Rhetoric is one of the major vehicles through which religion manifests and organizes itself in the world of humans. Along with ritual, it is an ancient and primary form for mediating religion—for making present what sometimes lies beyond the immediate senses. As a result, rhetorical concepts and theoretical perspectives potentially have a great deal to offer the interdisciplinary study of religion across media, cultures, and time. I will elaborate on these claims below but for now say that I am using rhetoric first in the spacious sense of communicative address with the potential to alter or solidify beliefs, sensibilities, identities, communal attachments, and ways of living in the world for the audiences who receive it—including that special internal audience that hears our own words and silent thoughts. Rhetoric additionally refers to a particular intellectual tradition and body of concepts that make sense of such communicative address—rhetorical theory, if you will, for interpreting rhetoric as socially manifest. That intellectual tradition emerged and gained its name in ancient Greece and, developed through the Latin world, came to inform dimensions of Western learning into the contemporary age. It also entered into Islamic thought and practice, and, as recent scholarship has helped us to see, it has analogues in other civilizations and cultures as well. Western and non-Western rhetorical concepts, I will argue, are potentially important tools for making sense of mediations of religion and their power on people.

Historically, rhetoric as a social practice takes on particular significance in culturally unsettled moments—those marked, for instance, by significant change,
marked disagreements, or widespread doubts. In such moments, rhetorical practices become primary media through which emergent and traditional forms of life make themselves felt upon hearts, minds, and bodies swimming in larger seas of instability or competing voices. As the anthropologists Ivo Strecker and Stephen Tyler (2009) have argued, experiences and ideas "remain unstable and incomplete as long as we do not manage to persuade both ourselves and others of their meanings," and this work is done through rhetorical means (pp. 26—27). Rhetoric as an intellectual discipline has also frequently flourished in culturally unsettled moments—including those marked by transformations in media environments, religiosity, or both, as I illustrate briefly below. As a theoretical vocabulary developed over more than two millennia, then, rhetoric provides a cultural hermeneutic whose history trails multiple and deep encounters with emergent media and changing religious orientations.

In this chapter, I offer an extremely condensed sketch of that longer intellectual history, make a case for rhetorical ways of understanding how religion impresses itself upon embodied hearts and minds, and introduce digital religious eloquence as a theoretical concept. In the first two sections, I offer the briefest introduction to rhetoric for non-rhetoricians, sketching aspects of Western and non-Western rhetorical traditions that I hope might stoke fresh ways of thinking about religion and media and cast questions about it in long historical relief. Following those broader orienting remarks, I turn to digital religious eloquence as a category of contemporary rhetorical address that blends traditional and emergent cultural sensibilities and creates potentially meaningful experiences for audiences exposed to it. I conceptualize digital religious eloquence in relation to Birgit Meyer's idea of aesthetic formations, provide a couple of examples, and lay out ways that scholars of rhetoric, anthropology, and media studies can productively work together to advance the study of religion across media.

An Extraordinarily Short Introduction to the Long History of Rhetoric, Religion, and Media

The Greek word rhetorikê was apparently coined in the fourth century BCE to name a social practice growing in cultural importance as city states such as Athens democratized—the art (־ίκη) of the public speaker (rhetor, Schiappa, 2003). The coining of the term coincided with the formalization of the art and the early codification of principles for guiding the production and interpretation of speech. The sophists were its earliest teachers, with men such as Protagoras asserting that every argument (logos) had its contraries (dissoi logos), a multi-sided perspective that undermined the authority of any position that declared itself true and helped make Protagoras one of the first characters in the West to have his books burned (Billig, 1996). He was surely not helped by his skepticism about the gods, stating that he couldn't be sure whether they existed or not, since the question was difficult and life was short. Other early teachers of rhetoric would deploy the art to less skeptical ends—Isocrates, for instance, who taught oratory as a medium for expressing knowledge, advancing good, and deliberating internally about them; and Aristotle, who defended rhetoric against his teacher Plato's famous attack on it, established it as an art of mobilizing available means of persuasion, carved out space for it in the domains of opinion (doxa) and belief (pistis, also the New Testament word for faith [Kinneavy, 1987]) through which humans necessarily moved, and argued that it was necessary in a world of uncertainty. This Greek art entered the Roman world, where Cicero, extending Isocrates, advanced the ideal of eloquence, not mere persuasion, as rhetoric's governing end. Capturing the ideal of wisdom or truth artfully rendered, eloquence in turn entered the Christian tradition through St. Augustine, who had been deeply influenced by Cicero when he was a teacher of rhetoric before his religious conversion. After a period of medieval scholasticism, when dialectic and grammar dominated rhetoric in the arts of language (McLuhan, 1946/2006), Renaissance humanists would revive and extend the Ciceronian ideal, championing eloquence as an ideal governing oratory, literature, and the arts (McKeon, 1971/1987). Though rhetoric's fortunes declined in the Enlightenment and Romantic movements, when its artifice was denigrated in comparison to natural reason, empirical science, and more direct intuitive contact with nature or the soul, Transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson continued to defend eloquence as a spiritual and political ideal manifest through oratory that moved hearts as well as minds.1

