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# The First Research Phase of the URPP Digital Religion(s): Contributions, Insights, and the Road Ahead

**Abstract:** This article provides a systematic overview of the first research phase (2021–2024) of the University of Zurich’s University Research Priority Program (URPP) “Digital Religion(s)”. It outlines the main findings from 13 research projects, categorised into “Internal Dynamics” (focused on individual religious practices, religious communities and institutions) and “External Dynamics” (legal, educational, medical and social reputation contexts). The research reveals the blurred boundaries between online and offline religious practices and underlines the growing influence of digital technologies on belief systems, authority structures, and community formation. Emphasis is placed on collaborative approaches, interdisciplinary synergies, and responsiveness to global challenges, particularly those accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The URPP also positions itself within evolving international debates in Digital Religions and Digital Theology research. The programme’s second phase (2025–2028) will deepen empirical and theoretical investigations and expand into areas such as AI and global religious diversity, thus reinforcing the URPP’s commitment to transdisciplinary engagement and long-term impact.

Dieser Beitrag bietet einen systematischen Überblick über die erste Forschungsphase (2021–2024) des an der Universität Zürich angesiedelten Universitären Forschungsschwerpunkts (UFSP) „Digital Religion(s)“. Die Ergebnisse aus dreizehn Forschungsprojekten werden entlang der Unterscheidungskategorien „Interne Dynamiken“ (individuelle religiöse Praktiken, religiöse Gemeinschaften und Institutionen) und „Externe Dynamiken“ (rechtliche, bildungsbezogene, medizinische und gesellschaftlich-reputationsbezogene Kontexte) strukturiert. Die Forschungsergebnisse machen deutlich, wie sehr sich Online- und Offline-Praktiken religiöser Kommunikation durchdringen und wie digitale Technologien bestehende Autoritäts- und Gemeindestrukturen verändern. Der Beitrag hebt zudem die Relevanz interdisziplinärer Synergien und die besondere Prägekraft globaler Krisen wie der COVID-19-Pandemie hervor. Der UFSP positioniert sich im internationalen Forschungsfeld der Digital Religions und der Digital Theology. In der zweiten Forschungsphase (2025–2028) sollen empirische und theoretische Analysen vertieft, Themen wie Künstliche Intelligenz und religiöse Diversität intensiver erschlossen und die transdisziplinäre Forschung



weiter gestärkt werden – mit dem Ziel einer nachhaltigen wissenschaftlichen wie gesellschaftlichen Wirkung.

## 1 Introduction

This article presents the main contributions and insights of the URPP Digital Religion(s) and its individual research projects in this first, exploratory phase (2021–2024) in the form of a systematic overview, situated within the broader field of Digital Religions research and oriented towards future research in this URPP and beyond.

This exploratory phase – of identifying central content-related and methodological aspects, as well as possible interdisciplinary synergies – corresponds to the overall logic of the URPP, which is organised in three phases of four years each. At the end of this first phase, essential foundations were established for further in-depth research in the second (2025–2028) and third phase (2029–2032), including the implementation of sustainable structures for the time following the end of this specific research programme. Therefore, the long-term planning and design flexibility of the URPP, generously financed by the University of Zurich and supported by the Faculty of Theology and the Study of Religion, make it possible to explore the topic of Digital Religion(s) for a substantial period of time, taking into account both the dynamic developments of digital religious practices and cutting-edge research in the field.

The exploratory and planned in-depth research phases of the URPP Digital Religion(s) are reflected in the structure of this article. First, an overview of the key findings from the URPP's research from 2021–2024 (1) will be provided. In the following section (2), we will situate this research within the broader field of Digital Religion research, paying particular attention to aspects of interdisciplinary collaboration. Finally, the article outlines further perspectives on the planned research for the period from 2025–2028 (3).

## 2 Main Contributions and Insights between 2021 and 2024

The following paragraph provides an overview of the collected articles presented in this volume, as well as broader additional research conducted at the URPP in its first phase from 2021–2024. This collection of results and research projects is



not exhaustive, representing only a selection of the research conducted. This article therefore references other relevant contributions from the respective research projects where appropriate. Detailed references can be found in the individual articles of this volume.

