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The Corporate Governance of Religious Organizations in a Digital Society: From Monastic Organization to Neomonastic Resonance

Abstract: We examine the intersection of religious governance and digitalization by focusing on traditional monastic communities. From an organizational sociological perspective, we ask how digitalization is negotiated within monastic communities. We apply established organizational theories such as imprinting theory, economic and micropolitical approaches, and organizational theories of legitimacy. We gather comprehensive insights into these dynamics with a multimethod approach that combines a quantitative survey, website coding, qualitative interviews, and ethnographies applied across German-speaking Catholic monasteries in Europe and Jerusalem. Our research first highlights how monastic digital media use is legitimized through bottom-up processes rather than traditional hierarchical authority. Second, historical democratic community principles continue to hold monastic leaders accountable in their exercise of authority in the digital world. Third, we demonstrate that institutional logics imprinted during founding centuries ago continue to influence digital policy today, with decentralized decision-making promoting adaptability to and innovation in digital practices.

Wir untersuchen die Schnittstelle zwischen religiöser Governance und Digitalisierung, mit einem Fokus auf traditionelle monastische Gemeinschaften. Aus einer organisationssoziologischen Perspektive fragen wir: Wie wird die Digitalisierung in monastischen Gemeinschaften verhandelt? Wir stützen uns auf etablierte Organisationstheorien wie die Imprinting-Theorie, ökonomische und mikropolitische Ansätze sowie organisationale Legitimitäts-Theorien. Unsere Studie verwendete einen Multi-Methoden-Ansatz und kombinierte quantitative Umfragen in deutschsprachigen katholischen Klöstern, Webseiten-Codierung, qualitative Interviews und Ethnographien in europäischen Klöstern sowie in Jerusalem, um umfassende Einblicke in diese Dynamiken zu gewinnen. Wir zeigen erstens, dass die Verwendung digitaler Medien in Klöstern eher durch bottom-up Prozesse als durch traditionelle hierarchische Autorität legitimiert wird. Zweitens verpflichten historische demokratische Gemeinschaftsprinzipien klösterliche Füh-

rungspersonen in ihrer Autoritätsausübung auch in der digitalen Welt wirksam zur Rechenschaft. Drittens zeigen wir, dass institutionelle Logiken, die zur Gründungszeit vor Jahrhunderten geprägt wurden, auch heute noch die digitale Praxis beeinflussen. Dezentrale Entscheidungsfindung fördert dabei eine grössere Anpassungsfähigkeit und Innovation.

1 Introduction

From at least the time of Max Weber's work, organizations have been recognized as fundamental structures for coordinating and ordering complex societies (Dash and Padhi 2020). Organizations shape historical, economic, and social phenomena within societies (Kühl 2015). This fact suggests that contemporary religious practices can only be fully grasped by understanding the organizations and the structures through which they operate. This project, situated within the URPP's Internal Dynamics group, aims to deepen our understanding of the dynamic relationship between religious governance and digitalization from the perspective of organizational sociology. Our research contributes to a recent research strand within the study of digital religions: the impulses of sociological theories to digital religions (Lövheim and Campbell 2017).

Our project focuses on Catholic monastic communities and their governance across centuries of change. Monasteries are communities of religious virtuosi and have been studied, for example, for their religious history, life, buildings, authorities, and education (Fritz et al. 2018; Pollack et al. 2018; Stausberg 2012). From the perspective of organizational sociology, monasteries in the Western hemisphere are the first systematic work organizations with a rational design (Dash and Padhi 2020; Kieser 1987; Weber 1922). They have a centuries-old history of organizational learning and adaptation to social, economic, and technological challenges (Rost 2017). Monastic organizations have been studied for their unique features, including their effective, time-proven governance (Rost et al. 2010) and their contributions to technological innovation (Doehne and Rost 2021). These studies have demonstrated how monasteries' resilience and adaptability in the face of sociotechnological change may inform the study of modern organizations.

Our project contributes to the study of digital religions by addressing how digitalization is negotiated within monastic communities. Drawing on the organizational conceptual toolbox, we use legitimacy theory (Haack, Schilke, and Zucker 2021; Suchman 1995), imprinting theory (Stinchcombe 1965), and economic approaches (Scott and Davis 2015) to study digitalization in monasteries. We aim to highlight the differential effects and mechanisms of various organizational logics

and decision-making structures in religious organizations in relation to digitalization. Our research applies a multimethod approach that combines survey research with ethnographies, in-depth interviews, and archival data on online monastic presentation.

We contribute to organizational sociology and the study of digital religions by highlighting, first, that in monasteries, digital media usage is legitimized bottom-up in a cyclical relationship between community and the individual rather than top-down by traditional hierarchical authority (see section 3.2). Through ethnographic investigation and semi-structured interviews, our study uncovered the narratives that are employed by monastics to legitimize new media use as a means of integrating tradition with innovation (Danko, Golan and Rost 2025).

Second, we show that traditional participatory institutions within monastic governance predict the expression of authority and community in online media (see section 3.3). We combine quantitative survey data from monastic leaders and regular members with archival data from monastic websites and social media presentations to investigate how the traditional democratic institution of recall, the historically established option of removing leaders to hold leaders accountable, impacts online leader self-presentation and behavior. Findings indicate that communities with recall mechanisms demonstrate significantly higher accountability to their community, greater innovation in digital media, and a careful protection of core religious rituals from digital disruption. These findings thus contribute to a better understanding of religious authority and community in the digital age.

Third, religious communities' engagement with the digital world are shaped by their specific historical contexts (see section 3.4). Our research shows that organizational logics imprinted long ago in specific societal, religious, economic, and technological contexts continue to shape organizational identity and behavior even after centuries of radical environmental change. By comparing diverse collectives of monastic communities across several historical eras, we observe the intriguing pattern that the oldest collectives are both more open to innovation and at the same time more wary of the negative effects of potential digital disruption. Our study thus shows that the organizational principles of religious institutions may be more stable than widely acknowledged and provide adaptability and resilience across diverse sociotechnological contexts.

