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# **Religious Communication, Interaction and Transformation in a Culture of Digitality. Insights into the Zurich University Research Priority Program “Digital Religion(s)” – An Introduction**

Rapid developments in digitalisation over the last three decades have not only had a considerable impact on the technological, economic, social and political spheres, but also in the field of cultural practices, including religious practices. In parallel with technological innovations, scientific research into the phenomena of religious practice under digital conditions and their possible effects on the self-understanding of individual and institutional religious actors has developed significantly.

Since the turn of the century, different facets of the relationship between religion and digitality have become a subject of intensive research in humanities and social science disciplines, which has resulted in a broad range of content-related studies, a variety of methodological approaches and overall in a wealth of academic literature in this field of research.

In addition, a whole series of collaborations and research initiatives – such as the International Society for Media, Religion and Culture (ISMRC) or the Global Network for Digital Theology (GoNeDigiTal) – as well as conferences, monographs and journal contributions demonstrate that religion in a culture of digitality has increasingly been the focus of both interdisciplinary and international inquiry for quite some time now. In their thematic diversity and contextual grounding, these studies make clear that the developments of a society characterised by far-reaching digitalisation processes are not leading to the dissolution of religion, but on the contrary to highly dynamic forms of religious communication emerging across various formats and platforms within the digital public sphere(s).

Even if the general prediction of a comprehensive return of religion should certainly be treated with caution, the wealth of previous studies in the research field of digital religion make one thing clear: many religious actors are actively dealing with the challenges of digital dynamics through intensive negotiation processes, critically assessing the appropriateness and suitability of new offerings in innovative, experimental and proactive ways. Even if, for methodological reasons, one should be cautious when talking about digital-religious transformation processes, there are nonetheless unmistakable signs of reform processes that are

significantly co-initiated and promoted digitally. The fact that these negotiation processes are linked to specific patterns of justification, narratives, metaphors and imaginations of the digital is clearly visible across many different religious traditions, despite their differences.

However, this does not mean that the need for further in-depth quantitative and qualitative analyses and interpretations of the reciprocal relationship between religious and digital innovation have been exhausted. Rather, fundamental questions are increasingly being asked about the possible transformations of previous ideas of established religious authorities and power relations, the logic of community formation, new forms of expressing individual identity and authenticity, the organisation of ritual and sacramental practices and the shaping of religious and spiritual meaning-making in times of digitally induced attention economy.

In addition, the rapid development in recent years of new information and communication formats driven by artificial intelligence has made the fundamental question of their potential influence on the image of man, human dignity and – by extension – its existential significance and the associated ethical responsibility of religious actors increasingly urgent.

The launch of the University Research Priority Program (URPP) “Digital Religion(s). Communication, Interaction and Transformation in the Digital Society” at the University of Zurich in 2021 aims, on the one hand, to build on existing research dynamics and debates as well as their findings. On the other hand, this interdisciplinary research network seeks to collaboratively advance “state of the art” interdisciplinary research in an organisationally structured and content-driven exemplary manner, thereby further expanding and refining it.

The research in this programme therefore focuses on investigating the fundamental dynamics and challenges of the digital age with its specific effects on religious communication, interaction and transformation in a culture of digitality.

Incidentally, this foundational insight also explains the somewhat unusual designation “Digital Religion(s)”, understood as an “umbrella term” under which various phenomena and practices with very different religious references are brought together. At the same time, however, this term is intended to signal that individual phenomena are to be analysed and interpreted both empirically and hermeneutically within their specific contexts, guided by the intention of researching the dynamics of communication, interaction and potential transformation under digital conditions in their respective complexity. We were aware from the outset that this field of research is inherently diverse in itself and that the phenomena to be analysed in more detail can therefore only represent one component of these highly plural dynamics in different religious contexts.

In this sense, the structure of the first phase reflects both the existing plurality of phenomena as well as the necessary focus and interdisciplinary orientation of the URPP: A particular privilege of the URPP is that it is organised over a total of 12 years, divided into three phases of four years each. On the one hand, this allows long-term planning of the content of the work and, depending on technological developments, the adaptation of the individual content priorities as well as the monitoring and analysis of individual religious practices over a longer period of time. On the other hand, this provides the foundation to foster long-term interdisciplinary collaboration, and establish new research fields and methodologies. Such a programme has the potential to be both discipline-defining as well as structurally transformative and its impact will therefore extend well beyond the usual disciplinary borders.

For a better understanding of the contributions summarised in this volume, the following should be noted at this point: This research network was originally based on a much more far-reaching initiative as part of the 5th series of the so-called “National Centres of Competence in Research” (NCCR) funding programme of the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) for 2020. In 2018, Markus Huppenbauer and Thomas Schlag had already invited colleagues from various disciplines and university locations in Switzerland to collaborate on the project, specifically those whose affinity with the topic of religion was already known to us. The innovative aspect of this project lay in the active involvement and collaboration of scholars from various disciplines who had not necessarily been at the core of this thematic research area in the past but who were now willing to actively participate, engage, and come together.

