Religion and Media
Intellectual Output 2, Unit IV

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Religious experience and media

Nowadays, the media are increasingly used to spread and intensify the religious experience: television, radio, advertising, internet, videogames intersect every field of human life. Again, it is a rather common opinion to believe that Internet is now integrated into daily life, becoming an indispensable tool through which even religions have found the opportunity to enhance their message of religious salvation and spirituality. The so-called **digital religions**, for example, have become a new form of spiritual experience, through which beliefs, prayers, pilgrimages and religious rites can be integrated online. It is important to note that this type of religious culture can be divided into two main categories: "**religion online**" and "**online religion**": the first expression refers to the historical institutional religions (Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, etc.).) that have become part of the Internet universe, while the second expression indicates instead religious groups or virtual communities for which the **network becomes decisive for the very existence of religious experience.**

The spread of digital religions is due to the fact that the Internet is a **free and richer mean of communication** than the old media (in particular, radio and television). Users can have a personalized experience, and the visual stimuli and the level of interaction is way higher. Being without intermediaries, internet is becoming not only the privileged terrain for institutionalized traditions to communicate their religious messages more effectively, but, above all**, for believers to interact and communicate** their views to each other much more freely.

Digital religions are also linked to a **general crisis of authority and orthodoxy** in old institutionalized religions: in fact, now on internet **anyone can write** and 'sell' themselves as an expert of a certain spiritual tradition, and this factor increases the pluralism of views, and the possibility for a net surfer to explore different ways of **being religious in a fluid, personalized way**.

At the same time, **institutionalized religions exploit**, also from the point of view of marketing, **the potentiality of the web in terms of images, sounds and interactivity**, for example giving the followers the possibility to light a virtual candle, or to communicate via e-mail or via forums with celebrants and other religious leaders/experts. Similarly, software-houses and web developers try to meet the needs of these virtual practitioners by **selling them virtual tools for online rituals**, like commemorations for the dead.

Although the **old media** seem to be partly supplanted nowadays by the internet, they still play an extremely important role for the **dissemination of religious culture**: Mass on television, the media dissemination of sacred images and holy places, the television transmission of religious texts are still followed today by millions of faithful. Television, in particular, still contributes to spreading the religious message of institutionalized religions such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam or Buddhism. It should be noted, however, that in some cases, media such as television have often been i**nstrumental in manipulating the religious message towards certain goals**, inducing even radical behavior in the faithful, inciting racial hatred, altering the perception of political events or inducing religious fundamentalism.

In sum, it must be noted that also the **dimension of religious experience and practice evolves**, responds and interacts in various way **with social, technological and even commercial developments**.

Reference Digital Modules:
- **Religion in modern and post-modern society**

Case study 1: Mass and television/internet broadcasting

In the Christian-Catholic religious culture, **Mass on television** (or, **TV Mass**) is generally considered a television product *sui generis*: along with the news, it is one of the oldest and most widespread television programs in the world, with the exception of countries with anti-democratic or fundamentalist regimes. For example, Italy's Sunday programming of the Mass on television enjoys a very high listening index and reaches a large audience on certain occasions like the Mass of the Pope at Easter or Christmas. Even in Islamic society, television and radio broadcast programs in which authoritative figures explain the message of the Koran and the precepts of Islam. Moreover, some television programs propose instead images of praying people inside a mosque or images of holy places of Islam. With the development of **web broadcasting**, such programs are **available also to believers living in foreign countries**. Moreover, followers can also **interact with the celebrants**, for example, sending them personal prayer intentions.

Reference Digital Modules:
- **Liturgies and places of worship in Christianity**

A Catholic Mass broadcasted through YouTube. Here the priest is reading a passage from the New Testament. © 2018 Daily TV Mass.

Case study 2: *Ramayama* and television in India

The transmission of the ***Ramayana*** (journey of Rama), together with the ***Mahābhārata***, is one of the greatest epics of India. Since the end of the eighties, Indian state television has started broadcasting television programs focused on the deeds of the mythical king Rama. In the Hindu tradition Rama, besides being a king, is considered an ***avatar*** (manifestation) of

the god **Vishnu**, who is incarnated every time in the world to restore peace and harmony among men by driving away evil. The *Ramayana* is in fact basically a story of struggle between good and evil and of the triumph of good, but also of friendships, loves and betrayals. The enormous fame that this television program still enjoys today is therefore due to the fact that Hindus take the gestures narrated in this ancient religious text as an ideal model of conduct.

Reference Digital Modules:

- **What does "Hinduism" mean?**
- **Vishnu, "Bhakti" devotion and the concept of Avatara**.

Case study 3: Televangelists

In North America, **televangelists** are generally priests (or pseudos, as in many cases they are not priests), representatives of **Protestant churches** (especially from the Evangelical movement) or leaders of new religious movements, who preach and entertain the public with discourses on sexual morality, the education of children, salvation of the soul, etc. However, televangelists are ministers of worship who spread, in most cases, a simplified image of religiosity in order to reach a vast audience.

In U.S. televangelists have become influent opinion-makers. For example, the televangelist Jerry Falwell (1933-2007) founded the prominent political organization called "Moral Majority", that played a key role in the Republican presidential victories throughout the 1980s.

