



Homo Liturgicus in Digital Culture: Reconstructing Youth Spiritual Formation through James K. A. Smith's Theological Anthropology

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Abstract:

The rapid expansion of digital culture has significantly transformed the ways young Catholics constructed identity, developed relationships, and practiced their faith, raising new challenges for Christian spiritual formation. This study examined how James K. A. Smith's concept of *homo liturgicus* provided a theological framework for understanding spiritual formation beyond the transmission of doctrinal knowledge. Using a qualitative theological library research approach, the study critically analyzed Smith's major works, Matthew 28:19–20, and recent scholarship on digital religion, theological anthropology, and youth spirituality. The analysis demonstrated that spiritual formation was fundamentally shaped through *habitus*, embodied practices, and rightly ordered desires rather than through cognitive instruction alone. It further showed that digital culture functioned as a system of cultural liturgies that continually formed attention, imagination, and affection. A reinterpretation of the Great Commission revealed that Christian discipleship emphasized forming disciples who embodied Christ's teachings through faithful practice rather than merely acquiring theological knowledge. The study concluded that youth spiritual formation should integrate theological reflection, biblical discipleship, and embodied Christian practices to cultivate mature faith within contemporary digital culture. This conceptual framework also offered a constructive contribution to the development of Asian empirical theology and provided a foundation for future empirical research on youth ministry in digitally mediated contexts.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital technology has profoundly transformed the ways people communicate, construct identity, cultivate relationships, and experience religious life. For young people, digital media no longer function merely as communication tools but have become a *digital lifeworld* in which everyday decisions, desires, values, and identities are continuously shaped. Social media algorithms, the attention economy, and immersive digital environments influence not only what individuals know but also how they perceive reality and imagine the good life. Consequently, the challenge facing the Church today extends beyond the effective use of digital platforms for evangelization. It concerns a more fundamental theological question: how does digital culture shape the formation of Christian identity and spirituality? As Campbell (2013) argues, digital media are not simply technological instruments but environments in which religious beliefs and practices are negotiated and reconstructed. Likewise, Campbell and Evolvi (2020) emphasize that digital technologies

increasingly influence the ways religious communities understand authority, participation, and lived faith.

The significance of this issue becomes even more apparent in the context of youth ministry. Numerous pastoral initiatives have successfully adopted digital media to disseminate biblical teachings, catechetical materials, online retreats, and evangelization programs. Nevertheless, the availability of abundant religious information has not necessarily resulted in deeper Christian discipleship. Young Catholics may consume countless sermons, podcasts, or inspirational messages while simultaneously being formed by the rhythms of consumerism, instant gratification, self-presentation, and algorithmic validation. This paradox suggests that spiritual formation cannot be reduced to the transmission of theological knowledge alone. As Smith (2016) provocatively observes, modern Christianity frequently assumes that human beings are merely "brains on a stick," believing that "if you just get the ideas right, the behavior will follow" (Smith, 2016). Such an assumption neglects the formative power of embodied practices, habits, and desires that shape everyday life.

Recent scholarship has increasingly explored the relationship between digital culture and religious practice. Studies in digital religion have demonstrated that online environments reshape religious authority, communal participation, and spiritual identity (Campbell, 2013; Campbell & Evolvi, 2020). Research on youth ministry likewise highlights the necessity of integrating digital literacy into Christian education (Oliver et al., 2020; Cowan, 2024). Other scholars have investigated how digital environments influence moral development, attention, and patterns of religious participation among young people (Mullen, 2025; Szwed, 2025). Although these studies provide valuable insights into the opportunities and challenges of digital ministry, they predominantly approach digital technology as an instrument of communication or pastoral strategy. Comparatively little attention has been given to the anthropological assumptions underlying Christian formation, particularly concerning how digital practices cultivate desires, habits, and embodied dispositions. Consequently, an important research gap remains regarding the formative relationship between digital culture and Christian discipleship through the lens of theological anthropology.

James K. A. Smith offers a compelling conceptual framework for addressing this gap through his notion of *homo liturgicus*. Drawing upon the Augustinian tradition, Smith argues that human beings are fundamentally not *thinking beings* but *desiring beings*. In his well-known formulation, "you are what you love" (Smith, 2016). Human action is therefore shaped less by abstract ideas than by the practices, rituals, and habits that educate desire. According to Smith (2009), cultural practices function as "liturgies" because they "*calibrate our hearts by shaping our loves*" (Smith, 2009). Shopping malls, social media platforms, entertainment industries, and digital algorithms therefore become forms of cultural liturgies that continuously direct human affection toward particular visions of the good life. From this perspective, digital culture should not merely be understood as a technological environment but as a formative ecosystem that educates desire, imagination, and embodied practice. Such an approach

significantly broadens theological reflection on youth spirituality by shifting the focus from information transfer to the formation of habits and affections.

