6 Digital Devotion: Musical Multimedia in Online Ritual and Religious Practice

MONIQUE M. INGALLS

Digital technologies and online networks have transformed religious faith, practice and experience in the twenty-first century. The Internet both communicates and mediates; it is a means for sharing and evaluating religious ideas and a space where religious experience takes place. The Internet not only enables engagement in established forms of religious ritual brought online, but also makes possible new forms of ritual practice. The online environment is both a medium for expressing and experiencing religion and a mode of religious production in its own right, generating powerful religious experiences for those who approach its digital offerings in a devotional posture, and, in the process, challenging certain religious authorities and official traditions. In particular, online media challenge the historical connections between ritual acts of worship and discrete geographical places, types of social interaction, and 'live' or 'face-to-face' modes of passing on religious tradition. Just as online media have enabled new forms of human sociality to flourish, so also have they opened new ways for individuals to experience direct connections to the divine, often without recourse to religious authorities or to traditionally established ways of accessing the divine.

Exploring the ways digital technologies and religious practice have mutually shaped and influenced one another has formed the basis of much scholarly reflection since the late 1990s, part of the general 'media turn' within religious studies (Engelke 2010). This resurging interest in processes of mediation within religion – and in religion as a form of mediation – has spurred the development of interdisciplinary subfields such as media and religion and 'digital religion' (see especially Dawson and Cowan 2004; Campbell 2005, 2010, and 2013; Engelke 2010; Wagner 2012). Scholars working at the interface of digital culture and religious practice have developed and applied a range of methods for analysing and interpreting textual and visual components of digital religion; however, sonic, musical and audio-visual elements remain comparatively under-theorised despite their prominent role within digital rituals and online resources.

To show the crucial role of music and, more generally, sacred sound[1] within digital religious practice, this chapter examines music's role in three types of devotional ritual, synthesising case studies from scholarship in

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316676639.013 Published online by Cambridge University Press

media, music and religious studies. These case studies include those from my own research on music in digital devotion within evangelical Christianity, as well as scholarly research on other religious traditions. They facilitate exploration of several interrelated questions, including how and in what contexts music is used in online ritual; how engaging in music as part of participatory digital technologies is changing how people experience and practise their religious faith; and to what extent music in particular connects online and offline religious practices. Addressing these questions through the lens of musical and audio-visual experience will help scholars understand and assess the implications of the new digital apparatus on religious authority, religious experience and the formation of religious communities. It will also bring scholarship on music and digital religion into a more sustained dialogue, enabling these conversations to further enrich one other.

Ritual in Digital Religion: Definitions and Key Issues

Devotional rituals, though not exclusive to religion, are acknowledged to be central components of most religious traditions as the key means of imparting religious experience and forming a united community.[2] Literary critic Marie-Laure Ryan offers a succinct description of the relationship between religion and ritual: 'in its religious form, ritual is a technique of immersion in a sacred reality that uses gestures, performative speech, and the manipulation of symbolic objects ... to [establish] communication between the human and its Other' (2003, 293). Online digital platforms serve as both '*resource* and *space* for devotional practice' (Vekemans 2014, 132, emphasis mine). In other words, digital online media provide a marketplace or gift economy for resources that support religious devotional rituals offline (particularly audio and audio-visual materials), in addition to an immersive ritual environment where people may encounter the sacred. The transfer of religious practice online, as well as the use of the web for individual religious experimentation, has spurred numerous debates within religious communities worldwide about what kinds of online rituals (or offline rituals with online components) can be considered 'authentic', and to what extent they are efficacious. In other words, how far can these activities themselves be considered rituals versus merely computer-mediated representations of rituals? Is taking part in a Buddhist ritual in *Second Life* a substitute for attending one offline? Is the experience of congregational worship as meaningful when one is in front of a large screen at a 'satellite' church venue, singing along with a band that is playing 'live' at a different venue across town? Can a Jewish worshipper

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316676639.013 Published online by Cambridge University Press

joining a prayer group over Skype comprise part of the quorum of ten individuals necessary for corporate prayer? Are YouTube videos that juxtapose digital Qur'anic text with sacred sound a help or a hindrance to a believer's devotion to the divine word?

The study of media and religion[3] shows that these questions are not new; rather, questions of authenticity, authority, and the moral, social and spiritual shaping of community inevitably accompany media and technological change within religious groups and the societies of which they are part (see Hoover 2006; Schofield Clark 2007; Lynch 2007; Engelke 2010; Lynch et al. 2012). Such tensions and debates within religious traditions have sprung up with the introduction of various technologies at other points in history (e.g. graphic writing, mass-mediated printing, musical notation, microphones and cassettes), as people within these traditions debate whether the possibilities afforded by new technologies are in line with their beliefs, practices, ethics and aesthetics.

So what actually *is* new about how people use digital technology in relationship to religion and ritual? What difference does digital culture make to religious practice? The academic field of digital religion (sometimes also referred to as 'cyber-religion' or 'online religion') has emerged to answer this key question and to lay out related questions for scholarly exploration. According to Stewart Hoover, what is different about digital media 'is the extent to which it encourages new modes of practice', its 'generativity' (2013, 267). New modes of practice that digital media enable have generated liminal 'third spaces' for religious practice;[4] digital practices enable 'small sphericals of focused interaction' and entail unique aesthetic logics that 'hail' the user and point toward social action (268).

