HOMO RELIGIOSUS DIGITAL:
FAITH FORMATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Abstract— **This research captures the phenomenon of '*homo religiosus* digital', especially among younger faith believers. Indebted to the explanation from the classical work of Mircea Eliade's,** *The Sacred and the Profane,* **that the 'human of traditional societies is admittedly a *homo religiosus'*, it seeks the dynamics, even disruption, of faith formation among *homo religiosus* digital in the millennial generation. As an essential premise of this study, the inclusion of digital technology into their lives shapes the faith formation of*homo religious* digital.**

Keywords— *homo religiosus, digital world, stage theory of faith, dynamics of faith, homo religiosus digital*

I. INTRODUCTION

A. The Irruption of Homo Religiosus Digital

My interest in doing research on the theme of this article begins with the experience of teaching Religious Education course for university students who according to the age range belong to millennial generation. When I interact intensively with them in class, I see the dynamics, even the painful struggle of their faith in articulating God, faith, prayer, and community of faith. Discussions about these cases led me to know more deeply about their existence as a *homo religiosus* digital. I am also interested in exploring an appropriate formation of faith for millennials in the digital age.

The irruption of *homo religiosus digital* in Indonesian faith communities, has not gained much academic attention. Pioneering research by lecturers involved in faith formation at universities is marginal both in quantity or quality. There is an urgency to carry in-depth studies of the phenomenon of *homo religiosus digital* which is in the transition of faith in the digital age. This research poses two main questions. Who is the *homo religious digital*? How does their dynamicsin articulating faith contribute to the formation of faith in the digital era?

B. Review of Related Sudies

In the twenty-first century, we use digital media to recreate faith practices. We visit online shrines, take virtual pilgrimages, and incorporate social media into their 'spiritual routines.[1]' Despite its fertile field, the incorporation of social media into faith formation has not received much attention in the study of religion and digital technology. There have been attempts by millennials who contribute to our discussions about faith formation in the digital age. Faith formation in the digital ecology remains one understudied subject.

The rejection in discussing the incorporation of social media into faith formation has similarity with digital games. At least these four reasons influence for those who reject it. First, they consider social media as a form of entertainment for millennials. Second, they consider social media as an artificial form of expression. Third, they think digital technology as secular in nature. Fourth, they see digital world as unreal. Because games are assumed to be merely frivolous childish fun, mixing religion and gaming is problematic for many of us.[1]

Faith communities subtly negotiate the incorporation of digital technology into faith life. We evaluate and reflect on all aspects brought on the digital technology prior to incorporation. [2] We live in a world where digital technology is increasingly intersecting with faith life. The intersection changes the personal presentation of faith and the way millennials do faith.[3] Networked theology offers a conceptual image how the internet, as 'the network of networks', offers faith communities space to new forms of theological inquiries.[3]

Homo sapiens digital accepts digital enhancement as an integral fact of their human existence. They access the power of digital enhancements to complement innate abilities. They also use digital enhancements to facilitate better decision making.[4] I propose a new term 'homo religiosus digital' to refer to believing humans, especially millennials, who accept digital enhancement as an integral fact of their faith life. They access the power of digital enhancements to complement innate abilities and use them to solve faith issues.

II. RESEARCH METHOD AND METHODOLOGY

While engaged in teaching a group of multi-religious students attending my religion class this 2018 Spring semester, I research the phenomenon of *homo religious* digital within their lives. I hypothesize that they belong to this new *homo religious* digital at different levels. I see the necessity of reconsidering Eliade's *homo religiosus* and Fowler's stage theory of faith by taking into account new dialectics between the sacred and the digital in order to better articulate their dynamics of faith.

