

Rhizomatic religious belonging in times of the fourth industrial revolution

Social Compass

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journals.sagepub.com/home/scp**Daan Frans OOSTVEEN** 

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Abstract

Digital innovations are increasingly impacting our lives. While ‘offline’ religious practices and material religious culture had already been culminating in hybrid forms of religious belonging, such as rhizomatic religious belonging, technological innovations, and the digitalization of the immanent frame in which we engage in religious cultures complicates this picture even more. In this article, I will argue in favor of the conceptual frame of rhizomatic belonging to understand the negotiation of religious diversity in the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. I argue that a post-human religion is emerging, which, instead of being fragmented, individualized, or generally ‘lost’, is a transformation towards a new form of belonging, in which care, community, and play are elements. These post-human assemblages of rhizomatic religious belonging emerge at the intersection of digital culture and ‘offline’ material life. TikTok and Instagram become powerful tools for ‘Generation Z’ to explore new networks of religious connections. Digital dimensions of religion, such as the live streaming of the death wake of Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, and the development of artificial intelligence as vicarious religious actors are expressions of new forms of religious constellations that are strongly impacting the affective and phenomenological experiences of religious belonging. I will conclude that ‘belonging’ in the digital age is fundamental in understanding the challenges of our times and our communities because it elicits sentiments of ‘feeling at home’ in a dynamic world in crisis.

Keywords

community, digital, fourth industrial revolution, imagination, religious belonging, rhizomatic belonging

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Résumé

Les innovations numériques ont un impact croissant sur nos vies. Alors que les pratiques religieuses « hors ligne » et la culture religieuse matérielle avaient déjà culminé dans des formes hybrides d'appartenance religieuse, telles que l'appartenance religieuse rhizomatique, les innovations technologiques et la numérisation du cadre immanent dans lequel nous nous engageons dans les cultures religieuses compliquent encore davantage ce tableau. Dans cet article, je plaide en faveur du cadre conceptuel de l'appartenance rhizomatique pour comprendre la négociation de la diversité religieuse dans le contexte de la quatrième révolution industrielle. Je soutiens qu'une religion post-humaine est en train d'émerger qui, au lieu d'être fragmentée, individualisée ou généralement « perdue », est une transformation vers une nouvelle forme d'appartenance, dans laquelle le soin, la communauté et le jeu en sont des éléments. Ces assemblages post-humains d'appartenance religieuse rhizomatique émergent à l'intersection de la culture numérique et de la vie matérielle « hors ligne ». TikTok et Instagram deviennent des outils puissants permettant à la « génération Z » d'explorer de nouveaux réseaux de connexions religieuses. Les dimensions numériques de la religion, telles que la diffusion en direct de la veillée funèbre du professeur bouddhiste Thich Nhat Hanh, et le développement de l'intelligence artificielle en tant qu'acteurs religieux par procuration sont des expressions de nouvelles formes de constellations religieuses qui ont un fort impact sur les expériences affectives et phénoménologiques de l'appartenance religieuse. Je conclurai que l'« appartenance » à l'ère numérique est fondamentale pour comprendre les défis de notre époque et de nos communautés parce qu'elle suscite des sentiments de « se sentir chez soi » dans un monde dynamique qui se sent en crise.

Mots-clés

Appartenance religieuse, appartenance rhizomatique, communauté, imagination, numérique, quatrième révolution industrielle

Introduction

The paroxysms of our times are increasingly shaking solid ground between the imaginations of the global community that we might have had one day. In an accelerating vortex, opinions, perspectives, moral indignation, and genuine dread are mediated, replicated, and continually revised. Not only does it become increasingly hard to speak with genuine authority about our current predicament, but we are also overwhelmed by shock-induced fatigue. We have to come to terms with the loss of these past futures, these futures of progress: moral progress, technological progress, and social progress. Those who can still imagine the future to at least be no worse than the present, are, by now, the optimists. The concept of 'belonging' is fundamental in understanding the challenges of our times, because it elicits a sentiment of 'feeling at home' in a world that is increasingly destabilized. It allows us to decide what future communities we want to imagine.

