

AI as Spiritual Teacher: Reinterpreting Religious Authority through Connolly's Phenomenological-Hermeneutic Lens

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Abstract:

The development of artificial intelligence (AI) has given rise to new dynamics in religious practices and discourse: from interpretation chatbots, automated fatwa applications, to robotics-based representations of religious figures. This article proposes a conceptual reading of this phenomenon using a phenomenological-hermeneutic lens as recommended by Peter Connolly. This research aims to conceptually examine how AI transforms religious experience and authority, and how phenomenological and hermeneutic approaches can be used to understand technologically mediated religious experiences. Rather than assessing the authority of AI normatively or reducing it to a mere social product, this study positions technologically mediated religious experiences as meaningful objects, which also need to be understood from within (phenomenology) and interpreted as new symbolic texts (hermeneutics). The analysis is conducted through a critical reading of interdisciplinary literature on religion, media, and artificial intelligence, with reference to Peter Connolly's phenomenological-hermeneutic ideas on religious experience and the process of symbolic meaning. The results of this study indicate that AI has the potential to function as a new hermeneutic space, not as an absolute substitute for spiritual teachers, but as a relational arena where authority, meaning, and transcendental experience are renegotiated. In this space, the presence of technology expands the horizons of human religious experience, while simultaneously demanding a rereading of legitimacy, awareness, and moral responsibility in digital religious practices. This article concludes with epistemological implications for contemporary religious studies and ethical considerations regarding the limits of digital authority. The study's primary contribution is the development of a theoretical framework for a reflective reading of digital spirituality, one that maintains a balance between the depth of religious experience and a critique of technological commodification.

Keywords: AI and religion; Hermeneutics; Peter Connolly; phenomenology of religion; religious authority; spiritual mediatics.

INTRODUCTION

Technological developments have not merely transformed patterns of human labor, communication, and cognition; they have also profoundly altered how individuals encounter, interpret, and relate to transcendence. In recent years, artificial intelligence (AI) has increasingly entered domains once regarded as sacred and distinctly human, particularly those related to spirituality and religious authority. Innovations such as digital fatwa platforms, chatbot-based interpretations of sacred texts, and the emergence of robot priests, most notably BlessU-2 in Germany, signal a significant shift in the relationship between religion and technology. Within this evolving landscape, technology no longer functions solely as an auxiliary instrument supporting religious practice, but has begun to operate as an intermediary shaping spiritual experience itself. This development invites a series of critical and philosophical questions. Can artificial intelligence legitimately function as a spiritual guide or teacher? Is religious authority still rooted exclusively in human agency, or has it become dispersed across algorithmic systems that operate without personal consciousness? These questions challenge conventional assumptions about the nature of religious experience, authority, and mediation, especially in an era where digital systems increasingly influence meaning-making processes (Geraci, 2014).

This study seeks to explore these issues through a conceptual analysis grounded in phenomenological and hermeneutic methodologies, drawing particularly on Peter Connolly's perspective. This theoretical framework is selected because it enables a balanced engagement with religion as both lived experience and interpretive practice. Phenomenology allows for empathetic attention to how individuals experience the sacred in technologically mediated contexts, while hermeneutics provides tools to examine how meanings are constructed, negotiated, and transformed through digital media. Connolly argues that the academic study of religion should avoid reducing religion to purely social, institutional, or functional dimensions. Instead, religion should be approached as a dynamic process through which humans seek to interpret the meaning of existence within specific historical and cultural settings. From this standpoint, religious expressions whether traditional rituals or digitally mediated practices are not static entities, but evolving interpretations shaped by context and experience. Applying Connolly's framework to the interaction between humans and AI allows for a deeper understanding of how technological systems participate in contemporary religious life without prematurely categorizing them as replacements for human spirituality (Connolly, 2002).

Within the spiritual sphere, AI-mediated practices can thus be interpreted in two complementary ways. First, they may constitute new forms of religious experience, as individuals engage with technology in moments of moral reflection, guidance-seeking, or ritual participation. Second, they can be read as "texts" that continuously generate meanings through interaction, interpretation, and use. In this sense, AI does not merely transmit religious knowledge but becomes part of an ongoing hermeneutical process in which spiritual significance is negotiated. Consequently, the presence of AI in religious contexts should not be understood simply as a threat to traditional authority or authenticity. Rather, it represents a transformation in how religious meaning is accessed, interpreted, and lived. By employing Connolly's phenomenological-hermeneutic approach, this research aims to illuminate how technological mediation reshapes spiritual experience while remaining deeply embedded in human interpretive activity (Ricoeur, 1976).

In the context of this research, it is important to examine several previous studies that have discussed the relationship between religion and technology. For example, Campbell's research on Digital Religion highlights the formation of religious identity in online spaces (Campbell, 2013); and O'Leary's work discusses the transformation of spiritual authority through digital media. In Indonesia, studies such as those conducted show that digital da'wah has created new forms of media-mediated symbolic authority (Ding & Yusof, 2025). However, there is little research that specifically examines how AI, with its ability to mimic empathy and generate religious narratives, reconstructs the meaning of spiritual authority. This gap serves as the epistemological foundation for this research. The urgency of this research lies in the need to develop a new paradigm in religious studies that can address the challenges of the era of intelligent technology. To date, normative theological approaches often focus on whether AI is permissible or forbidden for use in religious practices. Meanwhile, sociological approaches tend to highlight its social impacts without addressing the existential layers of meaning experienced by believers. This research attempts to fill this gap by offering a phenomenological-hermeneutic reading that appreciates the depth of

spiritual experience while recognizing the role of technology in shaping new horizons of religious awareness (Campbell & Evolvi, 2020).