2 Theoretical Basis and Methodology

Organizational sociology frameworks have not yet been widely used to study digital religions, although they are useful in examining religious institutions in the era of digitalization. Organizational sociology's interdisciplinary lense has long focused on issues such as community, identity, legitimacy, and social structures that intersect with key concerns in the study of digital religions. Organizational sociology has also explored the interplay between institutional logics, leadership and authority structures, and legitimation processes in rapidly changing environments (Campbell and Evolvi 2020; Preisendörfer 2015) and provides potential insights into the diffusion of innovations, the varying capacities of organizations to adopt new technologies, and the influence of historical path dependencies (Blättel-Mink et al. 2019). Furthermore, organizational scholars have a long tradition in the systematic study of religious communities and entities. For instance, religious organizations have been examined to explore the genesis of accountability standards (Quattrone 2015), to investigate the diffusion of innovations (Doehne and Rost 2021), to explain processes of organizational change (Mintzberg and Westley 1992), and to understand organizational hybrids (Gümüsay et al. 2020).

Our research in the first project phase of the URPP Digital Religions adapts established theories within organizational sociology to religious communities in the digital era. We apply imprinting theory (Marquis and Tilcsik 2013; Stinchcombe 1965), economic and micropolitical organizational approaches (Buchanan and Tullock 1965; Pettigrew 2014), multilevel theories of legitimacy (Bitektine and Haack 2015), and innovation and technology theories (Dillon and Morris 1996; Greenacre et al. 2012). These theories are inherently interdisciplinary and have substantial potential for cross-fertilization in the field of digital religions. In the next subsection, we provide an overview of these theories.

2.1 Legitimacy Theory

Legitimacy theory emphasizes the importance to organizations of being perceived as desirable, proper, and appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions (Suchman 1995). From Max Weber's (1922) foundational classification of legitimacy types as traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational, the literature on legitimacy has evolved significantly. Dowling and Pfeffer's (1975) seminal work explores how organizations align their values with societal norms to maintain legitimacy. They emphasize that legitimacy is essential to organizational survival and can be threatened when organizations deviate significantly from societal expectations. Suchman (1995) further refined legitimacy

theory by emphasizing how organizations strategically manage legitimacy with diverse audiences. Recently, organizational theorizing has advanced more multifaceted conceptualizations of legitimacy (Díez-Martín et al. 2021). We generally understand legitimation as the process of making something acceptable and assigning it normative status within a particular collective (Golan 2015). Although legitimacy may involve evaluations by external entities, where it can be similar to reputation, our focus is on how digital practices are legitimized within the internal dynamics of organizations and communities.

We draw on Haack, Schilke, and Zucker's (2021) work, which conceptualizes legitimacy as a multilevel construct consisting of validity and propriety judgments. Validity refers to collective-level perceptions of appropriateness, and propriety refers to individuals' perceptions that organizational practices are appropriate within their social context. In addition, the concept of consensus describes the extent to which individual evaluators agree that a given organizational practice is proper; consensus thus signals substantial overlap between validity and propriety judgements. This theory enables a dynamic view of legitimacy in times of digital transformation, highlighting how legitimacy judgments evolve through the interplay of internal and external community dynamics.

Legitimation pressures become particularly prominent when traditional and innovative practices intersect, which prompts questions about their appropriateness and challenges the prevailing consensus (Golan 2015). Recent research has highlighted how the era of digitalization has challenged traditional concepts of organizations as organizations become more loosely structured, networked, and fluid social collectives with varying degrees of organizationality (Smith 2022; Weber et al. 2016). This has led to legitimation processes at the point where traditional organizational practices meet new organizational forms (Jemine et al. 2020).

This shift is evident in religious organizations, where digitalization challenges long-established institutions. Various studies have shown the increased use of new media within religious communities (Bunt 2009; Campbell 2010). However, how digitalization is negotiated within traditional religious institutions remains underexplored. In "Legitimating Digital Media in Religious Institutions" (section 3.2), we focus on the case of monastic communities to investigate how these communities of religious virtuosi, centered on asceticism and seclusion, legitimize digital media (Danko, Golan and Rost 2025). Although the Benedictine monastic tradition has been followed for over 1500 years, Benedictine and many other monasteries are extensively engaged with digital media (Jonveaux 2013). How do these communities balance tradition and modernity and negotiate change within their organization?

By answering this question, our research addresses knowledge gaps in legitimacy theory. We contribute to the literature by showing that monastic communi-

ties, a type of voluntary total institution (Sundberg 2020), negotiate the legitimation of digital media through a bottom-up, cyclical process between the community and the individual. Our research contributes to the study of digital religions by highlighting the role of organizational decision-making about digital policies within tradition-laden religious communities. It demonstrates the usefulness of recently developed multilevel constructs from organizational sociology in understanding shifting legitimacy within traditional religious institutions.

2.2 Economic Organizational Approaches

Economic organizational theories understand organizations as structured systems designed to coordinate human behavior toward achieving an organizational goal, whether economic, religious, or other (Scott and Davis 2015). Digitalization is understood as being actively shaped by individual utility assessments within community structures (Giddens 1984; Winter 2013). In this view, religious institutions are political arenas in which individual strategies compete (Pettigrew 2014). This approach allows us to examine decision-making processes as shaped by organizational structures (Linder and Foss, 2013), which in turn affect digital media adoption outcomes (Tasselli et al. 2015). Consequently, our research primarily focuses on the meso level of organizational structures within monasteries and their influence on digital adoption (Eisenhardt 1985).