Since Nietzsche declared the 'death of God', the study of religion has shunned away from discussing supernatural actors as a legitimate object of study. In its place, the

'human' has taken center stage: the scientific study of religion has been predominantly concerned with religion as a cultural and sociological phenomenon. Instead of God-centered in theology, the study of religion has often become anthropocentric. This has obfuscated the many non- and post-human actors in religion. Recently, a 'material turn' in the study of religion (Meyer, 2012) has been one attempt to correct this assumption. Instead of focusing on texts and the cognitive aspects of religion, the emphasis in material religion is on objects, bodies, and buildings. This material turn is now also influencing reflection on religious praxis (Keller and Roggenkamp, 2023; Roth and Gilly, 2021). Furthermore, it has been an ongoing question for the discipline to imagine the future of the study of religion and spirituality (Hanegraaff, 2020).

Posthuman challenges

This article situates itself at the intersection of the posthumanities and religious studies and aims to explore how 'belonging' functions in religion in a post-anthropocentric study of religion. Posthuman themes have been gaining attention in the humanities; however, they have not yet fully influenced religious studies and social sciences. I will explore to what extent a posthuman religion is emerging. What is a posthuman research methodology, and how does it change our perspective on religion? The imaginations of religion have an increased impact on our sense of belonging in times of the convergence of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the Sixth Mass Extinction (Braidotti, 2019). These imaginations define how we understand the crises we are living through. Environmental challenges and religion converge. How can methodologies such as critical posthumanism, new materialism, and interdisciplinarity be adjusted to be applied to the discipline of the study of religion and spirituality? When we engage in these posthuman contemplations, this might help us face the challenges of our time. What might posthuman religious belonging entail? This article does not aim to answer all of these questions, but I believe it is these trajectories we need to follow in thinking seriously through the meaning of posthuman religion in times of ecological catastrophe.

The study of religion has in the past decades been challenged to include posthuman 'anomalies' in the paradigm of religious studies. Also, there has been a renewed interest in creating comprehensive ontological imaginations as scholars of religion, without relying on a confessional or faith-based perspective. I give a brief overview. Thomas Tweed has emphasized how spiritual seekers are 'crossing and dwelling'. Josephson-Storm has called for a new age of 'metamodernism' in which religious ontology takes center stage again after decades of postmodern deconstruction. Hent De Vries (2008) has inquired on how religion still 'matters' after the deconstruction of the concept. This has also led philosophers of religion to propose 'radical theologies' (Caputo, 2020). Birgit Meyer (2012) shows incessantly how material culture mediates religion through artefacts. Rosi Braidotti has emphasized continuously how the 'humanities' are converging toward a post-human future (Braidotti, 2013, 2019), or are up for abandonment. Donna Haraway (2016) has recently acknowledged how indebted she is to her religious background and how strongly religious sensitivities still play a role in her transversal multi-species theory. James Hughes (2019) has observed the convergence of Buddhism and the aims for our post-human future. Sam Han and Kumaludeen Mohamed Nasir (2018) have thoroughly evaluated of digital culture and religion in Asia.

Critical theories and religious studies have not always been the most likely bedfellows. Indebted to a Marxist genealogy, which has, according to popular knowledge, considered religion as ‘opium for the people’, critical theories might not have always granted religion the critical thought it is due. Since then, it has also been noted how animism and the notion of an ‘agency of things’, might have been the repressed ‘other’ of science and religion (Bennett, 2010; Bird-David, 1999).

Technological innovations and digitalization

Digital innovations are increasingly impacting our lives. ‘Offline’ religious practices and material religious culture had already been culminating in hybrid forms of religious belonging, such as rhizomatic religious belonging (Oostveen, 2025). Technological innovations and the digitalization of the immanent frame in which we engage in religious cultures further complicate this picture. Rather than think about ‘religious diversity’ as the diversity of world religions (whether normative or descriptive, but as I have argued, even our models of religious diversity are ideological) I have proposed to understand religion as rhizomatic: as horizontal and connected networks, in line with the understanding of Deleuze and Guattari (1987). Although religious traditions have an interest in understanding each other as separate from one another, in fact, religious forms, ideas, practices, smells, buildings, and so on are always already interacting and mixing. Furthermore, no central authority governs any ‘religion’ in its entirety. Some religious networks are larger than others, and people from different religions but similar localities often share more than people from the ‘same’ religion at far distinct places.

