

Article

Ethnography of Religious Instants: Multi-Sited Ethnography and the Idea of “Third Spaces”

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Abstract: Attempts to understand contemporary religious practice, and its associated communities and identities, must take into consideration the way that these phenomena exist in both virtual and physical spaces, as well as the way that, in some instances, religion bridges or erases this dichotomy. The approach here focuses on those forms of religious practice that do not fit easily into one or the other type of space. Starting with existing discussions of ethnographic methodologies for studying religious practice and the growing literature on how to study “digital religion”, we examine the methodological needs for studying “third spaces”, the hybrid, in-between spaces of religious practice. The model presented here is one of simultaneous and collaborative ethnography that extends shared methods across the virtual and the actual dimensions as the most productive approach to this type of research. Using tailored research methods and techniques within this approach offers the opportunity to consider ways in which behaviors, interactions, and speech acts that happen within this event are continuous or discontinuous with each other. It also offers insight into the dynamics of “shared experience” and how perspectives are or are not shared within these multiple dimensions.

Keywords: multi-sited ethnography; religious instants; third spaces; simultaneity; collaboration; methodology

1. Introduction

The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have brought important questions about new and enduring forms of religious identity and practice. From the rise of the “nones” to the growth of digital avenues for religious expression and practice, we have to ask how we might best approach religion as an evolving object of study. The questions are both conceptual and methodological. We must consider whether religion today is what it was (or what we thought it was) and whether the methods and strategies that have been used in the past are applicable to our contemporary object(s) of study. Our focus here is primarily methodological as we build a model of simultaneous and collaborative ethnography, but we cannot address the methodological without engaging the conceptual. Therefore, our discussion of methodology emerges from ongoing debates about what constitutes religion as an analytical object of study.

With the premise that religious practice is increasingly hard to equate with unitary and localizable congregations or communities, the model described in this essay is designed to allow researchers to capture the diffuse components of contemporary religious practice. This model of simultaneous collaborative ethnography seeks to engage the digital and multi-sited dimensions of contemporary religious practices. It grows out of recent trends in ethnographic methodology and builds on increased attention to “digital religion” as a legitimate focus of academic study. Continued reliance on more traditional methods will likely limit the researcher’s ability to grasp and to analyze diverse and complex forms of religiosity. Looking to expand the opportunities for ethnographic study of religion, the model calls for multi-sited research by teams of two or more researchers working concurrently. It also calls researchers’ attention to fleeting or momentary religious *instants* in ethnography of religion.

2. Ethnographic Methods for Studying Religion

Ethnography has long been a primary methodological approach used to study religious practice, specific religious communities, and local forms of religiosity. It offers a perspective that complements textual and historical approaches. The ethnographic approach allows access to the practical and social dimensions of religion and often stands in counterpoint to idealized or ideological understandings of a particular form of religion. With careful and well-conceived ethnography, we can discover important social variations in religious expression and practice and ways that practitioners adapt to specific circumstances. We can also examine key dimensions like the role of leadership and rhetoric within religious groups (e.g., [1,2]).

Durkheim, the apical ancestor of the social scientific study of religion, bequeathed an understanding of religion rooted in identifiable communities. Starting with the understanding that religion was a social phenomenon with a social function, Durkheim directed the attention of analysts of religion to well-defined communities, presumed to have largely shared understandings and experiences. Coming out of this legacy we have a long history of ethnographies of social/religious communities, usually

rooted in the practice of long-term “fieldwork” in the tradition frequently associated with Bronislaw Malinowski. From Lester’s ethnography of a Mexican convent [3] to Engelke’s ethnography of an apostolic church in Zimbabwe [4], we continue to see very important and informative ethnographies rooted in this methodological approach. Typically the ethnographer spends considerable time conducting research with a particular religious group, practicing participant-observation, conducting interviews, and employing other ethnographic techniques.

While Durkheim’s theoretical model for religion has been critiqued and supplanted by a number of different theoretical understandings in the last century, his seminal ideas have had an enduring methodological impact on the study of religion. Ethnographic methodologies linked to Durkheim’s ideas have been productive and remain important to our continued collection of knowledge about religion. There have even been productive attempts to apply Durkheimian models to digital religion, e.g., Kruger [5]. However, two critiques of the Durkheimian approach warrant attention here: one conceptual, one methodological. First, Couldry [6] challenges Durkheim’s functionalism and its connection to social cohesion and a perceived social center. Rather than positing ritualized practices of media and religion as “an affirmation of what we share”, Couldry invites us to think about how practices order and mask boundaries and relationships of power ([6], p. 4). Couldry’s “post-Durkheimian” ([6], p. 5) critique, thus, maintains a focus on practices and how practices order lives, but it strips away the functionalist assumption that such practices necessarily create social cohesion around what Couldry considers a mythical center. This mythical center may be felt as *real*, but the task of empirical research, according to Couldry, is to understand how practices perpetuate this mythology *as real* and not be complicit in its perpetuation as real through Durkheim functionalism.

