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Shifts in Hierarchy in Post-Digital Religious Practices: Specifications Based on Three Research Areas

Abstract: This article provides an overview of research findings from Subproject P6 that were collected over the past four years. Three thematic areas were explored in this practical-theological subproject: (1) the potential of using participatory research methods for digital religion/digital theology, (2) religious influencers, and (3) religious and spiritual apps. One of the guiding research questions for investigating these three areas was the shift in power dynamics and the emergence of hierarchy and authority in relation to religious practices that exist within a culture of digitality. This perspective is further elaborated upon in the following article.

In diesem Artikel wird ein Überblick über einige Forschungsergebnisse der Arbeit des Teilprojektes P6 der letzten vier Jahre gegeben. Drei Themenfelder wurden in dem praktisch-theologischen Teilprojekt erkundet: (1) das Potenzial partizipativer Forschungsmethoden für Digitale Religion/Digitale Theologie, (2) religiöse Influencer:innen sowie (3) religiöse und spirituelle Apps. Eine der leitenden Forschungsfragen für die Erkundung dieser drei Themenfelder war die Verschiebung von Machtdynamiken und das Entstehen von Hierarchie und Autorität in Bezug auf religiöse Praktiken in einer Kultur der Digitalität. Diese Perspektive wird im nachfolgenden Artikel näher erläutert.

1 Introduction

This article examines the results of Project P6 “Hermeneutic Dynamics of Individual and Communal Endowment of Life with Christian-Religious Meaning in a Culture of Digitality” from the first phase of the URPP “Digital Religion(s)”, 2021–2024.¹ The aim of the research project was to gain a deeper understanding of lived religion and the-

¹ The changing team constellations make it clear that Dr. Katharina Merian was involved in the majority of the research results presented here.

ology within the digital condition, while paying particular attention to Christian contexts.² We were specifically interested in the shifting hierarchies and construction of authority that can be found in digital religious practices. According to Felix Stalder's analysis, community, as a key feature of the digital condition, is fundamentally characterized by this very topic: "the dynamics of network power have reconfigured notions of voluntary and involuntary behavior, autonomy, and coercion" (Stalder 2018, 5). We set out to achieve the goal of specifying what this means for Christian religious practices and analyzed the question of hierarchy and authority based on three areas of focus: religious influencers, religious and spiritual apps, and, more fundamentally, the implementation and development of a participatory methodological paradigm for researching digital religion and practical theology. The following article provides a brief overview of our research in these three areas:

In order to adequately capture these shifts in authority, an adjustment of research methods and approaches is required. This adjustment, the necessity of which is a central premise of our work, was made possible through the research approach of *participatory citizen science*. This paradigm fosters a transdisciplinary approach to capture shifts in hierarchy and constitution of authority within digital practices. Our research projects are not only grounded in this approach, but also committed to advancing and refining it within the disciplines of digital religion and digital theology. Since this research strategy underlies our entire work, it will be introduced in Chapter 1.

A new form of religious authority has emerged with the rise of *religious influencers*. This authority has been conferred upon these individuals by their followers through acts of following, liking, and interacting (see the term "prosumer"). Chapter 2, therefore, focuses on the question of the conditions of this attribution of authority. Designing a *religious app* means making use of theological interpretative and design authority. Through a participatory research approach, we aimed to democratize this process by giving users the opportunity to influence the further development of a specific app. Some of the results from this research process are presented in Chapter 3.

² The genesis of this project located these key questions in the so-called internal dynamics, which aimed to highlight the changes of digital practices on religious systems.

2 Participatory Citizen Science in (Digital) Theology: A Paradigm

To fully grasp the implications of authority in post-digital contexts, participatory citizen science (PCS) serves as a vital starting point.³ This paradigm opens the research process to broader involvement, allowing nonacademic communities and individuals to actively contribute to the analysis of digital religious practices. To demonstrate the potential of using this research approach in this specific field, this section provides a critical introduction to PCS as a research strategy (ch. 1.1) and its benefits when used in the field of digital theology (ch. 1.2).

2.1 Introduction to PCS

Participatory citizen science (PCS) is a research strategy that is strongly promoted by various research institutes throughout continental Europe (Müller et al. 2024; Friedrich, Reichel, and Renkert 2019; Müller and Todjeras 2021; Todjeras, Ritzer, and Müller 2024). The basic idea behind this approach is to include citizens in the research process with the aim of more closely interrelating science and daily life, while increasing the impact of scientific findings on individuals and communities. However, thus far, PCS has rarely been used in the field of digital theology.

As is often the case in emerging research fields, there is currently no unified definition of citizen science (CS). Depending on the context and specific design of the project, different emphases can be found in the various attempts made to define this term.⁴ Our understanding of CS is based on the following definition: “Citizen science enables citizens to actively contribute to all aspects of the research process, from conceptualization and data collection, to knowledge translation and evaluation” (Katapally 2019, 1). In contrast to more dialogical formats⁵ between the scientific world and the public, CS can be understood as a “*doing-science together*” (Schrögel and Kolleck 2018, 78) approach that aims to “invite citizens to take part in the process of generating knowledge” (Schrögel and Kolleck 2018, 78).

³ Parts of this chapter have already been published (Müller et al. 2024).

⁴ A compilation of different definitions is provided by Haklay et al., *What is Citizen Science? The Challenges of Definition* (Haklay et al. 2021). Furthermore, Schrögel and Kolleck offer a proposal for mapping the field by introducing a so-called *participatory science cube* (Schrögel and Kolleck 2018).

