

Religious Communication, Interaction and Transformation in a Culture of Digitality

Religious Communication, Interaction and Transformation in a Culture of Digitality



Insights into the Zurich University Research
Priority Program “Digital Religion(s)”

Edited by
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Thomas Schlag and Katharina Yadav

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We would like to express our sincere thanks to the UZH Zurich as the funding institution for the research programme and in particular to its Rector Prof. Dr. Michael Schaepman and the Vice-Rector for Research Prof. Dr. Elisabeth Stark as well as the Head of the Research Department Maurus Bolting, all of whom pro-

vided us with extremely benevolent support at all times during the application and start-up phase of the URPP.

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Within the URPP itself, we would like to thank the Scientific Directors Prof Dr Sabrina Müller (2021–2024) and Dr Ulvi Doguoglu (since 2024) for their collaboration on content and Natalie Stocker for her administrative coordination and support of the URPP.

We would like to thank Maarit Franzki for editing and Francine Boulanger for language proofing, as well as Katrin Mittmann and Dr Albrecht Döhnert for their willingness to include this volume in the De Gruyter publishing programme.

Finally, special thanks go to all those who signalled their willingness to engage with the researchers of the individual projects and made their time available to participate in the respective project, either as interview partners or as committed co-creators of the specific project outline.

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

Christa Dürscheid, Karina Frick, Christina Margrit Siever and Sandro Wick

Mourning Practices on the Internet

Abstract: The article presents the results of our URPP subproject “Mourning Practices on the Internet”, in which four linguists collaborated. Following our disciplinary background, the aim of the project was to explore how feelings of grief after a tragic event are expressed on the internet, what linguistic and visual means of expression are used, and how this form of online mourning is reported in the media (i.e. in newspapers). A particular focus was placed on the question of religious references found in the data we examined. Such references are expected in the context of death and mourning; the project investigated how these references are explicitly established. While other studies are predominantly in English, our research centers on German-language data. The article presents selected results from our qualitative and quantitative analyses and highlights how closely offline and online mourning practices are intertwined in our digitally permeated world.

Im Beitrag werden die Ergebnisse unseres UFSP-Teilprojekts „Trauerpraktiken im Internet“ vorgestellt, an dem vier Linguistinnen und Linguisten mitgewirkt haben. Unserem fachlichen Hintergrund folgend war es Ziel des Projekts, herauszuarbeiten, wie im Internet Trauergefühle nach einem tragischen Ereignis zum Ausdruck gebracht werden, welche sprachlichen und bildlichen Ausdrucksmittel verwendet werden und wie über diese Art der Online-Trauerbekundung in den Medien (z. B. in Zeitungen) berichtet wird. Ein besonderes Augenmerk lag dabei auf der Frage, welche religiösen Bezüge sich in den von uns untersuchten Daten finden. Dass es im Kontext von Tod und Trauer solche Bezüge geben wird, ist zu vermuten; im Projekt wurde untersucht, wie diese Bezüge explizit hergestellt werden. Der Beitrag präsentiert ausgewählte Ergebnisse unserer qualitativen und quantitativen Analysen und macht deutlich, wie eng in unserer digital durchdrungenen Welt Offline- und Online-Trauerpraktiken verwoben sind.

1 Introduction

We live in a digital world, in a culture of digitality (Stalder [2016] 2024). This manifests itself in many facets – not least in our approach to death. The grief over the loss of a loved one can be publicly shared on social networks (Giaxoglou 2021); virtual grave sites can be established (Geser 1998; see also Offerhaus 2016), and

people share their experience of caring for their dying child online (Marx and Tienken 2023). After a death in the family, friends and acquaintances, and often even strangers, express their condolences on online memorial pages, light virtual candles, or write personal messages in a digital condolence book. Even when we are offline, our world is permeated by digital elements. Taking pictures at a funeral, sending condolence letters by mail, the publication of obituaries in newspapers¹ – none of this would be possible without the use of digital technologies. Stalder ([2016] 2024, 20) rightly points out that digitality no longer applies only to “specific, isolated areas”, but is omnipresent in our society, even beyond digital media.² It is important to emphasize this. Even though our URPP project focuses on online mourning practices, they must be viewed in the context of traditional offline mourning practices (e.g., visiting the grave, attending a funeral service, sending condolence letters). While these practices occur offline, they are also part of our increasingly digital world. Moreover, they often serve as templates for how mourning offerings are designed on the internet (e.g., online memorial pages). The same is true for the many religious references found on these sites. Heidi Campbell (2012, 81) aptly notes: “In many respects, offline religion serves as a source book for religious practice online.”

From a linguistic perspective, the question arises as to the relationship between the many facets of mourning and the verbal and non-verbal means of expression (e.g., emojis, photos, ASCII art) available to people on the internet. How is mourning expressed online, and what linguistic tools are used? What connections to (offline) religion are made, and how does the relationship between public and private change when one’s feelings are made public in this way? These and other questions (see below) guided the URPP project “Mourning Practices on the Internet”, whose central results are presented here. Our project did not, however, merely focus on how people express their grief and sympathy online; the reporting on this kind of public mourning was also a key area of interest. So far, only a few studies have been conducted in this regard, primarily within the field of journalism (e.g., Stage and Hougaard 2018).

In the following sections, we will present some of the central findings of the project, but first a preliminary remark is necessary: In contrast to most other sub-projects within the URPP *Digital Religion(s)*, the religious dimension played a secondary role in our project. Although religious interpretive frameworks are often associated with death and mourning, the expressions of grief themselves do

¹ See Meier-Vieracker 2025. This paper examines over 55,000 obituaries and death notices that appeared in a regional daily newspaper.

² Cf. Stalder [2016] 2024, 20: “This hybridization and solidification, the presence of the digital beyond digital media, gives the culture of digitality its dominance” [our translation].

not reveal whether they are driven by religious motivations. This even applies to phrases such as “Rest in Peace” or “You are now in heaven with God”, which may be interpreted as mere figures of speech (Dürscheid and Wüthrich 2025).³ In exclamations such as *for God’s sake, oh my God, thank God, or God almighty*, it is immediately apparent that these expressions are idiomatic; there usually is no religious reference intended by the speakers or, to put it more cautiously, the original religious context recedes completely into the background in everyday communication. Even when the context seems to suggest religious content, one should not jump to conclusions. In order to learn about the actual intended use of expressions, interviews would need to be conducted with the individuals who employ them (e.g., when writing a condolence letter or in an obituary). This could shed light on their attitudes and clarify whether references to God, heaven, paradise, eternal life, and other Christian-religiously connoted concepts are genuinely intended as such. However, concerns regarding privacy protection and ethics often arise in this context. Furthermore, surveys like these are also problematic for reasons of decency and respect.

Section 2 provides detailed information on the methodological approach taken in the project and the composition of our data set. This consists of two large text corpora, the so-called *Gedenkseiten-Korpus* (memorial pages corpus) and the Twitter corpus, which were compiled with the criterion that the content should, as far as possible, involve mourning communication. A third, smaller corpus consists of newspaper reports covering online mourning practices. Section 3 presents selected findings: Firstly, it demonstrates which forms of expression are used when mourning children who died shortly before or after birth (3.1). The chapter then addresses the question of which religious (or, more cautiously phrased, religion-adjacent) language patterns can be found in our data (3.2). In doing so, we build on work from the field of religious linguistics (Lasch and Liebert 2017).⁴ In the third part of this section, the results of a qualitative study on the media discourse surrounding mourning practices are reported, and recurring patterns of expression in these texts are identified (3.3).

³ The paper by Dürscheid and Wüthrich (2025) was developed in close collaboration with the URPP project “Eschatological Contents of Digital Memorial and Mourning Practices”. The productivity of this collaboration is also reflected in the joint development and sharing of a database, in a co-organised international conference and the resulting publication of an edited volume (Frick, Gröbel, and Siever 2025). The exchange of ideas (concerning specific terms for example) also proved to be highly beneficial for both sub-projects.

⁴ This discipline, which stands at the intersection of language, culture, and religion, has gained increasing importance in German studies in recent years. It should also be noted that the authors of the present contribution have a background in German studies.

We conclude this introduction by summarizing the project’s objectives: 1) to examine how online mourning (especially in response to death) can be characterized; 2) to investigate whether new forms of condolence communities are emerging on memorial sites and in social networks; 3) to ask to what extent religious aspects are involved in these digital mourning practices; and 4) to analyse the public discourse on digital mourning. It is also important to note that the analyses in the URPP *Digital Religion(s)*, including our sub-project, primarily focus on German-language data. This distinguishes our research from other studies in the context of death and mourning, which is predominantly concerned with English-language data. We will return to this point in the final section of our paper.

2 Theoretical Basis and Methodology

Theoretically, our project draws on different linguistic subdisciplines: In addition to the religious linguistics (Lasch and Liebert 2017) already mentioned in the introduction, important theoretical points of reference include media and cultural linguistic works (e.g., Tienken 2015; Marx and Tienken 2023; Giaxoglou 2021). Methodologically, we are guided by corpus pragmatic approaches (e.g., Bubenhofer 2009) and discourse linguistic analyses (e.g., Spitzmüller and Warnke 2011). As our project is part of the URPP, we also worked closely with neighbouring disciplines, above all theology (see footnote 3) but also religious studies (e.g., Campbell 2012; Hutchings 2019) and sociology (e.g., Jakoby 2014). In the following, we explain our methodology and present the three corpora we have compiled.

A total of 25,346 profiles were scraped from the website www.gedenkseiten.de from 17 March 2021 to 26 May 2024. For each profile, the link to the profile, details about the deceased person (name, place of birth, birth and death dates), the name of the individual who created the page, the profile text, the images, as well as memorial candle texts, were collected. Memorial candle texts are brief messages authored by visitors to express their condolences, grief or memories of the deceased. As can be seen from Table 1, the texts of the obituaries are considerably longer than the candle texts.

Table 1: Average length of the different text types on memorial pages in our corpus.

Text Type	Ø Characters	Ø Tokens
Obituaries	883.5	143.54
Candle Texts	478.07	55.89

The corpus comprises a total of 2,168,102 candle texts; the average number of candles per profile is 85.54, with a median of only 13. This can be attributed to the fact that, for example, one profile contained 39,169 candle texts at the time of the crawl, while some other profiles had no candle texts at all.

As for the Twitter data, the time of data collection was from 15 October 2021 to 7 June 2023. We conducted both event-based and hashtag-based (or topic-based) crawls. In terms of events, incidents such as terror attacks were included (e.g. the attack on the Berlin Christmas market in 2016). We also searched for memorial days such as the Eternity Sunday and the Worldwide Candle Lighting Day (a day of remembrance for children who have died); looking for both hashtags (e.g. #RIP) as well as specific topics (e.g. “Sternenkinder”, angel babies, cf. section 3.1) in the process. A disadvantage of this method is the high potential for so called “false positives”.⁵ It should also be pointed out that only tweets from 22 March 2006 (the launch of Twitter) to the date of each specific query were collected. This led to a corpus containing 24,032,617 tweets. However, as multiple crawls were performed with different queries, some tweets appeared twice within our corpus and had to be removed. Thus, we finally obtained 22,917,053 unique tweets (with 433,097,386 tokens). In addition, metadata such as author ID, tweet ID, date and time of the tweet, hashtags used, and the number of likes, replies and retweets were also collected.

The third corpus consists of articles from Swiss newspapers dealing with mourning practices on the internet. The data was collected using the *Swissdox@LiRI* database.⁶ Initially, a broad keyword search was carried out, including articles published between 14 July 1996 and 15 July 2023 that contained the term “Trauer” [grief] as well as one of the following terms: “online”, “digital”, “Internet”, “Facebook”, “Instagram”, or “Twitter”. The query yielded a total of 3,280 articles, many of which were not relevant to the research topic. For this reason, the corpus was reduced using a semi-automatic review method. First, duplicates were removed, and then only articles in which the terms ‘Trauer’ and the internet-related target words appeared in close proximity were retained. These articles were then qualitatively assessed to determine whether they directly ad-

5 For example, someone might “mourn” their smartphone using the hashtag #RIP: “Wie befürchtet: Smartphone im Arsch. Startet jetzt nur noch mit Error . . . #RIP” (“As feared: Smartphone fucked up beyond all repair. Now it just starts with a bug . . .”).

6 <https://www.liri.uzh.ch/en/services/swissdox>. Due to commercial restrictions, the raw data cannot be shared. The original query (YAML format) used to retrieve the data is available at <https://gitlab.uzh.ch/sandro.wick/mourning-practices-on-the-internet/-/blob/8dba5bfdc116a2b229c41ca4fcb1fe88ce189a7c/files/query.yaml> [Accessed 19 September 2024].

dressed practices relevant to the research question.⁷ During this process it became evident that the creation of a discourse-specific sub-corpus, contrasting to the thematically non-specific overarching corpus, was crucial. Thus, the result of this process was not merely the curation of the media corpus, but also of a sub-corpus, as described in Table 2 below:

Table 2: Media corpus and thematic sub-corpus.

Corpus	Media Corpus	Thematic Sub-Corpus
Size (Articles)	462	139
Theme	Non-specific	Death & mourning online
Criterion	Online mourning is mentioned	Thematically

In the following section, we will give exemplary insights into the studies that we have conducted using the described corpora.

3 Main Findings

3.1 Digital Mourning Practices in the Context of Angel Babies

Children who die shortly before, during, or shortly after birth, have been referred to as “Sternenkinder” (angel babies) in German-speaking countries for the past 30 years. Tienken (2015, 135) identified an instance of this term on a memorial website dating back to 1991. The German-language Wikipedia article was created in 2008. Notably, there is no equivalent Wikipedia article for “angel baby” in English. Tienken (2015, 135) pointed out that the term “Sternenkind” had not yet become a widely recognised term among the general population at that point in time, particularly not among those who have not been directly or indirectly affected by the loss or stillbirth of a child. Our analysis of Twitter data shows that the expression has considerably spread in recent years: from one tweet contain-

⁷ While the manual approach reduced false positives in the corpus, classification could have been further refined through inter-annotator agreement. However, given our qualitative focus in the third corpus, the additional effort seemed disproportionate to the benefit.

ing this word in 2008 to 1927 tweets in 2021. Unlike other social media platforms, Twitter is used by a relatively small proportion of the population.⁸ Therefore, it cannot be claimed that language use on Twitter is representative of the population as a whole. However, the increased usage of the term “Sternenkind” on Twitter suggests that its relative frequency has increased, as the number of tweets featuring the term has risen while the user base remains constant.

A look into the *DWDS* newspaper corpus⁹ reveals that the expression has also proliferated considerably in newspapers over the past three decades. From 17 occurrences per 1 million tokens in 1993, its frequency has increased 65-fold to 1,110 instances by 2023 with the most significant growth occurring in the past 10 years. It remains unclear, however, whether the term first spread in general language use and is now reflected both on Twitter and in newspapers, or whether it primarily disseminated through the internet and was later picked up by newspapers. In any case, it must be acknowledged that the emergence of the term “Sternenkind” signifies a profound change in how grief about deceased children is expressed, shifting parents from passive sufferers to active mourners. By referring to a lost child as a “Sternenkind” rather than “miscarriage” the language use reaffirms the parent-child bond, repositioning parents as “angels’ parents”. This linguistic shift reflects broader changes in mourning culture and attitudes toward pregnancy loss. Moreover, digital grief communication plays a crucial role in destigmatizing these topics and raising societal awareness.

Our analysis of the use of the string “Sternenkinder” (case-insensitive) is based on a sub-corpus from our Twitter data and initially comprised 32,741 tweets (for more detailed information about the corpus see Siever 2024, 77–80). However, as pointed out in section 2, this dataset included numerous false positives. Consequently, after a manual review, the corpus used for the analysis was reduced to 8,351 tweets. Giaxoglou (2021, 33) emphasizes that the “language used in digital mourning features digital writing features, such as emoji and hashtags, and also draws on platform-specific vernaculars, for example images in photo-sharing websites.” However, as our analysis reveals, the usage of emojis and hashtags is not very frequent in our data; only 35% of all tweets use hashtags, with 65% of the former containing just one. Emojis are even less common, ap-

8 Between 2011 and 2021, about 1% and 2% of the German population used Twitter on a daily basis according to the *ARD/ZDF* online studies. In the *ARD/ZDF* online studies, internet usage and user behavior in Germany have been examined since 1997. The results are published in the journal *Media Perspektiven* and are available online: <https://www.ard-zdf-onlinestudie.de/>.

9 *DWDS* (<https://www.dwds.de>) stands for *Digitales Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache* (Digital Dictionary of the German Language). The newspaper corpus is part of this important online dictionary for the German language, which is based on large text corpora.

pearing in only 18% of tweets, with 56% containing just a single emoji. Future research should delve into cross-linguistic analyses and explore whether the low use of hashtags and emojis is due to the subject matter – grief – or rather characteristic for the specific platform (such as Twitter).

Regarding the use of hashtags, the analysis of the 20 most frequent ones revealed that they primarily reference the people involved (cf. rank 3: #angelsparents, rank 5: #orphanedparents), the event (rank 2: #miscarriage, rank 7: #death), related emotions (cf. rank 1: #grief/mourning, rank 11: #love), and acts of remembrance (cf. rank 15: #angelbabiesremainunforgotten, rank 17: #unforgotten). Commemoration events (e.g., rank 4: #worldwidecandlelighting) and locations (cf. rank 12: #cemetery) are also represented. The concept of missing is reflected in rank 6: #youaremissing. A characteristic of this hashtag is that the deceased person is addressed directly (Bodenmann et al. 2023).

As for the use of emojis, it is crucial to emphasize that directly linking them to emotions would be an overly simplistic interpretation, as emojis do not always reflect the actual emotional state of the writer (Beißwenger and Pappert 2022, 13). Therefore, we must approach their interpretation cautiously: emojis can be seen as markers within the discourse of mourning (e.g., the broken heart emoji, which conveys emotional pain or sadness). The red heart (❤️) is the most frequently used emoji in our corpus, followed by two different star emojis (🌟🌟) and the black heart (🖤). Other commonly used emojis include candles (🕯️), crying and sad faces (😭😭😭😭), rainbows (🌈), various colored hearts (💚💙💛💜💖💗💘💞), praying hands (🙏), broken hearts (💔), and star symbols (🌟🌟🌟). Overall, symbols connected with love dominate the top 20 emojis in our corpus, appearing in various colors and shapes. A total of 990 emojis potentially indicate love, while 576 may symbolize grief or mourning.

With regard to religious symbols, the analysis of the top 20 emojis revealed the following ones with potentially religious connotations: the 🕯️ emoji, the 🙏 emoji, and the 🇬🇧 (angel) emoji. The 🕯️ emoji holds significance across religious traditions; it, for example, symbolises remembrance of the deceased in the Catholic Church (Stage and Hougaard 2018, 51–52). It is frequently used, especially during commemoration days like “Worldwide Candle Lighting”. The 🙏 emoji may be used to signify prayer but it may also express solidarity, thankfulness, or gratitude (Beißwenger and Pappert 2022, 109). The 🇬🇧 emoji, which would rank 19th in our data if the various emojis with different skin tones were totalled, is often used to refer to deceased children as “angel babies” or guardian angels.

In summary, we find that apart from the red heart, emojis that express grief, such as sad faces or broken hearts, are central to online grief practices, while religiously coined symbols, such as folded hands or candles, are less prevalent (Siever 2023). Of course, the various star emojis and the rainbow emoji could be

interpreted as religious symbols, but the intention of the users is not known, so it is difficult to categorise them as religious or non-religious.

3.2 Religious Language Patterns

As already mentioned in the introduction, religiously coined references and patterns of interpretation are very common when it comes to death and mourning – both in (historically grown) offline practices as well as in online practices (that are based on them). Since death-related mourning is a particularly distressing situation, coping-strategies in the form of comforting and familiar practices are needed: “One such way, especially prominent in the face of disorientation and apparent meaningless [sic] generated by death, is through the meaning-making provided by religion” (Brennan 2008, 336). Religion offers people “ready-made ‘scripts’” (Brennan 2008, 337) in the face of death – and the speechlessness that is often invoked with it – that serve as orientation, support, and perhaps even actual verbal guidance. In this sense, these scripts are part of a patterned religious language use, understood here with Lasch and Liebert (2015, 477) or Liebert (2018, 406) as a functional variety – which means that, on the one hand, their use fulfils certain functions (such as those mentioned above), and on the other hand, that a detailed theoretical understanding of the underlying concept of religion is not only not possible (in our case because we did not interview individuals, see introduction), but also not necessary. Rather, we can assume with Neubert (2016, 16) that the attribution of one’s own or other positions or language uses as ‘religious’ is always linked to certain evaluations, values, and discursive practices. In summary, the following can be stated in the context of digital mourning practices: The use of religious terminology, symbolism or religiously patterned language is not a reliable indicator of actual individual (and not institution-related) religiosity (see above); rather, it is a form of positioning, e.g., vis-à-vis the patterns of interpretation and the accompanying ‘scripts’ for death-related mourning provided by religion (e.g., as helpful or useless, as consoling or upsetting).¹⁰

With this in mind, we would like to point to three important findings from our project with respect to religious language patterns in online mourning practices: a) religiously coined formulaic (in the sense of typical language patterns) expressions are employed as discourse inscribing means; they are used for indexing one’s participation in a discourse; b) the existence of multimodal religious refer-

¹⁰ This raises the question of who these ‘providers’ actually are. Are digital media formats possibly taking on the role of religious providers with their offerings?

ences on memorial pages as artistic consolation devices in the sense of a form of community-special art that is intended to have a comforting effect, and c) the establishment and maintenance of a vertical communication axis with the deceased which is reminiscent of practices of prayer with respect to the use of deictics. In the following, we will describe these three main findings in more detail with some examples from our data basis as described in section 2.

a) Hashtags – starting with *#jesuischarlie* after the terror attack on the Charlie Hebdo offices in 2015 – have developed as an important resource in the wake of “disruptive news events” (Giaxoglou and Johansson 2020, 170). These hashtags (see also section 3.1) are often religiously coined, as for example the widespread invitation to pray *#prayforX* (whereby the X is usually filled with different toponyms) or the likewise widespread acronym *#RIP*. As Brennan (2008, 337) shows with reference to the latter, the religious meaning of these formulaic phrases has often been “attenuated or lost”; this also applies to references to “God” or “heaven” etc. (Dürscheid and Wüthrich 2025). In social media contexts this is especially true, instead these pattern-like solidified strings have become a means of expressing solidarity by inscribing oneself into the discourse revolving around the respective disruptive event (e.g., terror attacks, amok runs, airplane crashes but also the death of public figures) – in the sense of: I acknowledge that something bad has happened, I express my sympathies and as a result I am part of a community that shares similar feelings about the event in question which can have a comforting effect. In other words, and to put it more broadly: Digital technologies in general and hashtags in particular offer new possibilities for a sense of belonging and community-building (Lagerkvist 2017, 107); this, of course, is also true in the case of the “Sternenkinder” (see above). The prevalence of this function is also shown by the fact that these hashtags are used when the linking function of the hashtag is not effective at all, e.g., on images. The hashtag is thus part of the formulaic, religiously coined string and functions as an indicator for “Diskursfähigkeit und Agendawürdigkeit” (discourse and agenda worthiness, Marx 2019, 251).

b) On memorial pages, we strikingly often find ASCII designs (Frick 2023), which are otherwise more or less extinct in social media. Generating, (more often) copying and sharing these elaborate structures, which are composed of numerous individual punctuation marks and other special characters thereby creating iconic imagery, has become an almost platform-specific multimodal practice on the memorial pages. By using these designs, users identify themselves as platform- and community-competent: they show that they know the common practices, (can) carry them out themselves and thus align themselves with their usage in

general and their (comforting) functions in specific. As the examples below (see Figure 1) demonstrate, these designs often take on religious forms or are based on religious symbols and objects indexed as religious: candles, crosses, doves, angels etc.

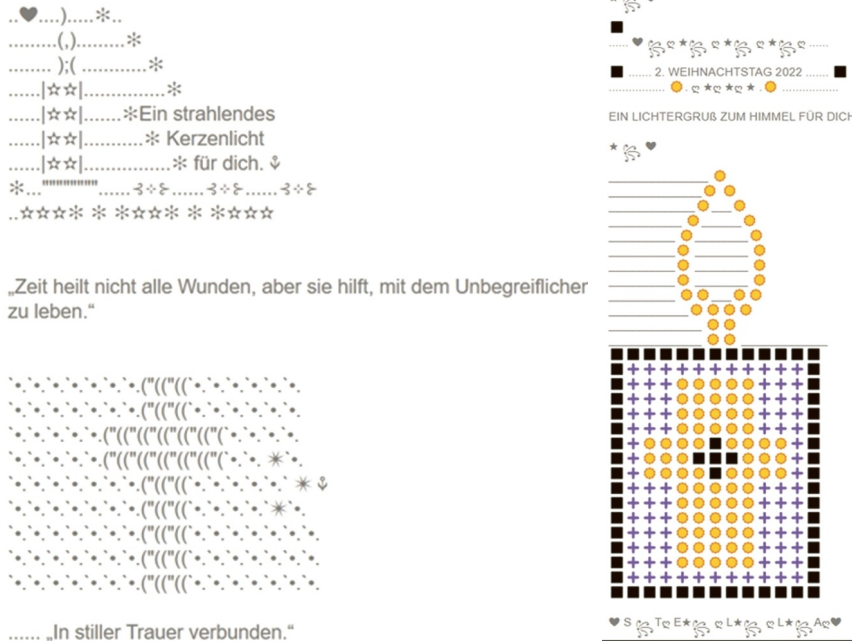


Figure 1: Artistic ASCII designs in candle texts on memorial pages (left one created on 22 May 2023, right one created on 26 December 2022).