David Morgan [7], however, argues that Couldry pushed too far in his attempt to avoid complicity with the perpetuation of a mythical social center. Morgan wonders if it is necessary, as Couldry suggests, to abandon a methodological approach that focuses on “the emotive side of Durkheim’s study of ritual”, which seeks to understand how people emotionally evoke “a mythic social center” ([7], p. 353). Morgan asks if it is necessary “to exclude one or the other approach because people use media to do both—to feel and think about the worlds which are both imagined and real, felt, and conceptually parsed. Certainly any map of social structure will have much to say simultaneously about borders and center, real or perceived” ([7], p. 353). Arguing for a more encompassing, “full-bodied aesthetic analysis of religious mediation”, Morgan recognized “that technologies of sensation structure the felt-life of a religion, telling us much about how people build and maintain their worlds, and what roles religions play in the ongoing work of cultural construction” ([7], pp. 351, 353).

Complicating classic Durkheimian sociology is important for both conceptual and methodological reasons. Couldry and Morgan pushed beyond classic functionalism, positing the mythology of cohesion and social centers, while also maintaining the centrality of practice. Both recognized that social cohesion is a mythology that masks relationships of power. They differ on the extent to which research should focus on the “cognitive side” (mapping social practice) or the “emotive side” (evocation of mythology) of Durkheim’s social thought, but they agree that the central focus should be on practice. This conceptual move is important methodologically because it begs for rethinking ethnographic methodologies and because it helps us to better understand *flows*—of people, symbols, capital—in late modern global life that challenge notions of social cohesion.

Today we are highly cognizant of forms of religion (or spirituality) that do not necessarily match Durkheim's dominant conception of religion as concomitant with an established or fixed community or social group. These religious forms may be highly individualized, fleeting/temporary, or internationally dispersed, e.g., [8]. As a result, in recent years, scholars of religion have developed several theoretical notions of religion that reflect understandings that religious practice does not easily map onto perceived communities or congregations. Concepts such as "lived religion" [9] and "everyday religion" [10], as well as "networked religion" [11], all offer insightful ways to understand religion as rooted in practice with complex relationships to community and other social structures.

Our model seeks to capture and examine religion as manifest in flows and networks and to match our methodological approaches to our evolving understanding of what constitutes religion. In many of these cases, long-term ethnography in one particular community or place may be unwarranted or relatively unproductive. One option is to shift to studying religion as a largely disembodied set of ideas or beliefs that manifests in each of these settings, but if we want to continue to analyze religion as a set of practices that accompanies ideas and beliefs, we need to adapt ethnography to study some or all of these religious forms. Ethnographic methods will also allow us to remain attendant to the social dimensions of complex flows and networks and avoid the tendency to perceive these religious practices as entirely individualized. Along these lines, Grieve [12] offered interesting insight into the way that creative practice and the experience of "energy" connected neo-Pagans socially despite the fact that they were not generally co-present in the same space. Therefore, we seek here to weave together divergent strands of thinking about ethnography and religion, including multi-sited ethnography, digital religion, virtual ethnography, and ethnography of fleeting/ephemeral moments.

3. Research Experience behind the Model

Our thinking about this model for simultaneous collaborative ethnography to study contemporary forms of religion begins with our own research of Synthesis 2012, a combination music festival and New Age conference held in Pisté, Yucatán to mark the supposed end of the Maya calendar in December 2012¹. The event invited participants from all over the world to converge in Pisté for the three-day event. In this way, it was similar to many musical and spiritual events staged and marketed in the global economy. It specifically catered to consumers of New Age religiosity and electronica music. However, the event, especially the spiritual side, was also marketed as being available to a virtual audience. Those who were unable to be there physically were invited to participate virtually *as if* they were there. A live feed was set up to broadcast the event on the Internet and was accompanied by several different online chats as well as a lively social media presence, especially on Facebook.

In our analysis and writing about Synthesis, we have explored topics like the experience of spiritual presence across virtual and actual platforms [13] and the role of Maya ethnicity in constructing this spiritual event. In addition, we found the experience to be equally stimulating for our methodological thinking. Because the event was a one-time event of limited duration, it required a specific and

¹ Murchison and Coats were the primary researchers involved in this project, but there were several others who were involved to a lesser degree—Heather Coats, James Bowley and his class on apocalyptic tourism, Coats's honors student, Sara Sacks, and Allie Jordan.

dedicated methodological approach designed to capture as much information as possible. We needed to work in tandem in order to research adequately both the virtual and actual dimensions. The research experience was a fruitful one, and it can yield insights as we consider doing ethnography of contemporary religious phenomena. Not all religious phenomena will share all of Synthesis's attributes—*i.e.*, a one-time event that presents itself as equally open to virtual and actual participation—but this particular example points us to larger methodological questions that address the limitations of our own research and the opportunities for future research. We are especially interested in facilitating ethnography of forms of religion that, like Synthesis 2012, imagine themselves as “global” or transnational as a result of their virtual dimension².