A post-human religion is emerging, which, instead of being fragmented, individualized, or generally ‘lost’, is a transformation towards new forms of belonging, in which care, community, and play are elements. Posthuman religion is the understanding of religion beyond anthropocentrism, the understanding that ‘religion’ is something for and of humans. Religiosities are assemblages of material objects, animals, plants, fungi, spirits and gods, in which agency is distributed, rather than situated in a human intentional mind. These posthuman assemblages of rhizomatic religious belonging emerge at the intersection of digital culture and ‘offline’ material life. TikTok and Instagram become powerful tools for ‘Generation Z’ to explore new networks of religious connections. When we analyze contemporary religious phenomena, we see a cornucopia of digital and virtual post-human religiosities emerge. In February 2022, Türkiye declared that ‘a visit to Mecca in the metaverse is not a real Hajj’. In January 2022, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk and spiritual teacher Thich Nath Hahn passed away at the age of 95. Only hours after his death, video images of his corpse were live-streamed on Facebook where mourning devotees paid their final respects to the great teacher. In Chinese Buddhisms, posthuman religiosities have become a day-to-day reality. At temples, statues of bodhisattvas carry QR codes for devotees to learn more about the deity and donate money. In the Dragon Spring Monastery in Beijing, a robot monk was developed by monks with PhDs in technology, to teach the laity about Buddhism (McCarthy, 2019). In India, a robot arm can now be used to perform religious rites. The Covid-19 pandemic has been a challenging time for organized religions, where the presence of followers in churches or temples during ceremonies of worship is essential for these communities to

exist. Many have moved to Zoom-broadcast celebrations, such as catholic eucharists. This has attracted millions of new home-bound believers to attend these religious services online, who might otherwise not have attended those in person. The development of artificial intelligence as vicarious religious agents is an expression of new forms of religious constellations that strongly impact the affective and phenomenological experiences of religious belonging.

As Rosi Braidotti has pointed out several times, not in the least in her recent publication on posthuman knowledge (Braidotti, 2019), we are currently living at the convergence of the simultaneous occurrence of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the Sixth Mass Extinction event. The Fourth Industrial Revolution is a term coined by Klaus Schwab (Schwab and World Economic Forum, 2017), which denotes the convergence of biological and technological advancements, such as gene editing and CRISPR technology, robotics, artificial intelligence, nanotechnology, advanced lithography, and the Internet of Things. The boundaries between the digital and the biological get blurred. The Sixth Mass Extinction is a term coined by Elizabeth Kolbert (2014) and refers to the current geological era that we are living through, in which species are dying a hundred times faster than without human intervention on the planet. The convergence of these two 'hyperobjects' (Morton, 2013), signals an 'ontology at the end of the world'. Since these two major developments signal a metaphysical shock imbued with apocalyptic imagination, it is impossible not to take the theory of religion into account. Most importantly, we need a reassessment of this 'we' who is living through this paroxysm of global warming and biodiversity collapse. How do we imagine the post-human subjectivities of this 'we'? Donna Haraway has formulated the challenge as 'how do we make kin in the chthulucene?'

We are in this together – but who are we?

Who is this 'we' that reflects on the crises of the times? The challenges of our time are both material challenges of imagination. New materialisms assert that these two cannot ultimately be distinguished. It is a common misunderstanding that when we look outside, we see the world, and when we look inside, we see ourselves; in fact, the reverse is true: when we look outside, we see ourselves, and when we look inside, we see the world. The question that imposes itself is the question of posthuman subjectivity. Contemplative practices have often been associated with a philosophy of consciousness. Both Dōgen, the Japanese Zen-Buddhist, and Nietzsche, the German philosopher, have emphasized the importance of the body in meditation technologies. In the *Fukanzazengi*, Dōgen explains 'how anyone can sit', and provides a universal instruction guide for doing so. Without aiming to define an essential 'core' of Buddhist teaching, it is inspiring to think of Buddha as a teacher who mainly has pointed out that when we sit, this is special in and of itself. I would argue that 'just sitting' is one of the most fundamental religious technologies ever developed.

