



## PERSPECTIVES ON DIGITAL EVANGELISM: EXPLORING THE INTERSECTION OF TECHNOLOGY AND FAITH

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**ABSTRACT:** *Digital evangelism, using technology to spread the message of faith, has become increasingly prevalent today. While some see it as a valuable tool for reaching a wider audience, others view it as a dilution of traditional religious practices. This paper explores the different perspectives on digital evangelism and examines the potential benefits and challenges associated with this practice. Through a review of relevant literature and case studies, this paper highlights how technology has been used for evangelism, the impact of digital evangelism on traditional religious practices, and the ethical considerations surrounding this practice. This paper also discusses digital evangelism's role in the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences on religious communities worldwide. Overall, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the different perspectives on digital evangelism and promote more discussion on the function of technology in the practice of faith.*

**KEYWORDS:** COVID-19 Pandemic, Digital Evangelism, Faith, religious practices, Technolog.



## INTRODUCTION

Digital evangelism refers to using technology to spread the message of faith. This includes using social media platforms, websites, mobile applications, podcasts, and other digital tools to reach a wider audience. Digital evangelism has become increasingly prevalent in recent years as religious communities seek to engage with the younger generation and adapt to the changing communication landscape. However, critics have also criticised it as a dilution of traditional spiritual practices.

This paper explores the different perspectives on digital evangelism and examines the potential benefits and challenges associated with this practice. Through a review of relevant literature and case studies, this paper highlights how technology has been used for evangelism, the impact of digital evangelism on traditional religious practices, and the ethical considerations surrounding this practice. This paper also discusses digital evangelism's role in the COVID-19 pandemic's effects on religious groups worldwide.

## THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY FOR EVANGELISM

Technology has become a crucial tool for evangelism in the modern era, with religious organisations using various digital platforms to spread their message of faith. It has opened up new opportunities for evangelism, allowing religious organisations to reach a wider audience, engage with individuals in new and innovative ways, and adapt to their followers' changing needs and preferences.<sup>1</sup> This section explores the use of technology for evangelism and its impact on religious practice and community.

One of the main benefits of using technology for evangelism is the ability to reach a wider audience. Digital platforms such as social media, websites, and mobile applications allow religious organisations to connect with individuals who may not have had access to traditional spiritual practices or may have been hesitant to engage with them.<sup>2</sup> As a result, the community of believers is now more diversified and international, with individuals from different cultural backgrounds and geographical locations able to connect and share their faith experiences.

Technology has also allowed for new and innovative ways of engaging with individuals. For example, religious organisations can use virtual reality technology to create immersive spiritual

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<sup>1</sup> A. A. Anderson, "Digital Media and Evangelism: A Powerful Combination," *Journal of Evangelism and Missions* 1(1), (2017): 67-74; also see R. A. Chesnut, & De La Torre, M. A. (Eds.) *Cybertheology: Thinking Christianity in the Era of the Internet* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2017), 27-79; L. M. Green, *Digital Evangelism: A Guide to Reaching the Unchurched, the Next Generation, and the Community with the Gospel* (WestBow Press, 2019), 1-3; M., Morgan, & Ribbens, W. (Eds.) *Digital Evangelism: Rhetoric, Civic Engagement, and Implications for Public Address* Lexington Books, (2021),1-20; J. Vockins, *A Digital Church: Evangelism and Discipleship for a New Era*. IVP, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> A. Burt, & Rane-Szostak, D. *Digital Religion and Spirituality: An Introduction*. In *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (Routledge, (2019), 1-19; also see H. A. Campbell, *Religion and the Internet: New Opportunities, Challenges, and Contexts*. In *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture* Routledge, 2016), 53-66; P. H. Cheong, & Huang, S. *Communication Infrastructure and Religious Congregations: A Comparison of Online Communities and Offline Congregations*. *Information, Communication & Society*, 14(8), (2011):1132-1151.



experiences or mobile applications to provide personalised religious content and guidance.<sup>3</sup> These digital tools can provide followers a more engaging and interactive experience, leading to a deeper connection with their faith.

