



Religion and digital culture: Changes in the worship orientation of Christians in Ambon

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ABSTRACT

The development of digital technology has had a significant impact on religious practices, including among Christians in the city of Ambon. This article discusses changes in the worship orientation of the Christian community in Ambon in the context of a rapidly developing digital culture. The presence of social media, worship streaming platforms, and digital Bible applications has shifted some of the traditional patterns of worship, which were previously centered on physical gatherings in churches, towards more flexible, personal, and virtual forms of worship. These changes not only affect personal spirituality, but also have social, cultural, and economic implications for church communities, such as the emergence of new relationship patterns, the redefinition of spiritual authority, and challenges in maintaining community unity. Using a qualitative approach through in-depth interviews, observation, and literature review, this article highlights how religion and digital culture interact in shaping the new face of Christianity in Ambon. Findings show that while digital culture expands religious access and experience, it also requires adaptive pastoral strategies to preserve the meaning of worship in this era of transformation.

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Introduction

The development of digital technology in the contemporary era has brought fundamental changes to almost all aspects of human life, including in the realm of religion. Religion, which was previously expressed mainly through communal worship practices in physical spaces, is now undergoing a transformation through the presence of digital culture. Social media, Bible apps, worship streaming platforms, and virtual meeting spaces have become new means of expressing faith and spirituality.

The city of Ambon, as one of the centers of Christianity in Maluku, has also experienced this dynamic. The orientation of Christian worship in Ambon, which has always emphasized face-to-face meetings, community togetherness, and strong communal bonds, has begun to shift with the advent of online worship options. This phenomenon has intensified since the COVID-19 pandemic forced congregations to move to digital spaces, yet it continues as part of worship culture to this day.

This shift in worship orientation raises several important questions. On the one hand, digital culture provides convenience, broader access, and flexibility for people to stay connected to worship amid modern busyness. On the other hand, it also poses challenges in the form of a weakening sense of community, a shift in spiritual authority, and the possibility of spiritual individualization. In the socio-cultural context of Ambon, which is rich in values of kinship, togetherness, and communality, the shift in worship orientation towards digital is not merely a technical change, but also touches on the aspects of identity and social relations of Christians. Therefore, it is important to examine how religion and digital culture interact and what the implications are for the church life of Christians in the city of Ambon.

Studies on religion and digital culture have been conducted extensively, particularly in relation to the phenomenon of online worship (Anderson, 2015), the use of social media in spiritual services (Jones et al., 2020), and changes in the patterns of religiosity among believers in various major cities in Indonesia and globally (Jenkins, 2011). These studies generally emphasize theological, sociological, and digital technology aspects as factors shaping the new face of religious life.

However, studies that specifically highlight the experiences of Christians in the city of Ambon are still very limited. In fact, Ambon has unique socio-cultural characteristics, with strong Christian traditions, high communal values, and a history of religious diversity compared to other urban areas. The transformation of worship orientation due to the entry of digital culture in the city of Ambon has not been explored much, especially in relation to how these changes affect religious identity, spiritual authority, patterns of congregational interaction, and long-established communal values.

Thus, there is a gap in research on the local context of Ambon: how digital culture interacts with Christian communal values, how people interpret online worship in their socio-cultural relations, and to what extent this change in worship orientation has an impact on church life. This gap is what this research/article seeks to address, thereby contributing academically to enriching the discourse on religion and digital culture in Indonesia, particularly among Christian communities in Maluku.

Based on the background described above, the main issues to be examined in this article can be formulated into the following research questions:

1. How has the orientation of Christian worship in Ambon changed in the context of digital cultural development?
2. What factors have contributed to the shift from traditional communal worship practices to digital-based worship?
3. What are the implications of these changes in worship orientation for church life, congregational relations, and the communal values of the Christian community in Ambon?
4. What strategies can churches develop in response to the dynamics of digital culture so that the meaning and value of worship spirituality are preserved?