During the application phase, the overall research structure of the consortium developed inductively from the individual research projects. As a result, a number of thematic issues, crucial research questions and approaches to the field only emerged through the URPP-consortium's deliberations and the deeper exploration undertaken within the individual research projects and cross-project modules. As emphasised in the introduction to this volume, the particular challenge and objective, as well as the defining feature of such a large-scale interdisciplinary research project, is to generate a specific added value that clearly goes beyond a merely additive form of individual research projects – the goal usually is to find a whole that is more than the sum of its parts. From the outset, research at the URPP has therefore focused on examining the fundamental dynamics and challenges of the digital era with its specific impact on religious communication, interaction and transformation across the individual projects. The broader horizon of these dynamics is the impact of digitalisation on media (Eisenegger and Udris 2021), especially on religious culture (Merle and Nord 2022), and its implications for ethical questions concerning “human life”.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, from the very beginning, questions regarding the interconnectedness of digitality and religion in its individual expressions and organisational forms – in individual personal practices as well as in faith-based religious institutions and communities – have been of central interest to the whole research consortium.

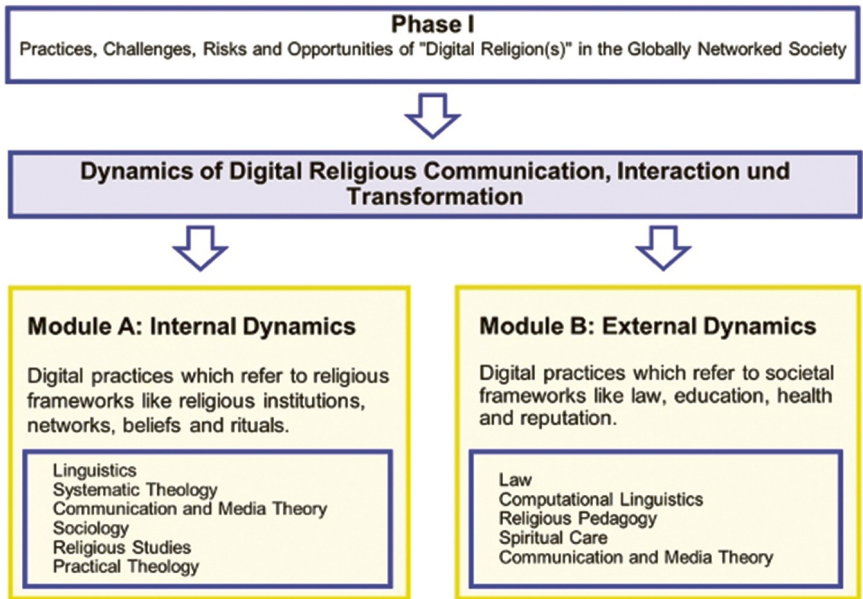
Both these individual and the organisational-institutional practices are reflected in the research approaches and insights of the individual projects. Attention should be drawn here to an internal differentiation and assignment of the projects P1 to P12,<sup>2</sup> which also influenced the respective approaches at least in part:

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1 As it is stated on the homepage of the URPP: “The URPP addresses legal and ethical questions of transhumanism and artificial intelligence from the perspective of human rights, religious values and interpretations of human life in terms of their relevance for coexistence in digital society.” (<https://www.digitalreligions.uzh.ch/en.html>).

2 The 13th project, which will also be presented, stems from Beth Singler's bridge professorship at the URPP and focuses on research into *Religion and AI*. As the position was only filled halfway through the first phase, the associated research project could not yet be included in the overall structure of the URPP.





**Figure 1:** Research Phase I (2021-2024) – Module A and Module B.

Projects P1 to P6 worked together in a substructure called “Module A” under the title “Internal Dynamics”, referring to religious frameworks like religious institutions, networks, beliefs and rituals. Projects P7 to P12 worked together as “Module B” under the title “External Dynamics”, referring to societal frameworks like law, education, health and public media reputation. This differentiation was intended to support both thematic focus and interdisciplinary collaboration. However, it should be noted at this point that this internal differentiation could not be carried out or maintained in a clear-cut manner, as many overlaps between the internal and external digital-religious communication dynamics became apparent. The following brief summary of the results of the first phase will focus on the key insights and findings of the individual projects.