⁵ “We use the term ‘dialogic formats’ to cover all types of consultations and public discussions (e.g., about nuclear waste management or about potential benefits and risks of genetically modifies organisms)” (Schrögel and Kolleck 2018, 78).

Our approach to CS was significantly influenced by the Citizen Science Center Zürich ('Citizen Science Center Zurich', n.d.), where we received our training. The center's research style is best described as participatory citizen science (PCS). PCS is a further development of earlier forms of CS (which has existed since the 19th century) that not only builds on citizens' participation as additional working resources and sources of knowledge in various areas (e.g., to study the weather, changes in biodiversity, and the emergence of HIV), but aims to turn them into co-researchers. In this way, different aspects of a research project, such as the design and research question, can be developed in collaboration to make the results profitable for both sides (Bergold and Thomas 2012).

PCS makes use of three distinct principles:

1. Co-researchers *participate actively* and *on an equal footing* in the research process. Various stakeholders associated with the field are involved in the research process, such as the design, decision-making, and evaluation processes (Unger 2014, 35–41).
2. Both the individual and the collective (*self-enablement and empowerment*)⁶ are promoted throughout the research process. PCS is based on an appreciative attitude towards one's co-researchers and their everyday knowledge. As a result, co-researchers are enabled to develop their own competencies when it comes to research methods, data analysis, and communication (Unger 2014, 44–46). By becoming agents of change and producers of knowledge, individuals can experience self-efficacy, which is a fundamental cornerstone of a democratically structured society.
3. In our understanding, CS projects are *scientific endeavors* with processes that lead to scientific results. When working on these projects, applied questions should also be taken into account, so that the results are both academic and relevant to the real world (ECSA (European Citizen Science Association) 2015).

The participatory methodological paradigm in digital religion and digital theology initiates two major transformational processes with significant epistemological and ethical implications for the scientific landscape. First, this paradigm challenges and broadens the traditional concept of knowledge by incorporating diverse perspectives and lived experiences. Second, it contributes to the democratization of the sci-

⁶ "Empowerment influences people's ability to act through collective participation by strengthening their organizational capacities, challenging power inequities, and achieving outcomes on many reciprocal levels in different domains: psychological empowerment, household relations, enhanced social capital and cohesion, transformed institutions, greater access to resources, open governance, and increasing equitable community conditions" (Wallerstein 2006, 19).

entific system, enabling wider participation and making research more accessible to non-experts, thus reshaping established hierarchies in knowledge production.

2.2 Benefits for Use in the Field of (Digital) Theology

PCS offers a promising, though challenging, paradigm shift within the field of digital theology by democratizing the research process, diversifying research topics, and enriching a scientific understanding of both lived religion and lived theology by actively involving citizens as co-researchers. Incorporating the everyday perspectives of citizens into science ensures that current societal concerns can be addressed. Therefore, research outcomes become more relevant (beyond academic contexts) and easier to apply. Innovation is stimulated as diverse perspectives inspire creative research questions and, therefore, new outcomes. Even with high integration and involvement, PCS approaches remain strictly scientific as they adhere to core principles of systematic inquiry. These approaches are grounded in empirical data that is systematically collected, analyzed, and interpreted. PCS projects also follow methodological guidelines, while maintaining high standards of documentation. Finally, ethical standards are paramount, including protecting participant privacy, complying with legal requirements, and avoiding conflicts of interest. PCS projects emphasize ethical conduct by respecting the contributions and rights of citizen scientists while ensuring the equitable distribution of benefits.

PCS aligns with both feminist and postcolonial methodologies by emphasizing situated knowledge and challenging traditional power structures within academia. The approach offers a path towards a more just and multi-faceted understanding of theology by integrating the experiences and insights of a broader range of voices. Furthermore, PCS challenges conventional academic practices and requires constant self-criticism, but for this very reason, the approach can lead to important epistemological and practical changes within the realm of digital religion and digital theology. Including PCS in the research process enables theology to better grasp the complexity of contemporary religious life and pursue a form of science that is socially relevant.

PCS not only leads to a shift in hierarchy within the academic research landscape, but also helps to more adequately perceive the shifts within the hierarchy of post-digital practices, as different actors are given a voice, allowing religious practices to be captured in a multidimensional way.

As a result, participatory research approaches appear highly relevant in relation to digital phenomena.

3 Research on Religious Influencers on Instagram

A new phenomenon of religious authority has emerged in continental Europe with the rise of religious influencers. Not only do clergy members reach an audience that parishes can never achieve,⁷ but laypeople can also present themselves as religious authorities on social media, sharing their biblical interpretations, ethical views, and personal faith experiences.⁸

At the same time, followers hold significant power, as they are the ones who grant influencers reach. By being able to follow multiple influencers simultaneously, religious authority is inherently pluralized. In our research, we are interested in the question of what is needed for religious influencers on Instagram to be attributed this authority. After presenting the current research discourse on religious influencing on Instagram, we will focus on this aspect of our research. A good overview of the current discourses on religious communication on Instagram is provided in the anthology by Viera Pirker and Paula Paschke (Pirker and Paschke 2023). While a range of topics (content, users, and research approaches) are discussed here, the phenomenon of influencing is explicitly addressed in the following articles: Brodthage 2023; Menzel 2023; Müller 2023a; Brunner 2020; and Neumaier 2022. In recent years, we have explored religious influencers, with a particular focus on the Instagram platform, through various qualitative and quantitative studies (Müller 2024b; 2022a; 2022b; Schlag and Müller 2021; Todjeras and Müller 2023; Todjeras, Ritzer, and Müller 2024; Müller and Knapp 2022; Müller and Suhner 2023; Todjeras 2024).