Building upon Smith's theological anthropology, this article seeks to reconstruct Christian spiritual formation for young people within contemporary digital culture. Unlike previous studies that primarily evaluate the effectiveness of digital media for evangelization, this article examines digital culture as a formative liturgical environment and proposes a model of spiritual formation grounded in *homo liturgicus*, *habitus*, and an embodied reinterpretation of Matthew 28:19–20. The originality of this study lies in integrating Smith's anthropology, theories of digital culture, and biblical discipleship into a coherent theological framework for youth formation. Using a theological library research approach, this study aims to demonstrate that authentic Christian formation requires more than the communication of doctrinal knowledge; it demands the re-education of desire through embodied practices, communal worship, and Christ-centered habits. In doing so, the article contributes to the ongoing development of Asian empirical theology by offering a theological paradigm that engages the lived realities of digitally connected young Catholics.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative theological library research approach to examine the relationship between James K. A. Smith's theological anthropology, digital culture, and the spiritual formation of young Catholics. Library research is appropriate for theological inquiry because it aims to develop conceptual and theological arguments through the critical interpretation of biblical texts, theological traditions, and scholarly literature rather than generating statistical generalizations (Bevans, 2002; Zaluchu, 2020).

The primary sources consisted of James K. A. Smith's major works, namely *Desiring the Kingdom* (2009), *Imagining the Kingdom* (2013), *You Are What You Love* (2016), and *Awaiting the King* (2017), together with Matthew 28:19–20 as the biblical foundation for Christian discipleship. Secondary sources included peer-reviewed journal articles and academic books published mainly within the last decade on digital religion, youth spirituality, theological anthropology, and Christian formation. Priority was given to recent international publications to ensure engagement with current scholarly discussions (Campbell & Evolvi, 2020; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Data were collected through a systematic literature search, purposive selection of relevant sources, intensive reading, note-taking, and thematic categorization. The selected literature met three criteria: relevance to Smith's theological anthropology, discussion of digital culture and youth spirituality, and theological reflection on Christian discipleship. The data were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis combined with theological reflection. The analysis involved identifying Smith's critique of rationalistic anthropology, examining the formative role of *habitus* and embodied practices, interpreting these concepts within contemporary digital culture, and correlating the findings with Matthew 28:19–20 to formulate a theological framework for youth spiritual formation (Osmer, 2008; Snyder, 2019). The study therefore

offers a conceptual theological model that may serve as a foundation for future empirical research on youth ministry in digital contexts.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Homo Liturgicus as a Critique of Rationalistic Anthropology

The analysis demonstrates that one of the fundamental weaknesses of contemporary models of spiritual formation lies in their underlying anthropological assumption. Much of Christian education continues to assume that human transformation occurs primarily through the acquisition of theological knowledge. Consequently, catechesis, preaching, and discipleship programs frequently emphasize doctrinal instruction, biblical literacy, and cognitive understanding as the principal means of spiritual growth. While these elements remain indispensable, they are insufficient to explain why individuals often profess orthodox beliefs yet continue to embody practices shaped by consumerism, individualism, and digital culture.

James K. A. Smith identifies this reductionist understanding of humanity as the "brains-on-a-stick" anthropology (Smith, 2016). According to Smith, modern Western thought has inherited an intellectualist view that regards human beings primarily as thinking subjects whose actions naturally follow correct ideas. As he remarks, "if you just get the ideas right, the behavior will follow" (Smith, 2016). This assumption has profoundly influenced Christian educational practices by equating spiritual maturity with the accumulation of doctrinal knowledge. However, such an approach overlooks the complex relationship between cognition, desire, embodied practice, and everyday habits.

Against this rationalistic paradigm, Smith proposes the concept of *homo liturgicus*, arguing that human beings are fundamentally creatures of desire rather than merely creatures of reason. His famous statement, "you are what you love" (Smith, 2016), summarizes this anthropological shift. Human actions are not determined primarily by what individuals know but by what they ultimately desire and habitually pursue. These desires are cultivated through repeated practices, rituals, and embodied experiences that gradually shape one's imagination and orientation toward what is perceived as the good life. Consequently, Christian formation should not be understood merely as the transmission of theological information but as the formation of rightly ordered loves.

