This essay assumes that what is needed in scholarship on digital religion is a re-centering of the "object" of digital religious practice into and on its own emergent terms, and that scholars and observers need to find new ways of thinking about and interpreting practice that assumes this re-centering. Our reflections on this are rooted in our own explorations in a research project focused on finding the ways and places that religion is represented, in significant ways, in media cultures. While we intended to look across all media, "new" and "legacy," it soon became apparent that the digital revolution is so driving the way that media are operating today that we shifted our focus entirely to "the digital." Once we made this shift we decided to cast a wide net. We did not limit ourselves to looking at only those places where "the received religious" was active, expressed, or contested, but instead decided to adapt an aphorism applied to religion (and variously identified with Peter Clarke, Martin Marty, and J.Z. Smith) that points to the categorical inclusion of those things which "...bear a family resemblance to religion...." There is a compelling theoretical reason for this. As we now understand cultures in terms of what can be
deconstructed, reconstructed, remade and redeployed through the reflexive practices of cultural actors, it is obvious that a different approach to the cultural “object” is justified. Consistent with current thinking in the field of religious studies, we wanted to be open to the affordances of “the religious” in the digital sphere, including the margins, boundaries, and borderlands. We thus began looking in digital spaces for things which either are religion or spirituality, which refer to then, or which bear a family resemblance to them, as each of these could be significant.

The result has been a set of case studies that operate in a variety of registers of relationship between “culture” and “structure.” We do not claim that these are a representative sample, but that they are significant because of what they can tell us about what "the digital" makes possible in the way of religiously and spiritually-registered explorations, resistances, articulations, and remediations. If we have any particular object in mind in assessing these cases, it is to think about what they mean in relation to changes within the category of “the social.” We are less interested in examples that are oriented to the maintenance of tradition, for example (though there are important questions there) than we are in considering how the various cases we look at might intentionally or unintentionally, directly or indirectly, “lead somewhere” in social terms.

As we have interpreted our cases, and began to look at others, it has become obvious to us that much could be gained in our understanding by re-centering our focus on "the religious digital" (thus broadly defined), its attributes, extents, and limits. Rather than assuming received categories of religion, spirituality, or religious or spiritual politics, or received physical or cultural geographies (the local/global dualism an example of the former, and gender politics an example of the latter) we have asked what might we learn by assuming that in digital religion we

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3 This was more than a casual decision. It was very much rooted in the evolving literatures in digital religion which continue to demonstrate that digital cultures host (and seemingly encourage) explorations that verge well beyond the reservation of "the received religious."
are looking at something on its own terms⁴ and its own locations? This approach made sense to us as we encountered examples among our case studies that were not easy to fit within received categories, yet had clear trajectories out of and into those categories. The significance of this to the "received religious" or "received spiritual" is obvious along a number of dimensions, but one in particular stands out: if there is some way that digital religion might be uniquely sited or located⁵ to be able to help re-imagine religion, then rather profound implications for religious authority present themselves.

As we continued our reflections on our cases, we found ourselves calling these practices in the digital realm, in relation to these cases, as—or as enabling—"third spaces." We were clear in this that we wished to make a distinction between what we meant by this and a more common prior usage (in a number of different literatures and disciplines), "third place." At the most basic, we wish to point away from physical location (an implication of "third place" as it most often used) and toward fluid, conceptual, and imagined locations (an implication of the less common use of the term "third space"). "Third place," and "third space" share in common an intention to describe something alternative to other, prior, or dominant domains. For our purposes, we initially thought of the idea of “third space” as something to “think with,” and we have been grateful for the collaboration of scholarly colleagues as we have done so.

Our work on digital religion takes place at the boundary between the disciplines of media studies and religious studies, and benefits as well from the emergent discourse in media and religion which boasts a vibrant scholarly community focused on that has been called “religion

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⁴ We credit here the observation by Deborah Whitehead, early in our explorations, that it is valid to look at objects that seem focused simply on “being about religion,” that is, practices in digital space can have their own inherent and internal logics and motivations. They need not be about “other” or “larger” purposes in the first instance.

⁵ We are well aware of the extent to which much of what we talk about here circulates around physical and geographic metaphors for the digitally-religious. We are, of course, not alone in this.
online,” “religion and new media,” and now “Religion, New Media, and Digital Cultures.” It is
the purpose of this essay to explore our idea of the “Third Spaces of Digital Religion” in relation
to evolving discourses in media studies. While there is much about the approach here that is
consonant with contemporary trends in religious studies, such as our focus on practice as
opposed to structure and on the emergence of “the religious” rather than the imposition or
construction of reified or essentialized notions of religion, it also remains for us to articulate our
project more completely with that field, as well.

First, though, is the challenge of connecting our thinking with our “home” disciplines of
media and communication studies. Emerging expressions of digital religion are significantly
articulated in relation two important trends: the coincidence of the increasing prominence of
digital mediation on the one hand and the persistence and re-imagining of the category of “the
religious” in contemporary life on the other. The digital sphere is a central social and cultural
phenomenon and a dominant theme of much contemporary public and private discourse. At the
same time, the whole meaning of religion, spirituality, and “the religious” is increasingly
prominent in social and cultural spaces and increasingly fluid, particularly in relation to what
once were their commonplace locations in social structure. Therefore, the phenomenon of digital
religion is rooted in two dimensions—“the religious” and “the digital”—that have co-evolved
temporally. This is important—and provocative—both conceptually and methodologically.
Across the same recent historical period that digital technologies and practices have re-made
private and public communication, religion has arisen as a more and more common—and largely
re-imagined—feature of private and public life. Against long-anticipated “secularization” in
modernity, a set of social and cultural trends have brought religion back into prominence. One

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6 See in particular Campbell, 2005 and 2011. Campbell, and other voices in this group including Christopher
Helland and Greg Grieve, have been instrumental in the creation of the Religion, New Media, and Digital Cultures
Facebook Group, which is becoming an important center of scholarly discourse.
of the arguable implications of the theoretical explorations in this essay is that this relationship is not coincidental, but that the affordances of digital spaces and the affordances of new ways of thinking about, expressing, contesting, negating, and reconstructing “the religious” are related to one another and to some common dimensions of contemporary life.

