Writing acknowledgments calls for a recounting of the history of the book and the odyssey it took in terms of the study, writing, and editing, as well as the biographies of its authors in their own journeys that converged to produce this manuscript, while spotlighting the silent or active supporting roles of others who generously contributed to its making.

I. Exposition – Oren and Michele’s Shared Journey

This book is the result of an eight-year journey. It was sparked through a substantial national Israeli grant that was awarded to a team of researchers from four academic institutions to study changes brought about by the information age. Specifically, the venture was titled LINKS – Learning in a Networked Society – and was part of the Israeli Centers of Research Excellence (I-CORE) initiative. Backed by its emergence, we were introduced through our shared acquaintance with Professor Tamar Katriel. At the time, Tamar was part of Michele’s doctoral review committee at the University of Bologna. Michele was honing his expertise as a semiotician and had specifically been investigating activists’ YouTube videos in Kosovo and Israel’s tumultuous West Bank. Oren had already been involved in digital religious research after a postdoc at Northwestern University and the Center for Religion and Media at New York University. At that point, he was nested at the Faculty of Education at the University of Haifa in both the department of Leadership and Policy in Education and the department of Learning and Instructional Sciences. As our paths crossed, he invited Michele to join his emerging NetLab on media, religion, and community and become an active postdoc.
They say, “it takes a village,” and, indeed, in this NetLab a cadre of advanced graduate students and postdoctoral experts were nurtured. A group that, to this day, is dedicated to online inquiry with special attention to digital religion. These bright members of the NetLab have gradually transformed themselves from curious students to colleagues in their own right, offering deep insight and repositories of knowledge that have informed and contributed in different ways to this book while creating a familial environment. Accordingly, we would like to firstly thank the late Yaakov Don. Yaakov’s work focused on the legitimation of new media among the religious Zionist elite, a perspective that was later explored in the book at hand, albeit, among Catholic media activists and the Holy See. Yaakov was killed in a terrorist attack, and we wish to acknowledge his social and intellectual contribution to the group and to the early creative process of the study on which the book is centred. Further members of the research team include Nakhi Mishol-Shauli, a graduate student at the time who studied Jewish ultra-Orthodox WhatsApp groups and online journalists. Nakhi’s advice has become an everyday source of support and creative fervour. Alongside Nakhi, we would like to acknowledge Eldar Fehl, who also studies the ultra-Orthodox community and whose sharp humour and acute intellect enriches the NetLab in so many ways. In addition, we thank Akiva Berger, who studies the authority of religious digital learning sites and responsa, a field which colours so much of believers’ lived religion. Berger’s deep knowledge of computer programming, as well as his religious studies background, continues to offer a rich source of knowledge and insight. In addition, we acknowledge Deby Babis, an exceptional ethnographer who became a postdoc in the NetLab and offered rich insight and support on the convergence between traditional ethnography and online visual communication analysis. Her work at the NetLab coincided with that of Noam Tirosh, an expert on collective memory and digital communications whose acumen enriched our knowledge of political apps and new media theory. Both Deby and Noam nowadays flourish as assistant professors in departments of sociology and communications, respectively, in Israel’s academia. Further thanks are offered to Maya Magnat, a graduate student who studies YouTube influencers and has become one of the younger members in the team, as has Tomer Udi,
who is currently involved in the study of Jewish identity on American campuses as they are forged through Instagram feeds. Adding to this there are several students who were not part of the NetLab but offer continuous support, such as the exceptional Yaara Peled, Ofir Sheffer, and Michael Sang. Through its evolution NetLab members met at scores of informal engagements, work sessions, and international conferences. These included LINK meetings around the country, as well as NetLab members’ joint travel to international congresses such as the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR), the International Society for Media, Religion and Culture (ISMRC), the International Society for Science & Religion (ISSR), the American Educational Research Association (AERA), and the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) in distant destinations such as Seoul, Boulder, Barcelona, Leuven-la-Neuve, Lausanne, and Toronto.

As the group’s dynamics fluctuated and expanded over a plethora of topics, it offered ideas that inspired us in small conversations, lectures, shared silences, morning coffee at the faculty’s cafeteria (thank you Julia), and ongoing WhatsApp exchanges. Through all of this, we continued the conversation on digital religion with a focus on Catholicism, the Holy Land, and digital mediascapes. At the heart of this group is Aref Badarne (aka the Northerner) who devoted hours to assist us in analyzing videos, discovering digital realms, and supporting our work in heart and mind. He personally witnessed the ebbs and flows that led to this book, to which he is bound by a vow of silence. To him, we owe our deepest thanks.

As the LINKS initiative ended (2019), the group continued to flourish and gained further support from other funding agencies. Oren received an Israel Science Foundation (ISF) grant to support this study (No. 624/17) and Michele received a generous postdoctoral grant from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme (No. 837727) and was duly affiliated with the University of Cambridge. Through this generous grant, Michele was able to expand the study and spend a lengthy period conducting fieldwork in São Paulo, Brazil, at the heart of the Canção Nova movement. A movement that has been an important agent in the Catholic Church’s digital outreach, particularly from the Holy Land. To the ISF and the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Foundation, we are deeply indebted, as well as to
the University of Haifa and its research authority for supporting the publication of the book in its final stages.