This research involves 74 university students whose date of birth were between 1997-2000. The amount of time spent to

connect online ranges from 5 to 20 hours. The average time allocated to connect online is about 13,5 hours/day. Respondents spend the usage of online connection 72,9% from data package and 17,1 from free service. *Whatsapp*, *Instagram*, *Line*, *Facebook*, *Youtube* rank top among others. *Wattpad*, *Webtoon*, Joox, and *Games*, such as *Mobile Legend*, *Ludo*, and *Heroes Arena*, follow it.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

A. Theoretical Framework

The dialectics between the sacred and the digital stretch from 'the sacralization of digital technology'[5] to 'digital religion.'[6] The proposed term '*homo religious* digital' needs further explorations in its content. It also requires investigations on the millennial avenues and venues of possibly new faith formation for the present X, Y, and Z generations. Recent initiatives on investigating this topic from an Indonesian perspective are relatively embryonal and require a return to the roots of our faith as a species.

Tertullian, one of the first Church Fathers, initiated the exploration of the dialectics between the contemporary world and religious belief by scrutinizing about "what does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?", juxtaposing the academic rhetoric of Aristotle's dialectic and logic with the profundities of Judeo-Christian theology. After reexamining Mircea Eliade's classical definition of *homo religiosus,* I now propose a new faith formation in the digital age. As a theoretical framework, I am utilizing James W. Fowler's dialectics between 'stage theory of faith and dynamics of faith.' [7]

Archaic societies tend to live as much as possible in the sacred or in close proximity to consecrated objects. The tendency is perfectly understandable, because, for primitives as for the man of all premodern societies, the *sacred* is equivalent to a *power*, and, in the last analysis, to *reality*. The sacred is saturated with *being*. Sacred power means reality and at the same time enduringness and efficacy. The polarity sacred-profane is often expressed as an opposition between real and unreal or pseudo-real. [8]

Mircea Eliade compares humans in archaic societies with the experience of humans without religious feeling. These humans live or wish to live in a desacralized world. The completely profane, desacralized cosmos is a recent discovery in the history of human spirit. Desacralization pervades the entire experience of the nonreligious humans of modern societies. They consequently find it increasingly difficult to rediscover the existential dimensions of religious humans in the archaic societies. [8]

I am indebted to James W. Fowler in reimagining faith formation in the digital age and the task of a faith community. Fowler understands the purpose of the Church as "ecologies both of care and of transformation.[9]" He further outlines pastoral care as consisting of "all the ways a community of faith, under the pastoral leadership, intentionally sponsor the awakening, shaping, rectifying, healing, and ongoing growth in the vocation of Christian persons and community, under the pressure and power of the in-breaking kingdom of God." [9]

Indebted to the works of Rudolf Otto, Eliade explains the phenomenon of analogical language. Language naively expresses the *tremendum*, or the *majestas*, or the *mysterium fascinans* by terms borrowed from the world of nature or from man's secular mental life. But we know that this analogical terminology is due precisely to human ability to express the *ganz andere*; all that goes beyond man's natural experience, language is reduced to suggesting by terms taken from that experience.[8]

B. Homo Sapiens Digital

High-speed internet increasingly becomes a daily need among millennials. They consider pending time and disconnection are not options anymore. The providence of high-speed internet guarantees them a connection. Pending time lessens connection. Disconnection expires it. Digital technology firstly and primarily is about connection when millennials incorporate it into their lives. Connections shape their deepest existence as a human being. The inclusion of digital technology shape their life wisdom.

Spending more time online becomes a simple way for them to stay connected in the digital world. On the contrary, spending less time online risk them for being less connected with, even disconnected from, the world. Disconnection means more than just a digital technology issue for millennials. It elevates as a great life issue. The world becomes an empty, dark place. Their world suddenly stops when they are disconnected. Without connection, they become no one.

The digital world contains important things that millenials see the necessity to always connect with it. Most important things are now uploaded online and they download them. Moreover, being updated with information is very important for them. Connecting online becomes an activity that shapes their lives. Without exaggerating it, connection means life for millennials. They live with the connection. They breathe with the connection. In a short, millennials see themselves as a generation of high connection.

