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Artificial Intelligence, Digital Platforms, and the Commodification of Spirituality: Ethical Perspectives in the Digital Age

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Abstract

The growing presence of artificial intelligence (AI) in digital platforms is transforming the way people experience spirituality. Today, many people use apps, social media websites, and AI tools for meditation, prayer, and spiritual guidance, making these more accessible than ever before. Spiritual practices that were once closely tied to religious communities, traditions and personal experience are now increasingly facilitated by algorithms, mobile applications, social media and AI-driven systems. While these developments enable people from different parts of the world to connect and explore spirituality easily, they also bring market logics that commodify spiritual experiences. This chapter argues that digital platforms often use algorithms and user data to recommend personalized spiritual experiences that keep people engaged, which risks spirituality becoming a consumable product designed for engagement, visibility, and profit. Rather than a meaningful path of personal growth or community connection. This chapter further raises concerns about authenticity, privacy, surveillance, and possible algorithmic manipulation. Finally, it concludes that AI is not only a tool for spiritual democratization but also for spiritual commodification, requiring critical ethical reflection and governance.

Keywords: Digital Spirituality, Artificial Intelligence, Commodification, Contemporary Spirituality, Algorithmic Curation.

Introduction

In the past few decades, the relationship between spirituality and technology has undergone a profound transformation. Spirituality has always had to adjust to technological advances, from the printing press making sacred texts more accessible to more and more people to digital platforms now playing an increasing role in the way people seek meaning and transcendence. The scale and nature of this mediation is what makes it different in the present moment. In the present, spirituality is embedded in a digital infrastructure of commercial interests, algorithmic curation, artificial intelligence (AI), and data-based business models. The digitization,

datafication, and monetization of spirituality raise critical questions on the nature of spiritual experience and spiritual authority in contemporary society.

Digital media has not just created new avenues for spiritual communication, it has also changed the nature of the formation and maintenance of spiritual communities, beliefs and practices. Campbell (2012) conceptualizes this change in terms of the networked religion, and explains that religious and spiritual life are now increasingly organized through interconnected digital networks. Characteristics of networked religion include online religion communities, changing modalities of authority, hybrid modes of practice, and multiple places of religious engagement. Spirituality is therefore no longer confined to sacred places but is now becoming part of daily interactions online.

This shift has significant implications for spiritual authority and participation. Individuals don't have to rely entirely on religious institutions, clergy, and established traditions for guidance. In the modern era, social media, online communities, digital influencers and algorithmically curated content are also significant sources of spiritual knowledge and practice. In the context of this growing commercialization of spirituality, attention, engagement, and monetization can be important factors in deciding the visibility and marginalization of spiritual voices. Thus, spirituality is starting to be integrated into larger scales of digital commercialization.

Artificial intelligence is the latest and possibly most powerful iteration of the digital revolution that is transforming spirituality. AI-powered recommendation systems, spiritual chatbots, content-generation tools, and personalized digital services are increasingly influencing how people access religious knowledge, engage in spiritual practices, and seek guidance on existential questions. These technologies have opened up access to spiritual resources and new possibilities of participation for those who were previously limited by geographic, social or institutional barriers. Meanwhile, they have also made spirituality more marketable by infusing spiritual techniques into digital systems that are powered by algorithms, data, and business models based on engagement. As AI assumes a greater role in mediating spiritual experiences, important ethical questions arise concerning authenticity, spiritual authority, privacy, and the commercialization of the sacred.

It is worth being careful about how this transformation gets framed. Cheong and Nord (2026), introducing a recent special issue on religious institutions and digital technology, argue that change of this kind rarely amounts to a straightforward replacement of old by new. Digital tools have opened up new ways to communicate, enabled new forms of religious and spiritual practice, and let religious leaders, communities, and influencers reach far beyond their physical congregations. But this same expansion has also created real tension between innovation and tradition, between disruption and continuity, as digital technologies reshape how authority, community, and practice get negotiated. Against this background, the chapter

examines the commercialization of spirituality in the digital age, explores how artificial intelligence is transforming spiritual markets, and discusses the ethical challenges arising from AI-mediated spirituality.