We are also indebted to the formidable subjects we met in our research journey, a journey that took us to the Holy Land’s sacred places of worship, including monasteries and newsrooms, shrines, and digital labs. They have been our guides in navigating these hybrid spaces in which religion resonates in a constant exchange between online and offline environments. Our gratitude goes to the friars of the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land who have been protecting and keeping the sacred places of the Holy Land alive for more than 800 years. This research would not have been possible without their welcome and support. We also want to thank all the staff and members of the Christian Media Center, a pioneering multicultural and multilingual media venture, whose complexity and potential for innovation never ceased to surprise us. Among them, a special recognition goes to the Canção Nova community, both in Israel and in Brazil, whose devotion and ideas represent the backbone of this evangelical media project. Finally, these acknowledgments would not be complete without expressing our deepest appreciation to members of the Catholic community of the Holy Land and the Middle East who welcomed and supported our work and facilitated a network of personal contacts and interactions that made our study possible. This book may not make them famous, but we hope they like it should they choose to read it.

Special thanks to the excellent staff at McGill-Queen’s University Press. To Kyla Madden and Kathleen Fraser who believed in the book from the start. To Shelagh Plunkett, who carefully read through the manuscript and identified the most detailed transgressions we made while skilfully and warmly helping to iron its creases. In Israel, we are deeply indebted to Avi Aronsky who carefully read through the manuscript, edited, and unravelled our often much too long sentences into accessible passages.

II. Oren’s Journey

In understanding my journey in and to this book, it is difficult to pinpoint the moments, stages, and people that supported its outcome. However, I refer to several milestones that shaped my intellectual
growth and led me to much of the understandings that are overtly and covertly implanted in its pages. My pathway begins in my years of study at the department of sociology and anthropology at the Hebrew University. There I gained a love of sociological inquiry to a large extent from my late advisor, Professor Reuven Kahane whose macroscopic and comparative gaze, structural perspective, and innovation in processes of legitimation as well as informal theory, propelled my thirst for unveiling the underlying structures of digital worlds, the emergent cultures of the young and the religious. This curiosity was further kindled by my dear friend and colleague Nurit Stadler, an anthropologist of religion, whom I have known since her seminal work on the Opus Dei, and whose scholarship on saints, shrines, and fundamentalist publics I have closely followed over the years. Complementing her warm encouragement, I was inspired by Batia Siebzehner, a dear friend and an extremely acute sociologist of comparative religion, the enlightenment, and Catholicism, who has guided me into the rich worlds of religious scholarship and has always been there for me with questions and late-night discussions. Further, David Lehmann of Cambridge University, who collaborated with Batia in the past, has also been a true friend for me and the book project. His intellectual breadth and shared interest in comparative religion, the Holy Land, religiosity in Latin America, and ethnography have continued to illuminate my work as he is an exemplar and friendly source of learning and support.

Complementing my journey into religion were my mentors who helped me in my study of digital worlds, including the late Professor Brenda Danet, a pioneer and visionary of early internet research, and Carmel Vaisman, an internet scholar whom I have known since graduate school and who has accompanied me on my journey through digital research with fascinating discussions in Tel-Aviv, Jerusalem, and conferences that took place during our postdocs in the Midwest and at the Association of Internet Researchers. I wish to further acknowledge Ariel Klinger-Inbar, a friend since my youth, a tour guide to the Holy Land, and a student of its Christian history. His exuberant thirst for knowledge and mastery of its holy sites has enriched and inspired me. I further thank Jacob Hecht, a brilliant and independent internet scholar who advised me on my early steps in the field, and the
marvelous Eyal Ben Ari, who also served as my PhD instructor and continues to advise and inspire my work, and, finally, from the Hebrew University, I wish to thank Ori Eyal for years of friendship and profound intellectual exchange.

It was in the spring of 2006 that I started a new phase in my intellectual journey as I expanded my scholarship from a primary focus on digital youth to that of digital religion. This shift occurred as I met Heidi Campbell. At the time, Heidi was on a visit to Israel and was seeking partnerships at the University of Haifa. Although I was not affiliated with Haifa at the time, I met with her and by 2008 we had begun a study of digital religion with a focus on the Jewish ultra-Orthodox community in Israel. This grew into a friendship and collegial relationship which led to a few publications in leading journals. Afterwards, I embarked on my postdoctoral years in New York and Chicagoland where I continued to pursue fieldwork and engage with scholars at conferences in Boulder, Colorado, New York, and beyond that fed my interest and further introduced me to the fields of knowledge surrounding digital religion. They include folks such as Lynn Shofield-Clark, Gregory Grieve, Stewart Hoover, Giulia Evolvi, Christopher Helland, Nabil Echchaibi, Tim Hutchings, and many wonderful others that I continue to meet and learn from in international meetings.

