# The Metamorphosis of Church Spirituality during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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*Abstract*— Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 outbreak, the practice of worship has transitioned online to the use of virtual worship. Likewise, the direction of church spirituality, in general, has more immigrated to cyberspace. The church is on the verge of a spiritual metamorphosis of social formation in the context of changing times. Is the church ready to be challenged to interpret whether technology substantially contributes to spiritual goals? So that the phenomenon of virtual spirituality is not a psychological escape, obsessions, and a moment's spiritual need in the current dynamics of Christianity. This paper aims to explain the theological review of the concept of virtual spirituality with a qualitative approach seen from several lenses and a multi-paradigm approach. Research Contribution: The research helps the reader to see how the spiritual paradigm changes in the context of Pandemic. This research helps the reader to see how the spiritual paradigm is changing in the context of the Pandemic. This approach is proposed to further develop openness to the dynamics of spirituality in the digital space as well as to utilize technology as a support system for the growth of church spirituality in transmitting the relevant messages of Christ in the Digital Age.

*Keywords—metamorphosis; spirituality; church; pandemic Covid-19*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Digital technology seems to have given humans more possibilities to connect with one another. In the current context, the church seems to continue to adapt by holding services virtually especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. The nature of digital technology has contributed, as its initial scope to unite people regardless of physical location. Worship is then the spearhead of the church fellowship, turning to digital technology to accommodate humans as spiritual beings to connect with other spiritual beings. However, the effect seems to be reversed. The reality of virtual spirituality is increasingly being absorbed by digital technology. It is as if spirituality has been robbed of its power and influence from spiritual beings. This fact seems to influence pseudo-spirituality in understanding the phenomenon of spirituality transitioning in cyberspace. This then raises the question of whether technology as a church meeting room can be equated with a physical encounter of communal fellowship. The mixture of spirituality with science is a bridge connecting the use of digital technology which has provided several great benefits to the existence of the church in this sophisticated age.

The contribution of science cannot be denied that it is very beneficial for human life and development. Science has proven to accumulate a wealth of knowledge, unravel the mysteries of the universe, discover and design extraordinary objects and technologies, find cures for various life-threatening diseases. Even though science has developed rapidly, this has not stopped the interest or need for something spiritual in humans through religion.

Regarding interest in spirituality, Bucher Dominica Motak wrote in recent years, the trend towards spirituality has increased rapidly, creating new "megatrends" [1]. Ulrike Popp-Baier in John Naisbitt wrote that over the years a new item has appeared in public discourse and research agendas in social science as well: spirituality. Years ago, a growing interest in spirituality was diagnosed as one of the top ten megatrends in contemporary American society [2], and European countries are clearly influenced by this trend: spiritual tours are available throughout major European cities, cinemas organize spiritual

film days, spiritual retreats are offered, books are widely circulated promising spiritual guidance or spiritual self-development.

This is in accordance with the predictions of Naisbitt and Aburdene as quoted by Aburdene Ngainun Naim by finding its relevance if you look at the development of social life in many Western countries. Although not entirely true, the general trend justifies the predictions of both. In general, there is an increased passion and enthusiasm from the community regarding aspects of spirituality. This is what Naisbitt and Aburdene probably call the awakening of the spirituality [3]. However, in the view of the two experts, the awakening of spirituality is not identical to the revival of religions. This is because spirituality and religion are not singular or identical. It could even be that the two of them are separate. This phenomenon then gave rise to a well-known jargon, Spirituality, yes. Organized Religion, No. So, the awakening of spirituality in this perspective is something that is completely separate from the religion [3]. Then what if spirituality is in a virtual space, what are the implications for the church?

In the current Covid-19 pandemic, churches are turning to the practice of an all-online spirituality movement with various options, one of which is the changing patterns of worship online, live-streaming, and even prayer activities carried out online [4]. This fact directly forms a new church definition of the meaning of the spirituality of post-modern Christianity as above. This dynamic is somewhat like a divine projection. In this context, contemporary perceptions of God are a kind of spiritual devotion as a feature of identity. In a world where personal and experienced moments are overly "perpetuated", published on social media, while online machines are continuously integrated with personal experiences, but the inner state remains silent. This, although it is constant with other people, produces a feeling of "plastic connection" [5] and a lack of authenticity which also has the potential to result in the need for mistaken identity.