3.1 Authenticity as a Crucial Aspect of Christian Influencing

The phenomenon of influencing is multifaceted and can be applied to diverse purposes, such as promoting consumerism and the market economy, spreading conspiracy theories, and, notably, facilitating meaning-making and life affirmation.⁹ When examining the term (for example, through the Cambridge Dictio-

7 One of the most widely followed pastors in the German-speaking world is Josephine Teske, with her channel @seligkeitsdinge, which had 42.1 thousand followers at the time of writing this article. (24.10.24)

8 A prime example is the evangelical, German-speaking channel @liebezurbibel, which currently has 72.7 thousand followers. The channel's operator, Jasmine Neubauer, is also engaged in commercial activities: her online shop *LiebezurBibel* features a range of products, including sermon notebooks, Bible tabs, and more.

9 Parts of this chapter have already been published (Müller 2024b).

nary), “influencing” fundamentally refers to the power to have an effect on people or things. Schach and Lommatzsch point out that influencers, especially due to the credibility ascribed to them, are becoming sought-after experts, establishing a new hierarchy in which influencers serve as accessible authorities in their specific areas of expertise (Schach and Lommatzsch 2018, 356). Thanks to research conducted on the phenomenon of social media, it is known that the perceived authenticity of influencers is an important factor when it comes to influencing the opinions and behaviors of their followers: “Public perceptions of the authenticity of social media influencers (SMIs) are a key driver of the latter’s persuasiveness as brand endorsers” (Lee and Eastin 2021, 822).¹⁰

As one of our research partners, the IMK (Institute for the Research on Mission and Church) in Austria, has pointed out, this also applies in the Christian context. Authenticity is, thereby, understood as consistency and perceived competence (Ritzer and Todjeras 2024). While the study analyzed the concept of authenticity in the perception of followers, we have been focusing on influencers’ perspective of these two aspects of authenticity. How do (Christian) influencers ensure consistency in their appearance and how do they stage competence?

In a narratological analysis, Sebastian Löwe explores how the influencing phenomenon operates in a manner that allows it to wield such significance. He concludes that, at the core of any Instagram channel, is an individual who, through images and short videos, curates various themes into a coherent narrative. This person-centered approach elevates the influencer as an authoritative figure, whose narrative and life choices implicitly set norms and values that followers may emulate. “At the center is an anthropomorphic figure, executing different actions and documenting various states, which, through the thematic unity of their persona, coheres into a meaningful whole” (translated quote Löwe 2019, 30). Thus, a cohesive overall picture emerges from the interplay of diverse content and a specific individual, which, following Löwe, can be described as an *offering of meaning* (Löwe 2019, 38). This communicative and visual point, as well as the phenomenon’s influence, mark the distinctive aspects of influencing (cf. figure 1).

¹⁰ A comprehensive survey conducted by project P3 reveals that the strength of the parasocial relationship between influencers and their followers, as well as perceived opinion leadership, are additional key factors influencing the persuasiveness of religious influencers. (Müller and Friemel in this volume)

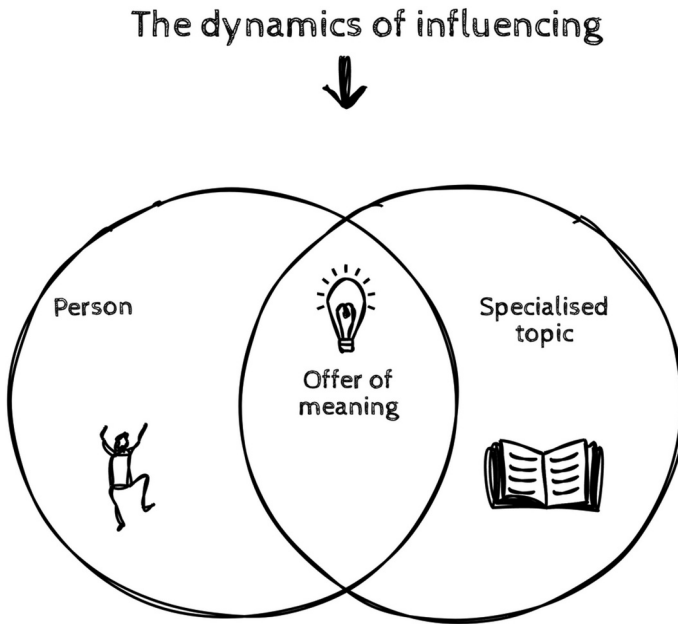


Figure 1: The dynamics of influencing.