Projects P1 and P2 examined online mourning practices in the context of digital media, online platforms, and apps – a trend that dates back to the early days of the internet, with specially created websites for mourning or “digital cemeteries”. However, these sites have seen a decline in use as mourning practices have increasingly shifted to social media (results from both projects now in Frick et al. 2025).



By placing particular focus on the question of religious references found in the data, project P1<sup>3</sup> showed from the background of German Linguistics how closely *offline and online mourning practices* are intertwined in our digitally permeated world. Accordingly, a key point of P1's research was that digital media are not just tools for everyday life but *shape lives, existence, communication, and worldviews*, including perceptions of death and immortality, and will most probably continue to do so also in the future (Frick 2023; Frick et al. 2023).

Project P2<sup>4</sup>, situated within Systematic Theology, proposed that eschatological expressions, as found in online mourning practices, should be an area of research for an empirically informed theological discipline, drawing on empirical insights from such fields as Digital Religion research and linguistics. This approach enables theology to develop a *reflective and sustainable engagement with digital culture* as a whole and to adequately explore *the religious dimensions* of these new forms of expression.

Project P3<sup>5</sup> examined from the perspective of Media and Communication Research the role of religious influencers as *sources of religious meaning* for their followers. The research team identified two key mechanisms that contribute to the significant role of influencers in the *lives and opinion formation* of their followers: the strength of the parasocial relationship between influencers and their followers, as well as perceived opinion leadership – which includes the aspect of perceived authenticity.

Within this thematic framework of “Internal Dynamics”, project P4<sup>6</sup> explored from the perspective of Sociology the digitalisation of monastic communities. This research showed that the use of digital media in monasteries is legitimised through *bottom-up processes* rather than by traditional hierarchical authority, while historical democratic community principles ensure that monastic leaders remain accountable in their *exercise of authority*. This means that *long established institutional logics* can shape digital practices today, as decentralised decision-making leads to *adaptability and innovation* (also in an interdisciplinary perspective Danko et al. 2023).

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3 Cf. in this volume Christa Dürscheid, Karina Frick, Christina Siever and Sandro Wick: Mourning Practices on the Internet, pp. 7–25.

4 Cf. in this volume Lea Gröbel and Matthias D. Wüthrich: Eschatological Contents of Digital Mourning and Memorial Practices. Theological Perspectives and Insights, pp. 27–43.

5 Cf. in this volume Julia Müller and Thomas N. Friemel: Meaning-Making through Social Media – Religious Influencers as Sources of Religious Meaning, pp. 45–64.

6 Cf. in this volume Jan Danko and Katja Rost: The Cooperative Governance of Religious Organisations in a Digital Society: From Monastic Organisation to Neomonastic Resonance, pp. 65–90.



Project P5,<sup>7</sup> located in the discipline of Religious Studies, conducted research on networking and community-building processes among digital natives from migrant communities in Switzerland through digital means. Interestingly, the project could not find any particular connection between the religiosity of the participants and efforts to build a religious community – neither online nor offline. On the contrary, digital religiosity was instead seen as a way to *experience religious inspiration without intense social bonds*, which are perceived as intrusive or even alienating. This finding highlights the *diversity of digital religiosity* and emphasises that Digital Religion and its research are *highly context-dependent* (also Menzfeld 2024).

In P6<sup>8</sup>, studies from the discipline of Practical Theology on app communities and religious influencers focused on *shifts of religious hierarchies*, considering both the methodological framework of participatory research as well as the content-related aspects of religious influencers on social media on the one hand and religious and spiritual apps on the other (also Müller et al. 2024). This research shows that, next to a *democratisation of religious communication* through prosumer logics that *empower followers* to take on an active role, social media facilitates *new forms of church, belonging and affiliation*.

The projects under the title “External Dynamics” dealt with phenomena and challenges of digital religious communication that were more closely related to particular publics. The focus here was on fields of law, religious education, health, and platform and attention economy.

In the context of these research topics, questions arise regarding laws and regulations on social media, extending to the protection of *human rights online* which project P7<sup>9</sup> has dealt with. The difficulty is that *online content moderation* often concerns several human rights interests, as well as different international non-binding standards and binding instruments from the OECD, the United Nations, UNESCO, the European Union, and the Council of Europe. In particular, the complex relationship between *freedom of expression and freedom of religion* when it comes to religious content requires human intervention. Currently, there is still a significant gap in terms of *standards and regulations*, which are urgently needed to balance all the different interests involved.

