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Article

Mediatised Religious Authority, Heresy, and Survivor Testimony in Korean Netflix Documentary

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Abstract

This article analyses the Korean Netflix documentary series *In the Name of God: A Holy Betrayal* (2023) and its sequel *I Am a Survivor* (2025) as sites where religious authority, heresy, trauma, and victimhood are publicly renegotiated in contemporary South Korea. Focusing on the case of the Christian Gospel Mission (JMS) led by Jeong Myeong-seok whose seventeen-year prison sentence was confirmed by the South Korean Supreme Court in January 2025, this article argues that the two series enact what it terms mediatised religious unmasking: a documentary mode that performs explicitly theological functions, asking questions of legitimate authority, naming heresy, legitimating survivor testimony, and relocating sacred agency from the charismatic leader to the victim and witness. Drawing on the theoretical framework of digital religious authority, this article situates the series within the broader transformation of religious authority in the digital age whilst attending to the distinctive institutional and regulatory context of South Korean OTT documentary production. Close attention is paid to the formal and aesthetic dimensions of the two series. The article concludes that OTT documentary now functions as a critical domain for the public negotiation of religious authority, posing new challenges for religion-media studies and for the study of new religious movements.

Keywords: religion and media; religious authority; South Korea; JMS; digital religion

1. Introduction

In the spring of 2023, a Netflix documentary series became the most-watched programme in South Korea within days of its release, and climbed into the platform's global top five within weeks. *In the Name of God* had been produced in collaboration between the South Korean public broadcaster MBC and Netflix, and it examined four controversial religious movements whose leaders claimed divine status: the Christian Gospel Mission (JMS), led by Jeong Myeong-seok; the Evangelical Baptist Church (Agadongsan), led by Park Soon-ja; the Providence-adjacent Teacher Group; and the World Mission Society Church of God. Its sequel, *I Am a Survivor*, premiered on 15 August 2025 and shifted the analytical and ethical focus from the leader to the survivor, expanding its scope to include four tragedies that are JMS sexual violence, the Busan Brothers' Home abuse, the Jijonpa murders, and the 1995 Sampoong Department Store collapse and centring the testimonies of those who had survived them.

The two series raise questions that are, at their core, questions of religious authority, legitimacy, and contested knowledge. Who has the right to name heresy? Whose testimony about divine will carries weight? How is the boundary between authentic faith and destructive manipulation decided in public culture? This article addresses these questions through both theological and media-analytic dimension. Existing literature has charted the entanglement of religious practice with media technologies across multiple platforms and historical periods (Hoover 2006; Campbell and Evolvi 2020; Evolvi 2021). However, the investigative documentary released via an internet streaming platform and its capacity to perform what this article calls mediatised religious unmasking has received comparatively little attention.

This article argues that the JMS-focused episodes of *In the Name of God* and the sequel series *I Am a Survivor* constitute a distinctive form of mediated religious intervention. They do not merely report on JMS; they perform the theological work of adjudicating authority, naming heresy, legitimating testimony, and relocating sacred agency from the charismatic male leader to the victim-witness. In doing so, they participate in, and help to constitute a broader public renegotiation of religious authority that is increasingly conducted through digital and streaming media rather than through confessional, juridical, or ecclesiastical channels.

The article is organised as follows. Section 2 develops the theoretical frameworks drawing on work on mediated and hypermediated religion, digital religious authority, deep mediatisation. Section 3 outlines the contextual background introducing JMS, key features of Korean religious culture, and the emergence of OTT investigative documentary in South Korea. Section 4 sets out the methodological approach. Sections 5 and 6 offer close analyses of *In the Name of God* and *I Am a Survivor* respectively, before section 7 discusses the implications of the findings for religion–media studies. Section 8 concludes by returning to the question of who, in the current media landscape, may be said to speak with religious authority.

2. Theoretical Framework: Religion, Digital Mediation, and Authority

Within the broader field of religion and media scholarship, this article approaches the two Netflix documentary series *In the Name of God* and *I Am a Survivor* as instances of hypermediated religion. More specifically, this paper interprets them as expressions of digital religion where online and offline religious practices are deeply entangled. Building on this perspective, the section assembles a theoretical framework that draws on accounts of digital religious creatives and counter-authority, on debates about deep mediatisation developed and tested in pandemic-era contexts. These resources enable the article to simultaneously focus on the platform conditions of documentary production, the theological stakes of survivor testimony, and the aesthetic dimensions of mediated religious experience.