In "Monastic Principles as an Antidote to Leadership Hubris" (section 3.3), we investigate the traditional institution of leader recall in its potential effects on power abuse, risk-taking, and self-presentation by leaders in the era of digital media. We apply economic theory to argue that recall options effectively incentivize the accountability of leaders to organizational members, thereby shaping leaders' sustainable digital media usage. Although digital religions studies have predominantly conceptualized communities as human and natural systems, the perspective of religious organizations as rational systems can provide a new approach (Scott and Davis 2015). Such a microlevel approach is encouraged by recent findings on the importance of human agency in determining and shaping the use of digital media (Methnani et al. 2021). By focusing on structured behavior in both online and offline religious communities, the organizational lens can deepen our understanding of digital adaptation in such communities, including the design of digital platforms, leadership online, and the coordination and possible trade-off between spiritual and organizational goals (Campbell and Evolvi 2020).

2.3 Imprinting Theory

The extent to which technology shapes organizational structures and how organizational structures in turn shape the adaptation of technologies is an ongoing debate in organizational sociology (Dalziel and Basir 2024; Nelson 1985; Rao and Drazin 2002; Wyrwich et al. 2022). An influential theory for explaining this relationship is imprinting theory (Stinchcombe 1965). Marquis and Tilcsik (2013, 199) define imprinting as "a process whereby, during a brief period of susceptibility, a focal entity develops characteristics that reflect prominent features of the environment, and these characteristics continue to persist despite significant environmental changes in subsequent periods." The imprinting argument first suggests that organizational features are stamped into the organization for a limited time, termed the window of imprintability, during which the organization exhibits intensified receptivity to external influence (Carroll and Hannan 2000; Higgins 2005; Immelmann 1975; Johnson 2007; McEvily et al. 2012). Second, during this sensitive period, significant influence is exerted on organizations by core features of the environment, for example its economic, technological, and institutional aspects and the organizational logics that founders establish (Baron et al. 1999; Carroll and Hannan 2000; Johnson 2007). Third, imprints persist even after significant environmental and technological changes (Marquis and Tilcsik 2013; Stinchcombe 1965).

Two conflicting hypotheses have emerged in addressing the contemporary adaptive usefulness of historical imprints: the liability-of-aging hypothesis suggests that older organizations are more likely to face disruption due to the inadequacy of their increasingly outdated institutions within changing sociotechnological contexts. This aligns with Schumpeter's (1939) conception of creative destruction, in which innovations incessantly destroy obsolete economic structures. In contrast, the exaptation hypothesis suggests that older organizations can, under certain circumstances, leverage their imprinted structures and processes in a new environment. Exaptation is an often-unacknowledged yet important process by which new markets for products and services are created by organizations (Dew et al. 2004).

Our research discussed in section 3.4, titled "Dinosaurs of the Organizational Landscape Facing Technological Disruption," contributes to clarifying blind spots in imprinting theory by testing both hypotheses through an examination of the influence of digitalization on Catholic religious orders and their monasteries. Our contribution expands the theoretical repertoire in the field of digital religions. Many religious organizations and communities have long histories of evolution. Do these organizations and communities have to fear for their survival particu-

larly strongly due to the technological change brought by digitalization? Or are they able to leverage their traditional organizational structure and learnings?

2.4 Method

We employed a multimethod approach that combines quantitative empirical methods with qualitative methods to minimize the weaknesses of each method: (1) We conducted a quantitative survey of 112 monastic communities in German-speaking Europe on a range of governance and digitalization topics. (2) We enriched these data with online coding of the websites and social media channels of these monasteries to assess their online self-presentation. (3) We collected qualitative data in 28 in-depth interviews with monastics from diverse backgrounds regarding nationality, gender, and position in the community. (4) We conducted ethnographies in monasteries in Switzerland, Austria, and Jerusalem, each lasting around a week. This mixed-methods design allows us to triangulate data from multiple sources and ensure that our findings are robust and reflect the complexities inherent in the study of monastic life (Irvine 2010).

Table 1: Comprehensive data gathering on governance and digital practices in monasteries.

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Quantitative survey:	112 Catholic monasteries DACH
Document analysis:	112 websites, social media presence
Ethnographies:	4 monastic communities: Germany, Austria, Jerusalem
Interviews:	28 abbots, abbesses, regular members

3 Main Findings: Presentation of Research Results

Our research has so far yielded insights in three major areas of digital religions: the legitimation of digital media in traditional-religious communities, the effects of governance and community principles on digital policies, and the lasting effects of historical imprints on current organizational behavior in the digital era. First, we provide descriptive statistics of our broad quantitative survey (n =112) in German-speaking monasteries to give an overview and familiarize the reader with the context of the study. This is followed by a detailed discussion of our research findings, with individual manuscripts presented in separate sections.

## 3.1 To What Extent is Digitalization Taking Place in Monasteries?

Our data shows that digitalization is pervasive and omnipresent in most monasteries studied. Some 97.4 percent of monasteries in our sample (*n* = 112) have a website, as do 96.3 percent of the German-speaking monastery population (*n* = 353). Of the monasteries in our sample, only 29 percent do not use Facebook or Instagram, and over a third (34 percent) use both social media platforms. This aligns with Jonveaux's (2013, 99) observation over a decade ago that "although Catholic monasteries are theoretically out of the world, monks and nuns more and more use the internet, both for religious and nonreligious reasons." This can be illustrated by the monastery of Disentis, located in the Surselva valley in Switzerland. Although it is the oldest monastery we have studied, having celebrated its 1400-year anniversary a few years ago, the abbey is embracing digitalization in many ways: It offers a livestream of its services, it is active on various social media platforms, and it has already developed two apps.