I'll return to the idea of eloquence below, but first I want to gesture toward macro-level dimensions of some of the social settings in which rhetoric has flourished as an intellectual discipline. This begins in ancient Greece, where rhetoric emerged as a distinct and codified body of thought within a culture that was undergoing fundamental changes in its media and religious environments. The introduction of writing and literacy helped fuel a process by which, as Eric Havelock put it, "language emancipates itself from the oral-poetic tradition," and a humanist-rationalistic worldview came into being against the backdrop of a longer mythic-poetic form of life (quoted and discussed in Schiappa, 2003, pp. 24—32). As an art of using words to alternately challenge or defend existing beliefs and practices, rhetoric served as both instrument and medium for advancing the rationalistic worldview. When Protagoras taught his students to argue both sides of a question and give their breath to countervailing logoi, when he boasted that he could make "the lesser appear greater," he helped create a medium through which under-recognized perspectives could gain social stature. In purportedly burning his books, his critics
were recognizing the power of the disembodied word to further undermine authority about the gods and other cherished matters. In its birth moment, then, rhetoric was intimately tied to shifting religiosities and newer media. Painting with an equally broad brush, we can cast the Renaissance in analogous terms. The flowering of Ciceronian rhetorical humanism took shape against the backdrop of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, within new cultures of print that were themselves overlaid upon older oral and chirographic forms of communicative life—oration, conversation, and letter-writing, for instance, all flourished as traditional media alongside the newer medium of print (see Rehborn, 2000; P. Burke, 2013; Eisenstein, 2011; McLuhan, 1962). Again, rhetoric gained force as both a theoretical vocabulary and family of social practices in an epoch of fundamental religious and media change.

Another chapter in this story has unfolded since the late nineteenth century, when two idiosyncratic geniuses, utterly marginal in their own day, rediscovered and intellectually refrigated rhetoric in their own ways. Against the backdrop of the rise of religious unbelief and unorthodox spiritualities in Europe and North America (Taylor, 2007; Turner, 1986), Charles Sanders Peirce and Friedrich Nietzsche wrote seminal works that laid the foundations for reconstructive and deconstructive rhetorical theories in the next century. Over four decades, Peirce outlined a new “speculative rhetoric” that addressed “the formal conditions of the force of symbols, or their power of appealing to a mind” (1992, p. 8) and that united hermeneutics and communication (Peirce, 1998, ch. 23; see Bergman, 2009; Lyne, 1980). He worked out his new rhetoric over a period in which he also wrote his fascinating if enigmatic essays, “Evolutionary Love” (1893) and “A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God” (1908). Nietzsche, meanwhile, was famously on a different course, delivering lectures on rhetoric that fed his theory that truth was a rhetorical animal. That project, even in outline, is well beyond the scope of this chapter, but I point toward it as a way of hinting at the fuller promise of rhetorical pathways of thought. The Western rhetorical tradition has always featured ideas of performance, bodies, emotions, aesthetics, style, and the deep sociality of humans—standing always already as a critique of Cartesian rationalism and the abstract ego, as it were. It offers a range of theoretically rich traditional concepts ripe for ongoing retrieval and updating, including pathos (ongoing moods and catalyzed emotions), ethos (socially cultivated character as recognized by particular audiences), style (as manifest through figures, tropes, and culturally specific aesthetics of the fitting and the striking), presence (whereby distant or un-sensed entities are brought palpably close to an audience), kairos (the opportune moment in time and space), and decorum (the culturally determined sense of what is appropriate and possible for particular settings, topics, or participants)—not to mention eloquence, which combines these qualities into an ideal of morally truthful and affectively powerful rhetorical address. Moreover, from the introduction of writing in ancient Greece, these principles have proven themselves adaptable to a range of media outside the body, from letters to printed treatises, the fine arts and architecture, radio and television broadcasting, and the new digital realm.