Existing literature on religion and media suggests that religion is, in important respects, always already mediated. As Hoover (2006) argued, contemporary seekers actively construct religious meaning through their engagements with media, and the boundaries between religious practice and media consumption are increasingly blurred. This claim has since become widely accepted in digital religion research as Campbell and Evolvi (2020, p. 5) observe, digital religion research proceeds from the recognition that online and offline constitute entangled rather than separate realities. What began as an observation about television and print has, with the rise of digital platforms, become considerably more complex. The question is no longer whether media shape religious experience but how specific media forms, logics, and institutional arrangements shape the negotiation of authority, authenticity, and sacred meaning.

Giulia Evolvi's (2021) conceptualisation of "hypermediated religious spaces" is particularly useful in this regard. Expanding on Hoover and on broader theories of mediatisation, Evolvi argues that digital religion operates not only in virtual space but in a third space that is simultaneously material and virtual, physical and networked. For instance, Pope Francis's Easter *urbi et orbi* blessing during the COVID-19 pandemic was delivered to an empty St Peter's Square yet mediated to millions of screens across the world, demonstrating that religious authority and sacred presence are reconfigured by their mediation rather than simply diminished by it. The key analytical move is to approach religious spaces as hypermediated which is constituted through multiple overlapping media layers, each carrying its own logic and aesthetic conventions. In what follows, both Netflix series are analysed as precisely such hypermediated religious spaces: spaces that function simultaneously as courtrooms, confessional booths, memorial archives, and streaming platforms, and that draw their authority from the productive tension among these overlapping registers.

A second strand of scholarship concerns the specific ways in which digital media have reconfigured the production and contestation of religious authority. Heidi Campbell (2019, 2023) has traced the emergence of what she calls "religious digital creatives", individuals and communities who

use digital technologies not merely to communicate existing religious content but to create new forms of religious meaning, community, and authority. Campbell and Evolvi (2020) situate this development within a four-waves account of digital religion research, moving from early studies of online community formation, through examinations of specific practices and platforms, to the present moment in which digital religion is understood as deeply entangled with broader social and cultural transformations. The fourth wave, they suggest, is characterised by attention to emerging technologies – artificial intelligence, virtual reality, big data – and to the political and ethical dimensions of digital religion. This article aligns itself with that fourth-wave orientation, whilst insisting that the transformation of authority is shaped not only by platform affordances but by the specific content, aesthetics, and institutional arrangements of media productions.

A growing body of work has established that institutional gatekeepers such as clergy, theologians, ecclesiastical bodies find their authority increasingly contested by the proliferating voices of online religious communities, influencers, and critics. It is worth noting, in this context, that the authority at stake in *In the Name of God* and *I Am a Survivor* is not primarily that of digital platforms but of a highly embodied and historically specific form of religious authority: the charismatic authority of the new religious movement leader. Jeong Myeong-seok's authority within JMS was built on claims to divine appointment and direct revelation, sustained through a complex apparatus of devotional practice, communal discipline, and affective bonding. The constellation of investigative producers, survivor-witnesses, and OTT infrastructure assembled across the two series constitutes a distinctive configuration of digital religious creatives, one that systematically unmask the mechanisms by which charismatic authority was produced, the abuses it enabled, and the evidence that ultimately belies its claims. In doing so, these productions deploy survivor testimony and investigative journalism as their own form of counter-authority, setting the analytical and ethical terms through which JMS's claims are to be judged.

Furthermore, research that bears directly on the present analysis concerns the concept of deep mediatisation which explains the process by which media and communication technologies become so thoroughly integrated into social life that they transform the conditions of possibility for social action and institution-building (Hepp, Hjarvard, and Lundby 2017, cited in Kołodziejska 2021). Marta Kołodziejska's (2021) study of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church in Poland during the COVID-19 pandemic offers a nuanced account of how this process operates within religious institutions. Drawing on Hepp et al.'s five trends of deep mediatisation, 'differentiation, connectivity, omnipresence, innovation, and datafication', she shows how the pandemic functioned as a powerful accelerant. The pastors who had previously exercised little media competence were compelled to become media producers, and the resulting shift from embodied, communal authority to mediated, individual authority had lasting effects on congregational dynamics and pastoral identity. Carole Lorea and colleagues' (2022) comparative research across multiple pandemic contexts adds further dimensions to this picture. Their findings cluster around three related observations: that media function simultaneously as reflexive tools and enchanted objects; that the religious sensorium is particularly persistent and resistant to digitalisation; and that the relationship between sacred space, time, and community is modular and reconfigurable rather than fixed.

