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The Performance of Religiosity on Social Media: Three Future Research Directions

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Abstract:

This working paper proposes an advancement of geographies of religion by putting forward three interconnected key areas for consideration in future research. It starts by briefly looking at the past and current discourse within this field in an attempt to lay out the field's future directions. The three key areas that this paper proposes to explore are as follows. First, through a discussion of techno-religious space as a religious conduit for young people to perform their religiosity, the significance of these online sites or spaces in religious and socio-cultural contexts will be underscored to advance further the new geographies of religion. Second, this paper will flag the importance of studying micro-geographies of young people as new religious agents. Transfers of religious authorities have been observed, and this is significant in understanding the transformation of religion in new contexts. Third is the performance of these young people's religiosity in the online environment, and a consequence of their performance of religiosity is the concern with measuring or assessing religious performativity in online contexts. While these three proposed key areas will be discussed within the context of Islam and Muslim identities, they are not limited to Muslim contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

Geographies of religion is not a recent field of study within the socio-cultural geography sub-discipline. It has received growing interest within academia since the 1960s, although it was not initially acknowledged as a stand-alone subfield. Scholars in this subfield, Adrian Cooper, Richard Gale, Lily Kong, Elizabeth Olson, and Peter Hopkins, to name a few, have advanced this field with their own research interests and have been studying sacred and non-sacred sites, public and private sites, modernity and religious transformation, general religious patterns, young people's religiosities, and religious community and identity. This paper contributes to current discourse by capturing the transformation of religiosity in the performance of religious practices particularly within the online environment. As we are still searching for a distinct 'geographies of religion' (Proctor 2006), this paper helps to refine both conceptual and empirical aspects of the field. To this end, the author proposes three key areas to add onto current research.

At present, there is an immense interest in media and communication and their socio-cultural and material relations. Technological developments such as television and radio have provided a new platform or space for religious sharing and broadcasting. As technology has developed, newer spaces with distinct infrastructures, settings, and contexts have emerged, shaping socio-cultural and religious processes in ways that are qualitatively different from before. Such space has been termed by Kong (2001) 'techno-religious' space in her paper on broadcasting and religion in Singapore. I propose that we study this online space in detail, as technological affordances of online space/site can offer new and different forms of social-cultural and religious interactions and practices. The Internet (a non-sacred and non-religious network) is providing new sites for religious representation beyond the traditional physical sacred spaces (Kong 2001;

Hopkins et al. 2011; Shelton et al 2012). Such online spaces must not be left out of academic analyses, and must be considered to further inform academia as a whole, the discipline of geography and, in particular, geographies of religion, in which this concept of techno-religious space is anchored.

The Internet affords a different form of spatial construction of religious identity and spatial enactment of that identity. Relevant to the issue of space is the idea of religious agents and also, of course, the performance of religiosity. As technology progresses, so do the demographics of the users. Young people are now the key users of websites, in particular, social networking sites and video and photo sharing sites that are characterised by user-driven content. Religion is practiced more often (as a consequence of the Internet) at the individual level, and less at the community level. As this become commonplace, new spaces are painted with multitudes of contexts. We benefit greatly from observing and analysing this information at the individual and everyday levels. In the remainder of this paper, a survey of current discourse in geographies of religion is briefly offered. This is followed by discussion of the three proposed key areas to further advance the field: techno-religious space, religious agents and transfer of authority, as well as performance of religiosity.

New Geographies of Religion—Where Are We Now?

A plethora of work has been done within geographies of religion that spans politics of religious space (Kong 1993; Kong 2006; Kluver and Cheong 2007) including: first, how places are implicated by meaning-making for religious groups and individuals, creating religious and non-religious space; second, manifestation of conflicts, contestation and negotiation between religious and non-religious groups in buildings and spaces; third, politics of identity and community (involving youth identities, concerns with residential segregation, and the acknowledgement of the complexities of interconnected transnational, national, and local forces in the constructions of identities); and fourth, realisation that both micro and macro scale research are essential to advance our understanding of the real-world situation, and lastly, the significance of geographies other than of the British Muslims (Kong 2009). New areas for geographies of religion were suggested over a decade after the initial interest in this field (Kong 2001). These include: different sites of religious practice beyond the 'officially sacred', different sensuous sacred geographies, different religions in different historical and place-specific contexts, different geographical scales of analysis,