As I received my appointment at the University of Haifa, I was warmly received by colleagues in different disciplinary fields that through the years opened me to new perspectives and fields of knowledge that have inspired ideas in this book. Most notably is Sarit Barzilai, whose original ideas on post truths and personal epistemology are a source of inspiration; I am honoured to be her friend and colleague. Others I would like to mention are Clara Sabbagh, who has always offered her support and acumen; Lotem Perry-Hazan, who shares my curiosity for the study of religious groups and is a leading expert on law, education, and religion – together we currently lead a program on informal education that is supported by the Rothschild Foundation, and I continue to learn from her and enjoy her friendship; and Ayelet Baram-Tsabari of the Technion – the Israel Institute of Technology – whom I collaborate with in the study of science dissemination and education among the ultra-Orthodox. Ayelet and I
also co-supervise a PhD student on digital religion, and I enjoy her comradery, curiosity, methodological rigor, and intellectual insights. Back in the University of Haifa, Dani Ben Zvi and Yael Kali are deeply thanked for their support. They have taught me so much on issues of education in the digital age, have accepted my sometimes unconventional fields in the learning sciences – with my emphasis on informal learning and religious media – and have warmly supported my journey at the university.

As aforementioned, in Haifa I met Michele Martini, the co-author of this book. A young scholar who has taught me so much on semiotics and visual culture and whose knowledge, curiosity, and youthful drive continue to feed my mind. I am deeply indebted to him for joining my journey and collaborating with me on this project. I continue to thank the brilliant Tamar Katriel for initiating our acquaintance.

Writing a book and managing an academic career burdens the soul and takes a toll on the body. I wish to extend my gratitude to people who have supported my physical journey: my calisthenics instructor Or Eicher and my former trainer Yuval Elroy have both added balance to my life, as has my gym friend Avi Chanes who adds humour and friendship to my workouts. Also adding balance, I wish to thank two of my closest friends: Yael Ron, a zealous defender of workers’ rights who continuously advises and supports my work and daily life, and Michael Attali, a dear lifelong friend and an economist whose humour and astuteness continue to broaden my perspective.

For my part, I dedicate this book to the memory of my father Yoram (Goldwag) Golan, a survivor of the Holocaust horrors and a man of deep scholarly disposition, who encouraged my journey and opened me to different cultural nodes through family travels and his rich background in languages and cultures. My mother, Judith (Dita) Kolodny-Golan, who has always been supportive of my scholarly journey and offered strength and support through it all. I am indebted to my beloved sisters, Donna and Sharon – Donna, the eldest, who has always taught me self-discipline and perseverance which were deeply needed to author this manuscript, and Sharon, whose attention to symbolic culture and belief systems from East and West has taught me so much. Both their beloved support aids me in my daily life as do their wonderful spouses, Shlomo and Tal, and children, Adam, Rona,
Tia, Emma, and baby Ann. Finally, I mention Arnon Kolodny, who is a pilot, a business entrepreneur, and, most importantly, my beloved uncle. My journey starts with these kin and they inspire my wor(l)ds.

III. Michele’s Journey

Publishing a first monograph is an important milestone for an emerging scholar and, like all milestones, it marks the border between the path already walked and that which lies ahead, a route whose navigation requires a lot of experience and knowledge, by and large not your own. Indeed, in the course of my career I have had the honour to encounter and be guided by several mentors. They have shared with me their knowledge and experience but, perhaps most importantly, have shown me what it means to be an intellectual in these troubled times. For that reason I want to thank Professor Patizia Violi, who supervised my rather massive MA thesis and first saw in me the potential to pursue academic research as a vocation. My gratitude goes also to Professor Tarcisio Lancioni, who supervised my PhD dissertation and patiently hammered down its most convoluted theoretical claims. Few people, however, have left a mark on my life as has Professor Tamar Katriel, whose example has become for me a model of intellectual and moral integrity. To her, I also owe my encounter with Professor Oren Golan, who has been my mentor for several years and who taught me those skills and crafts that are essential for a scholar in today’s academia. This book, which we co-authored, is first of all a proof of his success. Researching in the field of digital religion led us to meet many wonderful scholars such as Professor Valentina Napolitano, Dr Giulia Evolvi, and Dr Carlo Nardella, whose work continues to enrich our knowledge and ignite our curiosity. Among them, my gratitude goes especially to Professor David Lehmann, whose support has been crucial in enabling me to expand my research from the Middle East to Latin America, making it truly a global study, and to Professor Frank Usarski, who welcomed me at the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo. Finally, I want to express my deepest gratitude to Professor Susan L. Roberson, with whom I had the honour to work at the University of Cambridge. We live in a time of deep crisis, a time in which we doubt human societies will ever be able to build just and
sustainable futures for themselves. In this unprecedented conjuncture, Professor Roberson gave me what I most needed: the conviction that our intellectual work does matter.

To conclude, I would like to thank my family, who have been by my side through this journey: Marco Martini, Daniela Malench, and Francesca Martini. They are the one community I can always come back to and have a good fight. My deepest gratitude goes also to my partner, Dr Larisa Olteanu, whose intellectual courage and curiosity is for me an endless source of inspiration and headaches.