This reference to religiously associated symbols is in line with the theoretical considerations above: it draws on (in a Christian-Western culture) well-known scripts that invite people to identify with them or position themselves in relation to them (which they also do by using them, for example). However, the reference remains so abstract that it has no binding character whatsoever: It does not call for or demand a specific form of religiosity, but simply represents an offer of consolation through the potential religious interpretation frame (Hilpert 2017, 133; on the top of consolation in (social media) mourning see Klug 2023).

c) Another reference to religious practices can be found in the deictic organization of the memorial candle texts (see also Giaxoglou 2021). We find that a) users very often address the deceased with the use of the deictic pronoun *du* (you) in

order to maintain (or rather: imitate) communication with them. This shows that the memorial pages represent a forum for communication with the dead and, in this function, serve to maintain the social relationship with them potentially indefinitely in the sense of the “continuing bonds” model (Jakoby and Reiser 2014, 82). However, authors of these texts not only verbally imagine a communicative channel with the deceased, but also arrange it spatially by deictically opening up a vertical communication axis in which they localize and position themselves *hier unten* (down here) and the deceased *da/dort oben* (up there) (Bodenmann et al. 2023). Two examples from our memorial page corpus (see section 2) will illustrate this:

- (1) Ich hoffe Du bist dort oben im warmen und trockenen.
I hope you are warm and dry up there.
- (2) Ein Engel sein für einen Tag, und dich noch einmal wiedersehen . . . um dir zu sagen, wie sehr du uns hier unten fehlst . . .
To be an angel for a day, and to see you again . . . to tell you how much we miss you down here . . .

This – inevitably monologic – vertical communicative axis (Lasch and Liebert 2015, 483) is not reminiscent of the religious practice of prayer and worship by accident. This may also explain the use of star emojis or images and the metaphor of “Sternenkind” in general.

These three exemplary insights in our findings show that religiously coined references and religious patterns of language use play a central role in online mourning practices – even if this is potentially a less concrete, partly faded and certainly also strongly (Christian-Western) culturally influenced type of religiosity.

3.3 Digital Mourning as Represented in Swiss Newspapers

As Frick (2022, 212) observes, due to their emergent nature, mourning practices in the context of digitalisation have become the subject of journalistic reflection. This section builds on Frick’s observation and presents selected findings from a corpus-based study that draws on the media corpus (see above). It focuses on two key areas: firstly, the different representations of digital mourning practices depending on the actors involved; and secondly, the extent to which a trend towards the integration of digital elements in mourning practices can be traced in public perception through the analysis of the media discourse.

Different forms of mourning practices on the internet can be reconstructed from the media corpus as they are represented through journalistic coverage. It is important to note, however, that our focus was not on the mourning practices themselves but rather on their portrayal and reflection in the media. Thus, we present a collection of practices that are discussed and negotiated within newspaper articles, considering not only communication that directly discusses mourning practices online but also, following Schütte (2021, 242–243), identifies mortality-related themes in seemingly unrelated contexts. The analysis is based on an actor-centred approach to the data (Spitzmüller and Warnke 2011, 174–177). In our context, this means that newspaper articles use different forms of representation of online mourning practices depending on the *animator* (following Goffman 1981, 226; i.e. the actor who performs the utterance – in our context the mourner). These variations are shaped by the *author* (i.e. the journalist), who presents mourning practices in a specific way based on the identity and role of the mourner (and the deceased). Examples (3)–(5) provide prototypical formulations that demonstrate how the journalistic representation of mourning practices varies depending on the mourner and the deceased. The examples are then briefly commented on.

- (3) Die sozialen Netzwerke wurden von Gedenkmeldungen und -fotos geradezu überflutet: «Wir werden dich niemals vergessen», «Ein Grosser stirbt nie», «Er war ein Komik-Genie», schrieben die User, Kurzangebundene begnügten sich mit «RIP» (Rest in Peace).

Social networks were virtually flooded with tributes and memorial photos: “We will never forget you,” “A great one never dies,” “He was a comic genius,” users wrote, while those at a loss for words settled for “RIP” (Rest in Peace). Trauer ist ansteckend, nzz.ch, 14.08.2014.

- (4) Selbst Präsident Obama stimmte in den Chor der digitalen Trauergemeinde ein: «The movies won’t be the same without Roger», meldete er über Twitter. *Even President Obama joined the chorus of the digital mourning community: “The movies won’t be the same without Roger,” he posted on Twitter.* Die letzte Instanz, Tages-Anzeiger, 06.04.2013.

- (5) Auf ihrem Facebook-Profil strahlt Lena weiterhin. Herz-Emojis hauchen ihrem toten Profil Leben ein. Für Hinterbliebene ist es nicht immer einfach, dass Verstorbene nach dem Tod noch präsent sind. Auch Anna irritiert anfangs, dass ihre Freundin Lena virtuell weiterlebt. «Ich war lange nicht wirklich traurig, weil sie auf Facebook noch da war», erinnert sie sich. *On her Facebook profile Lena continues to shine. Heart emojis breathe life into her dead profile. For the bereaved, it is not always easy that the deceased are*

still present after death. Anna also found it unsettling at first that her friend Lena continued to live on virtually. “I wasn’t really sad for a long time because she was still there on Facebook,” she recalls.

Digitaler Nachlass – Statt Blumen gibt’s für Tote Herz-Emojis, *srf.ch*, 14.06.2017.

(3) is part of an article reporting on social media reactions to the death of a public figure. Notably, there is no lead-in or direct reference to the *animator* of the direct quotes. Instead, the example presents a general collection of memorial messages. This contrasts with (4). Although the article is also about the death of a public figure, the condolence message is attributed to the *animator* combined with a lead-in. This is common in cases where the article describes one celebrity mourning another. The coverage of unknown people mourning others who are also not in the public eye occupies a distinctive position in our media corpus. An example of this is given in (5). The digital mourning message itself is no longer quoted in this article. The focus shifts from quoting digital expressions of grief to statements that reflect the individual’s personal grief and mourning practices on the internet. As such, articles like this one constitute a unique category in their own right.

In a second step, we have extracted a thematic sub-corpus. It differed from the broader media corpus, which includes articles that may only make passing reference to mourning practices while addressing other topics. Table 3 provides examples of titles specifically addressing digital mourning practices (from the sub-corpus) alongside titles of broader articles (from the main corpus).

Table 3: Examples for titles of articles about mourning practices on the internet and other topics.

Sub-Corpus: Articles about mourning practices on the internet		
<i>An eternal life on the World Wide Web</i>	Ein ewiges Leben im World Wide Web	Tages-Anzeiger 10.12.1999, ID 15457296
<i>Ancestor worship is maintained on the internet</i>	Ahnenkult wird im Internet gepflegt	Zürcher Unterländer 17.09.2013, ID 1518529
Main Corpus (without Sub-Corpus): Articles about other topics		
<i>Queen Elizabeth II has died</i>	Königin Elizabeth II. ist tot	Der Landbote 09.09.2022, ID 47504155
<i>Robin Williams suffered from Parkinson’s</i>	Robin Williams litt an Parkinson	tagesanzeiger.ch, 15.08.2014, ID 211130

We examined the data in more detail to identify potential trends in the publication of newspaper articles focusing exclusively on online mourning practices

compared to those on other topics in our media corpus. In Figure 2 (see below), we plotted the yearly publication frequencies of both categories for comparison.

The frequency analysis of the two types of articles in the corpus, as shown in Figure 2, reveals a shift towards articles that primarily cover other topics but still refer to mourning practices on the internet. This may indicate a trend towards the normalisation of digital aspects within these practices: whereas in the late 1990s and early 2000s coverage tended to focus on the impact of digitalisation on mourning and its wider social implications, a growing tendency towards a more integrated coverage of the phenomenon has become observable over the past few years. Mourning practices have increasingly absorbed digital components, to the point where it can be assumed that, in the public discourse, digital mourning practices become a natural extension of traditional mourning rituals. As a result, these digital aspects are no longer at the centre of journalistic attention to the topics but are mentioned in passing, reflecting their seamless integration into the current public perception of contemporary mourning practices.

4 Conclusion and Future Research

At the beginning of this paper we pointed out that most of the work dealing with the topic of digital religion is focused on the English-speaking world, whereas our project centres on the German-speaking area. While it is a positive step to shift the focus to another language, comparative studies between different cultures and languages are still lacking. Tim Hutchings highlights this in his article “Angels and Digital Afterlife”. In a call to action, he writes: “First, we urgently need a much wider range of cross-cultural studies of death and grief online (as of other forms of religious/non-religious existential experience), to balance the current wealth of case studies from the English-speaking (particularly North American) world” (Hutchings 2019, 4). Indeed, it is not enough to conduct individual studies in different linguistic and cultural areas; the data must also be analysed comparatively. From a linguistic perspective, it would therefore be desirable, in a next step, to explore whether similarities in the use of linguistic and visual means can be identified in online expressions of grief across cultural boundaries. Future studies could also examine the extent to which digital platforms contribute to the creation of global mourning communities.

We now come to the conclusion – and simultaneously back to the introduction of this paper, where it was explained that our daily lives are permeated by digital technology. Following Amanda Lagerkvist, we can even go as far as to say that digital media are not only tools of everyday life but have profound effects on

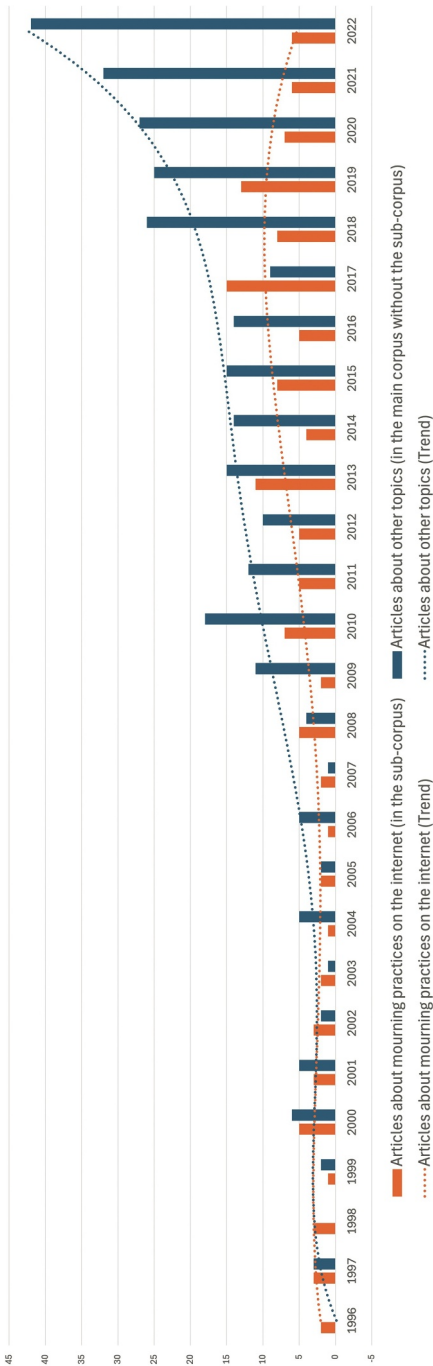


Figure 2: Number of articles about mourning practices on the internet and articles about other topics.

our existence, they are “life-defining” (Lagerkvist 2017, 99).¹¹ Recent works have referred to this omnipresence of the digital as “postdigital” – analogous to other word formations of this kind, such as “postmigrant”. Stalder ([2016] 2024, 20) does not use the term postdigital himself; he points out that it can be misunderstood: “[T]he prefix ‘post’ is often read to imply that something is over or that one at least understands it and can move on to newer things” [our translation]. In contrast, one could argue that the prefix *post-* aims to capture how our society is currently transforming. What follows the digital is now another, a second stage of digitality.¹² This stage arises from our “digital thrownness” (Lagerkvist 2017) and shapes our view of the world – and, consequently, our understanding of death and dying. Will this, in the long term, lead to a new understanding of immortality? This possibility is suggested by Savin-Baden (2023). In her essay titled “Postdigital Afterlife” she concludes: “The digital world opens up an unimaginably diverse range of opportunities for one individual’s identity to perpetuate after the death of their real human being” (Savin-Baden 2023, 3). In the vast field of digital (or postdigital) religion, many new questions are emerging that still need to be addressed.

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¹¹ As Lagerkvist (2017, 97) notes, this applies at least to the networked populations of the Global North. She aptly states: “Hence, we seem to be, to speak in Heideggerian terms, *thrown* into our digital human existence.”

¹² For this reason, it no longer makes sense to speak of “digitalization”. The process is already completed.

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Eschatological Contents of Digital Mourning and Memorial Practices. Theological Perspectives and Insights

But where are you now?
Are you anywhere at all, somehow?
With God and in heaven, as they say?
Have you found peace?
Can you hear us now?¹

Abstract: This article presents and discusses two selected findings of the URPP sub-project ‘Eschatological contents of digital mourning and memorial practices’. Firstly, the hermeneutical task of theological eschatology is stated, and it is argued that digital forms of online mourning and commemoration represent a productive field for addressing this task. On this basis, three interconnected examples are then used to show how digital expressions and realizations of mourning and commemoration can be perceived within theological eschatology.

Dieser Beitrag präsentiert und diskutiert zwei ausgewählte, aufeinander aufbauende Erkenntnisse des UFSP-Teilprojekts „Eschatologische Gehalte digitaler Trauer- und Gedenkpraktiken“. Zunächst wird die hermeneutische Aufgabe der theologischen Eschatologie exponiert und dargelegt, dass digitale Formen des Online-Trauerns und -Gedenkens ein produktives Feld für die Bewältigung dieser Aufgabe darstellen. Auf dieser Grundlage wird dann anhand von drei miteinander verbundenen Beispielen exemplarisch gezeigt, wie digitale Ausdrücke und Vollzüge der Trauer und des Gedenkens innerhalb der theologischen Eschatologie wahrgenommen werden können.

1 Introduction

Digital phenomena of mourning and commemorating a deceased person came up at the same time as the World Wide Web became accessible to and useable for a broader public. As early as the 1990s so-called ‘virtual cemeteries’ were estab-

1 Quote of a German online memorial page, our translation.

lished, where users, who had lost someone, could create virtual gravesites to share their grief and to build a virtual memorial. At the end of the same decade and in the early 2000s these phenomena were recognized and described by research, especially within the disciplines of the social sciences (e.g. Geser 1998; Schwibbe and Spieker 1999; Roberts 2004).

Since these beginnings of the widely accessible internet and early forms of digital mourning and memorial practices a distinguished field of researching death online has been established, including widespread phenomena that can also be grasped by the term ‘digital afterlife’, which reaches from online mourning, the digital (re-)mediation of death, dealing with digital postmortem remains to digitally supported pre-mortem end-of-life planning.² Within the comprehensive research on digital mourning and memorial practices in Western societies, historically heavily influenced by Christian tradition, many have noted that people often draw on religiously connotated language and imagery in these practices (Frick 2023; Savin-Baden 2022b, 54; 66–70; Hutchings 2019, 1; 4; Staley 2014, 9; 13–14). Some have also suggested that such practices themselves seem to hold a spiritual dimension, especially due to their predominant mode which can be described as ‘communicating with the dead online’ (Sumiala 2023, 408–409; Lagerkvist 2022, 167–169; 173; 175–176; Walter 2016). However, these constitutive aspects of mourning practices implying traditionally Christian-religiously impregnated imagery are not sufficient to indicate that the practices let alone the individuals performing them are indeed religious ones. Therefore, their religious, spiritual or non-religious status remains at most vague and should not be overestimated or too easily categorized as ‘religious’ (Frick 2023, 153; Savin-Baden 2022b, 70; Lagerkvist 2022, 168; Hutchings 2019, 3–4; Walter 2018, 11; Dürscheid et al. in this volume). This is also why it is debatable whether further religiously informed reflection of digital mourning such as the theological one is necessary or even adequate to the task at hand.

Nevertheless, we have chosen a decidedly theological approach in our project. This approach, however, is not primarily motivated by a supposed religiosity of the objects of investigation; i.e., the practices themselves allegedly being religious, spiritual or nonreligious. Rather, we presume that there is a factual affinity or similarity of mourning practices to certain questions which can be allocated in the theological field of so-called eschatology. While this link of online mourning or other phenomena of the digital afterlife to eschatology has already repeatedly

2 For a processual typology of ‘the digital afterlife’ differentiating between the interrelated *afterlife phenomena* on the one hand and *afterlife managers* on the other s. Lagerkvist 2022, 172–176. For research on phenomena collected under the term ‘death online’ s. Death Online Research Network <https://cc.au.dk/en/research/research-programmes/cultural-transformations/cultures-and-practices-of-death-and-dying/dorn>.

been made (Sumiala 2023, 409; Savin-Baden 2022a, 585; Staley 2014, 17–18), it has not yet been explicitly elaborated and examined in more detail in the context of German-speaking Protestant Systematic Theology we are focusing on.

In addition, we start with the observation from within theology that it is precisely the context of the death of another person which can serve as possible entry point for eschatological considerations (Polke 2020, 401, n. 25; Körtner 2020, 629). More concretely, to develop a contemporary form of eschatology, it has been suggested that theology needs to be attentive towards the verbally processed images which are placed upon the intangible limit of death as well as a potentially imagined beyond (Polke 2020, 395). However, a theological acknowledgement of how the unexceedable limit of death is imaginatively surrounded, circumnavigated and thus also tentatively gauged in contemporary practices of mourning and commemorating the dead is still owing. If it is ‘at the graves’ where theological eschatology finds its exemplary field of probation (Polke 2020, 411; Härle 2022, 606), then it seems necessary to also theologically recognize what is present in the very context of people having to bury, mourn and commemorate someone. Here, digital mourning and memorial practices, which have been present for several decades already but still lack in-depth theological investigation, can serve as an exemplary starting point for this theological task. As digital online practices mostly rest on nondigital offline ones and remain essentially intertwined with them (Campbell and Bellar 2023, 8) the field of online mourning can reveal substantial aspects of how people in our contemporary digital culture (Stalder 2018) in general mourn and commemorate the dead. Many of these aspects have probably been part of mourning and commemoration before, but only become visible or accessible due to their digital condition.

Within the frame of this contribution, it is not possible to unfold and conduct in detail the theological in-depth investigation we pursued in our project. In the following we will merely trace a few elements of this exploration by way of example. In accordance with the explicitly theological approach indicated above, we will first contour in more detail what we conceive as the theological task regarding mourning and memorial practices in the field of eschatology (2). The elaboration of this task further serves as theoretical basis for the then following empirically based investigation and the presentation of some elemental findings (3). The methodology used for this attempt will be described at the beginning of the relevant section. The article ends with a conclusion (4).

2 The Death of Another Person As Exemplary Context of Eschatology

The theological investigation of digital mourning and memorial practices within eschatology on the one hand and within the research field of Digital Religion(s) on the other presents a multilayered challenge due to two uncertainties. Firstly, the religious status of these practices is unclear, and it is not seen as a primary aim of theology to alleviate this uncertainty by evaluating, e.g. via means of empirical research, the (non-)religiosity of certain practices. This is because the theological position holds that the very decisive Christian religious practice, faith, which is the reflexive object of theology, is not purely a practice and can never be certainly determined empirically but only be hinted at. This is also why it is precarious if and how theology can refer to or even integrate empirically describable practices. This already implies the second insecurity concerning the relation of theology and the studies of religion. The latter, which dominate the research field of Digital Religion(s), mostly come from a multidisciplinary background eschewing any denominational commitments and predominantly follow a socio-constructionist paradigm (Campbell and Bellar 2023, 8–9; Sumiala 2022, 511; Grieve 2021, 28; 31; 35–36). Theology, however, cannot in all parts adapt to this approach and paradigm, for the reality it ultimately refers to cannot be exhaustively encapsulated by what is socially construed in practices.

To grasp, and also partly circumvent, these challenges, we have – as mentioned above – chosen a decidedly theological approach. Within this approach, we operate with the basal theoretical assumption that there is an affinity or even a factual *resemblance* and *correspondence* between some bundles of practices, like digital mourning and memorial practices, and some theological topics or questions. Yet, this correlation can only be constructed from a *theological* perspective.

While death represents a classical topic of eschatology, meaning the study of ‘the last things’, the recognition of contemporary contexts of death and what is at stake therein concerning the questions emerging in these contexts as well as how they are dealt with, often remains rather abstract within Systematic Theology. However, a sense that one possible and important empirical context of eschatological considerations is located ‘at the graves’ or in accompanying people who grieve as a task of pastoral care, can still be traced in some systematic theological contributions (Polke 2020, 411; Härle 2022, 606). Furthermore, this context is named as the one in which eschatological propositions are supposed to prove their value and which therefore needs to be included in systematic theological reflection (Polke 2020, 411; Härle 2022, 606). For Christian Polke the hermeneutic

task of the theologian in this probation field is to “critically and constructively return to the meaning” of the “polymorphy of eschatological genres and imagery” in the New Testament as well as of “religious motifs and images, with which an eschatologically tinged consciousness is expressed in our contemporary culture” (Polke 2020, 395).³

This description of a possible hermeneutic task in eschatology is here taken as seminal guideline that in doing eschatology it theologically is not only important to recognize the biblical imagery connected to death and an imagined, believed in or hoped for afterlife but also to consider the imagery which temporarily appears in this context. However, as mentioned above, it does not seem to be empirically possible to narrow down expressions of “an eschatological tinged consciousness” to the ones of “Christian faith or the Christian-pious self-consciousness” (Polke 2020, 395) in advance. Rather, we follow the assumption that it is, in general, the death of others, of those “who have died already and die every day” (Körtner 2020, 629), which urges for the reflection of finiteness (Polke 2020, 401, n. 25) and a potential Christian hope (Körtner 2020, 629; 642; 646) and which therefore serves as an entry point for exploring “eschatologically tinged” expressions “in our contemporary culture”. In the context of death, these expressions will primarily be imaginative and metaphorical, as humans here are deprived from any approaches to secured knowledge and therefore have to resort to modes of the symbolic in order to visualize what essentially cannot be visualized (Polke 2020, 400–402). However, the concept of ‘image’ or ‘imagery’ needs to be widened to deal with mourning and memorial practices as it is not only the explicitly linguistically processed images which are exerted to iteratively surround and thus gropingly comprehend the intangible threshold of death. Rather the forms and realizations of these practices themselves can also serve as representations of the unrepresentable (Stetter 2024, 31; 255–257; 294–295).

In Systematic Theology, which the topos of eschatology belongs to, considering concrete practices based on empirical data is – at least in the German-speaking context – not a given. As sketched, this is because the primary object of theology is Christian faith. Therefore, the plausibilization of a possible theological examination of digital mourning and memorial practices – as roughly outlined here – by identifying the death of others as exemplary source and target context of eschatology and setting out the hermeneutic task hereof already represents *the first finding of our project*. It does not follow a given theoretical basis or specific predetermined methodology but can rather be described as reasoning, encircling and enriching search movement in and from theological eschatology leading to a

3 Any German quotations have here been translated into English.

form of theology which could be characterized as an ‘empirically informed’ Systematic Theology (Henriksen 2019).

3 Empirical Attempt: Addressing, Missing, Locating the Dead

While our first finding concerns the overall hermeneutics and methodological structure of our project, the findings presented in this chapter result from this basic structure. We will first start with a preliminary remark on the methods of our empirical investigation and then turn to some exemplary insights of this procedure.

In order to survey digital mourning and memorial practices as an exemplary site for ‘eschatologically tinged’ images and representations, we collected different sets of data in cooperation with the linguistic project of the URPP P1. Together, we compiled a corpus of the German memorial pages *gedenkseiten.de* as well as a Twitter/X corpus including event-, hashtag-, and topic-based queries. Because these corpora are identical with the ones of P1 more detailed information on these data can be found in their contribution. As grief, when shared online, is nowadays mostly expressed on social media, we have also added a small qualitative data collection on grief posts on Instagram. To do so, we manually collected around 200 public posts which were tagged with the hashtag #grief and were accessible via the “explore”-site of Instagram. While all the data used was publicly accessible in very minimally invasive manners, for ethical considerations we will only refer to this data in anonymized ways.

To analyze these data, we have especially drawn on means and analytical concepts used by linguistics such as a linguistically elaborated concept of social and verbal “practices” (Frick 2025) and “patterns (of language use)” (Frick 2023; Tienken 2015; Linke 2011). Although our empirical procedure mostly relied on cultural and media linguistic approaches to mourning practices (Frick 2023; Giaxoglou 2021; Tienken and Marx 2020), we, in comparison to P1, proceeded more qualitatively oriented following our theological research interest asking how death is comprehended within these practices and what (verbal, practical, imaginative) means can be identified that are mobilized to continuously relate to the dead thus tentatively orbiting the limit of death, opening up a potential postmortem perspective and cultivating expressions of an ‘eschatologically tinged consciousness’.