Arguably the most resonant of these for the present analysis is the concept of the "sanitised sacred", the forms of religious practice produced under pandemic conditions from which embodied, sensory, and affective dimensions had been carefully controlled or excised, generating experiences that were simultaneously recognisable and significantly transformed. This line of argument suggests that authority in religious communities is always mediated and always at stake; the pandemic merely rendered visible a set of tensions and transformations that were already underway. At the same time, these debates direct sustained attention to the affective and sensory dimensions of media-religious experience and dimensions that are, as the analysis of *I Am a Survivor* will argue, central to the ethical and therapeutic work performed by that series' distinctive glitch aesthetic. S Scholars argue that the transformation of authority, the aesthetic dimensions of mediated religion, and the ethics of reception remain among the central preoccupations of the field (Bornet and Knauss 2025; Evolvi 2025).

Finally, this article draws on the author's prior ethnographic research on Korean Christian faith based organisations. That research examined a Christian humanitarian organisation in Itaewon, Seoul, referred to by the pseudonym A Centre, which provided welfare services to migrant Muslim workers in the area. The central concept developed in that work is theocentric care ethics, a form of care motivated not by affective empathy alone but by a theological understanding of divine agency. The theocentric orientation holds that God acts through human carers, and that care for the vulnerable is simultaneously care for God. As the ethnographic research demonstrated, this orientation both motivated extraordinary commitment and produced characteristic tensions, between compassion and proselytism, and between respect for the other's humanity and the imperative to bring them within the community of faith.

The relevance of this prior research to the present article lies in what it reveals about the theological stakes of victimhood within Korean Christianity. If care for the vulnerable is understood as care for God, and if the victim figure carries a kind of mediated divine presence, then the testimonies of JMS survivors carry not only legal and moral weight but theological weight. The survivor who speaks publicly about the abuse she has suffered within a religious community is, within the terms of theocentric care, a figure through whom divine agency is made visible and through whom the community's obligation to God is activated. This reading connects the documentary series to a broader theological tradition whilst also extending it, since the central claim of this article is that the two Netflix series relocate sacred agency from the charismatic leader to the victim witness, and that this relocation constitutes both a theological and a political argument, one grounded in, but reaching beyond, the framework of theocentric care.

3. Contextual Background: JMS, Korean Religious Culture, and the Rise of OTT Investigative Documentary

South Korea presents a distinctive case in comparative religion as the country is one of the few countries in the world where Christianity has grown rapidly in a non-colonial context. Protestantism in particular expanded dramatically from the late nineteenth century onwards, and by the early twenty-first century approximately thirty per cent of the population identified as Christian. At the same time, South Korea is home to a significant number of new religious movements, some of which have attracted international attention both for their rapid growth and for the controversies that have surrounded them. The domestic landscape is considerably more varied and includes movements such as Shincheonji, the World Mission Society Church of God, and the Christian Gospel Mission (JMS).

JMS – the movement's Korean name, Christian Gospel Mission – was founded by Jeong Myeong-seok in the 1980s. Jeong was born in 1945 in South Chungcheong Province and claims to have received a series of divine revelations that appointed him as a messianic figure. The movement grew rapidly, particularly among university students, and developed a distinctive culture of communal devotion, intensive Bible study, and physical fitness – Jeong himself was an accomplished marathon runner and used athletics as a recruiting tool. By the early 2000s, JMS had an estimated membership of sixty thousand in South Korea and had established communities across East and Southeast Asia, including notably large groups in Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Allegations of sexual violence against Jeong had circulated for decades before the documentary series brought them to wide public attention. He had been convicted of sexual assault in South Korea in 2009 and sentenced to six years in prison; upon his release, he relocated to China and continued to lead the movement from abroad. The devotional videos – referred to in Korean as *Bogoja Dongyoungsang* – that became central evidence in both the documentary and the subsequent legal proceedings were recordings made by female JMS members and sent to the absent leader: a form of mediated devotional practice that simultaneously documented the community's continued operation and, as the documentaries argued, constituted material evidence of ongoing grooming. Jeong returned to South Korea in 2018 and was arrested again in 2022; the Supreme Court confirmed a

seventeen-year prison sentence on 9 January 2025, on charges including quasi-rape, quasi-similar rape, quasi-indecent assault, and false accusation (Supreme Court of Korea 2025).