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7 Cf. in this volume Mira Menzfeld and Virginie Fazel: How Relevant is Community, and How Digitable Is Religion?, pp. 91–107.

8 Cf. in this volume Aline Knapp, Sabrina Müller and Patrick Todjeras: Shifts in Hierarchy in Post-Digital Religious Practices: Specifications Based on Three Research Areas, pp. 109–132.

9 Cf. in this volume Cristina Frei and Christine Kaufmann: Content Moderation in Social Media – Artificial Intelligence to the Rescue?, pp. 133–152.



From the perspective of law, and due to both the increased online presence of churches and their growing use of digital media, project P10<sup>10</sup> highlighted emerging questions concerning *church law*, particularly in light of *secular legal requirements* such as *copyright and data protection laws*. In this project, it became clear that, especially in areas such as church communication through social media and *new practices* such as digital communion, *regulatory frameworks* have rarely been established. Instead, so-called *soft law solutions* have been applied – though these have at times led to planning uncertainty and continue to do so. Based on its findings, this research project leads to the conclusion that the diminishing significance of *physical space* as a meaningful dimension of church organisation – due to the cross-border effects of digital communication – will likely, in the long run, manifest in the increased importance of *personal parishes* (also Özgü et al. 2024).

The problematic developments of new forms of *online public spheres* such as *hate speech* or the spread of *conspiracy narratives* – referred to as “External Dynamics” – were analysed by P8<sup>11</sup>, along with what can potentially be done against them. This project from Computational Linguistics worked on an approach that combined quantitative and qualitative digital analyses in order to come up with a particularly nuanced understanding of hate speech and the aim of hate speech detection. P8 used more modular and therefore efficient *hate speech detection systems* on the one hand and *conceptual maps* as a tool for visualising associations in large datasets on the other. Their analysis revealed a *pattern of negative sentiment* and the *politicisation of religion*, in contrast to *spirituality*, which was associated with more positive connotations and perceptions. This raises further questions about the evaluation of religions within *broader (digital) public spheres* and the influence that *prejudices* can have, which are then further amplified and disseminated through algorithmic reinforcement.

The research also explored broader transformations in (religious) pedagogy related to the dynamics of mediatisation and digitalisation. Project P9<sup>12</sup>, based on Religious Pedagogy, conducted studies with *religious education organisations* as well as in the context of *non-formal religious education*, namely confirmation work, to explore and highlight the opportunities and challenges of *digital education formats*. Concerning religious education, it was generally observed that ana-

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10 Cf. in this volume Andreas Thier and Ramazan Özgü: Protestant Churches, Digitalization, and the Law in Switzerland and Germany: Perspectives and Challenges, pp. 209–223.

11 Cf. in this volume Gerold Schneider, Janis Goldzycher and Martin Volk: Detecting and Mapping Hate in Religious Contexts, pp. 153–183.

12 Cf. in this volume Jasmine Suhner and Thomas Schlag: (Inter-)Religious Education in the Digital Society, pp. 185–208.



log formats were often simply transferred to the digital space rather than developing teaching and learning formats tailored to digital media. This raises the question of what *learning content* religious education seeks to convey and which forms of theological communication (Schlag and Suhner 2023) are appropriate in a digital society. To better achieve the actual goals of religious education, an *evidence-based development of encounter-based learning and affective learning* in digital education would be necessary.

The opportunities associated with digital transformation in pastoral care and spiritual care have also been examined at the URPP over the past four years. Project P11<sup>13</sup> has from the perspectives of Theology and Medical Anthropology investigated *Digital Spiritual Care approaches* that continue to gain importance due to demographic shifts towards an aging population and an increase of chronic diseases. For spiritual care givers, acquiring *digital competencies* is therefore essential to effectively work in virtual environments. According to the assessment of this research project, this also presents an opportunity: chaplains should *actively participate in shaping and utilising digital technologies* to ensure holistic and patient-centered care.