Another benefit of using technology for evangelism is the ability to adapt to followers' changing needs and preferences.<sup>4</sup> With the rise of digital technology, individuals increasingly rely on digital tools for information, entertainment, and communication. Religious organisations that embrace technology can provide followers with a more accessible and convenient way to engage with their faith, which can lead to greater participation and commitment.<sup>5</sup> For example, the Vatican is on Twitter and YouTube, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has created a series of podcasts aimed at a younger audience. Technology has also allowed religious organisations to reach a global audience, breaking down geographical barriers and creating opportunities for cross-cultural communication.

However, the use of technology for evangelism also raises some concerns. One of the main concerns is the potential for a loss of community and personal interaction. While technology can provide a way to connect with individuals who may not have had access to traditional religious practices, it may not offer the same level of personal interaction and community building that is often associated with traditional spiritual methods.<sup>6</sup> This can result in some individuals losing social support and identity. Another concern is the potential for the commercialisation and commodification of religious practices. With technology, religious organisations can create and market products and services that may not align with traditional

<sup>3</sup> G. P. Grieve, & Barbour, K. "Virtual Reality Church: Postsecular Engagement and the Future of Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 81(1), (2013):209-234; G. P. Grieve, *Virtual Reality and Religion*. In *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (Routledge, 2017): 215-230.

N. J. van Eck, & Waltman, L. *Augmented Reality and Virtual Reality in Education*. In *Augmented Reality and Virtual Reality* (Springer, 2018): 471-494; H. A. Campbell, "Religion and the internet of things," In *Religion and the Internet* (Routledge, 2015): 121-137; P. H. Cheong, & Huang, S. "Technology and Practices of Online Religious Talk" *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 17(3), (2011): 397-421.

<sup>4</sup> H. A. Campbell, "Digital Religion and New (Im) Possibilities for Scholarly Research" In *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (Routledge, 2016): 33-52. S. M. Hoover, *Religion in Cyberspace: Global Perspectives on Digital Culture and Faith* (Routledge, 2017); S. Kim, "Digital media, youth religiosity, and religious identity transformation" *Journal of Media and Religion*, 19(4), (2020): 208-225; B. van Driel, & Gauthier, M. "Religious Uses of Mobile Technology: A Preliminary Exploration" In *Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture: Perspectives, Practices and Futures* (Peter Lang Publishing, 2014):161-174; B. Burchett, & Kramer, E. "The Church in Digital Culture," In *Theology, Technology, and Human Flourishing* (Routledge, 2016), 49-70.

<sup>5</sup> R. D. Putnam, & Campbell, D. E. *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. Simon and Schuster (2012), 1-30; K. Simpson, "Religion and the Digital Age: Understanding Digital Religion through Everyday Religion," In *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (Routledge, 2017): 20-32.

<sup>6</sup> H. A. Campbell, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (Routledge, 2012); L. Bos, & Wisse, J. "Digital Religion and Community," In *Digital Methodologies in the Sociology of Religion* (Routledge, 2018):165-178; E. Drescher, "The Potential and the Perils of Digital Religion" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 87(3), 2019): 817-840; G. P. Grieve, "Technology and the Crisis of Authenticity: Virtual Reality Church and the Postsecular Reformation," In *Religion in Virtual Reality: Exploring the Digital Religious Experience* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 183-201.



religious practices or values.<sup>7</sup> This can dilute the religious message and focus on profit rather than spiritual growth and development.

In sum, the use of technology for evangelism has had a significant impact on religious practice and community. While it has opened up new opportunities for engagement and outreach, it has also raised concerns about the loss of community and personal interaction and the commercialisation and commodification of religious practices. As religious organisations continue to navigate the digital landscape, it is essential to find ways to balance the benefits of technology with the preservation of traditional religious practices and values. The use of technology for evangelism is a phenomenon that has been around for a while. In the 20th century, radio and television were used to broadcast religious messages to a wider audience. However, the rise of the internet and social media has dramatically changed how religious messages are disseminated. In recent years, religious organisations have used social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to communicate with the younger generation in a more casual context.