Religion has had a troubled and contested place in media studies. As David Morgan (2013) has pointed out in his recent account, the fields of religious studies and media studies “…have spent most of their history ignoring one another.” Morgan provides a tart but yet largely accurate picture of the received framing of religion in media studies:

For its part, media studies has happily presumed that religion expired somewhere between the French Revolution and Marxism’s dismissal of religion as the opiate of the masses, a largely inert pacifier that was no match for more interesting distractions such as entertainment media. Secularization was supposed to mean that the nasty incursion of religion into public life would be no more and that the secular state, safely insulated from ecclesiastical control, would arise. Disestablishment happened, to be sure, but religion did not go away.

And it is this obvious persistence of religion, particularly in the North Atlantic West in the first decades of the new Century, that has begun to raise its profile as an obvious focus of study across a range of disciplines—including media and communication studies. The obvious solution to this situation, at least under what has come to be called the “traditional paradigm” of media studies, has been to think of ways to examine religion as just another aspect of social and cultural life. And a certain amount of this is good, necessary, and long overdue. What we will argue, though, is that there are ways in which religion is unique and uniquely-articulated and “articulate-able” into media spaces, particularly in the digital era.

It is important as well to position our work in relation to traditions in culturalist media studies, specifically the legacy of British Cultural Studies, which has been a significant influence on our work and on the broader fields we wish to inhabit. The sort of articulation of cultural practice we intend to describe here bears much in common with ideas about the role of culture in
daily life, particularly Raymond Williams’s notion of the “structure of feeling.” Religion was less explicit than implicit in Williams’s formulation, but yet religiously-inflected ideas, behaviors and practices were written all over his interpretations of the conditions of cultural meaning. It is an important feature of the contemporary situation that what could be taken as implicit by Williams (and Hoggart) is today seemingly by necessity more explicit. This might be in part (though not entirely) due to the particular influence of the culture of the United States on the contemporary cultural and political evolution of the North Atlantic West. This need not be an argument rooted in received or nationally-chauvinistic bromides of “American exceptionalism.” There is reason to expect that careful historicism could explicate the ways in which the idea of “the religious” has been formed and shaped differentially in different cultural locations, including the United States, and how the cultural influence of the North American context has made its particular understandings or practices significant beyond its shores not least because of the influence of its media industries.7

7 This is an argument and a historicization which must await another day. The intention would be to explore how the normative context of the theory-building of the BCS tradition included a particular and unique instantiation of religion, bound particularly to the post-war period in Great Britain. Much of the work of the CCCS for example assumed, but did not problematize, religion—or seemingly made an account of a particular differentiated social history with regard to religion. The also-unique context of the US was made up of dissenting Protestants in contrast to the British condition of religious establishment. This exploration could helpfully draw on such sources as the recent work of David Hollinger which re-thinks the role of Protestantism in the construction of U.S. public culture: The United States, whatever else it may have been in its entire history as a subject of narration, has been a major site for the engagement of Protestant Christianity with the Enlightenment. This engagement was—and continues to be—a world-historical event, or at least one of the defining experiences of the North Atlantic West and its global cultural extension from the eighteenth century to the present. Still, the United States has been a uniquely conspicuous arena for this engagement in part because of the sheer demographic preponderance of Protestants, especially dissenting Protestants from Great Britain, during the formative years of the society and long thereafter. Relatively recent social transformations can easily blind contemporaries to how overwhelmingly Northern European Protestant in origin the educated and empowered classes of the United States have traditionally been. Hollinger (2013), p 3.
Some Conditions

To begin, there are three large, definitive conditions that situate the theoretical and methodological tools available to us. First is the phenomenon Couldry (2012) has called “media supersaturation.” By this he means the social condition whereby media are inevitable, ubiquitous, and increasingly present and definitive of daily private and public experience. To Couldry, this condition is so complete and absolute that all social theorizing must now take account of what has been called “mediatization.” We will return to mediatization presently, as there is a vibrant and growing scholarly consideration of religion in relation to broader thinking about mediatization.

The second condition is one we’ve already referred to: the seeming persistence of religion in late modernity. Against long-predicted processes of “secularization” which should have made religion less and less significant as national and global rates of education and income rose, religion has not disappeared in the North Atlantic West. While its role and presence is unevenly distributed in this context, and its place must be seen (as we have said) in a wide and diffuse set of locations, conditions, and practices, it seems more present today than at any time since mid-Century. And its role is increasingly problematic in relation to politics in particular. This is not only a so-called “post-911” phenomenon, but something that can be seen in a range of contexts and registers.

The third condition we wish to acknowledge is the nature of contemporary social practice which centers individual and collective social action as a defining logic of the social. This has been well-described in Giddens’s work on structuration (1986) which outlined the role that social

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8 It is of course the case that the general and superficial case for secularization, as stated here, has always been too facile a reading of Berger’s (1967) original conception. In fact, a broad literature on secularization has continued which has persuasively argued that the kind of “restructuring” of religion that has been underway for the past four decades is in fact evidence of ongoing secularization (Wuthnow, 1990; Casanova, 2006).
action plays in the constitution of social structure, and on the self (1991) where he identified the contemporary project of the self as fundamental. Social actors today, according to Giddens, aspire to a reflexive engagement with social contexts of practice through which they may craft an ideal and plausible version of themselves. Contemporary meaning-making, then, is more than a solipsistic search for cultural resources fitted to notional or idiosyncratic ideas of value and purpose. It has a logic that attempts to articulate meanings achieved through a variety of sources (including mediated sources) to social contexts where those meanings can have efficacy.

Our understanding of the practices which we see as inhabiting and constructing what we call the “third spaces of digital religion” is informed by a range of scholarly work on the social and the cultural. Henri LeFebvre’s work on the tacit ideologies that define everyday life produced two key ideas significant to what we describe here. His ideas regarding the location of “moments” of revelation, self-clarity, and presence that can resist the “numbing banality” of social life provides an important insight into how constructive action in the digital sphere could be about such a project. Equally important is LeFebvre’s insight about the cultural production of space. Digital spaces are of course conceptual rather than physical, but our case studies have shown us examples of how a conceptual projects of meaning-making act as though they have produced spaces of constructive action.