Then what is the interest of the Christian community in Indonesia with their various spiritual activities and agendas? This is especially true in virtual spaces. Therefore, digital technology influences humans by seizing essential, interactive participation in life and spirituality, placing religious traditions in the arms of memories, or the past that does not exist. Cristina Elena Safta quotes Sigmund Freud this is referred to as the concept of "filtered memory" and her interpretation of it as memory, which never happened even though it looks like it happened a while ago [5].

This research is motivated by previous research where Hutahaean [6] encourages new research on the segment spirituality in the midst of a pandemic or other unusual situation. In his research, Hutahaean found a separate meaning in Christians for the Corona pandemic in relation to spirituality. The great confession of surrender shows one-way God changed the direction of surrender and the lives of the people through this event. Meanwhile, God has provided a means for humans to stay close to Him through digital media [6]. Cyber discourse

in this virtual era requires Christianity to develop a cyber theology discourse (cyber theology). Especially when the COVID-19 outbreak became a catalyst that spontaneously forced Christianity, especially in Indonesia, to think about developing the spirituality of its congregation members outside of traditionalist-style physical gatherings [7].

Based on the above explanation, this is of course a challenge and an opportunity for the church both now and in the future, however, the trend towards a spirituality of believers affiliated with virtual worship is inevitable. For this reason, the Church continues to strive for the spirituality of the congregation to be built beyond the direction and orientation of understanding spirituality that is static to become dynamic. As the concept of spirituality changes, it comes together to be connected. So that this paper contributes to providing understanding and meaning of virtual spirituality, of course, with suggestions and suggestions for further research. With a combination of church spirituality, both offline and online, it is hoped that it will have a transformative and constructive impact on Christian spirituality.

## II. METHOD

This paper was written using descriptive qualitative methods. Through the process of collecting material with insight into scientific papers in general and also literature that discusses the development of written works based on theological studies of spirituality [8]. The emphasis in this paper lies on the theoretical framework (theoretical discussion) using socio-theological analysis to open up Christian understanding of the transformation of church spirituality during a pandemic. The dominance of data collection in this paper comes from the study literature studies through various kinds of books, literature, research journals, online articles, or notes related to writing.

## III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### A. *Spirituality in Virtual Space*

In March/April 2020 most churches around the world have been forced to close their doors due to the need for social distancing and local lockdowns to fight the spread of the COVID-19 virus [9], [10]. The result is that traditional churches have had to make an unplanned and rapid transition to a technology-driven form of meeting. This makes the use of digital technology in the church unavoidable.

The recent development of media platforms has led to the creation of virtual spaces introducing important changes in religious practice resulting in the phenomenon of digital religion. There is suggestive evidence that virtual representations of religious buildings facilitate spiritual experiences like those in actual synagogues. In other words, the internet is metamorphosing as a new "electronic house of worship" where both traditional and new religious movements can find and gather their communities. Its function, which is so effective at relating time and space, creates a deeper reflection

on the human condition and the possibility for individuals to reach new levels of transcendence. This raises the question of whether the "mysterious" nature and function of the Internet has opened new possibilities for "world charm" through generating new personal and spiritual empowerment? The internet is not only a communication tool but embodies the spiritual philosophy of the community, becoming an empirical part of its values.

*B. Reinterpreting Christian Spirituality in the Present Era*

Spirituality can be part of a particular religion or independent of religion, in a self-directed and personal route of the mind. As part of a larger religious journey, spirituality is usually described and predictable, relating to one's personal relationship with a god or divine purpose. As the explosion of spirituality and technological innovation continues to influence consciousness in contemporary society and high technology, it is likely that non-dual consciousness may find new forms and cultural relevance emerging at the new frontiers of the virtual world [11].

In his writings, Keener describes one of the striking images in the New Testament of a new temple in Christ. Ephesians 2 links this new temple to bringing Jews and Gentiles together in the common worship of God. This new way of thinking brings a conceptual perspective on the temple as a place of worship. While Jesus did not reject the temple as a place of worship, his intention was to invite all people to have access to the inside of the temple without the need for intermediaries [12].