Additionally, within this field of “External Dynamics”, the URPP research has examined broader digital transformations, including the dynamics of *platformisation*, the production and consumption of news online, and the possibilities for *political participation* in digital public spheres (Eisenegger 2021). With regard to the legitimacy and legitimisation of churches, P12<sup>14</sup> found from the perspective of Communication and Media Research that journalistic online media are more important in *shaping the reputation of Christian churches* than social media (Schwaiger and Jarren 2022; Schwaiger et al. 2022). However, the most important factors are *interpersonal communication* and *personal experience*, which means that even in the so-called digital era, *non-digital sources* and *touchpoints* remain crucial for the *communicative construction of religious actors*.

Beyond these 12 projects, the establishment of an Assistant Professorship for Digital Religion(s) within the URPP has opened up a further important research perspective. Beth Singler presents her research on *Religion and AI* during the first phase from the perspective of Anthropology, employing a Digital Ethnography approach, with regard to the *narratives* surrounding them, that can obscure *power*

13 Cf. in this volume Fabian Winiger and Simon Peng-Keller: From the Bedside to the “Device-Side”: Digitalisation and the Professionalisation of Healthcare Chaplaincy, pp. 225–242.

14 Cf. in this volume Rebekka Rieser, Mark Eisenegger and Jörg Schneider: Digital Public Spheres: The Role of Media and Other Touchpoints in Shaping Swiss Church Reputations, pp. 243–260.



*structures* and are often formulated and disseminated in reference to *religious narratives*.<sup>15</sup> Scholars of religion, she argues, are used to identifying these narratives and understand the *power of stories*: Therefore the tools that are needed in a post-AI age include *competence* in the affective methods of storytelling, critical thinking, theological understanding, and sociological frameworks to comprehend generative AI and its implications for society as a whole (Singler 2025; Singler and Watts 2024).

With regard to the contributions of the 13 projects and articles presented here, it can be stated that research conducted under the umbrella of the URPP Digital Religion(s) has yielded significant insights over the past four years, making substantial contributions to international Digital Religions research (Campbell and Tsuria 2022). Although the individual projects initially appeared to be concerned with very different topics, a wide range of important aspects emerged that not only directly connected with previous overarching topics of Digital Religions research, but also built on them in terms of content, methodologies and interdisciplinary approaches.

In this respect and in the broader context of the URPP research, the keyword “transformation” appeared repeatedly – for example within church communication and education practices (Müller and Suhner 2023), as well as the presence of religious influencers and the resulting shifts in interpretative authority (Todjeras and Müller 2023; Müller 2022; Schlag 2022b; Schlag et al. 2025b).

In addition to highlighting the central role that religious authorities can play in meaning-making processes and networking practices (Schlag and Müller 2022), there was also a fundamental examination of the dynamics of authority and hierarchies, which appear complex and multidimensional in a digital culture. Specifically in relation to the institutionalised Church, research addressed phenomena such as a “Networked Theology” (Schlag and Müller 2021), questions of ministry and community under digital conditions (Schlag and Nord 2021a), ethical questions (Schlag 2021a), and a (new) ecclesiology in the light of digital media usage (Müller 2021; Schlag 2021c). Connected with this, approaches to a “lived theology” (Müller 2021) through the empowerment of volunteers were explored, as well as the question of how new digital presences can reshape hierarchies (Müller and Todjeras 2021). This led also to concise and detailed scientific research approaches to aspects of the *materiality of digitalisation*, e.g. the usage of smartphones (Schlag 2022a; Müller 2024) or robots in ministry (Nord et al. 2022; Nord and Schlag 2025).

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15 Cf. in this volume Beth Singler and Kristina Eiviler: Insights from Current Research on the Entanglements of AI and Religion, pp. 261–278.



This combination of insights from individual research projects, as presented in this volume, with broader insights gained by URPP researchers in the context of their wider research, can indeed be regarded as an important added value and specific contribution of this URPP to current research in this field. These findings not only fill research gaps but also open up new fields of study. Some of them will be explored in greater depth through empirical studies, theoretical research, and mixed-method-approaches in the next phase of research from 2025 until 2028.