Judith Butler’s ideas about performativity have also informed the way we have looked at digital third spaces. Following Foucault, Butler (1993) has argued that performance (we prefer the term “practice” in relation to actions in relation to digital media) “…reiterates the power of discourse to produce the phenomenon that it regulates and constructs…..” What is so significant about Butler to our project is the near-axiom that through performance and practice, real cultural work is being done. Janice Radway (1984) applies this idea of productive action to broader
contexts of interaction through media, demonstrating how “communities of practice” can provide both the contexts and logics of constructive and meaningful action through shared attributions and experiences with cultural objects.

Clearly power, the attribution of power, the instantiation of power, resistance to power, and the claiming of power is implied in the practices we see in digital third spaces. Tim Ingold (2010) has suggested that power can be brought to life through “creative entanglements” in social space. Objects in social space, Ingold argues, can become “affordances” of purpose, if not of power. More importantly, perhaps, he suggests (with Latour) that it is an issue of instantiated, not only revolutionary, power. Power can be incremental, not of necessity interruptive. This bears much in common with Giddens’s structuration theory, which sees power as “…the capability to intervene in events…” (1985:7). Power then can be “interventions” in social space that do social and cultural “work” through reflexively-engaged action.

Of course, much has been written about power in relation to digital media. Manuel Castells attributes power in the digital age largely to the technical capacities of the “network.” He does not grant much space for practice. Castells’ “networked power” is all about inclusion and rules for “the network.” Power is something that is known when it is expressed and technologically mediated. As he puts it (2011:779): “…power operates…in the human mind through processes of communication….” Mass-communication and mass-self-communication are “…how people think….” To Castells, this defines how power can be exercised. It is less about finding LeFebvre’s “moments” and Giddens’s “interventions” and more about the determinative realities of the network.

Robert Latham and Saskia Sassen also see in contemporary interactive communication networks a possibility for rescaling social relations and opening up the frame of social action.
Using a sociological approach to study what they call new “digital formations”, Latham and Sassen argue that the digital turn requires a critical social perspective as opposed to a strictly technical and engineering one. From a social science perspective, they say, “such digitized information and communication structures and dynamics—what we call digital formations—filter and are given meaning by social logics. By social logics we intend to refer to a broad range of conditions, actors, and projects, including specific utility logics of users as well as the substantive rationalities of institutional and ideational orders. The distinctiveness of digital formations can contribute to the rise of social relations and domains that would otherwise be absent” (2005:6). It is precisely this type of assemblage of network capacities, power systems, user practices and visions, and social conditions which gives rise to arguably new and thickened social formations. This emphasis on a complex configuration of organization of content and practices, interaction among users, and spatial composition and staging (through the digital) of both content and social relations renders legible the mobility of knowledge networks and structures and the possibilities for disruptive interventions. These cultures of use -not access- in Latham and Sassen’s “digital formations”, is what needs to be properly theorized. “Their concern,” as they say, “is rather with this in-between zone that constructs the articulations of users and digital technologies” (2005: 21).

For our work, and our evolving understanding of religion in relation to digital cultures, the practices we see are much more tactical and iterative, and much more embedded in the meanings and affordances of social spaces. But they are also about certain kinds of power. Some aspire to power, some resist, some are clearly expressions of projects aimed at expression and influence. But their location and their logic are radically in the spaces defined, enabled, and afforded by emergent digital resources. Their logics are not defined by those technologies and
networks so much as they are negotiated. Thus, seeing these as meaningful practices where real cultural and social work is being done, we saw as well that their logics involved a kind of located logic, one that we chose to call “The Third Spaces of Digital Religion.”

Thinking about “Third-ness”

There is a wide range of literatures that have used the concept of “third-ness.” Best-known perhaps are the ideas of the sociologist Ray Oldenburg (1989), who wrote about the “great, good places” that used to exist between the home and the workplace, and of the architectural theorist Edward Soja (1996) who has contributed much to our understandings here about how physical spaces work with social and emotional liminality to generate meanings. In both of these traditions, there is a clear commitment to the notion of physical space as central and generative, with “third-ness” existing in negotiated, dynamic relationship with the physical. The social, to both Soja and Oldenberg, is subject to the physical in important ways, but is not itself central or generative in the way that culturalist social theory (such as Butler or BCS) might posit.

When we thought about the notions of third-ness we were encountering, a range of locations and registers presented themselves, all oriented around the location of practice in the digital sphere. What Oldenburg’s notion of "third place," and our (and Soja’s) notion of "third space" have in common is an idea of "in-between-ness." Third places, to Oldenburg, are somehow between (or beside) home and work, but in our frame of reference, the categories of "private" as the first space and "public" as the second, are also implied. In talking specifically about religion, we also intend to point to somewhere beyond institutions (churches, mosques, denominations, faith groups) as the first space and individual practice as the second space. As

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9 See Hoover and Echchaibi (2012) for a fuller account of these literatures and our differentiations from them.
10 There are examples of claims about digital third-spaces rooted in religion, typically using the term in relation to institutional and personal practice. (Cf. http://www.thirdspaceministries.co.uk/; http://www.smallgroupministry.com/leadership/pastor%27s-corner/launching-into-third-space;
we are thinking about processes of technological mediation, we might also mean that the digital enables or “remediates” (in the words of Medianou and Miller, 2013, who we will get to presently) a third space beyond the first space of legacy media and the second space of entirely individual and solipsistic articulation and action. Other "first" and "second" spaces that are implied by digital practices we study include: "commodities" and "authenticity;" "embodiment" and "virtuality;" "tradition" and "secularism;" "authority" and "autonomy;" "knowledge" and "practice/performance;" "individual" and "community;" and "static" and "generative" spaces in cultural production. There are many dimensions on which the digital can be located as a unique space between and beyond received polarities. This "in-between-ness" is, to our way of thinking, basic to the meaning of "third-ness."