**Rhetoric Across Cultures**

Though the tradition called “rhetoric” was formalized and developed from ancient Greece, other cultures had their analogues, as recent comparative scholarship has shown us. In contrast to the Western tradition, though, where rhetoric was a distinct discipline and body of knowledge, other cultures generally embedded principles for the production and interpretation of speech within broader doctrines of proper conduct or embedded them in religious or literary texts or oral traditions (see Kennedy, 1998; Lipson & Brinkley, 2004, 2009; Oliver, 1971). One could argue that, in the West, rhetoric’s status as an independent discipline has both reflected and contributed to instrumental, strategic thinking and practice in communica-
Another Islamic tradition, al-balalgha (eloquence), consisted of a science of traditions were subsumed under Islamic law as arbiter of proper procedure in public renderings (hermeneutics), a science of clarity; and a science of ornamentation. Both tra

tise, On Christian Doctrine, while also exercising the rhetorical art in the Confessions and writing. Augustine of Hippo was a teacher of rhetoric in Carthage and then Rome, and he would bend that learning to the first great Christian rhetorical treatise, On Christian Doctrine, while also exercising the rhetorical art in the Confessions and other writings (see Troup, 1999).

In the Islamic world, Aristotle’s Rhetoric was translated into Arabic with commentary by the tenth century, when scholars drew it toward Islamic understandings (Ezzaher, 2008; Watt, 1993). These commentaries fed the tradition of al-khatam (the art of the public speaker), sometimes rejected as pagan, but also incorporated into the practices of Muslim preachers, some of whom cast the Prophet Muhammad and his contemporaries as unsurpassable models of the art (Halldén, 2005). Another Islamic tradition, al-balalgha (eloquence), consisted of a science of meanings (hermeneutics), a science of clarity, and a science of ornamentation. Both traditions were subsumed under Islamic law as arbiter of proper procedure in public speech, with shari’a serving “as the definer of decorum in human behavior generally” (Halldén, 2005, p. 23). Recently, Nabil Echchaibi (2013) has interpreted contemporary Egyptian teleevangelism in the contexts of this longer Islamic tradition, showing the value of a rhetorical hermeneutics for differently mediated religious address.

Indian and Chinese civilizations also had well-developed ideas about speech and its proper use, embedded within canonic ancient texts, and pointing toward traditional understandings of spoken and embodied mediations of social order, right conduct, and truth in the broadly religious register (see, e.g., Chen, 2009; Kennedy, 1998; Lipson & Brinkley, 2009; Oliver, 1971). Indians “put a very high value on speech, higher perhaps than that found in any other ancient culture,” with even the longest texts memorized and transmitted orally, and knowledge of sacred texts controlled by priests (Kennedy, 1998, p. 172). The Upanishads includes an ex-cursus on the idea that Brahma, the ultimate principle of the world, “is speech” (p. 179). Robert T. Oliver (1971) has argued, too, that the caste system that placed Brahmins at its top was a kind of “rhetoric in being,” which he defines in terms of “customs, folkways, habits, regulations which shape communicative behavior, including thinking, speaking, listening, and responding” (p. 31). This “macro-rhetoric,” if you will, helps to establish the social grammar of rhetorical performance: who speaks, to whom, in what manner and settings, and through what sorts of linguistic and gestural conventions. It provides its own mediation of sacred and profane by regulating and coding public expression of them, and opens out into a different register of rhetorical interpretation of social communication.

In sum, even if they have no word or distinct subject that corresponds to the Greek rhetorike, non-Western cultures carry their own traditional understandings about speech and its relation to piety and right order. These in turn furnish anthropologically and historically embedded frameworks for interpreting religious address within those cultures, raising questions about what rhetorical understandings inform religious communication, what attitudes toward persuasion inform discourse as it circulates through different media, what standards of rhetorical excellence are operative, and what “rhetorics of being” help structure the interpretive work done by audiences and producers. These questions in turn point toward more general pathways for thinking rhetorically about religion across cultures, media, and time.