3.1 Addressing the Dead

As already mentioned in the introduction and exemplified in the opening quote from a memorial page (“But where are you now?”), the predominant formal mode of online mourning and memorial practices is to directly address the dead (Lagerkvist 2022, 173–174; 192–196; Walter 2018, 6; 8; Offerhaus 2016, 50; Cann 2014, 122–123). However, this form of relating to the deceased, casting them as living persons by one of the most basic verbal modes of social interaction, the direct address in the second person (“you”), has so far hardly been taken into account when theologically conceptualizing death or a possible beyond of death. The difficulty of theologically recognizing a continuing (Klass, Silverman, and Nickman 1996), though transformed (Mathijssen 2018) bond or relationship of the bereaved towards the deceased can be seen in the reformatory attempt to avoid “meritorious misunderstandings” (Klie et al. 2015, 8) according to which the bereaved could, should or must do something for the salvation of the soul of the deceased (Brouwer 2015, 229; Grethlein 2022, 103–108; Grethlein 2007, 282). Historically, it remains unclear whether and to what extent this Protestant prevention of speaking to the dead was implemented in church services and pastoral care (Grethlein 2007, 286; 289). In contrast, the reformatory impetus advocating divine grace, which is effective in the justifying faith, as the exclusive means of salvation was clearly emphasized in the Protestant theological discourse in the 20th century and denied humans any ability to influence their own salvation or a post-mortem existence. As a consequence of this emphasis, a certain conceptualization of death, which was later referred to as the so-called “whole death thesis”, became the dominant stance on death within the German-speaking Protestant discourse. Because this stance is still effective until today, it can be seen as the main reason for the contemporary theological difficulty to recognize relations of the bereaved towards the dead manifested in direct addresses (Karle 2020, 570–572; Klassen 2023, 10–11).

This thesis consists of different levels, but is mostly grasped as countermodel to the idea of an immortal soul which is assumed to be the essential part of a human being that cannot be destroyed, not even by death (Härle 2022, 634). In contrast, the ‘whole-death thesis’, in alignment with the sciences as well as with the dominant tendency in the biblical scriptures, holds that a human being only exists as inextricable unity of body and soul, which is why, in death, the whole human entity dies, including all experiential human aspects which can be conceived as soul (Härle 2022, 635; Körtner 2020, 638).

Theologically, this conception of death rather emerged as theological by-product of the Protestant-centered understanding of the justifying faith by unconditioned divine grace and has never been strongly defended as stand-alone thesis

(Sacher 2023, 5–6). However, it was advanced to a problematic anthropologically coined definition of death when it was further explained as “the onset of total relationlessness” in the 1970s by Eberhard Jüngel (Jüngel 1993, 145)⁴. Notwithstanding that this definition is based on relationality, it narrows the “enigmatic, indefinable” phenomenon of death (Jüngel 1974, 5) to a seemingly general, objective, unifying anthropological definition of the “*essential nature* of death” (Jüngel 1974, 115). On a positive note, it must be admitted that Jüngel succeeds in taking the radical nature of death, and the irreversibly terminating rupture that occurs with it, extremely seriously with this definition (Wagner-Rau 2024, 200–201). Therefore, the value of Jüngel’s definition should not be underestimated, as it is only the irreversibility of a life having ended with death that makes the grief and pain induced by the death of another person comprehensible at all. However, on the basis of this definition of death, it is hardly possible to theologically acknowledge some concrete and essential practices in the context of death in such a way that they are also able to reveal something substantial about the phenomenon of death and therefore cannot simply be dismissed as improper or denying reality. That this is predominantly not the case when bereaved persons directly address the deceased online (or offline s. Stetter 2024, 200) can be illustrated by another prevalent pattern that also is a major one in online mourning practices and clearly indicates the absence of the dead.

3.2 Missing the Dead

1. You are missing. ❤️
2. You are missing to me / I miss you. 💞⁵
3. I miss you so much ❤️ Just one more time to feel your little body on me, feel your heartbeat, breathe in your smell. ❤️⁶

As it appears to be all too obvious that the dead are missing it seems that little attention has been paid to this pattern which is one of the most prevalent ones in online mourning – especially in directly *addressing* the dead (3. “I miss you”).

On the one hand focussing on the dominance of this pattern in online mourning practices helps to connect these practices to the theological discourse on death in the frame of eschatology – which is our primary aim here – as it corre-

⁴ With this quote we follow the original German text instead of the official English translation.

⁵ In German this pattern is realized in two ways, constructed with two verbs which both translate to the English “missing”.

⁶ Quotes from selected Instagram posts tagged with #grief.

sponds with the strong emphasis on death as a total break-off as stated in the ‘whole death thesis’. On the other hand, this pattern can also serve to contextualize the ‘social presence’ of the dead constituted by online mourning and memorial practices as well as the assumption that, on the long run, the bereaved might be denying that the dead are actually dead because they engage in communicative practices towards the deceased (Grethlein 2022, 235).

In theological eschatology, it is imperative not to promote a simple hope of an ongoing life beyond death, seeing that the Scripture as the original document for Christian faith provides no definite basis for such an overly simplified notion of hope, nor can it be reasonably and candidly stated in the face of death. Therefore, it is an unquestionable strength of the so-called ‘whole death thesis’ that it does not rashly present a Christian hope of eternity and resurrection and thus overhastily circumvent the radical and irreversible rupture happening with death which appears to be the main reason for grief. Rather, it takes seriously the finite limits of the human being represented in dying as in grieving as the “relentless harshness of death” (Laube 2023, 75).

That the harshness of death, as held by the whole death thesis, is foremost constituted as rupture of and in an embodied human life can very well be shown in the verbal pattern of missing the dead. Within this pattern the bereaved often articulate that it is especially aspects of the bodily-physical existence they are missing, such as the voice, the smell (3. “breathe in your smell”), the body heat, the breath or the heartbeat of the deceased (3. “feel your heartbeat”). Although these aspects seem to be very basic ones of the physical constitution of a human being they still can be interpreted as verbal hints to what Thomas Fuchs phenomenologically calls intercorporeality (Fuchs 2018, 46–47). As the relationship to the now deceased was constituted by “an intercorporeal sphere” (Fuchs 2018, 47) it also becomes tangible in online grief that the deceased are now missing as a *somebody* (Lagerkvist 2022, 189). Thus, the “ubiquitous indications of absence” (Fuchs 2018, 43) of the dead are not easily surmounted by addressing them. Rather, this very pattern of directly addressing the dead in order to express the gaping absence of the addressed verbally illustrates the “ambiguity of presence and absence”, which Fuchs posits as “the core conflict of grief” (Fuchs 2018, 51). While it seems obvious that online practices of mourning and commemoration are dominated by practices of presentifying the dead (Walter 2018, 6–7), it helps to stick to this prevalent pattern of simultaneously addressing and missing the dead in order not to pass too quickly by the fact that these practices only emerge as a way of dealing with an undeniable and also often explicitly undenied absence (Walter 2018, 11). The ambiguity of presence and absence as core conflict of grief does not only show how, in grief, “pragmatics undermine semantics” (Stetter 2024, 200) but also functions as display of what essentially constitutes grief. There-

fore, any easy decision of privileging the pragmatics over the semantics or forms of performed presence, communication and agency over the recognition of absence, speechlessness and inability will only partially account for the multiple ambiguities (Stetter 2024, 265–269) which built the peculiarity of relating to the deceased in mourning and commemorating and which are also manifested online.

It is precisely the imposed way of dealing with the death of others characterized by a multifaceted ambiguity of absence and presence and at the same time producing this ambiguity in a practical way, which reveals a certain structural similarity of mourning to religious practices (Stetter 2024, 152–153; Thomas 2023, 75) as they can theologically be described for faith. Additionally, the way in which people in mourning attempt to occasionally manage this ambiguity, to dissolve it and thus momentarily get rid of it, can also be linked to operations constituting the object of eschatology. For while the emotion or experience of grief can phenomenologically be described as nonlocalized and as alienating the grieving person from her previously known world (Ratcliffe 2022, 7–9; 50–56), grief in practices which both express and co-produce it in the first place, is iteratively directed at the dead. This often goes hand in hand with practices of personalizing and locating the deceased tentatively transcending the threshold of death (Stetter 2024, 278–282). Similar to religious practices that refer to a transcendent dimension of eternity in the face of death, these practices are mostly realized by means of presentifying or representing what essentially is absent and unrepresentable hinging on elements which Manuel Stetter, in regard to funerary practices, paradigmatically lists as “the modes of experience of ‘as if’ or Heike Behrend’s pattern of ‘I know . . . , but still’” (Stetter 2024, 244).

On a linguistic level this peculiar structure of ‘as if’ can predominantly be found in metaphors or other forms of visual, non-conceptual language. Returning to the hermeneutic task of eschatology stated above, it is precisely these rhetorical forms that ought to receive special theological attention, provided that it is also assumed that what eschatological statements essentially refer to can only be expressed in a figurative-symbolic or metaphorical way (Krüger 2023, 68; Laube 2023, 76; Polke 2020, 401–402; Körtner 2020, 620–622). Thus, imaginatively locating the dead by and in mourning and memorial practices showcases a sort of momentary ambiguity management (Krüger 2023, 81) which does not necessarily have to be interpreted as affective-cognitive conflict (Fuchs 2018, 52–53)⁷ or dismissed as oversimplifying, reifying vernacular imaginations (Laube 2023, 76). Rather, the imaginative and metaphorical forms of locating the dead as persons can also be

7 Fuchs here draws on an example where this ambiguity actually is experienced as a conflict.

understood as following the very structure of situations which the philosopher Hans Blumenberg characterizes equally by a “lack of evidence and compulsion to act” (Blumenberg 2001, 417). In such situations, of which the death of another can be seen as a paradigmatic one, Blumenberg proposes that humans can only hark back to rhetorics (Blumenberg 2020, 655) of which the metaphor is a significant element (Blumenberg 2001, 416). Therefore, a last example serves to illustrate that in metaphorically locating the dead the ambiguity of death is not necessarily erased but rather precisely sensed and expressed on a very small scale.

3.3 Locating the Dead

An exemplary caption of an Instagram post of a bereaved parent reads as follows:

My dear darling, today you have not been with us for 6 years, but you are always there in our hearts! We miss you infinitely, but we also know that you are up there together with many other children.

The structure of this caption follows the pattern of placing metaphors against the undenied reality of death in an almost paradigmatic way. It firstly addresses the deceased person in an intimate-familiar register presentifying the deceased as a specific person (Stetter 2024, 280–281). Then, it states the reality of the person being dead within a countable time frame of six years as ‘not being with us [any-more]’⁸ meaning a gaping absence of ‘infinitely missing’. Finally, it counterfactually and metaphorically challenges this very reality with the metaphors of the deceased ‘you’ ‘always being there in our hearts’ and ‘up there’ in community with others.

In oscillating between the reality of the person being dead and metaphorically holding on to the person as persisting, this example shows a significant two-fold ambiguity: Firstly, it verbally expresses the above-mentioned ambiguity of absence and presence portrayed as critical in grieving in the dichotomy of ‘not being there/with us anymore’ and ‘being there’, necessarily vaguely referring to a different place implying a different way of being whereas the person seems to remain identical. Secondly, with the metaphorical ‘solution’ of this primary ambiguity a second ambiguity evolves in the parallelism of metaphorically locating the dead “in our hearts” and “up there”. Thus, the metaphors themselves do not only momentarily dissolve the ambiguity but in combination create a new one, show-

⁸ The German text literally adds the very typical phrase of “not being anymore”.

ing that the whereabouts of the deceased is a crucial question in grief that can only be addressed by transiently and iteratively resorting to metaphors or images which are themselves negating to essentially be what they are showing (Krüger 2023, 71).

The parallel use of these metaphors also questions the interpretation that people in grief vernacularly tend to reify the deceased by, amongst other things, decisively locating them in imagined places. Rather, the metaphors used elude any precise determinations which would undermine their metaphorical character. Although metaphorically placing the dead “in our hearts” (Klassen 2023) or “up there” – the latter mostly associated with a cosmological understanding of heaven (Dürscheid and Wüthrich 2025) – appear to be overly conventionalized patterns, it is exactly these images and the practices they are embedded in theology ought finally turn to. The chosen example illustrates that the pattern of locating the dead is embedded in a presentifying pattern of directly addressing the deceased and an acknowledging pattern of recognizing their death and absence while metaphorically still holding on to them in a certain mode of presence. As such it is precisely these conventionally formed images which display a sense of the multiple ambiguities of death and a possible hope beyond death, which also is the prerequisite of any eschatology (Polke 2020, 402). Thus, mourning and commemorating practices inevitably take the death of a person seriously due to the ‘ubiquitous absence’ that constitutes grief and the unsettling condition of missing. At the same time, they show a structure of relating to the dead as persons by metaphorically locating them in imagined places. In this respect, these practices can be seen as a mode of resistance towards ultimate loss and transmitting a sense of transient hope or solace. Therefore, mourning and commemorating practices might accurately be grasped as what theologically has been posited as expressions of an ‘eschatologically tinged consciousness on our contemporary culture.’ As this culture has substantially become a digital one, digital mourning and memorial practices appear to be a productive field where these eschatological expressions or ‘contents’ appear and are to be investigated.

In sum, the examples here presented as a *second finding* show that the communicative practice of addressing the dead, which so far has hardly been taken into account when doing theological eschatology, cannot necessarily be understood as simplistic, essentializing or substantializing practice of the bereaved. Rather, they performatively reveal a multiple ambiguity which tends to be temporarily and partially dissolved by personally locating the dead verbally, mainly realized by using metaphors. As such they might not be a vernacular form of ‘lived’ religion or spirituality, but at least show decisive parallels to religious practices known from the theological reflection of Christian faith. Particularly in presenting and sustaining the multiple ambiguities these digital practices of mourning

and commemorating the dead appear to be a crucial and productive field for contemporary constructions of theological eschatology.

4 Conclusion

In our project we started with the observation that digital mourning and memorial practices have been present for a while but have – at least in the context of German-speaking Protestantism – so far hardly been theologically investigated in more detail.⁹ We traced this lack of examination to several symptoms such as the unclear religious status of these practices, a general hesitation of Systematic Theology towards empirical research and dominating figures of thought in Protestant theology preventing this specific bundle of practices from being taken seriously by many theologians. In contrast, the findings of our project, which were presented here in a highly compact and incomplete fashion, firstly show that there are reasonable indications within the discourse of eschatology which make it at least very plausible, if not even necessary, to theologically acknowledge practices of online mourning and take them as impulses with the potential to reshape certain eschatological notions. Specifically, we identified the death of another person, which is, among other things, constituted and surrounded by practices of mourning and commemorating the deceased as a central context for eschatology. On this basis we set out the hermeneutic task of theological eschatology to especially focus on what is represented and visualized in these practices.

Having established the ground for a theologically resourced empirical investigation of online mourning, our second finding, consisting of several subfindings, shows that there are significant structural elements of digital mourning and memorial practices which might be profitably interpreted as decisive and seminal for contemporary considerations in theological eschatology. While the practices of digitally relating to the dead in general can be understood as existential strivings (Lagerkvist 2022, 193), viewed through a theological lens, they can furthermore be interpreted as expressions of an ‘eschatologically tinged consciousness in our contemporary culture’. As such, they provide necessarily vague, tentative, and transient representations of what essentially eludes any mode of being represented in a more definite way. In this manner, these practices show a movement

⁹ However, this diagnosis – as presented in this contribution – mainly refers to Systematic Theology, whereas in Practical Theology these practices have especially been researched by Swantje Luthe and Ilona Nord (Nord and Luthe 2015).

of dealing with ambiguity which can reasonably be linked to some aspects that are constitutive for theological eschatology, too.

With the intention of grasping these contemporary ‘eschatological expressions’ it seems imperative for theology to empirically learn from the research field of Digital Religion(s) and, in our case, also from (the) linguists (involved) to specifically target these practices *as practices* in order not to fall short of unhinging the images or metaphors embedded therein from their implementation and thus to find what can productively be referred to within eschatology. Conversely, analyzing digital mourning and memorial practices with the help of theological resources can also reveal structures of mourning which plausibilize drawing parallels between them and religious practices. It thus becomes possible to describe these practices as religiously shaped or religion-alike. This parallelization is, however, only conducted in a theologically perspectivized and appropriated manner.

Finally, to grasp our endeavor of theologically investigating digital mourning and memorial practices we might borrow from a subcaption of an article which in a way served as founding paper for the still nascent and explorative field of digital theology. There, Peter Phillips, Kyle Schiefelbein-Guerrero and Jonas Kurlberg framed a central way of doing digital theology as an “[i]ntentional, sustained and reflexive theologically-resourced engagement with digitality/digital culture” (Phillips, Schiefelbein-Guerrero, and Kurlberg 2019, 39) which – as every culture – essentially evolves through the practices that constitute it. For Systematic Theology to participate in this engagement the findings of our project suggest turning to an empirically informed (systematic) theology. This will allow for a broader perspective which does not exclusively consider overarching developments and narratives of a world increasingly permeated with digital technology and media and thus rashly disregard how a digital culture is configured in our everyday lives by concrete (micro-)practices.

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Julia Müller and Thomas N. Friemel

Meaning-Making through Social Media – Religious Influencers as Sources of Religious Meaning

Abstract: In recent years, religious influencers have emerged on social media as sources of meaning. However, few studies have explored the factors that contribute to their perceptions as sources of religious meaning. This study examines three potential factors: the perceived credibility of the influencer, the strength of the parasocial relationship (PSR) between the influencer and their followers and the perceived opinion leadership (POL) of the influencer. A survey was conducted among followers of religious influencers in the German-speaking regions of Europe. Results indicate that the strength of the PSR and POL is positively related with the extend of being regarded as a source of religious meaning. Specifically, the emotional connection through the PSR and cognitive perception attributed to the POL were found to be key mechanisms driving this perception. The study concludes by discussing the implications of these findings and providing suggestions for future research.

In den letzten Jahren haben sich religiöse Influencer:innen zu Sinnquellen auf den Sozialen Medien entwickelt. Die Faktoren, die dazu beitragen, dass sie als Quellen religiösen Sinns wahrgenommen werden, sind jedoch kaum erforscht. Diese Studie untersucht deshalb drei potenzielle Faktoren: die wahrgenommene Glaubwürdigkeit der Influencer:innen, die Stärke der parasozialen Beziehung (PSB) zwischen den Influencer:innen und ihren Follower:innen sowie die wahrgenommene Meinungsführerschaft der Influencer:innen. Dazu wurde eine Umfrage unter Follower:innen religiöser Influencer:innen im deutschsprachigen Raum durchgeführt. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass die Stärke der PSB und der wahrgenommene Meinungsführerschaft damit zusammenhängt, dass Influencer:innen als Quelle religiösen Sinns angesehen werden. Insbesondere die emotionale Verbindung durch PSB und die kognitive Wahrnehmung, die der wahrgenommenen Meinungsführerschaft zugeschrieben wurde, erwiesen sich als Schlüsselmechanismen. Die Studie schliesst mit einer Diskussion über die Bedeutung dieser Ergebnisse und mit Vorschlägen für die künftige Forschung.

1 Digital Media Use of Religious Individuals

In recent years, digital media has been increasingly used by religious individuals to experience and express their own beliefs (Tsuria and Campbell 2022). Within this broader field of research, the present study specifically focuses on the fulfilment of religious functions through digital media. To address this, a functional perspective on religion, which defines religion through the functions it can fulfil for the individual or society (Knoblauch 1999), is adopted and translated into the digital age. The aim of this approach is to understand the role that digital media can play in fulfilling religious functions for religious individuals (Hjarvard 2008; Müller and Friemel 2024). One function appears to be specifically relevant in relation to digital media: the function of religious meaning-making (Hoover and Park 2004; Mahmudova and Evolvi 2021; Schnell 2011). This function describes a process through which meaning is found in an everyday situation by referring to something or someone related to one's own religion (Müller and Friemel 2024; Taves 2018). Religion in general acts as one of the main sources of meaning in the lives of believers (Schnell 2011). Religion helps individuals understand many life questions, hence contributing to the meaningfulness of life (Park 2005; Schnell 2011). By interpreting religious scripture and conveying religious beliefs and attitudes, religious authorities traditionally communicate religious meaning (Müller 2022; Müller 2023). Hence, we refer to religious authorities as the sources of religious meaning.

In recent years, traditional religious authorities have witnessed a shift in religious communication toward the digital sphere, where digital media are increasingly used to express religiosity (Tsuria and Campbell 2022). This digitalisation of religion gave way to the emergence of a new form of religious authority: religious influencers on social media (Bowman, Osueke, and Baires 2021; Myers et al. 2023; Schlag 2022; Müller 2023; Zaid et al. 2022). Like traditional religious authorities, these online influencers communicate religious information and religious beliefs while creating close relationships with their followers (Smith et al. 2021; Müller 2022). They use both pictures and text in their content to negotiate the bridge between their online and offline identities (Schlag 2022).

With these digital authorities available to religious individuals, it is crucial to understand the role they can play in the lives of religious individuals. Recent research has highlighted religious meaning-making through media (Hoover and Park 2004; Hjarvard 2008), especially social media (Mahmudova and Evolvi 2021). By being communicators of religious ideas, attitudes, interpretations and so forth, religious influencers might help their followers find meaning in their everyday lives (Müller 2023; Zaid et al. 2022), hence acting as a source of religious meaning. Our previous research revealed that, compared with other sources of meaning in

life, such as family or friends, religious influencers are seen as less relevant, thereby challenging their importance as sources of religious meaning compared with offline sources. Therefore, in the present study, we focus on potential factors that can increase the perception of a religious influencer as a source of religious meaning. Hence, we ask, ‘What are the relevant factors that determine whether a religious influencer is perceived to be a source of religious meaning, and how is this related to the general meaning in life?’ To answer this research question, a quantitative survey with Christians who follow religious influencers in Germany, the German-speaking parts of Switzerland and Austria ($N = 186$, $M_{age} = 22.45$; $SD_{age} = 5.88$) was conducted. This study is part of the University Research Priority Programme ‘Digital Religion(s)’ and the project ‘Digital Social Dynamics of Spirituality’. This chapter adds to previous work on religious meaning-making (Müller 2021), interaction in the online sphere (Merian, Todjeras, and Müller 2023) and religious influencers (Schlag 2022; Müller 2023).

This chapter first describes the phenomenon of religious influence (sec. 2). Next, we investigate the role of religious influencers as sources of religious meaning and the potential influencing factors (sec. 3). Afterwards, the main hypothesis model that is used to answer the overarching research question is derived (sec. 4). The method and the sample (sec. 5) are described, followed by the analysis and results of the study (sec. 6). Finally, we discuss the results in light of previous research on religious influencers (sec. 7), name the limitations of the study (sec. 8) and take an outlook on future research in the field (sec. 9).

2 Religious Influencers

In recent years, research has increasingly focused on how religious individuals express themselves in the online sphere, especially on social media (Campbell 2020). Some actors actively and regularly post religious content and build a large following (Smith et al. 2021; Zaid et al. 2022): religious influencers.

Influencers are generally social media users who regularly post content on social media platforms, through which they promote brands, products or opinions. With this content and by communicating with their followers, they can influence their followers’ attitudes towards the respective subject (Jahnke 2021). In addition to their posting behaviour, the follower count is an important factor when the term ‘influencer’ is defined. Influencers can be classified into different categories based on their follower count. For example, ‘macro influencers’ can be defined as accounts with more than 100,000 followers, ‘micro influencers’ have between 10,000 and 50,000 followers, and ‘nano influencers’ have fewer than 10,000

followers (Jahnke 2021). In addition to the number of followers, the engagement of influencers with their followers is crucial. Hence, even a nanoinfluencer with fewer than 10,000 followers could have a large impact in their niche topic (Jahnke 2021).

Social media influencers may also aim to promote ideologies, ethics or meanings rather than products (Baake et al. 2022; Schorn, Vinzenz, and Wirth 2022; Müller 2022). These have been labelled ‘Sinnfluencers’. This word stems from a combination of the German word for meaning (*‘sinn’*) and ‘influencer’, marking these types of online creators as sources of meaning. By communicating religious attitudes and beliefs and not primarily focusing on brand marketing, religious influencers also fall under the term ‘Sinnfluencer’ (Schlag 2022; Müller 2022).

Based on previous research, religious influencers are defined here as creators who regularly post content on social media about their faith and religious lifestyle. With this, they aim to influence their followers’ attitudes towards their religion (Smith et al. 2021; Zaid et al. 2022). Through their content, religious influencers communicate personal narratives about faith experiences (Bowman, Osueke, and Baires 2021; Zaid et al. 2022), religious ideas, attitudes and meanings (Smith et al. 2021; Cheong 2022; Krain and Mößle 2020; Schlag 2022; Müller 2022). A distinct feature that sets religious influencers apart from other influencers is their self-perception: They see themselves as having a transcendent calling to act as influencers on social media and communicate their faith and beliefs to encourage others to adopt their beliefs (Smith et al. 2021; Zaid et al. 2022). These religious influencers can be both a part of a religious organisation, such as a pastor or an imam (Cheong 2022; Zaid et al. 2022), hence being a religious leader who shifted into the online sphere (Schlag 2022), or a person with no such prior affiliation or religious education (Campbell and Bellar 2023). In both cases, utilising the online sphere allows them to become accessible not only through the church or other religious communities but also beyond it (Cheong 2022). Through their content and interactions with their followers, religious influencers aim to build close parasocial relationships with their followers to encourage them to embrace influencers’ beliefs (Smith et al. 2021). Furthermore, by including specific religious cues, for example, the naming of God or Jesus, in their content, they can activate their follower’s religious social identity, leading to high engagement among their followers (Myers et al. 2023).