Scholarship on digital religion generally includes in-depth analysis of texts and images; however, it rarely examines sonic and musical components in any detail.[5] Music is a key element in much audio-visual devotional media, as well as a communicative, affective medium in its own right. Sacred sound and music are key elements in the connective tissue between 'religion online' and 'online religion' (Helland 2000) – in other words, resources for religious practice made available online, and religious devotion practised online. And music's use within new online digital rituals brings along with it many aspects of older debates about how music should function within religious devotional practice (see especially Echchaibi 2013, Engelhardt 2018). It is my contention that close attention to music and sacred sound can illuminate many of the key questions digital religion scholars are asking about how authenticity and authority are variously established, challenged, deposed or maintained. The case studies in this chapter show how music variously facilitates, enhances, comprises and authenticates online religious practice, and focus in turn on different types

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316676639.013 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of digital devotional practice: (1) ritual in online virtual worlds; (2) devotional resources for use in offline ritual that are shared online; and (3) audio-visual materials that serve as both resources and spaces for devotion. These are arranged in a general progression from digital rituals that are relatively conservative (in that they reflect or seek to simulate offline devotional practices) to transformative rituals that challenge religious authority and influence devotional practice offline.

Music and Ritual Online: Shaping and Authenticating Sacred Soundscapes in Virtual Worlds

Virtual worlds, as Ryan conceives them, are created from a deep immersion in narrative that creates an experiential break with ordinary time and space. She notes that 'the presence of the gods can be compared to the telepresence of VR, because it breaks the boundary between the realm of the human, located *here*, and the realm of the divine, located *there* in sacred space' (2003, 295). Often in direct contradiction to religious authorities and traditions which seek to preserve the distance between worshippers and the divine, mediated virtual realities create proximity, resulting in 'the participants in the ritual experienc[ing] the live presence of the gods' and attaining 'a status that may be properly described as co-authorship of the cosmos' (295). Devout practitioners of religions have often recounted intense, immersive experiences in sacred 'virtual worlds' as part of ritual devotional practice (see Wagner 2012; Garaci 2014). Participating in devotional music-making – whether through chanting prayers, 'deep listening' to a cantor or choir, or lifting one's voice together with others in congregational hymn-singing – often facilitates this kind of deep immersion into the narrative of religious tradition by evoking a complex set of associations, memories and emotions (Rouget 1985 [1980]; Becker 2004). In online 'virtual' rituals, from tours of pilgrimage sites and interactive ritual simulations to religious services in virtual gaming worlds, music serves as a mechanism for structuring time and transforming online space into ritual space.

Perhaps the best-documented virtual religious ritual is the online pilgrimage or 'cyberpilgrimage', facilitated by venerational websites that enable practices common in shrine worship (Brasher 2001). Connie Hill-Smith defines 'cyberpilgrimage' as 'the practice of undertaking pilgrimage on the internet', online journeys that are 'hugely diverse in scale, complexity, content, design and purpose, ranging from technologically "simple" web pages displaying photographic galleries and explanatory text, to more sophisticated websites that attempt to reconstruct and repackage iconographic, structural and sensed aspects of the experience of "real-life"

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316676639.013 Published online by Cambridge University Press

pilgrimage' (2011, 236). Traditional sites of Christian pilgrimage, including Lourdes, St Peter's Basilica, Jerusalem's *Via Dolorosa* and Croagh Patrick, have become popular sites for online pilgrimage (MacWilliams 2004; Hill-Smith 2011; Wagner 2012). While early cyberpilgrimage scholarship occupied itself predominantly with studies of Christian sites, recent studies examine sacred online journeys within Hinduism (Jacobs 2007), Buddhism (Connelly 2013), Jainism (Vekemans 2014), Judaism (Radde-Antweiler 2008) and Islam (Derrickson 2008). Players have populated the MMORPG (massively multiplayer online role-playing game) *Second Life* with numerous real-world physical sacred sites, including well-known mosques, temples and churches, many of which give users the option to stream or download devotional music as their avatars explore the virtual sacred sites (Radde-Antweiler 2008). Some places of worship on *Second Life* also host live (virtual) devotional musical performances, and occasionally avatars can join enactments of sacred journeys, including a virtual *hajj* to Mecca.

Just as programmers can arrange constellations of pixels on a screen to create recognisable ritual objects, so also do they use music and sound to imprint soundscapes, transforming virtual space into sacred space. Numerous sites devoted to prayer rituals demonstrate how music structures, frames and sacralises virtual ritual. For example, Hindus, Jains, Sikhs and some Buddhists practise an individual prayer ritual called puja ('adoration', 'worship'), which involves presenting various offerings to the image of a particular deity and can be performed at either domestic or temple altars. Devotional songs (bhajans) and mantras are a common accompaniment to devotional acts offline and are frequently present in online practice as well. When users visit spiritualpuja.com, they can click on the image of a Hindu temple to enter the main site. Once 'inside', you are greeted with the words 'ONLINE PUJA' along with a brief explanation of elements of the Hindu devotional ritual. You can scroll down and choose from fifteen different puja rituals (including three tantric rituals with 'adult content' warnings). When you enter each puja in honour of a particular deity, a new bhajan begins. You can view a video compilation or devotional images, or scroll down to the virtual altar, where you can make virtual offerings of flowers, incense or a candle to a central image of the god/dess or guru. A 'guide me' button to the side of the altar reminds you to ring the virtual bell to begin the ceremony. Similarly, the Jain informational and devotional website jainuniversity.org, sponsored by a coalition of Jain leaders in Vadadora City (in northwestern India) offers a virtual puja ceremony to the Lord Mahavir, with simulation of eight different offerings. When you click on each offering, a new bhajan begins playing.[6]