Millennials see a connection as a window that allows them to see the world. On the contrary, disconnection pushes them to live outside this planet. Disconnection is like having a broken heart because of separation from the lover. Their lives become a void when they experience bad connection. Social media becomes like a 'diary' that millennials need to write on it without skipping even one day without it. Connection helps them exist. On the contrary, the lack of connection causes millennials suffering from loneliness, even emptiness.

Suffering from disconnection, millennials share their worries of missing important things in their lives. Losing connection causes them less updated with the latest information. Interrupted connection even turns them into outdated humans. More than just being less updated with information, they become less human when they suffer from disconnection. As one respondent metaphorizes connection as like writing a diary, some in effect turn empty pages when they only connect occasionally.

Millennials rely less on third-party providers that offer free internet access. Depending on third-party providers decreases their independence in entering into the digital world.

Dependence on third party-providers limits millennials in having internet access. They see the need for greater independence by having an internet connection. Purchasing unlimited data package fully delimits dependence on third-party providers. It guarantees connection that is important for millennials.

The deep effect on humanity because of disconnection tells the close relation between millennials and connection. Only a small percentage of respondents experience disconnection as having a minor effect on their lives. For the majority of respondents, connection means more than just voluminous information. Disconnection means more than just about losing connection with social media. Connection relates to the lives of millennials at its deepest level. Millennials suffer emptiness when disconnection interrupts life. It means even non-existence.

Despite their strong faith in connection, millennials are increasingly critical to its real problem related to it. They realize the danger of becoming antisocial when they play social media without any interruption. The human search for existence in the digital world may falter into loneliness. Their weakness, even inability to sign out from social media may end in digital addiction. When they are disconnected from social media, millennials understand it as a time for seeing real world. They finally realize that the real world is as playful as the digital one.

C. Faith Wisdom in the Digital Age

Browsing online religious sites is considerably slow still in traffic in comparison to accessing social media. Millennials occasionally visit online religious sites to look for perspectives on complicated issues, such as religious conversion, interfaith dating and marriage, joining other faith's religious service, and religious violence. Religious leaders, religious teachers, and parents play a significant role in providing them perspectives. Millennials consider faith formators as trusted figures in discussing the above issues.

Credibility becomes one great issue related to online religious sites for millennials. It takes for quite some times for them to discern certain sites as trusted, less trusted, or untrusted while they use them seeking answers for faith issues. As online religious sites offer diverse, even contrasting, answers, millennials need to discern them. Repeated visits provide millennials wisdom in categorizing certain sites as less trusted, even untrusted for offering simplified answers to complicated faith issues.

The credibility toward online religious sites reaches as high as 59,6%. 40,6% respondents express doubt with certain contentsin online sites. Many count on offline sources to assure faith in God. Some refer to Scriptures become the most reliable source in times of doubt. Even when millennials admit that they read Holy Scriptures only occasionally, they connect online more frequently to search for daily inspirations taken from scriptural verses. Instead of reading Scriptures in linear, they select verses that are close to their needs.

Despite rich information provided by online religious sites, millennials need still additional time to discern faith issues before taking a decision. They often need more than just instant answers offered by online sites. These issues require millennials to blend digital and faith wisdom. Without faith, digital wisdom limitedly helps millennials. Discernment becomes possible only when millennials enhance faith wisdom not only during formative years but throughout their lives. The unenhanced faith wisdom complicates discernment process.

Digital wisdom works dependently in solving faith issues for millennials. It requires them to link digital with faith wisdom. The incorporation of digital wisdom accelerates millennials in helping them making decisions on problematic issues. Homo religiosus digital combine both digital and faith wisdom in discerning disputable issues. Millennials may have a relatively high degree of incorporating digital technology into their lives. The level of faith wisdom faith shaped throughout lives often makes a difference among them.

Faith communities come as later players in outreaching homo religiosus digital. Predigital accents have influenced them in building the infrastructure of their digital presence. This infrastructure does not yet customize connection with millennials. Many online religious sites are more instructive than interactive in nature. The faith formators a represent more anonymous, even absent, while millennials expect personal connection with them. Despite their claim as an authoritative voice in faith issues, they do not yet become the primary source.