There are four important distinctions, then, between our use of the term "third space" and the Oldenburg’s (and others’) "third place." First, for heuristic reasons, at least, we wish to center things on digital cultures and their capacities to constitute such third spaces, not on their putative capacities to support normative notions of "third places" in social life. Second, we wish to focus on spaces as conceptual or notional spaces, not only as physical ones. Third, we think of "thirdness" in relation to a range of dimensions, not only "home" and "work" or even "the domestic" and formal locations of activity beyond the domestic. Fourth, the point is not necessarily a singular normative good, such as the "civic engagement" that is the concentration of so many uses of the concept of "third place."

http://www.emergentbrethren.org/?cat=14.) However, see Knott (2005) for a substantive exploration of third space in relation to embodied religious meaning practice.

11 Moje and her associates (2004) provide a provocative and indicative argument close to our own, looking at cultural articulation in third spaces in relation to literacy education. In their terms, the notion that we might look at some sort of interaction between "geographic" and "discursive" grounds is also indicative because the practice they contemplate (socio-linguistic translation and articulation) are homologues to much of the practical generativity encouraged in digital cultures.
We want to consider the ways that these practices imagine that they exist within a conceptual context where they make sense and have particular capacities for accountability, understanding, and action. The online communities of our case studies act, in important ways, as though these are "third spaces," and as though these third spaces are generative positions from which important personal, social, and cultural work can be done. Such a sensibility necessarily relies on a rather complex reflexive interactive engagement with technology, practice, and lived experience.

The “As-if-ness” of Digital Third Spaces

Practices in the Third Spaces of Digital Religion are if nothing else reflexive. They demand a reflexive consciousness of location, place, project, and technology. They are what Medianou and Miller (2013) call “remediations” that demand a kind of self-conscious engagement. There is thus an "as-if-ness" to these practices. People act "as-if" these were bounded contexts of discourse and interaction. They act "as-if" they were communities of shared experience and sentiment. They act "as-if" they were contexts of public discourse and public deliberation. They act "as-if" these were powerful media for the communication of ideas and "as-if" there are relatively broad audiences of listeners out there. They act "as-if" the various expressions they craft in these spaces represent grounded, received truth claims for known communities of shared experience and value.

In using the term “as-if” we do not intend to imply that these position-takings and practices are in some way less valid than if they were “real.” That is far from our point. Instead, it will be clear from our further exploration of this turf that these “as-if” practices in fact deepen and instantiate their significance for those who practice them. They can be more valid and more meaningful to the extent that they are fluid and that they invite active participation in their
constitution. Their significance derives from this authenticity of participation, but also from a more teleological level on which aesthetic practice must always, on some level, involve “as-if” thinking.

This idea of "as-if-ness" has roots in philosophy, most identified with Kant. This intellectual history is most relevant to our explorations here to the extent that it points to a Kantian reflection on the nature of aesthetic practice. In an important essay in this tradition, Eva Schaper argued (in 1965) that the "as-if" is basic to aesthetic action, to the understanding that we think about things concretely that are actually immaterial. "To think and speak aesthetically is to be deliberately aware of and articulate about the nature of some things as fictions. It is to mention things in a special kind of bracket—the "as if." (Schaper, 1965) The essential claims of the Kantian "as-if" that are relevant to us are that it is possible to believe and act coherently in relation to these kinds of judgments, that in fact that is one of the essential characteristics of human reason, and that "as-if-ness" can be playful, indeterminate, hybridic, and elastic.

Assuredly, there is some point of determination in such practices, be it merely judgment or articulated into social action of some kind. The point is that determinancy is not at the center. What is at the center is playful and negotiative practice, one that in Kant's terms, achieves a kind of finality on its own terms. And this relies on—and indeed derives a good deal of its resonance and pleasure from—its reflexive position-taking. This suggests a different way of thinking about categories of contemporary practice. We can understand digital curation, for example, as a way of organizing an array of resources and judgments into a coherent whole, and doing so based on commonly-shared rules of inclusion, exclusion, and judgment. The practice of curation achieves a kind of finality or determinancy in its indeterminance.
There is a further, playful, aesthetic, and ludic dimension of this “as-if-ness.” It is clear that for the practices we have looked at, the exploration, the quest, and the pleasures of exploring and questing in new aesthetic dimensions, including the visual and auditory, have their own role in constituting the practice, and through their pleasures, justifying and authenticating it. A further dimension of “as-if-ness” has been pointed to in the work of Adam Seligman and his associates (2008). Their work suggests that practices, the lived and explored meaning rituals of life, can be generative and constitutive in their own terms, that they do not have to be ritualizations about “something else” to which they are bound in legitimating synergy. We want to point to and interpret the capacities that fluid, exploratory, ludic, and playful practice has to make things happen.

We can see this "as-if-ness" operating in our case studies. There are of course the rather superficial references to the online space as "community," but there is the real and embodied interaction that happens online and on the border between "online" and "offline." The case study of the Iranian martyr of the 2009 “green revolution” Neda depends on the elastic and creative imagination of her status and her attribution into ongoing political discourses that necessarily treats the online space as a central locus of discourse and action. Participants treat it "as-if" it is a space where an emergent international discursive community, made up of diasporic and resident Iranians, can share a common practice of productive cultural action. Participants in the *PostSecret* phenomenon visit the site each Sunday and attend the live rallies of its founder Frank Warren "as-if" it were a kind of personal or public ritual of shared sacrality. People create networks of shared experience through their shared consumption and circulation of the *PostSecret* cards, through which a kind of community is defined, which is treated "as-if" it were real and physical. And, the online as-if-ness generates new offline audiences and communities
through public events of various kinds. The hacktivism of the various national Anonymous collectives depends on important and determinative "as-if-ness" around the imagined and shared sense of purpose.

