

24 September 2018

## Theological Education in the Digital Age

### Short Response #1

Pauline Hope Cheong, professor of Human Communication at Arizona State University, examines the impact of the Internet on religious authority in her essay “Authority.” Cheong undertakes an exploration of two alternative views of the effect digital media has on religious authority. She posits that, though the field is relatively new and there is not yet a scholarly consensus, both views have merit: the Internet can both weaken and strengthen religious authority. Additionally, the tension created by the recognized validity of both of these categories merits further research and study.

The first view pursued by Cheong is “the logic of disjuncture and displacement” (2013, p. 74) which asserts that religious authority is damaged or questioned by the Internet. Cheong analyzes a variety of studies to examine ways in which religious authority is challenged by digital media. She looks at the challenges presented by the Internet as a space outside of traditional religion’s purview, creating a potentially disruptive sphere of influence. The potential of access becomes a source of disruption as texts traditionally requiring authoritative interpretation become widely accessible. The movement of available information can also become disruptive as disinformation, non-authoritative interpretations and propaganda may be created and distributed. Additionally, the transfer or reimagining of religious authority is a notable conflict, considering both the potential for emergence of new leaders and the privileging of those with technological expertise. A transfer of power may also occur, as diaspora groups are required to rely less on traditional authorities as they can access information through alternative channels.

Cheong next turns to more recent theory and supporting scholarship, which she refers to as “the logic of continuity and complementarity” (2013, p. 78). This logic takes a more positive view of the impact of the Internet on religious authority and views new media as a means of extending religious authority. The summarized studies show that the Internet can be a realm that responds to institutional religious authority and existing hierarchies. Religious authorities are able to stem or censor damaging rhetoric and control the behavior of individuals, standing in tension with earlier theories that viewed the Internet as a sphere outside of institutional religion’s purview. The Internet also becomes an effective tool for religious authorities, considering for example the generally positive framing of authority in Christian blogs, current authorities’ effective incorporation of social media into their work, and increased employment of new media in various ways that mirror and expand existing authority.

In considering Cheong’s analysis, are there comparable studies of other types of authority and their interaction with the Internet that could be in conversation with this research? As this piece was published in 2013, have there been any significant updated findings in the impact of the Internet on religious authority? Where individual religious leaders are incorporating social media into their vocation, is there any disruption within existing hierarchies? Do transfers of power occur within hierarchical structures and is this a challenge to existing authority?

Cheong, P.H. (2013). Authority. In H. Campbell, A. (Ed.), *Digital religion: Understanding religious practice in new media worlds* (pp. 72-103). New York, NY: Routledge.