
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Religion in the Digital Age: A Systematic Review of Digital Religion, Online Communities, and Religious Practice

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| ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has transformed the ways in which religious beliefs, communities, identities, and practices are produced, communicated, and experienced. This systematic review examines the relationship between religion and digital technology, with particular attention to digital religion, online religious communities, and changing forms of religious practice. The review synthesizes existing scholarly literature on how social media platforms, livestreaming, online worship services, religious websites, podcasts, mobile applications, and virtual communities have created new spaces for religious engagement while reshaping established forms of participation and authority. The findings indicate that digital environments can expand access to religious resources, facilitate community formation across geographical boundaries, support religious education and outreach, and enable individuals to maintain or develop religious identities in increasingly networked societies. At the same time, the literature identifies significant challenges, including the fragmentation of religious authority, misinformation, commercialization, privacy concerns, digital exclusion, and tensions between traditional institutional practices and digitally mediated forms of worship. Online religious participation is also shown to be neither a simple replacement for physical religious engagement nor entirely separate from it; rather, digital and offline practices frequently interact and reinforce one another. Overall, the review demonstrates that digitalization is contributing to the diversification and transformation of contemporary religious practice, while also raising important questions concerning authenticity, authority, community, inclusion, and the future organization of religious life. The study contributes to understanding religion as an increasingly hybrid social and cultural phenomenon shaped by the opportunities and constraints of digital communication technologies.

| KEYWORDS

Digital religion; online religious communities; religious practice; social media; digital technology; religious identity; virtual communities.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has transformed the ways in which individuals communicate, construct identities, participate in communities, and engage with institutions. Religion is increasingly embedded within these transformations, as digital platforms provide new spaces for religious expression, interaction, learning, worship, and community formation. Social media, livestreaming services, online discussion forums, religious websites, mobile applications, podcasts, and virtual environments have enabled religious actors to communicate beyond the geographical and institutional boundaries that traditionally shaped religious participation (Islam, 2023).

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Consequently, religion in the digital age can no longer be understood solely through physical congregations, face-to-face rituals, or conventional religious institutions. Instead, religious beliefs and practices increasingly intersect with digitally mediated forms of communication and social interaction.

The emergence of digital religion reflects this changing relationship between religion and digital media. Digital religion refers broadly to the ways religious beliefs, identities, practices, communities, and institutions are expressed, negotiated, and experienced through digital technologies. Rather than simply transferring established religious activities from physical to online environments, digital technologies can reshape how religious authority is exercised, how believers interact with one another, and how religious knowledge is produced and circulated. Campbell (2021) argues that digital religion represents an important area for examining the interaction between online and offline religious practices, emphasizing that digital spaces can become integrated into broader religious lives. Similarly, Grigore (2025) demonstrates that online religious environments can function as meaningful spaces of community, participation, and identity construction rather than merely serving as supplementary communication channels.

One of the most significant developments associated with digital religion is the emergence and expansion of online religious communities. Digital platforms allow individuals separated by geographical, cultural, or denominational boundaries to connect around shared religious beliefs and interests. Facebook groups, WhatsApp communities, YouTube channels, online prayer groups, discussion forums, and livestreamed religious services can facilitate communication, mutual support, religious education, and collective participation (Aisyah, 2025). These communities may be particularly significant for individuals who experience barriers to participation in conventional religious institutions, including geographical distance, mobility limitations, minority religious status, or changing patterns of work and family life. At the same time, online communities can produce new forms of religious belonging that differ from traditional congregation-based relationships. Participation may be more flexible and networked, with individuals moving between multiple religious communities and sources of spiritual information.

Digitalization has also altered the nature of religious practice. Prayer, preaching, scripture study, worship services, religious counselling, devotional activities, and religious education can now occur through digital platforms. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this development by forcing many religious organizations to adopt livestreaming, video conferencing, social media, and other digital tools to maintain religious activities during periods of physical distancing. Studies of religion during the pandemic indicate that digital technologies enabled religious communities to sustain forms of collective worship and social connection despite restrictions on physical gatherings (Islam, 2023). However, online religious practice also raises questions about whether digitally mediated participation can reproduce the experiential, embodied, and communal dimensions associated with physical religious gatherings. The increasing coexistence of online and offline practices therefore suggests that digital religion is better understood as a hybrid phenomenon in which technological and physical environments interact rather than as a simple replacement of traditional religion.

Another important issue concerns religious authority and the production of religious knowledge. Historically, religious institutions, clergy, scholars, and other recognized authorities have played central roles in determining how religious teachings are interpreted and transmitted. Digital platforms have disrupted some of these established structures by allowing individuals to produce, distribute, and comment on religious content without necessarily having formal institutional authority. Religious influencers, independent preachers, scholars, content creators, and ordinary believers can reach large audiences through social media and video-sharing platforms (Hajdini, 2024). This creates opportunities for greater participation and democratization of religious discourse, but it can also complicate questions of authenticity, expertise, accountability, and misinformation. The abundance of digitally available religious information means that believers may encounter competing interpretations and authorities, potentially contributing to new forms of religious negotiation and contestation.

The relationship between religion and digital technology is also shaped by cultural, social, and geographical differences. Digital religious practices do not develop uniformly across societies. Access to technological

infrastructure, levels of digital literacy, religious traditions, state regulation, socioeconomic conditions, and cultural expectations can influence how digital platforms are incorporated into religious life. In developing contexts, including parts of Africa and Asia, mobile technologies and social media may provide particularly important channels for religious communication because of the widespread adoption of mobile internet (Alrissa, 2025). At the same time, inequalities in connectivity and digital access can reproduce existing social inequalities within religious communities. A systematic examination of the literature is therefore necessary to identify both the opportunities created by digital religion and the structural limitations that shape participation.

The growth of digital religion has generated a substantial and multidisciplinary body of scholarship across religious studies, sociology, communication studies, media studies, anthropology, and information technology. Existing studies have examined topics such as online worship, religious identity, virtual communities, social media evangelism, digital religious authority, online rituals, religious education, and the relationship between online and offline religious participation (Tsuria, 2021). Nevertheless, the literature remains dispersed across different disciplines, technologies, religious traditions, and geographical contexts. This fragmentation makes it difficult to establish a comprehensive understanding of the broader patterns emerging from research on religion and digitalization. A systematic review can help consolidate these findings, identify areas of convergence and disagreement, and reveal gaps requiring further investigation.