The Commercialization of Spirituality

The relationship between spirituality and commerce is not a new phenomenon. In the past, religious institutions have relied on economic resources to ensure the maintenance of places of worship, to carry out charitable works, and to spread their messages. Today's spirituality, however, is different from the past in the ways that market concepts are increasingly influencing the creation, distribution, and consumption of spiritual beliefs, practices, and identities. This has been accelerated by the rapid proliferation of digital technologies, which have opened new spaces where spiritual practice is no longer limited to physical communities but mediated via digital platforms, mobile applications, social media and online networks. As a result, spirituality is being integrated into the commercial digital space where visibility, engagement and consumer participation are all valued.

Recent research indicates that digital technology has revolutionized spiritual experience. These developments have led to a hybrid spirituality as described by Philips (2025) in a systematic review of literature on spirituality in the digital age, which is continually negotiated between individual religious experience and digital mediation. Spiritual activities like prayer, worship, meditation, and scriptural reflection are increasingly facilitated by online communities, digital applications, and virtual interactions. These technologies have brought opportunities for participation by making spiritual resources available beyond geographical and institutional boundaries and by providing opportunities for people to explore a variety of religious traditions based on their interests and needs.

A greater availability of spiritual resources has helped to promote a wider democratization of spiritual life. People no longer need to rely on religious bodies or recognized spiritual leaders for direction. Rather, they can access sacred texts, online communities, digital creations, and a variety of spiritual practices via digital media. This has enabled many people to experience a more individualized spiritual path, but has also led to a paradox of authority for them as described by Philips (2025). The lines are becoming more blurred between recognized authorities, influencers, practitioners and ordinary users, as anyone can offer spiritual teachings or claim religious expertise online. The issues of authenticity, credibility, and legitimacy are thus more complicated, especially when spiritual knowledge is influenced by popularity and not depth from a theological or experiential perspective.

Digital environments are also changing the expression and experience of spirituality. Virtual communities provide individuals the opportunity to create more personal forms of faith in their own way, construct spiritual supports, and engage

collectively across cultural and geographical divides in different spiritual ways. These digital spaces are also creating a culture of participation where visibility and engaging the audience are the main factors. Philips (2025) points out that, in digital spirituality, faith is often reduced to being superficial and commodity-oriented, as expressions of faith are frequently evaluated through metrics such as likes, followers, shares, and views. Consequently, spiritual practices risk becoming performative, with content designed to maximize attention rather than promoting reflection or inner transformation. In such contexts, public visibility may become mistaken for spiritual significance.

The commercialization of spirituality extends beyond digital visibility to the wider organization of contemporary spiritual life. York (2001) argues that many forms of contemporary spirituality, particularly those associated with the New Age movement, have developed within the broader context of liberal capitalism. Rather than existing outside market systems, spirituality increasingly operates through them, offering a wide range of spiritual products, services, workshops, retreats, books, coaching programmes, and healing practices that compete for public attention. People are more and more being seen as consumers, choosing spiritual practices based upon their preferences, lifestyle and self-development rather than enduring a religious tradition over the long term.

Focusing on the consumer-oriented aspect of modern spiritual life, Carrette and King (2004), argue that spirituality has increasingly been absorbed into consumer culture. They argue that spiritual beliefs and practices frequently lose their religious, historical and moral context and are resold as commodities and products for personal fulfilment, happiness, productivity or wellness. During this process, spirituality is not what is shared as a moral or religious framework, but rather it is a personalized product that can be bought, customized and consumed. Market values such as choice, convenience, efficiency, and individual satisfaction increasingly shape how spirituality is presented and experienced.

These commercial dynamics have been enhanced by digital technologies which extend the reach of spiritual entrepreneurs, influencers and organizations beyond religious settings. Social media platforms and subscription-based apps as well as online learning environments have opened up new avenues for spiritual content monetization, and the logic of digital markets is increasingly shaping the production, presentation and valuation of spiritual content.

Despite these concerns, the commercialization of spirituality must not be seen as entirely negative. Digital technologies have enabled spiritual understanding to be more widely distributed and have brought people into the faith community who may not otherwise have had access to it. Nevertheless, when market success and consumer demand increasingly shape spiritual content, the distinction between

spiritual formation and commercial consumption becomes progressively harder to maintain.

These developments set the context for understanding AI's growing role in contemporary spirituality. AI has not just introduced the commercialization of spirituality, it has accelerated existing trends by enabling unprecedented levels of personalization, automation, and digital mediation, within a commercial environment that was already well established.