### **3 URPP-Research in the Context of Digital Religions Research**

To better situate the research conducted at the URPP in its first phase (2021–2024) within the broader context of Digital Religions research, it is first important to note that the URPP was shaped not only by the conditions and dynamics of digitality and its diverse developments but also by the outbreak of the global COVID-19 pandemic at the beginning of the first research phase of the URPP in early 2020. The pandemic was not only a worldwide social and societal catastrophe that led to existential challenges including human suffering, deaths, societal divisions and hasty political decisions that later proved at least partly inadequate. But the pandemic can also be seen as a catalyst for creativity, experiments and innovation, particularly in the use of digital media for purposes such as very fast communication and digital interaction, new forms of community building, responsibility and solidarity.

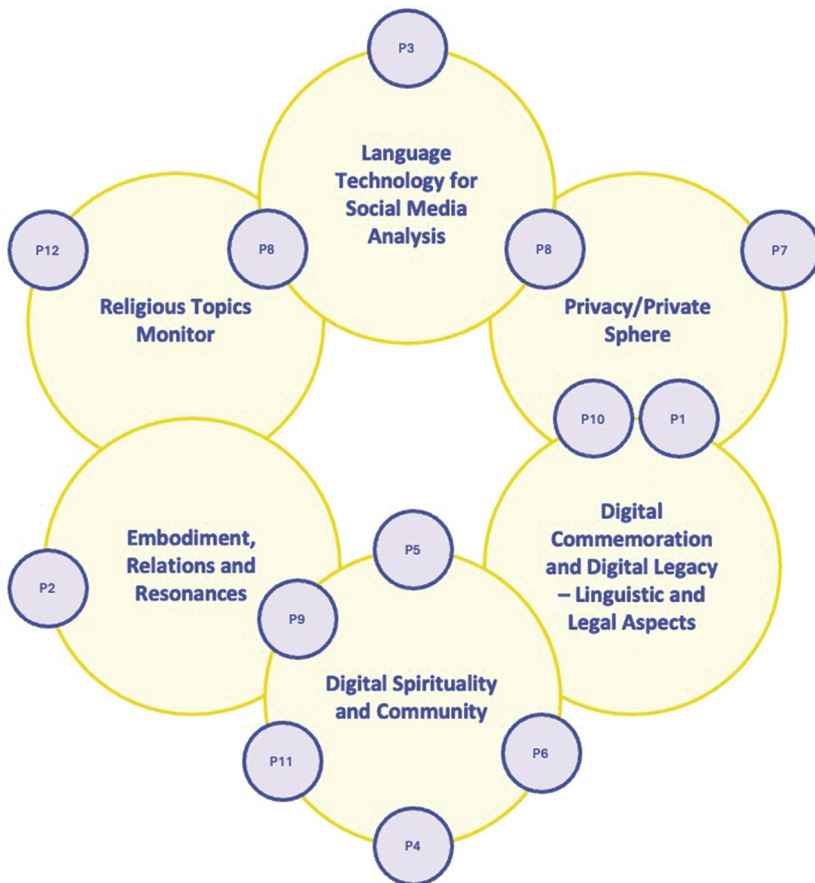
Against the backdrop of the specific challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the two CONTOC-studies (Churches Online in Times of Corona) emerged (Schlag et al. 2023a; 2023b; 2025a), which were planned and conducted within the framework of the URPP, analysing developments in digital church communication and of the pastoral office in 2020 and 2022. Additionally, further research was undertaken to examine the effects and dynamics of the COVID-19 pandemic, including research on its impact on churches and ecclesiastical practices (Schlag and Nord 2021b), the understanding of ministry among clergy working in the health-care sector (Neuhold 2022), on religious education (Schlag 2021b) and regarding the question of the public role of churches and religious organisations in times of crisis.

The developments in the context of the pandemic have therefore also influenced research within the URPP. On the one hand, digital dynamics in the field of religious communication and interaction practices contributed to a further expansion of the entire research field. On the other hand, growing public and



media interest in our research findings presented us with the challenge of reviewing the originally planned research projects and the overall structure of the URPP, at least to assess whether any adjustments might be necessary.

In fact, the URPP underwent a significant restructuring after approximately the first two years of its existence. The initial rough categorisation of all projects into the two overarching modules of “Internal Dynamics” and “External Dynamics”, as explained in the first section of this article, was complemented by additional thematic clusters, which emerged through project collaborations and within which interdisciplinary cross-project research was conducted.