The objectives of this study can be formulated as follows:

1. Describe the changes in the worship orientation of Christians in Ambon in the context of digital cultural development.
2. Identify the factors that drive the shift in worship practices from traditional communal patterns to digital-based worship.
3. To analyze the implications of changes in worship orientation on church life, social relations within the congregation, and the communal values of the Christian community in Ambon.
4. To formulate strategies that churches can use in responding to the challenges and opportunities of digital culture so that the spiritual meaning of worship is maintained amid the transformation of the times.

Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design. This approach was chosen because it focuses on the subjective experiences of Christians in Ambon City in understanding and interpreting changes in worship orientation in the digital culture era.

Using phenomenology, the researcher seeks to explore the deepest meaning of the religious experiences of people who have switched or adapted from face-to-face worship to online/hybrid forms of worship.

The research was conducted in Ambon City, considering that Ambon is the center of religious and social activities in Maluku, which has a variety of Christian denominations and relatively high access to digital technology. Research Subjects and Informants. The subjects of the research were Christians who experienced a change in worship orientation due to the use of digital media. In addition, the criteria for informants were: - Congregations who actively participated in online, offline, or a combination of both forms of worship, - Church leaders/ministers involved in the management of digital worship, and - Congregations across generations (youth, adults, elderly) in order to obtain a diversity of perspectives. The sampling technique used is purposive sampling with the snowball sampling principle to achieve data saturation. The number of informants is estimated to be 8-12 people.

Data collection techniques are: In-depth interviews, namely: Exploring the experiences, views, and reflections of congregations and church leaders regarding digital worship practices and changes in their spiritual orientation. In addition, digital and field participatory observation. Mainly observation of face-to-face worship and online worship (livestream, Zoom, YouTube, Facebook). The author will attempt to record interactions, the use of symbols, the atmosphere of worship, and congregational participation. Documentation and analysis of digital content: to examine recordings of online worship, digital announcements, online liturgy, church social media posts, and internal church documents related to digital worship policies. Research Instruments. The main instrument is the researcher himself

(human instrument), who plays a role in collecting, interpreting, and analyzing data. The researcher uses semi-structured interview guidelines, observation notes, and document analysis formats as auxiliary instruments.

The analysis was conducted interactively according to the Miles & Huberman model, namely: Data reduction, which involves sorting important information from interviews, observations, and documentation; Data presentation, which involves compiling narratives, matrices, or charts that facilitate interpretation; and Drawing conclusions and verification, which involves identifying key themes such as the meaning of digital worship, ritual transformation, or socio-religious impacts.

In addition, efforts were made to ensure data validity through source triangulation: comparing data from congregations, leaders, and documents; method triangulation: combining interviews, observations, and documentation; member check: confirming the results of the interpretation with the informants; and peer debriefing: seeking input from colleagues/experts to test the consistency of the analysis. All of this is done in order to maintain or achieve quality and research ethics: researchers uphold ethics by requesting informed consent from informants, maintaining confidentiality, and being sensitive to religious values so as not to offend the sanctity of worship.

Results and Discussion

The Theory of Imagined Communities by Benedict Anderson (1983) essentially discusses how communities are built not only through physical meetings, but also through media that allows people to feel part of a wider community. This is relevant because it is useful to see how the Ambon Christian congregation continues to feel like one body

of Christ even though they worship online, and how virtual togetherness is formed.

The Mediatization of Religion theory by Stig Hjarvard (2008) discusses how religion no longer stands alone but is mediated and influenced by the media. Digital media is not only a means but also an agent that shapes the way people practice religion. This is relevant because it can explain how the worship of Christians in Ambon has shifted in orientation due to the presence of social media, live streaming, and digital applications.

The Theory of Disembedding (Anthony Giddens – *Modernity and Self-Identity*). Essentially, this theory emphasizes that modernity (including digital technology) detaches social practices from their local context (disembedding) and connects them to the global sphere. As a result, social spaces and interactions are expanding and shifting from traditional communities to a more practical, accessible, and enjoyable virtual community. Therefore, this theory is relevant for observing that Christian worship practices in Ambon are no longer limited to the local spiritual community but are also connected to global liturgy or sermons, which influence the identity and spirituality of the congregation. According to Giddens, this has become an inevitable consequence of modernity (Giddens, 1990).

