

**Digital Religion:
Concept,
Theoretical
Perspective
and Practice in
Vietnam
(Case Study of
Tịnh Thất Quan
Âm Pagoda)**

Đặng Hoàng Giang, PhD*

With the trend of digitizing all human activities, in the past three decades world religions have turned to communication technology to increase their influence in modern society. The field of digital religious studies was born in that context and has accomplished many important achievements. Digital religion has appeared in Vietnam for more than a decade and played an increasingly important role in the spiritual life of Vietnamese people. However, this remains a major gap in academic research. This article introduces some basic theoretical issues in the field of digital religion in the world. A digital belief model in Vietnam is introduced through the case of Tịnh Thất Quan Âm in Hiệp An commune, Đức Trọng district, Lâm Đồng province.

The concept of digital religion

Digital religion research first emerged alongside Internet research in the 1990s and early 2000s. Originally described as “online religion” research, digital religion explores ways that religious practice is embedded in the digital environment and the powerful effects this has on religious expression and belief. However, as the so-called “new media” technologies appear

* Lecturer, Faculty of Vietnamese Studies and Language, College of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Hanoi.

more and more, it is clear that the study of religion and technology only through the Internet has revealed its limitations. This realization requires a conceptual expansion to accommodate new objects and fields of study. As a result, scholars have proposed the term “digital religion” as a more comprehensive way to describe and investigate the intersections between religion and digital media. In this respect, digital religion is understood as the exploration of the connections and interrelationships between online and offline contexts and how these contexts have become bridging, blending and fading over time (Campbell, 2013). It is for this reason that Campbell (2012a) introduced the theoretical concept of “networked religion” and highlighted five core features of how religion is practiced online and shaped offline in the digital era.

These traits of networked communities, storied identities, shifting authorities, convergent practices, along with multi-site reality, highlight core research focuses of scholars on digital religion. This suggests that digital religion creates new possibilities to help scholars investigate in the broader context how religious individuals form communities, establish identities, and negotiate with authorities through activities that take place between online and offline locations. Currently, scholars in the field of digital religion are asking a series of important questions to promote the development of the industry from a theoretical and methodological perspective: Will technology shape religion or vice versa? How can scholars measure the impact of digital culture on religion and the impact of religion on digital culture? How do religious leaders and followers access the Internet? What challenges and opportunities do the new media pose to religious groups and institutions? What is the connection between online and offline phenomena? These are just some of the questions that digital religion scholars explore through empirical studies.

Theoretical perspectives

Core theoretical approaches in digital religious studies include mediation, mediatization, religious social-shaping of technology, and hypermediation.

The mediation theory, first formulated by Martin-Barbero (1993), considers communication processes that occur through a medium and involve the relationship between the individual and the culture. Birgit Meyer (2010) proposed the theory of mediation in relation to religious experiments by exploring religious objects that bridge the gap between constancy and transcendence. This includes all forms of matter—such as images, books, sounds, body practices, space—particularly in what Morgan (2009) has defined as “material culture”. Stewart Hoover (2006) uses mediation to explore religion in the media age and to understand how media technology helps believers understand ultimate cultural meanings.

Mediatization is another perspective that has been applied to the study of religion and the media. According to the definition provided by Couldry and Hepp (2013), mediation considers the media as producing lasting structural changes in society. This suggests that the media are pervasive; they facilitate interpersonal interactions and social formation. This theory has been applied to religion by Hjarvard and Lövheim (2012) and Lundby (2014), focusing on secularized texts characterized by high pervasiveness of communication technology.

Another influential theoretical perspective is the socio-religious shaping of technology (RSST) put forward by Campbell (2007a, 2007b, 2007c). This approach examines four

areas of informing religious groups about new technology. These include: (a) the traditions and history of a religious community; (b) its values and principles; (c) acceptance, rejection and/or technological innovation by a group; and (d) their views on the use of technology. From this perspective, Campbell explored the decisions made by religious groups and members about technology, regarding the degree to which they accept (or reject) a given medium based on ethical boundaries and group morality, as well as the motives and consequences of this choice.