The hybridic and ludic possibilities of the aesthetic are thus deeply linked to this 'as if-ness.' Through this connection we wish to argue that autonomy and reflexivity are deeply linked. The sense of autonomy draws from the resources of the reflexive engagement in the "third spaces" as subjectivities imagine their capacity to do new and different things through their online activity. At the same time, the aesthetic operates on its own terms. It is not all about purpose or power or autonomy. It is important to understand, at the same time, that practices of meaning-making and articulation through aesthetic action are unique and uniquely-significant on their own terms.

Homi Bhabha and Third Spaces

Homi Bhabha's use of the term “Third Space” in postcolonial theory has been a particularly influential source for our project. For Bhabha, the outcome of the necessarily imbalanced relationship between a hegemonic colonial authority and a subordinate indigenous culture is a hybridized subjectivity in which individuals negotiate, subvert and reread the signs and symbols of colonial power while resisting scripted notions of inherited cultural purity. It is thus a negotiation of space, cultural meaning, and power. "It is in the emergence of the interstices,” Bhabha writes, “the overlap and displacement of domains of difference--that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural values are negotiated" (1994: 2). The postcolonial third space, therefore, is the expression of a “mutual and mutable recognition of cultural difference” whereby colonized and colonizer can no longer exist independently of each other. Rather than projecting an image of the colonized as a
complicit or resistant subject, Bhabha's "third spaces" suggest an ambivalent subjectivity which is a fluctuating process between the two positions. From this location, prescribed meanings about both the colonial and the colonized are revised and a third location of enunciation is introduced. These third spaces for Bhabha are liminal and interstitial sites where cultural meaning is not simply reflected but actively produced by subjects who are constantly interpellated to resist the monolithic dominance of hegemonic power.

In a similar vein, we can think of digital spaces as important performative sites of enunciation where formal and unitary structures of religious knowledge and practice become the object of both revision and transformation. Not all of our cases or all of the examples we might identify as “Third Spaces of Digital Religion” involve the post-colonial context directly. We see instead in Bhabha’s ideas of ambivalence and mimicry a way of describing cultural logics of hybridic performance and action that self-consciously negotiate a place for themselves over against other dimensions or poles. As such, the digital with its own communication logic, stylistic features, and convergent properties can become a significant site of disruption and invention, or at least of imagined possibilities of what values such as community, authenticity, and civility among others could be in a presumably open terrain of non-linear thinking. It is important to note here that not all digital formations qualify as transformative third spaces or sites of radical difference, but we believe the digital hosts and mediates critical articulations of liminality, translation, and negotiation of cultural meaning. One of the productive capacities of third space is precisely a competence to operate in a borderland of different modes of being and fashion something in between, unexpected both in form and substance. As Bhabha (1990) notes in relation to the value of hybridity and cultural translation as an alternative positioning:

…for me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from
which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the ‘third space’ which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom. …The process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation (211).

The quality of thirdness that we seek to foreground in borrowing from Bhabha is primarily its resistance to the impulse to anchor culture and identity “in place” and within existing bounded frames of thinking. But it is more than that. Third space arguably unsettles the singularity of dominant power narratives and opens up new avenues of identification and enunciation.

In the context of digital religion, this means our research efforts are directed at interpreting these spaces as critical attempts to recuperate the particularity of the lived experience of religion or spirituality in late modernity and divest it from a narrow essentialism of belief. Far from being mere technological events, religious third spaces in the digital realm are different not because they are radically new, but because they build from the ambivalent encounter of old and new forms of sociality and negotiate differing poles of cultural identity. As a “contact zone,” to use Mary Louise Pratt’s concept (1991), these spaces are not simply places where marginal subjects toy around with their peripheral individuality, but rather are sites where individuals use the technical capacities of the digital to imagine social and cultural configurations beyond existing binaries of the physical versus the virtual and the real versus the proximal religious experience. Recognizing, as Bruno Latour has said, that “technology is society made durable,” we do not assume these digital spaces to be borne in a social vacuum (1991). Instead, their very existence is contingent on a dialogic interaction and re-mixing of a multiplicity of forms, discourses, and subjectivities precisely to ensure the coming together – albeit in a much more contested sense- of society.
The digital in a third space configuration also becomes much more revealing because it makes legible the dynamics of translation and reflexivity as individuals—and at times institutions, too—seek alternative modes of belonging and community building. So, instead of seeing the digital in the study of religion solely in terms of its technical properties and their impact on some pure belief or on the authenticity of the spiritual experience, we look at it as a complex text of social practice, a site of negotiated religious praxis, which resists totalizing and monologic frames of reference and produces its own spiritual repertoire, its own discursive logic and its own aesthetics of persuasion.

Bhabha, then, illustrates three fundamental dimensions that frame our understanding of the third spaces of digital religion. First, his notion that cultural articulation can take place through a continuous process of hybridity, that they need not be constrained by determinative externalities. Second, his demonstration of the ways that such hybridity, rather than being diffuse (as would be a received view) can actually be constitutive and generative of salient articulations and meanings that can express cultural power and autonomy, and can achieve a new singularity in articulation and meaning. Third, his argument that the most important work is the work of distinction, made particularly acute as it resists and renegotiates. Bhabha clearly believes that significant interpretive communities can form around hybridic articulations of the situation, that identity work is being done, and that these articulations can result in meaningful action.

What we think of as "third spaces," then, follows Bhabha's ideas about hybridity, adding a number of other significant dimensions. In addition to their hybridity, the digital third spaces of religion are generative (as Bhabha has claimed). They can be and are the sources of ideas, of claims, of identities, and of solidarities around their articulations. Digital third spaces of religion
are in-between, as we have said. They exist between private and public, between institution and individual, between authority and individual autonomy, between large media framings and individual "pro-sumption," between local and translocal, etc. Digital third spaces of religion are fluidly bounded. Boundaries are important, but they are subject to a constant process of negotiation. Digital third spaces of religion are interactive and thus "co-generative." Their "communities" of shared interest and purpose produce ideas and generate action that are realized in both online and offline contexts. Digital third spaces thus depend on, and help create, subjectivities of autonomy through the more-or-less constant reflexive engagement into which their participants are "hailed."