Millenials migrated half way into online religious sites in the hope of enhancing them in discussing disputable faith issues. They wait for religious sites to transform from disconnecting into connecting in character. Millennials wait for them to transform from restricted to accessible sites. They expect that that administrator who runs online sites can transform pending into real time. Based on their judgments on current conditions of online sites, millennials decide to migrate midway.

Similar situations happen with the digital presence of online faith facilitators. Some sites center on faith formators who control the conversation with visitors. Faith formators require visitors to follow the instruction in order to guide them to connect with faith formators who host the sites. Visitors need to wait for quite some times before faith formators connecting with them. Waiting, even delaying time can discourage millennials. For the sake of better connection, millennials take a step back by returning to offline faith formations.

The research finding informs their preference contacting offline faith formators to online religious sites. Millennials experience more connectedness with them based on past formative years. They consider the interactiveness of offline faith formators at a certain degree. The opportunity to speak directly to, or mediated by digital technology, they find that faith formators more personalized than reading issues online. While waiting for migration, they maximize the availability of offline sources in facilitating their disruptive journey.

The capacity to discern complex, even disputable, issues firstly and primarily characterizes homo sapiens digital. Processing available information using digital wisdom

becomes their task. Faith issues often resolve not instantly despite digital wisdom within their lives. Religious sites offers necessary information about faith-related issues voluminously. Realizing that their faith wisdom is in a formative stage, millennials as *homo religiosus* digital connect with faith formators to help them in discerning faith issues.

D. A Community of Connections

Faith formation in the digital age disrupts previously fixed relationship between *formator* and *formandi*. Rather than instructive, further hierarchical, connective characterizes the new relationship between them. Faith institutions need to transform into what I call "a community of connections." Without any willingness to reimagine faith formation, faith communities may lose a great number of millennials who actually wait for their digital presence. They enter into a transitional period of renewing their presence among millennials.

Faith communities in the transitional period build new infrastructures of their digital presence. Faith formators learn from millennials in incorporating digital world as new ecology. The incorporation of digital technology into faith institutions shapes the new infrastructure. On the contrary, their reluctance, further resistance, to include digital technology into their communities decelerates the process. Millenials hope that the transition from predigital to digital religion will accelerate without any postponement, even stoppage.

The transitional period also happens in the lives of millennials as faith believers living in the digital world. As James W. Fowler already mentioned, the transitional period can be painful for them.[7] The great percentage of them use faith idioms belonging to the scriptural world to address God. Borrowing idioms from past formative years also becomes part of their efforts in understanding prayer in the new ecology. It takes for quite sometimes for millennials to articulate faith using digital idioms. A few of them are not articulative yet with new idioms.

Online religious sites, in the transitional period, instead of providing instant answers for millennials, rather become a connecting place for millennials in learning faith wisdom. It can serve as an ecology for both millennials and faith formators to discern faith issues in depth. If online religious sites can transform from information storage into as what I call 'ecology of faith wisdom',millennials will equip themselves with competence necessary to discern faith issues in the digital era.

Instead of transmitting knowledge, problem-solving characterizes online religious sites. Faith formators come not as providing instant answers. They rather accompany millennials in investigating faith issues. Despite their expertise as an authoritative voice in faith issues, they position themselves as a companion in discernment. Faith formation in the digital age decenters religious leaders from becoming the authoritative, further from the danger of becoming authoritarian, voice. The design of faith program in the digital era centers on millennials.

Instead of putting them in training, communities incorporate millennials through faith-related activities. Since initiation, millennials have involved in each faith community as active members. This sense of initial connection challenges them to engage further into the faith community. The failure to involve millennials may cause a forced exodus from faith community. They may wander at least temporarily to search for a transitory home. On the contrary, when they witness that faith communities care for them, despite its imperfection, millennials prefer staying in it.