The Rhetorical Power of Eloquence

Eloquence is one traditional rhetorical ideal, found across multiple religious traditions, which I have briefly touched upon. I want to elaborate further and introduce the idea of digital religious eloquence to name a rhetorical effectiveness that, in tandem with what Birgit Meyer calls aesthetic formations, serves as a kind of communicative mechanism through which religion is mediated and impressed upon the affectively colored minds of the faithful. To help fill out that claim, let me combine traditional ideals of eloquence with some key insights from contemporary rhetorical theory.

In the twentieth-century revival I alluded to earlier, rhetorical theory broadened out in sociological and anthropological directions, providing the basis for making sense of humans as rhetorical animals thrown into symbolic worlds that make claims on their minds and bodies. One of the key developments occurred...
when the literary critic Kenneth Burke shifted rhetoric’s traditional focus from persuasion to identification—the process of generating commonality among disparate particulars, be they people, actions, institutions, or any other entities or phenomena that can be grouped together within some named category. X. Burke drew attention to the way in which all discourse reveals and advances both particular views of reality (X, not Y) and bonds of community (we are people agreed in X)—at the same time that it invites identification’s opposite, division—X is not Y, we are not them (K. Burke, 1950). Carefully examined, Burke argued later, that same discourse reveals the presence of linguistically structured hierarchies of being and value that are essentially religious, crowned by “god terms” that organize value and ethico-religious energies (K. Burke, 1961; Booth, 1991, 2000; Carter, 1992). These insights in turn fed the idea that rhetoric can be “constitutive”—helping to create the collective identities and other social realities that it purports merely to describe (e.g., Charland, 1987) and to underwrite particular, morally weighted attitudes and worldviews.

Complementary insights have arisen from other quarters. Members of the Rhetoric Culture project, for instance, a recent collaboration among rhetoricians and anthropologists, have built a research agenda around the twin facts that rhetoric is both “the instrument with which we describe” culture and “the means by which we create culture” (Strecker & Tyler, 2009, p. 2). Mapping “interrelationships between cultural forms of practice, passion, and reason” as well as “culturally generated orders of discourse—and their technologies of production” (p. 21), they cast rhetoric as culturally inscribed force for fixing meanings and other shared realities by means of inward (self-talk) and outward address. Their view accords with that forwarded in an important University of Chicago religious studies project that advances rhetoric as “a family of questions about what is involved in influencing oneself and others regarding (the interpretation of) any indeterminate manner” (Jost & Olmsted, 2000, p. 2). Rhetoric, in other words, is a social and psychological force for solidifying particular ways of life in a world of competing alternatives, including all manners of religiosity.

I would then add that what I’m calling digital eloquence is one class of rhetoric as a culture-generating, culture-fixing potentiality and practice. It is the latest material mediation of eloquence, the ancient ideal involving the artful, appropriate, and affectively forceful expression of wisdom, knowledge, or ethical truth. Originally an ideal governing oratory of a civic sort (Cicero’s “wisdom expressed with fluency”), eloquence was transferred by Tacitus to other forms of written and oral expression as well, from prose to poetry (Baumlin & Hughes, 1996). St. Augustine established the contours of a distinctively Christian eloquence exemplified for him in Paul’s letters (On Christian Doctrine, Book 4, Chs. 5–7). Several centuries later, Syed Al-Radi advanced a Muslim eloquence in the Nahj al-Balagha (Peak of Eloquence), a collection of sermons and writings by the Prophet’s son-in-law, Ali, put forth as inimitable masterpieces of divine wisdom perfectly expressed (www.nahjul-balagha.org).

Besides artfulness, which marks its aesthetic dimension, and wisdom, which links it to perceived truths, eloquence is also marked by affective force, which means that it carries the power to move audiences. Eloquent rhetoric registers emotionally on those who come to feel the wisdom in its words, images, or performance. This was the dimension of eloquence the French Encyclopédie picked out when it announced, somewhat ambivalently, “Eloquence was created to speak to sentiment, and can impose silence even upon reason” (D’Alembert, 1751/1995, p. 33). A century later, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1847) expressed this quality through a material metaphor to indicate how eloquence could mediate the divine: “the essential thing is heat, and heat comes of sincerity. Speak what you do know and believe; and are personally in it; and are answerable for every word. Eloquence is the power to translate a truth into language perfectly intelligible to the person to whom you speak.” The romantic trope of “heat” indexes the felt quality of eloquent address—the impression it can make upon embodied sentiments and culturally inscribed sensibilities.