different constitutions of population, different dialectics, and different moralities. Human individuality is progressively seen in religious rite, ritual, performance and in overall religious experiences and, in particular, in the everyday use of online spaces and this makes it more relevant for geographies of religion to focus on individual experiences in their studies, for religion is both individual and communal. A more individualised approach to studying religious experiences was addressed earlier by Cooper (1992). A move away from religion and society in general to a more narrowed-down approach that includes human individual experiences and contexts was suggested. There is also an emphasis on the empirical, rather than just theoretical, t including the construction of identity and everyday practices. Further, there is a growing acknowledgement that religiosity and transformation of place and space involve contestation and negotiation, and that religion and the spatial reproduction of socio-cultural identities intersect with gender, ethnicity, and age, highlighting complexities in the field (Holloway and Valins 2002).

At present, research on religion and media is focused on religious identity and religious communities online, and on the ritual use of the Internet (Hoover and Clark 2002; Dawson 2005; Horsfield and Teusner 2007; Kawabata and Tamura 2007; Ess et al. 2007; Cloete 2015). This mushrooming and particular interest in religion in the media and in online space could be attributed to the rise in the use of these spaces. Attention received by the Internet and mass media is warranted, as our daily use of online sites continuously transforms our everyday experiences at individual and societal levels. Furthermore, the significance of such study in both offline and online environments cannot be denied, as it is crucial for the understanding of current religious landscapes, communities, and individuals.

New Directions—Three Key Areas

Techno-Religious Space

Kong (2001) has asked how technology has changed and facilitated new religious practices, and how religion harnesses technology and how will geography and place figure in the reproduction of religion as rituals metamorphose. Although these questions were asked over ten years ago, I believe that they are still pertinent to the study of religion and technology. It is not my intention to provide the answers to the questions that Kong raised but to acknowledge their relevance to today's situations and to highlight the significance of transformation in religion and its practices, and the

subsequent creation of a techno-religious space. The issues within the nexus of religion and technology that have been raised are highly relevant in comprehending and analysing religious experiences, expressions, and practices in the new media age. In line with some of her work on religious space and community, I wish to put forward here the experiences of individuals in the online space within religious contexts. It is not merely about the experience and feelings of religious community in the online space but about disembodiment and experiencing the 'site' — techno-religious space — itself: "[t]echnological developments have opened up new spaces of religious practice—or 'techno-religious spaces'" (Kong 2001, p. 405). Such a space discussed by geographies of religion scholars refers to both spaces created by media, such as mass broadcasting via television and radio, and also physical offline spaces, whether they are sacred or non-sacred. To date, online space, with its socio-cultural and religious contexts, has not been conceptualised as a techno-religious space and of course has not been widely studied as individualised and personalised space. As highlighted in the introduction the internet has become a new platform for religious practices with different contexts and socio-spatial arrangements and, more so today, a place for the individual user to share their daily religious reflections. Such arrangements are a result of the dynamic processes between the users and the sites themselves. I suggest that we incorporate online space into our studies, as we are in the age of new media, where they are heavily used in everyday life (Lawrence 2002; Campbell 2005; Cowan 2007).

What makes a space an Islamic space? In the offline environment, Islamic spaces are identified by the physical landscape—mosques, schools, or community centres. In the online environment, the social and religious physical symbols are missing or intangible. Religious space becomes heavily reconceptualised owing to the new technologies. With the rise of online space, physical religious spaces are not replaced but, similar to other aspects of life, there is continuity in individuals' life experiences and social practices that flow seamlessly between online and offline spaces. As argued by other scholars (Markham 1998; Wellman and Hampton 1999; Wellman and Gulia 1999; Hine 2000; Boyd 2008; Haji Mohamad 2014) online should not be separated from offline, putting them at different poles and precluding the possibility of crossovers. The separation between online and offline contexts, according to Teusner (2015), is one of the limitations of current studies on virtual spatial religious geography. He therefore proposes to look at online sites as 'spaces of flows' rather than actual spaces. One interesting point he made is that the virtual is not space but a flow of information. As he has written "[i]n a networked geography of religion