If the Gospels also give us another indication that Jesus considered a new temple, does this mean that Jesus' presence can also be experienced immanently through that virtual space? This fact, according to Luckmann, creates new challenges for scholars who examine the diversity of religious expressions (in a broad sense) on the Internet. It is possible not only to follow the process of adaptation and adoption of religious individuals and institutions to new means of communication. We can also (perhaps for the first time in history) make manifest what has so far been designated an invisible religion [13].

In the context of Heidelberg's research project on religion on the internet, it has since been referred to as the "Patchwork Religion" [14]. This expresses the fact that individuals create their own personal religious framework and rituals apart from theological norms and doctrines. This opens up new and individual perspectives on the historiography of religion in what is referred to as the "religious individualized [13]. The same is true of ritual as a performative aspect of the religiosity [14]. Therefore, the concept of "individual spirituality" is currently being developed in the project mentioned to try to describe the discourses and processes that lead to the framework of individual perspectives on religion and ritual.

In relation to the explanation above, Heidbrink wrote, "Do any of you deny that a legal service takes place through television? He then continued that a paradigm shift must occur when worship services move from the realm of radio to television. A similar paradigm shift is possible when worship

moves from pulpits to radio broadcasts…and when it moves from handwritten words to printing…and when it moves from oral history to the written word…Meaningful worship is independent of the technological level of the perpetrator. Online rituals are, in my experience, as powerful and transforming as any ritual in the face-to-face world [13].

While responding to the above statement in her writing Cristina Elena Safta tends to refer more to spirituality through an Orthodox Christian understanding, she emphasizes that lately, spirituality seems to be separated from its original Christian womb, from which even the name originates and is used to denote a whole area of impressive signs. and psychological experiences. The Orthodox Christian understanding of spirituality excludes this notion which is governed by the mass media in which spiritual beings are considered only as cultivated beings, celebrities, or glorified celebrities [5].

The consequence, according to Safta, will result in a slow and systematic decline of spirituality, through the excessive use of digital companion species is a truth that humans must consider. Digital technology has given us abundance but leaves us spiritual deficiency and emptiness. To quote the great Charlie Chaplin, "More than machines we need humanity, more than the speed we need kindness and gentleness [5].

The majority of the faithful of the Church admit that they fail to pray, concentrate, and discard worldly concerns and the storms of spirit and soul that are detrimental to the peace of mind, equanimity, pleasant work, family serenity, and constructive social life. The world of industrial imagery degenerated into real idolatry [5].

The meaning of the life of spirituality online is still struggling, both in the conflict between faith and wisdom. Meanwhile, the Church as a vessel for spiritual formation cannot remain silent in its function. The church must be returned to its original essence, which is to build up the body of Christ, not build buildings. This requires thorough consideration and attention before rejecting the notion of online spirituality. As Soren Kierkegaard's famous quote "life can only be understood backward; but it must be lived forwards". The point is not to quickly determine whether something new is good or bad it is necessary to make room for it to be understood.

Starting from the thoughts of Cristina Elena Safta above, instead of rushing to consider online spirituality as spiritual regression, on the contrary, the facts of human life can be considered parallel in both real and virtual reality. As Wahyudin said, "life in cyberspace is a continuation of real-life". People go online almost as they do offline, but they do it differently. Cyberspace is considered to be able to serve all human interests and overcome all human limitations by wandering in various realities without limits [15]. However, the question is whether spirituality in the online framework today is useful or not? How can the Bible provide a complete theological basis in the matters described above? This was later written by Adiprasetya, quoting Mircea Eliade, explaining that

for religious humans, the space of encounter with the Divine is not uniform[16]. Fellowship with God is not only defined by "physical space", but also by "heart space". Nuban Timo actually put the words, "God does not live-in church buildings but in good people's hearts". It is true that the building was consecrated as a house of God, pulpit, or altar, as a place for preaching the word and for the sacrament ministry, but it should be remembered that even the heavens cannot contain God, let alone the house that the congregation ordained (1Ki. 8:27).