In her study of online Buddhist practice, Louise Connelly writes that visual and auditory dimensions of online ritual must compensate for the

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316676639.013 Published online by Cambridge University Press

lack of the remaining senses to combat the sensory limitations of the online platform (2013, 131). Ambient sounds are common features of the *Second Life* experience and, tellingly, even the silent meditation ritual (*zazen*) at the Buddha Centre on *Second Life* is far from sound-free: the 'silence' idealised in this virtual environment is created not by the removal of all sound, but by the presence of certain sounds, including running water and windchimes. A gong and singing bowl are sounded to mark the start and end of the ritual, and chanted scriptures often form the focus of the ceremony itself. Further, social roles at the gathering are established sonically, creating continuity between religious authority online and offline: it is the avatar of one of the rotating meditation leaders – all of whom are religious specialists, including monks, priests or teachers in offline temples – who chimes the singing bowl to signify the start and end of the meditation session, and who leads the chanting and intones the mantras (Connelly 2013, 130).

Hill-Smith (2011) observes that 'the overlaying of tradition-preserving, tradition-transmitting media material on to the basic experience (i.e. culturally specific music, doctrinally based text explaining or enhancing imagery, iconographic "hotspots", etc.)' is a common feature of nearly all cyberpilgrimages. The examples sketched above suggest that this observation can be extended to most rituals that take place within virtual worlds, whether on websites created and hosted by religious institutions or within gaming platforms like *Second Life* (see also Miczek 2008; Kluver and Chen 2008; Jenkins 2008). Sonic architecture helps to constitute spaces for religious devotion, and in the same way religiously marked sounds and genres enclose and authenticate certain virtual spaces and activities as sacred, suggesting a generally conservative orientation where online 'ritual patterns replicate offline forms with limited innovation' (Hutchings 2013, 164). Hutchings argues here that ritual online is essentially dependent on religion offline: that the transfer of offline ritual practices to online ritual spaces relies on the transfer of their associated meanings. But not all uses of music in online ritual are conservative. We shall see that some of the practices of digital devotion pose a formidable challenge to religious institutions and structures.

Reinventing Tradition: Online Musical Tools for Offline Devotional Practices

The Internet constitutes a vast marketplace for devotional resources, particularly audio recordings for accompanying public or private worship. Scholars working across religious traditions have noted how readily many

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316676639.013 Published online by Cambridge University Press

religious communities use the online marketplace to share and purchase audio and audio-visual resources for devotional practice, including recordings from music labels and distributors, music-related discussion forums and blogs, music streaming sites, livestreamed or pre-recorded religious services and concerts, online radio stations, sound recordings and music videos uploaded to social media sites such as YouTube (Echchaibi 2013; Engelhardt 2018; Hagedorn 2006; Ingalls 2016; Summit 2016; Weston and Bennett 2013). This section engages these academic case studies to highlight the ways the vast array of online musical resources shape and condition offline devotional practice.

The ready availability of religious musical materials online has in some cases encouraged a 'pick 'n' mix' spirituality (Campbell 2013, 6) in which individuals draw from a variety of disparate materials to meet their self-defined spiritual needs – so bypassing sources of authority and communities of interpretation that condition the meaning or constrain the use of these materials. This is an intensification of a trend noted before the advent of digital technologies: religious items proliferated on the globalising commodity marketplace, enabling the rise of powerful religiously oriented commercial music and media industries.[7] In the same way, musical recordings of global sacred traditions, now readily accessible via the online marketplace, have become popular resources for such individualised spiritual practices. In analysing online comments from listeners, Katherine Hagedorn writes that the online marketplace facilitates an engagement with 'exotic' sacred traditions like Cuban Santería and Indo-Pakistani *qawwali* that allows Western listeners to 'gain access to some of the spiritual capital of these religious traditions without investing in the religious practices themselves' (Hagedorn 2006, 489).

What begin as idiosyncratic practices may, however, aggregate into more standardised forms shared by far-flung communities of practice. Weston and Bennett (2013) note that the vast array of musical resources and ideas available via the internet marketplace, including instructional videos, internet radio stations, blogs, forums and online stores, helps spread and standardise practice within the virtual community of neopaganism. Music forms the central node of discourse and practice in 'the one place that unites nearly all Pagans: online' (4). In the case of a relatively new religious movement like neopaganism, listening to and discussing shared music provides a meeting place for community and in turn establishes connections between individuals which extend to offline relationships. Further, these increasingly dense interconnections entailed in shared practice and discourse work to create norms from an array of eclectic practices and beliefs.