In the end, our interdisciplinary, broad-based Swiss research consortium narrowly missed being selected as part of this NCCR process. Fortunately, however, the University of Zurich offered an alternative funding opportunity through the URPP programme, which was running almost in parallel. As a result, we were able to adapt the research we had originally planned to the Zurich site and the expertise available here, and at the same time to refine that research. The University of Zurich approved our project in the summer of 2020, which enabled us to plan the organisation more precisely and to enter the first research phase on 1 January 2021.

Even though this new focus on the Zurich research context meant that we were unable to pursue some promising interdisciplinary collaborations across different academic locations in Switzerland, the originally planned basic structure of the work in two research modules under the headings “Internal Dynamics” and “External Dynamics” could in principle be retained.

The “added value” of this research programme therefore lies precisely in its interdisciplinary approach: concrete religious practices under digital conditions

are illuminated and examined from multiple disciplinary perspectives, with both the content and methodological approaches to each field enriched by insights contributed by other disciplines within the URPP.

Due to the aforementioned longer-term orientation of the URPP, this first phase (2021–2024) primarily served to explore the topic in each specific research field and to explore the possibilities of interdisciplinary cooperation in the two modules already mentioned, as well as in the context of the URPP as a whole. At the same time, however, it should also be mentioned that due to the pandemic itself, a first face-to-face meeting of the entire research consortium was not possible until autumn 2022 and that no shared premises were available in the first phase of the URPP. Otherwise, the basis for exploring possible synergies could undoubtedly have been developed and established much more quickly.

These initial conditions briefly described here are now also reflected in this volume and its contributions. The leaders of the 13 individual research projects were invited to share key findings and interpretations from their analyses, tailored specifically for this volume. The order of the individual contributions also reflects the allocation to the two modules of the URPP.

The contributions and insights from the individual projects are generally organised in a way that highlights each project's specific disciplinary exploration and focus, while at the same time making evident the extent to which they engage with insights from other URPP projects. This can be recognised by the fact that individual projects sometimes make intensive reference to the joint work in the module, which is reflected in interdisciplinary references and, for example, in the consideration of findings and literature from other research projects.

The fact that in many cases the so-called “early careers” are named as the first authors of the articles is due on the one hand to the fact that they are primarily responsible for writing the respective article. At the same time, we see this as an expression and signal of the considerable commitment of early career researchers to the respective project and to the URPP as a whole.

However, this primary responsibility also means that the insights presented here are generally not simply summaries of the qualification theses. As we are aware that publishing in the relevant leading journals of the respective discipline is still relevant to one's career, we have asked those responsible for projects and contributions to provide exemplary highlights rather than summaries of their qualification papers. For this very reason, we have also asked the authors to explicitly reference their own past or forthcoming publications in the respective literature references.

On the one hand, the overall appearance of the volume may therefore appear to be more multifaceted than a typical overall presentation of the insights of the

first research phase of the URPP. Nevertheless, the fact that this first research period was an exploration phase should be emphasised once again.

On the other hand, we believe that the contributions presented here provide very important insights for further disciplinary and interdisciplinary research in the field. The range of contributions presented here can thus be seen as both a reflection of the complex dynamics shaping this field of research, and an orientation for necessary future research efforts.

The concluding chapter of this volume presents our editorial perspective on the findings, discusses their contribution to and significance for the forthcoming research debates – both nationally and internationally – and explores the synergies they may generate for the second phase of the URPP.

We are aware that the technical English in particular poses its own challenges for some interested readers. We have therefore included at least a German summary before the articles. At the same time, the bibliographies of the individual articles generally contain further references to German-language publications in the field of the respective research project.

With this volume, we also aim to open a window to academic, social, and religious “publics”. As researchers in this field, we consider it both exciting and a privilege to be able to scientifically investigate current developments in religious practice within the digital society over such a long period of time — and, in doing so, to offer some orientation for future self-understanding and practice itself. We view the resources provided and the trust placed in us not only as an opportunity, but also as a particular responsibility that shapes our academic work.

In this respect, we hope that the research presented in the volume will inspire academic readers to remain or become more deeply engaged in this evolving field of Digital Religion(s). At the same time, we invite those in stakeholder positions to engage critically and attentively with the findings presented in these articles. In particular, the results may be of interest to representatives of religious communities, like those responsible for healthcare, migration and integration, those in positions of responsibility in religious and canon law, in religious studies in both formal and non-formal educational contexts. But we hope that our insights are also inspiring for technology developers and media professionals dealing with religious topics in the current situation, who find themselves asking about the possible contribution and continued relevance of religion practice, not least in times of crisis, conflict, polarisation and indoctrination.

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We dedicate this volume to two of our members whom we miss: Prof Dr Markus Huppenbauer (1958–2020), who played a key role in developing the original idea for the URPP “Digital Religion(s)” and who was able to witness the successful funding approval before his unexpected death in July 2020. He would certainly have been delighted with these first insights into the results of our research. And to Prof. Dr. Martin Volk (1961–2025), who was project leader of Project 8 in Phase I of the URPP, in which he inspired us with his knowledge, insight and enthusiasm. His unexpected death in September 2025 after a short sudden disease leaves us sad and speechless. We are deeply grateful to both their contributions, and will continue our research in their spirit.