Also useful in digital religious studies is the theoretical perspective on the third space and the meta-media, which has been used by scholars to discuss the Internet space. Hoover and Echchaibi (2014), drawing from mediation theory, described digital venues where users discuss religious practices and beliefs as a third space. That term denotes religious sites that exist between online and offline environments, places that adherents approach as if they were authentic spaces of religious activities. The key features of these spaces are the juxtaposition of hybrid religious identities, the creation of a shared aesthetic, and the permissiveness of unorthodox religious narratives in digital venues. This does not mean that all Internet places are automatically a third space, but that certain websites, blogs and social media platforms can become meaningful when they carry religious values. Evolvi (2018) referred to the theory of the third space to build the basis of *hypermediated religious spaces*. Considering the intensification of media activities in the Internet age, Evolvi hypothesized that religious spatial hypermediators such as gathering places and religious blogs, allow users to create networks, actions and actors related to different forms of communication and physical space.

Vietnam's context

The Đổi Mới policy introduced by the Communist Party of Vietnam in 1986 has promoted important socio-economic and cultural transformations of the country. During the past 35 years, Vietnam's economy has achieved a decent growth rate, rapidly transforming Vietnam from one of the poorest countries in the world into a low-middle-income country. From 2002 to 2018, GDP per capita increased 2.7 times, reaching over USD 2,700 in 2019, with more than 45 million people escaping poverty. The poverty rate dropped sharply from more than 70% to less than 6%.

Certainly, the field of religion is no exception to these movements. The religious policy of the Vietnamese government has undergone significant changes in the direction of reducing government regulation of religious activities and providing new conditions for religious dynamism and diversification. New legislation enacted in 1986 loosened government control over religion and religious activities. State-recognized religions including Buddhism and Catholicism have gained a strong vitality, evident in a wide range of activities such as the restoration of old churches and temples, the construction of new places of worship and their contributions to social welfare (Chung 2017:41). The government's policy of encouraging foreign investment also facilitates the passage of foreign missionaries and disseminates new movements in Islam, Buddhism and Christianity to remote areas of the country (Philip 2007: 1).

Đổi Mới also witnessed the strong rise of a new field: Vietnam's technology market. Despite having a technologically backward starting point, Vietnam has made significant breakthroughs in this field by attracting the world's leading

technology corporations to invest in Vietnam. According to Coursera's Global Capabilities Index Report 2020, Vietnamese people rank second in the Asia Pacific region in terms of technological capacity (Coursera, 2020). Technology is not only changing the structure and strength of the economy, but also profoundly changing every aspect of Vietnamese people's lives, including their spiritual life. It is an obvious fact that religious institutions in Vietnam are very active in anticipating the digital trend and exploit the great benefits of digital technology to serve the purposes of evangelization. Among the major religions in Vietnam, Buddhism, with a tradition of always exploiting the latest technologies (Daniel Veidlinger, 2014), has also shown its initiative in adapting to the digital age.

Never before have we seen Vietnamese Buddhism appear in the media as often as it does today. Various types of social networks such as Youtube, Facebook, Messenger, Zalo or website have become the platforms for transmitting all the most essential Buddhist activities: giving lectures to introduce popular Buddhism to the masses, organizing Buddhism practice courses for the youth, release living creatures as an act of merit, and organizing other voluntary activities. However, up to now, this vivid reality of digital Buddhism in Vietnam has largely been neglected in the academia. The rest of this article hopes to partially fill that academic gap by introducing the digitization process of Tịnh Thất Quan Âm, a Pure Land Buddhist temple in South Vietnam.