This also becomes evident in the various influencers whom we have observed over several years (Müller et al. 2025) and with whom we have interacted repeatedly during this period. The insights were gathered through digital ethnography,¹¹ a qualitative research strategy that emphasizes human experiences and cultural understanding, which is grounded “[. . .] in deep appreciation of the context of people’s everyday lives. It explores social systems of shared meaning and is informed by the self-awareness of both the researcher and the cultural participants” (Cartledge 2023, 190). Here is a brief excerpt from an analysis of influencers that was already published (Müller 2024b). The term *person*, as used in the

¹¹ Well-known approaches in the field of digital ethnography include: Boellstroff et al. 2012; Hine 2015; 2016; Kozinets 2010; Pink et al. 2015; Hutchings 2017; Cooper et al. 2021; Cartledge 2023. Our understanding of digital ethnography aligns closely with a line of research that Anna Neumaier describes as follows: “others understand digital ethnography as including research questions related to digital media, but with a focus that moves beyond them. This is based on the premise that ‘those digital practices do not exist as separate [. . .] from other social and cultural practices’ (Walker 2010, 23) [. . .] corresponding research consequentially includes other media environments or local fields and data and understands digital platforms as one part of a multi-sited ethnography” (Neumaier 2021, 220).

following analyses, refers to the *staged* portrayal of the respective influencers on Instagram.

3.2 Evelyne Baumberger @evelyne_baum

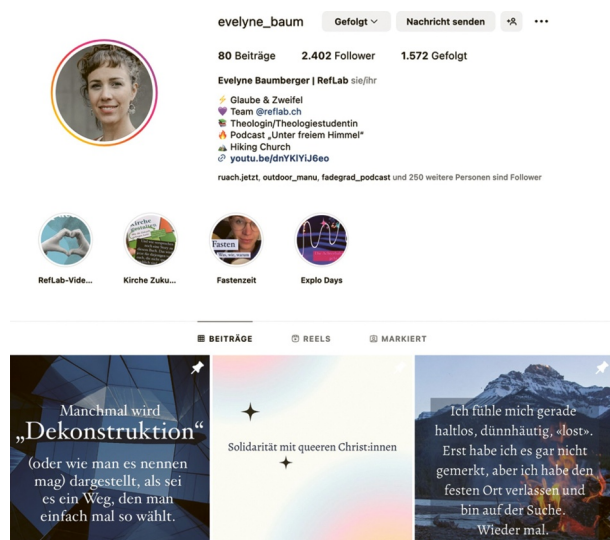


Figure 2: Instagram profile of Eveline Baumberger [accessed: 31.3.2023].

Person: Post-Evangelical Theologian and Digital Editor

Evelyne Baumberger is a self-described “theologically searching” and formally theologically trained individual who has moved away from her evangelical roots and now identifies as post-evangelical. As a theology student nearing the completion of her studies and a co-director at RefLab,¹² she works as a digital editor, bringing together her interest in theological reflection and societal issues. She considers herself an experimenter, albeit one who sometimes questions her confidence during new undertakings. Her most rewarding “experiment”, she reflects, was leaving her journalism career to study theology.

¹² The Reformed Laboratory (RefLab for short) is a project of the Zurich Reformed Church, which provides various resources such as blogs, podcasts, and a newsletter.

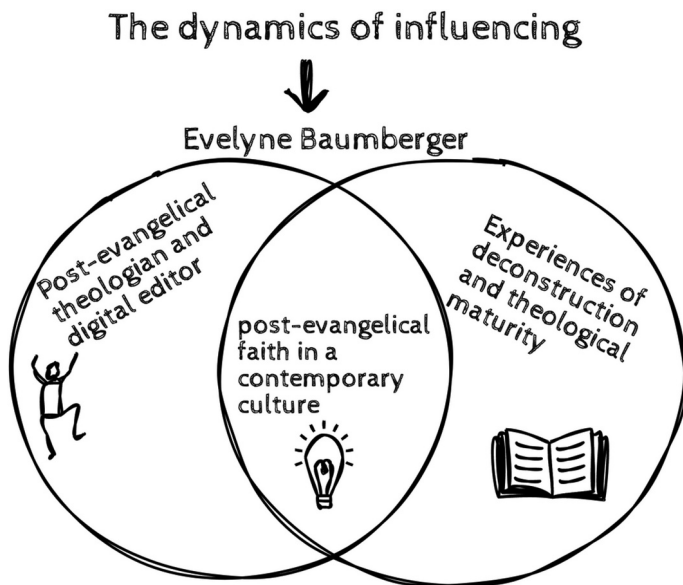


Figure 3: Dynamics of influencing by E. Baumberger.

Specialised Topic: Experiences of Deconstruction and Theological Agency

In her posts, Baumberger addresses processes of faith deconstruction, questions of belief, post-evangelicalism, and theological reflections drawn from her own life. As a feminist, she is particularly committed to amplifying women's voices within both the church and society overall. She shares her experiences, but also conveys her identity as a theologically searching individual who is dedicated to engaging in serious reflection on her faith.

Offer of Meaning: Post-Evangelical Faith in Contemporary Culture

As a post-evangelical theology student and editor, Baumberger shares her theological reflections and personal experiences on Instagram. She integrates her theological education with the aim of encouraging her followers to think independently. Through her reflections, she wants to provide her followers with insights into how to live in a meaningful way that is tied to their Christian faith in today's late-modern world.