Specifically, regarding *The Consequences of Modernity* (1990), Giddens explains that modernity is characterized by the separation of space and time and the reliability of abstract systems that change the way humans live their social lives, including in spiritual aspects. This is directly related to changes in worship practices in the digital age, where religious practices are no longer limited to physical spaces or face-to-face interactions, but can be carried out online through applications, social media, or other digital platforms. The separation between space and time allows religious communities

to continue performing their rituals without having to be present in a specific place, while trust in technological systems becomes the basis for the legitimacy of these spiritual practices. Thus, modernity as described by Giddens helps us understand how digitalization is reconstructing patterns of religiosity while expanding access and flexibility in worship.

In addition, several recent research results related to religion and digital culture include: Hanung Sito Rohmawati, Zulkifli, Nashrul Hakiem (2025), who researched the topic: Mediatization and Hypermediation in Digital Religion and the Transformation of Indonesian Muslim Religious Practices through Social Media Usage. The three researchers examined how mediatization and hypermediation change Muslim religious practices in Indonesia through the use of social media. Furthermore, Ayu Jelita Ningrum & Moh. Anas Kholis (2024) researched the Modernization of Spiritual Life (Literature Study on Digital Religion in the Digital Space) and found that the modernization of spiritual life through digital religion in the digital space opens up new opportunities for religious practices that are more inclusive and adaptive to technological developments.

In addition, according to Syamraeni, S. (2024). "Religious Value Transformation in the Digital Age: A Literature Analysis." Surya Raden Intan / ejournal regional found that digitalization changes access, interpretation, and religious practices (including the trend toward individualized worship). Therefore, the form and manner of worship have shifted from face-to-face and community-based to virtual encounters.

Similarly, in Religion and the Internet: Digital Religion, (Hyper)Mediated Spaces, and Materiality; Zeitschrift für Religion, Gesellschaft und Politik, 2022, it is explained

that the presence of technology has created new spaces for religious expression, where spiritual practices take place not only in the physical realm, but are also mediated by digital media. For example, research in the Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture highlights how the use of social media, worship applications, and streaming platforms creates virtual communities that strengthen religious identity while opening up spaces for cross-cultural dialogue. This analysis shows that religion in the digital age does not merely preserve tradition, but also engages in creative adaptation that reflects the dynamics of contemporary culture.

The changing orientation of Christian worship in Ambon in the digital realm

This study found that the development of digital culture has brought significant changes to the worship orientation of Christians in Ambon City. Previously, worship was more focused on physical presence in church with collective rituals bound by space and time, but now that orientation has shifted towards more flexible, technology-based worship. The presence of digital media such as live streaming of worship services, Bible apps, WhatsApp groups for congregations, and spiritual content on social media allows people to access worship online, anytime and anywhere. This shift has given rise to a more personal, fast-paced, and accessible form of worship, although it has the potential to reduce the intensity of face-to-face rituals in church spaces. This is acknowledged by a Christian religious leader in Ambon City, whose initials are HJ, who said, "We cannot hinder technological developments that make our congregation, especially Gen Z, prefer online worship and unable to come to church. because that is the reality today. However, what we must do now is serve them as best as we can and continue to pray that God will touch their hearts so that they

realize that fellowship through meeting each other is very important."

In addition, this change in worship orientation also reflects new dynamics in the religious patterns of the Christian community in Ambon. The digitization of worship has created a virtual community space that expands inter-congregational relationships while also introducing new religious authorities through preachers or spiritual figures in the virtual world. Thus, worship is not only understood as a sacred activity in the church, but also as a spiritual practice that takes place in everyday digital networks (Mannerfelt, 2022). This transformation shows that digital culture is not merely a supporting medium, but also reshapes the way Christians in Ambon understand, live, and interpret their religious practices.