In the cases of sacred world music and neopagan devotional music, online pedagogical tools and resources encourage spiritual practice beyond

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316676639.013 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the purview of religious institutions. Such tools are indispensable within some organised religious traditions, enabling greater access to once-specialised training and sometimes sparking renewal of interest in certain musical or devotional practices. In the process, online digital mediation can subtly alter, or even completely overhaul, received meanings and essential aspects of the religious practice by bypassing traditional sources of authority and enabling new ways of practising religious music. In his recent book chronicling the resurgent interest in cantillating Scripture within American Judaism, Jeffrey Summit (2016) discusses how digital technologies for teaching Torah cantillation are changing how the tradition is transmitted and authority is structured. According to Summit, the proliferation of cantillation software and audio and audio-visual recordings available online has raised issues of 'the validity of authority, a dislocation of learning from a specific place and time, a shift from community oversight and control to individual direction and personal agency' (221). Educators and students based in local synagogues often use online pedagogical materials to learn tropes, or musical motifs, applied to each word of scripture as indicated by symbols above the text. Students learning cantillation from online resources often encounter simplified and standardised versions, bypassing traditions from their local synagogues replete with variations passed down from cantor to student. Yet the democratisation of technology to record and transmit cantillation practices can also have the opposite effect. Summit notes that it is spurring many Jewish cantors and educators to record their personal trope styles in order to preserve local traditions (238). Again, students sometimes learn cantillation from Jewish traditions on the opposite end of the theological or political spectrum from their own, thus blurring denominational lines. These technologies enable a private, individualised learning of Jewish tradition, unmoored from both traditional authority and local community. Summit notes the near-unprecedented situation in which 'it is possible to become a "technician of the sacred" without being an actively engaged member of a worship community' (238).

In the case of devotional music genres with well-established commercial industries and circulation networks, as in that of sacred world music, online access accelerates trends that began in prior decades with the growth of commodity markets for devotional recordings. Within evangelical Christianity, for instance, the online saturation of popular commercial worship music further erodes the authority of denominations and church networks as gatekeepers of congregational worship music. But there are other gatekeepers. While individuals have instant access to thousands of new worship songs, the Christian commercial recording industry plugs the music of a handful of popular brands and so increasingly constrains their

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316676639.013 Published online by Cambridge University Press

choices. Evangelical worship music evidences the seemingly contradictory trend noted by Jenkins wherein new media technologies enable individuals to 'archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content in powerful new ways', even as media content – commercial devotional music, in this case – becomes even more tightly concentrated in the hands of a few dominant corporations (2006, 18). Since the early 2000s, owing in large part to online circulation, contemporary worship music (a pop-rock-based repertoire intended for congregational singing and often simply called 'worship music') has become a transnationally circulating genre sung in weekly services by tens of millions of evangelical and pentecostal-charismatic Christians. The music's ready availability on the Internet further fuels the dominance of a handful of influential worship 'brands' who produce the music.

One of the major influences on the digital market for evangelical congregational songs over the past two decades has been Christian Copyright Licensing International (CCLI). CCLI is a private, for-profit company that provides licences for churches to reproduce song lyrics in their services by serving as a copyright clearinghouse for most of the Anglophone contemporary worship music industry. It also provides a range of paid online services for churches, including the digital library SongSelect, which the company bills as 'the best place to find licensed audio samples and lyrics along with vocal, chord and lead sheets from more than 300,000 songs of worship' (us.ccli.com). CCLI collects detailed statistics twice per year from a proportion of subscribing churches – now totalling over 250,000 – which it uses to distribute royalties to songwriters and publishers. The company began publicising its 'Top 25' charts in the 1990s, listing the most frequently sung worship songs among their subscribing churches.

Due to the surveillance into local practice enabled by this powerful digital platform, the CCLI worship charts not only reflect but also to a great extent drive the production and adoption of new worship music. During my three years of field research within the Nashville-based Christian music industry, music executives and recording artists told me story after story about attempts to identify, promote and market songs that would top the CCLI popularity charts, which they called the 'church charts'. New songs shared online on social media – whether 'legally' through publishers and recording labels' official channels or informally by fans recirculating the recordings via social media – amass hundreds of thousands and sometimes millions of views within weeks of their release, facilitating their quick adoption into local worship contexts. The average age of contemporary worship songs on the CCLI charts has decreased rapidly as local music directors at churches increasingly use paid online services like CCLI's SongSelect and social media, in addition to Christian

commercial radio, to discover and access new songs, rather than denominational resources, record clubs or music conferences.[8] In 1997, the average song on CCLI's top twenty-five worship songs list was seventeen years old, and the newest of the songs on the list was eight years old. By 2006, the average song on CCLI's list was ten years old, and six songs on the list were five or fewer years old. By 2016, the average top 25 CCLI song was seven years old and over half the songs on the list (thirteen songs) had been written in the last five years.