3.3 Tovja Heymann @Tovja_behuetet

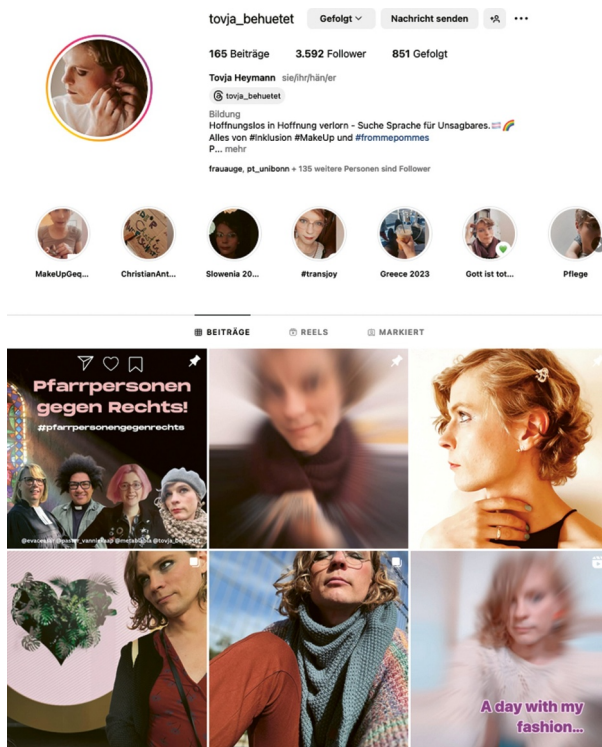


Figure 4: Instagram profile of Tovja Heymann [accessed 31.10.2024].

Person: Clergyperson, Non-Binary, and Caregiving Parent

Tovja Heymann is a non-binary clergyperson who, alongside their partner, co-manages a parish for the Gronau and Niederdorfeld communities in Germany (Evangelical Church of Kurhessen-Waldeck). In addition to this clerical role, Tovja is also a caregiving parent.

Specialised Topic: Makeup, the Gospel, Feminism, Justice, and Solidarity

On Instagram, Heymann shares their life as a non-binary pastor and caregiving parent, advocating for human rights and encouraging others to embrace their

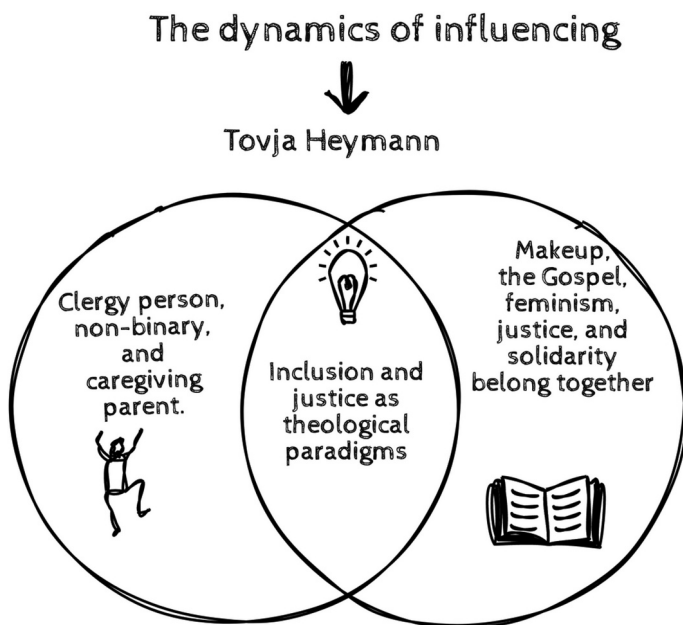


Figure 5: Dynamics of influencing by T. Heymann.

own identities. Beyond their pastoral work, they provide makeup and fashion advice while also addressing political issues, for instance, in their story series #MakeUpGequassel, where they discuss topics like climate justice, women's rights, the Iranian revolution, and sexism. Heymann is particularly active in promoting the interests of caregiving individuals, which they do by drawing from their experiences with one of their children who requires care and the challenges their family has faced dealing with bureaucratic systems. Heymann uses their platform to highlight societal challenges, while promoting an inclusive and open society. Through candidly political statements, they take a stand on social issues and strive to build a more just world. By blending personal experiences with theological insights, Heymann demonstrates how their theological reflections and beliefs influence their actions and thinking. While the combination of makeup advice with theological and socially critical issues might appear unconventional, it underscores Heymann's journey as a non-binary individual refusing traditional gender roles and societal norms. Through their openness, Heymann exemplifies how one can be a different kind of pastor, while demonstrating that theology and lived experience not only coexist, but also inform one another.

Offer of Meaning: Inclusion and Justice as Theological Paradigms

Heymann's message centers on the blending of traditional and innovative pastoral roles, while combining Christian theology with encouragement for individual freedom beyond binary roles and identities. Simultaneously, Heymann draws attention to individuals' social and political responsibilities, while advocating for solidarity with marginalized groups. By promoting an inclusive and open society, Heymann encourages others to live authentically and seeks to foster a community in which all people are accepted regardless of their identities or backgrounds. Through their engagement, Heymann illustrates how theology and daily life intersect.

3.4 Mirja Zimmermann-Oswald @mirjazimmermann

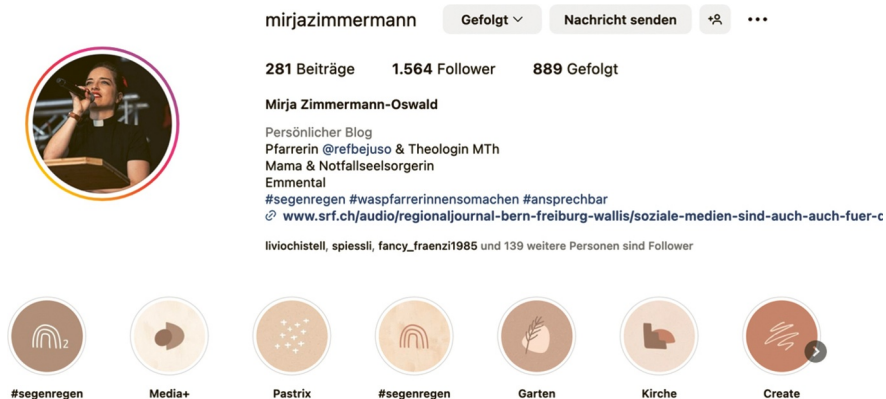


Figure 6: Instagram profile of Mirja Zimmermann-Oswald [accessed: 31.3.2023].