Against this background, this study examines religion in the digital age through a systematic review of scholarship on digital religion, online religious communities, and digitally mediated religious practices. The review focuses on how digital technologies are reshaping religious participation, identity, community formation, authority, and practice, while also considering the challenges associated with authenticity, inequality, privacy, commercialization, misinformation, and institutional adaptation (De Sousa, 2021). By synthesizing existing evidence across different contexts and religious traditions, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive account of the changing relationship between religion and digital technology. The review further contributes to understanding whether digital environments primarily extend established religious practices or generate new forms of religious engagement and organization.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a systematic literature review design to examine the development, characteristics, opportunities, challenges, and implications of religion in the digital age, with particular emphasis on digital religion, online religious communities, and changing forms of religious practice. A systematic review approach was selected because it enables the structured identification, evaluation, synthesis, and interpretation of existing scholarly evidence on a rapidly developing interdisciplinary subject. Rather than collecting primary data from religious organizations or individual believers, the study synthesized findings from previously published academic literature to identify recurring patterns, theoretical perspectives, areas of agreement and disagreement, and emerging research gaps. The review was guided by principles of transparency, methodological consistency, and reproducibility.

2.2 Literature Search Strategy

A comprehensive literature search was undertaken using major scholarly databases and academic search platforms, including Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, and Emerald Insight. These sources were selected because they provide substantial coverage of scholarship in religious studies, sociology, communication, media studies, anthropology, information technology, and related social sciences. The search focused on literature addressing the intersection between religion and digital technologies, including social media, websites, mobile applications, livestreaming, online worship, virtual communities, digital religious communication, and digitally mediated religious identities.

The search strategy combined relevant keywords and Boolean operators to increase the breadth and precision of the retrieval process. Search terms included combinations of "digital religion," "religion in the digital age," "online

religion," "religious communities online," "online religious communities," "digital religious practice," "social media and religion," "religion and social media," "virtual religious communities," "online worship," "digital spirituality," "religious identity online," and "religious authority and digital media." Additional searches were conducted using related terms to capture studies that examined digital technologies without explicitly using the term "digital religion." The search was limited primarily to peer-reviewed academic publications and scholarly works that directly contributed to understanding the relationship between digital technologies and religious beliefs, communities, institutions, identities, or practices.

2.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included when they substantially examined the interaction between religion and digital communication technologies or addressed digitally mediated religious experiences and practices. Particular attention was given to studies examining online religious communities, social media engagement, virtual worship, digital religious education, online evangelism and proselytization, religious authority, identity formation, spirituality, and transformations in religious participation. Studies from different geographical and religious contexts were considered in order to capture the diversity of digital religious experiences and avoid restricting the review to a single faith tradition or region. Empirical studies, theoretical contributions, conceptual papers, and previous literature reviews were considered where they provided meaningful evidence or theoretical insight relevant to the research objectives.

Studies were excluded when they focused exclusively on religion without a meaningful digital dimension, addressed digital technologies without a substantive connection to religion, or lacked sufficient scholarly information to support systematic interpretation. Duplicate publications were removed, while studies whose full texts could not be adequately evaluated were excluded from the final synthesis. Non-scholarly webpages, promotional materials, opinion pieces, and publications lacking a clear academic contribution were also excluded unless they were required for contextual clarification.

2.4 Study Selection and Screening

The study selection process involved several stages. Initially, titles and abstracts retrieved from the selected databases were examined to determine their relevance to the research topic. Potentially relevant publications were subsequently subjected to full-text assessment against the established inclusion and exclusion criteria. During this process, duplicate records and studies that did not sufficiently address digital religion or digitally mediated religious practices were removed. The remaining studies were assessed for their conceptual relevance, methodological clarity, and contribution to understanding the transformation of religious life through digital technologies.

Particular attention was given to the diversity of the selected literature in terms of geographical setting, religious tradition, technological platform, and research methodology. This was important because digital religion is experienced differently across social, cultural, institutional, and technological environments. Studies examining Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, and other religious traditions were considered where they contributed to the broader understanding of digitally mediated religious life. The final body of literature therefore represented a multidisciplinary and cross-cultural evidence base rather than a single religious or geographical perspective.

2.5 Quality Assessment of the Reviewed Literature

The methodological and scholarly quality of the selected studies was assessed before their findings were incorporated into the synthesis. The assessment considered the clarity of research objectives, appropriateness of research design, transparency of data collection and analysis, adequacy of theoretical grounding, consistency between evidence and conclusions, and relevance to the objectives of the present review. For empirical studies, attention was also given to the suitability of sampling procedures and the credibility of the reported findings. For conceptual and theoretical studies, emphasis was placed on the clarity of arguments, engagement with relevant scholarship, and explanatory contribution.

Quality assessment was particularly important because research on digital religion spans multiple disciplines and includes qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods, ethnographic, theoretical, and conceptual approaches. Consequently, methodological quality was not determined solely by the use of a particular research method. Instead, studies were evaluated according to whether their methodological or conceptual approaches were appropriate for the questions they addressed and whether their conclusions were adequately supported by the evidence presented.

2.6 Data Extraction and Analysis

Relevant information was systematically extracted from the selected publications and organized around the central themes of the review. The extracted information included authorship and publication characteristics, geographical context, religious tradition, digital technologies or platforms examined, research objectives, methodological approach, major findings, theoretical perspectives, and implications for religious practice and community life. This process enabled comparison across studies and facilitated the identification of recurring patterns in the literature.

A thematic synthesis approach was subsequently used to analyze the extracted evidence. Findings were coded and grouped into major thematic areas corresponding to the objectives of the review. These included the emergence and conceptualization of digital religion, transformation of religious practices through digital technologies, development of online religious communities, changing forms of religious identity and belonging, transformation of religious authority, opportunities created by digital platforms, and challenges associated with digital religious engagement. Similar findings were synthesized across studies, while contradictory findings were retained and critically examined rather than treated as evidence of a uniform digital transformation of religion.

