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Digital Worship as Fostering or Inhibiting Social Inclusion and Social Cohesion

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Abstract

This paper seeks to address the ways and extent to which participation in digital worship might be seen as fostering or inhibiting social inclusion and social cohesion, and to assess the current state of research on this important topic from both a sociological and theological perspective. It aims to broaden digital theological understanding beyond sacramental and ecclesiological concerns towards more wholistic concerns of participation and belonging, intersecting with the digital divide and theology of disability. Drawing on the work of Martha Nussbaum and the capabilities approach, this paper proposes consideration of digital participations with respect to their significance for cultivating participation in community by conducting a literature review of various studies. Further, it addresses ambivalences which arise out of these studies, as digital access seems to enhance certain forms of connectedness while rendering other forms less stable. Observation of these ambivalences is framed into research desiderata for future study on the interrelationship of digital participation in religious community and the facilitation of community and social resilience. With the intention of building upon this recent research to address the more specific question of what kinds of digital participation foster social inclusion with a focus on religious communities, it identifies concrete pathways for further academic inquiry, and suggests a framework for new practical theological questions centring justice and inclusion.

While scholars have investigated the subject of online religion for over 25 years (Campbell 2005), the theological discourse has largely remained concerned with questions pertaining to ecclesiology and the overall legitimacy and authenticity of the digital church. Surprisingly less prevalent are theological concerns surrounding the impact of the digital church in areas of access and social inclusion, including the actualization of liberation theologies like the theology of disability. If one expands

considerations beyond systematic theological questions to encompass both practical theology and social theory, this creates space for reflection regarding how bonded groups relate to one another by way of systems and structures. In the context of the digital church, it is hard to consider these questions without drawing one's attention to the problem of the digital divide and digital inequity. Conversations around the "digital divide" are frequently framed in a limited capacity which narrowly considers access as the only precondition for achieving digital equity. Evidence suggests that improving access to digital technologies does not necessarily predict social inclusion and improved societal participation. Drawing on the work of Martha Nussbaum, Amartya Sen and their capabilities approach, a more nuanced analysis must be pursued regarding what people are actually able to do and achieve in community and how digital technologies foster or inhibit these capabilities. According to Nussbaum (2011), just societies inherently promote a substantial number of opportunities and freedoms by which individuals possess equal autonomy to exercise their choice. Social inclusion and cohesion closely relate to Nussbaum's central capability of "affiliation", which involves the right to engagement in various forms of social interaction. Nussbaum notes that this capability pervades all other capabilities, in the sense that affiliation encompasses respect for each person as a dignified, social being; this precondition must be met for any capability to be actualized (Nussbaum 2011: 34–40). Many studies have assessed the significance of digital participation in supporting mental well-being and social inclusion in a variety of forms, including for example, studies on digital participation among the elderly (Delello and McWhorter 2017; Friemel 2016), among indigenous communities (Walker et al. 2021), and among refugee communities (Andrade and Doolin 2016). Others have considered the relationship between digital religious communication and social and community resilience (Fröh and Robinson 2023). However, additional research is required regarding the more specific role of digital participation in facilitating social inclusion within religious communities. A recent study from Mora and Martínez (2022) explores digital diasporic spiritual consciousness among Venezuelan Evangelicals through the digital worship collective, *Adorando en Casa* (AeC). Their findings suggest that the incorporation of social media into regular church worship channels has fostered improved sense of community and belonging among diaspora communities who have been able to reconnect with churches in their home countries through digital worship projects. Further consideration is required regarding the correlation between the type of social inclusion fostered by digital religion and the concerns of other justice issues, including the theology of disability, and the extent to which these interests overlap.