Both the examples of Jewish cantillation and of evangelical Christian worship music demonstrate how increased autonomy provided by digital technologies poses serious challenges to traditional religious authorities. However, in other cases, digital tools for musical devotional practices work hand in hand with and even help to shore up religious authority. Jeffers Engelhardt recounts such a case in his examination of how digital musical media has helped Orthodox practitioners in Greece establish what they call a 'Christocentric everyday': 'a worldly Orthodox milieu of ethical action and Christ-like becoming' (2018, 72). Rather than focusing on one media form, Engelhardt uses thick description of the digital audio and audio-visual resources that four devout followers of Orthodoxy in Thessaloniki use in their devotional practice. These include: digital recordings and broadcasts of sermons and chant; YouTube video channels devoted to liturgical chant and daily hymns; mobile ringtones using chant intonation formulas; and mobile apps that produce an electronic vocal drone for accompanying Byzantine chant (73). While Engelhardt's Orthodox informants found these resources useful for private devotion and musical pedagogy, they drew a firm distinction between what he terms 'natural media' and 'marked media': in other words, those analogue forms that comprise the received Orthodox tradition and new digital forms seen as outside it. Natural media, such as 'incense-laden air, human voices and bodies, and bells' (76), are those thoroughly enculturated media forms understood as central to Orthodox practice that, over time, have been rendered immediate within liturgy and theology. Marked media, which include broadcast and digital media, are those which operate outside the boundaries of worship and thus call attention to themselves and their 'sense of remove from the sacramental life of the church' (76). Rather than individualising practice and challenging traditional Orthodox belief, these media have participated in a widespread Greek 'push back to the church', a popular move to embrace traditional religious authority in the wake of widespread political and social change in the context of Greek neoliberal austerity.

Examples from across established religious traditions and new spiritual movements show that the influence of digital technologies is neither

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316676639.013 Published online by Cambridge University Press

predictable nor unidirectional, and that there are a variety of ways in which religious practitioners use online musical tools in offline devotional practices to (re)invent and reinvigorate their traditions. In some cases, their use can forge closer links with traditional authorities and religious hierarchies, while in other cases it encourages a transfer of power, mediated through the agency of individuals, from religious institutions to media industries. The next section continues in this latter vein, describing how digital media transform religious practice, sometimes blurring the line between online and offline devotional practice. In these instances, online digital musical and audio-visual resources move beyond being merely resources or ingredients for religious practice, instead serving as the very spaces where religious experience occurs.

Online Devotional Resources: Muslim and Christian YouTube Videos as Audio-Visual Icons

Music plays perhaps the most formative – and transformative – role within the third type of devotional practice: the use of audio-visual resources for rituals experienced online. Exploring case studies from Muslim and Christian devotional videos on YouTube illustrates how audio-visual media draw together images, text, and music and sacred sound in a manner designed to produce powerful religious experiences for devoted viewers. Further, these religious practices online challenge established authorities – and sometimes even key tenets of religious orthodoxy – shaping expectations and religious experience in a way that spills into offline religiosity.

Sound is recognised as the dominant sense within Islamic religious devotional practice, and its strategic use has been key to the success of revival movements within contemporary Islam (see Hirschkind 2006). Both listening practices and communication styles within contemporary Islam have shifted markedly due to the introduction and widespread use of audio and audio-visual technologies. In his research on popular cassette sermons in Cairo, Charles Hirschkind writes that catering to devotees whose listening practices have been shaped by the media and entertainment industries has altered both sermon rhetoric and the aesthetics of oral delivery. These rhetorical innovations 'combine classical sermon elements with languages and narrative forms rooted in such diverse genres as modern political oratory, television dramas, radio news broadcasts, and cinematic montage' (2006, 11).

Expanding Hirschkind's work on cassette sermons to digital audio-visual media, Nabil Echchaibi analyses the rhetorical and stylistic innovations within Islamic communication that have resulted from popular

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316676639.013 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Muslim preachers' use of various digital online technologies. Using Egyptian televangelist Amr Khaled[9] as an example, Echchaibi notes that his sermons involve 'a creative triangulation of the physical, the visual, and the digital' (2013, 445), and that his embrace of the integrative potential of digital technologies has introduced new aesthetic possibilities: 'Khaled has moved beyond aural media and therefore expanded the sensorium his followers draw from to build pious identities in a world of confusing sounds, images, and digital bytes' (448).

As a spoken form, Khaled's sermons often use dramatic, evocative visual imagery; online, some of his videos feature superimposed images and many include background music. On one video sermon posted to Khaled's YouTube channel in June 2016, a recording studio forms the central source of images during the minute and a half of opening credits.[10] The opening video segment features a hand turning a knob; as a tape reel starts to rotate, soft arpeggiated piano music with heavy reverb begins. As the song continues, a rapid succession of images from the recording studio (hands turning dials and knobs, cassette decks, analogue equalisers, and a pianist's hands on a keyboard synthesiser) are interspersed among images of sacred texts, illuminated light bulbs and the imposing wooden door of a mosque. The instrumentation quickly thickens, as violin, *'ud*, a full string section, and a male voice are added to the texture. The musical highpoint (01:13) features lush string orchestration and a male vocalist singing a melismatic line as several dynamic video segments flash in quick succession: a written script descends, a male worshipper falls prostrate in worship, two hands are shown on an electronic keyboard, a hand grasps prayer beads, and an unseen hand writes on parchment as the camera pans back from a library shelf covered in well-worn texts. After the credits and the opening song end, Khaled, a smiling, dark-haired middle-aged man, appears in a brightly lit, lavishly furnished room seated cross-legged in front of a large microphone. Soft instrumental music continues to play under most of his sermon. At the end (19:00), as Amr Khaled closes his eyes, lifts his hands in a prayer posture, and begins an impassioned prayer, a soft, low synthesiser drone begins and the melismatic male voice returns once again to sing a florid line.