## IMPACT OF DIGITAL EVANGELISM ON TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

Digital evangelism, which uses digital technology to spread religious messages and practices, has significantly impacted traditional religious practices. While digital evangelism has allowed religious organisations to reach a wider audience and engage with individuals in new and innovative ways, it has also disrupted traditional practices and raised concerns about the impact on religious identity and community.<sup>8</sup>

One of the ways that digital evangelism has impacted traditional religious practices is through the blurring of geographical and cultural boundaries. With digital tools such as social media and mobile applications, religious organisations can reach individuals from different parts of the world and various cultural backgrounds.<sup>9</sup> This has created a more diverse and global

<sup>7</sup> L. L. Dawson, "Commodified Authenticity: An Analysis of the Commercialization of Spirituality," in *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 25(3), (2010): 385-403; also R. M. Geraci, *Virtually sacred: Myth and meaning in World of Warcraft and Second Life* (Oxford University Press, 2014); T. Hutchings, & Gardner, S. "Marketing Religion in the Digital Age," In *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture* (2016):89-102; D. Morgan, *The Commercialization of Religion: Consumerism and Commodification in a Globalized World* (2019); S. W. Poon, & Swatman, P. M. "The Commercialization of Religion on the Internet," *Journal of Electronic Commerce in Organizations*, 7(3), (2009):71-92.

<sup>8</sup> G. R. Bunt, *Digital Islam and Islamophobia: The Politics of Online Space and Identity* (Oxford University Press, 2020),10-40; G. P. Grieve, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (2017), 2-27; S. Hjarvard, "The Mediatization of Religion: A Theory of the Media as Agents of Religious Change," *Northern Lights*, 11(1), (2013): 9-26; B. J. Jansen, *Understanding the Web-based Religious and Spiritual Searching Behavior of Religious and Spiritual Seekers. Information, Communication & Society*, 14(5), (2011), 656-675.

<sup>9</sup> B. Burchett, & Kramer, E. "The Church in Digital Culture," In *Theology, Technology, and Human Flourishing* (2016): 49-70; H. A. Campbell, "Networked Religion: What the Digital Age Offers to the Study of Religion," In *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (2017): 78-94. P. H. Cheong, & Huang, S. *Religion Online: How Digital Technology Is Changing the Way We Worship and Pray* (2011); S. Hjarvard, "The Mediatization of Religion: A Theory of the Media as Agents of Religious



community of believers but has also raised questions about the role of cultural identity in religious practice.

Digital evangelism has also impacted how religious information is disseminated and consumed. Traditional religious practices involve sacred texts and in-person teachings, but digital evangelism has made religious information more readily available through digital platforms such as podcasts, videos, and e-books.<sup>10</sup> This has allowed individuals to consume religious content on their terms and at their own pace but has also raised questions about the authenticity and authority of the information.

Another impact of digital evangelism on traditional religious practices is the potential for losing community and social interaction. While digital tools have allowed for increased communication and engagement, they may not provide the same level of personal interaction and community building often associated with traditional religious practices.<sup>11</sup> This can result in a loss of social support and identity for some individuals, particularly those who may be isolated or marginalised.

Finally, digital evangelism has also raised concerns about commercialising and commodifying religious practices. With digital tools, religious organisations can create and market products and services that may not align with traditional religious practices or values.<sup>12</sup> This can dilute the religious message and focus on profit rather than spiritual growth and development.