On the one hand, Buddhist practitioners have emphasized the experience of 'ego-loss' that is associated with sitting meditation. Truthful to the principle of an-atman, not-soul, the 'ego' appears to evaporate through the practice of sitting. Those who sit, are lost to themselves. On a material level, the self of the sitting body has never been unitary in the

first place. More than two kilograms of what we commonly refer to as ‘the human body’ is comprised of vast colonies and cultures of microorganisms. ‘I contain multitudes’, as Walt Whitman puts it (Yong, 2016), but even more so we are always already multitudes. Seen from this perspective, the ego does not so much vanish when seen from the perspective of contemplative truth but multiplies into vast communities of bodily me-ness. When we think again of Dōgen’s understanding of the Buddhist dharma as ‘just sitting’ and try to understand this from a posthuman perspective, the question emerges whether non-human bodies also engage in meditative practices. Can the post-human body sit?

Furthermore, the Buddhist practice might not ultimately be aimed at ego-loss, but at the cultivation of *maitri* (love) and *karuna* (compassion), at cultivating the desire that all living beings be liberated, replacing ego-centered desires. This is not necessarily the result of the idealistic emptiness of the ego-self, but instead an awareness that ‘I am multitudes’, going through a continuous transformation – *anicca*, nothing ever stays the same, as it is called in the Pali canon. Buddhist idealistic nihilism makes way for Buddhist compassionate kin-making.

Post-human compassion is not exclusive to the world of non-human life (such as our kinship relations with animals, plants, microorganisms, and fungi), but just as much to our kinship relation with non-living others. The anthropocenic condition does not only open up the awareness of the ubiquitous microorganisms, permeating human bodies and life-worlds, but also, for example, the all-invasive presence of microplastics. We live in a plastic world, an ‘artificial’ material, designed through human ingenuity out of fossil matter, the lifeblood and bones of long-deceased ancestors from primordial times. In a sense, our ancestors have been resurrected through our plastic designs. These single-use objects have taken a ubiquitous presence in our life worlds.

We can also think of the religious technology of ayahuasca shamanism (Fotiou, 2019). Ayahuasca, a psychedelic plant mixture used in the Amazon produces visionary effects that allow shamans in South American (and now also Western) traditions to administer healing to participants in the ceremony. Recently I was informed that ayahuasca groups such as Santo Daime continued using Ayahuasca during the pandemic by means of Zoom-meeting. The technological mediation of spiritual mediation, or a sort of *mis-en-abîme* of spiritual technology.

Belonging

Religion and spirituality are ultimately forms of belonging. This belonging has usually been conceptualized as the belonging to a religious church community of like-minded practitioners to forge connections with an assumed ultimate reality. However, these communities are usually imagined as communities of human beings, in their relationship with the (or a) divine.

Belonging has strong emotional connotations. But belonging in religious belonging is usually reserved for belonging to religious traditions only. These hybrid forms of religion challenge us to reimagine ‘religious belonging’. The challenge to reimagine belonging is twofold: first, I propose to imagine ‘belonging’ beyond religious traditions; if people do not belong exclusively to a particular religion, what do they belong to? Second, this new

religious belonging should take into account that individuals connect to beliefs and practices from various religious traditions that understand each other as different and delineated. The world religions paradigm, as well as the idea of religious traditions, define, if anything, borders of difference. When we consider belonging, therefore, we also consider ways in which we imagine borders, and how these imaginations constitute ontologies of religious diversity.

