's syntagma of a "global village", striving to mark the time of our period for which the awareness of the world as a whole is rising with the help of the social media, which make the differences between individuals, groups, space and time less relevant. Concerning that, Kevin Robbins notes that today, human civilization is facing a new technological order. It means a new media system that consists of global infrastructures that are in

process of interaction with the networks that are formed around the Internet, in the imagination of individuals, in the policies of governments. As an example of this new order, Kevin Robbins highlights the computer as an omnipotent symbol of possibility, as a medium that has the capacity to simulate reality. Communication achieved using a computer becomes a computer mediated communication, where the old, traditional forms of communication are abandoned. In fact, that communication is performed in some other imaginary world or according to Kevin Robbins, in the imagined virtual reality (Robins, 1996: 22). Hence, the Internet has a primary role for promoting the religion in the world. This industry, as a part of our society, is an important force that has an influence in shaping the social reality, which still shapes the culture and its identifiers. Therefore, the adaptation of the local societies and cultures to the modern times becomes a necessity. The world is more and more integrated, as a mosaic consisting of different socio-cultural realities.

We isolate this particular concentration as relevant for explaining the power of the social media and religion. Their power has been mediated in many ways, but it is obvious that the technological transformations through digital communication, computer networking and global-local communication have a definitive role in the integration of the world as a whole. The dependence and the integration gain in intensity in all areas of social living from real to virtual society. Today, virtual reality is the basis upon which the new media establishment is built aiming towards creation of opportunities for new types of communities.

In the literature, the term "virtual community" means creation of a new form of community, which directly (on-line) connects the individuals and groups based on their mutual needs, interests and values (Rheingold, 1993: 6). In other words, this is an interactive network organized for a certain purpose, which leads the users toward their on-line- memberships. For the contemporary individual this is a place where one could escape from reality (from the real society) and articulate virtually one's culture, religion. Actually, every individual, regardless of the national, territorial, religious, class race, gender, ethical or language affiliation is connected to networks of media, out of which one could use channels and platforms of choice, depending on personal interests, needs and tastes. According to Caleb Carr and Rebecca Hayes, social media are "internet-based, disentrained, and persistent channels of mass personal communication facilitating perceptions of interactions among users, deriving value primarily from user-generated content" (Carr and Hayes, 2015: 49). The social media, primarily, are new media that play a crucial role in the online sociability, dominated by a new type of communication, which Castells defines as mass self-communication (Castells, 2009). According to him, this is self-communication, which per its nature allows the individual to generate a message and direct it towards potential recipients, and also, allows independent selection of the contents that will be transmitted to the recipient (Castells, 2009: 55). This helps in creating a universal communication platform which supports the sharing of messages on various social life topics among individuals, groups, organizations. All of them express the importance of forming dominating beliefs in the world and the utmost values; what

is good and what is bad, what is negative and what is positive, moral or evil. And so, they help the individual to transcend fears and uncertainties to which one is inevitably exposed in life. Such relations persist and they are not only formal or temporary – or occasioned by certain holidays – but they are rather effective and defy geographical distances and social mobility of the individual. This is enabled by the speeding globalization processes, which entered energetically into modern societies and in the last decades, created changes especially in the media and the methods of communication. As noted by Lev Manovich, the media identity went through dramatic changes resulting in new media governed by their own principles. According to him, these are the principles of numeric media coding, modular structure of media operations, automatization of many operations in the process of creating media contents, changeability and transcoding, as crucial consequences from connecting computers to media (Manovich, 2001). Hence, it is ever more noticeable the influence of the social media and the changes in the religion. In that context, the following changes may be identified: first, increased use of religious contents via social media leads to changes towards establishment of online religion; second, creation of new religious locations (virtual) with the help of communication technologies influences the religious experience and practices; third, the rise in number of religious sites and individuals bring upon institutionalization of the relationship between the social media and religion; four, the increased religious communication via social media increases the power of the individuals, religious leaders, organizations which participate in the creation of a shared religious identity. These changes are interpreted by Heidi Campbell in her work, Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practices in New Media Worlds. Here, she suggests that in an era marked by social media we see that religious self -expression and representation has become an accepted part of religious identity and practice. On the global network, Jesus has his own Facebook page, Buddha tweets, and you can download a variety of religions mobile phone apps that can help you pray towards Mecca or connect with the Pope (Campbell, 2013: 10). Very similar standing is expressed by Sophie Zviadadze. She states that today religiosity is manifested not only in a traditional form of piety (church attendances, observance of rituals) but also in expression of religion in new media (clerics preaching on YouTube, a church bell as a ringtone on a mobile phone and a picture of a church as a desktop photo) (Zviadadze, 2014: 164). Such conceptions point out the possibilities of the social media to act as intermediaries in brining religion to the believers, thereby suggesting to them to accept the existing establishment. In that light, the sociologists Deana Rohlinger, brings about the thesis that "new media can be a powerful tool for religious leaders. Priests, reverends, ministers, rabbis, and imams can use websites, blogs, and social media to show us how they live their faith and communicate with us in a more direct way'' (Rohlinger, 2019: 89). This type of communication provides for the individuals and groups all over the world to use, at the same time, new possibilities and tools for communication networking in order to enhance their projects, to defend their interests and at the same time to protect the values in which they believe (Castells, 2009).