Tịnh Thất Quan Âm and the digitizing project

Tịnh Thất Quan Âm (TTQA) is a small temple located on Elephant Mountain in Trung Hiệp village, Hiệp An commune,

Đức Trọng district, Lâm Đồng province. In the beginning, this was just a small vihara built by Venerable Thích Giác Nhiên in 2000. Before 2007, at TTQA, there were only Thích Giác Nhiên and his parents. They practiced Zen together. In 2007, Thích Giác Nhiên listened to lectures by Master Tịnh Không on the Pure Land Dharma through CDs. This event had completely changed the practicing career of Venerable Thích Giác Nhiên and the development orientation of TTQA. Following the path of Most Venerable Chin Kung, Thích Giác Nhiên not only switched from meditation practice to the Pure Land Dharma, but also decided to rely on the media to propagate Buddhism. TTQA's digitization path can be divided into three stages:

Print CDs

In 2008, Venerable Thích Giác Nhiên set up a media team to promote the digitization project. The first thing they did was recording all of Thích Giác Nhiên's lectures on the Pure Land Dharma and sending them back to Saigon to print on CDs to give to Buddhists in Vietnam and other countries. These were mostly public lectures given at weekend retreats at TTQA, sometimes also at some temples that follow the Pure Land method. During the period from 2008 to 2013, each lecture of Thích Giác Nhiên was printed on CDs and distributed free of charge to Buddhists attending the sermons. Following in the footsteps of this network of Buddhists, the CDs were distributed to all regions of the country. For example, Ms. H. and her husband moved from the North to Cà Mau province to do business in the late 1990s. In 2010, she was given a CD of Thích Giác Nhiên by a friend who still sometimes goes to Lâm Đồng to attend weekend Buddhist retreats at TTQA. The lecture stirred Ms. H's spirit, encouraging her to come to join the weekend Buddhist talks by Venerable Thích Giác Nhiên at TTQA. After that trip, the couple sold all their properties in Cà

Mau to buy land and build a house near TTQA. For her, this is the best way to focus on Buddhist practice.

In addition to printing on CDs, Thích Giác Nhiên's lectures were also uploaded to Youtube for easier access. I was one of the people who came to know about Master Thích Giác Nhiên through the lecture "The Path toward the Bliss" which was circulated on Youtube in 2012. At that time, Youtube was relatively popular among the Internet user community in Vietnam. Thích Giác Nhiên's lecture helped me understand what the Pure Land is and what a Pure Land practitioner should do. Since then, I have kept observing TTQA's activities.

Distribution of MP3 and MP4 players and making channel on Youtube

Since 2013, the Internet has developed very quickly in Vietnam. As long as there is the Internet, people can easily update images and information and watch videos without needing to go through a CD anymore. Therefore, TTQA stopped printing CDs and switched to using MP3, MP4 machines to serve Buddhists. Compared to CDs, MP3 and MP4 players have more advantages because they can compress many lectures, can even show pictures (MP4), and can be used anytime, anywhere. Thanks to TTQA's network of Buddhists in Hong Kong who knew Thích Giác Nhiên from watching CDs and Youtube videos, TTQA found a place to make cheap MP3 and MP4 players and Youtube videos in China and became its regular customer. From 2013 to 2015, TTQA distributed hundreds of thousands of MP3 and MP4 players to their Buddhist community.

At the same time, to professionalize activities on Youtube space, on 15 June 2014, TTQA officially opened a Thích Giác Nhiên channel. To date, on this channel, 2,412 videos have been

uploaded. Its influence is constantly growing with 138,000 subscribers and 43,028,585 views. With such a large number of views, Thích Giác Nhiên has become one of the famous names in the media.

Building website voluongtho.vn

In order to further promote the propagation of Pure Land Dharma, since 2013 TTQA has started operating the website voluongtho.vn. Initially, this website mainly introduced the teachings of the Venerable Thích Giác Nhiên and documents related to the Pure Land method, as well as the Buddhist activities of TTQA. Thanks to this, viewers can systematically follow all the lectures related to the Pure Land method of Venerable Thích Giác Nhiên. By 2017, this website was restructured in a more modern and attractive way to better attract the Internet user community. Especially, with the help of Duc Quang, a young Vietnamese American businessman who follows the spiritual path of Thích Giác Nhiên, TTQA used live stream technology to report live its daily Buddhist practice program on website voluongtho.vn. In this way, TTQA's Buddhists around the world can practice at home without having to go to the temple. This experience gives them great reassurance because their spiritual practice is guided daily by Venerable Thích Giác Nhiên and they rely on the strength of a large community of which they are members.