While eloquence can serve many truths and has frequently served socially dominant (and dominating) institutions, it also holds special place in the arsenals of the dispossessed and marginalized—calling out injustices, mobilizing supporters, and doing battle for the hearts and minds of potential sympathizers and broader publics. We can see this exemplified in the long fight for African-American equality in the United States, where an esteemed tradition of religious and religiously inspired orators have mobilized eloquence for the cause—including the freed slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass through Martin Luther King Jr., Jesse Jackson, and the philosopher Cornel West in our own day. From the deep baritone voice and commanding bodily presence of Frederick Douglass, this power has always been mediated through material forms that help underwrite its cultural force. They index scores of lesser-known ministers, civic leaders, and grassroots activists whose vernacular eloquence has moved local audiences in analogous ways, extending Augustine’s vision of Christian eloquence and realizing the power of eloquence to, in Thomas Farrell’s (1995) perceptive account, transform mindssets, alter meanings, advance new cultural forms, and mediate the particular with the moral universal.

Digital Religious Eloquence and Aesthetic Formations

The texture of eloquence changes across media environments. Kathleen Hall Jamieson’s (1988) study of “eloquence in an electronic age” pointed the direction here, detailing the ways in which broadcast political eloquence differed from ear-
Digital religious eloquence as a broader category in turn differs from traditional forms in at least five ways. First, as I mentioned above, it is more heterogeneous in form and genre than eloquence associated with other media. Second, it is more mobile and rhizomatic than oratorical, print, or broadcast eloquence, which are paradigmatically anchored in the oratorical body and its live performance, the author and print artifact, and the national network and television set, respectively. Digital eloquence on the other hand is hyperlinked, always already connected to cross-cutting networks and Internet connections, and experienced by audiences through widely dispersed and geographically mobile computers, cell phones, and other personal electronic devices. Third, while the figure of the great orator or virtuosic writer animated and individuated the traditional ideal of eloquence, digital eloquence accelerates processes of democratization that date back to the nineteenth century and earlier. Fame still matters in both drawing attention to digital eloquence and disposing audiences to be moved by it, but it is a more socially dispersed kind that adheres less in the figure of the great orator and more in characters that emerge from the din of competing voices and abundant discourses. Fourth, digital eloquence is often (though not always) multimodal, blending words, images, and sounds with the embodied sensations of audience members who experience it. Fifth, digital eloquence is frequently brief—140 characters in the case of eloquent tweets, perhaps only a minute or two for some eloquent YouTube videos, sometimes no more than two or three paragraphs for an eloquent blog entry, and in this way differs considerably from longer-play sermon and oratory.

Digital religious eloquence does some of its rhetorical work in conjunction with what Birgit Meyer (2006, 2009, 2010) has called sensational forms and aesthetic formations. She argues that religion is mediated through cultural aesthetics understood in the broad sense of the ancient Greek aesthesis—referring to “humans’ capacity to perceive the world with their five senses and to interpret it through these perceptions” (Meyer, 2010, p. 747), and simultaneously encompassing sensation, the senses, and beauty (Porcello Meintjes, Ochoa, & Samuels, 2010, p. 57). This sort of aesthetic mediation is accomplished through sensational forms—historically generated “modes for invoking and organizing access to the transcendental that shape both religious content (beliefs, doctrines, sets of symbols) and norms,” and which are in turn embedded in broader sensibilities that change over time and thus offer “an excellent point of entry into processes of religious transformation” (Meyer, 2010, p. 751). Sensational forms are manifest in “concrete social situations” peopled by subjects variably open and attentive to them (Meyer, 2006, p. 23), and they are embedded in larger aesthetic formations that both form cultural sensibilities and are formed through them. As Meyer describes them, they have a rhetorical dimension, too, for “sensational forms . . . repeatedly persuade people of the truth and reality of their sensations.” Persuasion “does not imply a ‘free’ subject yet to be persuaded,” she goes on, for “an aesthetics of persuasion itself works within religious structures of repetition” in which people are “already constituted as particular religious subjects with certain desires and doubts. Thus, aesthetics of persuasion is intrinsic to sensational forms, whose power convinces religious believers of the truthfulness of the connection between them and God and the transcendental” (2010, p. 756).