2. The role of the social media in the religious promotion

The speedy and comprehensive rise in the use of social media is present in all spheres of social living and therefore it turns into a crucial channel for exchange of ideas, dialogues and stimulating interaction of individuals and groups in a virtual manner. Hence, the literature on social media offers an abundance of works in which the authors try to group and classify the social media concepts depending on their social and ideological position. According to van Dijk "the role of the media is therefore to provide order to the information world by linking broadcasters with users'' (van Dijk, 2006:26). A very interesting classification can be found in the work of Alfonso Montagnese. He points out that social media are connection and communication tools available only in the cyber space, which operation is based on technological hardware (Internet and mobile networks) and software platforms (Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, LinkedIn, YouTube etc.), thanks to which the users can communicate with each other, share various types of contents (video, photography, picture, text, audio and other types of recordings), they can built and reinforce networks in one or more areas (professional, family, social, cultural, religious, political etc.) and they can develop and define their own identity (Montagnese, 2012 :5). Ralph Schroeder develops a very similar standing and notes that everywhere social media are proliferating and becoming more differentiated. From the original function of connecting "friends" (university classmates), these sites now connect more and less outward facing groups (for example, some use them within the family, some for presenting the family to the world at large, some for presenting the religion); for different socializing purposes (WhatsApp for messaging, Pinterest and Instagram for sharing hobbies and photos, and YouTube for sharing videos). Beyond social media, there are other tools for sociability, such as Skype for video communication. And beyond sociability, there is even greater differentiation: for work, with LinkedIn; journalists forming separate cliques with their own followings on Twitter, celebrities becoming marketers and advertisers on Twitter and YouTube, and many more (Schroeder, 2016: 5630). In the presentation of the religious topics via social media and live services, they enable the users to post and share messages and to be present in thousands of homes at the same time. Many research materials demonstrated that the social media share messages with contents that includes religious ideals and activities (Helland, 2012). The sociologist Paul McClure, in the article 'Tinkering with Technology and Religion in the Digital Age: The Effects of Internet Use on Religious Belief, Behavior, and Belonging' (2017), analyzes the relationship between the technology and religion and notes that "many of us spend a lot of our time on the Internet, which makes us more prone to understanding our religious participation as individuals that can connect with the abundance of religious ideas – even opposing ones, from opposing religions".

According to the data from Socialbakers (http://www.socialbakers.com/statistic/25.03.2020

), it is evident that most shared Facebook pages in 2020, or pages with largest audiences are those concerning sports, music, food and religion. Concerning the topic of religion, the most shared Facebook pages are Jerusalem Prayer Team with number of fans 73 497 648, Jesus Daily with number of fans 35 289 640. These data shows that Facebook plays a huge role in the promotion of a certain religion, as well as in advertising religious messages, religious books, and publishing of images and videos of religious leaders that can be seen on smart phones of the users. This enables the users to see one video multiple times, to share it and comment it with different people from all over the world.