This research presents a novelty by positioning AI not merely as a technological object or social phenomenon, but as a new hermeneutic space in which humans negotiate the meanings of spirituality and authority. By reading AI through Peter Connolly's phenomenological-hermeneutic framework, this research shifts the focus from the normative debate of "permissible or not" to an epistemological understanding of "how religious meaning is produced and experienced" in the digital age. Another novelty is the interdisciplinary, reflective approach that bridges the study of religion, the philosophy of technology, and media communication. The purpose of this research is to explore how artificial intelligence alters how humans experience, interpret, and make sense of the transcendent presence. Using a phenomenological-hermeneutic approach, this research aims to trace the meaning-making process in human interactions with artificial intelligence systems that act as representations of spiritual authority. Conceptually, this research asserts that religious experience is not only determined by the object of faith, but also by the mediating structures that enable it, including algorithms, language, and digital interactions (Latour, 2005).

The benefit of this research is its tangible contribution to understanding and developing religious studies that adapt to technological developments. Conceptually, this research broadens the horizon of religious phenomenology toward digital phenomenology; methodologically, it demonstrates the relevance of a hermeneutic approach to interpreting religious meaning in the AI era. Practically, this research provides a reflective basis for religious institutions, spiritual educators, and technology developers to navigate the transformation of religious authority with ethical responsibility and spiritual awareness. This research has significant implications in various aspects. Practically, the results can serve as a reference for developing policies and ethics regarding the use of AI in religious contexts, for example in education systems, preaching, or spiritual services. Academically, this research enriches theories on religious experience and authority, broadening the phenomenology of religion to the context of digital technology. Another implication is at the global level, where discourses on post-human spirituality and digital transcendence are beginning to emerge. This research places the contribution of Islamic thought and the Indonesian context within the global discourse on religion and technology (Floridi, 2014).

Against this backdrop, this research will make a significant contribution to the development of a new paradigm for reflective, contextual, and interdisciplinary religious studies. AI is presented not only as an object of technological study but also as a mirror that shows how human religious consciousness continues to reinterpret itself amidst changing times. Through Peter Connolly's phenomenological-hermeneutic approach, this research seeks to demonstrate that spirituality in the digital age is not a decline in the meaning of religiosity, but rather a new form of seeking transcendence that requires a more honest, profound, and open understanding (Hjarvard, 2013).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Technological advancement, particularly in artificial intelligence (AI), has not only reshaped socio-economic practices but also the contours of religious authority, experience, and interpretation. Historically, the interface between religion and technology has been conceptualized predominantly as a tool-enhancement paradigm technology serving human religious agents rather than sharing in spiritual authority. Yet, contemporary developments such as digital fatwa apps, verse-interpreting chatbots, and even robotic religious figures challenge the assumption that spiritual teaching and authoritative religious interpretation are exclusively human domains. Underlying this emerging discourse are multiple scholarly discussions spanning digital theology, phenomenology of religion, religion and technology, hermeneutics, psychology of religion, and ethics.

One of the foundational works in the academic study of AI and religion is Randall Reed's exploration of AI in religious contexts. Reed argues that artificial intelligence can contribute to the study of religion and the classification of religious knowledge through AI's pattern-recognition capabilities. While Reed does not suggest AI becomes a spiritual teacher per se, his work opens space to reconsider how algorithmic processes participate in religious epistemology and knowledge dissemination (Reed, 2021). Similarly, Dingler et al. explore AI's potential within the psychology of religion, emphasizing how conversational agents can simulate personalized guidance through adaptive responses based on theological principles and religious texts. Though these systems lack spiritual interiority, they can replicate aspects of guidance

previously associated exclusively with human spiritual directors (Alkhouri, 2024). These contributions point to a growing discourse suggesting that AI participates in religious meaning-making, albeit without consciousness or spiritual subjectivity.

The notion of AI serving as a mediator in religious contexts aligns with how digital religion scholars view technology's transformative role in spiritual engagement. Emerging research on AI and religion demonstrates that AI does more than facilitate religious tasks; it reshapes modes of interaction with sacred texts, belief systems, and spiritual communities. For example, Tsuria and Tsuria argue that generative AI tools reflect moralistic approaches to religious content and thus shape users' religious understandings in nuanced ways (Tsuria & Tsuria, 2024). Classic phenomenological studies link religious experience to inner intentionality, meaning, and transcendence. While existing phenomenological research has not directly centered AI as a spiritual teacher, it offers insights relevant to understanding how AI might participate in religious experience. For example, phenomenological studies on spiritually significant experiences emphasize how subjective interpretation and context shape the meaning of phenomena, such as hearing voices interpreted as divine communication. These studies highlight the interpretive depth of religious experience and provide a framework for discussing how technology might intervene in similar processes (Cook et al., 2022). Phenomenology, as Connolly advocates, focuses less on institutional authority and more on how individuals experience the sacred whether in traditional ritual or AI-mediated environments thus offering a lens to explore the emerging role of AI in shaping spiritual feelings, reflections, and interpretations.