> In this millennial era, faith is questionable, because many of us are sometimes indifferent to our beliefs. Many millennials care not about faith because modernization sometimes makes us more interested in ourselves. However, not all of us are in such an indifference of faith. Many of us still see the importance of faith. We compose idioms about God to apple more millennials return to faith. These interesting idioms make us investigative about faith and the interest to know God more deeply comes back to life.[1]

The shifting process from predigital culture often meets resistance from faith communities. It takes great effort to fully incorporate digital culture into their bodies. Faith communities should reject stigma against digital culture. Without the willingness to embrace, at least to take into account, digital culture, faith communities may experience similar death like old sites. Millennials migrate from these sites when faith communities preserve predigital culture in connecting with them.

Shaped by religious communities that have been culturally predigital, millennials have searched new idioms of God and prayer by referring first to Scriptures and second to Tradition transmitted through previous faith formation. Although using predigital images, new understandings of them are implied that require faith formators in the digital era to read between the lines. We wait patiently millennials to search for new idioms about God, prayer, and other faith topics.

> When I was little, I always imagined that God was like the god of Neptune in the Spongebob cartoon. In my imagination, whatever I ask for will be given by God, for God is a God who always comes to me all the time. I always thought if I could meet God, when I had trouble in facing my school works or when I was sick. My imagination about God is too much when God I've been waiting for does not come.[2]

Despite the incorporation of digital technology into their spiritual life as millennials, the shifting from predigital to the digital image of God is yet underway. I witness subtle weaving

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[1] Citra Perdana Atmajanti W.P, "Tuhan Seperti Google" (April 16, 2018).
[2] Angela Merici Kharina Putri MP, "Doa Seperti Whatsapp" (April 16, 2018).

of conventional idioms for God taken from Scriptures and Traditions, and new faith experiences as *homo religiosus* digital. They position Scriptures and Traditions as the main sources in addressing God. When they seek new idioms for God, they take into account past faith formation.

> As a young man, even a young believer, I must be able to sort out the good from the bad. When surfing the internet and opening adult sites, Positive Internet appears. I accept it as a warning from God. I am grateful to him for he has protected me from sin….God never leaves us under any circumstances. When I surf the internet, God never leaves me. God protects me like Positive Internet .... Positive Internet is one of God's roles that reminds me to do good and harmless in life.[3]

Similar to their addressing God, a sense of formality shapes millenials in understanding prayer. Slightly different from addressing God, millennials experience greater toleration in composing new idioms about prayer. Many prefer 'communication' to 'connection.' The preferred idiom 'communication' sounds formal than 'connection.' Few find more freedom in incorporating their experiences as millennials in understanding prayer. Despite formal idioms about prayer, their faith experiences are, by character, millennial.

> In the digital world, prayer is like a *Whatsapp*. How does it happen? For me, at times, my prayer is not read, only read by God. But my prayers are often answered by God. I have many stories about prayer, including exasperation and desperation. All are connected together beautifully. I greatly admire and constantly befriend Him.[4] … I always remind myself that when God has not replied me, God may busy, and may have not yet had time to open his *Whatsapp*.[5]

Similar to what digital educators call it 'pedagogical mashup', millennials seek an appropriate pedagogy, even andragogy, to fully live in faith communities. The phenomenon of 'faith mashup' happens in a transitional period when millennials seek a new pedagogy to connect with faith communities where they affiliate with. Rather than rejecting predigital religion entirely, they borrow some parts of it to survive in digital religion.

> God is like Google. Google is an application where we can find everything we want to look for without being limited by space and time. Anywhere and anytime we are, we can access it through an internet connection. God is the ruler of the world who knows about our way of life as his creature. God knows

answers to the life problems that we often complain about. We can find all the answers we want to know by way of praying to God. Through prayer, we talk to God directly wherever we are without any conditions.[6]

On the other side, millennials find the advantage of borrowing faith idioms belonging to the predigital religion. Borrowing idioms belonging to predigital religion helps them to survive faith during the transitional period. It also helps them to realize the necessity of composing new idioms of faith. Rather than satisfying with mere borrowing, transitional period leads them to maturity by composing new faith idioms. Newly composed idioms articulate a faith that is truly characteristic of millennials living digital religion.

