# Religious Discourse and Digital Society

## A Critical Socio-Theological Analysis

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**Abstract.** The purpose of this article is to critically analyze the situation of religion and Digital society. IoT is used as an instrument of power both politically and economically in religious and social life which results in the creation of social inequality and the collapse of religiosity and human values. Religion is dialectically criticized but at the same time is able to provide intervention through theological values for Digital society. This article uses a qualitative approach with a content analysis research method to discuss and then analyze phenomena related to religious expression in the socio-theological context of digital society. This research produces at least three aspects of a socio-theological perspective for religion and digital society. First, criticism of religion that is exclusive and provides absolute indoctrination without consideration of common sense. Second, religion is shifted to the private sphere with existential-reflective consciousness. This means that religion is separated from society and is no longer a public matter. Third, acceptance of religion where religion is still needed in the context of society. The conditions of the digital society have made individuals isolated and act only for their own interests. Here, religion intervenes and relates to Digital society with its religiosity values and potentially criticizes as well as partners, and learns from each other.

**Keywords:** Religion, Digital Society, Socio-Theological

## 1    Introduction

Today, technology has become the primary need for most existential human activities both locally and globally. Technological advancement is characterized by various phenomena such as driverless cars with the presence of Artificial Intelligence (AI), which uses robots. Of course, the question arises, what or how is the impact of extreme automation, rapid turnover by AI, Big Data, Industry 4.0, and the Internet of Things (IoT)[1]. These technologies have changed the unpredictability of people's daily lives [2]. Technological advances have transformed religious and social life based on the digitalized 4.0 revolution. Religious patterns have come to a virtual reality where "click activity" has become a new community of faith. [3]. The flow of digi-

talization through the internet continues to connect one person to another, access to religious spirituality, community activities can be done together by giving meaning in digital relations, at any time from various locations without limits [4].

The consequence of the development of a digital society is that human decisions or actions must at least first be determined through technological considerations. There are at least four periodization's proposed by Harari related to human civilization throughout history. First, humans are determined by nature (Cosmo centric), second, humans have hope in God or gods (Theocentric), third, humans design and determine others (anthropocentric), and fourth, internet technology can be said to have designed and determined humans (datacentric) [5]. Digital society is synonymous with dataism, which through various kinds of information has become a new idolatry as a determinant of human survival.

In addition to becoming a new idolatry, the internet in today's digital society is used as a tool to legitimize power. [6] Both political and economic aspects emphasize instrumentality and productivity. Instrumentality encompasses the totality of man's efforts to control his life and environment by controlling the world instrumentally, while productivity encompasses the totality of man's efforts to bring about new things through which they can be realized in a controlled manner [7]. This condition results in the creation of social gaps in people's lives. Internet technology is used as a part to reap as much profit as possible. No wonder turbo capitalism became a common phenomenon and gave rise to a pessimism in society as the end of human emancipation [8]. This also has an impact on the value of humans only on capital, which serves the interests of unlimited capital development. The Internet of Things is increasingly connecting people in the context of digital society instrumentally and on the value of productivity. Therefore, turbo capitalism is able to overturn the values of morality, spirituality and humanity. [6].

Previously, there have been several studies conducted to discuss digital society from several aspects. The use of the internet from the point of view of information processing is based on Christian moral and ethical values in order to suppress cybercrime through this neutral internet  [9]. Theological discussion about IoT from a Catholic perspective that emphasizes that the internet or digital age is a new way of living faith related to spiritual relationships with God and others more deeply [10]. Other studies emphasize the condition of human spirituality which is not only in certain religious institutions, but encourages human spirituality to shift to the digital world, the virtual world [11]. There is also a critical discussion about the internet that explains the existence of virtual communitarians, the impact on dependence, changes in behavior towards cybercrime and optimism for the internet developed through media literacy education. [12]. The discussion of IoT above has helped with a common understanding of the internet in the context of religion and society but has not yet come to a critique of religion and society themselves simultaneously as well as their positive interventions in the context of a digital society.

Based on the above statement, this article offers a socio-theological discursive view of religion and digital society. So, the aim of this writing constructively is that religion needs to be criticized as well as being able to intervene in digital society with the values of religiosity that are still needed. It is hoped that the emancipatory side of

religion and digital society will be realized which becomes a primary part of life at this time and beyond.