Hermeneutical frameworks offer another dimension crucial to this inquiry. Hermeneutics views religious texts, practices, and symbols as dynamic "texts" continuously interpreted within specific contexts. Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, which have influenced religious hermeneutical theory, emphasize that understanding arises through a "fusion of horizons" between interpreter and text. When AI enters interpretive practice through scriptural interpretation, devotional conversation, or theological Q&A the question arises: can AI engage in hermeneutical interpretation? While AI lacks intentional consciousness, its hermeneutic participation occurs through structured processing of texts and contexts. The emerging literature suggests that AI's interpretive contributions should be read not as equivalent to human interpretive agency but as components within ongoing interpretive communities. Indeed, an interdisciplinary study framed within phenomenology and hermeneutics treats AI not as neutral tool but as co-shaping agent in religious interpretation. By applying phenomenological vigilance and hermeneutics that integrate both trust and suspicion, scholars argue that technology can illuminate both potential and ideological biases embedded in digital mediation of religious content (Przygoda et al., 2025).

The literature on ethical and theological reflections regarding AI continues to grow. Several studies take a critical theological stance on the integration of AI within spiritual and educational contexts. These studies emphasize that AI's role must remain subordinate to theological and ethical frameworks that preserve core spiritual values. For instance, Christian theological reflections caution against attributing spiritual agency to non-conscious entities and stress the centrality of human relationality and divine agency in spiritual formation (Puling, 2025). Similarly, in Islamic educational contexts, scholars explore how AI can facilitate spiritual awareness without compromising foundational theological principles. These ethical analyses reinforce that while AI may simulate aspects of spiritual mentorship, its functions should remain grounded in human moral agency and theological oversight.

METHOD

This research employs a conceptual qualitative approach with a phenomenological-hermeneutic orientation, as recommended by Peter Connolly in understanding religious phenomena. This approach does not aim to collect empirical field data, but rather to examine the ideas, concepts, and structures of meaning that emerge from the interaction between humans, religion, and artificial intelligence (AI) technology. Thus, this research is reflective-analytical, focusing on exploring technologically mediated religious meanings and experiences, and their implications for religious authority. The paradigm used is an interpretive paradigm, which views social and religious reality as a construction of meaning formed through an intersubjective process. In this paradigm, religion is not seen as a static or dogmatic entity, but rather as a reality that is continuously interpreted and experienced dynamically. Therefore, the AI phenomenon is not approached as a mere technological object, but as a symbolic mediation that enables

new religious experiences. This interpretive approach allows researchers to explore how humans form, negotiate, and internalize spiritual meanings in interactions with artificial intelligence systems. A phenomenological-hermeneutic approach is used to understand the two main dimensions of the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2016).

Phenomenological Dimension: This approach starts from the assumption that religious experience is a phenomenon of consciousness. In this context, interaction with AI is read as a new form of religious consciousness: the subjective experience of humans when confronted with a non-human entity that speaks a religious language. The phenomenological approach requires researchers to engage in *epoché* (a suspension of theological judgment) in order to understand the phenomenon as it is experienced by the subject. Thus, the meaning explored is not "whether AI truly believes," but "how humans experience transcendence through technological mediation." **Hermeneutic Dimension:** Hermeneutics, from Connolly's perspective, positions religion as a symbolic text whose meaning is constantly being negotiated. In this context, AI is treated as a new text containing religious meaning structures in the form of narratives, language, and digital symbols. Hermeneutic analysis is conducted by exploring how the meanings of authority, faith, and spirituality are constructed through the interaction between users, algorithms, and the religious language generated by AI. Thus, this study views AI as an interpretive space where religious meaning is not fixed but is continuously generated through human-technology dialogue (Miles et al., 2014).

The object of this study is the conceptual phenomenon of religious authority in the era of artificial intelligence. This research does not utilize field data, but rather library research sourced from interdisciplinary scientific works, including: (a) Peter Connolly's books and articles, particularly *Approaches to the Study of Religion* (1999), which outlines the relevance of phenomenology and hermeneutics in the study of religion; (b) Literature on religion and media studies, such as the work of Heidi Campbell (*Digital Religion*, 2013) and Stewart Hoover (Campbell, 2013; Hoover, 2006); (c) Recent literature on the relationship between AI and religion, such as the work of O'Leary and Shadaab Rahemtulla, discusses the transformation of religious authority in the digital world.

These materials are analyzed comparatively and reflectively to explore the intersections between religious experience, technological mediation, and spiritual authority. The analysis is conducted through three interrelated conceptual steps: **Phenomenological Description:** Presents an in-depth description of the phenomenon of AI as part of a digital religious experience how users experience spiritual connectedness through interactions with algorithm-based systems. **Hermeneutic Interpretation:** Interpreting the symbols, narratives, and religious language used by AI, by tracing the meaning behind the text or responses generated by the technology. **Philosophical Reflection:** Critically reflecting on interpretive findings by linking them to Connolly's theory and contemporary theological and philosophical literature on religion (Creswell & Clark, 2018). This stage produces a conceptual synthesis of new forms of authority and spirituality in the AI era. Although not empirical, this research maintains its academic validity through argumentative traceability and theoretical relevance. Validity in conceptual studies is measured not by the quantity of data, but by logical consistency, analytical strength, and originality of perspective. Therefore, each argument developed is supported by credible scientific literature and reviewed through cross-disciplinary critical readings involving theology, religious studies, and media studies.