Artificial Intelligence and the Transformation of Spiritual Markets

Artificial intelligence is the latest big shift in the digital transformation of spirituality. Earlier the internet largely increased the access to spiritual resources and online communities, AI now has introduced unprecedented ways of creating, interpreting, and delivering spiritual content. The shift towards personalization, interaction, and automation in spiritual engagement is accelerated by machine learning, natural language processing and generative AI. Artificial intelligence is no longer only a communication tool, it functions as an active mediator of spiritual knowledge and practice, shaping the ways people access spiritual guidance, understand religious teachings, and engage with faith communities.

Artificial intelligence has expanded opportunities for spiritual engagement by making religious resources available beyond geographical, institutional, and temporal constraints. AI-powered applications for prayer, meditation, and mindfulness enable individuals to access spiritual guidance whenever required, thereby reducing barriers associated with physical religious spaces or the availability of spiritual mentors (Brumec & Platovnjak, 2025). AI-powered systems have also expanded participation, enabling scriptural learning, virtual religious communities, multilingual availability of sacred texts and personalised spiritual assistance from various faiths (Chanda, 2025; Alkhouri, 2024).

One of the most visible applications of AI is the development of intelligent digital tools that assist individuals in their daily religious practices. AI applications increasingly assist individuals in maintaining religious practice through prayer reminders, fasting notifications, multilingual translation of sacred texts. AI is also used to organise and search scriptures, answer religious questions and create online spaces where people can discuss their beliefs. These applications not only improve convenience but also enable believers to participate more actively in religious life despite geographical, linguistic, or physical barriers (Alkhouri, 2024).

Moreover, AI systems tailor spiritual information by leveraging algorithms that draw from the existing databases and user interaction tendencies. While personalisation may improve accessibility and user satisfaction, it also risks reinforcing algorithmic bias and creating spiritual echo chambers in which individuals are repeatedly exposed to similar beliefs and perspectives. Rather than encouraging

critical reflection or deeper spiritual exploration, recommendation systems may prioritise emotionally engaging or commercially successful content, limiting exposure to diverse religious traditions and interpretations (Brumec & Platovnjak, 2025).

These developments have also reshaped the spiritual marketplace. Digital platforms increasingly employ AI to personalise spiritual content, recommend meditation programmes, curate religious videos, promote online courses, and deliver tailored devotional material. Personalisation has undoubtedly enhanced user experience by allowing individuals to access content that aligns with their beliefs and interests. At the same time, it has strengthened the commercial logic of digital spirituality. AI systems are designed to maximise engagement by analysing user behaviour and continuously refining recommendations. As a result, spiritual content is increasingly selected not only for its religious or philosophical value but also for its capacity to attract attention and sustain user engagement within digital environments.

The growing commercial use of AI has further expanded opportunities for spiritual entrepreneurs, religious organisations, and digital content creators. AI enables the rapid production of devotional material, educational resources, guided meditations, religious videos, and personalised learning experiences at relatively low cost. It also supports subscription-based services, premium digital courses, AI-assisted coaching, and personalised spiritual applications that transform spiritual guidance into scalable digital services. Brumec and Platovnjak (2025) note that many AI spiritual platforms now operate explicitly on subscription models or sell premium content, which raises real ethical concerns about the monetisation of sacred practice. Spirituality, in other words, is being drawn ever more tightly into broader digital economies, where innovation, personalisation, and commercial sustainability sit uneasily alongside religious and spiritual objectives.

Although these developments have expanded access to spiritual knowledge and created new opportunities for religious participation, they also alter the relationship between individuals, technology, and spiritual authority. Importantly, commercial expansion does not automatically generate trust or adoption. A study of astrology application usage among Indian youth and adults found that while the vast majority of respondents were aware of such platforms, only a small fraction reported actually using them, with most continuing to prefer face-to-face consultation for reasons of credibility and personalised engagement (Mishra et al., 2025). Even among those who held strong belief in astrology, trust in digital platforms remained notably low, suggesting that cultural familiarity with a spiritual practice does not readily translate into acceptance of its AI-mediated equivalent. If AI, as a system, becomes a mediator between seekers and sacred texts, there is always the room for debate about authenticity, trust, human oversight, and profit motives inherent in the technology. But it is not only a question of whether AI can assist spiritual practice that needs to be addressed, rather the question of how its increasing impact is changing

the nature and purpose of modern spirituality or more precisely, how such changes are affecting its ethical underpinnings, explored in the next section.