Person: Pastor and Family Woman

Mirja Zimmermann is a pastor in Sumiswald, Bern, Switzerland, who gives her followers insights into her life in a rural parish by sharing images and stories from traditional village events, such as the alpine cattle descent. Her social media presence extends beyond her pastoral role to address the balance between her professional and family life.

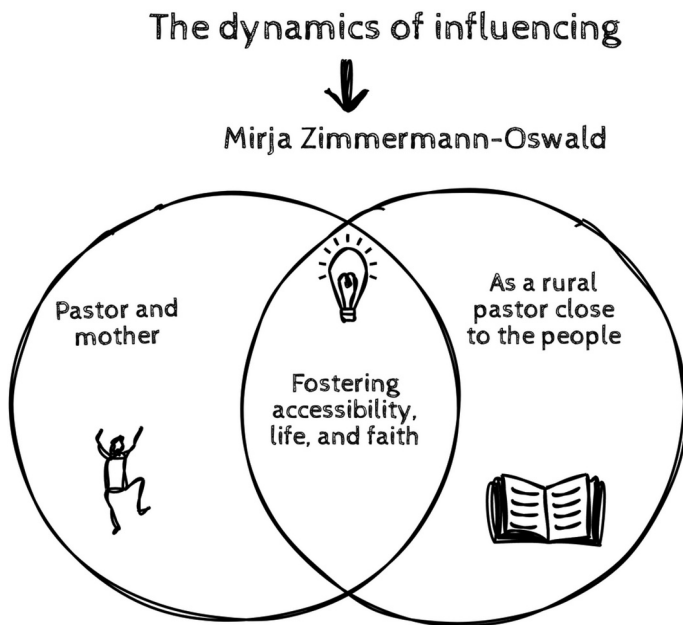


Figure 7: Dynamics of influencing by M. Zimmermann.

Specialised Topic: Being Close to the People as a Rural Pastor

Zimmermann offers her followers glimpses into the daily life of a pastor in a rural parish, portraying herself as an approachable and present figure within her community. She shares her preparation for church activities and posts spiritual insights for her audience, presenting herself not as a flawless pastor, but one who openly engages with the complexities of her role, including balancing family responsibilities and meeting the diverse expectations placed upon clergy members.

Offer of Meaning: Living Accessibility and Fostering Faith

Zimmermann's message emphasizes her dedication to making herself available to her community. By sharing glimpses into her preparations for services, lessons, and other pastoral duties, along with some spiritual reflections, she conveys a profound commitment to her rural parish. This allows her followers to gain a new perspective on pastoral life and rural living, while enhancing their understanding of the pastoral vocation. Zimmermann's approach is deeply rooted in

the experience of proximity and accessibility that is traditionally associated with rural pastoral care.

3.5 Reflection

This interplay between persona/credibility, subject matter, and resultant meaning-making (cf. figure 1) has also manifested among religious influencers who were examined in other studies, such as the German-language Midi study “Digital Communities: A Pilot Study on the Followership of Christian Influencers on Instagram.” (Hörsch 2022). This study demonstrates that follower demographics vary depending on the influencer’s persona and thematic focus.¹³ For example, Christian influencers like @theresaliebt and @koerper.poesie, whose content centers around themes like motherhood as well as pre- and post-natal yoga, attract a predominantly female following (92.9% and 91.4%, respectively) (Hörsch 2022, 25). For faith-based influencers, the communicative and visual impact similarly lies in the interplay between their persona and thematic focus, shaping the nature of their community engagement and connectivity (Müller and Knapp 2022, 64). Their role as perceived spiritual authorities often establishes them as leaders within their communities, reinforcing a unique hierarchy wherein their authenticity and thematic focus define community boundaries and engagement.

In the case of Christian-religious influencers, it becomes apparent that each account and profile, alongside its pastoral-theological approach, conveys gospel communication and practice with distinct thematic emphases and role models. A critical aspect in determining an influencer’s authenticity is the perception of how religious practice and communication are incarnated in their depicted life. In this sense, religious communication and lived experience are inseparable (Müller 2021; Müller 2023b; Todjeras and Müller 2023). In collaborating with these influencers, we observed that their digital religious practices are intrinsically driven by substantive content intentions. Therefore, this religious communication is purposeful and avoids vacuity (Müller and Suhner 2023, 222–223). Influencers depict faith as a life-affirming resource in their own lives. Thus, the accounts we studied, while not overtly preaching, function as sermons that render the gospel relatable across diverse life situations through the theology embodied in their lives. This embodiment of theology further reinforces these influencers’ authority

¹³ The focus is on socio-demographic questions, questions about access to the profile, the motivation to follow the profile, questions about the added value for everyday life, and questions about subjective religiosity.

as interpreters of faith, granting them a pastoral role and deepening the hierarchical relationship with their followers.