**Figure 2:** Thematic Clusters.



On the one hand, the cross-project collaboration fostered interdisciplinarity within the URPP, allowing for a more effective utilisation of synergies. The outcomes of these collaborative efforts included publications in various formats, like videos on “Digital Spirituality and Community”,<sup>16</sup> an article on “Digital Commemoration and Digital Legacy” (Dürscheid and Thier 2023), a blog on “Privacy”<sup>17</sup>, a Religious Topics Monitor,<sup>18</sup> an interdisciplinary study on Virtual Baptism, dealing with the topics of “Embodiment, Relations and Resonances” (Gröbel et al. 2025), and an interdisciplinary teaching course on Language Technology for Social Media Analysis.

On the other hand, over the course of the first half of the first research phase, it became evident that the content-related phenomena of Digital Religion(s) could not be neatly categorised into certain internal and external dynamics. Rather, it is inherent to digitality that these dynamics intertwine and mutually influence one another in their interconnectedness.

Furthermore, throughout the research process across the 12 (later 13) research projects within the URPP – and, notably, in light of the public debates about the “new normal” of digital church practices after COVID-19 – it became clear that questions and phenomena related to Digital Religion(s) always involve both *online and offline settings*, each playing a crucial role in shaping religious expressions and informing research on them. Consequently, these two spheres of human communication and interaction cannot be meaningfully separated.

This aligns with the *third wave* of Digital Religions research (Campbell and Lövheim 2011 drawing on Hojsgaard and Warburg 2005), which is characterised by a pluralisation of research approaches and a greater theoretical focus on the influence of the Internet and digital media on religion, manifesting in the interconnectedness of online and offline settings. This very aspect of “‘theoretical and empirical exploration’ of how we assess the impact and influence of religion online” (Campbell and Lövheim 2011, p. 1085, drawing on Cowan and Hadden 2000) was not only placed on the agenda by the URPP in its first phase of research but will be of continuous interest of our research.

Therefore, building on this foundation, the next phase of the URPP (2025-2028) will increasingly position itself within the *fourth wave* of Digital Religions research, engaging with existential as well as hermeneutical questions of “good” and “threatened” life (Lagerkvist 2022; Schlag 2025b). Current discussions on the possible connection and reciprocal inspiration of Digital Religions and Digital

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16 Cf. <https://uzh.mediaspace.cast.switch.ch/channel/UFSP%2BDigital%2BReligion%2528s%2529/13099>.

17 Cf. <https://www.uzh.ch/blog/digitalreligions/2024/05/10/1632/>.

18 Cf. <https://reltm.ikmz.uzh.ch/>.



Theology research – including the exciting developments of the so-called “Computational Theology” (Nunn and Oorschot 2024; 2025) are also expected to play a crucial role in shaping further international research (Oorschot 2023; Schlag 2024; Schlag 2025a; Kurlberg et al. 2025).

By widening its research focus in these directions, the URPP acknowledges that “broader cultural beliefs and values are implicated in key areas of digital religion, including identity, authenticity, authority, and community formation, which should be further addressed in more detail and depth.” (Cheong and Campbell 2023, 633). Questions concerning the understanding of religion and spirituality (Peng-Keller 2019; Grieve 2022) are expected to become even more prominent than in the first phase of the URPP, including the growing issue of which criteria justify speaking of the “religious” – and in this respect also the “non-religious” – as a form of self-identification.

These thematic expansions also make clear that future research in this field will have to go beyond questions of digital media communication and take into account the dimensions of technological developments and their ethical, social, cultural, economic, and political implications, as well as disruptions. This will significantly expand the field of the URPP’s existing reference sciences, as well as research in the areas of Digital Religion and Digital Theology in a broader sense. And it will be necessary to closely observe and consider the extent to which the latest AI-developments (Britton 2025) will bring about completely new and as yet barely foreseeable manifestations of the presence and practice of religion(s), theology(ies) and meaning-making processes (Paulus and Langford 2022; Paulus 2023; O’Giebllyn 2022) and thus of our understanding of them.