## 2      Method

Based on library research, the method used is content analysis. Content analysis allows researchers to manage and summarize information and then discuss it discursively related to the topic at hand. [13]. Based on the explanation above, the researcher analyzes the contents of various writings related to the topic of religious discourse and society in the digital context, which then draws, describes, and explains the messages embedded in the contents of the reference writings. The researchers first sorted out the reference writings, integrated the messages from the writings, summarized the content of the messages, and managed them to extract information constructively that could be used as a reference for discussing the topic. [13]

## 3      Findings and Discussion

### 3.1      Discursive Analysis of Digital Society

In the 21st century, the fourth revolution is known as industrial revolution 4.0. The physical, digital, and biological fields through technology are successfully combined, or collectively called cyber-physical systems. This revolution is characterized by the development of artificial intelligence (AI), nanotechnology, fifth wireless technology (5G), 3D printing, and the Internet of Things (IoT) industry. The merging of industrial technology with digital technology certainly creates a new mindset and culture [14].

The digital society is synonymous with the internet, which is connected to ubiquitous sensor data, then distributed around the world [1]. Transparency or openness of information flow, strengthening efficient resources and data accuracy are offered by the digital society [15]. The digital society at its core, connects any device with an 'on' and 'off' switch to the internet. Schwabb points out that digitization is continuously improving its networking capabilities, and continues to connect everything to the internet. Eventually, everything becomes 'smart' and connected to the internet, which enables the expansion of data-driven communication services based on increased analytical capabilities [16].

The digital society through IoT has aroused the interest of many people to use, and utilize it according to their own desires. Digitalization in society has made it easier for humans to carry out various forms of their activities so that many people do not need to go too far places to buy their needs and desires. What they want to buy can be done through online stores. In addition, various systems in government, religious organizations have used the internet. Various applications of e-banking, e-government, e-politics, e-christianity, etc., have made the internet shorten or even eliminate distances and boundaries [14].

## 3.2     Challenges of Religion and Digital Society

**Public Space Encounters**

Public space is a concept that presupposes the creation of an ideal communication, where all people as participants discuss in a free and equal state, without discrimination, without pressure about life together. [17]. In practice, public space is a "coffee room" where people or groups of people can hold critical-reflective discussions related to the surrounding social reality, such as government policies, religious activities and so on. Public space is characterized by ignoring status, similarities, ideas, and having ideals that are inclusive and build symmetrical public relations. [18]. In its development, today's public sphere is characterized by a liberal-secular society, a plurality of cultures, religions and worldviews and the emergence of a life that is appreciative of individual autonomy and freedom. This means that (modern) societies in the public sphere tend to value individual autonomy and are critical of the homogeneity of a single culture and worldview. [19].

The encounter between religion and society in the public sphere often creates tensions because they feel the most righteous based on the idea of choosing 'this' or 'that' (either/or). It is this tension that makes religion pushed into the private sphere by secular societies. The phenomenon of religion being pushed into the private sphere has become normative in secular societies [20]. On the other hand, religion can also contribute to the modern public sphere with its ethical-theological aspects. This means that religions need to develop patterns of rationality that allow them to participate appropriately in the public sphere of society [21]. It needs to be emphasized and brought to our attention that the public sphere is a discursive arena where people and religions participate and act through dialogue and debate. Public space is an autonomous space that is independent of capitalist administrative and economic power [17].

**Encounters in Digital Space**

The transition from public space to digital space has become a reality and is present in human life. Hardiman argues that there has been an evolutionary transformation from what is called homo sapiens to homo digitalis. Homo digitalis is no longer I think, but I browse. That way, mutual encounters can be made [22]. In digital space humans are collectively valuable through shared relations, but their individual authority is governed by external IoT algorithms. The public in digital encounters no longer consists of people alone. IoT digital communication networks continue to provide encounters through information, anonymous messages that continue to circulate endlessly. Homo digitalis participates in assembling the digital reality [22]. In the digital era through IoT, humans who have become digital beings, live in society through interactions with WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, Tiktok, YouTube, and so on. The body is indeed present during real encounters, but its involvement is not really here, but there, in their respective digital virtual community encounters [22].

Through the internet, humans have developed into "impersonal forces" that have dominated society. In practice, through IoT, "impersonal forces" appear clearly, for example in the world of advertisements. At any time, "impersonal forces" appear through advertising slogans that are attractive, mesmerizing, and promise all human

expectations with the internet as the instrument [23]. So, the intersection of the digital space of society can be a great advantage for the owners of economic capital, and political power.

### 3.3    A Socio-Theological Perspective for Religion and Digital Society

**Secularization: A Critique of Religion**

Traced socio-theologically, criticism of religion by modernization and a society that has become secular. The loss of the role of religion in modern society or digital society is an effect of the enlightenment paradigm. Beliefs about religion will gradually disappear, and people's lives will eventually be free from so-called traditional metaphysical patterns and only believe in rational sources based on secular universal ethical principles [17]. However, it cannot be denied that religion also spreads in the public sphere through digital instruments. What is highlighted is when religion in the public sphere is taught without consideration of common sense and the emergence of religious arrogance, feeling the most righteous, not recognizing humanity, and it cannot be denied that religion is actually a source of hatred, anger, and war [24]. This kind of religion is believed to be slowly abandoned. The values of religious religiosity that once rose are now appearing with full of problems [25]. Society in the digital context will abandon religion if there is no vigilant and selective attitude from the community through critical education in choosing applications, information, and arguments about religion. It has become a reality that a lot of internet content, social media comes without a verification process which results in easy exposure to intolerance and is prone to the entry of religious radicalism [26].