4 Research on Religious and Spiritual Apps

Even though religious apps can transcend traditional structures, their design is, by no means, free of hierarchy; rather, it is shaped by the lived theology of the designer. To democratize this interpretative power, we designed a participatory research process in which app developers and users collaborated on the further development of a specific app. The research process that emerged allows for some conclusions to be drawn regarding the shifts in hierarchy resulting from post-digital practices.

4.1 Previous Research

Thus far, research on religious apps has mainly been related to app design and content (Bellar 2017, 111).¹⁴ Initial attempts involve categorizing religious apps. Rachel Wagner, for example, has developed a classification system with six categories: prayer, ritual, sacred text, religious social media, self-expression, and focusing/meditation (Wagner 2012, 199–201). Heidi Campbell et al. have further developed this approach and defined 11 types of religious apps: sacred text, prayer, focus/meditation, devotional worship, ritual, religious utilities, wisdom and leaders, religious media outlets, religious games, religious apps for kids, and religious social media (Campbell et al. 2014). The authors note, however, that these classifications, while helpful for app developers and platforms like the iTunes Store, fall short in practice since many apps can belong to more than one of these categories (Campbell et al. 2014, 168). For example, a confession app simultaneously encompasses ritual elements, refers to sacred texts, and integrates prayers.

Another illustrative example can be found in the article written by Joshua Mann, who compares and reflects on the differences between the print edition and the app version of the Church of England's *Daily Prayer*. Mann concludes that there are significant hermeneutical differences in paratextual communication between the book and the app, partly due to usage. For example, the app is

¹⁴ Other works on religious apps, in addition to those explicitly mentioned below, include: (Fewkes 2019; Hutchings 2015; Rinker et al. 2016; Tsuria 2021).

easier to use, especially for people who are unfamiliar with the Anglican liturgy. However, the liturgy and texts give the impression of a certain fluidity and lack consistency. The print version, on the other hand, conveys authority, permanence, and unchangeability through features such as its leather cover, gold font, and colored bookmarks, even though the content is identical (Mann 2017).

Although religious apps are becoming more widespread (the multi-religious app Insight Timer, for example, is used by 19 million people worldwide), there is little research on the perspectives of users (Müller 2024a; Müller and Bruderer-Traber 2023).¹⁵ Elements of community and belonging within apps have hardly been researched to date, but are, in part, central to their use, as the following statement by a 50-year-old woman on her use of Insight Timer [IT] illustrates:

“We’ve been on IT since 2014 or 2015, I think [. . .] I have to say, though, that since we joined the XY Circle in March, my time meditating has skyrocketed. I think it is, in part, because of the dynamics of group meditation and the heart connection we have with people all over the globe [. . .] I guess what I am saying is the personal connection has taken our use of this app to a whole another level.”¹⁶

4.2 Research Project

Building on this research gap, we initiated a PCS project with the users and developer of the Evermore¹⁷ app.¹⁸ In keeping with the spirit of PCS, we wanted the outcome of the research to be useful for scientific and practical purposes, which means there was a twofold goal. First, in the context of her PhD project, co-author Aline Knapp aims to identify traits of a post-digital spirituality through the practice of app usage, following a praxeological approach. Secondly, we wanted to de-

15 It is worth mentioning Wendi Bellar’s study, in which she examines how evangelical Christians select and utilize religious apps and how this usage affects their religious identity. Her “findings support the current literature and conceptualization of storied identity within the networked religion framework” (Bellar 2017, 123).

16 The statement is derived from an interview conducted by co-author Sabrina Müller on 2 September 2021.

17 The religious app EVERMORE (Evangelisch-Lutherische Landeskirche Hannovers, n.d.) is under the purview of the *House of Church Services* (*Haus Kirchlicher Dienste*), which is part of the *Lutheran Church of Hanover* and was developed by Rainer Koch in partnership with the design agency *gobasil*. Since its release, in 2019, EVERMORE has been downloaded over 30,000 times. On average, it is used by 20 to 40 people every half hour. These numbers were derived from information provided by the app developer, Rainer Koch, on 10 October 2023.

18 Parts of this section have already been published (Müller et al. 2024).

velop a research question, in collaboration with practitioners and the app designer, and to facilitate dialogue between the users and developers of Evermore. In the autumn of 2021, we initiated a research process that was structured into three phases:

1. Initially, we established contact with the app developer, Rainer Koch. His research questions and concerns were integrated into the research process from the outset. Koch was particularly interested in whether it made sense to integrate a community option into the app. Meanwhile, citizens interested in using an app like Evermore and participating in the research project were sought out through both public and private channels. By mid-January, 36 individuals, primarily from Germany, had registered, along with some participants from Switzerland and Austria. We organized a workshop involving the co-researchers to address their ideas and considerations on the research process and further steps. It was decided that the question of digital community building would be used to guide us.
2. During phase two, the co-researchers selected and undertook a practice path, a so-called “journey” within the app, for two months. The users formed group chats on Signal to exchange their experiences.¹⁹ This allowed for the exploration of the potential for a community option within the Evermore app. In two additional workshops, users were able to discuss their experiences with the designer and the researchers from the University of Zurich.
3. Due to the twofold objective of the research project (post-digital spirituality and digital community building), the data was analyzed in two ways. While Aline Knapp is currently interpreting and analyzing the data within the scope of her dissertation on the question of post-digital spirituality, we also evaluated the data in relation to the question of digital community building, presented the results to the co-researchers, and opened up a discussion to ensure that the interpretation of the data was not solely left to the full-time researchers. The results of this second research strand will now be discussed in more detail.