This perspective also provides a compelling theological explanation for the formative power of digital culture. Social media platforms, algorithmic recommendation systems, and digital consumption patterns function not only as communication technologies but also as what Smith (2009) describes as "cultural liturgies." These everyday practices silently educate desire by repeatedly directing attention toward particular values, aspirations, and visions of human flourishing. As Smith argues, cultural liturgies "calibrate our hearts by shaping our loves" (Smith, 2009). Therefore, digital culture should not be interpreted merely as an external environment in which young people live but as a formative ecosystem that continuously molds their habits, affections, and moral imagination.

From this perspective, the challenge of youth spiritual formation extends beyond providing accurate theological content. The more fundamental question concerns the kinds of persons that Christian communities seek to cultivate through their practices. If digital culture continually forms young people through embodied habits, then Christian discipleship must likewise become an embodied process of formation rather than an exclusively cognitive exercise. The concept of *Homo Liturgicus* thus offers a significant corrective to rationalistic anthropology by relocating the center of spiritual formation from information to desire, from abstract knowledge to embodied practice, and from intellectual persuasion to the transformation of human affections.

Habitus and the Formation of Affections

Building upon the concept of *Homo Liturgicus*, the analysis indicates that spiritual formation is fundamentally a process of shaping *habitus* rather than merely transmitting religious knowledge. For James K. A. Smith, Christian discipleship is inseparable from the practices that cultivate the desires of believers. Human beings become what they repeatedly practice because habits gradually orient the heart toward a particular vision of the good life. Consequently, Christian formation cannot be understood as the accumulation of doctrinal propositions alone but as the transformation of embodied dispositions through sustained participation in formative practices.

Smith employs the concept of *habitus* to explain how repeated actions gradually become stable dispositions that influence perception, judgment, and behavior. Rather than functioning as mechanical routines, habits educate human desire by shaping what individuals come to love and pursue. As Smith (2009) observes, "our wants and longings and desires are at the core of our identity" (Smith, 2009). These desires are not formed primarily through rational persuasion but through repeated participation in social, cultural, and religious practices. Likewise, Smith (2016) argues that "discipleship is a rehabilitation of our loves," emphasizing that Christian formation is directed toward the reordering of human affection rather than merely correcting theological ideas.

This understanding provides an important framework for interpreting the formative power of contemporary digital culture. Daily interaction with smartphones, social networking platforms, algorithmic recommendations, and continuous streams of visual content does more than provide information. These repetitive practices cultivate particular patterns of attention, expectation, and desire. As Verbeek (2011) argues, technologies actively mediate human perception and action rather than serving as neutral instruments. Similarly, Campbell and Evolvi (2020) note that digital environments reshape religious experience by influencing the ways individuals participate in, interpret, and perform their faith. From this perspective, digital culture functions not simply as an external context but as a formative environment in which habits are continually reinforced.

Theologically, this insight suggests that spiritual formation should be understood as the intentional cultivation of counter-habits capable of redirecting human affection toward God.

Christian liturgy, communal worship, prayer, Scripture meditation, sacramental participation, acts of charity, and practices of silence are significant not merely because they communicate theological truths but because they gradually reshape the desires of believers. As Smith (2013) writes, Christian worship seeks to "recalibrate our hearts" by directing human longing toward the Kingdom of God rather than toward competing cultural narratives. These practices therefore constitute what Smith describes as *counter-liturgies*, namely embodied practices that resist the formative power of secular cultural liturgies.

The findings of this study therefore suggest that the central challenge of youth ministry in the digital age is not simply to increase access to theological information but to cultivate formative practices capable of transforming desire. Young Catholics require communities that embody alternative rhythms of life through prayer, shared worship, hospitality, service, discernment, and intentional digital discipline. Such practices gradually form a Christian *habitus* in which faith becomes an embodied way of life rather than merely a body of knowledge. Consequently, the effectiveness of spiritual formation should be evaluated not only by cognitive achievement but also by the extent to which Christian practices reshape the loves, habits, and everyday lives of young believers.

Reinterpreting Matthew 28:19–20: From Teaching Knowledge to Forming Disciples

The foregoing discussion on *Homo Liturgicus* and *habitus* provides a fresh perspective for interpreting the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19–20. Traditionally, this passage has often been understood primarily as a mandate for evangelization and doctrinal instruction. Consequently, Christian discipleship has frequently been associated with transmitting biblical knowledge, teaching doctrinal truths, and ensuring theological orthodoxy. Although these dimensions remain indispensable, the present study argues that the Great Commission calls for a more comprehensive process of human formation.