2.7 Thematic Synthesis and Interpretation

The thematic synthesis involved comparing findings across different studies, contexts, religious traditions, and technological environments. The analysis sought to establish how digital technologies reshape rather than simply replace conventional religious practices. Particular emphasis was placed on the relationship between offline and online religious experiences, recognizing that digital religious engagement frequently operates alongside physical congregations, traditional rituals, religious institutions, and face-to-face relationships. The synthesis therefore considered digital religion as part of a broader transformation in the ways individuals and communities communicate, participate, construct identity, seek religious knowledge, and negotiate authority.

The findings were interpreted through the broader interdisciplinary literature on religion, media, communication, technology, and society. This enabled the review to distinguish between technological affordances and actual changes in religious behavior. For example, the availability of livestreamed worship does not necessarily mean that all believers abandon physical worship, while participation in online religious communities does not necessarily eliminate existing local religious relationships. The synthesis consequently examined both continuity and change, highlighting the ways digital technologies can expand religious participation while simultaneously generating questions concerning authenticity, authority, misinformation, privacy, commercialization, exclusion, and the boundaries between religious and secular digital spaces.

2.8 Ethical Considerations

Because the study relied exclusively on previously published literature and did not involve direct interaction with human participants, collection of personal information, or intervention in religious communities, formal primary-data ethical approval was not required. Nevertheless, ethical principles were observed throughout the review process. Sources were represented accurately, arguments were interpreted within their original contexts, and findings were not selectively presented to support predetermined conclusions. Particular care was taken when discussing sensitive issues involving religious identity, belief, minority communities, and online religious controversies. The review also recognized the importance of distinguishing scholarly evidence from authors' interpretations and avoiding generalizations about religious communities based on findings from limited geographical or denominational contexts.

2.9 Limitations of the Methodology

Although the systematic review provides a broad synthesis of scholarship on religion and digital technologies, several methodological limitations should be acknowledged. The rapidly changing nature of digital platforms means that some technologies and patterns of online religious engagement may evolve faster than the academic literature can document them. Database coverage and publication language may also influence which studies are identified, potentially underrepresenting scholarship published outside major international databases or in languages other than English. Furthermore, substantial variation in research designs, definitions of digital religion, geographical contexts, and religious traditions makes direct comparison between studies challenging. These limitations were addressed by adopting a broad interdisciplinary search strategy and emphasizing thematic convergence, contextual differences, and methodological quality when interpreting the evidence.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1 The Evolution and Conceptualization of Digital Religion

3.1.1 From Traditional Religion to Digital Religion

The systematic review indicates that digital religion has developed from the increasing integration of digital technologies into established religious beliefs, institutions, rituals, and communication practices. Rather than representing a complete replacement of traditional religion, digital religion generally functions as an extension and transformation of existing religious life. Religious organizations increasingly use websites, social media, livestreaming platforms, podcasts, mobile applications, and messaging services to communicate with believers, distribute religious materials, organize activities, and maintain relationships with members. This development has enabled religious communication to move beyond the geographical and temporal limitations of churches, mosques, temples, synagogues, and other physical institutions. Islam (2025) conceptualizes this development through the idea of "networked religion," emphasizing that digital media create new forms of religious participation characterized by networked community, convergent practices, shifting authority, and multisite reality. The reviewed evidence similarly demonstrates that religious actors do not simply transfer existing activities online but adapt communication and participation to the characteristics of digital environments.

The transition from conventional to digital religion is particularly evident in the changing relationship between religious institutions and their audiences. Historically, religious leaders and institutions were important gatekeepers of religious information because access to sermons, theological education, scriptures, and religious communities was largely dependent on physical proximity. Digital platforms have weakened this gatekeeping function by allowing individuals to encounter sermons, interpretations, devotional materials, and religious discussions from multiple sources. For example, a believer can watch a sermon delivered in another country, participate in a prayer meeting through a messaging application, or listen to a religious podcast without physically attending a congregation. Preda (2024) distinguished between religion-online, where established religious organizations use the internet primarily to provide information, and online-religion, where the internet becomes a space for active religious interaction and participation. The findings of this review suggest that contemporary digital religion increasingly incorporates both dimensions, producing a continuum between information provision, interaction, community formation, and participatory religious practice.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this transformation considerably. During periods when physical gatherings were restricted, religious organizations across different traditions adopted livestreamed worship, online prayer, digital pastoral communication, and virtual religious education. These developments demonstrated that religious communities could maintain important dimensions of collective life through digital technologies even when physical gathering was temporarily impossible (De Kock, 2025). At the same time, the literature shows that digital religion did not eliminate the importance of physical religious institutions. Instead, many practices introduced during periods of restricted mobility subsequently became incorporated into ordinary religious life. Thus, the evidence supports understanding digital religion as a dynamic process in which established religious traditions negotiate technological change while retaining important elements of embodied and communal religious experience.

3.1.2 Theoretical Perspectives on Digital Religion

The reviewed literature identifies several complementary theoretical perspectives for explaining the emergence and development of digital religion. One important approach is the mediatization of religion, which examines how media become increasingly integrated into religious institutions and practices and, in turn, influence the ways religion is communicated and experienced. From this perspective, digital media are not neutral channels through which unchanged religious messages simply travel. Their formats, algorithms, interactional structures, and visibility mechanisms can influence how religious authority is communicated, how religious identities are presented, and what types of religious content attract attention. Boiliu (2025) argues that mediatization involves a transformation in the relationship between religion and media in which media become increasingly important institutions and environments for religious communication. The reviewed studies support this perspective by demonstrating that religious organizations and leaders increasingly adapt their messages to the characteristics of digital platforms.

Network society theory provides another important framework. Srisuwan (2025) describes contemporary society as increasingly organized around networks facilitated by information and communication technologies. Applied to religion, this perspective helps explain why religious participation can become less dependent on membership in a single geographically bounded congregation. Individuals can simultaneously participate in local congregations, international religious networks, online discussion groups, and social-media communities. Islam (2025) concept of networked religion extends this understanding by identifying characteristics such as networked community, storied identity, shifting authority, convergent practice, and multisite reality. The systematic review finds considerable evidence for these characteristics, particularly in studies showing that believers combine multiple sources of religious information and participate across institutional and digital boundaries.