online, virtual does not refer to 'another space', but a system of information that sits at the periphery of all settings of social interactions" (Teusner 2015, p. 3730). While this point has merit, virtual space can also be regarded as another *space* or *site* not just an information flow. Indeed, information shared by users and made available for other users to consume characterises this virtual space. But as Markham (2003) has argued, an online site is best pictured not just as a tool, but also as a space and as a way of being. Such virtual or online spaces are not just tools for communicating and sharing information, but also actual spaces. They are platforms similar to offline spaces, places where everyday societal practices and relations materialise. The complex interplay between the users' and the sites' own features results in a multitude of spatial arrangements. It is a place as well as a "*process* and *encounter*" (Jacobs 2007).

Similarly, Kong's (2001) and Campbell's (2005) research on new media, religion, and space epitomised the above argument made about virtual space as a space, rather than just informational flow. New sites such as social networking sites (not only bulletin boards, emails, and Second Life), where people create a profile and interact on a daily basis, provide the users with a space/site to, first discuss religion through the sharing of religious materials, and, second, to unpack, negotiate, and try out a new (religious) self as these sites are made into platforms for the expression of identity, exploration, and contestation (Turkle 1995; Boyd 2008; Stern 2008). The transforming nature of religion and religious practices—always in transition and adaptation (Greiner 2015)—continuously modifies religious spaces, for instance, the creation of Muslim spaces in the form of prayer rooms in most airports. Tong and Kong's (2000) study on modernisation in Singapore and its effect on Chinese death rituals is a good example of how (physical) space is moulded by both the people and physical changes in the space owing to the need for modernisation and progress.

Greiner (2015) has asked what people think of this newly created sacred place at the airport, created especially for travellers. Similarly, in the online context, what do people think of online sites, especially the status updates sections where they post prayers? Do the users see these simply as tools for expressing their religious reflections, or do they see the site as a reflection of their own self, an extension of their offline and embodied self? The questions Greiner asked (in the offline context) are interesting and open up new avenues for exploring those non-conventional, non-

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physical spaces to which individuals have been flocking for the satisfaction of their everyday social needs.

Online spaces and sites deserve further attention within the field to provide us with a deeper insight into real world situations, where the use of new social media has become pervasive and has created social worlds qualitatively distinct from before. Looking deeper into the transformation of religion and its practices within this new space, will not only allow us to see macro social-religious changes, but, most importantly, to see how technology harnesses religion and how religion harnesses technology at a micro level. Haji Mohamad (2014) has argued that it is imperative to study individual religious experiences on a micro level, particularly in the online context, as the use of those sites and experiences are individualised. She stresses the importance of acknowledging spatialised, individualised, and temporalised contexts for a more accurate insight into individuals' life trajectories, especially when the use of online sites is very personal and context-based. As religion is experienced and practiced daily, we benefit more from observing and analysing information at the individual and everyday levels.

Religious Agents and Transfer of Authority

The transformation and creation of new spaces for religious purposes have also altered the lives of religious followers who previously worked at a communal and institutional level. With new spaces and contexts, we have new religious agents, and the nascent transfer of religious authority, which inevitably forces us to reconsider today's religious agents[1]—the young people (Haji Mohamad, 2014). As we are already aware, the dominant users of online space, in particular, the users of social-networking sites, are young people. The members of this group of users share their everyday life on such sites and, as Islam is embedded in their everyday mundane life, religious practices are evident in the forms of religious sharing online. Rather than only observing mass preaching or mass broadcasting in both online and offline environments, we can observe intentional self-reflection '*muhasabah diri*' online and personal religious reminders that signal these young people's religiosity. Online sites' infrastructures, features, and settings—photo album features, status update features, the ability to share links, and hashtags to name a few—are appropriated to

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[1] I use the term 'agent' to label the new type of religious followers who due to the technological affordances of online sites (for example, user-driven individual sharing) and through their everyday experiences, online and offline, are actively transforming religious practices, religious sharing or ways of thinking about religion.

satisfy these users' religious needs. The change in religious agents is changing our religious landscape, and more individualised religiosity can be observed in the online space.