The grammatical structure of Matthew 28:19–20 supports this interpretation. The central imperative of the passage is μαθητεύσατε (*matheteusate*), "make disciples," while the participles "going," "baptizing," and "teaching" describe how discipleship is accomplished. The ultimate goal is therefore not simply the communication of religious information but the formation of persons who embody the life and mission of Christ. As France (2007) observes, discipleship in Matthew denotes an ongoing relationship of learning, imitation, and faithful obedience rather than the mere acquisition of knowledge. Likewise, Hagner (1995) emphasizes that the Matthean understanding of discipleship involves an enduring commitment to live according to Jesus' teaching within the believing community.

This emphasis becomes even clearer in Jesus' instruction to "teach them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:20, NRSV). The object of teaching is not simply comprehension but obedience. The Greek verb τηρεῖν (*tērein*) carries the sense of keeping, observing, or faithfully practicing what has been commanded. As Luz (2005) notes, Matthew consistently presents discipleship as a lived response to Jesus' teaching rather than an intellectual affirmation of doctrinal propositions. Consequently, Christian education cannot be

reduced to cognitive instruction alone; it must cultivate a way of life characterized by faithful participation in the Kingdom of God.

James K. A. Smith's theological anthropology provides a constructive dialogue with this Matthean vision of discipleship. If human beings are fundamentally creatures whose desires are shaped through embodied practices, then Jesus' command to teach believers to "observe" His commandments acquires a distinctly formative character. Christian discipleship becomes an intentional process of shaping habits, desires, and communal practices that enable believers to embody the gospel in everyday life. As Smith (2016) argues, "discipleship is a rehabilitation of our loves," suggesting that obedience arises not merely from intellectual conviction but from desires that have been reoriented toward God. From this perspective, the Great Commission is fundamentally concerned with the formation of Christian character rather than the transmission of theological information.

Within the context of digital culture, this reinterpretation carries significant pastoral implications. The Church's mission is not fulfilled simply by expanding online access to sermons, catechetical materials, or biblical content. Such resources remain valuable, yet they become transformative only when integrated into practices that cultivate Christian *habitus*. Digital evangelization therefore reaches its fullest expression when it nurtures communities of prayer, sacramental participation, hospitality, service, and shared discernment in which young believers learn to embody the gospel. The Great Commission ultimately calls the Church not merely to produce informed Christians but to form faithful disciples whose desires, habits, and everyday practices bear witness to the reign of God.

Implications for Youth Spiritual Formation in the Digital Age

The preceding discussion demonstrates that the primary challenge of youth ministry in the digital era is not the absence of religious information but the competition between formative practices. Young Catholics are simultaneously shaped by the Church's liturgical life and by the everyday rituals of digital culture. Consequently, spiritual formation cannot be reduced to increasing biblical literacy or expanding access to online catechetical resources. Rather, it requires an intentional process of cultivating Christian practices capable of redirecting human desire toward the Kingdom of God.

From the perspective of *Homo Liturgicus*, effective Christian formation begins with the recognition that habits shape identity. This insight calls for a shift from an information-centered pedagogy toward a practice-oriented model of discipleship. Catechesis, therefore, should not only explain Christian doctrines but also immerse young people in repeated practices of prayer, communal worship, lectio divina, sacramental participation, silence, hospitality, and service. These embodied practices gradually form what Smith (2009) describes as rightly ordered loves, enabling faith to become a lived reality rather than merely an intellectual conviction.

Such a perspective also invites a critical engagement with digital culture. The goal is neither to reject technology nor to embrace it uncritically. Digital media remain valuable

instruments for evangelization, communication, and community building. Nevertheless, Christian communities must also recognize that algorithmic environments continually educate attention, desire, and imagination through repetitive digital habits. As Campbell and Evolvi (2020) argue, digital media reshape religious participation by influencing how believers encounter authority, community, and religious practice. Consequently, digital ministry should seek not only to produce religious content but also to cultivate digital disciplines that foster attentiveness, discernment, and responsible participation.

The findings further suggest that youth ministry should recover the formative significance of Christian liturgy as a counter-cultural practice. Rather than functioning merely as ritual obligations, liturgical celebrations become spaces where Christian imagination is continually renewed. Participation in the Eucharist, communal prayer, the liturgical calendar, and acts of service forms an alternative rhythm of life capable of resisting the fragmented temporality and consumerist logic of digital culture. In this sense, Christian liturgy functions as what Smith (2009) calls "counter-liturgies," practices that redirect human affection toward God by offering an alternative vision of human flourishing.