> That is why I love to use a rather uncanny metaphor of prayer like a toll. When entering the toll booth, we have to stop at the counter queue, but after going through the queue counter, the trip feels very smooth. We do not have to stop because there are traffic lights, no police cars, no obstacles at all. Just like me who at the beginning of the conversation falter in expressing feelings, once I can talk, I smoothly communicate without any obstacles.[7]

One respondent composes a digital idiom 'signal' for prayer. There are times when she experiences bad signal. Similar to chatting with friends, she sometimes also experiences pending, an even unanswered response in prayer. She makes meaning of pending response as a time for God to see her unfailing efforts in connecting with Him. When God answers not yet her posting, she understands it as a waiting period for her part. Waiting for pending answer happens as a normal activity when she chats with her online friends.

> It turns out that my parents break not their marriage promise. Lord Jesus also answers my prayer even though I have to wait. God knows the best and the best time when all petitions are answered. God never fails to grant us. When God grants not yet our prayers, God wants to see our best efforts. Prayer is sometimes like a pending and unanswered signal.[8]

Another respondent chooses idiom 'always on' to address God's action in connecting with his people. He borrows this idiom from a hashtag by an internet provider. The internet provider promises its users of uninterrupted connection. 'Always on' is an idiom that refers to a continuous connection. The respondent underlines his belief in God as Life as his reading of Scriptures tell it. Prayer becomes a faith moment

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[3] Alexander Fridolin Diomora Samalinggai, "Tuhan Seperti Internet Positif" (April 16, 2018).

[4] Angela Merici Kharina Putri MP, "Doa Seperti Whatsapp"

[5] Ibidem.

[6] Citra Perdana Atmajanti W.P, "Tuhan Seperti Google" (April 16, 2018).

[7] Kristiana Wening Utami, "Tol Menuju Tuhan" (April 16, 2018).

[8] Natalia Renny Destwina S, "Sinyal Tuhan Yang Tersendat" (April 16, 2018)

for him as millennial to experience God as the One who is 'always On'

> For days I prayed, but my prayer never seemed to receive an answer. I almost give up praying to God and consider prayer as a nonsense… God is always with people who believe in his power. Papa and mama reunite. They always love each other because what God unites they should not separate it… God's way is always special… God givesnot a big rock in the middle of the road, but an invisible pebble only. I know that God is 'always on.'[9]

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The phenomenon of *homo religiosus* digital in faith communities drives this initial research from an Indonesian perspective. *Homo religiosus* digital are different from archaic societies "who tend to live as much as possible in the sacred or in close proximity to consecrated objects." *Homo religiosus* in the premodern societies, as Mircea Eliade underlines it, correlates 'the sacred' to 'power' and 'reality'. *Homo religiosus* digital correlates 'the sacred' to 'connection.' Their closeness to connection shapes new idioms of God, prayer, dan faith formation.

The connection becomes a consecrated word that leads formators in imagining faith formation designed for millennials in the digital era. Millennials are the generation of connection. Faith formation for millennials needs new idioms that take into account their digital experiences of breathing with a connection. Digital idioms for God and prayer reshape their new image of the faith community as a community of connection. Crafting only catchy idioms without shifting from predigital pedagogy will terminate faith formation in the digital era prematurely.

The encounters with millennials inspire faith formators to develop a connection pedagogy in the digital era. Instead of imagining faith formation as centering on formator, connection pedagogy centers on millennials. Instead of understanding faith of formation as transmission to millennials, connection pedagogy sees it even as disruption. We shift from teacher to facilitator that accompany millennials in faith formation. The content of connection pedagogy needs further elaboration.

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