In the past, these religious influencers appeared in different religious traditions, such as Islam (Zaid et al. 2022) and Christianity (Smith et al. 2021; Myers et al. 2023; Müller 2022). As Christianity is the most prevalent religion in the German-speaking regions of Europe (Bundesamt für Statistik 2020; Müller and Pollack 2022; Statistik Austria 2022), we specifically focus on Christian influencers. Especially for German-speaking regions, little is known about how Christian influ-

encers are perceived by their followers. One study surveyed the followers of protestant influencers on Instagram and reported that the influencers were perceived as authentic expressions of lived religiosity that help inspire and strengthen their followers' faith. Furthermore, influencers have been seen as important for followers' religious life (Hörsch 2023). These findings highlight the importance of better understanding the role that religious influencers play as a source of religious meaning.

3 Religious Influencers as Sources of Meaning

Referring to religious influencers as 'Sinnfluencers' suggests the communication of meaning to their followers (Schlag 2022; Müller 2021), thereby implying their role as a source of religious meaning. Generally, sources of meaning help individuals in their search for understanding and orientation in life (Schnell 2009). They guide individuals to achieve meaningfulness in their lives and increase happiness and well-being (Grouden and Jose 2015). Meaning in life can generally be seen as a system of beliefs, assumptions and goals of an individual who defines how life events are perceived and interpreted (Park 2005). Meaning in life can be investigated by examining three overarching concepts: the coherence of one's own understanding of the world, the overall purpose in life and the general feeling of significance (Martela and Steger 2022). Religious authorities act as the communicators of religious meaning because they provide interpretations of religious text, religious values and attitudes (Müller 2021; Müller 2023). With the shift to the online sphere, religious influencers use their platform to communicate religious ideas. To better understand the conditions that might favour if an influencer is perceived to be a source of meaning (SoM), we explore three aspects: influencer credibility, the parasocial relationship (PSR) and the perceived opinion leadership (POL) of the influencer. In other domains, these three aspects have been shown to be central in determining an influencer's ability to persuade their followers (Farivar, Wang, and Yuan 2021; Han and Balabanis 2024; Yuan and Lou 2020).

3.1 Source Credibility

The perceived source credibility is defined through three main aspects: the trustworthiness of the influencer, the expertise of the influencer in their respective field and the physical attractiveness of the influencer (Ohanian 1990; Yuan and Lou 2020). The perceived credibility of the influencer is especially important in a

religious context: With the rise of the internet, an increasing number of opposing opinions on religious issues and interpretations became vocal, and the internet became difficult to navigate for religious individuals (Moberg, Kheir, and Gökce 2020). Therefore, perceived credibility is a central base criterion for following religious influencers and might affect whether the influencer is perceived as a source of religious meaning. This perceived credibility of the influencer has been shown to be related with other perception variables (Fernandes Crespo and Tille 2024; Yuan and Lou 2020).

PSRs with influencers are built based on this perceived trustworthiness, expertise in their field and physical attractiveness (Yuan and Lou 2020). Additionally, these three dimensions affect if an influencer is seen as an opinion leader (Jegham and Bouzaabia 2022; Martensen, Brockenhuus-Schack, and Zahid 2018; Peter and Muth 2023). In particular, expertise is relevant: Studies on political influencers on social media could show that they can be perceived as opinion leaders by their followers, especially if the influencers are seen as experts in their field (Baake et al. 2022). Hence, the dimensions of credibility can influence both the PSR with an influencer and the POL of an influencer.

3.2 Parasocial Relationships

Research has shown that individuals following influencers build so-called parasocial relationships with these influencers (Farivar, Wang, and Yuan 2021; Rosaen and Dibble 2016; Yuan and Lou 2020). A parasocial relationship describes ‘a lingering sense of intimacy and connectedness with media personalities’ (Tukachinsky, Walter, and Saucier 2020, 868). These social connections are long-lasting and go beyond the mere reception experience (Horton and Wohl 1956; Rosaen and Dibble 2016). Religious influencers may work at building these relationships to better persuade their followers of their beliefs (Smith et al. 2021). The relationship between followers and influencers differs from the traditional understanding of the PSR because social media platforms offer space for real-time and asynchronous interactions between followers and influencers. This phenomenon has been referred to as trans-parasocial relationships (Lou 2022). It can be assumed that a strong PSR with an influencer could affect their role as a source of religious meaning. Previous research has shown that social relationships such as friendships and family contribute to the general feeling of having meaning in life (Grouden and Jose 2015), showing that one main SoM is relationships with others (De Vogler and Ebersole 1981). Because PSRs can be seen as the meaningful connection between the follower and the (social) media person (Tukachinsky, Walter, and Saucier 2020), having

a PSR with the influencer could contribute to the perception of the influencer as being a source of religious meaning.

3.3 Perceived Opinion Leadership

In addition to perceived source credibility and the PSR, the POL of an influencer might affect their role as a SoM. In general, opinion leaders are individuals who can exert a strong influence on the decision-making of others because they are sought out to obtain advice and information (Rogers and Cartano 1962). Influencers, as opinion leaders, ‘can be conceptualized as semi-professional communicators, who range somewhere between friends and role models, which is why followers are more likely to trust their recommendations’ (Peter and Muth 2023, 165). Influencers identified as opinion leaders shape their followers’ attitudes toward certain brands or products and can influence follow-up behaviour (Casaló, Flavián, and Ibáñez-Sánchez 2020; Fakhreddin and Foroudi 2021; Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2017). Although this has been shown for marketing influencers (Casaló, Flavián, and Ibáñez-Sánchez 2020; Fakhreddin and Foroudi 2021), only recently has research examined the role of ‘Sinnfluencers’ in this role of opinion leaders. They are mostly received not as a primary source of information but as the interpreters of prior information from different sources (Peter and Muth 2023). Because the perception of the influencer as an opinion leader can affect the persuasiveness of an influencer and, therefore, can affect attitude formation and behavioural intentions (Bowman, Osueke, and Baires 2021; Hörsch 2023; Peter and Muth 2023), we assume that the perception of religious influencers as sources of religious meaning might also be shaped by their perception as opinion leaders.

4 Hypothesis Model

To answer the research question – ‘What are the relevant factors that determine whether a religious influencer is perceived as being a source of religious meaning and how is this related to the general meaning in life?’ – we pose a hypothesis model (s. Figure 1) based on the previous research presented above.

Because credibility in the form of trustworthiness, expertise and physical attractiveness is especially relevant in today’s online sphere (Moberg, Kheir, and

Gökce 2020), we propose that this credibility predicts whether an influencer is seen as a source of religious meaning:

H1: The greater the perceived trustworthiness (a), expertise (b) and physical attractiveness (c) of an influencer are, the more religious influencers are perceived as sources of religious meaning.

Research has shown that higher credibility expressed through trustworthiness, expertise and physical attractiveness is associated with a higher PSR (Yuan and Lou 2020). Because relationships can be seen as important sources of meaning in life (Grouden and Jose 2015), a PSR with the influencer might also affect if the influencer is perceived as a source of religious meaning. Based on this research, we propose the following mediation:

H2: The relationships among the trustworthiness (a), expertise (b) and physical attractiveness (c) of the influencer and the perception of the influencer as a source of religious meaning are mediated through the PSR with the influencer.

H2.1: The greater the perceived trustworthiness (a), expertise (b) and physical attractiveness (c) of an influencer are, the stronger the PSR with the religious influencer will be.

H2.2: The stronger the PSR with the influencer is, the stronger the degree to which the religious influencer is perceived to be a SoM.

Apart from the PSR with the influencer, influencer credibility has been shown to be associated with a higher POL (Jegham and Bouzaabia 2022). Because the POL can influence the persuasiveness of an influencer (Casaló, Flavián, and Ibáñez-Sánchez 2020; Farivar, Wang, and Yuan 2021), we assume that it might also affect perception as a source of religious meaning. Hence, we propose the following mediation:

H3: The relationships between the trustworthiness (a), expertise (b) and physical attractiveness (c) of the influencer and the perception of the influencer are mediated through POL.

H3.1: The greater the perceived trustworthiness (a), expertise (b) and physical attractiveness (c) of an influencer are, the greater the POL will be.

H3.2: The greater the POL of the influencer is, the stronger the religious influencer is perceived to be a SoM.

Finally, because SoMs can be assumed to have an impact on the overall sense of meaning in life (Grouden and Jose 2015; Schnell 2009), we propose the following hypothesis:

H4: The stronger an influencer is perceived to be a SoM, the greater the overall coherence of the meaning system (a), purpose in life (b) and significance of life (c) of the follower.

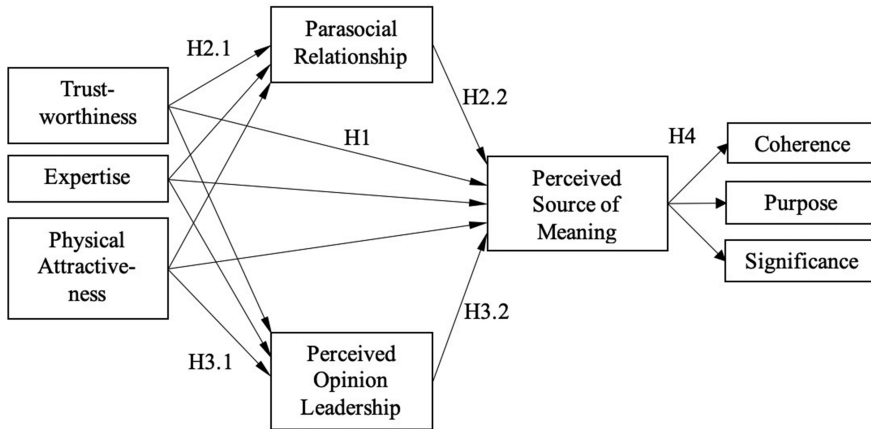


Figure 1: Hypothesis model.

5 Methods

To test the hypotheses, we conducted a quantitative survey among young Christians (14+ years old) in Germany, Austria, and the German-speaking part of Switzerland who follow Christian influencers. Currently, the Christian faith is the most prominent in these three countries; hence, we focus on this faith tradition (Bundesamt für Statistik 2020; Müller and Pollack 2022; Statistik Austria 2022). To recruit the participants for the survey, we contacted all protestant, Catholic and independent regional church organisations in each country and invited them to share our survey with their members. For each regional church organisation, the person responsible for youth or young adults was contacted. Younger participants were specifically targeted because the followers of religious influencers seem to be predominantly young (Hörsch 2023). We then followed up multiple times through e-mail and telephone. In total, 669 individuals participated in our survey. Among the study participants, 289 followed Christian creators on social media, of whom 186 followed religious influencers, as defined in the present paper. On average, the participants were 22 years old ($M_{age} = 22.4$; $SD_{age} = 5.88$), mostly female (73%) and well educated (58% had at least a high school diploma). Regarding religious denominations, the sample included 41% protestants, 13% Catholics and 46% independent church members (e.g., Baptists, Methodists). Most of the partic-

ipants were from Germany (74%), whereas Switzerland (20%) and Austria (4%) made up a smaller proportion of the sample. The participants highly believed in God ($M = 6.0$; $SD = 1.0$; 1 = *no faith*; 7 = *very high faith*).

The questionnaire first asked whether the participants viewed religious creators who regularly posted online about their faith. If so, we then asked for the names of religious influencers. The participants were able to enter the names of up to three religious influencers they viewed most frequently. All the following variables then referred to their most frequently seen religious influencer. Here, we first asked for general information about the influencer, followed by questions regarding the perceived credibility of the influencer, the PSR with them, the influencer's POL and the influencer's role as a source of religious meaning. The participants were subsequently asked about their general meaning in life. Finally, the sociodemographic information of the participants was collected.

Regarding the perceptions of religious influencers, the variables were assessed using a seven-point likert scale via the following measures:

Source credibility was adopted from Yuan and Lou (2020) and measured through three subdimensions each with three items: trustworthiness (e.g., I consider [name of influencer] to be sincere), expertise (e.g., I consider [name of influencer] to be an expert in religious and faith-related issues), and physical attraction (e.g., I find [name of influencer] very attractive). The reliability of all scales was acceptable ($\alpha > 0.7$).

The *PSR* with the influencer was measured following Rosaen, Sherry and Smith (2011) with three items (e.g., [Name of influencer] is a person I would like to spend time with privately). The reliability was acceptable ($\alpha > 0.7$).

POL was assessed following the attributes for online opinion leadership defined by Jungnickel (2018) and measures with nine items inspired by Casaló, Flavián and Sánchez (2020) (e.g., [Name of influencer] is a role model for me in my faith). We conducted an explorative factor analysis. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was 0.87, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($\chi^2(36) = 543.47$, $p < .001$), indicating that the data were suitable for factor analysis. However, we found that all nine items loaded on a single dimension. The reliability was acceptable ($\alpha > 0.8$).

Influencer as a SoM was measured with three items. The items were adopted from Martela and Steger (2022) and measured meaning in life (e.g., [influencer] makes me feel like my life has a purpose). The reliability was acceptable ($\alpha > 0.8$).

Meaning in life was assessed via a scale by Martela and Steger (2022) that measured three dimensions of coherence (e.g., 'On the whole, I understand the world around me') ($\alpha > 0.6$), purpose (e.g., 'I have a set of core goals that give my life direction') ($\alpha > 0.6$) and significance (e.g., 'I have the feeling every day that my life is worth living') ($\alpha > 0.7$).

6 Results

To first understand the general perceptions of religious influencers, we explored the data descriptively. We found that religious influencers were perceived as being highly trustworthy ($M = 6.3$, $SD = 0.8$), to be experts in their field ($M = 5.8$, $SD = 1.2$) and to be attractive ($M = 4.8$, $SD = 1.6$). The PSR revealed that followers seemed to have a PSR with the influencers ($M = 4.5$, $SD = 1.7$) and that the influencers were perceived as being opinion leaders ($M = 5.0$, $SD = 1.1$). Furthermore, the descriptive results indicated that religious influencers were perceived as a SoM ($M = 4.5$, $SD = 1.7$).

To test the hypothesis, we subsequently conducted a path model in R, including the two mediations. The model was performed via 1000 bootstraps. The fit of the model was acceptable ($\chi^2(31) = 47.02$, $p = .03$, CFI = .96; SRMR = .05; RMSEA = .06). Table 1 shows all effects between the variables, and Figure 2 depicts the significant direct paths.

The results for H1 showed that the source credibility variables trustworthiness, expertise and physical attractiveness had no significant direct effect on the perception of the influencer as a SoM. Hence, H1 is rejected.

For H2, looking at the direct effects hypothesised in H2.1 and H2.2, we found that trustworthiness ($\beta = .29$) and physical attractiveness ($\beta = .34$) predicted a higher PSR with the influencer, whereas the PSR with the influencer directly predicted the perception of the influencer as a SoM ($\beta = .14$). For the overall assumption of a mediation of trustworthiness ($\beta = .04$) and physical attractiveness ($\beta = .05$) on SoM mediated through the PSR (H2), a significant indirect effect was found, and for trustworthiness, a significant total effect ($\beta = .19$) was found.

Finally, for H3.1 and H3.2, trustworthiness ($\beta = .24$) and expertise ($\beta = .47$) significantly predicted POL. Furthermore, a stronger POL predicted a greater perception of the influencer as a SoM ($\beta = .28$). Regarding the mediation (H3), we found a significant indirect effect of trustworthiness ($\beta = .07$) and expertise ($\beta = .13$) and a significant total effect of trustworthiness ($\beta = .22$) on perceived SoM as mediated through opinion leadership.

Finally, for H4, a significant effect of the influencer as a perceived SoM on coherence of life ($\beta = .18$) was found while no significant effect on purpose and significance of life was found.

Table 1: Structural path estimates.

Path	Path Estimates	Standard Error	Lower confidence interval	Upper confidence interval
Direct Effects				
Trustworthiness → Perceived SoM	.15	.10	-.02	.37
Expertise → Perceived SoM	.06	.11	-.15	.27
Physical Attractiveness → Perceived SoM	.11	.09	-.09	.27
Trustworthiness → PSR	.29	.08	.11	.44
Expertise → PSR	.05	.10	-.17	.23
Physical Attractiveness → PSR	.34	.07	.19	.47
PSR → Perceived SoM	.14	.07	.01	.29
Trustworthiness → POL	.24	.09	.06	.43
Expertise → POL	.47	.08	.31	.61
Physical Attractiveness → POL	.06	.08	-.08	.24
POL → Perceived SoM	.28	.09	.10	.47
Perceived SoM → Coherence	.18	.08	.02	.34
Perceived SoM → Purpose	.13	.08	-.04	.27
Perceived SoM → Significance	.07	.08	-.10	.22
Indirect Effects				
Trustworthiness → PSR → Perceived SoM	.04	.03	.003	.11
Expertise → PSR → Perceived SoM	.01	.02	-.02	.05
Physical Attractiveness → PSR → Perceived SoM	.05	.03	.003	.11
Trustworthiness → POL → Perceived SoM	.07	.04	.01	.17
Expertise → POL → Perceived SoM	.13	.05	.04	.23
Physical Attractiveness → POL → Perceived SoM	.02	.02	-.02	.08
Total Effect				
Trustworthiness → PSR → Perceived SoM	.19	.10	.02	.40
Expertise → PSR → Perceived SoM	.06	.11	-.14	.27
Physical Attractiveness → PSR → Perceived SoM	.15	.09	-.02	.32
Trustworthiness → POL → Perceived SoM	.22	.10	.03	.43

Table 1 (continued)

Path	Path Estimates	Standard Error	Lower confidence interval	Upper confidence interval
Expertise → POL→ Perceived SoM	.19	.10	-.02	.38
Physical Attractiveness → POL→ Perceived SoM	.12	.10	-.09	.29

Notes: If the upper and lower confidence intervals do not cross 0, the path between two variables is significant.

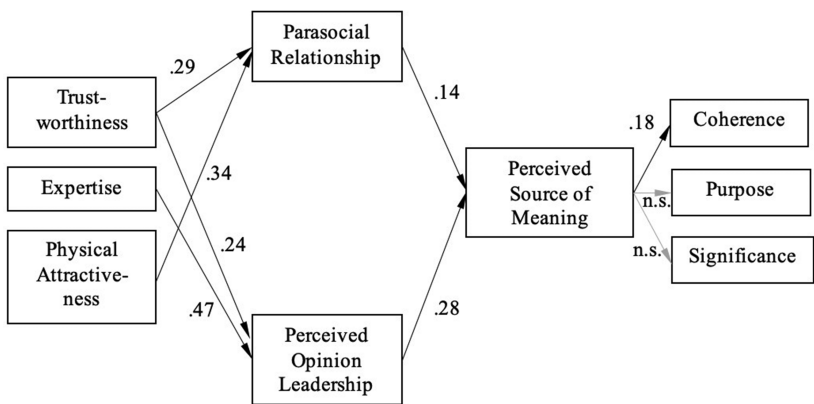


Figure 2: Path model with results.

Notes: The values adjacent to each path describe the strength of prediction (0–1).
 General model fit: $\chi^2(31) = 47.02$, $p = .03$, CFI = .96; SRMR = .05; RMSEA = .06.

7 Discussion

Our study aimed to understand the factors that can contribute to the perception of religious influencers as a source of religious meaning. Based on our results, we found that, although credibility had no direct effect on perceptions as a SoM there were four significant indirect effects through the PSR and the POL. For trustworthiness, a significant total effect was found for both the PSR and POL. Furthermore, the PSR and POL directly predict perceptions as sources of religious meaning. Our results can be summarised in three main contributions to the academic discussion.

First, we have focused on the role of the influencer’s credibility (consisting of the three subdimensions of expertise, physical attractiveness and trustworthi-

ness). In contrast to our hypotheses, the three source credibility dimensions had no direct effect. This could suggest a reassessment of the importance of credibility which has been a main focus in previous research (Moberg, Kheir, and Gökce 2020). In fact, our findings imply that these effects are mediated via additional dimensions: the PSR with the influencer and the POL. Hence, source credibility should rather be viewed as affecting the emotional/social connection and the POL of the influencer, which, in turn, influence the perception of the influencer as a source of religious meaning. Among the three subdimensions, trustworthiness is especially important because it fosters both a PSR and POL. This relevance of trustworthiness has also been highlighted by previous research. The trustworthiness of a ‘Sinnfluencer’ is particularly important because the communicated messages extend beyond mere brand communication (Baake et al. 2022). Therefore, future research on religious influencers should investigate the perceived trustworthiness of the influencer more deeply. Furthermore, although trustworthiness is generally an important factor of ‘Sinnfluencers’ (Baake et al. 2022), physical appearance, although indirectly, also impacts the perception of the influencer as a SoM. This superficial factor can contribute to the building of a PSR with the influencer. Appealing to the aesthetics of social media channels that circulate religious online content has been shown to impact the success of these channels (Beta 2019). Hence, investigating the physical attractiveness of influencers might be interesting for the research on religious influencers.

Second, we discuss the role of the PSR and POL. The results revealed direct effects of the PSR and POL on the perception of the influencer as a source of religious meaning. These pathways highlight the importance of both factors for the perceptions of religious influencers. With the PSR being an important factor, it becomes apparent that the efforts to build relationships taken by religious influencers (Smith et al. 2021) are reciprocated by their followers. Similar to other social connections, such as those with friends or family (Grouden and Jose 2015), the deeper the connection with the influencer is, the more they are perceived as being a source of religious meaning. This PSR is predicted both by the trustworthiness of the influencer and by physical attractiveness (Yuan and Lou 2020). In addition to the PSR, the POL has also been shown to be a relevant factor for predicting the source of religious meaning. In general, greater opinion leadership of the influencer leads to greater persuasiveness (Fakhreddin and Foroudi 2021). This persuasion effect also seems to translate into the perception of the influencer as a source of religious meaning. Hence, the religious beliefs and attitudes communicated by the influencer are perceived to be important and relevant by the follower.

In combination, both mediating variables (PSR and POL) contributed to the prediction of the influencer as a source of religious meaning. Mediation via the

PSR can be seen as an emotional/social pathway that includes factors, such as trustworthiness and physical attractiveness (Yuan and Lou 2020). The mediation via POL is related to cognitive factors, including the authority and expertise of the influencer (Fakhreddin and Foroudi 2021). Although both mechanisms contribute to the extent to which followers perceive influencers as sources of meaning, opinion leadership appears to have a stronger overall impact, hence reflecting the importance of authority and knowledge in shaping followers' sense of meaning. However, influencers who can engage in both pathways – building emotional bonds while also positioning themselves as opinion leaders – are likely to be the most effective in being seen as meaningful figures. Future research should consider both of these pathways – emotional and cognitive – when aiming at understanding the role of religious influencers as sources of religious meaning.

Third, we show that following religious influencers on social media is positively related to overall meaning in life. If an influencer is perceived as a SoM by the follower, this perception predicts the coherence of the individual's meaning system. More specifically, the content of religious influencers may help followers establish a framework through which life is viewed as coherent and purposeful.

However, these findings need to be interpreted carefully because the present study lacks a longitudinal design. Owing to the cross-sectional design, the causal direction remains subject to theoretical argumentation. Hence, future research is needed to further investigate this possible effect.

8 Limitations

The current study is subject to three main limitations.

First, by recruiting participants through church organisations, we have no reports on how many Christians were reached in total and how the sample might be biased. Hence, even though our recruitment was systematically conducted, the final sample needs to be considered a convenience sample of young Christians who engage with local churches. Future research might also consider followers who do not visit an offline organisation. Furthermore, because of the method of recruitment, the sample mostly consists of young people who were visiting a church. Although this has provided insights into a cohort that is strongly engaged with digital media, we cannot make any assumptions for other age groups. Furthermore, all participants were Christians. However, the phenomenon of religious influence is not limited to Christianity; rather, it occurs across religions. Hence, future studies might also aim to consider other religions. Second, for methodological reasons, the perception of the religious influencer was only assessed for one

(the most relevant) influencer per participant. Hence, the model described only between-person effects (and not within-person effects). Third, our questionnaire was cross-sectional. Therefore, we have neither insights into the causal direction of the identified relationships nor into the long-term effects. Future research should utilise a longitudinal design to investigate the causal relationships and potential effects of religious influencers on the meaning of life for their followers.

9 Conclusion and Outlook

In conclusion, the present study explored the extent to which religious influencers can serve as sources of religious meaning, hence fulfilling the role of meaning-making in the digital age. We specifically examined the factors that influence whether followers perceive these influencers as providers of religious meaning. Our findings revealed that there is no direct effect of influencers' credibility on the perception of the influencer as a SoM. However, both the PSR with the influencer and influencer's POL significantly contribute to the perception of the influencer as a SoM. These results suggest two distinct pathways through which religious influencers are recognised as sources of religious meaning: an emotional or social pathway, through the PSR with the influencer, and a cognitive pathway, through the POL, the perceived expertise and authority of the influencer. Finally, the results show that the perception as a SoM predict whether the participants perceived the world around them as being coherent (as one of three dimensions of meaning in life).

We took a follower-driven approach to better understand the phenomenon of religious influencers. Using different research designs, such as experimental and longitudinal designs, will be necessary to translate the correlational findings into causal claims of how religious influencers affect the lives of their followers. Our study indicates that the PSR with the influencer and the POL both contribute to the perception of an influencer as a SoM. However, future research should consider additional factors, such as authenticity or opinion congruity (Han and Balabanis 2024); this might provide a deeper understanding of the two pathways that contribute to perception as a source of religious meaning.