The author agrees with Joas Adiprasetya, quoting Luther's 1529 that Christ is certainly present and active everywhere, even in the smallest leaf of a tree…in every creation, in his innermost or outermost being, pervades, penetrates, above, below, behind, ahead, so that nothing could be more present, nothing more intimately connected to every creation except Allah and His power [17]. Spiritually, through this virtual world, humans can experience God as well as in the offline world. It is a fact that virtual reality has permeated every aspect of human life. It means that this form of communication must be reflected not only sociologically but also spiritually and theologically [18].

Mick quoted Byrne as explaining the emergence of theology about the spiritual space which is beyond the physical space in which humans live. It is a sacred space and enables God's presence in the world and the Christian community in a mysterious and unique way. Byrne calls it a "sacramental space" (sacramental space), an infinite space where the virtual God also exists in the cyber world [7].

Therefore, in the digital era of Christianity, it does require an adaptation process, the Internet has made it possible for new types of communities to develop in the world of cyberspace. As a result of this development, many people have become interested in online worship as an opportunity to experiment with spirituality in new ways and imaginations. This is both a challenge and an opportunity.

*C. Christian Spirituality in Pandemic Times*

During the Covid-19 pandemic, government policies on social restrictions affect worship activities carried out at home online (online) to break the chain of covid-19 transmission in the community. The worship progression is transitioning from gathering to being connected. This step is an effort to build the spirituality of the church. This is a form of response to the adjustment of the Church in anticipating the continuity of the ministry, so it is still done even though virtually, even though this change in the administration of worship still reaps pros and cons. Some time ago these various responses culminated in a focus on the online celebration of the Eucharist (sacrament of holy communion).

The above phenomenon can perhaps be explained based on the picture that might change in the context of the worship experienced by Israel in exile as Fransiskus et al quoted Panjaitan, changing the paradigm of God's people, which previously focused more on ritual (sacrificial offerings) and

shifted to obedience (teaching the word) 1 Samuel 15:22[19]. The current social changes reminded the Christians of the slogan 'Ecclesia Reformata Semper Reformanda', which is continuously renewing itself. Furthermore, it also transforms and innovates to surpass the current and new challenges [20]. The world has continuously experienced the ongoing process of change, which is always preceded and guided by science, also known as the human cognitive domain [21].

Thus, virtual worship in the pandemic era is an alternative to being a container of religiosity, which is a way for Christians to express spiritual content, ways of worship, and procedures. Meanwhile, context is a culture or a situation that is happening, namely a pandemic situation. As an alternative, online worship becomes a container that is quite relevant depending on the context, but it needs to be chosen and adjusted wisely because a good container is certainly a good tool, but above all, the most important thing is not once again that all containers are good but have zero content. So, the online platform used is a container that at least currently fits the context best. If the context changes so will the possibilities for containers.

Therefore, Fredy Simanjuntak explained that the Church remains dynamic in practice, maintains spiritual life, teaches the Word of God, does discipleship, and continues to provide pastoral services such as cell groups, counseling, or prayer together. The implementation of worship using technological media and forming virtual communities is the best solution chosen by churches today so that congregations can still receive ecclesiastical services [22].

## IV. CONCLUSION

Based on all the above discussion it can be concluded that (1) today's spiritual upheaval and changing living conditions are part of a broader and deeper revolution. Intellectual formations are combined in spiritual formations in virtual space which have a new impact on the field of culture and way of thinking even in the church. Even technology has now changed the rather static concept of reality to a more dynamic and evolutionary concept in spiritual terms; (2) New and more efficient media of social communication contribute to knowledge of events; by triggering chain reactions, they provide the fastest and widest possible circulation of styles of thought and feeling. Finally, this new condition has an impact on the spirituality of the church; (3) Globally the church is already in an era where cultural and social transformations are taking place, which also has an impact on her spiritual life without losing the meaning of contextual spiritual progress; (4) the church as an agent of transformation can perform its function to continue to observe and guard spiritual metamorphosis in the light of the Bible so that any purpose of the transformation that occurs can be translated into a language that can be understood by each generation about this life and the life to come; (5) The church uses technology as a support system in church services as well as a medium of communication in translating Christ's messages in the pandemic era.

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