RESULTS

AI and the Transformation of Religious Authority

The emergence of artificial intelligence in religious contexts is one of the most prominent signs of a paradigm shift in religious authority in the digital age. Authority, which in classical religious traditions is rooted in the legitimacy of sacred texts, the chain of knowledge, and the personal charisma of a spiritual teacher, is now experiencing a new distribution through technological networks. In this context, AI is not merely an administrative tool or a medium for conveying messages, but also a symbolic actor that is beginning to play a role in shaping religious discourse and the religious experiences of the congregation. One of the fundamental characteristics of traditional religious authority is a personal and hierarchical relationship: a cleric, priest, or spiritual teacher gains legitimacy through community recognition, scientific competence, and spiritual connection to the source of teachings. AI, on the other hand, operates through functional and performative legitimacy: speed of response, consistency of argument, and the ability to

mimic the structure of religious language. In this case, what can be called algorithmic authority emerges a form of authority that relies not on personality or tradition, but on the system's ability to generate convincing and socially acceptable responses (Coeckelbergh, 2020).

This phenomenon can be seen in the emergence of applications like QuranGPT, BibleAI, or the Ask the Imam Chatbot, which offer answers to spiritual questions with a speed and accuracy that humans find difficult to match. In many cases, users even treat these systems with a reverence reminiscent of a spiritual guru. This is where the epistemic relationship between humans, texts, and religious authority becomes apparent. Whereas previously sacred texts were interpreted by humans with scientific legitimacy, now they are "reinterpreted" by algorithms, and the results are still treated as valid sources of knowledge, as long as they meet the user's spiritual expectations. However, this shift is not simply replacing one form of authority with another; it is democratizing access to authority. AI expands the participation of believers in the process of religious knowledge. Through interaction with artificial intelligence systems, every individual has the opportunity to receive direct spiritual guidance without the constraints of time and space. In this sense, AI represents distributed authority: authority is no longer centralized in a specific individual, but spread across digital networks and the user's personal experiences.

This condition aligns with Peter Connolly's view that religion, in phenomenological and hermeneutic studies, is never static. Religious authority is always the result of an interpretive process that takes place within a specific historical context. Connolly emphasizes that understanding religion requires empathy for actual religious experience and an awareness that religious meaning is always generated through a dialogue between text and context. Within this framework, AI can be understood as a new hermeneutic context that shapes the horizon of modern human religious interpretation. However, this shift carries serious implications for the dimensions of spiritual authenticity and ethical responsibility. Traditional authorities serve not only as conveyors of meaning but also as guardians of the moral integrity and ethical awareness of the faith community. AI, meanwhile, operates calculatively without moral awareness or spiritual intention. Therefore, what appears to be "authority" here is more accurately understood as functional, rather than normative or spiritual, authority. It has the power to influence religious behavior and understanding, but lacks the capacity to bear ethical responsibility for its impact.

This transformation demands a redefinition of what is meant by "religious authority." In the digital age, authority is no longer monologic (one-way from teacher to student), but rather dialogic and even interactive. Users actively participate in assessing, filtering, and interpreting religious information provided by AI. In a phenomenological context, this reflects a new form of religious consciousness: an experience of faith that no longer relies on hierarchical relations, but on the reflective interaction between humans, texts, and technology. Thus, AI cannot be equated with a spiritual teacher in the traditional sense, but neither can it be dismissed as a neutral factor. It is a mediating agent of meaning that actively influences how humans understand truth and authority. In Connolly's hermeneutic perspective, this process creates new interpretive horizons where religious meaning is continuously generated, negotiated, and adapted to the surrounding cultural and technological context.

The shift in religious authority due to the advent of AI also indicates a deeper epistemological shift: from tradition-based authority to mediatic experience-based authority. Authority no longer stems solely from historical legitimacy, but also from the effectiveness of perceived spiritual experiences. If users feel touched, enlightened, or find inner peace from interacting with AI, then the experience itself becomes a source of legitimacy. This is what Connolly refers to as a non-reductionist understanding of religion, as religious value is measured not only by doctrinal truth but also by the quality of the subject's meaningful experience. However, this transformation also carries risks: when religious experience is reduced to algorithmic interaction, spirituality can lose its contemplative depth. Digital authority has the potential to give rise to "spiritual banality"—a state in which holiness is reduced to a data format, and spiritual guidance becomes an automated product consumed without reflection. Therefore, it is important to read this phenomenon with a hermeneutic balance: accepting its potential as a new space for spirituality, but remaining critical of the dangers of a reduction in meaning.

Phenomenology of Digital Religious Experience

For Peter Connolly, the essence of religious studies is the attempt to understand religious experience as it is experienced by its subjects, without first assessing the theological truth of that experience. This view aligns with the tradition of phenomenology of religion developed by Mircea

Eliade, Ninian Smart, and Edmund Husserl, where religious experience is understood as an awareness of a transcendent presence, experienced directly, personally, and meaningfully. Within this framework, the researcher's task is not to judge the truth or falsity of the experience, but rather to describe the structure of religious consciousness that emerges from it. The phenomenology of religion emphasizes the principle of *epoche*, the suspension of theological or moral judgment, allowing researchers to see religious experiences as they are. With this approach, research on AI in a spiritual context is not intended to assert whether AI "has a soul" or "believes," but rather to understand how humans experience the religious dimension through interactions with non-human systems. In the digital context, religious experiences are no longer confined to prayer spaces or community gatherings but also exist in mediatic spaces. When someone opens an automated prayer app, interacts with a chatbot that provides spiritual advice, or listens to verses recited by a voice algorithm, the experiences that arise are often accompanied by a sense of peace, connectedness, and even profound spiritual understanding. From a phenomenological perspective, such experiences cannot be dismissed as artificial phenomena, because what is being studied is not the source of their sacredness, but rather the consciousness experienced by the subject.