Theological Framework

There is a great deal of concern and hesitation among church leaders regarding the legitimacy of the digital church, and a strong desire to preserve the physicality of communal, sacramental, and liturgical embodiment. Further, there is increasing anxiety that the digital church will serve as a substitution or replacement for historical modes of worship (Chow and Kurlberg 2020). Introduction of a new perspective to digital church that is less theological, and more ecumenical, does not intend to invalidate these concerns, nor to suggest that digital religious spaces can unequivocally replicate or replace the physical presence of embodiment which occurs during in-person worship services, nor to take a position regarding its role in sacramental life. Rather, it simply offers greater weight of importance to social issues than theological ones, particularly digital equity, and social inclusion. In a post-pandemic context, willingness to give new ecclesiological consideration for digital religious spaces is inherently interdependent to maintaining relevance in the contemporary world. Demonstration of how digital worship can positively foster religious community in online spaces should not be viewed as a threat, but a supplementary asset and enhancement of existing church worship structures which occur in physical spaces. The existence of a new, growing, digital spiritual community does not diminish the fundamental importance of physical, in-person communion. However, to dismiss religious experience in digital spaces as invalid, based on digital hesitancy alone, challenges even the most traditional ecclesiology. In Colossians 1.18, the church is understood as the body of Christ, the essence of which is a divine and spiritual reality, not an inherently physical one. A Christological ecclesiology is one which fundamentally challenges this notion of church as a purely social, historical human institution (Chia 2020). This is not to dismiss the role of "place" in the context of worship. Afterall, in Exodus 26, God commands the Israelites to build the tabernacle, describing its specifications in great detail. Place of worship, symbol and ritual are all elements of great importance which provide a strong foundation and direction for the praise of God. Although God will "meet" the Israelites at the tabernacle, it is important to note that it is not anchored to one location. This suggests that the place of worship is synonymous with encountering God's presence (Musa 2020). In effect, space facilitates a relationship between God and the worshipper and the worshipper and themselves. The nature of space helps to facilitate the experience of worship as both transcendent and immanent. Certain attributes of space cultivate this feeling of transcendence, including scale and volume, light, art/architecture, and organization. All these elements should be considered when facilitating worship in digital spaces (Schiefelbein-Guerrero 2023) In 1 Corinthians 3.16-17, the Church is described as the Temple of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit indwells in the Church through both the individual and the community. This theologically informed understanding inherently challenges the notion that the Church's identity is dependent or

bound by historically contingent forms, or that the character of the Church is diminished or altered by external circumstances that shape her model of worship. The digital church cannot be exempt from this spiritual reality of communion with God, composed of the members of Christ's body, made possible through faith and the power of the Spirit (Chia 2020).

Beyond the ecclesiology of the digital church, consideration must also be given to how Christian worship is defined. Worship, like church, is characterized by human activity, yet it also transcends human experience. Christian worship is made possible only through the grace of God and the power of the Spirit; a doxological response cannot be actualized externally from this context. It is the Spirit that gathers the church and cultivates unity among its individual members, fostering spiritual community. It is only by the agency of the Spirit that Christians can participate in worship and therefore this participation in worship as a spiritual reality cannot be diminished regardless of whether the gathering engages a traditional space or a digital one (Chia 2020). It seems the dilemma is less related to the authenticity of digital worship and more a resistance to the deconstruction of traditional hierarchical worship and communal structures. Digital worship challenges conventional models of community in favor of a worship space that is more dynamic, adaptable and organic. The digital church transcends its historical geographic network of community towards a fellowship which is united more by way of relationship (*koinonia)* than by affiliation (*ekklesia*) (Campbell 2022: 71–2; O'Lynn 2022).

If fellowship (*koinonia*) is cultivated through Christ alone, then surely this cannot be eliminated by the limitation of virtual gatherings (Chia 2020). If God's presence exists at all times and in all places, this affirms the sacred throughout all things, places and history. Digital church offers a unique opportunity to bridge the gap between the secular and the sacred, the traditional and the contemporary. As digital spaces continue to become more prominent in public spheres, the Church must bring the gospel to its audience. This is a natural trajectory, and if approached with the intentionality of keeping God at the centre of worship, it can draw believers closer to God and cultivate a heightened sense of community (Musa 2020). The very heart and essence of the digital rests in the cultural reality of communication; it is this very concept which presents a theological invitation into the mystery of the triune God, and the communication of God's existence by way of revelation throughout the course of human history. In the ultimate revelation found through Jesus Christ, as the Word incarnate, salvation is communicated through his life, death and resurrection. Illuminated by the Spirit, the Church becomes the vessel which spreads the good news of the gospel throughout the world. As modes of communication continue to evolve in the wake of technological progress, digital religious communication may be understood as an advantageous new strategy for fulfilling this mission (Zsupan-Jerome 2014: 2). Further, the adoption of polymodal forms of worship, which allow for full

participation both in person and online, are inherently more inclusive of those who are unable to return to physical in-person worship spaces due to medical vulnerability and disability (Schiefelbein-Guerrero 2023).