Young people are now the dominant religious agents on online sites, which have resulted in the burgeoning of young people's religiosities. Brunei's youth religiosities constitute a good example of the changing demographics of religious agents and this new understanding of religious 'authority'. Looking at Bruneians' online landscape, I have observed that there is an unofficial, often uncontested, transfer of religious sharing from institutions (such as Pusat Dakwah Islamiah, and *Imam*) to individuals. In the past such sharing were dominant, the public rely on officially appointed individuals from religious institutions to disseminate religious information. Now, with the growing use of social media sites, young people between the ages of 17 and 25 are taking to social media and have been sharing religious information and self-reflection that are intended for themselves as a personal reminder but is publicly or privately broadcasted to their audiences. For instance, prayers for oneself and others, reminders to recite verses in the *Al-Quran*, reminders to keep a safe distance between single males and females to avoid sinning, and reminders on the significance of covering up (*hijab*) are often uploaded on Instagram (a photo and video sharing application). Despite such actions being set as a self- reminder, they are in fact sent out as reminders for others. The individuals involved somewhat become a 'religious police', with an unofficial authority to educate others in their network.

Of course, this growing religious sharing by individuals is not taken uncontested by others who do not share similar sharing practices. Such sharing activities are taken as unnecessary by others and are undermining other individuals' piety, which for this latter group are not necessarily exposed to social media. As a consequence of this religious sharing, I observed strategic presentation of self by the individuals on their social media accounts. Although presenting a pious self online is not expected, they carefully and skilfully disclose self that are acceptable by that group of 'religious police' and other Muslims in their network in general. This strategic performance of Muslim self and religiosity are also explained in the subsequent section. These actions not only epitomise new and distinct forms of religiosities, different from those in offline contexts and, even in online contexts, such as those evident on bulletin boards and e-mails but it also suggests the transfer of (unofficial) authority to share religious information from the religious officers to just about anyone with a social media account.

Following the recently observed new forms of young people's religiosities, the transformation in the way religiosities are performed and the group's active involvement in the dissemination of religious materials, there has been a growing number of studies conducted on young people's religiosities in both offline and online contexts (such as Hopkins 2007; Hopkins et al. 2011; Vincett et al. 2012; Haji Mohamad 2014). As we are witnessing an unremitting transformation in socio-cultural and religious aspects of our everyday life, in particular those pertaining to young people and religion, research on the micro-geographies of young people as new religious agents is indispensable. It is especially important to focus on online spaces, as these new spaces continue to be created and opened up, as young people become ever more religiously active online.

Performing Religiosity

Religious practices are no longer just performed in conventional forms (verbal prayers, five times a day *solat*, Hajj and Umrah pilgrimages), there is a growing need to incorporate new forms of religiosity into our research and religious practices. This transformation brings its own set of implications for studying religion and space. Online spaces—except for some online shrine sites that are intentionally created for online worshippers (Jacobs 2007) —are not religious spaces. However, over time, we observe religiosity being expressed on these sites consciously or unconsciously. Performance of religiosity in online space is negotiated within the binary context of public and private, hence leading us to question the authenticity of these performances. "What action or online activity can be considered a genuine religious action? How is it possible to determine if the people practicing forms of online religion (in this case religion online) are in fact conducting actual religious activities and having genuine religious experiences?" (Helland 2005, p. 6). Do we need to set an indicator to measure and assess religiosities? Which performance is relevant? And what impact will this new form of performance have on this field, considering that it is inextricably linked to our understanding of space, place, and religion? Should we just leave this aspect of religiosity untouched or do we need to come up with a new conceptual understanding of religion and space to advance the field? This places us in a position where we now need to reconsider religiosity, its performativity, and space—conceptually and empirically. The questions that Helland (2005) has asked could open another research avenue for geographies of religion—measuring and assessing religiosity. Religious performativity has implications for our conceptual

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understanding of space, whether it is physical or virtual, our understanding of contemporary everyday lived religion, and, and the reconstruction of space and time.