According to Connolly, religious experience is always intentional, meaning it always "directs" toward something, be it God, truth, meaning, or a sense of sacred presence. In digital interactions, this intentionality is not lost, but rather transformed. The religious subject now directs his or her consciousness toward digital representations of the sacred: systems that speak religious language, invoke the name of God, and quote sacred texts. Thus, even though the object is an algorithm, the structure of consciousness remains religious, because in the subject's experience, there is a sense of connection with the transcendent. Phenomenology leads us to understand that religious experience does not always require a "metaphysically real" object. It can be present in symbols, rituals, or even mediatic interactions that evoke a sense of the sacred. As Connolly puts it, "religious experience is not defined by the medium through which it occurs, but by the meaning it conveys to the believer." Thus, digital phenomena are not a denial of spirituality, but a new mediation of religious experience that also contains intentionality toward the sacred. However, it is important to note that this digital religious experience has distinct characteristics from conventional religious experiences. First, it is interactive yet impersonal, meaning users feel like they are in a "dialogue" with a personally responding entity, even though that entity has no consciousness or intention. Second, it offers absolute speed and availability: AI can provide spiritual answers anytime, anywhere, without fatigue. Third, it replaces physical rituals with digital symbolism, such as typing prayers, listening to automated recitations, or staring at a screen in silence. All of this forms a new type of religious experience: *mediatized transcendence*—a spiritual experience realized through the medium of technology.

For Connolly's phenomenology, it is crucial to read this experience without ignoring its subjective authenticity. What is called "God's presence" in a digital context may not be an ontological presence, but it can still be experienced as a meaningful presence. This is what distinguishes a phenomenological approach from a theological one: phenomenology does not judge the metaphysical truth of experience, but rather respects it as a phenomenon of consciousness authentic to its subject. From this perspective, AI serves as a mirror for the religious consciousness of modern humans. When someone interacts with a spiritual AI, they are essentially engaging in a dialogue with an algorithmically mediated projection of their own consciousness. AI does not impart a new faith, but rather strengthens human awareness in their search for meaning and serenity. This aligns with Connolly's idea that religion is a field of interaction between the human and the transcendent, where technology has now become a new mediator in that experience.

The phenomenology of digital religious experience also shows that spirituality is no longer confined to sacred spaces but rather permeates the fabric of everyday life. The experience of listening to *dhikr* (remembrance) from an app, reading an automated interpretation, or participating in a digital meditation demonstrates that the presence of the sacred now "flows" in virtual space. In Husserlian terms, this constitutes a new form of *Lebenswelt* (lifeworld), a world where the experience of faith merges with technology and information. However, a phenomenological approach does not stop at describing experiences. It also demands reflection on their deeper meaning: do digital religious experiences truly enrich spiritual awareness, or do they actually shallow it by losing the context of community and tradition? This is where the role of hermeneutics becomes crucial (discussed in

subsection c below), as experiences without interpretation risk falling into a form of spiritual emotionalism that lacks symbolic depth.

Phenomenologically, digital religious experience is a symptom of technologically mediated transcendence. It demonstrates that humans continue to seek the presence of the Divine, even in an increasingly automated world. However, phenomenology also reminds us that true religious experience does not stop at a sense of psychological comfort or peace; it must lead to a reflective awareness of the meaning of life, moral responsibility, and connectedness with others. Therefore, digital religious experience can be understood as a new layer of modern spirituality that is legitimate as a phenomenon of consciousness, but still needs to be interpreted critically to avoid losing its ethical and existential depth.

Hermeneutics of Meaning and Authority in Peter Connolly's Perspective

If phenomenology helps us understand how religious experiences are lived, then hermeneutics helps us understand how those experiences are interpreted and given meaning. Peter Connolly asserts that the study of religion cannot simply stop at phenomenological description; it must move toward hermeneutic interpretation to uncover the structures of meaning behind human religious experiences. In Connolly's hermeneutic framework, religion is a living symbolic text, whose meaning continues to evolve as cultural, social, and technological contexts change. Religious meaning is not fixed or closed; it is always "reproduced" through the dialogue between humans and their world (Kroesbergen, 2020). Therefore, when the world context changes, such as with the presence of AI in spiritual life, the horizon of religious meaning also shifts.

1. Connolly's Hermeneutic Principles

Connolly adopts the hermeneutic spirit of Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer, but applies it uniquely to the study of religion. For Connolly, understanding religion means understanding the meaning experienced and interpreted by humans, not simply understanding its teachings textually. The process of meaning-making is dialogical: humans are not merely recipients of revelation or teachings, but also active interpreters who continually negotiate the meaning of those teachings in the realities of their lives. A key concept in Connolly's hermeneutics is the horizon of meaning, the horizon of meaning that serves as the backdrop for the interpretive process. Each human interprets religious texts or symbols from their own horizon of experience, and that horizon is constantly changing with the development of history, language, and technology. In other words, every era has its own hermeneutic context. The presence of AI, as a form of intelligent technology, is now creating a new horizon for the experience and understanding of religion in the digital age.