The production context of *In the Name of God* is itself analytically significant. The series was produced by MBC's documentary team but was released exclusively through Netflix rather than broadcast on MBC's own channels. According to an essay by the series' lead producer, Cho Sung-hyun (2025), this decision was deliberate and strategic: Netflix, as a foreign OTT platform, operates outside the jurisdiction of South Korea's Broadcasting Act and the Press Arbitration Act, and was therefore less vulnerable to injunctions, defamation claims, and regulatory review than a domestic broadcaster would have been. JMS had in fact filed an injunction to prevent the release of *In the Name of God* on 24 February 2023, which was rejected by the court on 2 March 2023 just over a week before the series premiered (Choe 2023). A second injunction filed in August 2025 against *I Am a Survivor* was similarly rejected (Hankyoreh, 14 August 2025). The choice of Netflix was thus not merely a commercial decision but a regulatory one, exploiting the gaps in South Korean media law to enable a form of investigative documentary that would have been significantly more constrained on domestic broadcast television.

A further key editorial decision one that generated considerable public debate was the choice to show the faces of some survivors without pixelation. In South Korean broadcast convention, victims of sexual violence are typically shown only from behind or with their faces blurred. Cho (2025) describes this as the most significant and contested decision made during production: the survivors themselves chose to be identified, and the production team agreed that respecting this choice was both ethically and argumentatively important. The survivor Maple Yip, from Hong Kong, appeared with her face visible in Season 1 and continued to do so in Season 2. This was a decision that, as the analysis below will argue, is central to the series' construction of the victim-witness as a figure of moral and quasi-theological authority. By the time of its broadcast premiere, *In the Name of God* had topped the domestic streaming charts and reached the Netflix global top five (Korea JoongAng Daily, 10 March 2023). Cho (2025) reports that JMS membership fell from approximately sixty thousand to approximately twenty thousand in the period following the series' release, suggesting that the documentary's impact extended well beyond public debate into the lived reality of the movement itself.

4. Methodology

This article employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology combining close textual analysis of the two documentary series with focus on their production contexts and public reception. The primary analytical object is the documentaries themselves, considered as carefully constructed media texts that make arguments that are simultaneously journalistic, legal, and theological in their implications. The article offers close analysis of the series' formal and aesthetic dimensions examining their narrative structures, testimonial conventions, visual and sonic choices, and the specific rhetorical strategies by which they construct figures of authority and victimhood.

As outlined in Section two, this research employs the concepts of hypermediated religious space (Evolvi 2021), mediatised authority (Campbell and Evolvi 2020), and the deep mediatisation of religious institutions (Kołodziejka 2021). This article offers close analysis of the textual aesthetic in *I Am a Survivor* which provides unusually detailed insider perspectives on the editorial decisions that shaped the series. In addition, the article takes account of the production and regulatory context as discussed in Section 3, treating the series' institutional positioning as MBC productions distributed through Netflix as analytically significant for understanding their claims to authority and their strategies of argumentation.

This article also draws on contemporary Korean-language journalism and cultural criticism produced in response to the series, including interviews with the production team and essays by leading cultural commentators. These materials are treated not as scholarly authorities but as primary evidence of how the series was received and debated in the public sphere, providing essential reception data for interpreting its cultural and religious significance.

In this respect, this research focuses on the close analysis of two key media texts rather than providing a comprehensive account of JMS as a religious movement or of new religious movements in South Korea more broadly. The article does not draw on original interviews with JMS members, survivors, or producers, and its engagement with the series is mediated through existing scholarly and journalistic analyses. Within these constraints, the article develops a theoretically grounded and empirically attentive reading of *I Am a Survivor* and *I Am a Survivor* situating them within the broader debates on the contemporary renegotiation of religious authority in South Korea.

5. Analysis

5.1. Making Heresy Visible: Testimony, Reenactment, and the Limits of the Leader's Word

In the Name of God is a conventional investigative documentary in a way it accumulates testimony, evidence, and expert commentary to build a case against four religious movement leaders. On the other hand, the documentary performs a set of functions that are recognisably theological in character. To understand this dimension of the series, it is necessary to attend both to what the series argues and to how it argues to the formal and rhetorical strategies through which it constructs its claims to authority and legitimacy.

The series' reliance on testimony is its most fundamental rhetorical resource. Each episode builds its case primarily through the testimony of former members and survivors, people who were once committed believers and who now recount their experiences from a position of painful retrospect. This kind of testimony-based structure is common in investigative documentaries, but these films become significant and differentiated when the documentary is about a religious movement. The testimony of a former believer functions simultaneously a legal claim, a moral claim, and crucially, a theological claim that the leader's authority was illegitimate and his divine claims were false. When Maple Yip speaks on camera about what she experienced within JMS, she is engaged in more than simply providing evidence. She publicly withdraws her belief, retracts her acknowledgement of Jeong Myeong-seok's authority, and repositions herself as a subject no longer bound by the claims of his revelatory discourse.