Using online ethnography, Haji Mohamad (2014) studied a group of UK-based Malay Malaysians students' performativity of religiosity on Facebook in a cosmopolitan context. The respondents interviewed and observed strategically utilised available settings and features on Facebook such as the site's Inbox, Photo Album, and Status Update features, to effectively manage their everyday lives, selves, and identities over a long period of time. Consistent effort is given throughout in ensuring that, from the outset, the online representation of their self is not in conflict with their offline self. Even if there is a slight inconsistency, it is strategically and effectively managed using the available settings and features offered by the online site, such as its audience selection tools (privacy settings) and by using chat features and inboxes to limit the audience of their conversation. The interview method used in the study is one of the many ways to study religious performance from the respondents' own voices, rather than the researcher basing their study on the assumptions of what performance should and must be. Religiosity is not accessed conventionally through the number of times they pray (*solat*) a day, or if they have gone for *Hajj* or *Umrah*, but on their everyday activities that do not seem to be religious yet are part of their spatial construction of their Muslim identity, and are hence regarded as the performance of their Muslim identity and, consequently, of their religiosity.

These examples have so far explicated the complexities of *being* and *going* online and, similar to offline life, they hinge on everyday life experiences. The performance of religiosity is closely tied to the identity of the individual as a Muslim. Veiling and sartorial presentation are, among many others, important aspects of the performance of religiosity. How does an individual perform their religious identity and how does wearing a veil shape the online landscape? In the offline context, the presence of a Muslim and their attire paints a picture of a distinct Muslim landscape. In the online context, Muslim spaces are shaped differently. This is not a new area of research, as the discussion of religious landscape in the previous sections has clearly laid out, but this topic remains interesting and fertile to explore. Modernity and transformation in technology and religion continuously lead to the negotiation of religious beliefs and practices. We need to keep an eye on new forms of religious performances to continue to seek the possibility of

reconstructing sacred space and the performance of sacred ritual activities in the online environment (Jacobs 2007).

Ways Forward—A Concluding Remark

In conclusion, this paper has put forward three potential key areas for the advancement of geographies of religion: techno-religious space, transfer of religious authority, and performance of religiosity. As underscored in the main body of this paper, academia and, in particular, scholars in the geographies of religion, must be aware of the current religious landscapes that are constructed in a multitude of contexts by the users—predominantly young adults—who are the key users of online sites. These individualised contexts are qualitatively different from previous contexts. The earlier focus on the making of religious spaces was directed at physical landscapes and how religious communities moulded these spaces through their religious rituals and practices as well as their religious identities. Now, however, these physical spaces are increasingly supplemented, if not taken over, by online, virtual spaces, where religious communities and individuals are adopting new modes of interaction and engagement to practice their religion and, at a basic level, to disseminate religious information. This techno-religious space deserves a focus of its own not for the purpose of propagating a new and different space for religious experience, but to study and capture the dynamics and complexities of socio-cultural and religious processes and practices in both offline and online environments. Tied to the creation of new techno-religious spaces are the performance of religiosity and transfer of religious authority. By researching all three key areas, either individually or together, we could create a new pathway within this field. One that takes into account the current religious practices and landscapes that are not detached from other socio-cultural processes and *spaces*, that work at all levels — individual, local, national, regional, and even global.

To end, although, this paper largely discussed the examples of Brunei Muslim youths' religiosities, the aforementioned religious activities and experiences are not limited to just this group of young people, Brunei Muslims and the Muslims contexts. Similar transformations in at least one of the three key areas have also been documented in other religious communities all over the world such as those studied by Fernback (2002) on Internet ritual, Horsfield and Teusner (2007) on Christianity and the Internet, Kawabata et al. (2008) on online religion; and Heidi et al. (2011) on Christian leadership and authority, which suggest a global transformation in religious practices

outside of Muslim contexts. Further studies on these three areas will help us understand the connection between media, culture and religion and how other societies may have experienced such transformation. To bring this closer to home, researching other societies with similar contexts such as other Southeast Asian societies (Muslim and/or non-Muslim) could provide us with a diverse empirical data to expand our knowledge of the region's socio-cultural and religious development facilitated by the progress in technology and to provide us with not only the micro-geographies of the young people but also the macro-geographies of our Southeast Asian societies.

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