4. Third Spaces

Rather than pursuing a dichotomy that splits the virtual and the actual methodologically, we are seeking an approach that brings them together and addresses the ways in which the underlying dichotomy may be detrimental to our overall understanding of our object. We agree with Wittel's general claim that “Rather than emphasising the differences between material and digital spaces, we should introduce a more relational perspective and concentrate on the similarities, connections and overlappings. No method would be more appropriate to achieve this objective than a modernised version of fieldwork” [16]. Campbell echoed this relational approach, arguing that online practices cannot be disembedded from offline practices. Instead, these practices must be considered in tandem—networked, convergent, and multisited [11]. With these methodological goals in mind, we turn to Hoover and Echchaibi's [17] notion of third spaces. They offer their formulation of the concept as a way of thinking about forms of digital religion. For them, digital religion is closely linked to the emergence of digital spaces, but not confined to them; its character is, however, directly connected to the opportunities of digital expressions and practices. Their focus on “third-ness” is useful in the way it pushes us past a facile dichotomy between virtual and actual and in the way that it emphasizes the characteristic hybridity of these spaces. In defining what they mean by “third spaces”, they suggest: “There are many dimensions on which the digital can be located as a unique space between and beyond received polarities. This ‘in-between-ness’ is, to our way of thinking, basic to the meaning of ‘third-ness’.” ([17], p. 9). Therefore, if we are studying third spaces, we need a methodological approach dedicated to that in-between-ness.

Linking third spaces to the historical circumstances of late modernity and invoking Mary Louise Pratt's [18] concept of a “contact zone”, Hoover and Echchaibi claim:

these spaces are not simply places where marginal subjects toy around with their peripheral individuality, but rather are sites where individuals use the technical capacities of the digital to imagine social and cultural configurations beyond existing binaries of the physical versus the virtual and the real versus the proximal religious experience.

² It should be stressed that “global” here does not imply universal or monolithic. It refers to a shape and character that transcends local and national boundaries (*cf.* [14], pp. 5–7). In many cases, these forms of religion are purposefully and/or self-consciously global and present themselves as such. Therefore, we seek to engage them as “global” but do so mindful of the need for good research and analysis that will “provincialize” them [15].

Recognizing, as Bruno Latour has said, that “technology is society made durable”, we do not assume these digital spaces to be borne in a social vacuum (1991). Instead, their very existence is contingent on a dialogic interaction and re-mixing of a multiplicity of forms, discourses, and subjectivities precisely to ensure the coming together—albeit in a much more contested sense—of society ([17], pp. 14–15).

In recent decades, ethnography has frequently recognized and sought to analyze dialogue and diversity in perspectives and experiences. In terms of religion, the ethnographer certainly cannot assume a collectively shared set of beliefs, experiences, or perspectives [8]. However, ethnographic attention to these issues still most commonly occurs with respect to a single site or group, e.g., looking at gender or age-based differences in a religious congregation. Looking at third spaces that bridge the virtual and actual, we need to evaluate conversations and dialogues across those spaces and the manner in which geographic, physical, and technological barriers are or are not transcended. We need multi-sited ethnography that does more than analyze each site separately. Borrowing again from Campbell, we need multi-sited ethnography that allows us to examine the interactions, intersections, and interstices of these third spaces and networks.

Drawing on Homi Bhabha’s discussion of hybridity in colonial contexts, Hoover and Echchaibi argue that these hybrid, in-between spaces of digital religion are “generative” ([17], p. 16):

They exist *between* private and public, between institution and individual, between authority and individual autonomy, between large media framings and individual “pro-sumption”, between local and translocal, *etc.* Digital third spaces of religion are *fluidly bounded*. Boundaries are important, but they are subject to a constant process of negotiation. Digital third spaces of religion are interactive and thus “co-generative”. Their “communities” of shared interest and purpose produce ideas and generate action that are realized in both online and offline contexts. Digital third spaces thus depend on, and help create, subjectivities of autonomy through the more-or-less constant reflexive engagement into which their participants are “hailed” ([17], p. 16).

This characteristic of generative hybridity calls for methods that bridge multiple sites and for thinking about new or revised methods that come out of these hybrid spaces. However, with the notion of hybridity we need to remain cognizant of the variety and divisions within religious forms. Emphasizing hybridity, one might be tempted to assume that each form of (digital) religion constitutes a singular third space with the plural of “third spaces” referring to the collective of various individual digital religions. If each religion constitutes a single third space, then that space equals a single field site. However, these religious forms, especially those that exist in both virtual and actual spheres, often exhibit significant site and space differences. Therefore, we want to embrace the hybrid dimensions of these religious spaces and practices without ignoring the methodological need to consider internal variations and divisions. Even if people within these spaces operate “*as if*” ([17], p. 22) they are part of a well-defined and relatively homogenous community, we need to remain attuned to diversity and disjuncture within that experienced community. In other words, we need to commit to multi-sited fieldwork that allows us to examine these dynamics and to locate religious practice within complex flows and networks.