Third Spaces and theories of Mediation and Mediatization

The re-emergence of a vibrant theoretical discourse devoted to “mediatization” provides a valuable opportunity and a challenge, not least because within mediatization theory there has been a focused articulation of theories of “the mediatization of religion” (Hjarvard, 2008). Hoover (2013) has suggested that Mediatization theory as applied to religion needs to be seen in relation to another tradition, one that focuses instead on the “mediation” of religion. This framework, persuasively present in the work of Birgit Meyer (2011), David Morgan (2007), and Jeremy Stolow (2010) (see also Couldry, 2008), focuses on continuities in the ways in which religions have always been mediated, and sees more modern means of mediation, such as in the digital realm, as evolutions, rather than disruptions. Proponents of the mediation view rightly fault some popular and scholarly theorizing that focuses instead on the medium as being entirely too technologically-deterministic.

This tradition has been extremely productive of conceptual and theoretical tools for understanding the interactions between “the religious” and modern media. For example,
Meyer’s (2011) work on the mediation of religious sensation has provided important insights into the nature of media practice including valuable insights about the way that aesthetic logics can be determinative. Morgan (2007) has shown that the visual is a powerful mode of practice, providing settings, occasions, and logics through which important cultural work in meaning-making, distinction, and resistance can take place.

For a variety of reasons though, mediatization theory has a growing influence in the broader field of media studies. In Hjarvard’s original formulation, mediatization theory focuses on the ways that, in a media-suffused world (in the North Atlantic West) structures and institutions come to take on a media form, and operate according to a “media logic.” In the interaction between “media” and “social institutions” or “social forms” something new is produced. It is not merely a matter of media acting upon these other domains, the interaction with the media makes and remakes the institution or social form.

The energetic scholarly debates about mediatization theory have focused on some important dimensions of the theory, not least the notion of a “media logic” (Couldry, 2013; Lundby, 2009). This idea has been at the center of theories of mediatization since the early work of Altheide and Snow and has remained controversial not least because of the problem of specification. Is a “media logic” a categorical feature that is applicable across a range of domains (do all social forms or social institutions experience the same “logic?”) or is it something that is unique to each context or instance of mediatization? Is it, further, something that is implicit in the media that drives action in these various spheres, or is it something more like Birgit Meyer’s “aesthetic logic,” a necessary—but not sufficient—explanation for the consequences that flow from the process of mediatization?

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12 This is our amendment and it is intentionally provocative of a needed reflection on the applicability of mediatization theory beyond its home context.
13 See, for example, Couldry, 2012 and Couldry, 2013.
As Couldry (2012; 2013) has suggested, the challenge of mediatization theory is also to better demonstrate how its processes are instantiated in actual domains of action, such as politics. Lundby (2009) posits that “media logic” must be understood less as for its consequences to atomized social actors and more in relation to social interactions. Couldry’s (2013) suggestion of an articulation of mediatization with field theory would appear to be a valuable way forward. Without such interpretive scope, mediatization theory could founder as merely another re-statement of a “strong media” theory, this time applied on a large scale to major locations of social structure. The question of “media logic” and the problem of grounding mediatization in actual fields of action (taking account of their interstices and interactions) are both problems as mediatization theory has been applied to religion.

Hjarvard’s (2008) work on the mediatization of religion pointed to media supersaturation as a social fact, and to empirical data regarding the decline in religious participation, looking for ways that the latter might well be understood in light of the former. He identified a range of examples of places where the functions of religion would now seem to have been replaced by media. What has happened, in Hjarvard’s view, is a “banalization” of religion as media cultures have increasingly offered opportunities for religious and spiritual “work” to be done through popular and commodity culture. His conclusion is to see this “banalization” as a loss in the total presence of “religion” in the culture as the formally or doctrinally, or historically, or confessionally “religious” is by some unspecified measure “losing out” to these banal forms. These representations of religion, or so Hjarvard argues, leave some elemental or essential nature or work of “the religious” in harm’s way.

Lundby’s (2009) account of Hjarvard’s work in this area pointed somewhat beyond such a formulation.
Hjarvard analyzes these elements as representations, and so they are. However, the banal religious expressions could as well be studied from the perspectives of those who produce and those who consume these representations, that is, the interaction with the texts and symbols that goes on in the production processes as well as in the reception processes. The media logic will then be de-masked and demystified, as one will observe actors and agents in play with the representations. Power relations behind the ‘banal’ religious expressions will be visible. (Lundby, 2009:112)

Lundby points to productive as well as consumptive practice. While he may not have had digital practices in mind, the very mode of action in the digital sphere operates according to a received hybriddic subjectivity (leaving aside for a moment the larger questions of agency and determination) of production and consumption. What he is arguing is very much what we would argue in relation to this aspect of Mediatization theory as applied to religion: that what might look like a diminution of “religion” when looked at from the perspective of the prospects of traditional religious institutions and their prerogatives, can look quite different when seen from the perspective of practice. To focus on the prospects of institutions occludes the rich possibilities that might be present in negotiations in the digital. More significantly, perhaps, “third-ness” (over against mediatization theory as we’ve characterized it)—doesn’t assume or lament a disintegration of “the religious.” Social actors are using the digital precisely to work against the dominant, unitary views of religion. They are not bound by that definition, and are in fact actively subverting it.

Hjarvard notes that what happens to religion is in the cultural appeal of consumer capitalism. This can lead to a kind of “re-enchantment,” (following Weber here) according to Hjarvard. Lundby describes it this way:

within this context, there is space for a re-enchantment of religion and spirituality and popular, cultural series and stories—contrary to Max Weber’s rational prophecy of how the modern world is becoming disenchanted. These new expressions of religion and spirituality are not dependent on the church or other established institutions they develop within the media themselves. (Lundby, 2009:112)
Hjarvard (and Lundby) argue that this situation represents a loss for “religion” because what is produced is not religion per se, but a banal form that somehow merely quotes religion. Thus for mediatization theory as applied to religion, there has been a concern with definition, with retaining as “religion” only those things that are within the prerogative and aspiration of religious authority. We do not have that problem. As we said, and hope to demonstrate, the range of things that are significant of and to “religion” and to “spirituality” today, that might constitute affordances of “the religious” in addition to being “religion” themselves, is somewhat wider than the field of action within which religious authority acts. Our work has therefore been distinct from the developing discourse on the mediatization of religion along a number of lines. For example, our focus on private as well as public action (again while allowing for how this private action may well have public force and effect). We can see in the contemporary evolution of religion across a range of domains and contexts that the mediatized practices of “the religious” that might be interpreted on one level as occurring in “privatized” spheres, do in fact function to make and remake larger networks, structures, and even institutions. 