The juxtaposition of music, sacred text and images in online sermons like this also appears in other genres of devotional videos centred on sacred sound. In Islam, Qur'anic recitation and *anasheed*, a vocal devotional song genre sometimes accompanied by percussion, enjoy widespread circulation online. Examples of both can be found on 'The Merciful Servant', which claims to be the largest Islamic YouTube channel, with over 700,000 subscribers and over 170 million views of its videos.[11] With the stated goal 'to educate, inspire and motivate muslims and guide everyone in the world

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316676639.013 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to a better understanding of islam [*sic*]', this YouTube channel features informational videos on such topics as jinn, prophets, and basics of Muslim belief and practice, together with devotional videos that feature chanting combined with still and moving images, frequently with translations into English superimposed. Merciful Servant bills these videos as 'emotional,' 'POWERFUL', 'heart touching' and 'motivational', clearly intending them to be affective, to stir the heart and the emotions towards greater devotion to God.

Though Islamic tradition prohibits the use of images in public devotion, Merciful Servant's devotional videos include numerous still and moving images of various kinds. 'Quran chapter 76: Al-insan (The Man)', a Qur'anic recitation video by Egyptian muezzin and recording artist Omar Hisham al Arabi, illustrates the way images are used in these videos. An English translation of the chapter's text is superimposed on a series of changing images as al Arabi chants in Arabic. The text comprises several distinct parts, beginning with a first-person account written in God's voice and describing the divine purpose in creating humanity; this is followed by a detailed description of paradise in the afterlife that awaits the righteous as a reward for their just deeds. The chapter ends with a series of commands related to proper devotional practice. Throughout the recitation, marked by reverb so heavy it sometimes gives the impression of polyphony, a series of moving images appears on the screen, generally changing every six to ten seconds. Many of these images are clearly intended to depict the sacred text. Images of human statues and a human foetus appear at the beginning of the chapter as God narrates humanity's creation. The image of a vast ocean accompanies the portion of the passage describing 'a fountain that flows abundantly'. During the textual description of the garden of paradise, the viewer visits a computer-generated garden. When the topic of divine cosmic judgment arises, the viewer takes a virtual trip through outer space.

Not all images used in the video correspond exactly to the sacred words; some introduce added meanings or associations. Many majestic images from nature (nearly all computer-generated) do not directly relate to the text. These include a snow-capped mountain flanked by clouds, a boat on the ocean at sunset, and a forest whose trees are on fire but not consumed. A human eye brimming with tears is shown as the text describes how devotees' love for God motivates their care for the poor, orphan and captive. When the text points to the coming transformation of humankind, a moving image appears of human figures made from what looks like flowing computer code, as in *The Matrix*. Depictions of public devotional practice are interspersed throughout, including an aerial view of a mosque, followed by the depiction of a lone worshipper prostrating himself on a tiled floor.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316676639.013 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Scanning other videos on The Merciful Servant, five basic categories of images predominate: images of nature (still and moving, photographic and CG); depictions of worship spaces and sacred architecture; men engaging in acts of devotion (mainly in *sujud*, the prostrate prayer posture); cosmic scenes featuring the universe or solar system; and abstract patterns of light that seem to depict flowing currents of energy. Several of these same image types emerged in my research into evangelical Christian devotional lyric videos on YouTube (see Ingalls 2016, 2018). I examined the musical and visual content of fifty worship videos (ten settings each of five popular contemporary worship songs) in tandem with online surveys and phone interviews with creators of twelve of the videos. Three image types predominated in this sample: nature images, used in more than two-thirds of the videos; depictions of worshippers, used in slightly more than one-third; and depictions of Jesus, used in one-third. I shall outline each in turn.

Occasionally the nature photos corresponded directly to the song lyrics, but they were usually unrelated. When discussing why they chose nature photos, Christian video creators told me they used images of nature to point to God as creator, and to create an atmosphere conducive to worship that would not distract the viewer from the song's message. In other words, nature images were intended to function as both subtle theological statement and as a pleasing, but innocuous, visual wallpaper.

Depictions of worshippers in worship videos generally feature a single worshipper or a group of worshippers with arms outstretched in prayer.[12] In analysing music, lyrics and visual elements together, I found that worship video creators commonly placed worship depictions at the musical climaxes within the song, especially at the beginning of a song's chorus where the instrumental texture, melodic height and volume increase. Worshipping bodies are generally featured as silhouettes against a plain colour or natural background, thus resembling the silhouetted bodies from Apple's iPod advertising campaign. Justin Burton describes why the dancing silhouettes were key to the overwhelming success of the campaign: the dancers were 'blank [human]-shaped spaces that could be filled with whatever identity a particular audience most wanted from [the iPod]' (2014, 319). By modelling the posture of worship at musical climaxes during these devotional videos, the worship video creators demonstrate that they have internalised certain expectations of evangelical devotional practice and gesture and invoke the bodily posture in which a devout viewer should be receiving the video.