Literature Review

While digital spaces are inherently value-neutral until their applied application, recent studies suggest a strong correlation between participation in digital access and an enhanced sense of community belonging among a diversity of populations. A case study conducted by Andrade and Doolin (2016) involving 50 resettled refugees and the use of ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) focused specifically on measuring its potential to foster increased social inclusion and societal participation. In the study, these New Zealand refugees were provided with 30 hours of basic computer training, a refurbished desktop computer, and internet access, as part of a government-funded initiative. After a series of interviews with participants from eight different countries, the authors noted that the pervasiveness of ICTs in society, or simply providing access to the necessary tools, did not automatically promote social inclusion. With an interest in what individuals are actually able to do and achieve with ICTs, Andrade and Doolin identified five capabilities improved during the study with the incorporated usage of ICTs: participation in digital society; effective communication; improved understanding of new society; social connectivity; and expression of cultural identity (Andrade and Doolin 2016).

A comprehensive review of recent literature, policy responses and case studies, conducted by Walker et al. (2021) regarding Indigenous youth in Australia, demonstrated the correlation between access to digital technology, improved mental health and wellbeing, and increased societal participation and social inclusion. Their findings determined that due to inequities in affordable access to digital technologies, only 63% of Indigenous Australians have access to the internet at home. Concurrently, their research also concluded that when access to digital technology and social media is achieved, it strengthens cultural identity, improves mental health, and reduces isolation from community and country (Walker et al. 2021). Note that access in this case presupposes participation, or one's ability to effectively use the technology provided.

Other studies, such as Delello and McWhorter (2017), focus on technology usage as a mechanism for counteracting social isolation and an overall decline in health among older adults. The researchers conducted a case study at a senior living centre in the Southwestern United States involving access to and usage of iPad technology. In addition to providing access to these devices, the study offered small group training sessions which included information about content sharing and social media usage. Upon conclusion of the study, it was determined that access to iPad technology

and improved digital literacy resulted in increased social connection with friends and family members and enhanced societal participation (Delello and McWhorter 2017). A second study related to technology usage among seniors was conducted by Thomas Friemel (2016), in which a random representative sample of 1,103 seniors in Switzerland over the age of 65 were interviewed. The interviews conducted revealed that only a quarter of seniors in Switzerland engage in regular internet use. Friemel found that barriers to usage disproportionately affect seniors over the age of 70. In all cases, the existence of a social context in which encouragement from friends and family is prevalent, coupled with opportunities for learning in private environments, were strong predictors for technological engagement (Friemel 2016).

Collectively, in the case of refugees, Indigenous youth and the elderly, these studies unanimously affirm that technological access does not necessarily predict social inclusion or societal participation. They also conjointly suggest that when certain preliminary conditions are met regarding equitable access, tailored digital literacy training to improve user ability, and a social context which fosters encouragement and support from friends and family, all three groups experience a heightened potential for digital engagement. Further, strong evidence suggests that when the culmination of these conditions is achieved, resulting in increased digital engagement, it has the potential to foster improved sense of community belonging, social inclusion, and societal participation.

Ambivalences

Despite the obvious potential for benefit presented in these studies, certain ambivalences undoubtedly arise, as digital access seems to enhance certain forms of connectedness while rendering other forms less stable. As Andrade and Doolin (2016) suggest, access to technology is helpful, but it is not always adequate in actualizing capability and fostering participation. Further consideration must be given to what Schejter (2021) calls the "right to communication", or the ability to communicate, in the context of the digital religious community. Utilizing the framework of Amartya Sen's capabilities approach, Schejter makes the argument that communication should be understood as a fundamental right and capability. Schejter's theory on the "right to communicate" asserts that free expression is a universal right that is interdependent with communication and therefore technological characteristics for communication should be made universally available in a digital age. In a digital society and participatory culture, the author views communication as a required function for participating in political, cultural, social, educational, and commercial spheres of life, making it a necessity for community belonging. In this context, participation extends far beyond the right to own or have access to digital media, and

communication is a basic requirement for humanity's well-being and their ability to function within any society or social institution (Schejter 2021).

While technology can be useful in facilitating the navigation of new contexts, further consideration is required to determine if the social or cultural cohesion cultivated through technological connection bonds participants more to their localized communities, their communities of origin, or some other facet of the global community. This raises important questions surrounding the nature of the type of "cultural cohesion" or "social cohesion" produced by digital religious engagement. In the case of Andrade and Doolin (2016), refugee participants reported the use of ICTs to make sense of New Zealand society and to become familiar with the new culture and way of life. Many participants said they felt more comfortable communicating in an unfamiliar language with the use of ICTs rather than face-to-face or in-person interactions. Regarding social connectivity, many refugees reported the use of digital communication, such as social media, to connect with other members of their particular ethnocultural group in New Zealand and in other parts of the world. It also afforded them the opportunity to connect with friends and family in their home countries and maintain certain expressions of their cultural identity, such as accessing resources in their native language (Andrade and Doolin 2016).