Therefore, while mediatization-of-religion theory, as articulated by Hjarvard, has been preoccupied primarily with the prospects of religions as large, established, public institutions, our work crosses between that context and other contexts, attempting to account for both, and for the layered, interactive, and negotiated ways in which those settings or levels interact and relate to one another through productive acts in the digital sphere. While mediatization theory has tended to focus on institutions and on a reification of “the religious,” we are more interested in what hybridic digital practice can generate. This may be a way in which our focus on religion derives theory-building in a particular way. The phenomenon we contemplate—“the 

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14 It could be argued, for example that the growing global phenomenon of Neo-Pentecostalism is best understood in this way.
religious”—operates in a number of registers not typical of all social forms and contexts, and particularly distinct from the realm of politics which has tended to draw the attention of social theorizing of the media.

There are a number of ways that religion is particular, or even unique in, relation to explorations of its contemporary mediation or mediatization. First, religion affords the possibility of transformations that are not restricted by the terms of politics—religion reserves the right to stand above it all. Thus, a politics of transformation or of recognition can be central (though are not necessarily so)

Second, religions have always been multi-modal, multi-media, about the senses, experience, imagination and revelation, whereas politics has tended toward linear and rational argument, foregrounding specific modes of deliberation.

Third, the media work in the same turf as religion, in registers of imagination, and can, through mediations of imagination and experience, interpose themselves into spaces and modes that were once more the monopoly of “the religious.”

Fourth, there is also, in contemporary life, the consequences of reflexivity and reflexive engagement. Practitioners are also critical of, or can distinguish themselves from, structures of authority (their reflexivity necessarily places them in a particular place vis a vis authority). This can be about their relationship to “the divine” or “the transcendent” where in politics it might be limited to relationships to “others.” More fertile imagination is possible and afforded—an economy defined by another dimension of experience, not constrained by the terms of political practice or the traditional forms of religious participation, either.

It is interesting that there is no significant discourse in digital third spaces of religion that focuses on “…why we do religion online….” There is no need to, it is tacit, even banal, that “the
digital” and “the religious” have a natural consonance. There is no need to explain or justify or “theologize” it. There is a further banalization, as well: the banalization of the neo-liberal market. The mediations within the third spaces of digital religion open this practice and integrate it into incursions of the neo-liberal market and the positioning of power within it.

What this all looks like in practice is that religiously-inflected digital practice can be about individual as well as public action and about interaction between these spheres. It can be about promotion and expression, but also about reflection and individual ascetic practice. It can be about piety and about resistance to religious authority. The central logic of our inquiry is to see how all of this works in the unique instantiation of digital spaces.

Other Sources in Media Theory

Important recent work has been helpful and provocative. We are particularly indebted to Couldry’s (2012; 2013) recent re-thinking of media theory which has moved the questions away from the technical logics of media or the prerogatives of media institutions and toward the fluid spaces of media reception and circulation. Placing his work in the broader context, Couldry suggests that we need to understand mediatization as

...a meta-process that emerges from the continuous, cumulative circulation and embedding of media contents across everyday social action, rather than as a reproductive logic or recipe already lodged somehow with media contents themselves. (2013:3)

Couldry’s formulation thus conceives of whatever logics exist in these processes as emerging in the interactions of individuals, networks, and publics with the affordances of the media, with those affordances evolving with new media and social forms as they themselves evolve. The point is not the technology, but what happens when media are made and remade in social spaces. His introduction of field theory (2013) into the evolving thinking about mediatization further elaborates a view which we can see in relation to our own interpretive
work. Thinking in field-theoretical terms, he notes (2013:8), “…naturally generate(s) a diversity of cases where thinking about mediatization as a broad metaprocess can be refined and applied,” allowing the theory to emerge from the range of instantiations of media with (in our case) “the religious” and drawing understandings from that about the affordances of practice in relation to digital technologies and to emergent cultural projects among various individuals, communities, and publics. The challenge, to Couldry (2013:9) as “…how transversal or crossfield media facts can be thought about in ways that both capture their pervasive reach…yet remain consistent with the differentiated nature of social space, as conceived by field theory….”

The value of Couldry’s approach can be demonstrated by means of some of the insights he derives from looking at the evolving media landscape in this way. Stepping outside the received categories of media practice implicit in much prior theory, for example, he has been able to identify the ways in which media are suffused into broader social practices in “rituals” (2008) that are conditioned and defined by social experience in the media age. Reflexive engagement with the media, then, involves more than what one knows from the media, but a great deal about what one knows about the media and about the ways that social and cultural value are exchanged in the media age.

Couldry (2012) has also provided an important category of practice—uniquely articulated to the media and thus a kind of media logic—he calls “presencing.” By this he means that one of the affordances of digital media in particular is a set of practices whereby individuals can make themselves, and their voices, known in media spaces. This logic runs very much against much of the received legacy of media theorizing. The media are not only about projection of messages across space and time from powerful forces to less powerful audiences, and not only about interactions through social media that are purposive in information terms, the media can also be
about a kind of cultural ritual of identity through recognition in the sphere that counts the most (by some logics) today: the media sphere itself. This presencing is a precondition to other things, of course, including political action, but it can itself be its own justification according the conventions of contemporary digital media.