5. The Methodological Model

Because the virtual possibilities expand the repertoire of possible sites for religious expression and practice and because those expanded possibilities seem to make it even more likely that forms of religion will span multiple sites, we suggest that this model of simultaneous collaborative ethnography will be especially relevant as we seek to study and understand religion in the twenty-first century. This model calls for ethnographic research that involves teams of researchers in concurrent research endeavors that are intentionally multi-sited. This approach will allow researchers not only to gain the sort of in-depth information in a particular site that ethnographers have always been able to garner but will also give insight into the ways that people, practices, symbols, and beliefs move between different spaces (physical and virtual) and the way that a religious form operates in different registers. In presenting this model, we begin with the large conceptual dimensions—multi-sited research, digital ethnography, the question of texts and places—and move toward more specific and practical considerations for this type of research, including simultaneity, collaboration, and ephemeral research data.

5.1. Multi-Sited Ethnography

Ethnography focused on a particular place is still the norm in ethnography generally and in ethnography of religion more specifically. However, multi-sited ethnography has become increasingly common over the course of the last two decades (e.g., [14,19]). George Marcus [20] was at the forefront of calls for multi-sited fieldwork. In 1995, he argued that we needed multi-sited ethnography in order to properly study the interconnected and transnational worlds in which humans now regularly live and operate. He suggested that multi-sited fieldwork was in and of the world system—suggesting a sort of reciprocal relationship between method and historical moment. On the one hand, according to Marcus [20], the particular historical circumstances had helped to shape the emergent method. On the other hand, the method was a way of studying precisely those historical circumstances in which it was situated. Indeed, multi-sited ethnography has allowed ethnographers to study things like the chains of food production in the global food system (e.g., [21]) and production and consumption of a variety of consumer goods (e.g., [22]). Ethnographers are perhaps more likely to be able to speak to global ideologies and processes as result of this methodological shift and even more likely to recognize variations in perspective and experience across field sites that are linked in particular ways.

Like with politics and economics, scholars of religion are increasingly faced with global and transnational forms of religion, e.g., [23–27]. Religion is clearly part of transnational flows and networks, and we need to study it as such. Multi-sited ethnography allows us to study religious ideas, symbols, practices, and communities that exist in spaces and forms beyond specific local places. Some of these religious forms may have characteristics and functions very similar to local religious communities. Nevertheless, we need to approach these forms in an appropriate methodological manner in order to understand religion as linked to something other than a static community and something that does not necessarily match up with social or bureaucratic structures and boundaries.

At the heart of this model is a commitment to multi-sited research. Ethnography has become increasingly open to multi-sited projects, but we need to continue to explore the possibilities of multi-sited

ethnography [28]. When Marcus linked the need for multi-sited ethnography to the world system twenty years ago, that linkage was rooted mainly in politico-economic systems in the physical world. However, the growth of virtual worlds has only expanded the possibilities and the need for multi-sited research. Spaces and avenues of virtual interaction make possible religious and social forms that are global and/or transnational in ways that merit close examination. Technologies, politics, and economics have helped to create research contexts that increasingly call for multi-sited research. This model can include a combination of virtual and actual sites with some projects working exclusively with one or the other category of sites if that is most appropriate in studying a particular religious manifestation.

With this model, we invite ethnographers to consider carefully the possibilities in studying virtual research sites in addition to more “traditional” physical sites. Multi-sited research that spans the virtual and the actual is key to our attempts to approach and understand the “in-between-ness” of third spaces. This model looks to the interstices between individual research sites and suggests that we can only approach those spaces by examining flows and networks across multiple research sites. Via multi-sited research, ethnographers can bring third spaces into relief as spaces of ethnographic research.

5.2. Digital Religion and Virtual Ethnography

Wellman [29] offers a comprehensive (and relatively brief) history of Internet Studies, beginning in 1990. He notes three waves of Internet Studies: (1) the euphoric/dystopic wave that he called presentist and parochial because the jeremiads about the Internet were stripped of context and history; (2) the mapping wave, interested in demographics of Internet uses; and (3) the current wave that seeks to understand how the Internet is embedded in everyday life. No longer young enough to be considered “new”, the study of digital technologies has established journals, conferences and associations, and the study of digital, networked technologies has been integrated into traditional academic disciplines.

The study of “digital religion” follows a similar trajectory as the broader field of Internet Studies, emerging as a subfield in the late 1990s, and riding similar waves, beginning with utopian hopes of new religious opportunities that collided with dystopic fears of the collapse of religious institutions and communities, moving to a focus on practice and everyday life, and entering a wave of increasing disciplinary interest and expansion (as well as fragmentation).