How do nuns and monks use digital media? Our data show that monastics primarily use digital media for personal purposes rather than for professional applications. Although they do use digital media for both spiritual and communication purposes too, personal use is more prevalent, for instance for pastimes, entertainment, and news. Figure 1 shows the frequeancy of digital media usage for various categories.
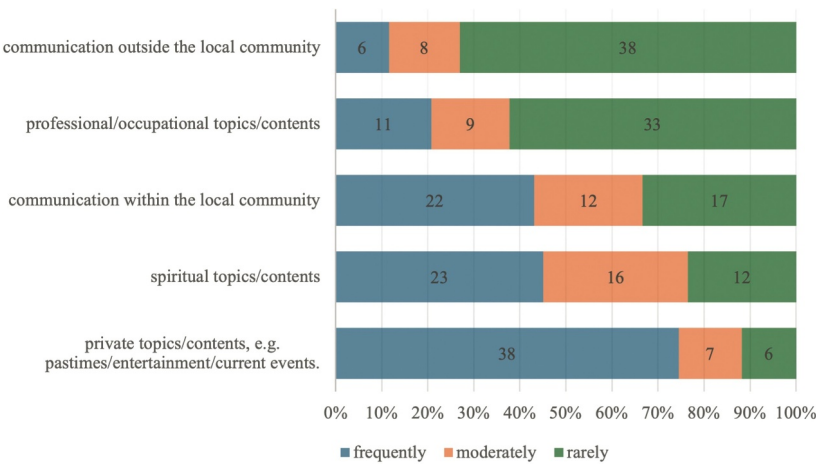
Figure 1: Use of digital communication and digital media by monks and nuns.

Digitalization poses a challenge for these traditional communities and potentially creates tensions with the principles of seclusion, asceticism, and contemplation for which they were originally designed. By examining digital restrictions in monasteries, we can identify the specific limitations communities impose on digital media use. Figure 2 illustrates the results. Although we find certain restrictions at certain times (e.g. during mealtimes) and places (e.g. in church), we find few strict measures imposed and more emphasis on personal responsibility.
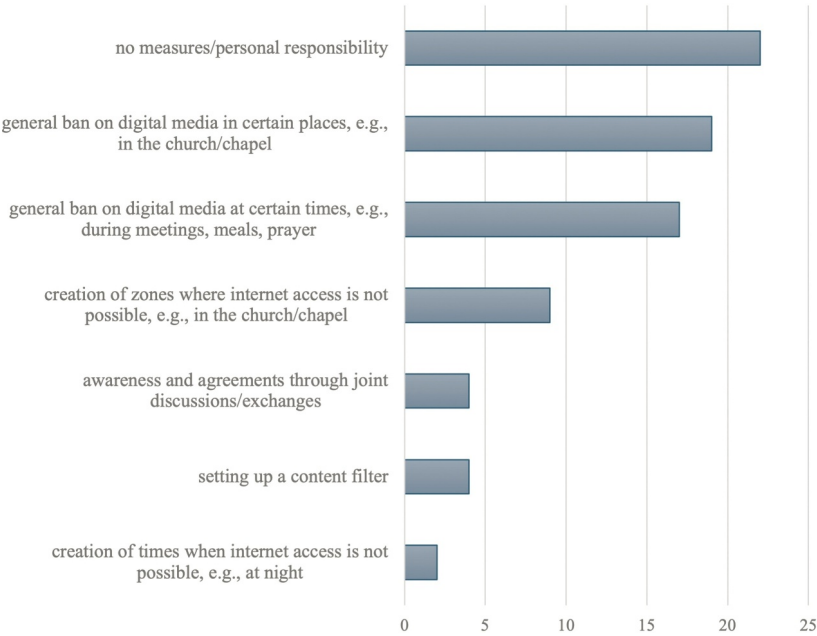
Figure 2: Restrictions on digital media within monastic communities.

Who or what determines the level of digitalization in a monastery? Interestingly, as shown in Figure 3, we find that in the communities we studied, it is the entire community that democratically exerts the strongest influence on the current use of digital media. This is followed by the head of the community, such as the abbot or abbess, but extended management and advisory bodies have less influence. This emphasizes the balanced governance of digitalization in monastic communities and is further elaborated in the sections on our research results below.

Intriguingly, although monasteries generally are digitalization friendly, monastic communities experience little disruption to their core traditional practices. In our quantitative survey of regular members, the vast majority of respondents
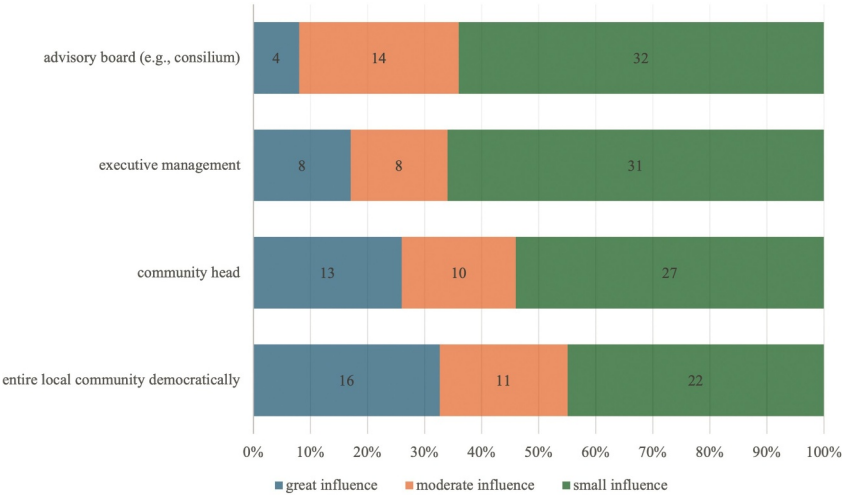
Figure 3: Who had the greatest influence on the current use of digital media in the local community?

indicated that digital media does not pose a significant threat to key rituals and traditional institutions, as illustrated in Figure 4.