¹⁹ The ESM (experience sampling method) is a method from the field of psychology that was developed to capture people’s experiences in their everyday lives. Typically, individuals would document their everyday experiences related to the research interest multiple times a day over the course of a few days (Schimmack and Diener 2003, 1). There are various types of ESM. The data-collection method used here most closely aligns with signal-contingent sampling, which “requires participants to complete their self-reports when prompted by a randomly-timed signal” (Scollon, Kim-Prieto, and Diener 2003, 7).

4.3 Digital Interaction as “Church in the Moment”

The chat group utilized by the co-researchers served as a space for resonance.²⁰ Dynamically emerging conversations and discussions were observed. Some message threads focused on practical exchanges regarding personal meditation. For example, there was a discussion about how to integrate Bible verses into everyday spiritual exercises, the use of meditation benches, meditation times and locations, as well as technical difficulties with the app. Additionally, personal and spiritual concerns were shared. For instance, conversations emerged about how one can experience God’s presence or what actions a person might take.

The analysis shows that, over the course of the research process, the chat group developed into a space for relationships. Experiences and impressions from the participants’ personal lives and everyday situations were shared, despite the co-researchers not knowing each other prior to the process. Moreover, blessings and well-wishes were frequently expressed. The co-researchers expressed gratitude and joy about the exchanges that took place in the group chat, often describing it as enriching or comforting. Some feedback explicitly emphasized the emerging sense of community. The chat group was referred to as a “community” and a “temporary congregation”, and in the follow-up conversation, as “church in the moment.” Since everyone in the chat was following the same journey and receiving the same daily impulses, the exchange about personal meditation was, in some cases, seen as more beneficial than conversations with already established contacts.

The results suggest that digital formats and time-limited groups can facilitate an intensive exchange as well as an experience of church. The chat group utilized by the co-researchers demonstrates that such a community can also be created in a digital space without the need for a strict hierarchical form of leadership to be established. Overall, it can, therefore, be said that church, understood here as a non-parochial Christian community of faith, can be constituted not only through longevity and years of accompaniment, but also selectively, where experiences of God are shared for a moment. This study shows that there is a special opportunity for the digital church when it comes to finding spaces and formats for congregations in the moment. These results had a significant impact on the development of the Evermore app. In August 2024, an updated version of the app was released, which includes a “Team & Community” feature and offers audio meditations for committees and groups.

²⁰ Parts of this section have already been published (Merian et al. 2024).

5 Summary

This article has explored the findings from Project P6 within the framework of the URPP “Digital Religion(s)”, while highlighting the dynamics of authority and hierarchy. In a culture of digitality, the concept of authority represents a highly complex, multidimensional phenomenon. Not only does it create space for new authorities, such as laypeople who become religious influencers, but it also increases the number of people who ascribe power to these new authorities. After all, it is the followers who make influencers successful and help them gain reach. The follower/prosumer logic leads to a democratization of religious communication, in which followers are not only passive recipients but also active participants. As clarified with the help of the IMK study in Chapter 2, the central currency in this context is perceived authenticity, which influencers are credited with when they convey competence and consistency.

Religious apps also present an ambivalence in terms of their processes of hierarchy. On the one hand, they are an expression of the lived theology of app designers, while on the other hand, they can create space for a new expression of church in the moment, which, in the absence of a distinct religious authority, thrives on a peer-to-peer exchange of experiences. To perceive these diverse processes in a nuanced way and contribute to democratization processes as researchers, it is essential to implement participatory methods when it comes to research on digital theology and digital religion. By inviting citizens to participate as co-researchers, not only is the academic understanding of lived theology and religion enriched, but individuals are also empowered to voice their insights and experiences. The approach facilitates the creation of more relevant and impactful research outcomes, bridging the gap between scholarly inquiry and everyday religious practice.

6 Future Research

Both our research question regarding religious hierarchies and our three thematic areas offer numerous opportunities for future research. Our participatory research approach provides a valuable framework for conducting transdisciplinary research by collaborating with various practical actors and for further exploring these fields across different disciplines. It is, therefore, important to continue developing the advantages of participatory research through the citizen science approaches presented here. Future research, particularly when aiming for a transdisciplinary focus, should prioritize participatory and collaborative meth-

ods, as introduced earlier, that engage both scholars and practitioners. The success of participatory citizen science when it comes to exploring digital religion illustrates the value of co-creation in research processes.

In future research, it would be beneficial to expand our inquiry to encompass various Christian denominations as well as multi- and trans-religious phenomena. While our current discourse has predominantly focused on Christianity, examining the digital engagement of other religious communities and spiritual movements, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and indigenous spiritualities, can yield valuable insights. Questions of hierarchy, authenticity and authority can only be thoroughly explored in practices that are increasingly post-denominational and trans-religious if the focus is broadened beyond explicitly Christian practices.

Research on spiritual apps also remains promising. Additionally, it is worthwhile to consider other emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence and virtual reality, which also influence the landscape of post-digital spirituality and religious practice. Here, too, new questions arise in the areas of interpretative power and authority. For example: How does artificial intelligence influence the creation of liturgical texts and celebrations?

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