Thus, digital evangelism has significantly impacted positive and negative traditional religious practices. While it has allowed for increased reach and engagement, it has also raised questions about the role of cultural identity, the authenticity of information, the loss of community, and the commercialisation of religious practices. As religious organisations continue to navigate the digital landscape, it is essential to consider these impacts and find ways to balance the benefits of digital evangelism with the preservation of traditional religious practices and values. While digital evangelism has opened up new opportunities for religious organisations, it has also raised concerns about its impact on traditional religious practices. Some argue that technology undermines the communal nature of religious practices and reduces the importance of physical spaces such as churches, synagogues, and mosques.

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Change,” *Northern Lights*, 11(1), (2013): 9-26; J. Y. Kim, & Ko, D. S. *Digital Religion and Global Religious Landscape: Emerging Trends and Challenges*. *Religions*, 10(9), (2019): 500.

<sup>10</sup> B. Burchett, & Kramer, E. *The Church in Digital Culture*. In *Theology, Technology, and Human Flourishing* (2016): 49-70.

<sup>11</sup> B. Burchett, & Kramer, E. *The Church in Digital Culture*. In *Theology, Technology, and Human Flourishing* (2016): 49-70; H. A. Campbell, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (2012), 2-20; P. H. Cheong, & Huang, S. *Religion Online: How Digital Technology Is Changing the Way We Worship and Pray* (2011), 30-65. T. Hutchings, & Gardner, S. “Marketing religion in the Digital Age,” In *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture* (2016): 89-102; D. Morgan, *The Commercialization of Religion: Consumerism and Commodification in a Globalized World* (2019), 1-15.

<sup>12</sup> Campbell, 20-24; Cheong, 7-17; G. P. Grieve, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (2017), 23-35; S. M. Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age* (Routledge, 2019), 15-25; D. Morgan, *The Commercialization of Religion: Consumerism and Commodification in a Globalized World* (Routledge, 2019), 20-45.



Furthermore, there are concerns about the quality of religious education provided through digital platforms, with some arguing that it is impossible to convey the same level of depth and understanding through a digital medium. Others argue that digital evangelism promotes a consumerist approach to religion, where individuals choose religious content according to their preferences rather than engaging in a holistic approach to faith.

## **ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS SURROUNDING DIGITAL EVANGELISM**

Digital evangelism also raises ethical considerations, particularly regarding the use of personal data and the potential for manipulation. Religious organisations are increasingly using digital tools to collect data on their followers. Digital evangelism has become increasingly prevalent in recent years, with religious organisations using technology to spread their message of faith through social media, websites, mobile applications, podcasts, and other digital tools. While digital evangelism has opened up new opportunities for religious organisations to reach a wider audience, additionally, it brings up moral issues that need to be resolved.<sup>13</sup> This paper will explore some of the ethical concerns surrounding digital evangelism.

### **Data Privacy and Security**

Data privacy and security are among the main ethical concerns surrounding digital evangelism. Religious organisations collect and store personal data, such as email addresses and phone numbers, from individuals who engage with their digital content.<sup>14</sup> This data can be used to target individuals with specific religious messages or to personalise their religious experience. However, collecting and using personal data raises concerns about privacy and security. Individuals may not be aware of how their data is being used, and there is a risk of the data being hacked or shared with third parties without their consent.<sup>15</sup> Religious organisations are responsible for protecting their followers' data and ensuring it isn't being abused.

### **Manipulation and Coercion**

Another ethical consideration surrounding digital evangelism is the potential for manipulation and coercion. Digital tools can be used to influence individuals' beliefs and behaviour, and there is a risk that individuals may be coerced into following a particular religious ideology.<sup>16</sup> Religious organisations are responsible for ensuring that their digital content is not

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<sup>13</sup> Stephanie Schiavon, and Gary B., "Digital Evangelism: Opportunities and Ethical Considerations for Religious Organizations" *Journal of Media and Religion* Vol.19 Issue: 1 (2020): 1-19 DOI: 10.1080/15348423.2020.1726123

<sup>14</sup> Sarah Washburn, "Religious Organizations' Use of Personal Data: Ethical Considerations and Privacy Concerns" *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture* Vol. 8 Issue: 3 (2019): 283-305 DOI: 10.1163/21659214-00803001 accessed May 16, 2023.