In 2006, Heidi Campbell [30] highlighted a number of trends in the study of digital religion, ranging from ecclesiastical, theological and instrumental issues to concerns with religious community, identity, authority/power and ritual. Building on Campbell’s work, Cho [31] offered a set of heuristics in this field: “Internet as information transmission medium”, “online religion in relation to offline religion”, “online influence of the offline”, “online-religion and religion-online” ([31], pp. 8–12). Many of these trends and heuristics remain as of this writing, though there is a move toward convergence, leading to what Molz called “blended geographies” in which the terms, online and offline, no longer make much sense ([32], p. 43). Indeed, there is still much to learn about the relationships about and among online and offline experiences, religious and otherwise, but as a practical, theoretical and methodological matter, the distinctions between these two modes of being have become increasingly blurred.

With such blurring, it is an open question whether or to what extent our questions and methods must change. Cho noted that the field was dominated by qualitative methodologies and supplemented by

quantitative survey analysis. In our own analysis of 38 journal articles from 2012–2014³, we learned that 13 of these involved textual analysis, including analysis of nationalist martyr narratives [36] and visual analysis of YouTube videos [37] and websites [38]. Seven of these articles employed ethnographic methods, broadly speaking, *i.e.*, in-depth interviewing and/or participant observation, (e.g., [39]), and seven involved analysis of survey data (e.g., [40]). In sum, the methodological approaches highlighted in Cho's 2011 review appear to be holding steady in 2015, but it is our contention that the changing, "blended" digital landscape requires rethinking our methodological approaches. Not all of them, of course. There is still much to be asked and answered using traditional approaches (which might at this point in history also include "net-nographic" approaches [41]). But we need other methods and strategies to answer new questions that emerge as landscapes continue to blend, blur and converge.

Therefore, digital religion and virtual field sites bring us to the practice and methodology of virtual ethnography. Internet or digital ethnography has been the subject of some considerable attention in recent years [15] even as traditionalists have approached it with skepticism and critique. From the idea that traditional ethnographic methods can be easily transported into virtual ethnography to reconfigured or brand-new methods for digital projects, the methodological discussions are important ones for our purposes.

For example, Boellstorff's ethnography of Second Life [42] and his handbook of virtual ethnographic methods [43] have clearly advanced anthropological approaches to the virtual theoretically and methodologically. He makes a compelling case for transporting ethnographic methods into a virtual world like Second Life and for studying that world or culture in and of itself. While noteworthy, Boellstorff does not stand alone in this regard. The lively academic discussion of "digital religion" has opened up similar spaces and avenues of analysis.

One still encounters a good deal of skepticism about the virtual or digital as an object of study in anthropology and related disciplines, but it is nevertheless an increasingly important object of study. As such, it is a pivot point for us, but we are most interested in considering how to study something that has an essential virtual component without being easily defined as virtual in essence. In other words, what if the virtual or digital realm provides one or more of the sites of research in a multi-sited research project? While there are some religious forms that clearly belong wholly to the category of virtual religion, there are a number of religious forms that exist in both digital and physical spaces and, therefore, merit an ethnographic approach that addresses both. Examples include congregations with physical places of worship that invite people to attend and participate through a virtual transmission of services or the uses of social media by otherwise "traditional" religious institutions. This is not simply a matter of online religion or religion online, though Helland's description is apt to a point [44]. In part due to changing technological opportunities and ways of being in the world, religious practice increasingly crosses back and forth between the virtual and the actual, often simultaneously and thus unified in time but *in* separate spaces. Individuals or groups of participants may move back and forth between these spaces and forms of religiosity, and their experiences, as Helland notes, can vary greatly dependent

³ This sample was drawn from Network for New Media, Religion and Digital Culture Studies [33]. Twenty-seven of these articles included traditional qualitative or quantitative measures indicated above. The remaining articles were either theory pieces or included less traditional methods like geo-tagging [34] or search log analysis [35].

upon setting, motivation and any number of different factors. Those who practice “online religion”, Helland notes,

are living their religion on and through the Internet medium. For those individuals who participate in online religious activity, there is no separation between their offline life and experiences and their online life and experiences, and their religious activities and worldview permeate both environments. For those people who practice online religion, the Internet is not some place “other” but recognized as a part of their everyday life and they are merely extending their religious meaning and activity into this environment ([8], p. 12).

Further, a religious group may combine virtual and actual “interaction zones” ([8], p. 13), providing spaces of religious interaction across media platforms. Some participants may interact across these media (in different spaces), but others may practice solely in the actual or virtual dimensions.

A religious community that exists entirely in a virtual world (e.g., [42]) may be amenable to the translation of a traditional ethnographic approach to the virtual space. In fact, that community may even match rather well the Durkheimian notion of religion as linked to a well-defined social group. Our existing methodological tool kits may be well developed to account for either religion online or online religion, “information zones” or single-sited “interaction zones” ([8], p. 13). However, many of these religious forms are not neatly bounded and easily approached using traditional or purely virtual ethnographic methods. We need to adopt a methodological approach that addresses as many of the “sites” of religious practice as possible, especially if we understand the religion to be embedded in flows and networks between the individual sites. We need a multi-sited ethnographic approach that recognizes and applies to both virtual and actual sites, as well as to the complexities within these categories of sites, (e.g., virtual interaction or informational zones) and among these categories of sites (e.g., where information, interaction, virtual and actual blend).