In Walker et al. (2021), similar findings suggest that participation in digital technologies and social media by Indigenous youth enhance cultural identity, and connections to both community and culture. The authors emphasize the importance of access to Indigenous culture, connection with Elders, family members, and community as an underlying facet of Aboriginal social and emotional wellbeing (Walker et al. 2021). In both cases, social and cultural cohesion often manifests within the local community but is informed by connections with unique ethnocultural identities that do not necessarily fit the dominant social discourse. In the case of Mora and Martínez (2022), the digital worship collective *Adorando en Casa* (AeC) was specifically designed to facilitate religious experience among Venezuelan Evangelical diasporic communities on a global scale, with membership spread across South America, the United States of America, Canada, Mexico, Costa Rica and Spain. The study demonstrates the effectiveness of digital religious communication as a mechanism to affirm and strengthen religious cultural identity and sense of community, inspire collaboration, and provide emotional and spiritual support in digital spaces (Mora and Martínez 2022). While the intentionality of this initiative was to inspire global community among diaspora communities with a shared religious identity, evidence from Andrade and Doolin (2016) and Walker et al. (2021) suggest digital religious communication has the potential to foster social and cultural cohesion across a diversity of religious traditions and ethnocultural communities on a local, national and global level.

Theology of Disability

Historically, theology of disability often centered the perception of what able-bodied people believe is in the best interest of persons with disabilities. Disability is often viewed as a flawed human condition, inherently representing a disadvantage or a problem to be corrected. This perception of disability as human flaw is unfortunately reinforced within biblical representation as New Testament authors draw parallels between healing and forgiveness of sin (Lk. 5.18-26; Jn 5.14) or lack of faith (Mk 5.34; 10.52; Lk. 17.19). This model inherently perpetuates disempowerment, exclusion and isolation. Thankfully, contemporary discourse surrounding disability has shifted its perspective to consider disability as more of a social problem, rather than a specific medical problem impacting individuals. With this understanding, a person becomes "disabled" only when barriers to access exist. In this way, impairment becomes socially transformed, not only as disability, but as an obstacle to full societal participation (Reynolds 2008).

Theology can wrongly equate disability with questions of theodicy and the problem of suffering because it falsely presumes that all persons with disabilities suffer. If disability is understood as an affliction sourced from God in parallel with prosperity, it is quite natural to fall into the trappings of "otherness" rather than to acknowledge one's limited understanding of God's compassion. Recognition of humanity's limited capacity for divine knowledge should undoubtedly lead to humility rather than judgement (Morgan 2021). A more accurate understanding is that persons with disabilities suffer not from their impairment but rather the failure of society to practice radical inclusion, and consequently, the perpetual dehumanization of their circumstances by able-bodied people (Michalko 2002). It follows that any theology of disability must be liberatory, centring the voices of persons with disabilities, and granting stigma only to the institutions and social attitudes whose barriers construct disability, rather than misdirecting this stigma towards non-conventional bodies (Eiesland 1998).

When discussing the capability of "affiliation", Nussbaum highlights the social reality that all aspects of society and public policy must be understood in the context of relationships. She discusses the insufficiency of making options available without proper consideration of this interdependence (e.g., employment options and workplace relations or privacy boundaries within healthcare). These considerations, which fundamentally centre human worth and dignity as social beings, is an important lens by which both theology of disability and the digital church can be practically understood and applied (Nussbaum 2011: 39–40). Nussbaum's framework points to the interrelationship between digital theology and theology of disability, recognizing the inefficacy which inevitably occurs when responses are done in insolation rather than affiliation (e.g., addressing digital access in separation from literacy).

This intersection can perhaps best be understood within the framework of theology of access, which considers the realities of how persons with disabilities are able to exhibit presence and participation in all aspects of church life and society. This scope expands well beyond the right to physical access of houses of worship to encompass a wide range of barriers that prevent persons with disabilities from full participation in ecclesial life. This includes concepts of worship and sacrament that intrinsically include language, sight, hearing and other elements that could potentially create barriers for "authentic" participation (McLachlan 2021). These components which inherently exclude many persons due to lack of consideration for diversity of bodies are quite synonymous with critiques of digital worship and its ability to cultivate full embodied presence. This suggests that current digital ecclesiology might require radical deconstruction of bias towards non-conventional bodies.