Criticism of religion creates a social belief that society does not depend on religion. The results of digital community communication and mutual agreement become new expectations based on mutual community agreement. Titaley states that religious tendencies at the sociological level are still exclusive. As long as there is an attitude of exclusivism in shared religious life, various kinds of problems will always occur [27]. Thus, the dynamically evolving culture of secularization, spilling over into the (former) religious culture, has the effect of reducing the cultural influence of religion through criticism of religion itself [28].

**Religion as an Embodiment of Existential Reflection**

Criticism of religion has alienated it from the public sphere to the private domain. Indeed, the private domain is an ideal aspect of religion. However, if it is confined to the private domain, religion (which emphasizes spiritualized ethical-theological values without being righteous) cannot be used as a social foundation for digital society. Religious-existential consciousness makes individuals continue to reflect personally and separate from society. Through IoT, individual interaction can be achieved in society, and individuals can gain satisfaction if they can fulfill their duties in society [23]. However, at the same time criticism also needs to be addressed to various kinds of rules, actions implemented by society against individuals. The rules of society that are said to fulfill the needs of individual existence must be viewed critically. In addi-

tion, the transfer of religion to the private sphere on the other hand makes a person's commitment to his religion stronger with the result that there is a transformation that occurs within him/her, and by itself the change becomes a strong symptom in every citizen of society [29].

Religion also has a part called good life that must prioritize the problem of justice in living together and trying to moderate its existential awareness. Religion existentially in social relations, cannot bring their beliefs into public/political affairs. Religion is still marginalized participation in socio-political life [17]. However, religious people who are aware of themselves including in the digital realm still realize their existence digitally as well as spiritually. Religion in the private sphere in the form of existential reflection continues to move dynamically according to the times [11]. Through this existential reflection, humans can escape from all forms of 'falsehood', and live an authentic existence. This is because the public in the context of IoT is in the crowd, making each personal identity lost because it dissolves in the gathered group. In religion as well, people just go through the rituals and what is commonly practiced or expected by others without personal appreciation of what is done [30].

Although religion is marginalized from the public sphere, there is another optimism with the realization that the focus of existential reflection is the relationship with the Divine. Religious citizens through their individuals realize the purpose of life is not their own, which is temporal for self-gratification only. In relation to the Divine, self-giving and religious commitment make religious citizens constantly remove and purge all forms of self-concern from their motivation to act (including later in the public sphere), as well as the desire to attain eternal happiness with the Divine [30].

**Religious Interventions and Relationships in Digital Society**

On the part of society, it is no longer criticizing, but rather accepting, and building relationships with religion. The realization that religion is still needed in public life in the context of IoT. Modern society is criticized for failing to embrace society. Humans are 'seduced' by promises of certainty, claims of absolute knowledge, and mechanistic thinking as the basis of science. People are mesmerized by the brilliance of modern science. In the end, people acquire manipulative knowledge, knowledge that is not for the sake of wisdom [31]. Modernization in a digital society not only increases intersubjective connectedness but also results in the isolation of individuals from one another, acting only in their own interests. Religion must intervene in public space and digital space by making the best use of traditions, documents to present the experience of the moral intuition of religiosity. These experiences are the experiences of the ancestors in faith as written in the Holy Scriptures and doctrinal traditions. [14].

Secularization, modernity, internet technology have lost their explanatory power, and at the same time religion and secular modern society should be in a mutually necessary relationship. Religion with its theological meaning serves to provide an ethical-educative foundation for public/digital discourse [17]. Religious intervention through IoT provides benefits for the public sphere to become a facility and instrument for the interests of religion and its adherents. The Internet has opened up new opportunities and needs to be welcomed by religious communities to be used as facilities, important resources to fulfill the positive interests of all for all [32]. That way,

religion is able to play an important role in the public space of the IoT context itself. Religion can also be seen as a potential partner in criticizing and rectifying the development of digital society.