Belonging has rightly come to the forefront of questions related to religious diversity and its transformation. This renewed emphasis marks a shift from a focus on *identity*, with a more individualistic outlook on religious affiliation, to *belonging*, which emphasizes the need for community. The word 'belonging' is central in the research on *multiple religious belonging* (Oostveen, 2025). Multiple religious belonging denotes people who express they belong to more than one religious tradition. This understanding of multiple belonging is sometimes understood as the absence of belonging, since belonging is understood as an exclusive commitment. 'Belonging' and 'identity' are normative terms. Its use or rejection defines how we understand the relation between the individual and the community. The word 'identity' focuses on the individual as having certain features to be considered part of a larger set. The word 'belonging' is more about the relationality to the larger group, and the affects connected to it. According to some scholars, 'belonging' assumes a mutual agreement: between a community that sets the standards and norms to which an individual can be said to belong, and between an individual's desire to belong to any particular group (Cornille, 2010). These normative and affective dimensions of 'belonging' cannot be disconnected from its purely sociological understanding as 'being a member of'. There exists a false dichotomy between mono-religious belonging as 'community' and multireligious identities as 'individualistic'. If anything, multireligiosity is very much about belonging and community.

I understand the word 'belonging' to open up three distinct semantic or hermeneutical spaces. The first semantic space refers to 'belonging' as 'belongings'. 'You belong to this church', as well as 'this sacred book belongs to our group', or 'where are my belongings?' It relates to questions of ownership and possession. Therefore, it also necessarily relates to the power dimensions between owned and owner. With regard to symbols, practices, religious tradition, sacred books, objects, temples, and 'religious real estate', this definition becomes even more pressing. Furthermore, the semantic space of belonging as possession is crucial for understanding both the decolonial wind that is blowing through the humanities and the normative relevance of questions regarding cultural appropriation.

The second semantic space 'belonging' opens, refers to *longing*, to yearning, to desire. Belonging inherently refers to a desire. Theologically interpreted this can be either focused on a longing for God, a longing for liberation, a longing for justice, or any reality beyond the immanently given. This semantic space makes belonging particularly well-suited as well as crucial to understanding religious belonging.

The third semantic space opened by 'belonging' refers to the spatial connotations of belonging. Thomas Tweed, an anthropologist, says: 'it is [more] common for individuals to ask [more] positioned and relational questions: Where do *I* belong? How did *we* get *here*?' 'I belong here', means you are in the right place. Belonging refers to religion as the 'house', as a form of spiritual space-making that is grounded, rooted, centered, and, in a sense, also static. 'Finally, I found the place where I belong'. Belonging is the

endpoint of a quest, of a movement, a search for truth and stability, for a place of secure nurture and care, and last but not least, a community.

Rhizomatic belonging, communities, and care: a dynamic approach

Hybrid religiosities mark a transformation towards new forms of belonging, in which care, community, and play are elements. For that, it is necessary to consider the possibility of a dynamic character of belonging. Belonging is not necessarily a static state. It is layered, there is a history to one's belonging. One suggestion has been to refer to a dynamic religious belonging as *transversal belonging*; a belonging that cuts through various religious identities, is layered, and changes over time. This can be a dynamic belonging to a multiplicity of religious elements, in the words of Hent De Vries (2008), religions' 'words, things, gestures, powers, sounds, silences, smells, sensations, shapes, colors, affects and effects'.

Another way of understanding dynamic or transversal belonging is by looking at the concept of the rhizome of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987) to reimagine such a dynamic religious belonging. In biology, the rhizome refers to a subterranean stem of a plant, which sends roots and shoots from its nodes. The philosophical concept of the rhizome is derived from biology and functions to represent non-hierarchical connections between multiple elements. In the introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari enunciate six principles of the rhizome: connection, heterogeneity, multiplicity, a-signifying rupture, cartography, and decalcomania. When applied to religion, the rhizome emphasizes that religious forms are all connected, that they are different and multiple. The concept of 'a-signifying rupture' is a rejection of the idea of tradition: that is, things can break off from the rhizome (or the religious current) and continue independently from what came before. This leads to a cartography, a map of religious heterogeneity, rather than temporally defined 'traditions'. Dynamics is therefore a quality of space, not of time. Finally, 'decalcomania', assumes that religious forms can copy and reproduce, like memes. They can spawn many different instantiations of the same sensational forms (Meyer, 2012), in different permutations and assemblages. Michelle Voss Roberts, a theologian, argues that 'hybrid religiosity as an omniscient model of divine relationality values difference and connection; it helps us imagine persons as nodes in a rhizomatic generation of religious subjects in which no single center definitively determines identity' (Voss Roberts, 2010). With a rhizomatic belonging, religion emerges as contextual assemblages, another term by Deleuze and Guattari, of heterogeneous religious elements. An assemblage refers to 'complex constellations of objects, bodies, expressions, qualities, and territories that come together for varying periods of time to ideally create new ways of functioning'. (Livesey, 2010) Rhizomatic religious belonging describes dynamic connections that cross transversally.