In correspondence with this, the focus will be on refining and further developing the methodological approaches that have already been established. In line with this, the research will shift in focus from individual case studies towards a stronger inter- and transdisciplinary integration of these studies and larger datasets, from singular examples within rather small-scale projects to a meta-level perspective that captures the broader picture of the relevant dynamics, and from short-term studies to long-term research (as a deeper reflection on this URPP perspective see now Mühlematter 2025). To summarise here: the overall aim of the next phase of research within the URPP Digital Religion(s) is to deepen our understanding of the complex interconnections and relationships between various actors within religious meaning-making systems in the post-digital world – characterised by the constant coexistence, interplay, and interweaving of digital, analog, and hybrid life worlds, theories and methods.



## 4 Future Research Perspectives

In describing the planned activities of the URPP in its second phase below, we aim to clarify how we intend to build on the research insights available to date, as exemplified in this collection. At the same time, we also aim to use the specific example of our URPP to highlight what we consider to be the key challenges facing this broader field of research. In this respect, the following remarks signal our research programme's openness and willingness to cooperate with other international actors in this field of research.

Research in the next phase of the URPP will address the multifaceted polycrisis – encompassing societal, political, ecological, economic, technological, existential, and religious dimensions – underscoring the relevance of the research in the second phase conducted across its 15 projects and their critical approach to current cultural and societal dynamics, including problematic outcomes such as injustice, exclusion, extremism, and the violation of human dignity and human rights.

This broad perspective is also reflected in the increased methodological diversity of the planned qualitative and quantitative studies, as well as in the variety of analytical techniques: Alongside quantitative research methods including Web Scraping and survey-based data collection, the next phase will include qualitative approaches such as Citizen Science research, participatory action research, qualitative media analyses and interview studies. Thus, Digital Religions must not only adopt a more differentiated view of both human and increasingly machine agents, but also develop “expanded methodologies of study to capture and analyse multimodal data that are contextualized within diverse and previously neglected cultural spaces” (Cheong and Campbell 2023, 631).

Accordingly, an expansion of the research contexts is underway: In addition to a stronger emphasis on the internationalisation of URPP projects, the scope will also be broadened to include other religious traditions –ultimately doing justice to the plurality suggested by the title of the URPP, with its admittedly somewhat unusual “(s)” bracket. The relevance of the research also extends even more beyond academia to institutionalised religion, society, politics, and individual ways of life. Recognizing this, the URPP and its researchers assume the responsibility of disseminating ethically and politically significant insights to religious, political, and societal actors while actively fostering their integration into policy and decision-making processes. Consequently, the research within the next four years of the URPP will be characterised by a critical transdisciplinary approach, which not only enhances academic discourse but also fosters broader public engagement with contemporary debates on religion (Bergmann et al. 2010; Savin-Baden and Reader 2022).



The fifteen research projects – now also integrating perspectives from Theological Ethics, Educational Science, and Cultural Science – collaborate within four different thematical clusters with the following core themes: Emerging Technologies (Cluster A); Post-Digital Religious Resonance Spheres: Spirituality, Networked Communities, and the Future of Religion (Cluster B); Post-Digital Religious Education (Cluster C) and Conspiracy Theories in Online Environments and their Religious Connotations (Cluster D).



**Figure 3:** Research Phase II (2025-2028) – Organisation of the URPP into four thematical clusters.

Another key aspect of this next research phase of the URPP will be that the 15 research projects will not only consolidate into the named thematic clusters, thereby enhancing inter- and transdisciplinary research and collaboration through the effective use of synergies, but will also be interconnected through so-called cross-cutting themes. Examples of these include 1. ethical dimensions of Digital Religions research, 2. intersectional perspectives in the form of postcolonial approaches or a focus on gender questions, 3. AI as a research tool as well as a research topic, 4.



issues of inclusion and exclusion, and 5. Digital Theology. This reflects the important insight that “instead of bifurcated either-or positive or negative responses to digital changes, seeing hyphenated ‘both-and’ realities will enable deeper and more nuanced understandings of the tensions and vulnerabilities produced in complex systems characterized by change and uncertainty.” (Cheong and Campbell 2023, 636). This heightened focus on divergences, contradictions, and the diversity of narratives – explored through a methodological and disciplinary plurality – will ensure that research at the URPP Digital Religion(s) not only enters a new phase that meaningfully builds upon the findings of the first, but also continues to contribute to international Digital Religions research and advance the field of studies to the next level of complexity.

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