This double structure, in which the survivor testimony as simultaneously legal evidence and theological counter-claim, is what makes the series more than journalistic reportage. This article refers to this mode as mediatised religious unmasking, a term that describes the use of documentary form to undertake theological work of adjudicating authority and naming heresy. The term draws on the long tradition, within both Protestant Christianity and Enlightenment rationalism, of 'unmasking' false religion exposing its mechanisms, demystifying its claims, revealing the human interests that lie behind apparently divine imperatives. In the context of *In the Name of God*, however, this unmasking is performed not by theologians or ecclesiastical authorities but by survivors speaking to cameras, and circulated not through confessional or institutional channels but through a global streaming platform.

In *In the Name of God*, the use of re-enactment constitutes another aspect of the argument that warrants close attention. Re-enactment is a common documentary technique but it is also a deeply contested one. Critics argued, with some justification, that the series' use of dramatic recreations, particularly in scenes of sexual violence, crossed into territory that was at once sensational and potentially re-traumatising (Cho 2023; Wi, *Kyunghyang Sinmun*, 17 March 2023). The production team defended these choices on the grounds that they were necessary to convey what words alone could not: the embodied reality of what survivors had experienced. This defence is not without merit, but it also raises questions about whose judgment determines what is necessary and for whom.

What is notable here is the way in which the sensationalism debate itself functions within the documentary's rhetorical field. Cultural critic Son Hee-jeong, interviewed in *Sisain* (31 March 2023), argued that critics who focused on the supposed sensationalism of victim testimony were, in effect, reproducing the silencing mechanisms of the original abuse. When victim testimony is described as pornographic, it is because of the way in which it has been socially constructed rather than because

of anything inherent to the testimony itself. This reading that is indebted to feminist critique of sexual violence discourse, reframes the debate over re-enactment as itself a site of ideological contest, in which the right to make certain kinds of harm visible is at stake. Wi Geun-woo's Kyunghyang Sinmun essay (17 March 2023) made a complementary point that the framing of Jeong Myeong-seok as a demonic aberration – the 'cult leader' as monster – risked obscuring the structural conditions (e.g., gender hierarchy within Korean Christianity, institutional silence, regulatory failure) that enabled his authority for so long.

The 'Bogoja Video', devotional clips recorded female JMS members and sent to the absent leader abroad, occupies a particularly complex position within the series' argument. Within the community, these videos functioned as a form of devotional practice, encompassing acts of faith performed for an absent God-figure and serving as means of maintaining connection and fidelity in the physical absence of the charismatic centre. In the documentary's analytical frame, however, they become something quite different, serving as evidence of grooming, manipulation, and coercion; artefacts that document the community's continued operation under direction from a man who was, at that point, a convicted sexual offender in hiding abroad. The recontextualisation of these videos and their transformation from devotional objects into legal evidence constitutes one of the most striking instances of mediated religious unmasking in the series. The same footage that constituted an act of faith within the community's own frame becomes, in the documentary's frame, evidence of the falseness of that faith's object. This is, to put it plainly, a heresy trial conducted through the medium of streaming documentary.

The figure of the prosecutor-general, who made a public statement in response to the series (Korea JoongAng Daily, 10 March 2023), further underscores the series' ambiguous position between legal and theological authority. In citing the documentary in a prosecutorial context, the prosecutor-general implicitly acknowledged its evidentiary status regarding the assembled testimony not merely as public commentary but as a form of legitimate proof. This is a significant moment as it indicates that in contemporary South Korea, the OTT investigative documentary has come to exercise a form of quasi-legal authority and can help influence the conditions under which criminal prosecution is pursued.

The series' argument about Jeong Myeong-seok's leadership is thus simultaneously an argument about religious authority in general. By demonstrating through accumulated testimony that his claims to divine appointment were false and his exercise of authority was criminal, *In the Name of God* does not simply condemn an individual but strengthen a claim about the conditions under which religious authority can be regarded as legitimate. The implicit theology of the series, never fully articulated yet structurally present, posits that authentic divine authority is incompatible with the coercive manipulation of believers, and in which the testimony of the victimised believer carries greater epistemic and moral weight than the revelatory claims of the charismatic leader.