Daoist rhizomatics

But the rhizome is also, as Mayfair Yang (2020), an anthropologist of Chinese religion, has argued, a concept that allows us to redress social inequality. By understanding the

rhizomatic quality of folk religion in China for example, as a network of religious codes, practices, beliefs, temples, gods, and spirits, we can see how rhizomatic religion and a person's embeddedness in it, can function as a tool to fight social inequality because of dominant worldviews and system, such as Confucian ethics, or the Chinese Communist Party.

In the Chinese philosophy and religious tradition of Daoism, belonging is fundamentally understood as a process. The religious question in Daoism starts from the question of location: where am I? Daoism understands your Inner Force, *De*, as fundamentally always in the process of threading the *Dao*, the Way. One never stays in one place, but one always leaves, progresses, and arrives. This ideal 'way' to go about the Way this is by means of *wu wei*, which means, no-action. Daoism offers a critique to Confucian philosophy, where things are localized, defined, and ordered. Confucianism, according to the Daoist philosophers, rejects the principle of multiplicity and heterogeneity. The Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi quotes Confucius who says (according to him):

The Way doesn't want things mixed in with it. When it becomes a mixture, it becomes many ways; with many ways, there is a lot of bustle; and where there is a lot of bustle, there is trouble – trouble that has no remedy! The Perfect Man of ancient times made sure that he had it in himself before he tried to give it to others. When you're not even sure what you've got in yourself, how do you have time to bother about what some tyrant is doing? (Zhuangzi, 1968: 22)

The multiplicity of religious beliefs and practices creates a new framework in which rhizomatic belonging is understood as an affective and dynamic practice, which is both beyond delineated religious traditions and radically particular. Rather, it should be seen as the imagination of religious belonging to a community that is radically diverse but also interconnected.

The convergence of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the Sixth Mass Extinction forces us to rethink our kinship relations beyond the human. What is opened up is belonging as 'being at home', a longing to be in the right place, but beyond the community of humans, rhizomatic and transversal. Rhizomatic belonging is first of all a way to address the multiple and heterogeneous character of the belongingness of those many people who don't appear to exclusively 'belong to a religion'. This also takes into account the fact that what we call 'religious traditions' are not equal, not similar instantiations of the concept 'religion', but already in itself cultural assemblages that are incomparable in character, dynamic, and can play different roles in a person's life. Belongingness is multiple, but also, there are multiple forms of belonging. Crucially here is that with a rhizomatic belonging, the fundament lies in a sense of belonging, a feeling at home, but this home-feeling is not connected to any particular location but to the process of, in the words of Thomas Tweed (2006), 'crossing and dwelling'.

Conclusion

This article started from a generally culturally critical view on the current state of the world. The technological and ecological predicament urges us to develop new epistemologies, new imaginations of belonging, and new forms of storytelling. Religion

involves the study of these imaginations and stories. When we tell stories, when we act religiously, these should emerge from more-than-life-modes that are not exclusive to human consciousness. I have therefore focused our attention on religious belonging as something that transcends human individualism. ‘We’ is a collective imagination of communities on this planet, which include plants, animals, spirits and Gods, as well as the interconnectedness between these. Our bodies are multiple; our life worlds are multiple. The boundaries we have erected between the human and the non-human, between life and non-life, are ultimately arbitrary. Posthuman religion assumes both ontological and normative positions. Although the latter has increasingly become common practice in humanities studies, the former is commonly shunned, out of a commitment to methodological agnosticism. Posthuman religion employs both situated, normative, and metaphysical imaginations of living and dying together on this planet.

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