Although telepredication began only in America, becoming very popular especially among Evangelical Christians and Christian churches, globalization has allowed some TV broadcasters to reach a greater audience through international transmission networks.
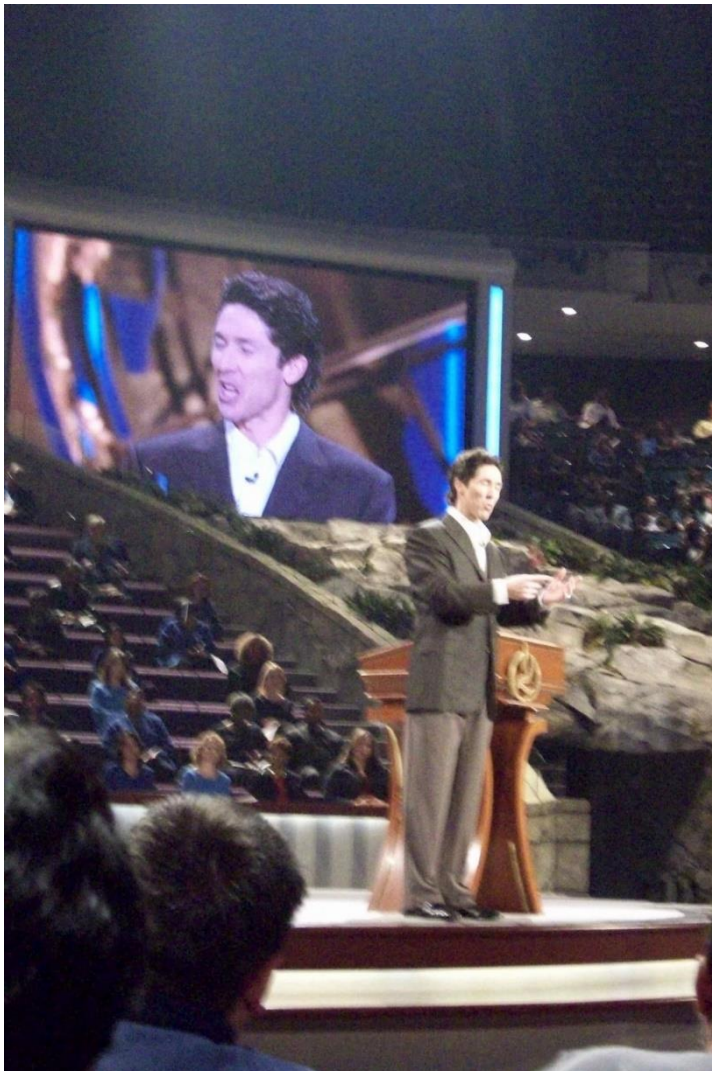
Televangelist Joel Osteen at Lakewood Church, a huge church (16,000 seats) in Houston, Texas

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Reference Digital Modules:

- **Christians worldwide**
  (esp. Source 2, showing the dynamism of the Evangelical Movement)

Case study 4: Pilgrimages online in Japan

Pilgrimages are a rather common religious practice in Japan. One of the most important is the **Shikoku pilgrimage** (*Shikoku henro*), a pilgrimage of eighty-eight temples scattered on the island of Shikoku which, according to Buddhist tradition, would have been visited by the famous Buddhist monk Kūkai, the founder of the esoteric Buddhist school **Shingon**. The religious experience of this pilgrimage, as well as visiting the temples, now also **includes websites for pilgrims and faithful**, and **numerous blog sites of pilgrim-bloggers** where they report their activities and religious practices.

Reference Digital Modules:

- **Buddhism in Japan**

Case study 5: Virtual cemeteries

Virtual cemeteries are generally different types of online memorial platforms, where users can commemorate their loved ones in various ways and without distinction of nationality, sex or religious cult. In some cases, users can send emails to the deceased, leave bouquets of virtual flowers, or publish a sentence or a memory. This kind of funeral commemoration can take place also on social networks, transforming the profiles into virtual tombs. Moreover, with the diffusion of smartphones, is not unusual to find virtual cemetery applications for mobile devices.

Although virtual cemeteries are not directly connected to a specific religion, these memorial platforms could become the ideal terrain for expressing one's religious faith or for practicing some kind of virtual funeral ritual tied to a specific religion.
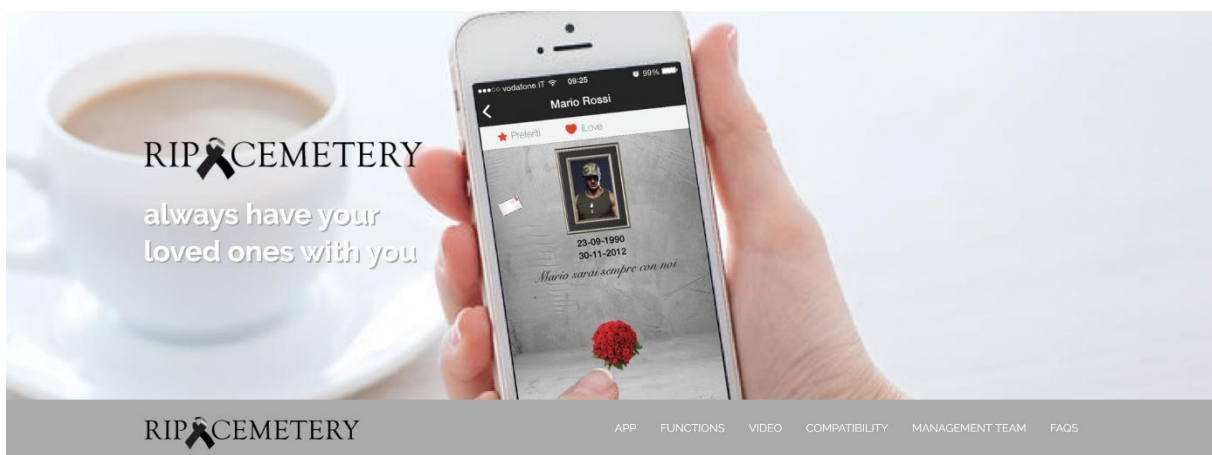
Screenshot from www.ripcemetery.com web site, advertising a mobile app for virtual commemoration practice.
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