Factors driving the shift in worship practices from traditional communal patterns to digital-based

This research successfully identified several important factors causing changes in worship patterns and practices. Therefore, this section will specifically mention and explain the three key factors of this change process, namely: First: The need for flexibility and efficiency. Changes in modern lifestyles have led people to seek more practical ways of worship that can be adapted to their busy schedules, making digital worship an attractive option. In addition, several informants even said that if there is an easier and simpler way, why should we always bother with complicated and expensive methods? Second: Advances in communication technology and the internet. The advent of smartphones, social media, and streaming platforms provides easy access for people to participate in worship online without the limitations of space and time. Third: The shift in social interaction patterns to the virtual realm. The

rise of digital culture has encouraged the formation of online religious communities that strengthen spiritual identity while shifting the orientation of worship from physical spaces to digital spaces.

The implications of the shift to online worship on church life

This study successfully identified four implications of the shift to online worship on church life and congregational relationships, namely:

Church life

The transition of some Christians in Ambon to online worship practices has brought about a transformation in church life. On the one hand, churches have gained new opportunities to reach congregations outside the city, the elderly, or those who find it difficult to attend church due to work commitments. Ministry has become more flexible and innovative, utilizing digital media as a means of teaching and fellowship. However, on the other hand, online worship can reduce the intensity of the congregation's physical involvement in church activities. Liturgical activities such as the sacrament of Holy Communion, communal prayer, or acts of charity become difficult to carry out in their entirety. As a result, church life has the potential to shift from being participatory and communal to being more individualistic, with congregants consuming worship like "spiritual content" rather than actively participating as the body of Christ.

Congregational relationships

Inter-congregational relationships are also affected by the orientation toward online worship. Digital platforms do provide new spaces for interaction (chat, comments, WhatsApp groups, Zoom breakout rooms), but the depth of relationships differs from

face-to-face encounters in church. In Maluku culture, which values family relationships (*pela-gandong* and spiritual bonds), physical encounters during worship have very important social significance. Online worship tends to reduce opportunities for spontaneous greetings, sharing stories, or showing real solidarity. As a result, congregational relationships can become looser, limited to functional and digital interactions.

However, for young people who are accustomed to digital culture, online interaction actually opens up opportunities to build networks across church communities, even internationally. In addition, the weakening of group solidarity due to the reality of online worship is evident in the weakening of social interaction and togetherness that had been formed through physical meetings in houses of worship. Online worship does provide convenience and flexibility for congregations, but on the other hand, it reduces the experience of emotional and spiritual togetherness. Relationships between members, which are usually strengthened through greetings, cooperation in ministry, and fellowship, become more impersonal because they are limited to the screen. In the long term, digital worship patterns have the potential to foster individualistic attitudes and reduce a sense of belonging to the faith community, so that the solidarity that was once strong within the group begins to weaken and shift towards more pragmatic and personal relationships.

Communal values

The communal values of Christians in Ambon are traditionally manifested through fellowship in worship, eating together after services, and collective involvement in church social activities. Online worship has the potential to weaken these values because participation no longer requires physical

togetherness. The concept of the body of Christ can be fragmented into a “virtual togetherness” that does not always give rise to real social responsibility. However, there is also a positive dimension: churches can use digital media to organize social actions, raise funds online, or build collective awareness across geographical boundaries. In other words, communal values are not lost, but are undergoing a transformation: from a traditional form based on space and physicality to a new form based on digital networks.

Although informants, especially church leaders and administrators, were somewhat reluctant to admit that the shift from in-person worship to online worship had caused a decline in church finances, which are intended to fund all church ministries aimed at achieving God's purpose in the lives of the congregation. In fact, since the COVID-19 pandemic, which was the main trigger for this change in worship orientation, it has been acknowledged that church finances have experienced a drastic decline. Informants believe that, in addition to the poor state of the national and regional economies, which has affected the willingness of congregation members to remain faithful and consistent in giving tithes and other offerings, the physical absence from church has also led to a decline in congregation participation in giving offerings.