5.2. From Victim to Witness: Glitch, Text, and the Ethical Aesthetics of *I Am a Survivor*

I Am a Survivor, which premiered on 15 August 2025 following the Supreme Court's confirmation of Jeong Myeong-seok's sentence, represents both a continuation and a significant transformation of the project begun in *In the Name of God*. Whereas the first series is organised around the figure of the leader, his history, methods and crimes, the sequel places the survivor at centre of its structure. This shift is evident at every level of the series, in its narrative organisation, its choice of protagonists, its ethical framing, and, most strikingly, in its formal and aesthetic strategies.

Yoo Su-yeon's (2025) close analysis of the series' textual direction, specifically the use of typography and glitch effects as primary documentary tools, provides the theoretical and descriptive foundation for the following discussion. Yoo argues that *I Am a Survivor* deploys text not merely as informational element but as an autonomous narrative actor, a form of "text-as-character". Typography in the series appears as fragmented, distorted, and repeatedly interrupted, a pattern Yoo characterises as a "glitch aesthetic" in her reading of the work through Rosa Menkman's (2011) theory. The glitch is not merely a visual effect but a form of argument since the broken and unstable

text enacts the impossibility of reducing the survivor's experience to a single, coherent narrative. To adapt Judith Butler's (1997) account of linguistic injury as cited by Yoo (2025), the glitch marks the point at which language fails to contain what it is asked to contain and becomes the formal trace of a harm that exceeds its description.

This formal strategy has specific theological resonances that Yoo's framework partly brings into view. The victim-witness in *I Am a Survivor* is not only a survivor of trauma in the clinical or legal sense. Instead, she is someone who once belonged as a believing member of a religious community who inhabited a world structured by specific claims about divine authority, sacred obligation, and communal belonging and who has subsequently had to reconstruct her understanding of herself, her community, and her God. In this context, the glitch aesthetic is not only about the trauma of violence but about the specific trauma of religious betrayal: the shattering of a world in which divine authority was both certain and, in its very certainty, the mechanism of abuse.

Maple Yip's arc across the two series from anonymised victim to named survivor to recurring witness enacts at the individual level what the series enacts at the formal level. In Season 1, her decision to appear with her face visible was described by the production team as a deliberate assertion of subjectivity, the visible face as a claim to personhood that the community's demand for secrecy had worked to suppress. In Season 2, her continued presence signals something more than personal resilience and constructs what might be called a figure of theocentric witness. The survivor who continues to testify, returning episode after episode to speak again about what she experienced, becomes a figure through whom something like divine agency is made visible in the documentary's own terms not the agency of a charismatic leader but the agency of persistent, embodied truth-telling in the face of institutional power.

The glitch effects applied to institutional symbols in the series, such as the logos, seals, and insignia of JMS and other organisations, further develop this argument. Yoo (2025) notes that the visual glitch applied to these symbols performs what she calls "power instability", marking the contingency and vulnerability of institutional authority that had presented itself as absolute and divine. This is, once again, recognisably theological argumentation in documentary form. The glitch demystifies the symbol by revealing that what appears sacred and inviolable is, in fact, a constructed and contingent claim, no more stable than the pixelated, fragmenting image through which it is now presented.

Brian Massumi's (2002) theory of affect, which Yoo (2025) also invokes, is relevant at this point. Affect theory draws attention to the pre-cognitive, bodily dimensions of media experience, to the ways in which images and sounds act on viewers before and beneath conscious interpretation. From this perspective, the glitch is not only a visual argument but an affective event, a moment in which the viewer's body registers the instability and wrongness of what is being shown before any cognitive processing has occurred. This affective dimension of the glitch aesthetic is crucial for understanding how the series conducts its theological argument, since it not only persuades viewers intellectually but also recruits their embodied, affective response to the side of the victim-witness.

I Am a Survivor also expands the scope of *In the Name of God* in ways that are significant for the present analysis. By including three additional cases, the Busan Brothers' Home, the Jijonpa murders, and the Sampoong collapse, alongside the JMS narrative, the series advances a structural argument about the relationship between institutional violence, complicity, and survival. These cases differ markedly in their religious dimension, since the Sampoong collapse, for instance, was not a religiously motivated event, whereas the JMS and Jijonpa cases involve explicit religious authority claims. What the series identifies as common across these cases is not their religious character as such, but their shared structure of power, silence, and institutional complicity, and, crucially, the figure of the survivor who refuses the role of silent victim assigned by that structure.