This presents us with an interesting puzzle. In this first descriptive overview, we find that digital media are omnipresent, rarely regulated, and used according to the principle of self-responsibility, but there appears to be little disruption of core traditional practices. How do monasteries negotiate digital media use within their traditional governance structures? In the following, we discuss the research we have conducted thus far.
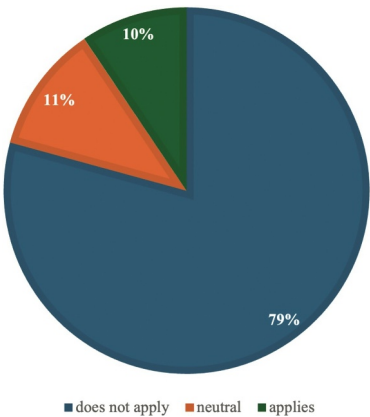
Figure 4: Replacement or threat to important rituals and traditional institutions by digital media in recent years.

3.2 Legitimating Digital Media in Religious Institutions: The Case of Benedictine Monasteries

Our ethnographic fieldwork in four Benedictine monasteries in Switzerland, Austria, and Jerusalem and 28 in-depth interviews with abbots and regular monastics identified three topics that monastics primarily use to legitimize the use of digital tools despite their initial ambivalence (Danko, Golan and Rost 2025).

Updated Traditionalism: Monastics claim to use digital tools to strengthen their religious mission, from improving administrative efficiency and enhancing community work to using digital media to enhance religious practices. Digital media is seen as a means to advancing monastic aims while maintaining the integrity of their religious practices. This is confirmed across a variety of contexts studied, ranging from Swiss monastic communities managing large schools to French monastic communities serving pilgrimage sites and communities of strict observance in Jerusalem.

For example, Abbot Martin, a French abbot in Jerusalem, emphasized that digital media are a "fantastic tool for work." He explained that he frequently uses the internet to source and write theological articles, which significantly aids his religious mission. In the past, he would have needed to travel to distant libraries to access such resources. Similarly, Brother Lukas, an Austrian monk, explained that "there are clear advantages that one would not want to do without; bookkeeping by hand, with about 80 employees, is pointless. So is looking for a brother in the monastery when you can just call or text him." A Swiss monk emphasized that his smartwatch allows him to discreetly check messages or calls during prayer times, allowing him to participate in prayer when he is on duty in the monastery's school. Highlighting digital media as an important means for contacting believers, the abbot in Jerusalem stated that "digital media are important for the monastery as a means of disseminating the services. Many follow the masses in the monastery online. There can be 40, 80, 120 people." According to Abbot Martin, this is many more than would otherwise sit in church.

Maturation and Self-Responsibility: Swiss Abbot Johannes describes new media as "an occasional intrusion from the outside world, which can lead to becoming distracted." Abbot Thomas, an Austrian abbot, even stated that "since the smartphone, the *clausura* is a thing of the past." This statement carries significant weight, because the *clausura* represents the heart of monastic retreat. The potential of digital media to distract thus requires the monastics to continually strengthen their ascetic qualities.

Novices are gradually introduced to digital media as part of their spiritual growth and moral development. In many contexts, novices are encouraged to submit their smartphones and agree upon the conditions of their usage with the

novice masters. This process is framed as a rite of passage that encourages self-discipline and responsible use of technology in alignment with monastic values, and it is welcomed as a time of abstinence in an overwhelmingly digitalized world, according to a novice candidate interviewed.

Whereas digital abstinence as an important element of socialization into the monastic value system is mentioned by several monks, self-responsibility is upheld as a dominant principle in dealing with the temptations of digital media by most of the monks and nuns interviewed. To quote Sister Marie-Louise, who entered a monastery in Jerusalem directly after graduating in theology, "at the latest, after solemn profession, everyone is responsible for their own temptations." There is a social norm of moderation rooted in each member's personal insight. The rigorous initiation and ongoing commitment to a life of renunciation signal commitment and self-regulation when facing temptations and digital practices. As a superior in Jerusalem stressed repeatedly, in dealing with temptations by digital media and beyond, "everything ultimately comes down to self-responsibility."

Advocating Religious Values of the Self: Digital media is appreciated for providing resources for the monastics' pious journey. It is reported to be used to maintain supporting personal connections beyond the monastery. This narrative theme emphasizes the role of digital tools in supporting the personal and spiritual lives of monastics.

For instance, Sister Agnes, in a community in Jerusalem, described her "two families": the spiritual family of the monastic community and her biological family. Both are important to her for leading a meaningful religious life, and all kinds of digital media help her to maintain supportive contact with her familial roots. Similarly, Brother Stefan, in a Jerusalem monastery, recounted a close friendship with a Swiss monk and explained that their sustained friendship and mutual encouragement would not have been possible without digital media.

The friars also emphasized how digital media can enrich religious practices. For instance, one brother from a Swiss monastery mentioned an app that helps users practice reciting Gregorian chants and thus supports worship in Latin. Similarly, a monk in a Swiss Benedictine monastery noted that his community has developed an app that enables them to engage with the Rule of Benedict and offers guidance on its teachings.

Our research concludes that despite tensions between digitalization and traditional monastic values, the Benedictine communities studied have found ways to legitimize and integrate digital media in ways that align with their spiritual goals and community life (Danko, Golan and Rost 2025). We discover an environment in which digital media are omnipresent and often used, given certain restrictions at certain times and places. As a result, an anomic lacuna with few regulations exists at the communal level. Instead, self-responsible digital media usage is practiced

with individual coping strategies in line with monastic values and qualities. Given the reluctance, and at times the inability, of superiors to regulate digital media, we find that digital media legitimation is negotiated in a democratic bottom-up process that challenges notions of hierarchical top-down authority in these institutions. This reflects a broader trend in how religious communities adapt to the digital landscape by balancing tradition with technological adoption. Simultaneously, monastics are cautious about potential distractions and excessive self-promotion on social media. Generally, monastic communities introduce innovations on a smaller scale, expanding them only when they prove themselves useful while carefully discerning implications for the individual and communal mission. This approach aligns with their lifestyle of spiritual seekers alone in community. For example, one monastic community collectively read *Digital Dementia* by Manfred Spitzer (2012) to foster reflection on the pitfalls of digital media and encourage the integration of digital practices in harmony with the community's spiritual goals.