Religion is a matter of life as well as change from within towards peace and openness. Optimistically, religion with its theological emphasis can develop an appreciative critical attitude. Religion should encourage people to be spiritual, beyond the boundaries of tradition, modernity, ethnicity and race [33]. Religion can be seen as an 'oasis' that is able to nourish the best side of society as the basis of thought against the world's various thoughts, or the basis of spirituality against the world's various spiritualities [25]. In the context of a digital society, religion seeks an adaptive and reconciliatory attitude when encountering modernity. The adaptation is in the form of reading the values of modernity, especially digitalization through its religious sources. Religion tries to respond to the modernization process by adopting and adapting the internet according to the needs of its communal context. So, the term intervention, relationship, response between religion and technology, in the context of society, is an effort to make digital society part of a positive culture. [32]. Thus, the digital society is a good opportunity for religion to take part in implementing its theological values.

The process of adaptation, building relationships can be successful if religion and society realize their respective limitations and agree to learn from each other. Digital society is required to have an attitude of respect for religious traditions, religious communities. Be open, to see the possibility of a cognitive side in religion, and be willing to learn from it. Conversely, religion is also required to find a new epistemic attitude that is appropriate regarding the encounter with the fact of the presence of a digital secular society in it [17].

The interaction for mutual learning can come in two stages. First, religions through their religious communities must develop the right epistemic (rational) attitude when they deal with religious and cultural plurality (internet technology). Faced with the complexity of cultural life including in digital society, faith needs to be clarified and matured by reason. This means that the heart and feelings need to be honed and educated by reasoning. [25]. It can be categorized as successful if these religious citizens are able to connect their religious beliefs with other communities, especially secular society reflectively without sacrificing the truth, existing faith beliefs. So, religion is able to take part in the public sphere if it can translate its potential into the expression of secular public reason in the digital context with plural solidarity. The implication is that religion, which is negatively perceived as a trigger for conflict, a source of chaos, is no longer seen as such, but positively strengthens tolerance, synergy, as a pillar of support for an inclusive common life. [34].

Second, religion through its religious citizens is willing to learn with or critically related to adjusting to the 'authority' of internet technology which has now become the holder of secular knowledge power. This learning process can be said to be successful if religion is able to formulate a relationship between the content of its religious teachings and secular knowledge in digital society so that there is no conflict between the two. Interventions and relations between religion and digital society can be said to be successful if both are able to integrate the principle of equality of indi-

viduals and communities and emphasize philosophical universal moral principles into their religious teachings [17].

The role of religion in the context of Christianity, especially the church as an institution, needs to realize its position in society, be fully present, and be able to coexist in the midst of a plurality of societies with various differences. Religion has a social responsibility to maintain political stability in the midst of the rapid development and use of internet technology which may give rise to religious tensions or conflicts [35]. Theologically, referring to Calvin's thought that emphasizes the role of community leaders in government as part of God's call to be respected not out of fear but out of respect for God's decree. Although each has different autonomy, because both theologically come from God, the church has the right and obligation to continue to remind the political rulers of society about the truth of God's Word. There is no higher authority of the church than the government and vice versa. Both, indeed, are different, but parallel to one another. Based on God's providence and sovereignty, the authorities in society are accountable as part of God's stewardship [36]. Religious people, theologians in their interventions need to reorient towards digital society so that they do not see it negatively. On the contrary, the hope to develop theology through digital society is enormous. Digital society with a weighty theological foundation can be developed if religionists are willing to plunge into the virtual culture of the internet in a critical-appreciative manner.

Society in a digital context can be used by Christianity through religious institutions to serve the community as well as the people as an effort given by technology for humans to relate to God. Religion, especially the church, does not remain silent or do nothing. Instead, religion is more proactive and creative in helping the community or people to continue to grow in living the God they live. Through internet technology, the proclamation of religiosity values, Good News, worship, spiritual writings can be used as a positive intervention of religion in a digital society [11]. Synergy can be created through interventions and theological relations from religion, especially Christianity for the community.

## 4     Conclusion

Based on the explanation and analysis above, it can be concluded that digital society has become part of the awareness of living together both in terms of economics, politics and religion itself. In practice, technology is used as a tool to legitimize the benefits of both parties, as well as being fully controlled by the technology itself. Through discursive discussions based on socio-theological critical analysis, both religion and society are open to criticism, and learning from each other. To bring the two together, religion is required to be able to intervene as well as build relationships by not looking negatively at digital society first. Religion with its religiosity values through Scripture and an appreciative view of doctrinal tradition is able to build synergy together for personal and communal spiritual growth in religion and digital society today dynamically. That way Religion is not passive and only sees the flow of developments in digital society, but there is sensitivity or activeness about the negative side

of digitalization in society and then helps people to be able to sort out or even participate through relationships correctly.

This article contributes to the discursive development of religion and society in the digital context through socio-theological critical analysis. The relationship between the two does not have to be contradictory but can sharpen each other. Religion can be used to evaluate the more constructive use of technology based on religious values for the sake of common progress in community life.

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