A report in *The Korea Herald* (5 August 2025) notes that the premiere of the series on 15 August, Korean Liberation Day, was not accidental, and that its framing as an act of liberation and of speaking truth to power is reinforced by this scheduling choice. This kind of symbolic resonance is characteristic of the series' mode of argument, which operates simultaneously at the levels of content,

form, and cultural context, and deploys the full resources of the OTT documentary as a genre to advance a case that is explicitly political, implicitly theological, and affectively powerful.

Cho Sung-hyun's (2025) production essay situates the series within what he calls the "age of the five thieves", a deliberate echo of Kim Ji-ha's well-known 1970 political poem that named five categories of corrupt power. Cho's five thieves are cult leaders who abuse their followers, complicit religious leadership that protects them, legal and institutional structures that fail victims, political enablers, and a media that remained silent for too long. This framing is striking for what it reveals about the series' own self-understanding, since it casts the documentary not as a neutral journalistic account but as a form of political and ethical intervention, explicitly aligned with the victim-witnesses and opposed to the multiple structures of power that enabled their victimisation. In the terms of this article, the documentary thereby presents itself as a mode of mediatised religious unmasking that operates at a systemic rather than merely individual level.

6. Discussion

The analyses offered in the preceding sections point to a set of broader implications for religion-media studies that this section draws out. The first concerns the concept of mediatised religious unmasking itself. This article has introduced this term to describe a distinctive documentary mode that uses the resources of investigative journalism, testimonial narrative, and documentary aesthetics to perform functions that are, at their core, theological, including adjudicating the legitimacy of religious authority claims, naming heresy, legitimating the testimony of the victimised believer, and relocating sacred agency. The concept is intended to mark something more specific than the general entanglement of religion and media articulated by Hoover and elaborated by Campbell, Evolvi, and their colleagues, naming both a particular genre of media text, the investigative documentary focused on new religious movements, and a particular mode of argument, the systematic exposure and refutation of illegitimate authority claims.

The concept also draws attention to something that the existing literature on digital religion has, to some extent, undertheorised, namely the agentive and argumentative capacity of media texts in the domain of religion. Much of the scholarship reviewed in Section 2 is oriented towards questions of reception and practice, how audiences and communities use media to construct religious meaning, rather than towards questions of production and argument, that is, what claims specific media texts make and how they make them. The analyses offered here suggest that investigative OTT documentaries are not simply occasions for audience meaning-making but are themselves active agents in the public negotiation of religious authority. They make arguments, they produce effects, and, as the decline in JMS membership following *In the Name of God* indicates, they can have significant material consequences for the institutions they examine.

A second implication concerns the relationship between the OTT platform and religious authority. As Section 3 noted, the decision to distribute *In the Name of God* through Netflix rather than via domestic broadcast television was itself a regulatory strategy that exploited the gap between domestic and foreign media law to create a space in which certain arguments could be advanced with less institutional constraint. This regulatory gap is, to some extent, a global phenomenon, since OTT platforms often operate in a legislative grey zone, and this creates both opportunities and risks. The opportunity is exemplified by the JMS documentary, which was able to make public claims that would have been more difficult to sustain in more tightly regulated media environments, while the risk is highlighted by critics of re-enactment, who argue that the absence of regulation opens space for forms of representation that may be harmful, sensational, or ethically questionable.

This tension between the emancipatory potential of less regulated media space and the risks inherent in that same lack of regulation is not unique to religion-media studies, but it takes a distinctive form in the context of religious authority. Religious communities in South Korea, as elsewhere, have long benefited from significant legal and cultural protections, including freedom of religion, respect for institutional autonomy, and a degree of deference to religious authority in matters considered internal to the community. The OTT documentary, operating outside the

conventional media regulatory framework, is able to contest these protections in ways that broadcast journalism finds more difficult. Whether this development is, on balance, desirable is a question that the present article does not attempt to resolve, but it is one that religion–media studies needs to address with some urgency.

A third implication concerns the figure of the victim-witness and its theological significance. The analysis of *I Am a Survivor* has argued that Maple Yip’s repeated testimony, and her persistence as a speaking subject across both series, constructs a figure of quasi-theological authority, a witness through whom truth, justice, and something akin to divine agency are made visible. This reading draws on the author’s prior research on theocentric care ethics, which showed how Korean Christian practice can construe the vulnerable other as a figure through whom the divine is encountered. The documentary series, in effect, performs a secularised version of this theological move by relocating the ground of religious authority from the charismatic leader to the testimonial witness.