Although many questions remain unanswered about how religious meaning-making operates in the online sphere, our study has addressed a crucial aspect of this phenomenon. By applying the concept of a source of religious meaning and linking it to new religious online authorities, specifically religious influencers, we gain insights into the mechanisms by which religious meaning is created and communicated in digital spaces. This approach has enabled us to better under-

stand how the roles traditionally held by religious institutions and authorities are being fulfilled through digital platforms, where influencers can serve as key figures in shaping religious beliefs, practices and personal spirituality. By focusing on these new dynamics, our research offers deeper insights into how religious meaning-making is fulfilled through the contemporary online environment.

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Jan Danko and Katja Rost

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 socio-technological 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 (Gümüşay 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 "Legitimizing 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.

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 legitimization 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 frequency of digital media usage for various categories.

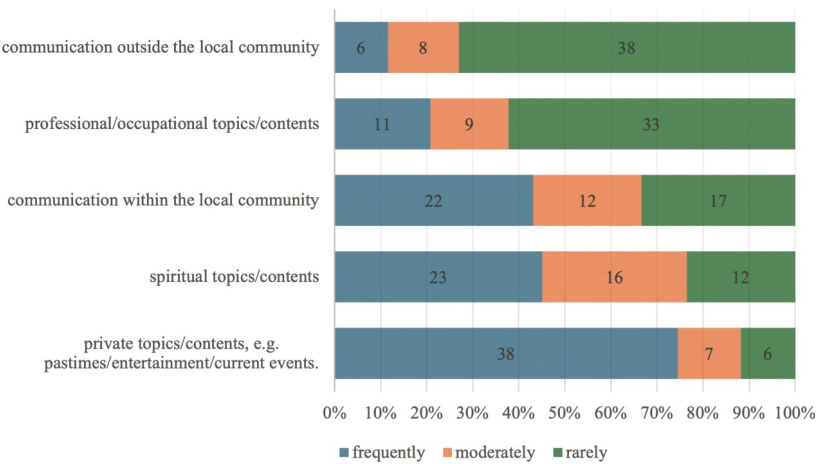


Figure 1: Use of digital communication and digital media by monks and nuns.

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.

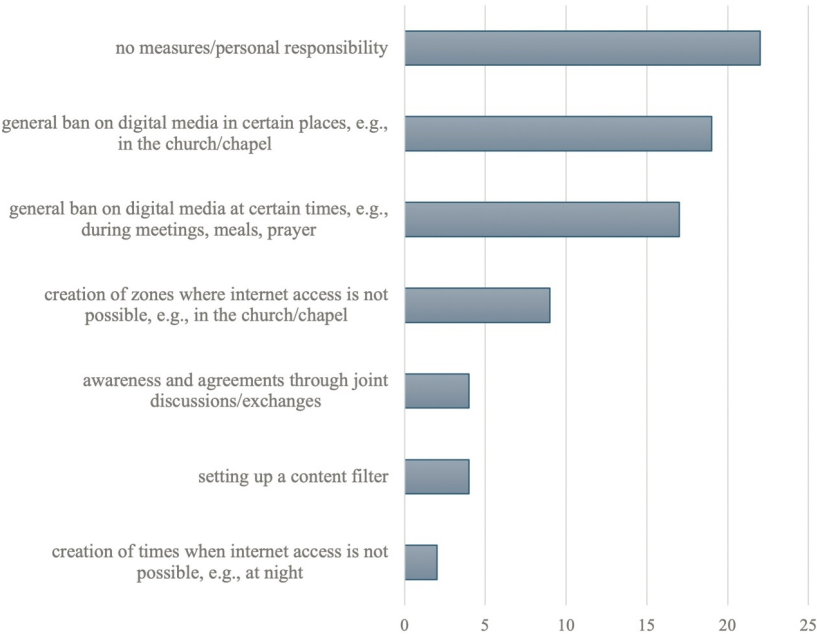


Figure 2: Restrictions on digital media within monastic communities.

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

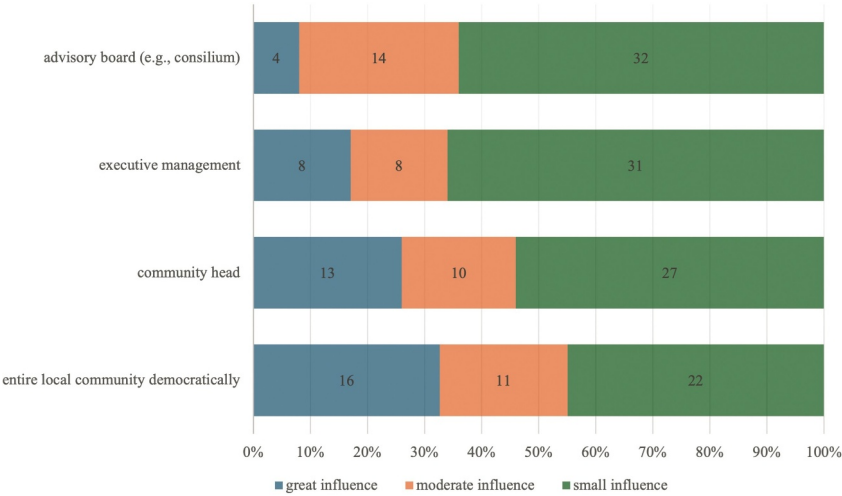


Figure 3: Who had the greatest influence on the current use of digital media in the local community?

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.

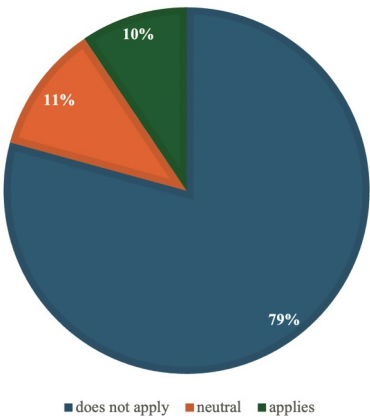


Figure 4: Replacement or threat to important rituals and traditional institutions by digital media in recent years.

3.2 Legitimizing 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; book-keeping 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 legitimization 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 virtuosos, 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, “Legitimizing 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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Mira Menzfeld and Virginie Fazel

How Relevant Is Community, and How Digitable Is Religion?

Emic Viewpoints on Digital Religion among Digital Natives in Switzerland with a Migration History

Abstract: As part of Module A, the *Digital Relationships and Local Religious Communities* project added a study to URPP phase I that includes various religions. We focused on researching the online and offline community experiences of digital natives in Switzerland – in particular, persons with a migration (family) history who possess very different religious backgrounds.

We were interested in the role that the online and offline natures of communities played – especially religious communities – in the importance of these communities as critical spaces for acquiring religious knowledge, seeking religious guidance, influencing religious practices and beliefs, and shaping the day-to-day lives of young persons with migration histories (e.g. finding support locally or online after migrating). In addition, we asked how digitable all these dimensions of community experiences were – that is, which dimensions of religious (community) experiences are easily translatable into digital spaces, which dimensions are a digital-only phenomenon for the research participants, and which dimensions of religious (community) experience are not digitable from an emic perspective. Finally, we examined the roles of local and online (religious) communities and the different interrelationships between them. Subproject 1 focused on our research involving young refugee or asylum-seeking migrants in Switzerland; Subproject 2 addressed persons with a migration history who possess a permanent residence permit. All research participants were either born into a religious tradition – of any kind – and/or claimed to be religious or spiritual.

After over one year of in-depth participant observation, we found that the importance of community experience among digital natives with a migration history seemed to be quite low but for different reasons in the two sample groups. Concurrently, the importance of religion was rated higher among persons with a residence permit than among refugees and asylum seekers.

Das Projekt *Digitale Beziehungen und lokale religiöse Gemeinschaften* ergänzte Modul A um eine Perspektive, die höchst diverse religiöse Ausrichtungen miteinbezieht. Wir konzentrierten uns auf religiöse Online- und Offline-Gemeinschaftserfahrungen

von Digital Natives in der Schweiz mit Migrationsgeschichte. Wir fragten, inwiefern es eine Rolle spielt, ob religiöse Gemeinschaftserfahrungen online oder offline stattfinden – und was Letzteres für die Bedeutsamkeit dieser Gemeinschaften hinsichtlich religiösen Wissenserwerbs, der Suche nach religiöser Orientierung, des Einflusses auf religiöse Praktiken und Überzeugungen sowie der Gestaltung des Alltagslebens (etwa bezüglich Unterstützung in migrationsbedingten Ankunftssituationen) junger Menschen mit Migrationshintergrund ausmacht. Darüber hinaus stellten wir die Frage, wie *digitabel* all diese Dimensionen der Gemeinschaftserfahrungen sind – also: Welche Dimensionen religiöser (Gemeinschafts-)Erfahrungen sich leicht in digitale Räume übertragen lassen, welche Dimensionen für die Forschungsteilnehmer:innen ein ausschließlich digitales Phänomen darstellen und welche Dimensionen der religiösen (Gemeinschafts-)Erfahrung aus einer emischen Perspektive nicht digitalisierbar sind. Zudem untersuchten wir die konkreten Wechselwirkungen von lokalen und Online- (religiösen) Gemeinschaften. Teilprojekt 1 konzentrierte sich auf die Forschung mit jungen Geflüchteten und Asylsuchenden in der Schweiz; Teilprojekt 2 beschäftigte sich mit jungen Personen mit Migrationshintergrund, die eine Niederlassungsbewilligung besitzen. Alle Forschungsteilnehmer:innen waren entweder in eine religiöse Tradition – jeglicher Art – hineingeboren worden und/oder bezeichneten sich als religiös oder spirituell. Nach über einem Jahr intensiver Feldforschung überraschte uns in der folgenden Analysephase die Entdeckung, dass die Bedeutung von Gemeinschaftserfahrungen bei Digital Natives mit Migrationshintergrund offenbar eher gering war – allerdings aus unterschiedlichen Gründen in den beiden interlocutor-Gruppen. Ausserdem entpuppten sich religiöse Erfahrungen und Zugehörigkeiten bei den untersuchten Personen mit Niederlassungsbewilligung als bedeutsamer als bei den Geflüchteten und Asylsuchenden.

1 Introduction

Forms of being affected by digital religion, and the acknowledgement of digital religion's transformational potential, have typically been researched among persons who regard themselves as part of – or as attached to and communicating in the context of – religious online organisations or digital religious exchange spaces (Evolvi 2022; Hutchings 2017; Kołodziejska and Neumaier 2016). In addition, a relatively common traditional notion in academia and public opinion is that immi-

grants find and connect with other immigrants in religious communities¹ when they arrive in new sociocultural environments (Baumann 2000; Nagel 2012). This notion is often true but overlooks the fact that (transnational) religious networks and migration frequently exist separately (Chen, Dean, and Kuah 2023). In essence, digital religion is usually researched intrareligiously, and migration is often researched within the confines of specific groups of individuals possessing the same country or region of origin. This approach has good methodological rationales – foremost of which are avoiding the trap of comparing apples and oranges as well as undue over-generalisation² – but conceptualises the researched people predominantly as being members of *their* religious or migratory group even though this may not form an important part of their identity.

Consequently, when our study and its two subprojects were conceptualised, we were primarily interested in providing a slightly new perspective on the nexus of religion, migration, digitality and community: We did not want to focus on the religious or ethnic commonalities of our prospective research participants as the starting point of the research; rather, we wanted to step back from the focus on religious creed in favour of researching larger and less narrowly defined groups that primarily share characteristics other than religion or ethnicity. In the context of digital religion research, we proceeded from the *digital* instead of the *religious* level of digital religion research. Our focus was on digital natives and their thoughts, associations and practices with respect to the interplay between religion, digitality and community. We tried to re-focus on neither hierarchising nor singularising, overemphasising, exotising or excluding any kind of religiosity that we might find in the field, which is a crucial approach lying at the heart of the study of religion – the discipline that we represent in the URPP “Digital Religion(s)”.

The specific contexts of migration or religion were not of predominant interest to us in this study. However, in addition to being digital natives, all the re-

1 For general information on the term community in regard to religion and how the study of religion sees the intertwinedness of community and religion, see Lüddeckens and Walther (2018).

2 Without enlarging this issue beyond the scope of this study, we want to add that we also considered this valid concern as a possible counterargument for our approach to defining our prospective research participants broadly. However, the variations within intra-religious and intra-ethnic groups are also immense; hence, we tend to consider only factors such as socioeconomic stance, class, education and gender. Therefore, we decided to include two more factors – religious and ethnic backgrounds – along which these groups vary to facilitate a truly broad exploration of the potential trends in the emically assumed and the factual relevance of the experience of digital religion and community as perceived and lived by digital natives with migration histories and any kind of religious rootedness.

search participants shared the characteristic of labelling themselves as religious/spiritual or having been born into a religious tradition along with having a migration background. Numerous studies have demonstrated the link between digital literacy and a history of migration (Nedelcu and Soysüren 2020). It is well established that migrants are highly skilled in using digital tools to, for example, navigate and find information online during their migration journey (Dekker et al. 2018), find alternative means of self-expression as members of a minority group (Candidatu, Leurs, and Ponzanesi 2019; Nedelcu and Soysüren 2020) or maintain communication with transnational contacts (Marino 2015; Oiarzabal and Reips 2012). However, notwithstanding this digital literacy, these online activities do not necessarily evince a sense of belonging to an online (religious) community. This is why we aim to apprehend the various ways in which our participants' experiences of community can be translated into a digital space and whether digital religion is relevant to community experience from an emic perspective.

In this study, we present a short overview of the research subprojects, the findings and a glimpse into a probable conclusion from our research, which has spanned the last four years – a conclusion that focuses on the relatively new idea of *post-social media* and the potential explanations that this approach may offer for our findings.

2 Theoretical Basis and Methodology

In this research project, we aimed to apprehend the relevance and perceived meaning attached to digital religious communities while paying attention to the communities and community experiences that are less or neither digital nor religious as well as to the – digital and non-digital – religious experiences that were not necessarily connected to – the experience of – community. We also wanted to capture the notions of hierarchisation that people may have in mind or practice with respect to digital versus non-digital communality and religiosity.

We grounded our research on two basic assumptions regarding digitality and (religious) community. The first basic assumption is drawn from (2021), who postulates that digital realities and non-digital realities are, in principle, emically distinguishable; although they may interact closely, they fundamentally possess some distinct attributes. Which aspects of religiosity are digitable (i.e. primarily or exclusively function digitally) and why, and how are the digital aspects of religiosity perceived in relation to its non-digital aspects? This is the main question we formulated based on our research approach, which differs slightly from other

perspectives emphasising that digital and non-digital realities would increasingly blur and become, at least emically, indistinguishable.

Our second basic assumption is inspired by the work of Dylan Trigg (2021/2022), who explores the effects and (co-)creation of atmospheres and shared emotions: Shared moods and emotions and communally experienced ambience are central to any sense of reality, community and communality. In principle, this applies both online and offline; however, online and offline forms of reality or community may be compared with each other and positioned emically in their assumed hierarchical relation to each other. This assumption made us attentive to taking shared moods and emotions and communally experienced ambiances seriously, even in non-digital contexts. Furthermore, it prompted us to place further emphasis on the fact that different kinds of reality and community (i.e. online and offline realities and communities) may be implicitly or explicitly ranked in terms of meaningfulness, status and weightiness by our research participants.

Apart from our focus on the experience of community, we are interested in something we have labelled “digitability.” In the context of our research, digitability refers to the potential and actual extent to which elements of a phenomenon – in this case, religion – can be imagined or realised as digital in the broadest sense (Menzfeld 2024). This definition encompasses the question of whether aspects of a given phenomenon can be visually represented digitally (e.g. pictures of holy scriptures) or exist solely in digital form (e.g. online-only witch rituals involving code and binary logics). Digitability also indicates how fully a phenomenon can be digital. In essence, digitability depends on the number of (potentially) digital aspects a phenomenon possesses while allowing for hyper-digital and non-digital versions of the same phenomenon (MacWilliams 2002), and it can be expressed in binary terms (i.e. completely digitable vs. not digitable). A challenging aspect of the concept is that digitability is also subjective, as what appears relatively or entirely digitable to one person (e.g. receiving a blessing and having sex) may seem completely undigitable to another.

With the main theoretical assumptions and concept formulations outlined, we explain the methodology in this and subsequent paragraphs. Our methodology focuses on long-term participant observations, digital ethnography and repeated qualitative semi-structured interviews (Fischer 2017; Pink 2021). By relying on long-term fieldwork with maximum effort towards anonymisation, we successfully navigated the challenge of gaining trust among precarious and sometimes even criminalised subgroups (e.g. Salafis and illegal immigrants). In addition, conducting more than one year of fieldwork allowed us to acquire a significant level of insight into the actual practices and lifestyles of the research participants; merely meeting with them once for an interview – in retrospect – would have produced dramatically shallow and even untrue responses to our interview ques-

tions, as many research participants, especially those with limited or no residence permits, have to be careful with what they say to strangers whom they do not yet trust.

Subproject 1 is focused on research with refugees and asylum seekers who do not have permanent residence permits. In Subproject 2, we have persons with migration histories possessing permanent residence permits as the subjects. In total, we recruited about 50 research participants, and the research languages were French, English and Swiss German. The majority of the participants in Subproject 1 were between 18 and 25 years of age, with the youngest participant being 15 years old. Of the twelve men and ten women that the responsible researcher observed and interviewed, six had emigrated from Syria, five from Afghanistan, four from Ethiopia, three from Eritrea, two from Iran, one from Somalia and one from Turkey. Fifteen of these participants are Muslim or were born into a Muslim family, and five are Orthodox Christians; the others belonged to different groups. All participants have been contacted via a trusted person ("gatekeeper" according to de Sardan 1995) and accepted individual interviews. The research participants in Subproject 2 were between 18 and 35 years of age, except for one person (a digital religious influencer) who was 40 years old. All Subproject 2 participants possessed permanent residence permits for Switzerland and had varying international backgrounds. The details of their countries of origin are withheld to ensure anonymity, which was promised as a condition for informed consent; however, for the case examples presented in this study, consent to reveal their countries of origin was requested by the responsible researcher and granted by these participants.

All participants were either born into a religious tradition and/or claimed to be religious or spiritual; they could be classified as *digital natives*, as they all lived their adult lives with the ubiquitous presence of digital devices and broadband internet access. Although we acknowledge that there are issues with using the term *digital natives* without critical consideration (Thomas 2011), we found it quite valuable in the context of our fieldwork, as it highlights a significant difference between the day-to-day experiences of our research participants and persons who grew up without the constant availability of fast and easily accessible internet via mobile devices.

Online ethnography, also called netnography (Kozinets 2015), was employed alongside local participant observation. The netnography methodology allows us to consider various data available online, such as websites, images and photos, and other digital artefacts. Given that online (religious) communities are at the heart of this research, online observation complements offline fieldwork, thus facilitating an understanding of the broader context and the bidirectional influences between the online and offline worlds (Scheifinger 2016). We searched for cer-

tain keywords in English and in the national languages of the concerned countries on specific social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and TikTok to emically determine whether online communities exist (Kok and Rogers 2017; Nedelcu 2009). Several websites were also explored, such as the websites of mosques and migrant associations. However, the online explorations did not yield relevant results, which supports the final findings regarding whether (religious) communities are digitable and what is the relevance of their digitability to their target audience. Thus, the emic perceptions of the research participants regarding their digital media use are highlighted and not the netnography perspective (Jordan 2009). Within this framework, we attempt to understand why online communities hold little importance in the eyes of migrants, notwithstanding migrants' longstanding use of digital devices and platforms.

Because we conducted this ethnographic study to detect the most recent trends among our research participants regarding perceived digitability and the relevance of community in the context of (digital) religion, our research or the research results were not intended to be representative of the target population. As is the case in all studies in the field of cultural anthropology and contemporary qualitative research on religion, during our fieldwork, we found ambiguities, conflicting trends, and individual counterexamples that complicate the broad picture. Therefore, although the main results of our data analysis are presented in the subsequent paragraphs, they do not present an exclusive summary of how digital religious communities and the digitability of religion are experienced by digital natives with migration histories.

3 Main Findings

Virginie (main researcher of Subproject 1) worked with young individuals in Switzerland who were asylum seekers or had a refugee permit, ranging from secular Iranian dissidents to unaccompanied immigrant Eritrean minors. She found that most of these individuals felt disconnected from and/or did not belong to any local or digital community. Even the attachment to their communities in the countries from which they emigrated was quite loose. Most importantly, however, neither digital nor non-digital religious communities played a role in their day-to-day lives. They were consumed with organising – sometimes precarious – living circumstances and finding a way to get along with the Swiss asylum system. They barely consulted communities – not even for practical reasons, such as obtaining advice on the asylum process.

First, Subproject 1 participants were randomly selected to avoid over-representing any single community, which would introduce bias into the results. Indeed, the research question of Subproject 1 compares the roles of and interrelations between local and digital communities with respect to young immigrants in Switzerland. The aim of Subproject 1 was to determine whether these individuals belong to (religious or non-religious) communities and, if so, to determine the nature of these communities. According to Wellman's (1983) network analysis theory, beginning with the individual instead of a particular community as the focal point of research allows for an emic elaboration of the individual's diverse networks, including the type and intensity of ties. This approach avoids the bias of focusing solely on one community and observing results that confirm the individual's belonging to that community.

Most young immigrants from the countries mentioned earlier often arrive in Switzerland alone. The majority are placed in federal asylum centres, where they may spend several weeks or months. This location (i.e. federal asylum centres) represents the primary source of local networks, as most immigrants have a local network comprising individuals they met at these centres; these networks rarely evolve, regardless of the number of years they live in Switzerland. Similarly, schools for immigrants serve as a source of local networks. Furthermore, study participants who migrated with their (nuclear) family or were later joined by them had a local network centred around their family. However, employment is not a source of local networks, as most immigrants awaiting residence permits in Switzerland are not allowed to work. Regarding religion, religious communities do not provide relevant support or a sense of community (Gruzd, Wellman, and Takhteyev 2011). For Muslim participants, attendance at religious programmes is for individual spirituality, not to seek communality. Among the Orthodox Christian interlocutors, the Eritreans get to feel a sense of community through their church, but this is largely a minority result. The Ethiopian participants in the study also described individual spirituality as the purpose of their religious practices. Consequently, young immigrants do not meet the individuals in their local networks through a religious community. Finally, the unstable and precarious situations of immigrants in Switzerland, along with psychological issues stemming from past experiences in their home countries and during migration, also hinder the development of optimal mental health, which is necessary for local network development. Thus, the local networks of young immigrants remain rather limited and generally do not develop significantly. Most of our research participants expressed a significant sense of loneliness.

There is the question of the role of online communities and whether affiliation with digital communities is of specific importance to young immigrants, given that they experience a dearth of local communality. According to Campbell

(2005), when no offline option provides a sense of community or spiritual connection, individuals seek online religious communities as substitutes. From this perspective, young immigrants in Switzerland who do not find a local community to which they have a sense of belonging would seek an online (religious) community. Notwithstanding the study populations' possession of high proficiency with digital tools (particularly smartphones), the immigrants who participated in this study were not involved in any form of digital community. Regarding online religious communities, the research participants did not feel the need to maintain a link with a transnational community in their country of origin. Several Muslim participants explained that maintaining a link with a mosque or a particular religious community in their country of origin was unnecessary; what mattered to them was having a mosque they could visit for their religious and spiritual activities. Some Orthodox Christians tried to digitally attend religious events in their country of origin via online channels – especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, these experiences did not provide them with a sense of community; being alone behind a screen exacerbated their loneliness. The only regular use of digital religion is for pragmatic purposes: applications that communicate prayer times and the direction of Mecca for Muslims, for reading the Bible or the Quran online, and for listening to religious songs or watching religious video content on streaming platforms. Therefore, digital religion does not function from the perspective of communality for the research participants.

Consequently, the results of our qualitative data analysis confirm a relative unimportance of digital and non-digital (religious) communities to the young immigrants interviewed in this research. The digital seems to reflect what happens locally for young immigrants: The ties individuals develop online are analogous to their offline relationships (Wellman 1998). For the participants in Subproject 1, the absence of online (religious) communities in their everyday lives reflects their loneliness and the dearth of local communities. Ultimately, (religious) communities are not digitable for these migrants, who instead use digital religion for pragmatic purposes. For a more comprehensive analysis and detailed discussion, these results will be further elaborated on in a dissertation thesis by Fazel, which is scheduled for publication in 2026.

Mira (main researcher of Subproject 2) worked with persons with migration histories in their personal or their parents' biographies, including imams of online mosques, Salafis and self-declared witches. She found that most of her interlocutors imagined many aspects of religion to be "digitable," that is, transferrable into the digital space or even translated into or created in digital format. Some thought that in-person community experiences would be different from digital community experiences but that, for them, this difference would not impact religious legitimacy

or affect aspects such as religious credibility and efficacy. In contrast, many interlocutors thought that the absence (or weakening) of real-life group dynamics in digitally lived (or digitally inspired) religion would even improve their feeling of being “in touch” or “in line” with the contents, rules, rituals and norms of their religion because other believers would not have as great an influence over them in digital spaces as they possess in in-person meetings.