Digital religious eloquence, I argue, encompasses a class of artifacts and experiences that do exactly this kind of broad persuasion, inviting audiences to dwell in aesthetically fitting words, sounds, and images whose affective moral power serves
to underwrite religious aspiration and truth. In that capacity, such eloquence designates one means through which aesthetic formations make themselves felt upon audiences in particular situations. But digital religious eloquence and related sensational forms do their rhetorical work through means other than persuasion in any straightforward sense. Here we should turn toward Burkan identification as a clue to seeing how sensational forms generate and regenerate bonds of commonality and difference among people, symbols, doctrines, actions, and other socially defined entities. And the constitutive turn out from Burke points to ways that the identities of subjects and collectives are themselves generated through rhetorical discourse that allows them to recognize and characterize themselves. I would argue that what Meyer terms "structures of repetition" are themselves constituted through a large number of discrete rhetorical acts addressing subjects in particular situations and inviting them to experience the world through a structured cultural aesthetic and moral sensibility. Eloquence names one class of such acts, whose blend of emotional appeal, perceived moral truth, and aesthetically striking composition give them particular capacity to lodge in the consciousness of audiences. The specific energy of eloquence resides in the way it brings together substance, style, and affect to create a distinctly moving rhetorical experience with more than average potential to advance both the repetition of existing habits and what Jacques Ranciere calls "the invention of sensible forms and material structures for a life to come" (quoted in Meyer, 2010, p. 735). By mediating and "objectifying the transcendental into material, sensational forms" (Meyer, 2006, p. 32), digital religious eloquence contributes to both cultural repetition and invention.

Two brief examples point us toward forms of digital religious eloquence and ways in which it is embedded within and advances broader aesthetic formations. The first is well-illustrated through Charles Hirschkind’s (2012) recent study of excerpts of Muslim sermons (khutub) as posted on YouTube. The clips he discusses, which range from one to ten minutes long (reminding us of the relative brevity of moments of intense but fleeting affect shorn of some of their religious specificity and “reduced to a generalized pious feeling” (p. 15). At the same time, attitudes about the visual component of the YouTube videos, Hirschkind argues, reveal what Meyer would call an aesthetic formation that still privileges “the ethical and devotional resonances of the human voice” and the continued “vibrancy of an Islamic tradition of acoustically mediated piety” (p. 17). Without using the concept, Hirschkind illuminates one variety of digital religious eloquence, maps affective currents generated in real-world audiences, and draws out continuities and discontinuities from more traditional eloquence—showing us the evolution of a sensational form as it moves to a new medium.

A second set of examples come from the world of tweeted religious eloquence. Last year, Twitter conducted an in-house study of the popularity of tweets as gauged by retweets and responses to them. They discovered a group of evangelical Christian leaders and writers whose inspirational tweets revealed an extremely high ratio of responses and retweets per follower—something they called an “engagement effect.” Some involved Bible verses, which translate exceptionally well to the 140-character limit since they run, on average, about 100 characters (O’Leary, 2012). In these instances, classic seventeenth-century King James biblical eloquence meets a twenty-first-century digital medium, where Twitter users might pass through or dwell, perhaps finding a spiritual locus that grounds them in the moment, reaffirming their devotion and identity through a process of repetition, (re)invention, and passing on the energy through retweets and other responses. The style and content of the language stand out from everyday speech, providing words and internal sounds that focus and add spiritual timbre to heart, soul, and mind. We see on Psalms & Proverbs (@Psalms_Proverbs), for instance, one of numerous Twitter accounts devoted to tweeting Bible verses: “Whatever the Lord does, it will be forever—Ecclesiastes 3:14 (please retweet)” (June 24, 2012); and “Better is a dinner of vegetables where love is, than eating a lot-fed bull and having hatred with it—Proverbs 15:17” (June 25, 2012). African Americans and people of color are heavily represented among the followers of Psalms & Proverbs, suggesting that we might read it as a contemporary manifestation of the longer tradition of eloquence in African American religiosity, pointing toward an aesthetic formation where anachronistic language (by the standards of everyday secular life) meets mobile electronic devices, and where affective religious devotion is materially mediated through digitized fonts and screens. Like the Egyptian YouTube khutub, these tweeted King James Bible verses represent one subcategory of digital religious eloquence, a kind of aphoristic spiritual wisdom that mediates the letter and spirit of traditional religious texts, all of which is embedded in the linguistic sensibilities, aesthetic tastes, and rhetorics-of-being practiced by the audiences called out by them.
Conclusion