3.3 Monastic Principles as an Antidote to Leadership Hubris: Recall as a Democratic Governance Tool

Perhaps counterintuitively, monastic communities can be regarded as experts in democratic governance (Danko 2025). Dating back over 1500 years to St. Benedict, who crafted the Benedictine Rule (*Regula Benedicti*), monastic orders have integrated democratic decision-making with hierarchical authority. Benedict emphasized the importance of involving all community members in key decisions and consulting them regardless of age and social standing. Over the centuries, monastic communities have refined democratic control mechanisms to address challenges such as governance failures and the abuse of power by leaders.

Our qualitative data highlight monastics' democratic self-understanding. One brother noted that "co-determination is seen as a significant concern. It has been part of the order's heritage since its origins. The assembly of all brothers in the house is the most important organ of the community." An abbot emphasized his community's participatory decision-making structure by stating that "all important decisions are discussed and decided by the entire community. As an abbot, transparency and the search for consensus are crucial." Another monk explained the connection between the key vow of obedience and democratic decision-making, saying that "obedience is a mutual process of collective listening" within the monastery. These insights underscore the emphasis on democratic principles, participatory leadership, and collective decision-making within the monastic communities studied.

Our study reveals that traditional participatory institutions within monastic governance play a significant role in shaping how authority and the community is

represented online (Danko 2025): Findings show that monastic communities with established recall mechanisms that allow the removal of leaders who do not meet community expectations exhibit higher levels of accountability. This is not to say that recall of abbots happens lightly; the position of abbot represents a sacred position in the community. In fact, recall of abbots or abbesses happens only rarely and often involves assessment by higher bodies in the congregation or province. Nevertheless, we argue and empirically find that recall options, through the constant threat of institutional confidence withdrawal, effectively hold monastic leaders accountable. Communities with recall options also tend to be more innovative in their use of digital media than similar communities without such mechanisms. Furthermore, communities with recall options are particularly cautious in protecting their organizational core such as religious rituals from digital disruption, ensuring that these sacred practices remain intact despite the pressures of modernization.

Moreover, this study found that measures of leader self-presentation, including displays of self-confidence and status symbols, increase in environments where these participatory institutions are observed. Leaders in these settings are more likely to present themselves in ways that align closely with their communities' values and expectations, both reinforcing their authority and remaining accountable to their members. These findings contribute to the organizational literature by emphasizing recall options as effective and pragmatic governance tools to hold leaders accountable. The findings also enrich the field of digital religions with insights into the translation of communal religious values into digital communal self-representation.

3.4 Dinosaurs of the Organizational Landscape Facing Technological Disruption: Testing the Liability-of-Aging and Exaptation Hypotheses using Digitalization in Monasteries

Our research highlights that organizational logics, deeply rooted in specific historical, economic, and technological contexts, continue to shape the identity and behavior of religious communities even after centuries of significant change (Rost and Danko 2025). This enduring influence is particularly evident when we compare monastic collectives that emerged in different historical periods. We observe a compelling paradox: the oldest monastic communities are often the most innovative in adopting new practices, yet they simultaneously display high wariness of the potential disruptive effects of digitalization. This combination suggests a complex relationship between tradition and innovation within these communities.

To explore how these older monastic orders navigate digitalization, we combine quantitative and qualitative data. Our findings indicate that it is not the societal context at the time of founding that determines current digital strategies. Instead, the organizational logics developed during their inception continue to exert a significant influence today. We find that the oldest catholic orders with their decentral and democratic organizational logics are more adaptable to digitalization and may possess survival advantages throughout the ages. The fact that older monastic orders may be particularly likely to adaptively repurpose their imprinted characteristics to a changing environment provides evidence for the exaptation hypothesis. We demonstrate that organizational logics guide monasteries' approach to digital adaptation even today, balancing innovation with prudence in response to the challenges of a rapidly changing world.

Overall, our findings suggest that digitalization is well established in monasteries, with many adopting digital media in a progressive manner that challenges the common stereotype of monasteries as outdated institutions lagging behind modern developments. Our quantitative analyses are supported by ethnographic studies in Benedictine monasteries, the most traditional type of monastery studied, which reveal that every monastery integrated digital technologies into their daily lives. For example, a monk in a Swiss Benedictine monastery emphasized the digital progressiveness of his community: "In our monastery, almost everything can be digitally controlled. The heating, the church lighting . . . even our organ can be controlled by tablet." Another brother echoed this sentiment, linking innovation with monastic tradition: "Monasteries have always been places of innovation and at the same time places of tradition, so there is no inherent contradiction." Reflecting on past challenges of maintaining contemplative focus, another monk in Jerusalem noted that "contemplation has always been a challenge, and there have always been distractions. In this sense, digitalization is nothing new."

Although there is considerable variation among our sample of monasteries, these findings demonstrate that digitalization is not perceived as inherently damaging to the monastic religious mission (Rost and Danko 2025). Hence, the relationship between organizational structure and digital media adoption in monastic communities warrants further investigation. To conclude, as a seasoned monk in a Jerusalem monastery put it, "digital media are like language. One can use it to do harm or to do good. It depends on how it is used, whether it harms or benefits life."

4 Conclusion: Classification in the Current Theoretical Debate and in the URPP as a Whole

In the field of digital religions, interest has grown in how online and offline religious spaces and practices have become "bridged, blended, and blurred" as religious communities integrate digital media with their religious lives (Campbell and Evolvi 2020, 5). Accordingly, the recent waves of digital religions have come with phenomena such as the creation of social media profiles for religious leaders, religious apps for prayer and confession, and the emergence of online religious communities largely independent of traditional institutions. All of this has contributed to new forms of religious identity (Evolvi 2021). To explain this intersection of the digital and the religious, scholars in the digital religions field have often used the central theoretical frameworks of mediatization, mediation, and the religious–social shaping of technology (Campbell 2017). Hence, the broad literature has observed emerging tensions between the overlap of religious traditions and modernity, the sacred and the profane, and old versus new communal forms, all of which create a need for negotiation within religious communities (Jemine et al. 2020).