This shift has important implications for how we understand the relationship between religion, media, and victimhood in contemporary South Korea. It suggests that the public negotiation of religious authority is not simply a matter of institutional competition between old and new forms of religious community, or between traditional and digital media, but also a matter of who is recognised as a credible and authoritative speaker about religious experience. In particular, it raises the question of whether the experiences of those who have been harmed by religious authority can themselves constitute a form of religious testimony. The documentaries examined here answer this question in the affirmative, and they do so implicitly yet insistently.

Recent work in religion–media studies indicates an increasing concern with ethics, method, and positionality in the analysis of mediated religion. The present article contributes to this methodological conversation by arguing that close attention to the specific argumentative strategies of media texts, rather than only to their reception or platform contexts, is indispensable for understanding how religion is negotiated in the contemporary media landscape. It also contends that the Korean case, which has received relatively little sustained attention in English-language religion–media scholarship, offers distinctive and theoretically productive material for such analysis.

Finally, the Korean-language reception of the series sheds light on the broader cultural context of these debates. The emphasis in much of the criticism on the structural and gendered dimensions of the JMS case, including readings through #MeToo, attention to institutional complicity, and analysis of how legal and media frameworks have historically protected religious organisations at the expense of victims, suggests that the documentary’s audience was alert to dimensions of the argument that a narrowly religious-studies frame might overlook. The entanglement of religious authority with gender hierarchy, institutional power, and legal protection is a persistent feature of the Korean context, and any adequate analysis of mediated religious unmasking in this setting needs to remain attentive to these dimensions as well.

7. Conclusions

This article began by observing that *In the Name of God* and *I Am a Survivor* pose questions that are, at their core, theological: questions about authority, legitimacy, heresy, and the capacity of the believer’s testimony to constitute a form of truth. It has argued that the two series enact a mode of mediated religious unmasking, using the resources of documentary film, investigative journalism, and OTT distribution to perform the theological functions of adjudicating authority claims, naming heresy, and legitimating the testimony of the victimised believer.

The concept of mediated religious unmasking is intended as a contribution to the growing body of scholarship on religion and digital media, and specifically to the study of how religious authority is constituted and contested in the contemporary media landscape. It draws on and extends existing theoretical work on mediated religion and deep mediation, whilst attending to the specific institutional, regulatory, and cultural context of South Korean OTT documentary production. It also draws on prior ethnographic research on care ethics in Korean Christianity, which provides a

theological vocabulary for understanding why the figure of the victim-witness carries the argumentative and moral weight that it does in these series.

At the same time, this reading obscures, or at least leaves undertheorised, a set of tensions that the present article has only been able to gesture towards. The first is the tension between the documentary's humanist framing, its commitment to survivor testimony as the ground of authority, and the theological claims of its audience, many of whom will bring their own frameworks of religious authority to the act of viewing. The second is the tension between the emancipatory potential of OTT documentary and its risks: the exploitation of regulatory gaps, the potential for re-traumatisation through re-enactment, the commercialisation of suffering for global streaming audiences. The third is the tension between the specificity of the JMS case, a new religious movement led by a man who made extraordinary claims and committed grave crimes, and the generalisability of the analytical framework proposed here. Not all cases of contested religious authority involve sexual violence; not all investigative documentaries perform the quasi-theological functions identified in this analysis.

These tensions point towards a broader research agenda. As OTT platforms continue to expand their global reach, and as investigative documentary continues to develop as a genre, the relationship between media, religion, and authority will require sustained analytical attention. The Korean case examined here is likely to be one of many; comparable dynamics can be observed in documentaries about other religious movements in other national contexts. What is distinctive about the Korean case is the specific entanglement of Protestant Christianity, new religious movements, gender hierarchy, and regulatory arbitrage that shapes the production and reception of these series, and it is this specificity that offers the most productive challenge to the general theoretical frameworks drawn from English-language scholarship.

At the same time, the most important question raised by *In the Name of God* and *I Am a Survivor* is not primarily a scholarly one. It is the question that the series themselves pose, in every episode: who may speak about what happened? Whose account of religious experience, whose testimony about authority, revelation, and harm, carries weight in the public sphere? The documentaries' answer is clear and consistent: the survivor who continues to speak, who returns again and again to testify to what she has seen and what was done to her, is the one through whom truth becomes visible. Whether that answer is theologically adequate, and whether it can sustain the weight that the series place upon it, is a question that will continue to be negotiated in South Korean public culture long after the streaming statistics have been forgotten.

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