Within the third category, depictions of Jesus, YouTube worship videos include evangelical popular art, Orthodox and Catholic icons, and still or moving images from films about the life of Jesus. US evangelicals, as heirs of Protestant iconoclasm, rarely use divine images in public worship;

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316676639.013 Published online by Cambridge University Press

however, religious historian David Morgan has shown mass-mediated images of Jesus to be central objects for private evangelical devotion. Morgan asserts that for pious viewers, these representations of Jesus 'make visual, and therefore in some sense embody, the personal savior, who "saves, comforts, and defends" them'. Through images of Jesus, 'Christ's personal significance for one's life is made visual: the face that one sees belongs to the divinity who cares personally for one's welfare. This visual personification of Christ clearly serves the evangelical imperative for a personal relationship with Jesus. Christ is encountered face-to-face' (1996, 193).

The religious work performed by the three image types common within Christian worship videos – two of which have direct counterparts in the Muslim devotional videos discussed earlier – suggests that in the online worship space images, sacred texts, and music are coming together to form a new and potent experiential whole. Within the YouTube comment boxes, some viewers testify how these videos invoke a personal experience with the divine. The video reminds some of powerful offline worship experiences they've had. Others narrate their real-time physical responses when watching the worship video, which range from being inspired to sing along loudly, to being moved to tears, to experiencing chills or goose-bumps, to feeling moved to spontaneously raise their hands in worship in front of their computer screen.[13] If we take these narratives at face value, it appears that, at least for some viewers, these videos mediate a sense of divine presence and evoke the same worshipful responses that characterise offline evangelical worship. Worship videos model a particular devotional posture and invite their viewers to adopt it.

These case studies of Muslim and Christian videos show how the affordances of digital online media have inspired new devotional practices with elements – in both cases, religious images – considered heterodox by many religious authorities and prohibited within public worship. Will these technologies drive a wedge between online and offline devotional practice, or influence the latter to become more like the former? In the case of contemporary mainstream evangelical Christianity, I have elsewhere suggested that online audio-visual devotional practices enabled by 'small screen' media are driving the incorporation of screen media in offline worship (Ingalls 2016). In *The Wired Church* (1999) Len Wilson, one of the first evangelical writers to address the use of digital technologies for worship, asserts that the screen is becoming 'the stained glass, and the cross, for the electronic media age . . . Icons were the Bible for the illiterate, and the screen is the Bible for the post-literate' (41). By synthesizing the devotional practices associated with sacred sound, images and text, audio-visual icons on small and large screens alike serve as markers of sacred

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316676639.013 Published online by Cambridge University Press

space, potent religious symbols, foci for devotional meditation and conduits for divine encounter. They become emerging examples of what Birgit Meyer has called 'sensational forms': religious media 'exempted from the sphere of "mere" technology . . . and attributed with a sense of immediacy through which the distance between believers and the transcendental is transcended' (2009, 12). As ways that religious traditions 'invoke and organize . . . access to the transcendental', new religious sensational forms like audio-visual devotional videos can influence not only practice, but also deeper structures of belief and ethics (13).

Conclusion: The Musical Shaping of Ritual and the Sacred Everyday

This chapter has demonstrated that music and sacred sound are essential components of many types of online ritual. From virtual pilgrimages to shared audio-visual resources to devotional screen media, music works to authenticate the online space as a sacred space even as it challenges – sometimes subtly, at other times overtly – what beliefs and practices are considered orthodox, efficacious or acceptable. Engaging in music as part of participatory digital technologies has the potential to change how people experience and practise their religious faith. Following Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2003, 116), online resources and spaces for digital devotion help fuel the 'production of [religious] desire . . . [T]he expansion and consolidation of the world market for consumer goods' create a sense of lack where once there was none, and expand the range of possibilities for devotional practice beyond the control of religious authorities. The Internet serves as a one-stop shop to find a vast array of resources across religious traditions: a marketplace of commoditised elements that can serve as resources for the conservator of tradition as well as for the 'spiritual-but-not-religious' person seeking out a mix of elements to further her quest for transcendence. It allows users to access information about musical and devotional practices from around the world, connects them to religious communities online and offline, and provides a relatively anonymous space for individual experimentation.

For practices whose authenticity or authority is likely to be questioned, music helps to sacralise the virtual world, grounding it in the associations of sacred practice offline. As Hirschkind reminds us, sound's sensuous aspects act powerfully on the body even as they shape ethical priorities, 'recruit[ing] the body in its entirety' and inciting moral passion in the devout listener (2006, 12). Arguably, at the level of sensation, it makes little difference whether the sound's source is live performance or a recording,

or whether it originates offline or online. But music-infused audio-visual rituals online do not merely serve to simulate or imitate offline practices; as demonstrated by YouTube devotional music videos, online ritual practices can convey divine presence in their own way, synthesising existing practices into new 'sensational forms' (Meyer 2009) that are not readily available – and sometimes not even replicable – offline. Music can either provide continuity between online and offline religious practices, or form part of a composite resource for devotional practice that synthesises and transcends its offline counterparts.