This idea, that media practice is about establishing and inhabiting spaces or contexts of meaning and interaction as much as it is about sharing information, is present in a growing array of studies of digital media. For example, Clark’s (2014) account of her studies of social media storytelling as a mode of identity politics for young people contending with issues of class and diversity in an urban high school notes that meanings are attached to the technologies themselves. The social and cultural exchange value of these devices and their imputed and presumed values in class and social terms in “the moral economy of the household” (see Silverstone, 1990), are one of the registers through which meaning work is done. It is not just about the efficacy of these devices for communication and network-building, it is about the meanings of the technologies and how those meanings attach to other projects in the social sphere.

Medianou and Miller (2013) provide a similar account in their work with social media and diasporic identities. Looking (like Homi Bhabha) at the post-colonial setting, but in terms of how various communities in diaspora negotiate their “thirdness” in layered responses to locations both “here” and “there,” Medianou and Miller outline a theorization of digital media they call “polymedia.” Looking (as we do) at projects of cultural production and exchange within “…proliferating communication opportunities…”, they lay out the view that it is necessary to differentiate the systematic ways that individuals can use these opportunities to advantage. “Polymedia” becomes a way of describing this reality. They put it this way:
Polymedia is an emerging environment of communicative opportunities that functions as an “integrated structure” within which each individual medium is defined in relational terms in the context of other media. In conditions of polymedia the emphasis shifts from a focus on the qualities of each particular medium as a discrete technology, to an understanding of new media as an environment of affordances. (2013:170)

While their focus is very much on the use of these technologies for interpersonal communication among the communities they study, the practices they outline can be seen to have public and near-public implications and aspirations. Throughout, they argue, individual actions in relation to media are made with consciousness of the technologies and with relations between various technologies and their capabilities and meanings, in play. The “remediations” that result take place both diachronically (in trajectories of received and remembered practice) and synchronically (focused primarily on contemporaneous exchange and purpose). Throughout, they see polymedia “…not as platforms, but as cross-cutting patterns of engagement….”

This has provided provocative and persuasive insights into our “third spaces.” The tactical and negotiative ways in which various media are selected, engaged, and made-meaning-of very much exists in a fluid register of practice that iterates among locations of social space, technology, and intended locations of action. It is a fluid space, and one that is fluid in both its aspirations to social or cultural purpose and in the ways that media “opportunities” (to quote Medianou and Miller) are valued and potentially used. The affordances of digital practice in our third spaces are very much a result of these various locations, opportunities, histories, memories, and valuations of various media. In one way, our “third spaces” are nothing more or less than the negotiations through which “…users exploit these affordances….”

Our Project in relation to Media Theory

Our thinking about our work in relation to media theory is still very much a work in progress. We have not been able to start from a stable base of media and communication studies
theory-building about religion in relation to media. As we’ve said, some of the most important sources of the current productive trends in media and religion have largely been silent about the category of “the religious.” There has been a tendency to see religion in only the narrowest of terms, if at all. The instrumental paradigm implicit in mass communication theory before the critical and cultural revolutions, looked at religion as well, rather instrumentally. The assumption that it was measured and measure-able by means of its visible public institutions meant that as their influence seemed to fade, so did interest in studying the larger category.

As we’ve said, religion has persisted, and new forms and new articulations of religion, of spirituality, of the near-religious and the anti-religious, of religion as piety and religion as politics, have emerged over the past two decades, making it increasingly necessary to account for this new field. The project is centered on “religion” as the distinctive object at the center of all this, at the same time that the very definition of religion and “the religious” has become more and more fluid. The ongoing evolution of the digital age has pushed this situation ahead. Lodging our work in evolving thinking in media studies, we’ve encountered a number of sources that have proven provocative and valuable. We close with some thoughts on Couldry’s evolving thinking and on our own, and on ways that our project draws from, and is consistent with, his account of evolving social spaces in the media age, but more importantly on ways that our work is distinct.

We do not contemplate something so large and total as Couldry’s project: a direct link between media processes and “…the changed dynamics and dimensionality of the [whole] social world in a media age…” (2013:6). Rather, we are trying to understand the ways that people make sense of the differentiated social spaces of late modernity (here we are heavily indebted to Bourdieu). Couldry cites Bourdieu: “…Bourdieu readily acknowledges that fields
are emergent phenomena and the concept should only be used if it helps us grasp the order in what particular types of people do…” (2013:6). We are thus not primarily interested in the larger effects of media, that Couldry calls “transversal,” or “…linked effects and transformations that occur simultaneously at all or very many points in social space…” (2013:7). We are interested in the affordances of media to practices of meaning-making and cultural production. What we identify might well, in a later iteration, be significant for larger projects and struggles, particularly in national and global politics. If the affordances of digital practice oriented around “the religious” operate along certain lines, then important effects in larger or transverse structures and spaces are obvious. Among the case studies we look at are those that have clear political valences and objectives. We can see the affordances of practice in these spaces supporting political efforts beyond. More broadly, the existence of these third spaces as places where new logics of religious identity, meaning, community, networks, and action can be explored and instantiated, has serious implications for the prerogatives of religious authority. Such implications “beyond” abound.

But our fundamental project is not in the first instance about something so large and grand as politics. We are instead interested in “the religious” and how it is both instantiated and formed through digital practice and how it—and its various valences across a range of imagined, lived, and remembered domains—comes to be negotiated into meaning-making in the digital sphere. Thus, the uniqueness of “the religious” in these considerations is in its multivalent and hybridic participation in meaning practice in these spaces. It can be at one moment the object of mediation and remediation and at another a constitutive force and at another a set of symbols or languages that are brought into play in negotiations about other things—including politics. Specifically, we ask, what does it mean to “do and imagine religion” within the digital
environments we have at our disposal today. What kind of religion and spirituality do we have in contemporary societies given the shifting modes of communication and dynamics of social action?

As our work progresses, we hope to be able to both build stronger links to emerging thought and emerging literatures focused on other phenomena and other domains. But, we also hope to be able to articulate the ways in which the religious object can be and is unique in these considerations. Finally, we do hope that our ideas about the capacities of digital practice to establish and inhabit what we call “Third Spaces” will prove useful to others looking both at the phenomena we look at and in other projects as well.

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