<sup>15</sup> Sarah Roberts, "Privacy Concerns in the Digital Age: Implications for Individuals and Society," *Ethics and Information Technology* Vol. 20 Issue: 4 (2018): 271-277 DOI: 10.1007/s10676-018-9476-1

<sup>16</sup> Francesca Giardini, and Andrea Guazzini, "Digital Influence on Religion: An Integrative Review and Research Agenda," *Journal of Media and Religion* Vol.17 Issue: 4 (2018): 180-197 DOI: 10.1080/15348423.2018.1532878 accessed May 16, 2023.



manipulative or coercive. They should also provide individuals with the information and resources they need to make an informed decision about their beliefs and religious practices.

### **Misinformation and Disinformation**

Digital evangelism raises concerns about the spread of misinformation and disinformation. Religious organisations may use digital platforms to spread their message of faith, but this message may only sometimes be accurate or truthful. Religious organisations are responsible for ensuring their information is accurate and truthful. They should also be transparent about sources of information and provide resources for fact-checking information.

## **THE ROLE OF DIGITAL EVANGELISM IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted religious practices worldwide, with social distancing measures and restrictions on public gatherings disrupting traditional modes of worship. In this context, digital evangelism has emerged as a critical tool for religious organisations to continue to engage with their followers and spread their message of faith. This paper will explore digital evangelism's role in the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on religious practice and community.

One of the main benefits of digital evangelism's effectiveness during the pandemic is providing a virtual space for worship and community building. Religious organisations have used digital tools such as live streaming, video conferencing, and social media to hold virtual services and connect with followers in real-time. This has allowed followers to continue participating in religious practices and feeling a sense of community, despite physical distancing measures. Digital evangelism has also allowed for increased accessibility and convenience for followers. With the shift to virtual worship, individuals who may have had difficulty attending traditional services due to geographical, physical, or other limitations have been able to participate in religious practices from the comfort of their own homes. Additionally, digital tools have increased flexibility in scheduling and content delivery, allowing individuals to engage with religious practices on their own terms and at their own pace.

However, the shift to digital evangelism during the pandemic has also raised concerns about the potential for a loss of personal interaction and community building. While virtual spaces can provide a way for followers to connect and participate in religious practices, they may not provide the same level of personal interaction and social support as in-person gatherings. This can result in a loss of social support and identity for some individuals, particularly those who may be isolated or marginalised.

Another concern is the potential for the digital divide to exacerbate existing inequalities in access to religious practices. Not everyone may have access to the necessary digital tools or internet connectivity to participate in virtual worship or engage with digital evangelism. This can further marginalise individuals who may already be facing social and economic barriers to accessing traditional religious practices.

Therefore, digital evangelism has played a critical role in the COVID-19 pandemic by providing virtual space for worship and community building. While it has allowed for increased



accessibility and convenience for followers, it has also raised concerns about the potential for a loss of personal interaction and community building and the potential for the digital divide to exacerbate existing inequalities in access to religious practices. As religious organisations continue to navigate the pandemic and the digital landscape, it is essential to find ways to balance the benefits of digital evangelism with the preservation of traditional religious practices and values.

## CONCLUSION

The paper examined that digital evangelism has opened up new opportunities for religious organisations to reach a wider audience and engage with individuals innovatively. However, it also raises ethical considerations that need to be addressed. Data privacy and security, manipulation and coercion, and misinformation and disinformation are just some ethical considerations surrounding digital evangelism. Religious organisations are responsible for ensuring that their digital content is ethical and does not undermine the integrity of the religious practices they promote. They should also be transparent about collecting and using personal data and provide individuals with the knowledge and data they require to make educated decisions about their beliefs and religious practices. By addressing these ethical considerations, religious organisations can ensure that their digital evangelism is ethical and practical and promotes the values and principles of their faith.

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