Using audio and audio-visual online media, this chapter has suggested that examining music and sound is crucial for religion and media scholars who seek to understand and assess the implications of digital culture for religious authority, experience and community. And for music scholars interested in digital culture, online ritual and religious practice provide an ideal site for examining how music participates in contemporary debates about the nature of online community, the global commodity marketplace, and the interface between musical and extra-musical media. Digital multimedia technologies enable new intermedial relationships among music, images and text, and the audio-visual experience that is produced is increasingly irreducible to each of its component parts. The type of media convergence demonstrated within online religious devotional resources has the potential to profoundly shape how people experience, share and make music. If online media continue to be important conduits for transmitting religious audio-visual content, will they reshape music industry structures in the process? Will they form religious traditions into increasingly networked communities who congregate around shared participatory audio-visual practices as much as common beliefs? One thing is clear: music and sacred sound, as an essential component of religious audio-visual practice, insert themselves into the structures of daily life and, in conjunction with offline religious practice, shape embodied ways of listening, viewing and worshipping.

For Further Study

Berger, Teresa. 2017. *@ Worship: Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds*. London: Routledge.

Campbell, Heidi, ed. 2013. *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*. London: Routledge.

Cheong, Pauline Hope, Peter Fischer-Nielsen, Stefan Gelfgren and Charles Ess, eds. 2012. *Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture: Perspectives, Practices and Futures*. New York: Peter Lang.

Engelke, Matthew. 2010. 'Religion and The Media Turn: A Review Essay'. *American Ethnologist* 37 (2): 371–9.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316676639.013 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Meyer, Birgit, ed. 2009. *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion, and the Senses*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Wagner, Rachel. 2012. *Godwired: Religion, Ritual, and Virtual Reality*. London: Routledge.

Notes

1 In this chapter, 'sacred sound' includes music but is also used to describe two distinct extra-musical phenomena. First, sacred sound is used to describe performance genres that share sonic organisation in common with music but are not conceived as music by participants (e.g. heightened speech used when chanting sacred texts, including Jewish scripture cantillation, Qur'anic chant, and devotional genres like *anasheed*, an unaccompanied Muslim vocal genre considered to fall into the category of sacred chant). Secondly, and less frequently, 'sacred sound' describes the sonorous qualities of religious speech (e.g. sermons, prophecy, ecstatic utterances).

2 Durkheim's well-known formulation of religion involves 'rites . . . that unite its adherents into a single moral community' (1912 [2001], 46). Engelke (2010) notes that, within studies of religion and media as both process and product, '"religion" is often understood as the set of practices, objects, and ideas that manifest the relationship between the known and visible world of humans and the unknown and invisible world of spirits and the divine' (374). For a discussion of the relationship between the categories of ritual and religion, see 'Ritual reification' in Bell (2009 [1997]), 253–67. For an analysis of devotional rituals not associated with organised religion, see Lofton (2011).

3 See Engelke (2010) for an overview of several significant developments in the study of media and religion in the decade after the year 2000.

4 Compare Shzr Ee Tan's references to the Internet's affording of safe, interstitial spaces in the contexts of political repression or intercultural communication (Chapter 10, this volume, 262, 269–70).

5 A lack of engagement with music has been recognised as typifying the field of media and religion more generally. See Schofield Clark (2006); Partridge (2014).

6 Tine Vekemans (2014) notes that the express intentions for the use of these sites do not necessarily translate into their actual use. In fact, there is a perceived authenticity problem among the sample of Indian Jain devotees that she interviewed. Vekemans writes that the computer-mediated puja's limited sensorium, its failure to provide social contact with other worshippers, and the perception that internet surfing is incompatible with a 'worship mindset' led many of her respondents to indicate 'that they saw online *darsan* and *pūjā* mostly as for Jains living abroad, meaning far removed from (or too busy to go to) actual temples and gurus' (138).

7 See Manuel (1993) for an account of devotional 'cassette cultures' among Indian Hindus and Muslims, and Mall (2012) for a detailed account of the US evangelical Christian recording industry.

8 According to licence holder survey data provided by CCLI, church music leaders who list the Internet as their primary source for discovering new music increased from 19.9 per cent in 2007 to 26 per cent in 2011. Christian commercial radio saw a rise from 23.5 per cent to 31.7 per cent during this period, while each of the four other categories (music club, direct mail, music conferences, bookstore) declined precipitously. For further analysis, see Ingalls (2016).

9 Though immensely popular, Khaled is a controversial figure, intensely disliked by some religious authorities who disagree fundamentally with aspects of his theology and his use of 'secular' media. For further discussion of controversies over Khaled and media logics in Islam more generally, see Echchaibi (2013).

10 This video is available on Amr Khaled's YouTube channel at www.youtube.com/watch?v=RbSApM8-FnA. As of 2 January 2017, it had garnered more than 300,000 views and 6,000 shares.

11 The Merciful Servant's YouTube channel can be found at www.youtube.com/user/TheMercifulServant.

12 The posture of hands upraised, an expressive worship practice in evangelical and charismatic congregational singing, has become a more or less universal evangelical Christian symbol for worship (see Ingalls 2018, introduction).

13 Several examples of each of these reactions can be found on the comment string for the video 'Our God – Chris Tomlin' available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=UdFzB4MQgEA.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316676639.013 Published online by Cambridge University Press