5.3. Considering the Role of Texts and Places

To this point, we have used the concepts of “field sites” and multi-sited fieldwork rather uncritically. In much the same way that Hoover and Echchaibi suggest approaching third spaces as conceptual as well as physical, we are working with an expansive notion of what constitutes a field site. Working with that expansive notion and tacking back and forth between very different types of sites, we need to think carefully about how we approach and understand these sites. Ethnographers always have to carefully consider the types of data or information (e.g., behavioral *vs.* linguistic) that they want to collect and the techniques most well suited to those ends. These methodological decisions are linked to how they perceive their site, the people they are working with, and the information they are collecting and analyzing. Ethnographers draw on a wide range of analogies from biology and ethology to drama and literature. An ethnographer who understands her object as similar to animal behavior engages a very different site from the ethnographer who sees her object as similar to a dramatic performance or a text. With multi-sited research, especially involving multiple researchers, these questions become even more amplified and require asking both how best to approach a particular site and how to manage work with different sites and different types of sites.

With ethnographic work between virtual and actual sites, this set of questions reminds us to reflect on how we perceive different sites, particularly those that are physically locatable and those that are not. Milner [45] links methodological choices in virtual ethnography to the tendency to approach virtual worlds as *either* places or texts. Helland, for example, does this in his distinction between religion online and online religion. The former is informational, consisting of sites where “people are given information about religion” ([8], p. 2). The latter is interactional, consisting of sites where “people are allowed the opportunity to participate in religious activity” ([8], p. 2). The site of religion online is a text. The site of online religion is a place⁴. Such a divide between place and text is certainly not unique to online research, but it may have particular valence due both to the types of ethnographic objects/materials that are most readily available and to the questions that are asked about online spaces as places. The tension between place and text invites further reflection on how methodological choices come out of, support, or disrupt that dichotomy. Some might ask whether it is multi-sited research if one or more of the sites are approached as a text. One can also ask whether this is similar to more traditionally place-based ethnographic work that draws heavily on texts as cultural artifacts open to analysis.

Interestingly Hoover and Echchaibi invoke third spaces as texts:

The digital in a third space configuration also becomes much more revealing because it makes legible the dynamics of translation and reflexivity as individuals—and at times institutions, too—seek alternative modes of belonging and community building. So, instead of seeing the digital in the study of religion solely in terms of its technical properties and their impact on some pure belief or on the authenticity of the spiritual experience, we look at it as a complex text of social practice, a site of negotiated religious praxis, which resists totalizing and monologic frames of reference and produces its own spiritual repertoire, its own discursive logic and its own aesthetics of persuasion ([17], p. 15).

Clearly, Hoover and Echchaibi have something more complicated in mind than Helland’s religion online that is an informational text. Their reference to the digital as text definitely fits with the literary turn in ethnography (and within the field of Cultural Studies in which Hoover and Echchaibi are situated), but probably also connects with the prominent place of text and the visual [17] in many digital spaces. Indeed, at least some digital spaces may lend themselves especially to textual approaches, for example, reading the visual and linguistic cues of the type of informational, religious websites that Helland called religion online.

Alternatively, the work of Stefan Gelfgren [46] offers an interesting example of research on digital religion focused on space and place. Examining how Christian places in Second Life have been constructed, he proceeds to a consideration of notions of remediation and hybridity and suggests that there might not be as much place-based independent innovation in Second Life as one might have predicted. The virtual places are linked to their actual counterparts in significant ways. In contrast with a textual approach to virtual research, Gelfgren very much approaches Second Life as a place rather than a text.

⁴ Helland [8] recognized that these are ideal types and that online/offline religious practices exists on a spectrum.

While the other sections are rather proscriptive in terms of key features of the research model, this section amounts to an invitation to consider the question of texts and places. Meier [47] suggested that digital texts are increasingly being supplanted by multimedia information, but our research experience with Synthesis 2012 opened our eyes to the relative ease with which many digital spaces can be rendered as texts. This is especially true when the digital interface is text-based itself. With a simple screen capture or an act of copying and pasting, the ethnographer can construct texts that are akin to verbatim notes. Analyzing religious phenomena and broader social and cultural phenomena as texts can be very productive for ethnographers. Nevertheless, we think ethnographers of third spaces will be well served if they evaluate their sites as texts *and* as places. Approaching a site as a place rather than a text may open ethnographers' eyes to behaviors, interactions, and movements that might be harder to access via a text. Considerations of place may be the best way toward Morgan's "aesthetic approach" since a text-based approach is more limited in evaluating how "technologies of sensation structure the felt-life of religion, telling us much about how people build and maintain their worlds" ([7], p. 351). We are not suggesting that ethnographers eschew the site as text. Rather we are suggesting that they remain aware of that as a default mode and consider how they approach different sites as texts and/or places, especially when defaults or tendencies might be linked to dichotomies like virtual and actual (as well as religion online and online religion) that the researchers are seeking to overcome. Collaborative research teams ought to be particularly fruitful venues for discussing this issue and allow for the blending of divergent well-reasoned perspectives.