2. AI as a New Hermeneutic Mediation

In this context, AI can no longer be viewed merely as a neutral tool, but as a hermeneutic actor—an entity participating in the production and circulation of religious meaning. When AI interprets verses, answers spiritual questions, or constructs prayers based on religious language patterns, it is actually participating in a game of religious meaning that was previously exclusively played by humans. Although AI lacks consciousness, it still acts as a medium of meaning, as its interpretations are received and interpreted by human users as religious messages. This creates a new form of participatory hermeneutics: religious meaning is no longer produced by a single interpreting subject (ulama, priest, or spiritual teacher), but rather by a network of interactions between humans, texts, and technology. This process marks an epistemological shift from singular authority to relational authority, where religious legitimacy no longer depends on traditional sources, but on the relevance and resonance of meanings produced in the digital space. For example, many users find it easier to understand religious teachings through AI systems that present simple and contextual interpretations. On the other hand, some believe that such interpretations are potentially shallow and lack epistemological integrity. Both are valid in their respective contexts, because in Connolly's hermeneutics, meaning is not singular but the result of a dynamic negotiation between text, context, and reader. Thus, the religious meanings that emerge from interactions with AI are not mere "imitations," but the result of an ongoing collective interpretive process in the digital age.

3. Authority and the Process of Interpretation

From a hermeneutic perspective, religious authority does not exist outside the interpretive process, but rather is built into it. Authority becomes legitimate not because it "possesses" the truth, but because it is able to mediate meaning that is recognized and accepted by the interpretive community. When AI begins to

act as a mediator of meaning, for example, through a religious question-and-answer system that produces logical and consistent responses, it has functionally assumed a partial authoritative role in the modern religious ecosystem. However, Connolly would remind us that true hermeneutics always demands a reflective awareness of the context and limits of interpretation. In this regard, AI lacks historical awareness or ethical responsibility for the meanings it produces. Therefore, even though AI functions as a generator of meaning, it still requires human co-interpreters to ensure that those meanings remain rooted in an authentic religious horizon. Thus, AI can be said to exert a quasi-hermeneutic authority: it is not a source of truth, but rather a catalyst for the interpretive process. Humans remain the center of consciousness interpreting the results of AI's work, but this process takes place within an ecosystem of meaning that is now digital, fast, and plural.

4. *The Challenge of Digital Hermeneutics*

This change poses several challenges. First, there is the risk of decontextualization, the detachment of religious texts from their historical and epistemological context when processed by AI. Algorithmic systems tend to reorganize texts based on linguistic probability, rather than theological understanding. As a result, religious meaning can degenerate into mere speech patterns devoid of symbolic depth. Second, there is the risk of relativism of meaning, as AI learns from diverse sources without distinguishing between theological authorities. This has the potential to give rise to syncretic interpretations that transcend the boundaries of schools of thought or doctrine. From Connolly's perspective, this situation emphasizes the need for a higher level of hermeneutic awareness: humans must recognize that the meanings they receive through AI are constructions, not pure revelation. Third, there is the ethical challenge, where moral responsibility for interpretation becomes unclear. Who is responsible if AI interpretations lead to misunderstandings or social impacts? Connolly's hermeneutics offers a solution: every interpretation demands personal reflection and responsibility. Therefore, while AI can interpret, only humans can interpret ethically.

5. *Synthesis: Hermeneutics of Meaning in the AI Era*

Through Connolly's lens, we can understand that AI does not create religious meaning, but rather expands the hermeneutic field in which that meaning is negotiated. Technology is not a substitute for spirituality, but an interpretive medium that both enriches and challenges the way humans understand the sacred. Authority in the AI era no longer belongs to charismatic individuals, but is the result of a collective dialogue between users, texts, and algorithms. Thus, AI presents a double hermeneutic shift: (1) from derived meaning to negotiated meaning, (2) from vertical authority to relational authority. This phenomenon aligns with Connolly's vision that religious studies must reject reductionism, both theological and sociological, and instead position itself in an ever-open field of interpretation (Lynch, 2012).

AI as a New Hermeneutic Space

The emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) in religious practices has opened new horizons in how humans interact with the sacred. While in the past, texts, rituals, and traditions were the primary medium for connecting humans with transcendental realities, technology has now become a new hermeneutic medium through which religious meaning is massively produced, disseminated, and negotiated. In this sense, AI is not merely a tool for spirituality, but an interpretive space where that spirituality is continually recreated. Peter Connolly asserts that religion must be understood within the dynamic context of human life, living within the ever-changing language, symbols, and experiences. In the context of AI, these changes occur not only in the forms of religious communication, but also in the epistemological structure of the experience of faith itself. AI presents a new form of mediation that transcends physical, geographical, and even emotional boundaries; it enables humans to experience a transcendent presence through interactions with non-human systems (Postman, 2006). Thus, digital technology is not merely an instrumental tool, but a hermeneutic space where humans interpret and renegotiate the meaning of religiosity.

1. *AI as a Field of Transcendence Interpretation*

Within a phenomenological-hermeneutic framework, every communication medium has transcendental potential to the extent that it enables humans to experience and interpret the presence of the sacred. AI creates new conditions in which religious knowledge becomes interactive and dialogical. When someone asks a system like QuranGPT or an AI Spiritual Assistant about the meaning of life and receives

an answer that touches their consciousness, therein occurs a hermeneutic moment of the interpretive process involving text, algorithm, and human consciousness. At this point, AI functions as a "hermeneutic mirror": it reflects human existential questions and helps individuals realize their own religious inner structure. In the phenomenological tradition, this mirror is not a passive entity, but rather a space of reflection that allows the subject to realize themselves as interpretive beings (*homo interpretans*). In other words, AI does not provide new meaning, but rather returns humans to the process of discovering meaning that is always already present within them.