Based on this, a brief analysis of the four phenomena is as follows: The shift to online worship has brought ambivalence to the lives of Christians in Ambon. On the one hand, digitization has expanded access, opened up space for innovation, and adapted the church to the challenges of modernity. On the other hand, it has shifted communal practices that have long been the main strength of local Christianity in Ambon. The most significant implication is a shift in the meaning of togetherness. This can be explained as

a shift from physical to virtual, which requires churches to create hybrid worship models so that congregations continue to feel spiritually and socially connected. In addition, the shift from collective rituals to individual consumption requires a renewed ecclesiological awareness that the church is not merely a provider of spiritual content, but a community of faith. The shift from traditional communalism to digital communalism opens up new opportunities but also risks spiritual alienation. Thus, the main challenge for the church in Ambon is how to maintain the essence of faith relationships and communal values while utilizing digital culture as a means of relevant ministry in the modern era.

Church strategies for preserving the spiritual meaning of worship in digital culture

In facing the tide of digital culture, churches are required to adapt not only technically, but also theologically and pastorally. The first strategy that can be pursued is to develop a hybrid worship model that combines physical and digital presence. In this way, congregants who attend online can still feel a spiritual and liturgical connection, while those who attend church in person can maintain physical fellowship. Digital liturgy can be designed to emphasize active participation rather than passive consumption, for example through interactive prayers, testimonies, and discussion forums after the service.

In addition, churches need to strengthen spiritual digital education for their congregations. Social media, Bible apps, and video platforms can be means of contextual and accessible faith teaching. However, churches must guide congregations to use technology wisely, so that spirituality remains deep and is not replaced by mere spiritual entertainment. This guidance is

also an effort to build the digital literacy of congregations so that they are not easily trapped by instant spiritual content or deviant teachings.

Another strategy is to build a meaningful digital community. Online groups, prayer forums, and virtual fellowships can be used as a means to strengthen bonds between congregations, while preserving communal values in a new form. However, involvement in virtual spaces must always be directed towards real practices, for example through joint social actions, digital fundraising to help others, or diaconal service across communities. Thus, digital spirituality does not stop at the virtual space, but bears fruit in acts of love in the real world (Dwiraharjo, 2020).

Finally, the church in Ambon needs to reaffirm the essence of worship as an encounter with God and others. Because digital culture is only a means, not an end. With this understanding, churches in Ambon and in other contexts can take advantage of technological opportunities without losing the core of spirituality: fellowship in Christ that transcends both physical and virtual spaces (Manafe, 2016).

Conclusion

Based on all of the above descriptions and explanations, there are several important points that can be conveyed as conclusions, as follows:

1. The Transformation of Worship to the Digital Space. The development of technology and digital culture has shifted the worship practices of Christians in Ambon City from the physical space of the church to the virtual space, creating a new form of spiritual togetherness through online media.
2. The Emergence of Virtual Church Communities. Digital worship

activities expand relationships between congregations beyond geographical and denominational boundaries, forming virtual communities that remain faith-based but are oriented towards more flexible and open digital interactions.

3. Changes in Religious Authority and Practices. The digitization of worship has given rise to new religious figures such as online pastors and digital spiritual content, which have helped shape the way people understand spiritual authority and church teachings in the new media era.
4. Challenges of Authenticity and Spirituality. Despite providing convenience and broad access, digital worship poses challenges to spiritual depth, emotional involvement, and the meaning of community that has been realized in physical meetings at church.
5. The Need for Contextualization of Digital Theology. The church in Ambon City needs to develop a theology that is contextual to digital culture in order to preserve the essence of faith, strengthen social relationships among the faithful, and remain relevant in the face of changing patterns of modern religiosity.

Declaration of Ownership

This article is our original work.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest to declare in this article.

Ethical Clearance

This study was approved by the institution.

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