5.4. Simultaneity

A significant portion of multi-sited research has focused on the physical movement of objects/commodities (e.g., tomatoes and cell phone components) or people (e.g., immigrants and diasporic communities). In many cases, the research strategy has involved conducting ethnography in one site at a time with the researcher(s) moving from one place to the next successively. This strategy makes sense when studying the physical movement of objects or people since their movement through space and systems takes place over time. Therefore, even if the researcher does not necessarily trace a specific person or object, the research unfolds over time in a manner that roughly mirrors the way that the flows and networks that they are studying unfold over time (often repetitively and continuously). However, some things like currency, media, symbols, and ideas are less circumscribed by the physical and temporal dimensions. Technologies like the Internet continue to make transfers, flows, and networks more immediate. There are, of course, many ways in which virtual experiences are not necessarily "immediate". In emphasizing simultaneity, we are not discounting the way that religious phenomena (even digital religions) unfold over time, but we do think that those temporal dimensions can be studied while also attending to simultaneity. Therefore, we emphasize the idea of simultaneity because we need research strategies that allow us to engage these relatively immediate flows and transfers.

A simultaneous ethnographic research project involves attending to multiple research sites concurrently. Doing so allows for the examination of simultaneous behaviors in different sites/spaces, interactions across spaces, and movement of ideas, symbols, and people between different religious spaces. This sort of simultaneous research facilitates "real-time" comparisons of various facets (e.g.,

linguistic features, organization and leadership, and innovation or hybridity). Recognizing that time is socially and culturally constructed and not entirely fixed, researchers practicing this sort of simultaneous ethnography will want to record as much information as possible about chronology and specific timing of religious behaviors and events in order to make comparisons across the multiple research sites possible. Researchers may want to investigate how well synchronized religious phenomena are across linked research sites and how “smoothly” different components of the religion in question move between the different dimensions/sites.

There are some interesting examples of ethnographic reconstructions using information collected *post facto* (e.g., [48]), and some data may be archived and accessible later (see discussion of fleeting data below), but there is no substitute for direct collection of ethnographic data whenever possible. Consequently, we propose simultaneity as an important pillar of this ethnographic approach. Ethnographers may decide to expand the scope of their research as their project develops and may choose to incorporate recollections or archived materials, but keeping simultaneity in mind as a principle of research will help in designing the most effective research projects and in considering what can and cannot be done with recollections and archives when they are used.

5.5. Collaboration

A commitment to simultaneous multi-sited research almost necessarily entails collaboration. Although it is possible for a single researcher to conduct research in physical and virtual sites simultaneously, this approach is likely to limit the researcher’s ability to focus appropriate attention on either site and to record sufficient information about the sites, especially when the two sites involve different sets of participants and possibly different activities that need to be attended to simultaneously. When participants themselves are engaged in multiple sites as part of their religious activity (e.g., using the internet or social media while also worshipping in a physical space), then a researcher engaging those multiple sites in similar ways may be practicing a form of participant-observation. Nevertheless, in most cases, simultaneous multi-sited research will benefit from a collaborative approach. Though ethnography has been long assumed to be a solitary endeavor, collaborative ethnography is increasingly common and valued. However, it still often stands out as the exception rather than the norm. Suggesting collaboration as a pillar of this research model means embracing it as a foundation of productive research (both in collecting research information and in analysis) focused on the third spaces of digital religion.

As Jarzabkowski *et al.* [14] make clear, collaborative ethnography involves its own challenges. Much of ethnographic research is rooted in subjective research and employs the ethnographer as a “research instrument”. Researchers will not be able to completely eliminate the subjective dimensions and the questions that arise surrounding replicability and validity. However, multiple researchers working together can help to provide checks in the process of data collection and analysis, and attending to these questions from the outset can help to ensure successful collaborative projects. As much as possible, collaborating ethnographers should be working from a shared research plan with a core set of research questions so that they are collecting pertinent and relatively comparable sets of information. When possible, communication between researchers during the course of the collaboration will help to facilitate a well-coordinated research project. The analysis should also be

collaborative, especially as the researchers seek to draw conclusions about the nature of phenomena that span multiple sites and registers. Jarzabkowski and her colleagues make a strong case for the use of team-based ethnography to study *global* processes and networks. In the course of their collaborative research focused on the reinsurance industry they came to understand their project as less about comparison of different sites and more about “an interconnected *global* practice” ([14], p. 15). Pursuing similarly collaborative ethnographic research ought to allow us to examine religion within global networks of practice and dialogue. To the extent that third spaces transcend single research sites, they are only accessible through multi-sited research and only accessible through collaboration. Collaboration will allow us to access and understand the generative hybridity of third spaces.