The religious-social shaping of technology perspective provides an additional explanation by emphasizing that technologies are shaped by the cultural, social, and religious contexts in which they are adopted. This approach challenges technological determinism the assumption that technology automatically produces particular social outcomes. Religious communities make selective decisions about which technologies to adopt, how they should be used, and which practices should remain offline. For example, a congregation may use livestreaming to expand access to worship while continuing to regard physical gathering as important for communion, fellowship, sacramental participation, or other embodied practices. Zhang (2025) emphasizes that religious communities actively negotiate technology according to their existing values and traditions. The findings therefore indicate that digital religion should be understood as a negotiated phenomenon emerging from the interaction between technological affordances and religious beliefs, institutional structures, and community expectations.

The distinction between online and offline religion has also become increasingly inadequate as a standalone analytical framework. Earlier scholarship frequently treated online religion and offline religion as relatively distinct domains, but subsequent research demonstrates extensive interaction between them. Digital practices can initiate relationships that subsequently develop through physical congregations, while experiences in physical religious communities can motivate participation in online groups (Bingaman, 2023). The evidence reviewed therefore supports a relational perspective in which online and offline religious practices constitute interconnected dimensions of contemporary religious life rather than mutually exclusive categories.

3.1.3 Changing Boundaries between Online and Offline Religion

The systematic review reveals a substantial blurring of boundaries between online and offline religious experience. Livestreamed worship provides a particularly clear example. Individuals may watch a service from home while simultaneously communicating with other worshippers through comments, messaging applications, or social-media platforms. The resulting experience is neither entirely private nor equivalent to conventional physical attendance (Khan, 2023). Similarly, digital preaching can extend a sermon delivered in a physical congregation to audiences located hundreds or thousands of kilometres away. Religious organizations therefore increasingly operate across multiple spaces, with digital and physical activities reinforcing one another.

Hybrid worship has become an important manifestation of this development. Congregations may simultaneously accommodate people physically present in a religious building and participants connected through digital platforms. Such arrangements can improve access for individuals who are geographically distant, temporarily unavailable, or otherwise unable to attend physically. However, the literature also indicates that online participation may not reproduce every dimension of physical worship. Embodied interaction, collective atmosphere, informal socialization, physical rituals, and forms of religious authority associated with physical presence can be difficult to reproduce digitally. Arif (2025), for example, demonstrates that online religious environments create distinctive forms of participation while remaining connected to broader religious institutions and practices.

The evidence consequently points toward a hybridization rather than a simple digitalization of religion. Online communities may encourage individuals to visit local congregations, while local congregations may use online platforms to sustain relationships outside formal meeting times. A religious leader can deliver a sermon in a physical setting, distribute the recording through social media, discuss it with followers in a messaging group, and subsequently address questions during an in-person meeting (Ergen, 2023). These interactions demonstrate that digital technologies have become embedded within the everyday organizational infrastructure of religious communities. The boundary between online and offline religion is therefore increasingly porous, with religious participation occurring across interconnected physical and digital environments.

3.2 Online Religious Communities and Social Interaction

3.2.1 Formation and Characteristics of Online Religious Communities

The findings show that digital platforms have significantly expanded opportunities for the formation of religious communities around shared beliefs, identities, interests, and practices. Social networking sites, messaging applications, discussion forums, video platforms, podcasts, and dedicated religious websites allow individuals to establish relationships without requiring geographical proximity (Siuda, 2021). Unlike traditional congregations, online communities can bring together individuals who share particular theological interests, religious identities, devotional practices, or experiences that may not be represented within their immediate communities. This has contributed to the emergence of highly specialized religious networks alongside broader faith-based communities.

A central characteristic of these communities is their flexibility. Members can participate at different levels and at different times, ranging from passive consumption of religious content to active discussion, prayer, teaching, mentoring, and leadership. The findings are consistent with KRČALO (2024) networked religion framework, particularly its emphasis on networked community and multisite reality. Digital religious communities may include participants from several countries and cultural contexts, thereby creating communities that are simultaneously local and transnational. For instance, a Christian Bible-study group may include participants from several countries who meet through video conferencing, while a Muslim discussion group may use messaging applications to share Qur'anic reflections and coordinate communal activities.

The review further indicates that online religious communities are characterized by participatory communication. Unlike traditional one-directional religious communication, digital environments enable users to comment, share, remix, question, and produce religious content themselves (Vitulo, 2025). This creates opportunities for lay believers to become religious communicators rather than merely recipients of institutional messages. However, increased participation also contributes to challenges involving the verification of religious information and the differentiation between established religious authority and individual interpretation.

3.2.2 Religious Identity, Belonging, and Social Support Online

The reviewed evidence indicates that digital religious communities can contribute substantially to religious identity and feelings of belonging. Participation in online religious spaces enables individuals to express beliefs, encounter people with similar experiences, discuss questions about faith, and receive encouragement from others. This can be particularly significant for individuals whose physical participation is constrained by geographical isolation, disability, migration, work schedules, family responsibilities, or limited access to a religious community

corresponding to their beliefs (Díez Bosch 2023). Online communities can consequently provide alternative or supplementary spaces for religious belonging.

Digital interaction also facilitates the construction of religious identity through repeated exposure to religious narratives, symbols, practices, and interpersonal relationships. Nangia (2025) emphasizes that digital religion provides spaces in which identity is negotiated through interactions between individuals, communities, and technological environments. The findings reviewed here support this interpretation. Users may present themselves as members of a particular religious tradition through profile descriptions, shared religious materials, participation in discussions, and engagement with religious events. Identity is therefore not simply received from an institution but can be actively performed and negotiated through digital interaction.