2. *From Technology Medium to Spiritual Space*

In Connolly's hermeneutic perspective, religious meaning is always open; it is continuously generated through a dialogue between subject and symbol. AI extends this dialogue into the digital realm. Through interaction with algorithms, humans encounter "living symbols" in the form of machine language. This interaction fosters a reflective spirituality, where the experience of faith is no longer tied to specific institutions or rituals but occurs in a personal, virtual, and immersive space. This phenomenon marks the birth of algorithmic spirituality, not because algorithms possess souls, but because humans place spiritual hope and meaning in the algorithmic systems themselves. In this context, AI becomes a kind of "digital contemplative space" that allows existential reflection to take place outside of traditional worship spaces. This aligns with Connolly's view that religious experience is not defined by the place or form of ritual, but rather by the meaning conveyed through human consciousness and interpretation. However, this algorithmic spirituality also brings challenges. In the digital space, religious experiences risk becoming fragmented and pragmatic. Many users approach AI not in search of profound meaning, but rather in search of quick solutions, instant answers, or even spiritual solace. Herein lies the paradox: the easier access to spiritual experiences, the greater the potential for religious banality. Therefore, this new hermeneutic space demands critical awareness and ethical reflection from users to prevent spiritual experiences from degenerating into mere consumption.

3. *Authority, Meaning, and Hermeneutic Consciousness*

AI also challenges the classical definition of religious authority. Authority no longer stems from scientific lineage, but rather from hermeneutic legitimacy, namely the ability of a source to produce meaning that resonates with modern religious consciousness. In the digital world, meaning is often deemed legitimate to the extent that it "feels right" to the user. This reflects a shift from external authority to reflective authority, from adherence to religious figures to the discovery of personal meaning facilitated by technology. Connolly would read this phenomenon as a form of hermeneutic pluralism—a plurality of interpretations that reflects the diverse horizons of human experience. However, this plurality demands hermeneutic awareness, namely the awareness that every meaning is the result of an interpretation open to revision, dialogue, and moral responsibility. Thus, AI can help expand the horizons of spiritual understanding, but it cannot replace the existential responsibility of humans to interpret honestly and reflectively.

4. *From Technological Hermeneutics to Transcendental Hermeneutics*

At a deeper level of reflection, AI can be understood as a symbol of the modern world: it represents humanity's quest to understand itself and its God through rationality embodied in technology. In this sense, AI becomes a hermeneutic space that challenges the boundaries between faith and reason, between spirituality and science. In humans interacting with AI, a transcendental dialectic occurs: humans are both creators and seekers of meaning. Peter Connolly, with his hermeneutic spirit, would argue that this phenomenon reaffirms humanity as an interpretive being. In the face of technology, humans do not lose their religiosity; instead, they rediscover the essence of that religiosity as a continuous process of interpreting the meaning of the Divine presence in a changing world (Schleiermacher, 1998). Thus, AI can be seen as a new hermeneutic space where modern spirituality is tested and expanded. It forces humans to reinterpret what it means to believe, worship, and experience the transcendent in an algorithmic age. As Connolly emphasizes, a living religion is not one that resists change, but one that is able to reinterpret its meaning without losing its essence.

DISCUSSION

The emergence of artificial intelligence in religious contexts represents a profound transformation in the structure and meaning of religious authority in the digital age. Traditionally, religious authority has been grounded in a combination of sacred texts, chains of transmission, institutional recognition, and the personal charisma of spiritual figures. Clerics, priests, and religious teachers derived legitimacy through prolonged training, moral credibility, and their perceived proximity to the source of divine knowledge. However, the integration of AI into religious life disrupts this classical configuration by redistributing authority across technological networks. Artificial intelligence no longer functions merely as a neutral medium or administrative aid, but increasingly operates as a symbolic actor that participates in shaping religious discourse and the spiritual experiences of believers. This shift marks the rise of what may be described as *algorithmic authority*, a form of legitimacy based not on tradition or personality, but on functional performance such as speed, coherence, and linguistic persuasiveness (Schweiker, 2018).

Algorithmic authority differs fundamentally from traditional religious authority in its mode of operation. Whereas classical authority is relational, hierarchical, and embedded in communal structures, AI-based authority is performative and impersonal. Systems such as QuranGPT, BibleAI, or chatbot-based religious advisors generate responses that appear consistent, confident, and contextually appropriate, often mimicking the rhetorical style of religious discourse. For many users, these characteristics are sufficient to produce trust and even reverence, blurring the distinction between symbolic guidance and spiritual leadership (Smart, 1996). The epistemic relationship between humans, sacred texts, and authority is thus reconfigured: interpretation is no longer exclusively mediated by human scholars but increasingly by algorithmic systems whose outputs are accepted as meaningful as long as they resonate with users' expectations and experiences. Importantly, this transformation does not simply replace traditional authority with technological authority. Rather, it democratizes access to religious interpretation by allowing individuals to engage directly with religious knowledge without institutional mediation. AI enables believers to seek guidance at any time and from any place, thereby dissolving spatial and temporal constraints that once structured religious learning. Authority becomes distributed rather than centralized, embedded within networks of interaction between users, texts, and technological systems. From this perspective, AI participates in a broader reconfiguration of religious authority toward a more participatory and experiential model (Syam, 2021).