Ultimately, youth spiritual formation should be evaluated not only by cognitive achievement or digital engagement but also by observable transformation in Christian living. Indicators such as participation in communal worship, commitment to prayer, practices of charity, moral discernment, and responsible digital behavior provide a more holistic understanding of discipleship. Spiritual maturity is therefore measured less by the quantity of theological information acquired than by the extent to which Christian practices reshape desires, habits, and everyday ways of life.

Contribution to Asian Empirical Theology

The preceding discussion demonstrates that James K. A. Smith's concept of *Homo Liturgicus* offers more than a theoretical critique of rationalistic anthropology; it also provides a constructive framework for rethinking empirical theological research within Asian contexts. Empirical theology seeks to understand how Christian faith is embodied, practiced, and interpreted within concrete social and cultural realities rather than treating theology solely as a system of abstract doctrines (Cartledge, 2015). From this perspective, the lived experiences of believers become an important locus for theological reflection.

Within many Asian societies, young people negotiate their Christian identity amid rapid technological development, religious pluralism, strong communal traditions, and expanding digital cultures. These realities shape not only what young people believe but also how they participate in worship, construct relationships, and practice their faith in everyday life. Consequently, empirical theological research in Asia should move beyond measuring religious knowledge or institutional participation to examining the embodied practices through which Christian identity is continually formed.

The concept of *Homo Liturgicus* contributes significantly to this development by directing theological attention toward practices, rituals, habits, and affections as empirical

realities. Rather than asking only what young believers think about God, researchers are encouraged to investigate how digital routines, communal worship, family life, sacramental participation, and online interactions shape Christian discipleship over time. As Smith (2009) argues, "we are what we love," suggesting that Christian identity is revealed less by cognitive affirmation than by the practices that continually orient human desire. This perspective resonates with contemporary empirical theology, which increasingly emphasizes lived religion, embodied spirituality, and everyday religious experience (Ward, 2017).

Furthermore, this framework provides a constructive agenda for future empirical research in Asian youth ministry. Theological reflection may be enriched through qualitative methods such as interviews, participant observation, digital ethnography, and narrative inquiry that explore how young Catholics negotiate faith within algorithm-driven digital environments. Such studies would enable theology to engage more deeply with contemporary cultural realities while remaining grounded in biblical discipleship and ecclesial tradition. In this sense, the present study does not conclude the discussion but proposes a conceptual foundation for future empirical investigations concerning spiritual formation, digital culture, and youth discipleship in Asian contexts.

Accordingly, the principal contribution of this article lies in integrating theological anthropology, biblical discipleship, and digital culture into a coherent conceptual framework that broadens the scope of Asian empirical theology. By relocating spiritual formation from the mere transmission of doctrinal knowledge to the formation of embodied habits and rightly ordered desires, this study offers a theological perspective capable of informing both future empirical research and pastoral practice among young Catholics living in increasingly digital societies.

CONCLUSION

This study has argued that James K. A. Smith's concept of *homo liturgicus* provides a constructive theological framework for rethinking youth spiritual formation in the context of digital culture. By challenging the rationalistic assumption that Christian formation is primarily achieved through the transmission of theological knowledge, Smith's theological anthropology redirects attention toward the formative power of desire, habit, and embodied practice. Read together with Matthew 28:19–20, this perspective demonstrates that Christian discipleship is fundamentally concerned with forming persons who faithfully embody the teachings of Christ rather than merely acquiring doctrinal understanding. Consequently, spiritual formation should be understood as the cultivation of Christian habits that gradually shape human affections toward God and the Kingdom.

The findings further suggest that digital culture functions not merely as a technological environment but as a formative ecosystem that continuously educates attention, imagination, and desire through everyday practices. This insight calls the Church to move beyond an information-centered model of catechesis toward a practice-oriented model of discipleship grounded in worship, prayer, Scripture, sacramental life, communal participation, and

intentional digital discipline. Such an approach does not reject digital technology but critically engages it by cultivating Christian *counter-liturgies* capable of nurturing faithful and mature disciples in contemporary society.

Finally, this study contributes to Asian empirical theology by proposing a conceptual framework that integrates theological anthropology, biblical discipleship, and digital culture into a coherent understanding of youth spiritual formation. Rather than treating lived religious experience as secondary to doctrinal reflection, the proposed framework recognizes embodied practices and everyday habits as important loci for theological inquiry. Future research may extend this conceptual model through empirical studies employing interviews, digital ethnography, participant observation, or action research to examine how Christian communities across diverse Asian contexts cultivate *homo liturgicus* amid the opportunities and challenges of an increasingly digital world.

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