In this project, we were careful to ensure that the study sample cut across a variety of religious traditions. The focus of this subproject was young individuals possessing intersecting traits, such as being a digital native, identifying as religious or spiritual and possessing a transnational or transmigratory family biography while simultaneously being part of Swiss society by virtue of a permanent residence permit. The objective was to gain a purely explorative perspective of the full spectrum of emic notions held by migrants on the digitability of religion and lived practices in online and offline religious communities. Hence, it was necessary that the exact religious or spiritual orientation of the research participants be diverse to facilitate identifying whether there were any trends or identifiable disparities as well as describing a broad spectrum of perspectives on digital religion. Subproject 2 is based on the basic assumption that digitality has the potential to enrich, transform and expand religiosity (Neumaier 2016) and that the interwovenness and multi-site nature of online and offline spaces (Campbell and Bellar 2022) are a reality – a reality, however, that does not necessarily result in the blurring or indistinguishability of the digital and non-digital elements of religion, which are emically experienced as closely intertwined yet distinguishable (Boellstorff 2021).

The digital natives recruited as participants in this study typically trusted the accuracy, effectiveness and reliability of religious practices and the knowledge that they acquired, found, performed or saw communicated digitally. Many of the participants argued that when it comes to finding inspiration for lived religiosity or identifying the assumed stance of one's religion regarding a specific question, the ability to browse multiple online sources for religious knowledge provides more reliable results than relying solely on in-person interactions, which also provide less variety. There was a general conviction that online religious practices are just as effective as those conducted in person. The necessity of community in religious practices was often viewed as a personal preference rather than a requirement for the enhanced efficacy or truthfulness of the acts.

The findings of this study reveal four main perspectives among digital natives regarding the digitability of religiosity. These perspectives are not intended to represent exhaustive or mutually exclusive emic views, but they represent the most frequently observed viewpoints in this subproject and can thus be considered an overview of trends in the viewpoints on digital religion among digital natives in Switzerland with a migration history.

Perspective 1: Religion is largely digitable but community is not. There is a strong perception that non-digital communities are valued more than digital communities, although this does not impact the validity or effectiveness of religious practices – the latter “work” online and offline alike.

Example: Nabil is the founder and imam of an online-first mosque community that had also developed into a real-life community. When answering religious questions online, he noticed that his followers did not question the credibility of his message because it was communicated digitally or had been found on a social network. He mentioned that there was no difference between digital and non-digital lived religiosity in terms of “better” or “lesser” religiosity but stressed the fact that the meandering and simultaneity of communication, as well as the collective physical presence during real-life prayers, cannot (yet) be adequately replicated digitally, which makes digital religiosity not a lesser kind of religiosity but a religiosity without crucial aspects of community.

Perspective 2: Religion is fully digitable, and the absence of community or belonging to a digital community is preferred over a non-digital community in religious contexts. The hierarchy perceived is as follows: no community > digital community > non-digital community.

Example: Lisa performs individualised sessions she describes as witch rituals, which are based primarily on inspiration she finds on Instagram. Lisa says she finds a lot of helpful and “true advice” online and identifies her main task as a ritual performer as distinguishing between things that Instagram influencers promote for monetary profit (which she feels is not needed in her rituals) vis-à-vis things that reflect a “good way to connect [to and with supernatural powers].” She does not readily grasp the concept of linking community experiences to religious rituals because “as soon as there are others, you start to lose energy. You do not want to, but you think, ‘How does my hair look?’” which is rather counterproductive when it comes to connecting to supernatural powers.

Perspective 3: Preferred access to religiosity – whether online or offline – depends on geographic proximity to a preferred religious context, such as a person or place, and there is a slight hierarchical perception of non-digital communities as preferred over digital ones in religious matters.

Example: Said equates religion to family, which means that the family in his country of origin is critical to his belief system, and his most pious trait is his loyalty to his family – especially to his maternal grandmother in Morocco. Whenever he is with her, he feels closer to God and closer to himself and the person he wants to be. He prefers to pray when she is around – that is, when he is in Morocco; however, when this is not possible, blessings via digital channels “do the trick, too.” He goes to the local mosque to pray sometimes, but he does not socially connect much with the people there – “they are not brothers to me, though they say ‘brother’ here, ‘brother’ there.”

Perspective 4: Religion is completely digitable; non-digital communities are viewed with scepticism. Online environments and private practices based on online sources are seen as safeguards against “distorted” communal religiosity. The hierarchy is as follows: no community > digital community > non-digital community.

Example: Theo’s religiosity consists primarily of him digitally consuming the prayers of American evangelical preachers, reading the Bible and obtaining religious information online via various sources. He very much values the detachment he can exercise when comparing online sources to find the most convincing resource, which is impossible in a live dialogue in which “the conversation or the atmosphere sucks you in, and then you – maybe – adopt an opinion that is wrong because the one that says it is charismatic.” In fact, contact with people is – from his experience – often the first step in distancing from oneself and from God, whereas private and individual contemplation makes him a more stable person and believer.

In summary, although religious activities and knowledge are generally digitable for digital natives with migration histories in Switzerland, communality is not digitable. The degree to which religious community can(not) be experienced digitally is perceived as either particularly appealing or particularly unappealing. A more detailed discussion of this finding can be found in Menzfeld’s (2024) research paper.

4 Conclusion

As discussed in the preceding sections of this paper, the importance of religion and community of any kind are not emically conceptualised as inherently intertwined. Although many refugees and asylum seekers did not feel a sense of belonging to any (digital or non-digital or religious or non-religious) community – often simultaneously missing community, in general, but not religious community – many migrants with a permanent residence permit expressed a need for

religion but not necessarily via a specific (non-digital or digital) community; if they did not belong to a religious community, this was often experienced as empowering, not as a reflection of loneliness. Thus, there is the question of what explains the relative irrelevance of (religious) community we found in this study and the relative separation of religiosity from the experience of community or the search for communality as well as the question of what is to be gleaned from these findings with regard to digital religion research.

One fresh approach to explaining the rare attachment to (religious) communities, especially among refugees, and the surprising separation of religion from communality – especially among digital natives with permanent residence permits – would be to focus on post-social media characteristics as a factor. Our data support the recently assumed post-social media trends, which are characterised by the following: (1) re-particularisation, flanked by the evolving of increasingly smaller echo chambers (Crul 2022), and (2) a re-hierarchisation of consumer versus producer roles (Benway 2023). The latter is mirrored, for example, by the fact that only 10% of users on social media platforms experience themselves as creating some kind of content, and only 9% identify themselves as being influential persons within these networks. As the online religiosity approach of many of our research participants was receptive instead of involved-productive, we choose to view our findings in light of a probable broader re-hierarchisation of the online content producer–consumer roles while simultaneously refraining from conflating productivity with authority or receptivity with the absence of agency. On the contrary, our research participants perceived themselves as highly empowered and selective with regard to accepting religious authority via being the ultimate selector of content, uninfluenced by a close religious community and uninterested in influencing a larger community themselves.

Our research participants, especially those with a permanent residence permit, expressed and showed that online or offline communities are not necessarily sources of (religious or non-religious) identity and are not even an especially desired mode of interaction. Instead, they found digital religiosity attractive because it promised religious inspiration without intense social immersion, which was viewed as aggressive and undesirable, even possibly estranging from God and other higher powers. For refugees and asylum seekers, digital religiosity enables certain religious or spiritual practices to be perpetuated daily in a pragmatic manner. Their few experiences with online religious communities failed to provide a sense of belonging. This notion of community experience as undesirable and distracting, even as altering religious experience in an unwanted way, has – to our knowledge – not yet been extensively discussed in digital religion research; however, from our point of view, it helps to explain why some young people

claim to be religious and yet do not become part of any religious community, online or offline.

We realise that other researchers investigating digital and non-digital religion in different settings and with different (and differently aged) categories of migrants found community and religiosity to be especially important to their research respondents, with non-digital religiosity and community not being the least in their ranking (Isetti 2022). All our findings, from our point of view, do *not*, however, decisively contradict studies that find online (or offline) religiosity to be very important, life-immersive or community-building, nor do they oppose findings in other contexts that reveal the authority-blurring and participation-empowering aspects of digital religiosities. However, our research findings make clear how seriously digital religion research has to take seemingly counterintuitive findings when it comes to young, transnationally rooted digital natives. Contrary to the expectations that one may have, many of these individuals are not relying on (religious or other) online networks; rather, their behaviour is more akin to choosy recipients than to input-creating discourse shapers, as they apply agency by picking rather than by producing. They not only notice but also cherish the absence of real-life religious experiences in digital spaces while not disputing the digitability of religion and religious experiences in many cases. This group of people exists, just as people with opposing perceptions and lived experiences of digital religiosity exist. Recognising this immense heterogeneity beckons us as scholars to constantly bear in mind that digital religion and digital religious communities are always highly context sensitive and that non-digital, qualitative in-depth methods are essential to truly gaining an understanding of digital religion(s).

5 Future Research Direction

Because our intent was to apprehend current trends in religious digitability and the perceived relevance of digital religious communities among digital natives with transnational family histories and migration biographies, the next step would be to investigate whether the trends we have sketched in this study do indeed reflect – or contrast with – the opinions and experiences of (a) people in other age groups and people who are non-digital natives, (b) people without migration and/or transnational family histories, (c) religious expert-only migrant groups and (d) people in other countries.

An interesting and promising future research direction from our subprojects would be to investigate further reasons why some people rate online and offline

(religious) community experiences as frightening, undesirable, disturbing or distracting, or simply as an unnecessary effort that consumes time they would much rather spend doing something else. This would be a fruitful question not only for religious studies but also for cooperation projects with disciplines such as psychology, theologies (in plural, to allow for comparisons between religions), cultural anthropology, sociology and cultural studies.

Investigating the digitability of religion as various persons attached to a specific religious background imagine it to be (in contrast to what we have done in this study – that is, focusing on cross-religious trends that were common to digital natives with migration histories and not to persons with multiple origin histories and of various cohorts that are part of one and the same specific religious community or tradition) will also be a fascinating addition to the explorative research presented in this article.

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Aline Knapp, Sabrina Müller and Patrick Todjeras

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)

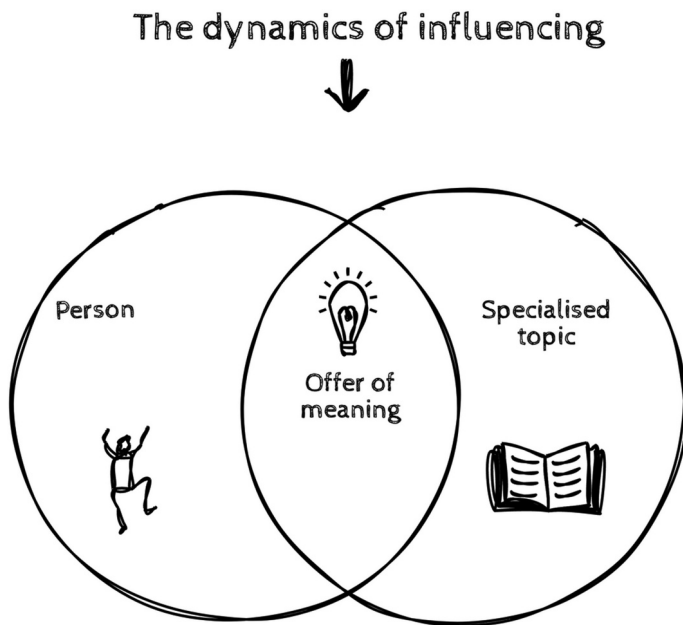


Figure 1: The dynamics of influencing.

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

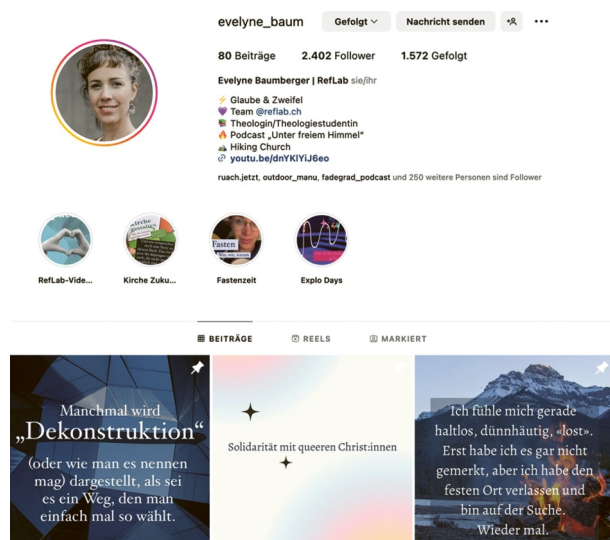


Figure 2: Instagram profile of Eveline Baumberger [accessed: 31.3.2023].

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.

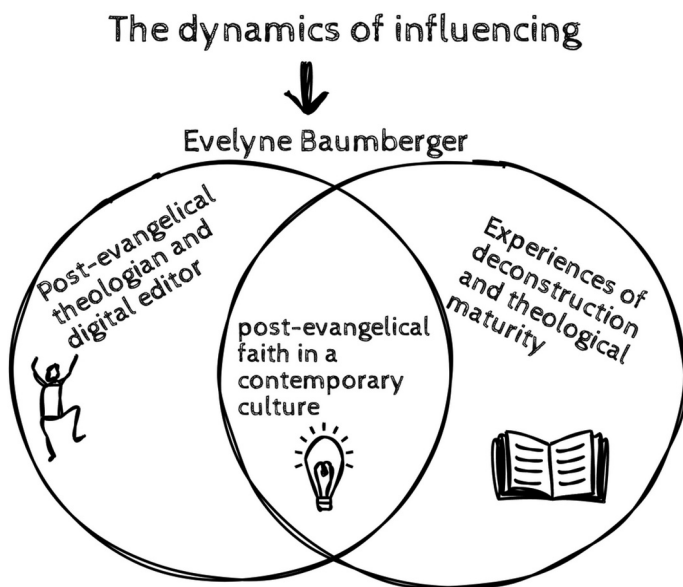


Figure 3: Dynamics of influencing by E. Baumberger.

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

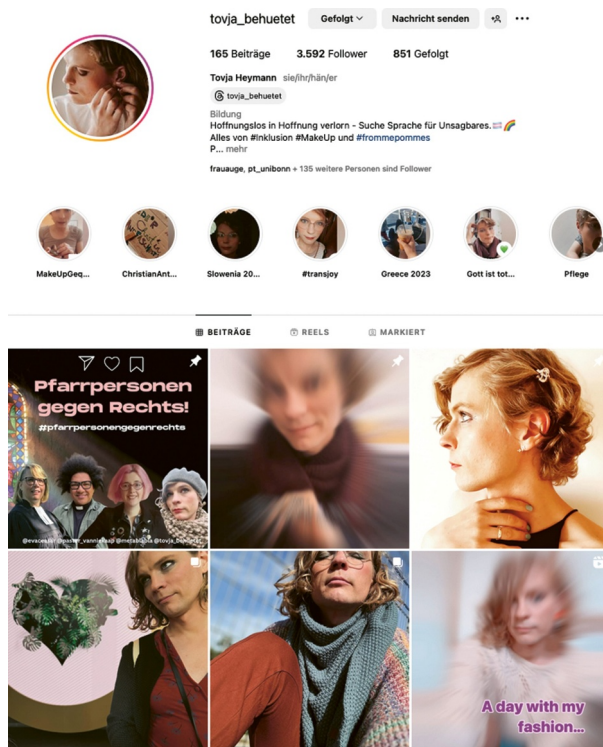


Figure 4: Instagram profile of Tovja Heymann [accessed 31.10.2024].

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

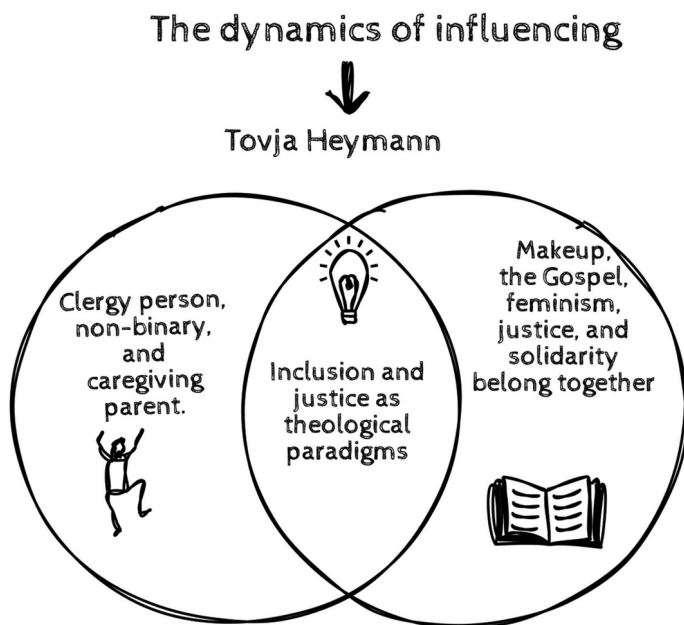


Figure 5: Dynamics of influencing by T. Heymann.

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

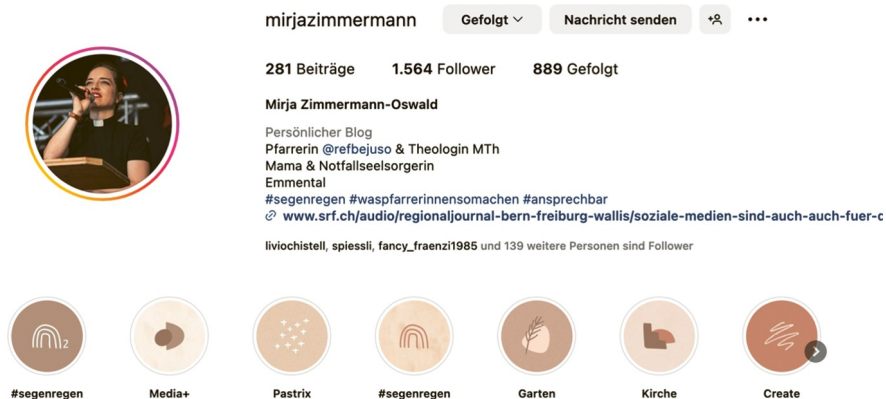


Figure 6: Instagram profile of Mirja Zimmermann-Oswald [accessed: 31.3.2023].

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.

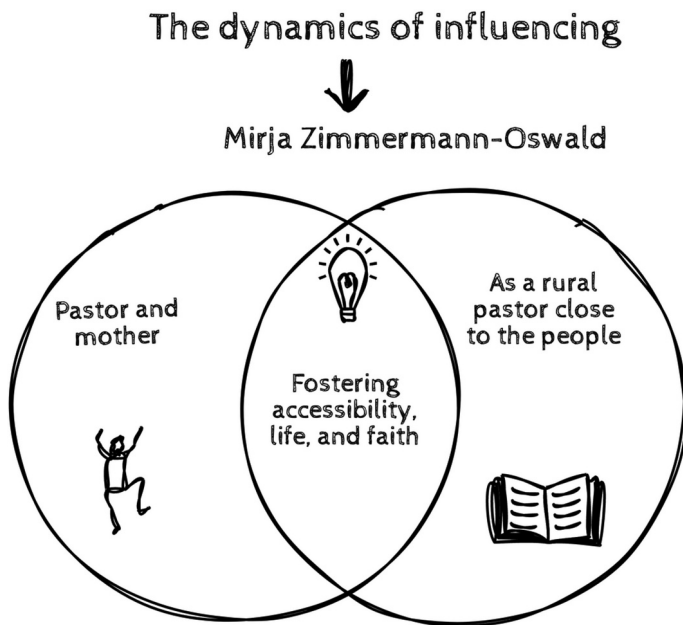


Figure 7: Dynamics of influencing by M. Zimmermann.

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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Cristina Frei and Christine Kaufmann

Content Moderation in Social Media – Artificial Intelligence to the Rescue?

*“Spirits that I’ve cited
My commands ignore.”*

(Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, The Sorcerer’s Apprentice)

Abstract: This chapter addresses the question of how human rights apply to the moderation of religion-related content on social media platforms, examines the function of content moderation in balancing the various human rights interests involved and the implications for regulation. It provides an overview of the most recent and relevant legal developments regarding artificial intelligence and content moderation, including international non-binding standards and binding instruments from the OECD, the United Nations, UNESCO, European Union, and the Council of Europe. The often complex interactions between freedom of expression and freedom of religion become apparent when applied to users who publish or are affected by religion-related content, as outlined in this chapter. Algorithmic content moderation faces limitations in balancing the various interests protected by human rights, which requires human intervention. The chapter highlights the importance of standards and regulations that provide tools for balancing different interests through remedies, procedural rights and safeguards.

Dieses Kapitel befasst sich mit der Frage, wie Menschenrechte auf die Moderation religionsbezogener Inhalte auf Social Media Plattformen angewandt werden, beleuchtet die Rolle der Content Moderation bei der Abwägung der verschiedenen betroffenen Menschenrechtsinteressen und die Konsequenzen für die Regulierung. Es bietet einen Überblick über die neusten und wichtigsten rechtlichen Entwicklungen in Bezug auf künstliche Intelligenz und Content Moderation, einschliesslich internationaler rechtlich nicht verbindlicher Standards und rechtsverbindlicher Instrumente der OECD, der Vereinten Nationen, der UNESCO, der Europäischen Union sowie des Europarats. Das oft komplexe Verhältnis zwischen Meinungsfreiheit und Religionsfreiheit zeigt sich bei der Anwendung auf Personen, die religionsbezogene Inhalte veröffentlichen oder davon betroffen sind, wie in diesem Kapitel erläutert wird. Algorithmic Content Moderation stösst bei der Herstellung eines angemessenen Ausgleichs zwischen den verschiedenen durch Menschenrechte geschützte Interessen an ihre Grenzen und erfordert menschliches Eingreifen. Dieser Beitrag unterstreicht die Bedeutung von Standards und Regulierungen, die Instru-

mente zum Ausgleich verschiedener Interessen durch Beschwerdemöglichkeiten, Verfahrensrechte und Schutzmassnahmen bieten.

1 Introduction

1.1 Situating the Project

With religion increasingly turning to the digital space, new legal challenges emerge: Information travels at unprecedented speed, regardless of its content. In addition, once information is in the digital space it remains there as it is impossible to permanently remove it. At best, measures can be taken for information not to be found anymore.

Why is this important from a legal perspective? Because as in the analogue world, people can get hurt, for instance in their religious feelings, and their rights violated (Kirchschläger 2021, 186–190). But when do such incidents amount to an infringement of human rights such as freedom of religion? To what extent are postings on social media protected by freedom of expression?

To add another layer of complexity, social media platform providers are private actors, which, in contrast to states, are legally speaking not bound by international human rights. Indeed, increasingly states have started regulating the digital space, but unlike in the analogue world the reach and boundaries of national legislation are not that clear. Moreover, states have different concepts, for example, of what activities constitute blasphemy or how far freedom of opinion and freedom of religion go and these concepts collide in a space for which we do not have clear rules of jurisdiction.

In addressing (some of) these challenges, our project looks at the legal protection of religions in cyber space and at the legal limits of these rights. For this purpose, we started with an analysis of the general protection of human rights in the context of digital religious practices, identifying specific examples of restrictions such as “digital authoritarianism”. We then moved on to elaborate on the regulatory framework that specifically governs the moderation of religious content on digital platforms which is at the core of this contribution. Our research benefits in particular from the research of the URPP subproject on argument structures in the automatic detection of intolerance and extremism (see Schneider et al. this volume), which reflects the current state of technological developments in content moderation and provides important elements for the discussion of the legal issues.

Finally, an in-dept analysis of the regulatory framework governing the moderation of religion-related content on social media platforms against the

background of international human rights law is the topic of Cristina Frei's PhD project as part of the URPP. It addresses the tensions that arise between global, regional and national approaches as well as public and private regulations and suggests key elements for regulation.

1.2 What's Artificial Intelligence Got To Do with It?

Artificial intelligence (AI) is relevant in the context of protecting freedom of religion in the digital space in three regards: First, it plays a critical role in defining the content that users of social media will see. This may lead to situations where users are confronted with content that affects their religious feelings or human rights.

Second, artificial intelligence is a double-edged sword: It facilitates the speedy spread of news allowing for broadly available instant information. However, the spread of potentially harmful information can pose significant risks, including human rights infringements and abuses. On X (formerly Twitter), researchers observed a significant increase of harmful content including anti-semitic posts since Elon Musk took over the social media platform (Lima-Strong 2023). This surge occurred despite his claim that the “new Twitter policy is freedom of speech, but not freedom of reach” and that hateful content would be “deboosted” to the greatest extent possible (Musk 2022).

Third, effective regulation will require social media platform providers to monitor posted content, in some instances remove it or block corresponding accounts. Facebook, one of the most widely used social media platforms, has currently more than 3 billion active users (Dixon 2024). In such circumstances, content is monitored with the support of AI (Meta 2023, 9). Other platforms apply different approaches: While TikTok reported a high number of content moderation decisions based on its implementation of the relevant EU law, the Digital Services Act and stated that it moderates content almost entirely automatically, X declared that it rarely moderates harmful content and only uses non-automated methods (Drolsbach and Pröllochs 2024, 940–941). Accordingly, the EU Commission launched a procedure against X for violation of the DSA on various grounds including content moderation and requested more information from X on its content moderation activities and risk management (European Commission 2024). The procedure is still ongoing at the time of this writing.

An overview of recent legal developments with regard to artificial intelligence and content moderation of social media will set the stage for a discussion of the manifold interactions between AI and freedom of religion and freedom of expression and their impact on content moderation.