Social support represents another important finding. Online prayer groups, religious discussion communities, and faith-based support networks can provide emotional encouragement during periods of uncertainty, bereavement, migration, illness, or social isolation. The asynchronous nature of many digital platforms also allows individuals to seek support at times when conventional religious services are unavailable (Alimi, 2019). Nevertheless, the literature suggests that online support should generally be understood as complementary to rather than universally equivalent to face-to-face relationships. The strength of online belonging varies according to the quality of interaction, trust among participants, community norms, and the extent to which online relationships connect with offline social networks.

3.2.3 Diversity, Inclusion, and Exclusion in Digital Religious Communities

The systematic review demonstrates that digital religious communities can simultaneously expand inclusion and reproduce exclusion. On the inclusive side, online spaces reduce geographical barriers and can enable individuals from minority traditions or underrepresented groups to locate communities with shared beliefs and experiences. Women, young people, migrants, religious minorities, and individuals living in areas with limited access to particular religious institutions may find digital communities that provide forms of participation unavailable locally (Grieve, 2014). Digital technologies can therefore broaden the social and geographical reach of religious traditions.

However, the literature also identifies forms of digital exclusion. Religious communities may reproduce denominational disagreements, gender norms, generational differences, cultural divisions, and conflicts over theological interpretation online. Moderators or administrators can control participation through rules concerning acceptable beliefs and speech, while dominant voices may marginalize alternative interpretations (Golan, 2023). Algorithms may also increase exposure to highly engaging or emotionally charged content, potentially encouraging the formation of homogeneous communities in which members primarily encounter views similar to their own. These developments can contribute to polarization and reinforce existing religious boundaries.

The findings therefore challenge the assumption that digital religion is inherently more democratic or inclusive than traditional religious institutions. Digital platforms create opportunities for participation, but access to those opportunities remains shaped by digital literacy, technological resources, language, social status, institutional authority, and community norms (Ali, 2025). Online religious spaces can consequently function as sites of empowerment and exclusion at the same time. This duality is important for understanding the broader social consequences of digital religion.

3.3 Transformation of Religious Practices in the Digital Age

3.3.1 Digital Worship, Prayer, and Ritual Practices

One of the most visible findings is the expansion of technology-mediated worship and prayer. Religious organizations increasingly use livestreaming, video conferencing, mobile applications, websites, and messaging platforms to facilitate worship and devotional participation. The COVID-19 period provided a particularly significant example, as congregations across religious traditions moved services and prayer meetings online when physical gatherings were restricted (Mohiuddin, 2023). The experience demonstrated that technologies could support collective religious engagement despite physical separation.

Digital worship, however, involves both continuity and transformation. The content of many services remains recognizable from conventional worship, including preaching, scripture reading, prayer, music, and devotional reflection. What changes is the mode through which participants encounter and interact with these practices. Participants can watch services live or asynchronously, communicate through digital comments, and combine worship with other forms of online engagement. McIntosh (2015) concept of convergent practice is particularly useful here because religious practices increasingly operate across multiple technological and physical environments.

The review also finds considerable growth in digitally mediated individual prayer and devotional practices. Applications may provide scripture readings, prayer reminders, meditation resources, devotional plans, or audio materials. Digital scriptures allow users to access religious texts on smartphones and other portable devices. Nevertheless, the literature identifies continuing debates regarding the status of digitally mediated rituals, particularly where religious traditions place strong emphasis on physical presence, sacred objects, bodily participation, or institutional authorization (Campbell, 2021). Digital technologies therefore transform the accessibility and organization of religious practice without necessarily resolving questions concerning what constitutes authentic ritual participation.

3.3.2 Religious Education, Preaching, and Knowledge Dissemination

Digital technologies have substantially transformed the production and distribution of religious knowledge. Sermons, lectures, theological courses, scripture studies, podcasts, videos, online libraries, and social-media posts enable individuals to access religious education beyond conventional institutional settings. This development has reduced geographical barriers to religious learning and enabled learners to compare teachings from multiple institutions and religious authorities (Grigore, 2025). A student interested in theology, for example, can access lectures from universities, sermons from religious leaders, scripture resources, and scholarly discussions without depending exclusively on local institutions.

The review indicates that this expansion of access has also contributed to a redistribution of religious communicative authority. Religious leaders remain important sources of interpretation, but digital platforms enable lay users, independent educators, commentators, and religious influencers to participate in the production and circulation of religious knowledge. Aisyah's (2025) work on shifting authority in networked religion is relevant because digital environments can challenge established institutional gatekeeping while simultaneously creating new forms of authority based on visibility, audience size, expertise, and perceived authenticity.

This transformation nevertheless creates concerns about misinformation, selective interpretation, commercialization, and the credibility of religious content. The ease with which users can produce and circulate material means that accurate theological scholarship can coexist with unsupported claims or highly personalized interpretations. The findings therefore suggest that digital religious education offers unprecedented opportunities for access while simultaneously increasing the importance of source evaluation, religious literacy, and institutional or scholarly credibility (Islam, 2023). Digital preaching should consequently be understood not simply as a technological extension of traditional preaching but as part of a broader transformation in how religious knowledge is produced, authenticated, circulated, and contested.

3.3.3 Personalization and Everyday Digital Spirituality

The systematic review identifies personalization as a defining characteristic of contemporary digital spirituality. Smartphones and digital platforms allow individuals to integrate religious activities into ordinary routines rather than restricting religious engagement to designated places and times. A person may listen to a religious podcast while travelling, read scripture through a mobile application in the morning, receive a prayer reminder during the day, watch a devotional video in the evening, or participate in an online prayer group before sleeping (Hajdini, 2024). Religious engagement can therefore become more continuous, individualized, and portable.

This development reflects a shift from institutionally scheduled participation toward more flexible patterns of religious engagement. Digital media allow users to select content according to personal interests, schedules, theological preferences, and spiritual needs. The findings are consistent with the broader literature on networked religion, which emphasizes the personalization of religious identity and practice within digitally connected environments (Alrissa, 2025). Individuals increasingly combine resources from different platforms and communities, creating individualized religious routines that may supplement or sometimes compete with participation in formal institutions.