Gabriel Faimau and Camden Behrens, affirm the idea of *shared identity* which is created as a result of interactions on Facebook, in order to get to a more integrated explanation of the nature of the social media (Faimau, Behrens, 2016: 82). They note that the shared religious identity, together with various affiliations, determines the status of the individual. For them, the religious Facebook user, the religious identity of the person who provided the religious autobiographical narrative is now his/her 'second self'. As a platform, Facebook therefore empowers religious Facebook users "to create and perform religious identity online and allows for religious identity performance (82). So, these types of interactions motivate proliferation of new identities, social groups and organizations. All these new identities, groups and organization require to be acknowledged in the public sphere as such, regardless of their aspirations and regardless if they defy the establishment or want to get integrated, or once integrated want to transform it or change it. As Campbell suggests these are the results of the needs of the individuals for personalized religious experience (Campbell, 2005). This individual (user) experience can be noticed through the channels that have a practical role in the acquisition of the religious education (see religteacher.com) and religious perspectives. In that context, we can see the applications such as PrayWithMe.com, Instapray, which enable prayer and spiritual connection at the same time. These applications give excellent tools for managing the prayer in a safe, digital environment, so that the individual can express themselves free of the secular distances. In that way, the religious experience and practices, as shared on the social media, enable the participation of the modern individual free of special and temporal dimensions. In addition, the religious websites play a crucial part as they transmit the religious communication to the users/believers, groups and institutions and have the potential to attract new ones. These websites share information of a certain religion, its symbols, practices, scriptures and literature.

Table 1. Mostly visited religious social networking sites

Mostly visited sites in the World	Christianity	Islam	Judaism
Google.com	Jw.org	Islamonline.net	Jpost.com
Youtube.com	Biblegateway.com	Islam.ru	Chabad.org
Facebook.com	Biblehub.com	Qantara.de	Inn.co.il

Yahoo.com	Biblestudytools.com	Albalagh.net	Forward.com
Amazon.com	Blueletterbible.org	Milligazette.com	Myjewishlearning.com
Wikipedia.org	Gotquestions.org	Muslimnews.co.uk	Jewishvirtuallibrary.org
Twitter.com	Christianbook.com	Islamicbulletin.org	Aish.com

Source: Top sites on WEB. You can read it on: http://www.alexa.com/topsites, March, 30th, 2020

From these data, it may be concluded that the Internet is the largest global worldwide network. Initially, it was used for exchanging messages between individuals and groups, and nowadays the Internet is more used for communication, information, religion, education, entertainment, commerce and many other activities. Presented data lead us to a conclusion that the websites that are mostly visited globally. The data in Table 1 allude that there are specialized religious websites that are visited not only globally but locally as well. Concerning their contents, these websites are very popular with the public of the global network. Also, in terms of contents they are connected strictly with the network world, especially the browsers (Google, Yahoo), which participate in the building of a networked religion. The common feature for them is that they affirm religions through the networks, which have a global reach. In that light, networked religion refers to the online religion in general, as well as to the creative communication among religions, as it enriches the array of new technologies which give positive values to each society. According to Cambell, networked religion is defined by core five characteristics:

Networked community suggests communities function as loose social networks with varying levels of religious affiliation and commitment. This transforms notions of membership in fixed, geographically- bound community to highlight the fact that people live simultaneously in multiple social networks that are emergent, varying in depth, fluid, and highly personalized.

Storied identity offers an understanding of the religious self which is malleable rather than fixed, yet unified through connecting to a select narrative. Individuals are able to assemble and perform their identity online in new ways through digital resources which are also used to connect this identity to a common group or experience to solidify meaning. This reflects changing perceptions of the nature of the self within wider society.

Shifting authority notes that there is a shift occurring within traditional religious power structures through the institution of new gatekeepers and authority roles and structures online. This means authority within a networked structure creates challenges between new and old authorities, as offline leaders seek to solidify their position and control in the face of newly empowered sources, raising issues of legitimacy, authenticity, and status within the social sphere.

Convergent practice outlines the blending of religious rituals and information from multiple sources in ways that build a self-directed form of spiritual engagement online. Here networked interaction creates new possibilities for highly individualized and hybridized traditional/innovative forms of practice and modes of knowing.

Multi-site reality suggests that the online world is consciously and unconsciously imprinted by users' offline values, so online ways of being are informed by patterns of life offline. This means there is a strong interconnection and potential movement between online and offline contexts, expectation, and behaviors. This ideological overlap guides individuals' network interactions (Campbell, 2012: 91-92).

Conclusion

In the analysis of the social media and religion in this paper we tried to address the recent trends on a global level, by focusing on the profound changes that occurred in the relationship between the social media and religion. In that context, we paid particular attention to practicing religion via social media, in order to give insight into the more comprehensive change in the way religion is communicated. Namely, this is visible from the creation of networked religion, which motivates less rigid religious affiliations and less formal and static adherence to the traditional authoritarian structures and hierarchies. However, what remains is the domination of power in each of the networks. These are networks of actors who manifest their powers in the religious realm and thereby accomplish their goals and interests. In that context, it is necessary to develop an analytical approach, as a response to the society in which we live.

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