Ethical Concerns in AI-Mediated Spirituality

The increasing integration of artificial intelligence into spiritual life presents ethical questions that extend beyond the technical concerns commonly associated with AI. While issues such as privacy, transparency, bias, and accountability remain important, AI-mediated spirituality also raises questions concerning authenticity, spiritual authority, human relationships, and the commercialization of the sacred. These concerns emerge because AI is not simply a technological tool; it increasingly mediates how individuals seek meaning, engage with religious traditions, and experience spirituality. As a result, ethical reflection must consider both the responsible development of AI systems and their implications for the integrity of spiritual life.

One of the most widely discussed concerns relates to the authenticity of AI-mediated spiritual experiences. AI-powered systems can generate prayers, devotional reflections, scriptural interpretations, and personalised responses to spiritual questions within seconds. Effective as they may be in terms of ease of access and convenience, such tools cannot fully capture the historical, cultural, emotional and existential contexts that underlie religious beliefs and spiritual practice. Chanda (2025) suggests that a lack of understanding of humans could lead to cultural insensitive understandings or an over-simplification of the complexities of religious experience. In this sense, AI should be understood as a tool that supports spiritual engagement rather than as a substitute for the wisdom, empathy, and discernment traditionally passed on by spiritual leaders and communities.

Closely related to authenticity is the changing nature of spiritual relationships. All religious and spiritual communities have traditionally focused on embodied practices, communal worship, interpersonal guidance and ritual experiences. Digital technologies offer opportunity for virtual participation, but scholars warn that technology should not take the place of these important aspects of spiritual life. Ojieabu and Oyinloye (2026) state that the use of digital technologies must contribute to the enhancement of real spiritual encounter, not its degradation. Although AI can facilitate worship, learning, and communication, genuine spiritual transformation continues to depend upon personal reflection, human relationships, ethical commitment, and communal participation. Relying on AI too heavily will otherwise lead to a spirituality that is merely a collection of automated interactions rather than a lived and transformative experience.

The growing influence of AI also raises questions concerning spiritual authority and trust. Digital technologies have already broadened access to spiritual knowledge and enabled individuals to seek guidance from a wide range of online

sources. AI takes this process a step further by generating religious content, recommending spiritual resources, and responding to complex existential questions. As Philips (2025) observes, digital spirituality has contributed to a paradox of authority in which traditional religious institutions increasingly share influence with online communities, content creators, and digital technologies. When AI systems mediate between individuals and sacred knowledge, it becomes ever more difficult to assess the credibility, authenticity, and theological dependability of spiritual guidance. Algorithmic systems may unintentionally privilege dominant religious perspectives while marginalising minority traditions, reinforcing existing inequalities rather than promoting genuine religious diversity.

Privacy is another major ethical concern in AI-mediated spirituality. AI systems depend upon extensive collections of personal information to deliver personalised recommendations and interactive services. Within spiritual contexts, this information may include prayer histories, religious preferences, spiritual struggles, devotional habits, or deeply personal conversations concerning meaning, suffering, and faith. Such information represents one of the most intimate forms of personal data and therefore demands particularly careful protection. Chanda (2025) and Alkhouri (2024) emphasise that the responsible use of AI within religious settings requires informed consent, transparency, secure data management, and robust safeguards against unauthorised access or misuse. A right to privacy for spiritual information is not just important to build user trust, but is also vital to maintaining spiritual dignity and confidentiality that is valued by many faiths.

Beyond concerns of privacy lies a broader ethical issue concerning the commercialization of spiritual data. Contemporary AI systems operate within digital economies that rely on continuous data collection, behavioural analysis, and personalised recommendations to maximise user engagement. As individuals interact with prayer applications, meditation platforms, AI spiritual assistants, or religious chatbots, they generate digital information that can reveal highly personal aspects of their beliefs, values, and spiritual journeys. When such information becomes valuable for improving algorithms, predicting behaviour, or supporting commercial business models, deeply personal expressions of faith risk being transformed into marketable data. Questions arise on the ethical implications of enabling sacred experiences to be used as tools of data-driven economies, and how commercial markets could slowly reshape the production and flow of spiritual knowledge.