If the task, or concern, of theology of disability is rooted in the liberation of persons with disabilities from the limitations imposed by institutions, social structures and human perception, does it not offer the same considerations as a sociological perspective of the digital church? Digital worship offers a valuable space for social inclusion in many of the same ways that theology of disability challenges us to consider. Further, it serves as a readily available means for church bodies to mitigate barriers to access related to theology of disability, socially transforming the church in a way that upholds equal value and participation of all its members. The incorporation of theology of disability into digital theology proactively corrects many of its inherent limitations by fundamentally broadening its spectrum of accommodations. Reflection on the capability of "affiliation" fosters consideration for the interrelationship between the accessibility of digital church and barriers faced by persons with disabilities. For example, offering church services online is advantageous for those with differing levels of mobility or those who suffer from compromised immune systems resulting in higher risk at in-person communal gatherings. By centering one's understanding of the digital church and digital worship within the framework of justice and radical inclusion, one's theological questioning moves beyond the sacramental and ecclesiological towards more wholistic concerns of participation, belonging and salvation.

Conclusion

A more serious pursuit of theological questions related to justice, inclusion, and its intersection with the digital divide calls for the following types of considerations. The presence of ambivalences suggests much potential opportunity for the future of research on the interrelationship of digital participation in religious community and the facilitation of community and social resilience. First, in consideration of Schejter's (2021) "right to communication" and the case study presented by Andrade

and Doolin (2016), it can be deduced that simply providing access and opportunity to engage in digital worship and other forms of digital religious communication does not necessitate community participation, nor does it necessarily facilitate social cohesion in the way of shared religious experience and enhancement of collective religious identity. Evidence suggests that to truly alleviate digital inequities requires movement beyond bridging the gaps between the "haves'" and "have nots" to ensure that members of faith communities are actually able to achieve the full potential of their capabilities required to engage in the type of full digital participation that can bring about radical social cohesion. All the studies presented here (Andrade and Doolin 2016; Walker et al. 2021; Delello and McWhorter 2017; Friemel 2016) suggest that when certain preliminary conditions are met (e.g., equitable access to ICTs, customized digital literacy training, and social/community support), digital engagement offers the potential to produce improved sense of community belonging, social inclusion, and societal participation.

This observation raises important questions regarding whether faith communities can effectively aid in the facilitation of meeting these necessary preconditions within their congregations. Further, what *kinds* of digital participation in religious communities foster social inclusion and thereby promote social cohesion? Plüss (2020) has already identified the occurrence of interchurch cooperation in which congregations in rural areas were successful in adopting new technologies by receiving help with digital material from more technologically advanced congregations. Additionally, he identifies the increased implementation of analog methods of communication across various congregations during the global pandemic, to help parishioners mitigate access barriers or lack of digital literacy (Plüss 2020). Further research is required to consider, does ecumenical cooperation have the potential to help alleviate digital inequities which impact religious institutions and their members, so that all parties can actualize their capability for full digital participation?

The second gap brought about by observation of these ambivalences is the lack of case studies specifically related to digital religious communities necessary to address more specialized facets of research, e.g., Do any observable digital participations exist specifically in religious settings/communities that foster inclusion and cohesion in those religious communities? Do any observable digital participations specific to religious communities/settings that foster inclusion and cohesion exist in the wider community (e.g., beyond the religious setting)? This article reviews a sample of ethnoculturally diverse, non-religious studies by which inferences can be made regarding their relationship with online religious communities, but only the Mora and Martínez (2022) study deals with this question directly. The findings of Andrade and Doolin 2016; Walker et al. 2021; Delello and McWhorter 2017; Friemel 2016 suggest that, when appropriate conditions are met, digital communication has the potential to improve mental and emotional well-being, enhance sense of community belonging,

and foster social and cultural inclusion and societal participation. The study by Mora and Martínez (2022) demonstrates evidence that these attributes are transferable in a digital religious setting, with the potential for additional benefits, including facilitation of collective digital religious experience, direct worship collaboration, emotional and spiritual support through digital prayer spaces, improved sense of belonging and connection with home countries among diaspora communities, and a strengthening of a more specific religious identity and sense of religious community. Further studies like Mora/ Martínez are required to draw stronger conclusions regarding the transfer of benefits found within non-religious digital communities to online religious spaces, and to produce stronger determination of the unique benefits that only digital religious communication can provide.

Finally, further consideration must be given regarding the extent to which addressing digital inequality inadvertently addresses the concerns of theology of disability and how an interdisciplinary approach to these two disciplines can collaboratively foster justice, social inclusion, and social cohesion.

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