My main goal in this chapter has been to make a case for rhetoric as a framework for understanding mediations of religion across epochs and cultures. That work has perhaps been more suggestive than demonstrative, but I have tried to provide a big-picture conceptual introduction and longue durée historical sketch to supplement and add new dimensions to interdisciplinary conversations about media and religion. I have said that rhetoric names both communicative address with inherent potential to move or stabilize the symbolic and material worlds of audiences hailed by it, as well as the theoretical vocabularies and intellectual traditions that have grown up to make sense of that address. The Greek-derived discipline of rhetorike came to inform both Latin-Christian and Arabic-Muslim traditions of practice and thought, where it helped mediate the divine for enfleshed audiences, in part through ideals and achieved approximations of eloquence. Outside those traditions, however, other cultures also have their own principles for producing and interpreting communicative address, implicit rhetorical theories that provide their own understandings of speech that mediates religious truths for audiences. I have suggested that these too stand ready for use in the contemporary study of religion and media over time.

My conceptualization of digital religious eloquence has been equally suggestive, intended to lay the groundwork for future empirical studies that blend theory, textual analysis, and ethnographically oriented audience study as well as indicating the potential power of combining historically oriented rhetorical, anthropological, and media analysis. I lay it out partly as a thought experiment: If religious eloquence is traditionally understood as the artful, appropriate, and affectively forceful expression of moral wisdom and higher truths, then what would that look like in digital media environments? What forms might it take, and what rhetorical work can it accomplish? I laid out the start of an answer by portraying rhetoric as that power of address that fixes meanings and identifications and solidifies affective and cognitive attachment to them—realizing that some of this work happens precisely by challenging other meanings and identifications, and through address to self as much as to others. Digital religious eloquence names one species of such rhetoric, which does its work by articulating itself with broader aesthetic formations and other kinds of sensational forms—the kind of entities that Meyer and her students have done so well in illuminating for us. Sometimes the work of digital religious eloquence can be dramatic and eventful (the YouTube video of the Iranian martyr Neda is one powerful example), but more often it serves to punctuate ongoing processes of devotion within the rhythms of everyday life (as in the tweets from Psalms & Proverbs).

In closing, let me list some of the rhetorical work accomplished or partly accomplished through digital religious eloquence, thereby providing a set of hypotheses for future empirical studies: (1) focusing ethico-religious conviction for a self that has multiple demands and possible loci of attention; (2) establishing and ritually reconfirming identities and identifications among people and other social objects; (3) mediating religious truths and unseen realities in a way that they are felt and meaningfully experienced by corporeal beings who are moved by them; (4) serving as a discrete mechanism through which aesthetic formations are manifest in particular situations and places; (5) providing occasion, material, or communicative links for further religiously directed rhetorical work; and (6) offering discrete pulses of symbolic energy that help solidify (or challenge) lived religiosity as manifest in the embodied lives of people.

Notes


2. The author would like to thank Heidi Campbell, Lisa Flores, Deborah Whitehead, Pascal Gagné, and especially Knut Lundby for their encouraging and very helpful comments on earlier drafts of this chapter.

References


A spatial turn in the humanities and social sciences that took place in the final decades of the twentieth century has by now influenced most fields of social and cultural studies, including those focusing on both religion and media. It sought both to put space back on a scholarly agenda that had become preoccupied with time and the temporal and to re-theorize the spatial, moving away from Cartesian, abstract, and geometrical notions to those that recognised space in material, social, and political terms, and as interconnected with bodies, power, relationships, and time. The principal spatial theorists of the late twentieth century, among them Lefebvre, Foucault, Jameson, and de Certeau, represented different theoretical traditions—Marxist, post-structuralist, and post-modernist. Between them, however, they brought new ways of thinking about space, place, and geography that were subsequently adopted by scholars keen to spatialize their own areas of study. In media studies, for example, these intellectual developments can be witnessed in MediaSpace: Place, Scale and Culture in a Media Age, a collection of essays by Nick Couldry and Anna McCarthy (2004a) in which notions of social connectivity, network, and virtuality are discussed. In the study of religions, they are evident in Thomas A. Tweed’s Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion (2006) and in my own book, The Location of Religion: A Spatial Analysis (Knott, 2005), in which a fluid, interconnected, embodied, material, and political sense of space is at the fore.

Although both fields have their own geographies and their share of actual physical as well as virtual places to be studied, a key challenge noted by scholars...
Religion Across Media

From Early Antiquity to Late Modernity

Knut Lundby, EDITOR