Spirituality is also being evaluated and experienced differently because of commercialisation. Digital platforms tend to reward visibility and engagement over depth. Philips (2025) argues that digital spirituality increasingly runs on the logic of likes, followers, and shares, as if popularity were somehow evidence of spiritual significance. Artificial intelligence intensifies this tendency by recommending content that is most likely to maximise interaction, reinforcing commercially successful forms

of spirituality while limiting exposure to alternative perspectives. As a result, in the future it could be possible that market value might rise to the forefront to the detriment of theological and doctrinal quality, moral responsibility and authentic spiritual formation.

Ethical concerns also include questions of fairness and inclusion. Although AI can make many spiritual resources more widely available, this is not to say that there will be equal access to these services. Access to AI-mediated spiritual services depends upon internet connectivity, technological infrastructure, digital literacy, and financial resources, all of which remain unevenly distributed across societies. An important study on churches and their services during the COVID-19 pandemic was recently published by Campbell (2023). The results of the study show that many churches did not have sufficient internet, appropriate devices and technical equipment for online services available. Clergy as well as the members of the congregations studied were in many cases lacking in digital skills and in training to become digitally competent. Smaller and less-resourced churches were particularly disadvantaged in the shift towards digital and AI-assisted forms of worship. Individuals and communities with limited technological access or digital literacy may therefore experience increasing exclusion from emerging forms of digital spirituality. Algorithmic bias in AI systems that have been trained on mostly dominant languages, cultures and religious traditions can furthermore cause disadvantage and marginalization for minority faiths all over the world and therefore need to be tackled during the development of these systems, not only from a technological point of view but also from a more culturally, lingually and religiously sensitive angle.

These ethical challenges suggest that discussions surrounding AI in spirituality should move beyond a simple assessment of technological benefits and risks. The central question is not whether artificial intelligence should be used in spiritual contexts but how it can be developed and employed in ways that respect the values underlying spiritual life. Ethical AI within spiritual settings should promote authenticity, protect privacy, preserve religious diversity, strengthen rather than replace human relationships, and ensure that commercial interests do not undermine the deeper purposes of spiritual practice. Achieving these goals will require a variety of people including technologists, ethicists, theologians, religious communities, policymakers, and AI developers to establish governance frameworks that balance technological innovation with spiritual integrity.

The ethical challenges of AI-mediated spirituality arise because the sacred situated within digital environments is shaped by commercial interests, algorithms, and data-driven technologies. As AI becomes more deeply integrated into spiritual life, the challenge will not simply be managing technological progress but ensuring that spirituality does not lose its human, relational, and transcendent character.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that artificial intelligence has come to occupy a dual role in contemporary spirituality. On the one hand, it offers an unprecedented level of accessibility and democracy for those seeking to engage in spiritual practice. People all over the world are now able to engage in spiritual practice in ways that were previously the preserve of institutional religion and restricted by factors such as geography and language. On the other hand, this same accessibility is structured by commercial logics that were already reshaping spirituality before AI arrived, and that AI has since intensified. The personalization of spirituality via algorithms, subscription models, and engagement-driven recommendations actively determines which forms of spirituality become more visible, popular and influential.

Concerns surrounding the issues of authenticity, spiritual authority, privacy and the potential for manipulation by algorithms have become central to an understanding of the current spiritual landscape, particularly where AI systems are providing access to sacred knowledge and thereby raising issues of credibility and depth of theology as these are measured against the yardstick of visibility and performance in the marketplace. Furthermore, the collection and use of personal spiritual data raises its own concerns. Because such data is bound up with the intimate nature of an individual's spiritual experience, its incorporation into the data economy means that experience is increasingly evaluated by its capacity to hold attention, with the most emotionally resonant or commercially viable content receiving the greatest visibility. The wide variety of traditions and perspectives within the religious spectrum are constantly at risk of being stripped of their individuality and reduced to their most basic form in a bid to sustain interest for as long as possible. None of this is to say that AI's effects on spirituality have to be negative. While it's true that for many people digital platforms have served up a cacophony of spiritually charged consumer goods to purchase and download, for a lot of others these platforms have actually enabled them to participate more fully than they otherwise would in spiritual life. If the challenges that AI-facilitated spirituality poses are to be addressed adequately, they will need to be tackled by those with a combination of technical and spiritual expertise, drawing together technologists and the religiously committed along with their respective institutional and organizational representatives, and treated as a matter of ongoing policy and program development, rather than as a series of discrete issues dealt with once and then set aside. In short, as more of our lives come to be mediated by AI, we need to work toward spiritual practices that remain answerable to more than just the market.

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