However, what do we mean by a negotiation process in the field of digital religions? Although a negotiation process is assumed in many studies of digital religions, organizational sociology can add value to the literature. By drawing on this toolbox, we make several theoretical contributions to the field. As the oldest systematic organizations as well as communities of religious virtuosi, monasteries provide a fascinating case of the tension between tradition and innovation, the handling of change, and the legitimation of apparent contradictions (Danko and Rost 2023).

First, the cyclical legitimation process of digital media identified in our study, "Legitimating Digital Media in Religious Institutions," offers new insights into how tradition-laden religious communities reconcile innovation and tradition. Digital media have become ubiquitous in monasteries, serving both religious missions and private and leisure purposes. How do monastics legitimate this apparent tension between their ascetic lifestyle and the temptations of the digital world? Communal restrictions on digital media use are relatively rare, with policies often negotiated democratically in the community. A dominant principle we observed within the monastic community is self-responsibility, through which monastics are held to develop unique qualities regarding digitalization and engage with it in a self-responsible manner. The identification of this bottom-up legitimation process in determining digital policies, as opposed to traditional top-down control, contributes to the theoretical debate within digital religions. Even

in the total institution of the monastery, the intrusion of digital media reshapes the nature and extent of traditional religious authority. Thus, in line with previous research, modern monastic communities might be more accurately conceived as voluntary total institutions (Sundberg, 2020), in which subjection to a structured, rule-bound environment is rooted in personal choice and sustained through ongoing individual approval.

We further identified key narrative themes in legitimating digital media in monastic communities. Intriguingly, our interviewees emphasized the advantages of digital media in advancing their religious mission. Here, we contribute to the theoretical debate in digital religions research by exposing the reinterpretation of traditional rules within the modern context to legitimize digital media as a recurring motif. In the Benedictine monasteries that we studied in-depth, we found frequent reference to the Benedictine Rule when discussing appropriate digital media use. Monastics often cited traditional monastic guidelines, such as moderation, as applicable to digital practices. For example, a young Trappist monk in a Jerusalem monastery remarked that "St. Benedict probably would have written a rule about the internet, but we have been overtaken by development. Yet, if we replace 'alcohol' with 'internet,' the rule is surprisingly appropriate even today." Whereas a predominant belief anticipates an inherent tension between the traditional and the modern, our studies reveal that tradition can serve as a vehicle for modernity. This phenomenon, which we refer to as updated traditionalism, demonstrates how the general, abstract, and value-oriented ethical principles underlying monastic rules allow the integration of modern elements into traditional religious structures. The traditional can be seen to address the apparent paradox of the digital and the religious by encompassing the modern rather than standing in opposition to it. Traditional monastic rules such as the 1500-year-old Benedictine Rule do not resist change but incorporate modern practices such as digital media while preserving core values and thus demonstrate an inherent flexibility that ensures the community's long-term sustainability by design.

Second, a research gap existed within digital religions studies on how diverse community principles variously influence the online representation of religious authority. Our research addresses this gap by examining traditional accountability institutions in monasteries in their effects on communal digital policy. We examined the role democratic community principles play in holding authority accountable both offline and online. Monastic accountability institutions were implemented centuries before the modern age and have remained institutionally remarkably stable. Consequently, we can plausibly investigate how these institutions shape digital policy rather than vice versa.

Our research highlights that the expression of authority online varies greatly among similar sociotechnological environments, yet traditional communal institutions remain strong predictors of digital policy. In particular, we find that tradi-

tional democratic structures in monasteries are strongly associated with enhanced expression of authority online and are significantly associated with less power abuse and risk-taking with digital innovation: Where these institutions are in place, we see fewer rituals being disrupted by digitalization and greater digital innovativeness compared to other communities, as well as evidence of more equal and fair treatment with less rule transgression by leaders. At the same time, leaders held democratically accountable show more authoritative self-presentation online. Thus, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the performance of authority in traditional religious contexts in the digital age and highlights the dominant effect of organizational structures in traditional religious institutions.

Another way of interpreting our results is that the expression of religious authority is enhanced in the digital sphere by effective accountability offline to the monastic communities through their democratic institutions. This interpretation aligns with studies that highlight the role of religious governance and practices in shaping online religious authority, such as when religious leaders seek to extend their authority into online spaces by leveraging traditional structures (Cheong et al. 2009). Our research could thus lead to further exploration of how religious communities negotiate effective accountability of leaders' expression of authority in digital spaces.

Finally, our work on the adaptation of traditional religious institutions to digital contexts represents a further contribution to debates within digital religions studies. Research has not only questioned how religious communities implement new digital technologies but also how digital media influence religious institutions (Abelló et al. 2013; Berger et al. 2023). However, many religious communities were often decisively shaped before the digital age, and the extent to which their imprinted organizational structures exert their effects until today has yet to be established. The historical path dependencies of communities dealing with digitalization have received little scholarly attention in the field of digital religions, although this perspective could contribute greatly to understanding the behavior of traditional religious communities towards digitalization.

We contribute to this conversation by revealing that organizational logics imprinted during founding times in Catholic monasteries, in some cases up to 1500 years ago, exert a lasting impact on digital policy of monastic communities even today. We show that, perhaps counterintuitively, the oldest organizational collectives are the most adaptable in embracing digital innovation and identify the imprinted features that made it possible for these organizations to remain resilient over the centuries.

These insights may inform research into religious communities' mechanisms for balancing resilience and adaptability over the very long run. Whereas previous research was unable to differentiate superficial short-term adaptations from

long-standing organizational structures, our research was able to shed light on the nexus of religious organization and adaptation to change by incorporating consideration of monasteries' centuries-long histories. Thus, our findings can critically inform the study of organizations and digital religions where the differential effects of context and organizational logics across centuries have hitherto been conflated.