5.6. Attending to Fleeting or Ephemeral Data

The concept of generative hybridity highlights the dynamics of change and draws our attention to the dimensions of religion that may be impermanent and fragile. Traditional ethnography is frequently focused on the routine and repetitive, typically assumed to be permanent or enduring. This focus leads to long-term research, usually in a single site, where the ethnographer seeks to identify and to learn the routine. However, ethnographers also have a long history of studying the unique and serendipitous and have increasingly turned their attention to change and dynamism. Sites are no longer understood to be ahistorical, fixed, and unchanging. Instead, they are regularly approached as historically, politically, and economically situated.

Repetitive and enduring processes are certainly features of many third spaces. Nevertheless, the concepts of generativity and negotiation suggest that we need to pay particular attention to the aspects that are fleeting, ephemeral, and impermanent, especially when we consider the opportunity to study religion *in process*. When third spaces exist independent of large institutional structures, there may be more opportunity for radical change (and the chance to study it). When third spaces are tied to one-time events, the spaces may emerge and dissolve in relatively short periods of time. In many ways, these concerns are reminiscent of ethnographies of prophetic movements, schisms, and irregular events or rituals. Ethnography is applicable to these sorts of situations and can be applied in third spaces, but we ought to be especially aware of these dynamics and how we practice ethnography to engage the fleeting or ephemeral as a lens into the generative and negotiated.

We need to be critically aware of the different types of data with which we have to work ethnographically and how we access it. In this research model intended to study digital religions and third spaces, the relative permanence or impermanence of the phenomena relates directly to the permanence or impermanence of the ethnographic data. In some ways, digital technologies make it easier for researchers and others to create enduring records of religious and social events. The growth of the Internet and related technologies has given rise to the “digital archive”. The ease with which information is stored digitally and the ever-expanding capacities for storage have produced an unprecedented archive that researchers can access, often quite easily. However, as is the case with any other archive, only some artifacts and documents get preserved while others disappear rather quickly [47]. In fact, we suggest that much of what ethnographers encounter in third spaces that bridge the virtual and the actual might be classified as fleeting or ephemeral. If ethnographers do not record this data, it

may not be accessible at all at a later date and will almost certainly lack the robust context and descriptive specifics that are the hallmark of good ethnographic research.

As Helland ([8], p. 10) points out, some things on the Internet are more likely to be preserved than others. Relatively fixed web pages that are designed to be informational are much more likely to be archived than temporary, in-the-moment, interactive pages like real-time chats. Likewise, public spaces and pages are much more likely to be archived than private ones. In short, the spaces of ethnographic research—the spaces of online behavior, interaction, and dialogue—are perhaps least likely to be preserved for posterity's sake. Therefore, as is the case in traditional ethnography, it is incumbent on ethnographers to record as much of this fleeting or ephemeral data as possible. To bolster our ethnographic understanding of digital religion, we need to remain attuned to the fleeting and ephemeral dimensions of the phenomena. That means making productive use of the digital archive but not using it as a substitute for firsthand ethnographic data collection. Likewise, we encourage ethnographers working with this model to pay close attention to the fleeting religious instants that they encounter in physical field sites. Doing so will open ethnography most fully to the consideration of flows, practice, and process. It will ensure that we remain attuned to the dynamics of generative hybridity.

6. Conclusions

Taking to heart the connection between method and historical circumstances, we have asked how the historical moment (what others have referred to as the digital age) might call for or produce a new methodological turn. We have tried to do this without going down a path of technological determinism. We do not claim that new media and/or technologies are the driving force, but we do want to engage newly emergent spaces and experiences and fully consider what is entailed methodologically in studying them. For these purposes, the concept of third spaces proposed by Hoover and Echchaibi offers a useful frame. Focusing on in-between-ness means focusing on intersections, interstices, and flows conceptually and, most importantly for our purposes, methodologically.

The model that we propose here to study these spaces and experiences brings together recent trends in ethnography, especially multi-sited research, virtual ethnography, and collaborative research. The study of religion can draw many benefits from these conversations, especially as we turn our attention to third spaces. Collaborative multi-sited research that includes the possibility of virtual field sites brings the methodology into a closer match with the forms of religion that we encounter as researchers. The model also calls for close consideration of the types of data collected and analysis of how we approach our research sites. In these two areas, the methodological and the analytical concerns are closely intertwined, and methodological attention from the outset will help to ensure fruitful analysis in the end. Methodological attention is also likely to inform important conceptual discussions of impermanence and space/text in religion.

We do not seek to sound the death knell for traditional ethnography of religion, but we do want to see increasing attention to the third spaces of religion and believe that a model of simultaneous and collaborative ethnography provides the methodological framework for doing that in a productive way. This approach must also consider “the virtual” as place and not just as text to fulfill the promise of this method. We look forward to richly textured ethnographies that allow us to continue to study religious practice through and across different sites and registers. This approach should allow us to locate and to

understand religious practice in fleeting instances, flows, networks, and interstices as much as communities and physical places.

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Author Contributions

Julian M. Murchison and Curtis D. Coats both contributed to data gathering, analysis and writing for this manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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