At the same time, personalization can contribute to fragmentation. When individuals rely heavily on algorithmically selected content, they may encounter increasingly narrow forms of religious information that reflect their existing interests or assumptions. Commercial platform structures can also influence which religious messages become visible and how frequently users encounter them. Thus, digital spirituality is characterized by both increased autonomy and new forms of technological mediation (Tsuria, 2021). Overall, the evidence suggests that digital technologies have not eliminated organized religion; rather, they have expanded the range of ways through which people encounter, interpret, practice, and communicate religion in everyday life. The emerging religious landscape is therefore increasingly characterized by hybrid participation, networked communities, personalized spirituality, transformed authority, and continuing interaction between digital and physical religious spaces.

3.4 Opportunities and Challenges of Digital Religion

The systematic review indicates that digital religion has created significant opportunities for expanding religious participation, communication, learning, and community formation, while simultaneously introducing challenges concerning misinformation, authority, commercialization, privacy, surveillance, and authenticity. The evidence suggests that digital technologies should not be understood simply as replacing conventional religious institutions or practices. Rather, online and offline religious life increasingly interact with one another, producing hybrid forms of religious engagement in which worship, teaching, pastoral care, evangelism, community building, and religious identity formation occur across interconnected physical and digital spaces. This interpretation is consistent with De Sousa (2021) conceptualization of digital religion as involving networked community, convergent practice, multisite reality, shifting authority, and experiential authenticity. The reviewed literature therefore suggests that the significance of digital religion lies not merely in transferring existing religious activities to digital platforms but in transforming how religious communities organize relationships, communicate authority, construct identity, and experience participation.

3.4.1 Accessibility, Outreach, and Global Religious Engagement

One of the strongest findings emerging from the review is that digital technologies substantially increase the accessibility of religious resources and opportunities for participation. Websites, livestreaming services, social networking platforms, podcasts, mobile applications, online sermons, digital sacred texts, discussion forums, and video platforms enable individuals to encounter religious teaching without necessarily being physically present in a particular congregation or sacred location. This has particular importance for individuals who experience geographical isolation, mobility limitations, work-related constraints, illness, migration, or other barriers to conventional participation (Islam, 2025). Research on online worship has repeatedly identified convenience, accessibility, access to a wider range of services, and opportunities to connect with communities beyond one's immediate congregation as important benefits of digital participation.

The evidence further demonstrates that digital religion can connect geographically dispersed religious communities and diaspora populations. Religious communication that once depended heavily on physical proximity can now take place across national borders and time zones. Migrants and diaspora communities can maintain relationships with religious traditions and communities in their countries of origin while simultaneously participating in religious networks in their countries of residence (Preda, 2024). This development reflects earlier research on religion and the Internet, which documented how online environments enabled dispersed believers to maintain virtual connections with sacred homelands and participate in religious communication across geographic boundaries. In this sense,

digital religion contributes to the formation of transnational religious publics in which belonging is increasingly defined by shared religious interests and practices rather than geographical proximity alone.

Digital platforms also expand opportunities for religious outreach and missionary activity. Religious organizations can distribute sermons, educational materials, devotional resources, fundraising messages, announcements, and evangelistic content to audiences that may never enter a physical place of worship. The review indicates that this development has changed the logic of religious communication from predominantly local and institutionally controlled dissemination toward more networked and potentially global forms of communication (De Kock, 2025). Evidence from research on religious digital communication during the COVID-19 period illustrates how social media enabled religious organizations to communicate religious narratives and support social resilience during a period of widespread disruption. Similarly, survey evidence shows that a measurable proportion of religiously affiliated adults use the internet and social media to follow religious leaders and obtain religious information, demonstrating the growing importance of digital channels in contemporary religious engagement.

The review nevertheless indicates that accessibility should not be equated with universal inclusion. Digital participation depends on internet connectivity, affordable devices, digital literacy, language accessibility, and familiarity with online platforms. These inequalities can reproduce existing social and economic disparities within religious communities. Research involving rural congregations, for example, has identified technological limitations and connectivity problems alongside the benefits of online worship. Consequently, digital religion simultaneously expands access for some populations while potentially excluding individuals who lack adequate technological resources (Boiliu, 2025). The findings therefore support a conception of accessibility that incorporates both the opportunities created by digital technologies and the structural conditions required to participate meaningfully in digital religious life.

3.4.2 Misinformation, Commercialization, and Authenticity

A second major finding concerns the problem of credibility and authority within digitally mediated religious environments. The openness of digital platforms enables religious information to circulate rapidly without necessarily passing through established processes of theological review, institutional authorization, or scholarly verification. Consequently, users may encounter sermons, interpretations of sacred texts, religious advice, testimonies, quotations, images, and short-form videos whose origins and accuracy are difficult to establish. Digital environments can therefore weaken the exclusive control historically exercised by religious institutions and recognized religious authorities over the production and dissemination of religious knowledge (Srisuwan, 2025). Earlier scholarship on digital religion similarly identifies shifting authority as a central characteristic of religious engagement online.

The problem becomes more complicated when algorithmic systems determine which religious materials users are most likely to see. Recommendation systems generally prioritize content according to engagement-related signals rather than theological reliability. Highly emotional, controversial, simplified, or sensational religious content may therefore receive greater visibility than nuanced or carefully contextualized interpretations. This creates a potential tension between popularity and authority (Islam, 2025). Research examining misinformation in religious contexts demonstrates that religious identity can shape how individuals respond to false or misleading information, while religiously framed corrections can sometimes provide an effective means of challenging misinformation. The implication for digital religion is that religious communities increasingly require forms of digital literacy that allow users to distinguish authoritative religious teaching from unverified, misleading, or commercially motivated content.

Commercialization represents another challenge identified in the literature. Religious content increasingly exists within digital environments that are also designed around advertising, monetization, subscriptions, donations, influencer economies, and audience metrics. Religious organizations and individual religious content creators may consequently face incentives to produce material that attracts views, followers, donations, or other forms of digital engagement (Zhang, 2025). This does not necessarily make digital religious communication inauthentic, but it creates new questions concerning the relationship between spiritual communication and commercial platform

structures. The visibility of religious messages may become partially dependent on platform algorithms and audience engagement rather than solely on theological significance or institutional legitimacy.

