What does the rise of digital religion during Covid-19 tell us about religion's capacity to adapt?

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Will the Covid-19 lockdown weaken the stability of modern religion? Can religion adapt to a vastly changed society? This article reflects on this and other questions, to explore what the rise of digital religion during Covid-19 might tell us about the nature of religion and its capacity for adaptation in uncertain times. Sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger (2000) argued that religion is based on the authority of tradition and relies on an intergenerational transmission of collective memory of that tradition in order to sustain itself. This does not mean that religion is static, nor that the fragmented nature of modernity is incompatible with religion. Hervieu-Léger (2000: 93) maintains that "modernity has not done away with the individual's or society's need to believe. Indeed, it has been observed that the uncertainty that flows from the dynamics of change has made the need stronger". Acknowledging that the transmission of religious tradition is more challenging in the contemporary era, Hervieu-Léger (2000: 93) argued that it would nonetheless persist in different ways than before; "religion retains a creative potential within modernity".

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What does that mean? It means that fewer people might identify with their country's dominant religion than in previous generations, but some may convert to another religion instead (Scharbrodt, 2015). It means that people will continue to use religion as a tool for cultural belonging, even as they reject key Church doctrine (Inglis, 2007). Hybrid religious practices will gain greater legitimacy (Brownlee, 2011). Increasingly, people will turn away from institutional religion for their religious or spiritual needs, such as those who seek out New Age and alternative spiritualities (Gierek, 2011). Finally, we might see evidence of Hervieu-Léger's (2000) argument in those who engage with worldviews and/or practices which contemporary society has questioned as being "religion" at all (Watt, 2014). These examples illustrate that we already know religion is malleable, adaptable, and capable of dealing with rapid change.

The response of religion and of religious individuals to Covid-19 presents us with an opportunity to examine Hervieu-Léger's (2000) arguments once more. What happens to religion when "normal" society shuts down? I imagine that Hervieu-Léger might suggest that our society has not shut down; that society, like our need for tradition, continues and adapts. This is evident through an examination of religion during Covid-19, where it appears that large numbers of regular church attendees have moved to incorporate online religious attendance, many for the first time, during Ireland's lockdown (Ganiel, 2020).

However, there is nothing new about digital religion more broadly. Digital religion is "the technological and cultural space that is evoked when we talk about how online and offline religious spheres have become blended or integrated" (Campbell, 2012: 4–5). Like all other aspects of our 21st century lives, the division between offline and online life has increasingly blurred (Boellstorff, 2015; Campbell, 2012). For some adherents, supplementing or even replacing offline religious community and practice with online alternatives and extensions is old news. It is important to be mindful of this as a bulwark against superficial reporting of the current moment which might suggest that Covid-19 has transformed religion. Religion is *always* transforming.

Exactly how offline and online religious worlds integrate will vary according to the religion, and the wider culture that surrounds it. Some religions are particularly good at taking advantages of the opportunities that digital technologies have provided us. Mormonism, my current focus of research, provides a good example. Within Mormonism, online cultural practices can blur with conventional religious practice and belief, allowing one to support the other until the distinctions between them are less clear (Thain, 2012). In this way, people's use of digital religion offers an opportunity for some to conform to their religion and to support dominant narratives about their faith (Burroughs, 2013; Cheong, 2014). For others, digital technologies create a space in which adherents can challenge or even reject aspects of their religion. This space is used creatively by those who would perhaps be hesitant to challenge their religion in "real life" for various reasons (Finnigan and Ross, 2013).

It is clear that there has been an acceleration of innovation in digital religion caused by Covid-19 and its associated lockdowns across the globe. This innovation is worthy of sociological analysis. As it has done with education through its initiative *Homeschool Hub*, Ireland's public service TV channel RTÉ has taken the lead. It broadcasts Catholic mass six days a week followed by a religious message from other denominations called *With You in Spirit*. People are streaming mass in large numbers; RTÉ reports that 1.2 million people have watched church services from Knock online since mid-March. Virtual pilgrimages are being created, with parishioners in the Catholic diocese of Cloyne being amongst the first to experience a virtual pilgrimage of Knock Ireland's national Marian shrine, located in Co. Mayo (McGrath, 2020). Adherents are also making use of social media to support their faith, joining groups like *The Digital Parish* on Facebook.

Across the globe, people are innovating their religious practice. In the United Kingdom (UK), BBC One has returned to broadcasting Sunday morning services. In Iran, Muslims are attending drive-in religious ceremonies during Ramadan, something described by one participant as "creative and beautiful" (AFP TV, 2020). In the United States, early studies show that 40% of regular worshippers have replaced church attendance with online services instead (Pew Research Center, 2020). Similar to Ireland (McGrath, 2020), it is likely that many of these U.S. church services are being streamed by church groups who have no previous experience with community engagement of this kind. A lack of previous experience offers a space in which novel adaptations of ritual, prayer, and community may emerge.

So, people's use of broadcast media, social media, blogs, livestreams, podcasts, forums, and other digital technologies to support, adapt, and challenge their religious experience is not new in the age of Covid-19. What is new perhaps is how Covid-19 has made digital religion more visible and accessible to more people, especially due to recent media coverage of these trends which have brought widespread attention to what is possible within digital religion. Clearly, many who would not usually tune in to a livestream of mass from Knock are now more aware that such things can be done and are trying it for themselves. For those religions which have not made use of digital technologies to the same degree as others, the current moment may accelerate a transition to greater online integration. Digital religion has opened itself up to the masses as a result of Covid-19, but this is an acceleration of a pre-existing development, rather than something new.

As per Hervieu-Léger (2000), people's need for tradition continues even when society is no longer structured to sustain that tradition to the same degree. Sociology has demonstrated that people will claim tradition in innovative ways to sustain that need. From the "outside" looking "in" at online religious engagement during Covid-19, someone leaving comments on a religious social media page may not look much like "tradition". But for an adherent denied physical access to their church or to the sacraments, this action can be interpreted as maintaining their link to their parish, as continuing the public declaration of their faith, or as observing sacred time that would usually be spent in church. For them, the tradition of their religion may be sustained through such practices. Using this

perspective, we can recognize that what appears at first to an example of change, a rupture with what has gone before, can also incorporate continuity.

Many want to know if the trends identified in the first half of 2020 symbolize a fundamental shift in how people will "do" religion in the future. Underpinning this question is often an assumption that such practices are completely new. However, emerging research does indicates that many more people are engaging with religion in this way currently (Newport, 2020). Hutchings and McKenzie (2012: 75) remind us that the internet is "neither content nor material" yet nonetheless "it structures what we can do". The digital world may be ephemeral and ungraspable but it does physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually affects us, as we affect it.

On this basis, it is reasonable to question if these recent trends are to become another of religion's adaptations. Will we see a permanent move towards a weekly online mass in Ireland's Catholic parishes where priest numbers are already low? Could this be a part-solution to Ireland's vocations crisis? Will this moment allow for greater ecumenical collaborations across denominations such as the recent UK initiative *Church Support Online*? Initiatives such as this demonstrate what is possible in bridging theological or cultural divides through the use of digital technologies. A significant question might be to ask if online religious engagement throughout Covid-19 will have been enough to sustain individual and collective belonging to religion? Or, will our time in isolation have irrevocably weakened the tradition that religion rests upon? Following the arguments of Hervieu-Léger (2000), I think that religion will continue to adapt in fascinating and unexpected ways, and I will continue to observe with interest.

Declaration of conflicting interests

Funding

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