Our research focused on the diverse landscape of Catholic orders in German-speaking monasteries. Future research could extend this by exploring more diverse interreligious settings, newer orders such as the Jesuits, and different religious and cultural contexts. Nonetheless, the monastic landscape we have studied offers a rich variety of communities, each embedded in distinct historical religious, political, cultural, and economic contexts. This unique variation provided an ideal environment in which to explore how various governance models influence digital policies within these traditional religious communities. Within the URPP, we contribute by investigating religious communities from an organizational sociological angle. Organizational sociology has undergone many theoretical debates, including the conceptual boundaries of communities and the mechanisms of interaction between the micro, meso, and macro levels and offers a powerful toolbox to analyze religious communities in the digital context. This project brought an organizational sociological perspective to understanding negotiations of the digital within religious communities. Engagement with theology and religious studies in and beyond monasteries helped to sharpen our understanding of this specific organizational context. Thus, the URPP's interdisciplinary nature was instrumental in broadening our understanding of religious organizations.

5 Future Research

Trends in digital religions reflect broader sociological patterns. These encompass the rise of individualization encouraging personal choice, the enabling of new forms of social relationships and communities, and the process of secularization, which alters religious practices as commitment to specific religious traditions declines (Pagis 2019). Traditional religious institutions are increasingly bypassed as individuals form new religious communities through decentralized digital media. Social media profiles, spiritual apps, and virtual religious communities offer new channels for religious expression and association. Consequently, traditional authority, community identities, and collective social norms may together change religious organizational structures. This development, in which traditional intermediaries are circumvented by digital means, in organizational sociology can

be termed digital religious disintermediation (Peukert and Reimers 2022): As a result of the more efficient interplay between supply and demand, we can observe a marked increase of religious ideas, communities, and services.

Our research focused on Catholic monasteries as the oldest organizations in the Western world and how they navigate the tension between tradition and innovation within their long-standing organizational structures. Within the religious market, monasteries are in competition with other suppliers of religious services. Over time, catholic orders have differentiated, new orders have emerged, and the focal points of monastic life have been partially redefined. This differentiation continues today and has led to the creation of new collectives that continue to live according to the monastic model. These are encompassed by the term neo or new monastic communities. New monastic communities are becoming a popular phenomenon in the Anglosphere, and in the German-speaking area, numbers of communities are also increasing.

Neomonastic communities draw on the "brand" of monastic tradition (Ehrmann et al. 2013). Their positioning vis-à-vis traditional monasteries in the religious marketplace is therefore an interesting research question. Typically, new monastic communities have formulated a rule of life, which members commit to and follow. Inspired by monasteries, many new monastic communities also adhere to a clear daily structure. Other elements in common with monasteries include daily prayer and dedication to socio-ecological and transcendental purposes. However, unlike traditional monasteries, we do not often find lifelong commitment to or requirement for a specific religion or denomination. As such, many of these communities are interreligious, although they usually have a Christian orientation. Other aspects, such as clothing, the poverty principle, and celibacy, are often not mandated and are voluntary. This suggests a relaxing of the ascetic principle from that in traditional monasteries while stressing the community principle (Cox Hall 2018).

This resonates with strands of Durkheimian thinking. Turner, Abrahams, and Harris (1969) introduced the concept of anti-structure to describe spheres in which social norms are temporarily disabled. In complex societies, where traditional rituals hold less significance, new spaces may emerge when religious countercultures emerge. We argue that neomonastic communities therefore provide resonance spheres outside everyday life which is characterized by connectivity, acceleration, and increased complexity, "bracketing" the dominant social and economic structure (Pagis 2019).

Future research comparing new monastic communities with traditional monasteries can offer valuable insights into the intersection of religious organization and digital media. Comparing the monastic with the neomonastic invites various research angles. This includes organizational ecology, which considers how environmental factors lead to organizational evolution; organizational structures and

contingency theory, which can assess the adaptiveness of varying distributions of decision-making power within traditional and new monastic communities; exit-voice theory, which sheds light on diverse voice arrangements in communities with diverse levels of commitment; and neo-institutional theory, which can study how neomonastic communities adopt traditional monastic practices to legitimate their position while innovating to meet modern spiritual needs.

We have conducted preliminary systematic research on the websites of new monastic communities. Results suggest that commitment is more flexible and inclusive in neomonastic communities. However, neomonastic communities also exhibit more reliance on hierarchical leadership with less developed options for co-determination by organizational members. Examining their digital media presence, we find that new monastic communities appear to be less evident in the digital sphere with fewer services offered online. This may mirror the social trend of digital detox triggered by the increasingly perceived negative effects of digitalization on individuals and societies. Neomonastic communities appear to use digital media mainly instrumentally for internal coordination and outreach and less for their religious mission. This suggests that neomonastic communities differ markedly from traditional monastic communities in their organization and digital policies. The neomonastic community thus can be seen as a modern form of monastic seclusion from the digital world that emphasizes communal spiritual living. Moreover, neomonastic communities lack the historical interconnectedness and embeddedness that traditional monasteries have within their political, societal, and economic contexts. In fact, many monasteries function as veritable enterprises and societal actors deeply integrated into their socio-economic surroundings. For example, the Admont Abbey as one of the largest employers in Styria, Austria's largest province, oversees two dozen parishes, operates a high school with approximately 500 students, runs a care home, and houses several businesses. By contrast, neomonastic communities represent distinct sub-brands within the broader monastic tradition and speak to distinct audiences.

These preliminary findings, when expanded, may give more insights into the continuity, resilience, and adaptability of monastic governance across the centuries. The project will continue to provide contributions for understanding the interplay of religious organizations and digital media. Our research can be also expanded to the increasing number of other bounded and intentional communities that embrace community and spirituality and reject worldly distractions to focus on "the essential" and thus provide insights into existing and emergent resonance spheres in the postdigital society.

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