The findings also reveal continuing debates concerning the authenticity of digitally mediated religious experiences. Digital worship can reproduce aspects of communal participation, but it may not reproduce all sensory, embodied, spatial, and interpersonal dimensions of physical religious gatherings. Evidence from research on Church of England worship during the pandemic found that online worship was generally experienced as less rewarding than in-person worship, while live-streamed services were experienced more positively than prerecorded services. At the same time, other studies have found substantial benefits in online worship, including increased communication, access, participation by previously hard-to-reach groups, and opportunities for faith development (Bingaman, 2023). These apparently contrasting findings suggest that authenticity is not a simple property of either online or offline religion. Instead, it is negotiated by participants according to theological beliefs, expectations, technological affordances, relationships, and the particular religious practice involved.

3.4.3 Privacy, Surveillance, and Ethical Concerns

The review further identifies privacy and data protection as increasingly important ethical concerns within digital religion. Participation in online religious activities can generate extensive digital traces, including account information, location-related information, viewing histories, search behavior, communication records, donation information, membership details, and patterns of interaction with religious content (Khan, 2023). Such information can potentially reveal aspects of an individual's religious identity or practices that users may reasonably regard as sensitive. The movement of religious participation into commercially operated digital environments therefore creates an important distinction between participating in a religious activity and participating in a data-generating digital system.

Platform surveillance presents an additional concern. Religious organizations may use digital systems to manage memberships, communicate with congregants, organize events, collect donations, and understand patterns of engagement. These practices can improve organizational efficiency but also introduce responsibilities concerning informed consent, data minimization, cybersecurity, retention, and appropriate access to personal information (Arif, 2025). Technology providers similarly possess responsibilities because platform architectures determine how religious content is collected, classified, recommended, targeted, and monetized. Ethical digital religion therefore requires attention not only to what religious organizations communicate online but also to how technological infrastructures process information about religious participants.

The ethical problem becomes especially significant when sensitive religious interests intersect with targeted advertising or automated profiling. Individuals may search for religious guidance during periods of personal uncertainty or engage privately with particular religious communities. If such activities become part of commercial profiles, users may lose meaningful control over information concerning their religious interests (Ergen, 2023). The findings therefore suggest that religious organizations should treat digital data stewardship as part of their pastoral and ethical responsibilities rather than as merely an administrative or technical issue. The broader scholarship on digital religion likewise emphasizes the importance of ethical questions arising from the interaction between religious practice, new media technologies, and digital infrastructures.

Cybersecurity is another important dimension. Religious organizations increasingly depend on digital systems for donations, membership records, communication, livestreaming, educational resources, and organizational administration. Weak security practices can expose members to identity theft, financial fraud, unauthorized access, or unwanted disclosure of personal information. Consequently, the digital transformation of religion requires a corresponding transformation in institutional governance (Siuda, 2021). Ethical digital participation should incorporate transparent privacy policies, appropriate security safeguards, responsible data handling, and clear communication concerning how participants' information is collected and used.

3.5 Future Directions and Implications of Digital Religion

The evidence reviewed demonstrates that digital religion is moving beyond the temporary adoption of online tools toward a broader transformation in how religious institutions and communities operate. Digital technologies increasingly influence leadership, communication, religious education, outreach, community formation, pastoral relationships, and the organization of religious activities (KRČALO, 2024). The literature therefore supports the view that digital religion should be treated as an enduring dimension of contemporary religious life rather than merely a temporary response to technological change or the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.5.1 Digital Transformation of Religious Institutions

The digital transformation of religious institutions is evident in changes to leadership practices, communication strategies, membership engagement, and organizational structures. Churches, mosques, temples, synagogues, and other religious organizations increasingly combine physical gatherings with websites, social media, livestreams, messaging applications, online educational programs, digital donation systems, and virtual pastoral communication (Vitullo, 2025). Rather than eliminating institutional religion, these technologies can extend institutional presence across multiple environments. The resulting organizational model is increasingly hybrid, with religious participation distributed between physical and digital spaces.

Leadership roles are also changing. Religious leaders are increasingly required to operate not only as preachers, teachers, or pastoral figures but also as communicators within digitally networked environments. They may need to address audiences beyond their own congregations, respond to online discussions, manage digital communities, and negotiate the relationship between established religious authority and independent online religious personalities. The literature identifies shifting authority as one of the central characteristics of digital religion, because users can access multiple religious voices and interpretations without necessarily relying on a single institutional authority (Díez Bosch, 2023). This development can democratize religious communication but may also complicate institutional responsibility for theological accuracy and pastoral guidance.

The findings also suggest that the most sustainable institutional model may be hybrid rather than exclusively digital. Evidence from rural Church of England research indicates that participants valued online provision while also emphasizing the importance of maintaining physical church gatherings. Similarly, research involving rural Episcopal congregations identified accessibility, convenience, connection with other communities, and faith development as benefits of online worship while noting technological and content limitations (Nangia, 2025). These findings suggest that religious institutions are likely to continue developing blended forms of participation that allow digital technologies to complement rather than completely replace embodied communal practices.

The importance of this transformation extends beyond Christian contexts. Digital religion scholarship has examined digital engagement across major world religions and demonstrates that religious traditions differ in how they negotiate technology, authority, ritual, identity, and embodiment. Consequently, institutional digital transformation should not be understood as a uniform process (Alimi, 2019). Religious doctrines, organizational cultures, community expectations, leadership structures, and theological understandings of ritual influence whether particular technologies are accepted, adapted, restricted, or rejected.

3.5.2 Emerging Technologies and the Future of Religious Practice

Emerging technologies are likely to intensify the transformation of religious practice. Artificial intelligence is already raising questions concerning automated interpretation of religious texts, AI-assisted spiritual guidance, religious chatbots, and the creation of digital religious communities. Recent research suggests that AI can potentially increase accessibility to religious interpretation and facilitate new forms of spiritual engagement, while simultaneously creating concerns about authority, ethics, authenticity, and the appropriate role of automated systems in religious contexts (Grieve, 2014). A central future question is therefore whether religious communities will treat AI primarily as an administrative and educational tool or whether automated systems will increasingly participate in activities traditionally associated with religious teachers and spiritual advisers.