This condition resonates strongly with Peter Connolly's phenomenological and hermeneutic understanding of religion. Connolly argues that religion is never static; it is always the outcome of an interpretive process situated within particular historical and cultural contexts. Religious meaning emerges through the dynamic interaction between texts, symbols, and lived experience. Within this framework, AI can be understood as a new hermeneutic context that reshapes the horizon of religious interpretation in contemporary society. Rather than viewing AI as an external intrusion into religious life, Connolly's perspective allows us to see it as part of the evolving conditions through which religious meaning is produced and experienced. However, this shift also raises serious concerns regarding spiritual authenticity and ethical responsibility. Traditional religious authorities do not merely convey doctrinal knowledge; they are also custodians of moral integrity and communal accountability. AI systems, by contrast, operate without consciousness, intentionality, or moral awareness. Their authority is functional rather than normative: they can influence belief and behavior, but they cannot bear responsibility for the consequences of their interpretations. This distinction is crucial, as it highlights the limits of algorithmic authority and underscores the continued necessity of human ethical reflection in religious life (Tillich, 1957).

The transformation of religious authority in the AI era therefore demands a conceptual redefinition of authority itself. Authority can no longer be understood as a one-way transmission of knowledge from teacher to disciple. Instead, it becomes dialogic and interactive, shaped by the active participation of users who assess, interpret, and negotiate the meanings generated by AI systems. From a phenomenological standpoint, this reflects a new form of religious consciousness—one that is less dependent on hierarchical structures and more oriented toward reflective engagement with mediated symbols. AI functions as a mediating agent of meaning rather than a spiritual teacher, influencing how truth and authority are perceived without fully replacing human interpretive agency (Tirosh-Samuelson, 2019). This development also signals a deeper epistemological shift from tradition-based authority to experience-based legitimacy. In the digital age, authority increasingly derives from the perceived effectiveness of spiritual experience rather than from historical lineage or institutional endorsement. If interaction with an AI system produces feelings of peace, insight, or transcendence, the experience itself becomes a source of legitimacy. Connolly's non-reductionist

understanding of religion accommodates this shift by recognizing that religious value is measured not only by doctrinal correctness but also by the depth and significance of lived experience. Yet this transformation carries inherent risks. When spiritual experience is reduced to algorithmic interaction, there is a danger that religiosity may lose its contemplative depth and become a form of automated consumption. The notion of “spiritual banality” captures this risk, where sacred meaning is flattened into data and religious guidance becomes a product rather than a reflective practice (Turkle, 2011).

A phenomenological analysis of digital religious experience further clarifies this transformation. Drawing on the tradition of Husserl, Eliade, and Smart, phenomenology seeks to describe religious experience as it is lived, without prematurely judging its metaphysical validity. From this perspective, interactions with spiritual AI systems must be taken seriously as phenomena of consciousness. When individuals experience calm, connection, or a sense of transcendence through digital interactions, these experiences are real in their subjective meaning, regardless of the non-human nature of the medium. Phenomenology thus allows us to acknowledge the authenticity of digital religious experience without conflating it with ontological claims about the divine status of technology. Connolly emphasizes that religious experience is always intentional, directed toward what believers perceive as sacred or meaningful. In digital contexts, this intentionality is transformed rather than erased. Believers direct their consciousness toward algorithmically mediated symbols that speak religious language and invoke sacred references. Although the object of engagement is technological, the structure of consciousness remains religious. This demonstrates that religious experience does not depend solely on the metaphysical nature of its object, but on the meaning it generates within human awareness (Leeuw & Gerardus, 1938).

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that the presence of artificial intelligence (AI) in religious practices presents a fundamental shift in how humans understand, experience, and interpret transcendence. Through Peter Connolly's phenomenological and hermeneutic approach, this research finds that AI cannot be viewed simply as a technological instrument, but rather as a new hermeneutic space where religious meaning is continuously negotiated and reflected upon. Phenomenologically, AI opens new horizons for religious experience: humans continue to direct their awareness to the transcendent, even though the mediation used is digital. Religious experience in algorithmic spaces confirms that the dimension of human spirituality is not lost in modernity, but finds new forms of expression through interactions with technological symbols and language. Meanwhile, hermeneutically, AI acts as an interpretive catalyst that expands the process of religious meaning-making. It shifts patterns of authority from hierarchical to participatory, where spiritual legitimacy emerges from a dialogical process between users, texts, and systems. However, this shift also demands critical awareness: without ethical reflection, digital spirituality can become trapped in algorithmic banality and lose its symbolic depth. Thus, AI presents a productive ambiguity for the study of religion: it simultaneously enriches and challenges understandings of faith, authority, and transcendental experience. In Connolly's framework, this phenomenon reminds us that religion has always lived in a dialectic between meaning and medium, between tradition and interpretation. In the digital age, this dialectic now plays out in an algorithmic space where humans continue to be interpretive beings, even when confronted with their own creation. This research contributes to the development of a digital transcendence paradigm in the study of religion: an understanding that modern spirituality does not end at the limits of technological rationality, but rather transforms through the reflective consciousness of humans who continue to search for meaning amidst a world filled with algorithms. AI, ultimately, is not a substitute for spiritual teachers, but rather a hermeneutic mirror that re-reveals who humans are creatures who constantly interpret, experience, and long for the divine.

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