2 Legal Framework and Regulatory Approaches

Standards and regulations for AI have increasingly been developed to support the innovation potential and the related manifold societal benefits of AI while at the same time manage the associated risks. They take different forms and follow different regulatory approaches. Some are legally binding, while others are based on voluntary commitments (Figure 1). Regardless of their formal legal nature, they vary widely in both their geographical as well as substantive scope.

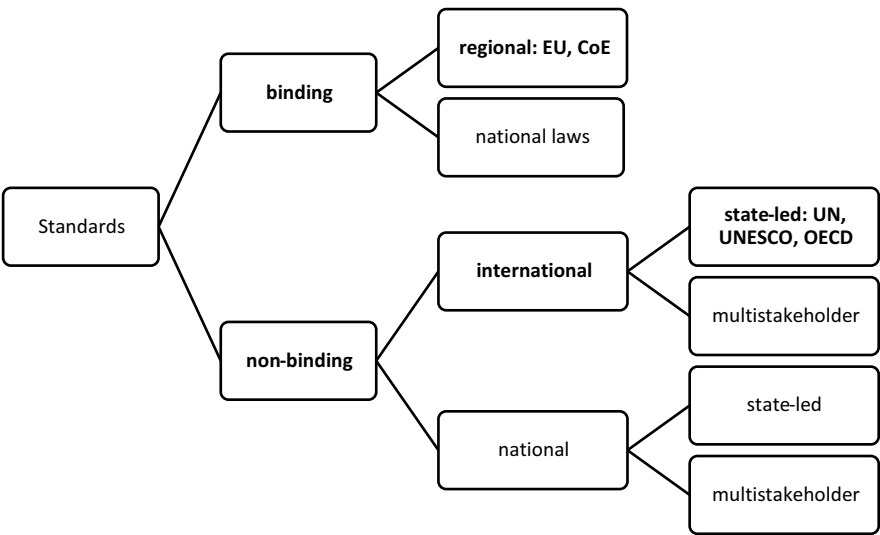


Figure 1: Legal nature of standards.

Generally, there are three different approaches to regulation: (1) Standards which contain requirements for the *actors*, i.e. platforms and users; (2) standards which focus on a specific *technology* and its impacts on human rights; and (3) regulations which serve as a comprehensive legal *framework* with principles for states to elaborate on in national law.

The following sections analyse selected instruments (highlighted in bold in Figures 1 and 2) with a view to their relevance for content moderation in the context of freedom of religion.

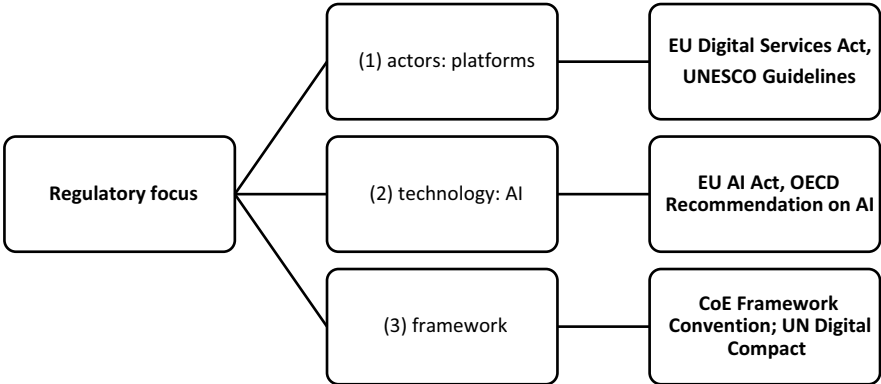


Figure 2: Regulatory focus.

2.1 International Non-Binding Standards

At the time of this writing in December 2024, no international legally binding standards on AI exists from organisations such as the UN and the OECD. However, several instruments developed within the framework of the UN and the OECD are relevant and have partially informed binding legislation (above Figure 1).

2.1.1 Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

The OECD adopted a *technology* specific instrument (Figure 2), the Recommendation on AI, with a set of principles for trustworthy AI in 2019 and updated it in May 2024 to reflect new technological and policy developments (OECD Recommendation on AI 2019; see Kaufmann 2024).

The Recommendation was the first intergovernmental standard on AI and developed in a multi-stakeholder process. It paved the ground for other regulations discussed in this section. The Recommendation is people-centered. Its ten principles should help governments, organisations and individuals to design and operate AI systems in a way that puts the interests of people first. They should also ensure that the developers and operators of AI-based systems and products are held accountable for their proper functioning. In sum, governments should ensure that AI systems are developed in alignment with values and laws, so that people can trust that their safety and privacy are put first (Gurriá 2019).

This focus was further strengthened in the update in 2024 with its increased emphasis on people and the fight against abuse of AI by addressing the following

themes: (1) Inclusive growth, sustainable development and well-being, (2) respect for the rule of law, human rights and democratic values, including fairness and privacy, (3) transparency and explainability, (4) robustness, security and safety and (5) accountability.

Based on these principles, five governmental actions are recommended: (1) Investing in AI research and development, (2) fostering an inclusive AI-enabling ecosystem, (3) shaping an enabling interoperable governance and policy environment for AI, (4) building human capacity and preparing for labour market transformation and (5) international co-operation for trustworthy AI.

Currently, 46 states and the European Union signed the Recommendation.

2.1.2 United Nations Global Digital Compact

In September 2024, the Global Digital Compact was adopted by the UN General Assembly. It covers the impacts of the digital transition on society in general and aims at ensuring that the digital transition is in line with the Sustainable Development Goals. Its objectives include enhancing the international governance of artificial intelligence for the benefit of humanity (UN Global Digital Compact 2024, para. 7.5, para. 50), and co-operation for trustworthy technologies, including AI, to advance a responsible, accountable, transparent and human-centric approach to their life cycle (UN Global Digital Compact 2024, para. 8(i)). This is complemented by an “urgent call” on technology companies and developers to take measures against potential harms induced by AI-enabled content, including hate speech and discrimination (UN Global Digital Compact 2024, para. 35(c)). States acknowledge the need for international coordination of AI standards, but no specific measures apart from convening a high-level meeting for reviewing the Global Digital Compact have been agreed. With its broad approach the Digital Compact qualifies as a *framework* instrument referred to in Figure 2.

2.1.3 UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of AI

The UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of AI adopted by its then 193 member states in 2021 (UNESCO Recommendation on AI 2021) follows the human rights by design approach as it states ten core principles for a human-rights centred approach to the ethics of AI and translates them into key areas for policy action (Ramos, Squicciarini, and Lamm 2024, 33–34). Among the ten principles is the right to privacy, which is to be protected throughout the whole AI lifecycle. The recommendation also states that AI systems should only be used to the extent nec-

essary to achieve a legitimate aim (proportionality) and be subject to a risk assessment to prevent harms resulting from their use. States are called upon to ensure that AI does not “foster disruption of freedom of expression and access to information” (UNESCO Recommendation on AI 2021, para. 66). Strong emphasis lies on the ultimate human responsibility and accountability. In other words, responsibility for human rights risks cannot be delegated to technology but remains with humans and, ultimately, the state. In addition, the Recommendation provides two specific instruments for implementation addressing both member states and non-state actors involved in AI projects.

In sum, the Recommendation – somewhat implicitly – acknowledges potential conflicting human rights interests which need to be balanced. Its regulatory focus is mainly on the *technology* (Figure 2).

2.1.4 UNESCO Guidelines for the Governance of Digital Platforms

The UNESCO Guidelines for the Governance of Digital Platforms adopted in 2023 focus on the *actors* and on the role of digital platforms and providers in protecting freedom of expression (Figure 2) (UNESCO Guidelines 2023). The Guidelines specifically address the lack of corporate transparency, accountability and due diligence, and call for a human rights-centred approach in state regulation. An important feature of any policy action is a multi-stakeholder approach. Five principles call on platforms first to conduct human rights due diligence in accordance with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNESCO Guidelines 2023, principle 1, paras. 85–90), and second to adhere to international human rights standards (UNESCO Guidelines 2023, principle 2, para. 91). Due diligence includes platform design and content. For this purpose, the Guidelines elaborate not only on the design process (UNESCO Guidelines 2023, principle 2, paras. 92–93), but also on *content moderation and curation policies and practices* (UNESCO Guidelines 2023, principle 2, paras. 94–100), including human content moderation (UNESCO Guidelines 2023, principle 2, paras. 101–102), and the use of automated systems for content moderation and curation, i.e. AI systems (UNESCO Guidelines 2023, principle 2, paras. 103–109). Generally, platforms should act in a transparent manner (UNESCO Guidelines 2023, principle 3, paras. 111–118), including with regard to the implementation of content moderation, curation policies and practices, and users should be notified when and on what grounds their content is removed (UNESCO Guidelines 2023, principle 2, para. 110, principle 3, paras. 115.e-j). Moreover, the Guidelines aim to hold platforms accountable to relevant stakeholders, which includes user reports as well as appeal and redress mechanisms (UNESCO Guidelines 2023, principle 5, paras. 123–129). The Guidelines conclude with a set of context-specific provisions

related to vulnerable and marginalised individuals (UNESCO Guidelines 2023, context-specific provisions, para. 130), situations of armed conflict, crises and emergencies (UNESCO Guidelines 2023, context-specific provisions, paras. 142–144), as well as to the specific issue of integrity of elections (UNESCO Guidelines 2023, context-specific provisions, paras. 131–141).

While – and maybe because – the Guidelines are not binding, they contain fairly detailed principles on content moderation and curation. It remains to be seen to what extent they will be taken up in future legislation.

2.2 European Union: Legally Binding Instruments

The first comprehensive and legally binding framework for specifically regulating AI and thus a regulation with a focus on *technology* (Figure 2) is the European Union’s *Artificial Intelligence Act (AIA)* (EU Artificial Intelligence Act 2024), which entered into force in 2024. It needs to be read together with the *Digital Services Act (DSA)* of 2022 (EU Digital Services Act 2022).

The DSA does not focus on a specific technology (such as AI) but on the *actors* (Figure 2), i.e. online platforms. On the one hand, it requires social media platforms to rapidly remove illegal content; on the other, it attempts to balance the protection against illegal content with users’ freedom of expression. For this purpose, platforms are required to counter illegal content. Moreover, they must make transparent how their content moderation and their algorithmic recommender systems work. In addition, large platforms have to conduct a risk assessment for their products, including risks to human rights. In the interest of protecting freedom of expression, users have the right to challenge content moderation decisions under the DSA. The DSA does not contain specific provisions on freedom of religion or focus on AI only but applies a general, technology-neutral approach which includes all human rights.

In contrast, the AIA addresses the *specific* features and the associated risks of artificial intelligence. It applies a “human rights by design” approach by requiring developers and deployers to take potential risks related to specific uses of AI into account. The goal is to foster responsible AI systems by defining clear legal requirements for AI systems according to the level of risk. Accordingly, the AIA bans AI systems with *unacceptable risks* such as threats to the safety, livelihood and rights of people outright, and strictly regulates those with *high risk*. AI systems with *limited risks* are subject to transparency requirements; and the use of *no or minimal risk* AI systems is free.

The regulatory approach of the European Union is particularly interesting because it aims at addressing the tension between protecting society against unac-

ceptable AI-related risks and safeguarding freedom of expression and the innovative potential of AI technology. When discussing algorithmic content moderation in the context of religion-related content (section 3), we therefore need to combine the approaches of the DSA and the AIA which in sum require platform providers to conduct *specific AI risk analysis* and at the same time give platform users rights to protect their human rights.

2.3 Council of Europe: Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence

With its Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence and human rights, democracy and the rule of law (CoE Framework Convention on AI 2024), the Council of Europe pursues a different strategy. It is the first international legally binding treaty in the field of AI and qualifies as a framework instrument (Figure 2). It requires states to take measures to ensure that activities within the lifecycle of AI systems comply with the fundamental principles of human dignity and individual autonomy, equality and non-discrimination, respect for privacy and personal data protection, transparency and oversight, accountability and responsibility, reliability and safe innovation. Respecting these principles requires balancing different interests. The Convention does not elaborate on detailed criteria for such a balancing exercise but provides a set of instruments in the form of remedies, procedural rights and safeguards that states need to establish. It also defines general requirements for the risk and impact management. While states are signatories to the Convention and thus the primary duty holders, the Convention covers the use of AI systems by both public authorities and private actors. According to the nature of the Convention as a framework states define the specific application to private actors (CoE Framework Convention on AI 2024, Article 3(1)).

It is important to note that the Framework Convention builds on existing international human rights law and on the Council of Europe's standards on democracy and the rule of law. The purpose of the Convention is to complement existing instruments to ensure that they also apply for the use of AI systems and thus beyond the analogue world. What this application entails with regard to the moderation of religion-related content will be elaborated in the next section. This includes an analysis of the related risks to the protection of human rights and the role of specific regulatory requirements.

3 Interactions of AI with Religion-Related Content – Selected Aspects

3.1 Moderation of Religion-Related Content and the Role of AI

Religion-related content may include a recording of a church mass on YouTube, a young woman sharing knowledge about her religion in a live-stream on Instagram (Fazel 2023), or a Salafi online influencer discussing theological issues in short videos on TikTok (Klapp 2023, 11). The platform's algorithms define the display of such content in newsfeeds, to whom it is suggested and how easily and widely it is accessible. An example are the high view and engagement numbers on Facebook for AI-generated images of Jesus rendered as a crab, which according to research are at least partially attributable to the recommendation algorithm (DiResta and Goldstein 2024).

Platforms collect user data by AI systems, enabling, *inter alia*, customised content on the user interfaces, which leads to higher user engagement and higher revenues for the platforms (Narayanan 2023). The resulting personalised online experiences may facilitate access to relevant content, including in terms of religious practice.

Religion-related content may be harmful or misleading and spread at high speed and widely on social media platforms. A striking example is the high number of Facebook posts inciting violence and discrimination against Muslims, especially Rohingyas, in Myanmar in 2017 (see UN Human Rights Council 2018, para. 1352). Accordingly, social media platforms have been called upon to adopt new or enhance existing policies and moderate content accordingly. Given the high number of accounts and users, content moderation by humans only will likely not suffice. As a result, social media platforms increasingly rely on algorithms for identifying religion-related content that contradicts the content policies of the platforms and/or national or international law. Such content may then be taken down, demoted or a warning note be given to the respective user.

An example for the important role which AI can play in content moderation is a video on Instagram accusing a Pakistani political candidate of having “crossed all limits of kufr” which was identified by Meta’s AI-based High Risk Early Review Operations (HERO) system as a potential risk and forwarded to Meta’s (human) policy experts (Meta Oversight Board 2024b). The experts considered the terminology as an accusation of blasphemy under Pakistani law based on its insinuation that the political candidate would believe in more than one God or equated someone with God. Due to the risk of offline harm that such an accusation could provoke in Pakistan, the video was taken down.

3.2 Challenges and Limitations of Algorithmic Content Moderation

However, algorithmic content moderation is not a panacea as it comes with its own challenges and limitations. Known issues include the inability of AI technology to recognise nuanced elements in some cases, the constraints with less widely used languages and contextual word interpretation, the difficulty of identifying prohibited content in certain forms of expression (such as voices, images or symbols), or the problem of coping with users' evasion tactics (for further details, see Hatano 2023, 149–150) and coded language that makes it difficult to detect whether someone is intentionally inciting violence on the basis of religion (Sanchez v. France 2021, para. 68). The use of implicit hate speech poses a problem particularly for the identification of antisemitism (Becker and Troschke 2023).

The UNESCO Guidelines (above 2.1.4) primarily acknowledge the challenges related to linguistic and cultural particularities of content (UNESCO Guidelines 2023, principle 2, paras. 94–95) and recommend regular external audits with binding follow-up steps of the automated and human tools used, including reviewing their precision, accuracy and linguistic capacity (UNESCO Guidelines 2023, principle 2, para. 103). In addition, the DSA (above 2.2) requires the providers of very large online platforms to include linguistic aspects in their risk assessment (EU Digital Services Act 2022, Article 34).

Given these limitations of AI systems, the incomplete removal of prohibited content remains a challenge. Members of religious minorities are often disproportionately affected by false negatives, i.e. content that is not identified by the platforms' moderation systems and therefore remains visible. For instance, the lack of Hindi and Bengali hate speech classifiers resulted in harmful content targeting Muslims in India not being removed on Facebook (Saaliq and Pathi 2021). Moreover, reports suggest that Facebook's algorithmic content moderation may have amplified the distribution of content inciting violence and discrimination against Rohingya in Myanmar by recommending it to more users (Amnesty International 2022, 45–48). Such content can provoke further hateful reactions in the form of likes, comments and shares. From a platform's perspective higher user engagement is desirable because it contributes to higher revenues. With regard to extremist content, recent studies concerning YouTube show that the adjustment of the recommendation system in 2019 was successful with regard to people who were not subscribers of extremist channels; yet the risk of algorithmically influenced radicalisation cannot be completely prevented (Chen et al. 2023, 8).

AI systems may also "overperform" and excessively remove or demote religion-related content or wrongly treat it as prohibited content (see Ashraf 2022, 773). Reports concerning the removal of content with the hashtag #AlAqsa on In-

stagram due to the confusion between the mosque revered by Muslims and a sanctioned organisation indicate that over-removal may also be a concern when it comes to religious content and would warrant further research (Mac 2021).

Finally, the risk of bias, i.e. inaccurate or unfair results due to the data that algorithms are trained on or use, is of particular relevance in the context of religion-related content. Bias in algorithmic systems can lead to discriminatory decisions, including in content moderation. Members of religious minorities or non-Christians are at higher risk that content which they publish on social media platforms is falsely classified by algorithms as prohibited, and thus deleted or demoted. A report by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) demonstrates how the sentences “I am Muslim” and “I am Jew” are much more likely to be categorised as offensive than “I am Christian” (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2022, 11). Accordingly, the UNESCO Guidelines (above 2.1.4) stipulate that the external audits mentioned above should check content moderation tools for possible bias or discrimination (UNESCO Guidelines 2023, principle 2, para. 103). Potential discrimination is also part of the risk assessment required by the DSA (above 2.2) (EU Digital Services Act 2022, Article 34).

In sum, algorithms are needed to moderate content on large social media platforms to effectively remove prohibited content, including hate speech and extremism, both from and against religious individuals. However, human rights compliant content moderation cannot be delegated entirely to AI. The challenge lies at the interface between humans and AI (addressed in the OECD Recommendation above 2.1.1): How can bias induced by humans be prevented? And how can the different human rights affected by AI supported content moderation be balanced?

4 Freedom of Expression, Religious Freedom and the Need for Protection – It’s Complicated!

4.1 Social Media Platforms’ Human Rights Responsibilities

Decisions about religion-related content by social media platforms, including by means of algorithmic content moderation, have an impact on human rights. While these platforms are not directly bound by international human rights treaties, which primarily address states, international instruments, such as the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises on Responsible Business Conduct, expect businesses to respect international human rights and recall that states have a legal obligation

to ensure corporate respect of human rights. This accepted corporate human rights responsibility forms the starting point for specific content moderation rules.

4.2 Protecting Freedom of Expression and Religious Freedom, But Not Religion as Such

As a result, content moderation applied to social media platforms has to be aligned with human rights. Particularly, the right to freedom of expression and the right to freedom of religion are affected in the context of religion-related content. These rights apply to both the person producing and/or distributing the content as well as the recipients.

When users publish or access content on a social media platform, they generally exercise their right to freedom of expression. Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) protects the right to freedom of opinion and expression, including the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds – religious content included – regardless of frontiers. The drafters of the Covenant made it clear that the type of media is irrelevant, thus the protection extends to social media.

Anyone who disseminates or consumes the content as part of her or his religion or belief (theistic, non-theistic or atheistic) is also protected by freedom of religion. Article 18 of the ICCPR guarantees the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. It encompasses the freedom to manifest one's religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching, whether individually or collectively in both public and private settings. As the scope of freedom of expression includes religious content, public freedom of religion and belief typically constitutes a subset of freedom of expression (Schabas 2019, 518).

Social media platforms that moderate, respectively restrict such activities will inevitably interfere with users' rights. Conversely, content moderation can be essential for protecting the rights of other users and affected third parties. An infringement of religious freedom may be assumed in situations where harmful content directed at members of a religious community is fostering a climate of public hostility to the extent that these members can no longer safely practice their religion publicly (Bielefeldt, Ghanaea and Wiener 2016, 492). In addition, religion-related content can affect other peoples' rights, for instance by inciting violence, undermining gender equality or conflicting with protection from discrimination on the ground of sexual orientation.

The rights to freedom of expression and freedom of religion find their limits not least in the protection of the fundamental rights of others. The justification

for an interference with freedom of expression often implies considering the freedom of religion of others and *vice versa*. Publishing content which denigrates an object of religious veneration and thus may offend the religious feelings of others, is in principle protected by freedom of expression. This raises the question, whether the protection of the religious freedom of those who feel offended justifies a restriction on freedom of expression and, consequently, the removal of content.

Efforts to protect religious feelings from “offensive speech”, including initiatives to establish a concept of “defamation of religions” at the international level (Langer 2014), contributed to the view that the right to freedom of expression and the right to freedom of religion are contradictory human rights concerns (Bielefeldt, Ghanea, and Wiener 2016, 483). Moreover, it was argued that freedom of religion would entail a right to respect for one’s religious feelings or the protection of one’s own religion from criticism, ridicule or insult, whereas freedom of expression would require the unlimited possibility to express oneself freely (Temperman 2008, 527). Yet, the international human rights framework does not assume an inherent conflict between these two rights.

While the interplay between these rights remains complex, case law and academic literature provided important guidance in defining their limits. Article 18 as well as further international human rights norms do not protect religion as such (Langer 2014, 123–142). Furthermore, the UN Human Rights Committee made clear that the scope of Article 19 extends to deeply offensive views (UN Human Rights Committee 2011, para. 11). Based on the decisions *Ross v. Canada* (Ross v. Canada 2000, para. 11.5) and *Faurisson v. France* (Faurisson v. France 1996, para. 9.6), it can be said that the UN Human Rights Committee, in contrast to the European Court of Human Rights, only accepts offenses against religious feelings as grounds for a restriction of freedom of expression to the extent that they meet the severity threshold of Article 20 Paragraph 2 ICCPR (Petzhöld 2015, 216–217). This provision prohibits hate speech that amounts to the advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence. In the same vein, General Comment No. 34 states that prohibitions of displays of lack of respect for a religion, including blasphemy laws, are not compatible with the ICCPR unless the particular conditions of Article 20 Paragraph 2 are met (UN Human Rights Committee 2011, para. 48).

4.3 Adequate Balancing of Human Rights by Algorithms?

These human rights-based ground rules for the moderation of religion-related content set the standard for balancing different human rights interests. When

freedom of expression and freedom of religion are implicated, the proportionality of an interference and the balancing of rights are central. The scope of human rights protection therefore needs to be translated into instructions for the algorithms which are needed for effective content moderation on large social media platforms. Determining which interest should be given more weight in individual cases is already a complex task for humans and even more so for AI systems which build on data provided by humans (see Prem and Krenn 2024, 485). In particular, the proportionality test, which includes assessing whether a restriction is necessary for and proportionate to the aim pursued, cannot be encoded in algorithms easily (Lennartz and Kraetzig 2022). For the time being, algorithmic decision making can therefore not guarantee the adequate balancing of rights (Peukert 2021).

Assessing the severity of a certain expression and accordingly the decision whether it should be prohibited in accordance with Article 20 Paragraph 2 ICCPR is challenging. The so-called *Rabat Plan of Action* summarizes the results of a series of expert workshops on the prohibition of incitement to national, racial or religious hatred, organized by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) (UN High Commissioner for Human Rights 2013). While it is not legally binding, it provides guidance to which international courts, bodies and experts regularly refer. It recommends using a six-part threshold test to consider the elements of context, speaker, intent, content and form, extent of the speech act und likelihood of harm. This requires an assessment of the *context* which includes the social and political circumstances. Furthermore, the *speaker's* position or status in society, such as for instance the influence of religious leaders, needs to be duly taken into account. Importantly, *intent* is required for advocacy and incitement, negligence or recklessness is not enough to be considered prohibited behaviour. *Content* needs to be analysed with a view to the degree of provocation and directness, its form, style or the nature of arguments. With a view to human rights risks, the Rabat Plan emphasises the importance of analysing the *extent* of a published content, i.e. its reach, public nature, the applied means of dissemination, as well as the frequency and quantity. The *harm* must be likely in terms of reasonably probable and not only hypothetical. In practice, determining the elements of intent and likelihood of harm are highly complex, especially in the context of content moderation, partly because not only the original authors need to be included in the analysis but also people who share the content (Benesch 2020, 110).

The Meta Oversight Board already applied the Rabat Plan of Action test in various decisions (Meta Oversight Board 2024a). In algorithmic content moderation, however, the current limitations of AI technology in recognising nuanced elements in some cases may prevent the reliable implementation of the six factors

(Hatano 2023, 149). This may also lead to situations where content which does not meet the threshold criteria is deleted or demoted, and thus an over-removal. Often, algorithmic content moderation does not give a clear answer on where the line is drawn or how diverging interests are balanced.

5 Conclusion

Our research can be summarized in three main conclusions which relate to (1) the applicability of human rights to religion-related content on social media, (2) the balancing of different human rights interests involved and (3) to the consequences for regulation and eventually the role of the state.

- (1) *Human rights apply to the digital space* as well as to the analogue world given the impact of digital technology on human rights. In particular, social media platforms can support human rights by allowing for fast and wide publication and dissemination of content, including religion-related. This potential comes with the *platforms' responsibility to respect* users' human rights and address potential risks. Human rights risks are particularly prevalent in the context of religion-related content.
- (2) Addressing human rights risks associated with religion-related content requires a careful *balancing of different human rights interests*. An important instrument for this purpose is content moderation.