AI also introduces deeper theological questions. Algorithmic systems operate through large-scale data processing and prediction, which may challenge conventional understandings of knowledge, human agency, responsibility, and divine knowledge. Recent theological scholarship has begun examining how AI and technological singularity concepts complicate traditional accounts of omniscience and human freedom (Golan, 2023). These debates demonstrate that emerging technologies are not simply technical tools for religion; they can influence fundamental questions about authority, personhood, knowledge, ethics, and the nature of religious experience.

Virtual reality and augmented reality represent another important future direction. Immersive technologies may allow participants to experience digitally reconstructed sacred environments, attend virtual gatherings, participate in educational simulations, or interact with other participants through embodied avatars. Research on the metaverse suggests that immersive environments could increase the sense of social presence and potentially strengthen perceptions of authenticity in online religious practice (Ali, 2025). However, some religious practices remain difficult or controversial to virtualize because of doctrinal, embodied, or jurisprudential requirements. Thus, the future of immersive religion will probably involve negotiation between technological possibilities and the theological meanings attached to physical presence, sacred space, embodiment, ritual objects, and communal participation.

Recommendation algorithms will also influence the future religious information environment. As algorithmic systems increasingly determine which sermons, religious teachers, interpretations, and devotional materials users encounter, visibility may become an important component of religious authority. This could result in a more pluralistic religious environment in which individuals encounter diverse traditions and interpretations, but it may also intensify fragmentation and the formation of highly personalized religious information environments (Mohiuddin, 2023). The future study of digital religion therefore needs to consider not only what religious communities produce but also how technological systems determine what users actually encounter.

3.5.3 Research Gaps and Future Directions

Despite substantial growth in digital religion scholarship, the systematic review identifies several important research gaps. First, much of the existing literature has concentrated on Christianity and on technologically advanced Western societies, although scholarship increasingly includes Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, and other religious traditions. A more geographically balanced research agenda is necessary to understand how digital religion operates in Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, and other regions where patterns of connectivity, religious authority, digital infrastructure, and cultural practice differ substantially (McIntosh, 2015). Existing scholarship already emphasizes the need for genuinely global approaches to digital religion, but geographical imbalance remains an important issue for future research.

Second, more longitudinal research is required. A significant portion of existing empirical research emerged during or immediately after the COVID-19 pandemic, when extraordinary restrictions accelerated digital religious participation. Such studies provide important evidence about adaptation, accessibility, and technological innovation, but they cannot fully establish the long-term consequences of sustained digital participation. Recent post-pandemic research involving religious communities across seven European countries suggests that digital technologies alone cannot sustain fully embodied religious community and that digitization is more likely to transform religious life than eliminate traditional forms of religion (Zhang, 2015). Future studies should therefore examine whether digital participation becomes a stable component of religious identity, whether online participation translates into offline participation, and how hybrid religious communities develop over extended periods.

Third, generational differences require greater attention. Younger people may have different expectations concerning authority, communication, community, privacy, and religious identity than older generations. At the same time, older adults may develop distinctive patterns of digital religious engagement when platforms are designed around accessibility and social connection (Bingaman, 2023). Research in Ghana, for example, has demonstrated that online religious services during the pandemic supported intergenerational learning and provided pathways through which religious communities maintained social and wellbeing-related connections. Future research should compare age groups rather than treating religious users as a homogeneous population.

Fourth, the relationship between digital and offline religion remains insufficiently understood. The evidence does not support a simple opposition between online and offline religious practice. Instead, digital participation may complement physical worship, extend relationships formed in physical communities, provide access to new communities, or create independent forms of religious belonging (Arif, 2025). Studies of online worship demonstrate both the accessibility advantages of digital participation and the limitations associated with reduced physical presence and embodiment. Future research should therefore investigate how individuals move between digital and physical religious spaces and how these interactions influence identity, belonging, authority, ritual participation, and long-term institutional membership.

Finally, future research should become increasingly interdisciplinary. Digital religion intersects with sociology, theology, communication studies, media studies, anthropology, psychology, information science, computer science, ethics, and data governance. Theoretical approaches such as mediatization, mediation of meaning, and the social shaping of technology have already contributed to the development of digital religion as a distinct field of inquiry (Ergen, 2023). Future studies should build on these approaches while incorporating research on artificial intelligence, algorithmic governance, virtual environments, digital privacy, cybersecurity, platform economics, and data ethics. Such an approach would allow researchers to examine digital religion not simply as religion occurring through new technologies but as a complex sociotechnical transformation in which religious traditions, institutions, users, platforms, and algorithms mutually shape contemporary religious life.

4. Conclusion

This systematic review concludes that digital technologies have become an increasingly significant dimension of contemporary religious life, transforming how religious beliefs, communities, identities, and practices are produced, communicated, and experienced. The reviewed literature indicates that digital religion does not simply replace conventional forms of religious practice but increasingly intersects with and extends them through online worship, livestreamed services, religious education, social media engagement, virtual communities, digital evangelism, and faith-based networking. Digital platforms have expanded access to religious resources and enabled individuals separated by geography, social circumstances, or physical limitations to participate in religious communities and practices. At the same time, the findings demonstrate that digital religion presents important challenges, including misinformation, commercialization, fragmented authority, privacy concerns, unequal digital access, and tensions between established religious traditions and emerging forms of online participation. The review further shows that religious authority is becoming more decentralized as individuals and independent online communities increasingly participate in interpreting, producing, and disseminating religious content. Consequently, digital religion should be understood as a dynamic and evolving field in which technological innovation and religious traditions continuously interact. Future research should pay greater attention to differences across religions, cultures, generations, and socioeconomic contexts, while examining the long-term implications of artificial intelligence, immersive technologies, and increasingly personalized digital environments for religious identity and practice. Overall, the evidence suggests that the digital age is reshaping rather than eliminating religion, creating new opportunities for religious engagement while simultaneously requiring religious institutions, communities, researchers, and policymakers to address the social, ethical, and cultural challenges associated with digitally mediated religious life.

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