TTQA and transnational spiritual network

According to our observations, TTQA's digitization project gives Vietnamese Buddhists within and outside Vietnam the opportunity to approach and practice Buddhism in a very

different way from their previous perception and experience. The new path of practice features being vegetarian, reciting Amitabha Buddha's name, chanting the Vô Lượng Thọ Sutra, giving alms and making offerings and helps them to overcome many psychological and health problems caused by the pressures of family life, the socio-economic transformation in Vietnam and the context of immigration. I met L., an elderly teacher from Lào Cai province, while attending a weekend Buddhism practice course at TTQA on a fall morning in 2017. She was accompanied by her son who had just been released after four years in prison for drug trafficking. The reason they were here is simple: after watching Thích Giác Nhiên's lecture on the Internet, the mother believes that Pure Land Buddhism can help her son recover. After a long retreat at TTQA, Ms. L.'s son realized his mistakes in the past, got rid of drugs and returned to his hometown to work as a motorcycle repairman to the boundless joy of his elderly mother. When participating in Buddhist events with a scale of up to thousands of people at TTQA, I heard many such life stories of people with different fates and circumstances from all over Vietnam and abroad, especially in the United States.

In my opinion, TTQA's digitization project not only brings new religious experiences to specific individuals, but, more importantly, has created a new phenomenon for Vietnamese people: the formation of a transnational spiritual network between Vietnam and the US. TTQA's Buddhists in Vietnam and in the US are the actors who have contributed to shaping this network. Before 2014, Thích Giác Nhiên's efforts to propagate the Dharma had gradually created a network of domestic Buddhists. At that time, some overseas Vietnamese Buddhists in the US also knew the name Thích Giác Nhiên through CDs or Youtube. However, since Thích Giác Nhiên's three-year trip to the US to propagate Buddhism (late 2014 – late 2017), that

network has expanded to become transnational. During these three memorable years, Venerable Thích Giác Nhiên was warmly welcomed by the Vietnamese Buddhist community in the US. This rarely happens because Vietnamese people in the US, due to historical and political contexts, have always kept a certain distance from religious leaders and cultural products coming from Vietnam (Thuy Vo Dang, 2008). The Dharma talks organized by Venerable Thích Giác Nhiên in the US witnessed the meeting and harmony not only between generations of Vietnamese Americans but also including groups of Vietnamese Buddhists in Vietnam and other countries in the world. These groups have flown from Vietnam, Canada, the UK, Australia and Hong Kong to the US to support Venerable Thích Giác Nhiên and the overseas Vietnamese community in the US to organize the Dharma talks. In a talk held in San Jose (Northern California) on 31 July 2015, Duc Quang gave a speech in both Vietnamese and English, on behalf of the Organizing Committee. The speech expressed the wish that the Vietnamese American community, especially the youth, would understand and follow the ethical standards of Buddhism, including the spirit of respecting parents and looking towards their origin – the homeland of Vietnam.

Under the coordinating role of TTQA, this transnational spiritual network has become a practice space for the Vietnamese people in Vietnam and those in the US. There, they share their experiences together, participate in events organized by TTQA, and practice every day according to TTQA's schedule that is broadcast live on the website voluongtho.vn. The digitization project of TTQQA has revealed two important aspects: digital Buddhism has brought a new religious experience for Vietnamese people in their homeland and around the world; and digital Buddhism has been quietly promoting national harmony between the Vietnamese communities in Vietnam and in the US.

Conclusion

Following the digitization trend of the world's religions, the major religions in Vietnam are also promoting the digitalization process and have made great changes in the structure of believers, as well as in the religious practices in different types of religious communities. The case of TTQA shows how a local temple, relying on digital technology, can emerge as a central hub of a transnational spiritual network gathering the participation of the Buddhist community in Vietnam and the Buddhist community in America. This is a very new thing in the cultural life in general and the religious life in particular of the Vietnamese people.

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