The applicable laws and the platforms' content policies are often of a rather general nature and leave broad room for discretion and interpretation. For religion-related content, such a balancing test is particularly challenging and depends on the interpretation of the right to freedom of expression and freedom of religion. Given the size of large social media platforms algorithms are needed for effective content moderation. The balancing of conflicting interests and ensuring the proportionality of restrictions is a key aspect of human rights law. Current AI based systems which identify, match and predict content, or classify content into one of several categories (see Gorwa, Binns and Katzenbach 2020, 4–5) are not equipped to conduct proportionality tests. Therefore, the balancing of interests cannot be delegated to AI but requires human intervention.

- (3) The challenges of algorithmic content moderation are reflected in *standards and regulations for AI*. The binding and non-binding instruments, such as the EU's DSA and AIA or the UNESCO Guidelines for the Governance of Digital Platforms, elaborate on the responsibility of social media platforms to respect

human rights. This includes conducting human rights due diligence to identify, prevent, mitigate these risks and account for how they are addressed. In addition, appropriate measures are required to assess and mitigate the risks that the use of algorithmic content moderation entails. With regard to religion-related content, for example, social media platforms should analyse how algorithmic content moderation may automatically remove certain religion-related content, potentially resulting in the over-policing of certain religious minorities (Ashraf 2022, 773). It will be key that such risk assessments draw on the expertise of social scientists, including in the field of digital religion. The DSA requires platforms to grant researchers access to relevant data. The interdisciplinary URPP Digital Religion(s), which includes researchers from the disciplines of computational linguistics, religious studies and media and communication studies, can serve as a forum for further clarifying the notion of religion and offering different perspectives and insights on the protection of religious minorities which would benefit new regulation.

New standards and regulations for AI and digital platforms further define social media platforms' responsibility to respect human rights, including freedom of expression and freedom of religion but do not specifically stipulate how the complex content moderation decisions should be taken. Instead, they provide important instruments for balancing different interests through remedies, procedural rights and safeguards. Research and academia will play an important role in supporting states and platforms by providing more data on the human rights impacts in the context of religion-related content and in translating abstract human rights concepts into criteria that can be operationalized for content moderation in practice.

Our research is a first step, as it identifies key elements for addressing potential risks and paves the ground for further human rights-oriented interdisciplinary work.

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Detecting and Mapping Hate in Religious Contexts

Abstract: Hate speech, a societal challenge with broad implications for democratic discourse, inclusivity and security of minorities, is propagated on online platforms. This chapter explores methods for detecting and analyzing hate speech, focusing on religious contexts. The chapter is structured into two main parts: The first part describes the key ideas underlying AI-based hate speech detection, highlights challenges of current approaches, and then introduces our approach for more modular, efficient hate speech detection systems. The second part dives into conceptual maps as a tool for visualizing associations in large datasets, applied to Twitter data. This analysis reveals a pattern of negative sentiment and the politicization of religion, in contrast to spirituality, which is associated with more positive connotations and perceptions. The chapter concludes by contextualizing these findings, emphasizing the potential of combining quantitative with qualitative analysis to obtain a more nuanced understanding of hateful discourses, and religion-related discourses on the internet.

Hassrede, eine gesellschaftliche Herausforderung mit weitreichenden Auswirkungen auf den demokratischen Diskurs, Inklusivität und die Sicherheit von Minderheiten, erfährt derzeit grosse Verbreitung auf Onlineplattformen. Dieses Kapitel untersucht Methoden zur Erkennung und Analyse von Hassrede mit einem Fokus auf religiöse Kontexte. Das Kapitel ist in zwei Hauptteile gegliedert: Der erste Teil beschreibt die zentralen Ideen, die der KI-basierten Erkennung von Hassrede zugrunde liegen, hebt die Herausforderungen für aktuelle Ansätze hervor und stellt anschließend unseren Ansatz für modularere und effizientere Systeme zur Erkennung von Hassrede vor. Der zweite Teil widmet sich konzeptionellen Karten als Werkzeug zur Visualisierung von Assoziationen in großen Datensätzen. Bei der Anwendung auf Twitter-Daten zeigt sich eine negative Assoziation und Politisierung von Religion, im Gegensatz zur Spiritualität, die positiver wahrgenommen wird. Das Kapitel schließt mit einer Kontextualisierung dieser Erkenntnisse ab und betont das Potenzial, quantitative und qualitative Analysen zu kombinieren, um ein differenzierteres Verständnis von Hassrede und religionsbezogenen Diskussionen im Internet zu gewinnen.

1 Introduction

Hate speech is a serious challenge for our society. We follow the UN's definition of hate speech which goes as follows: Hate speech is "any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor."¹ Hate speech hurts people, and it damages a culture of mutual respect and understanding. Hate speech may be spurred by the anonymity of the internet. Social media seems to be particularly affected. The impression that it has increased in frequency can be confirmed. After Elon Musk has acquired Twitter and renamed it to X, several findings support this impression. Racist posts have become more frequent,² and the social media index GLAAD confirms that user safety scored for the LGBTQ+ community have decreased further, after they had already decreased a year ago.³ Their study included all major social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and X. The suspicion that hate speech is simply more frequent because Musk's policy may be to censor fewer posts is thus not an explaining factor. At the same time, Musk's policy changes had clear effects on X. On the one hand, Musk's posts and Republican posts generally are boosted by the algorithm (Graham and Andrejevic 2024). This may have had an effect of the US elections, which Trump won, and the boosting may become even stronger when he takes up office. On the other hand, X users are now more likely to be exposed to hateful content.⁴ The amount of hate speech and thus exposure to it also depends on the topic. Politicized issues attract hate speech more than leisure topics. In this article we will assess the situation in view of topics related to religious debates, using data-driven approaches with few theoretical assumptions. We will see that many aspects of religion are affected very much by hate, politicization, and discrimination, while others, in particular spirituality, are often portrayed as offering innocent happiness.

In this chapter, we describe the two main contributions of our URPP project: First, how can we detect hate speech with state-of-the-art methods? For this we present the computational linguistic algorithms that we have applied and im-

1 See <https://www.un.org/en/hate-speech/understanding-hate-speech/what-is-hate-speech/>, last visited at 30.10.2024.

2 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2023/01/freedom-speech-not-freedom-spread-racial-hatred-social-media-un-experts>.

3 <https://glaad.org/publications/social-media-safety-index-2023/>.

4 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2023/03/30/elon-musk-twitter-hate-speech/>.

proved, using extensive and targeted training material. Second, we address the question of how much hate and negative sentiment is present in the religious discourse. For this, we investigate frequently used words in the context of religion, spirituality, and faith from social media. Before we delve into these, we further motivate our research, by showing why the detection of hate speech is important.

Hate speech is unpleasant and hurts the attacked groups or individuals. Even the attackers are at least partly aware of this fact, or they may also intend to hurt people. They thus violate the human right(s) of liberty and security and dignity. To a certain extent, even the right of life is jeopardized, at least the attackers are willing to play with fire. Bereft of context, it is difficult for the attacked to distinguish an uncontrolled bout of anger from a well-planned attack.

But censoring hate speech is also problematic. Censorship violates the human right of free speech, freedom of opinion and expression. Therefore, hate speech can lead to a clash of human rights and a bias towards excluding some voices in society (see also Frei et al. this volume).

1.1 A Clash of Human Rights

While there is no unanimous definition of human rights, most sources testify a strong overlap. In order to assess which human rights are concerned, we adopt the definition given on the learning platform Vaia.⁵ Their list comprises the following ten items:

1. Right to life: Every person has the right to live and not be deprived of life unlawfully.
2. Freedom from torture: No person should be subject to torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment.
3. Right to liberty and security: Everyone has the right to be free from arbitrary arrest or detention.
4. Freedom of thought, conscience, and religion: All individuals have the right to hold and practice their beliefs freely.
5. Freedom of opinion and expression: People have the right to hold and share opinions and ideas without interference or censorship.
6. Right to work and education: Everyone has the right to work in fair and safe conditions and to receive an education.
7. Right to privacy: All individuals have the right to privacy in their personal, family, home, and correspondence lives.

5 <https://www.hellovaia.com/explanations/law/human-rights-law/fundamental-human-rights/>.

8. Right to participate in government: Every person has the right to take part in their country's political affairs and exercise their right to vote.
9. Freedom of movement: People have the right to move freely within their country and to leave and return to it.
10. Right to equality before the law: All individuals are entitled to equal protection of the law without discrimination.

Unchecked hate speech may violate right 4, and jeopardize rights 1, 2, and possibly 3. Right 4 is especially tricky, as it potentially contains a clash in itself: freedom of thought entails the right to strongly dislike or even hate something, while freedom of religion entails the right to practice any religion and belief without fear. There is a crucial difference between rights 4 and 5. Right 4 postulates that thoughts need to be free, while right 5 entails the danger that voicing one's opinions with check may lead to hate speech, which poses a danger to rights 1 to 3.

Defenders of unlimited free speech typically argue that verbal expressions do not lead to bodily harm, thus rights 1 to 3 are still guaranteed. However, there are two main reasons that challenge the validity of this claim: First, clearly expressed intentions and desires encourage the execution of violent acts in the real world. Second, attacked groups may also psychologically suffer from degrading treatment in verbal form.

Discussions on what is best for society will, of course, continue. If we compare this conflict to economical models, both the fully liberal free-market model and highly protected communist ideologies are seen as failed by most theorists. In a similar vein, it is likely that fully unchecked hate speech will lead to disaster as well as filtering all negative comments, and that the debate of what exactly hate speech is, and how one should deal with it is unlikely to find an easy settlement. What we need in either way are tools that detect hate speech allowing social media platforms, regulators and the government to take appropriate measures. Our contribution is to provide such tools.

1.2 Definitions of Hate Speech

Finding an appropriate balance between freedom of speech and protecting groups is tricky, and the debate may be heated. In hate speech detection research various definitions of hate speech have been adopted and proposed (Khurana et al. 2022). However, these definitions are typically guided by the UN's definition of hate speech, given at the beginning of this section.

This definition entails that a sentence like "I despise you" is not hate speech, because the attack does not reference a *protected characteristic* such as religion

or ethnicity. However, the sentence “I despise these Muslims” or “I despise you, you Muslim” falls under the hate speech definition because the attack works via reference to such a characteristic. In this context the term *protected group* is often used in hate speech detection research to refer to groups that are defined via protected characteristics. For example, “black people” is a protected group because it is defined via the “race” or “colour” characteristic, but “teachers” is not a protected group because occupation is not a protected characteristic.

1.3 The Tenuous Relation between Thought and Action

While elucidating the clash between human rights in the previous subsection we have already hinted at the next clash: thoughts must be free and cannot be controlled, not even in the most oppressive dictatorship. However, the correlation of thought and action is disputed, in fact a classic in philosophy, ranging from common sense utterances that action speaks louder than words, that one should judge people (both in moral and legal terms) not on their thoughts but on their actions, up to the reminder that there is indeed a connection, that calls for violence often lead to real violence. Let the words of Nobel prize winner Maria Ressa speak, quoted in Hietanen and Eddebo (2023):

“Online violence does not stay online. Online violence leads to real world violence.” Maria Ressa, Recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize (SVT, 2021, 1:04:03).

We could formulate this second clash as follows: While there is unanimity that the condemnation of violence is a cornerstone of civilized society, there is disagreement (1) on whether verbal expressions as such constitute harm and (2) on whether hate speech incites violence in the real world.

Point (1) involves several aspects: While it is clear that psychological harm can be as hurtful as physical harm, it is harder to measure. Theoretical discussions do not necessarily conceive of hate speech as harm per se (Barendt 2019); however, one could argue that it should be prohibited due to its potential effects on society.

Point (2) is easier to defend, and also Barendt (2019) points out: If hate speech leads to physical harm, it needs to be detected and censored, particularly if vulnerable minorities are affected. Also, defendants of direct democracy sometimes forget that the touchstone of democracy is not only the rule of majority but equally the protection of minorities.⁶ The United Nations are unequivocal in

⁶ <https://www.principlesofdemocracy.org/majority>.

stressing that hate speech is often a precursor to real violence. History provides too many proofs of this fact, ranging from the Holocaust to the Srebrenica genocide in Bosnia and Herzegovina. There is also mounting evidence that online hate can turn into real-life violence. Williams et al. (2019) investigate correlations between police crime and Twitter data to show that there is a positive correlation between social media hate and real-world crime. The authors conclude: “This research shows that online hate victimization is part of a wider process of harm that can begin on social media and then migrate to the physical world.” (Williams et al. 2019, 114).

Further, psychological studies now also confirm that there is a cause-and-effect relation, as hate speech possibly causes mental differences: Exposure to hate speech deteriorates neurocognitive mechanisms of the ability to understand others’ pain, as Pluta et al. (2023) have found out. From a utilitarian perspective, it is also important to point out that calls for hatred and violence are pointless if they are not meant seriously in the majority of cases. If all authors of hate speech were convinced that there is a complete disjoint between actions and words there would be very little hate speech.

1.4 Why is Hate Speech Harmful?

After zooming in on the clashes of human rights and the freedom of speech, let us broaden the perspective again and remind ourselves of reasons why hate speech is harmful and may have a corrosive effect on society, and thus why tools such as ours are needed. This list is not encompassing.

- Hate speech affects inclusion and participation in society and its institutions.
- It creates fear and anxiety among the targeted groups.
- Children are at particular risk, as they are particularly defenseless and have less life experience to judge which threats are real.
- Hate speech divides and polarizes society.
- Hate speech is often not based on facts. In a post-fact society, any rumor can rise to a monster.
- Hate speech does not contribute to a solution to possibly real problems, it does not even intend to do so.
- Hate speech may violate human rights (as we have elaborated above).
- Hate speech is often a precursor to real violence (as we have elaborated above).
- Hate speech often meets no immediate resistance in the anonymous space of the internet.

- If unanswered, and not met with resistance such as counter speech, hate speech may lead to radicalization.
- Hate speech is often also harmful for the attackers: an uncontrolled fit of anger may lead to exclusion, to loss of reputation or even one's job, which can set off a vicious downward spiral.
- Hate speech is a real threat to democracy, because the attacked groups are often de-humanized, for instance their human rights are questioned, and the second pillar of democracy – protection of minorities – is jeopardized.

1.5 Why Can Hate Speech not be Filtered Manually?

The amount of posts on social media is simply too large to use manual filtering methods. Also, the fact that social platforms are under financial constraints makes it impossible in practice. Only filtering samples, for instance, to find perpetrators is not a viable answer either, as legal regulations (for example in the EU) demand reliable detection (see, for instance, the court case of EU vs. Musk⁷).

Even if enormous resources and a workforce were dedicated to the task, further problems remained. The task of manual filtering is tedious and very repetitive, and constant exposure to hate speech psychologically affects people, and an army of annotators would possibly be less consistent than a reproducible algorithm.

2 Theoretical Basis and Methodology

After showing why the detection of hate speech is important in the last section, we now turn to the methods needed to address our research objectives: First, we present how one can detect hate speech with state-of-the-art methods (Section 2.1). Second, we present a method that allows us to draw a map of hate and negative sentiment in the religious discourse (section 2.2).

⁷ <https://www.voanews.com/a/like-brazil-the-european-union-also-has-an-x-problem/7772200.html>.

2.1 Hate Speech Detection

2.1.1 An Excursion into Classification Methods

On a computational level, hate speech detection is typically formulated as a text classification problem (Poletto et al. 2020). Each incoming text, typically a social media post or user comment under a news article is classified as either hate speech or not-hate speech. The classification of texts into classes is typically called text classification or document classification and is a long-established task. What all classification models have in common is that they do not only look at a few isolated single indicators but at a multitude, and their interaction. The fact that many indicators (we will use the term *features*) are used already reduces the risk of making errors.

Document Classification

Each document, whether a newspaper article, a web page, a book, a paragraph, a tweet, or a similar discourse unit, is assigned to a class. Classes can, for example, be broad topics divided into the binary classes of relevant or irrelevant documents for an Information Retrieval task (Jurafsky and Martin 2009, chapter 23.1, page 781 ff.; Manning and Schütze 2001, chapter 15.1, page 530 ff. for an introduction). The research questions can deal with e.g. a positive or negative assessment of a political issue in automated content analysis (Grimmer and Stewart 2013 for an introduction). In the majority of the implementations, the words in the documents are used as discriminators between the classes, typically without respecting their sequence or syntactic context.

It would be better to use word sequences, words in combination and their interaction. Document classification respects the combination of words in the sense that it includes all words in a given document. The interaction model is a radically simple one, though. It is only counted how often a word occurs in a given document. The sequence of words and their position in the document or in the sentence is not taken into consideration. That is why this method is often called a bag-of-words model. In order to include a minimal notion of word order, the model is often extended to include frequent sequences of two words (bigram model) or three words (trigram model). Longer sequences are typically not used, as most longer sequences have very low frequencies.

Distributional Semantics and Word Embeddings

One further problem for document classification is that a bag-of-words approach does not know which words are similar. One can extract this knowledge, however, from large texts by considering the typical contexts of each word. Similar words tend to occur in similar contexts, because human language is inherently redundant. The Firthian hypotheses, summarized by “You shall know a word by the company it keeps” (Firth 1957, 14) allows one to detect similar words from the sums of their contexts, and can therefore add semantic knowledge to language models.

Sahlgren (2006) shows that while a very narrow context such as word adjacency delivers linguistic collocations, i.e. relations at the syntagmatic level, larger context windows, such as 10 words before and after, deliver semantic relations and associations, i.e. relations at the paradigmatic level. This insight is also exploited by the hugely successful research paradigm of distributional semantics (Baroni and Lenci 2010), which aims to detect synonyms, antonyms, and hyponyms of words.

Models predicting word similarity are now often based on neural networks. This approach is called word embedding, it goes back to Baroni et al. (2014). The probabilities of words given their context are predicted in two alternative ways, we briefly describe now. The probably more frequently used one, which is known as CBOW (continuous bag-of-word), works as follows:

If we use a context of 5 words, i.e. 2 words before and after the word to be predicted, the probabilities of the word to be predicted, in terms of conditional probabilities, is:

$p(w_0 \mid w_{-2}, w_{-1}, w_{+1}, w_{+2})$ [assuming a context window of 5 words].

All words would need to be predicted, which is too costly in practical terms. To reduce complexity, negative sampling and word hierarchies are used.

Supervised, Unsupervised, and Self-Supervised Learning

While document classification needs texts that are annotated for the classes that the algorithm should be able to detect for new documents, word embeddings are learned purely from the texts. Document classification is a typical instance of supervised learning, while word embedding is an instance of unsupervised learning.

More recently, an approach called self-supervised learning has become very influential, as it is the background of Large Language Models such as BERT and GPT, the latter is the base for the famous ChatGPT tool. Supervised learning approaches typically perform better than unsupervised approaches, but annotating

data is very labor-intensive. It is usually not possible to annotate millions of documents. Unsupervised learning has the advantage that it can profit from the almost unrestricted amounts of data available today, such as complete web scrapes and Wikipedia dumps.

Self-supervised learning takes these enormous amounts of textual data and makes class predictions that are readily available, although they may seem to be very far away from the prediction that is required for a given annotation task. Self-supervised learning predicts the next word (this is why they are also called generative models, as they can directly generate text based on an initial sequence, for instance, a sentence), some models also predict missing words (gap filling, like in a cloze test) or the full sentence. Predicting missing words is an approach that we have just seen in word embeddings, so in a sense self-supervised approaches represent a further development of word embeddings, not only in terms of their historical development.

BERT models focus on predicting missing words in the following fashion: every 15th word is masked, and the training process learns to predict it as accurately as possible from the unmasked words. For this reason, these models are sometimes also called masked language models. Although self-supervised models are basically trained for the “wrong” task – unless you want to predict word sequences – their world knowledge is impressive. They have seen more text than an experienced human in his/her entire life. Due to this, they typically only need little adaptation to be tuned to a specific task, such as question answering, natural language inference, text summarization or hate speech detection.

Large Language Models (LLMs)

The models that emerge in state-of-the-art self-supervised learning are several orders of magnitude larger than the largest supervised models. The number of features (often also called parameters) used for document classification or Distributional Semantics is roughly 10^4 . BERT models and the first GPT model (GPT-1) have about $10^8 = 100$ million parameters. BERT and BART models have between 110 million and 345 million (we use a large BART model in section 4.1). GPT-3 has about 175 billion ($=10^{11}$ parameters). As the models are so complex, and often perform as well as document classification, but on a large variety of tasks, users no longer train them from scratch, which would also be unecological. Training a GPT-3 model from scratch uses as much energy as a thousand US households per year.

Neural Networks and Transformers

We mentioned each node in a neural can be thought of as a separate logistic regression. In addition to the logit function known from logistic regression, other activation functions can also be used to trigger a node or “neuron” to fire or not.⁸

Classical feed-forward networks arrange the nodes in a grid of several layers, each layer containing several nodes, and every node is connected to each node in the subsequent layer. The number of layers defines how “deep” the deep neural network is. These networks have been used successfully for many tasks, also in computational linguistics. A class of neural networks called transformers (Vaswani et al. 2017) is particularly successful, because they observe a very large context window, by means of the so-called attention mechanism. The attention mechanism amplifies the weights of (the relatively few) important tokens in the context window and decreases the weight of all others. The aim of the attention mechanism is to simulate cognitive attention.

Pre-Training and Fine-Tuning

The large pre-trained models can be used directly for many tasks, without any adaptation, a so-called zero-shot approach. Alternatively, they may be adapted to a task with a small number of additional training instances. We use a fine-tuned model in section 3.1. These approaches are called few-shot. Usually, only the weights of the last few layers of the neural network are adapted based on the annotated, task-dependent material. The main advantage of fine-tuning is that far fewer training instances are needed than when training a model from scratch. Transformer-based LLMs have such detailed world knowledge that fine-tuning only needs to specify the particular task, for example, question answering, summarization, natural language inference, stance detection, hate speech detection, language level, etc.

Shortcomings and underlying reasons

A common criticism of deep neural networks is that they are “black boxes”, methods that are too complex to understand what happens in detail. Accordingly, it is hard to anticipate in which cases these models tend to fail. Neural models including transformers are typically very reliable, but sometimes they produce arbitrary, seemingly absurd results in sparse data situations, so-called hallucinations. Traditional model evaluation, i.e. computing the accuracy or F1-score over an en-

⁸ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Activation_function#Comparison_of_activation_functions for an overview of activation functions.

tire test set, does not help in this situation, since it only measures the overall performance – not the specific strengths and weaknesses of a given model. As a solution to this lack of insight where models fail behavioral testing has been suggested by Ribeiro et al. (2020). This is the motivation for our project presented in section 3.1. In addition, adding difficult and rare cases systematically, as we are doing, also reduces the risk of hallucination.

In addition to the algorithmic shortcomings, to which we alluded above, and which we evaluate in detail in the results section, we are aware that our proposed methods (described in the remainder of this section) have many further shortcomings. For instance, it can be argued that detecting hate speech only finds the symptoms but does not address the underlying questions: why do some people feel so offended, marginalized, and threatened by society that they see no other way but to resort to uttering hate speech? Will people who feel patronized by the state (“Wutbürger”) feel less patronized by AI?

A partial answer could be that recognizing hate speech is a first step in addressing it. Deleting offenders’ posts or banning users if abuse persists at least protects the potential victims, the targeted groups. Ideally, counter speech and talking to the identified offenders about the situation of their victims would be the next step.

2.1.2 Why is Classifying Hate Speech Difficult?

Hate speech detection is a special case of the more general task of text classification. However, there are a number of attributes that make hate speech detection a unique and challenging classification task. In this section we will highlight five of these hate speech-specific challenges and in the following section, we will showcase our new approach addressing these challenges.

The first challenge is that there is no universally agreed on definition of hate speech (Fortuna et al. 2018). There exist many datasets and classification models for hate speech, but they are often based on similar but slightly disagreeing definitions. Further, even if datasets and definitions agree, studies have shown that annotators (humans labeling texts as hate speech or not-hate speech) interpret these definitions differently, leading to inconsistent annotations that lead to contradicting signals for models trained on these data. How to handle such disagreements in the training data is an ongoing field of research (Uma et al. 2021).

Secondly, hate speech is often not expressed in simple, overt ways, like “I really hate the Jews.”. Instead, hate speech often relies on implicit language, metaphors, comparisons, and references to current events, making its detection challenging, even for state-of-the-art methods.

The third challenge is common to many text classification tasks: while there are many English hate speech datasets, there is little to no hate speech data for most of the world's languages. Current research addresses this on the one hand by creating datasets in more languages (Chhabra and Vishwakarma, 2022) and on the other hand by developing methods that require less training data (Röttger et al. 2022).

Fourth, when hate speech detection is used in content moderation systems to flag or block hate speech comments, then we expect to get an explanation for why a comment was flagged or blocked. However, current hate speech classifiers are black box systems that cannot provide such an explanation.

Finally, another line of research has shown that hate speech classifiers are often prone to keyword-based misclassifications. For example, Gröndal et al. (2019) demonstrate that simply adding the word “love” to the end of a hate speech comment will mislead many hate speech classifiers. Conversely, Röttger et al. (2021) have shown that hate speech classifiers tend to classify cursing or expressions of anger as hate speech, even if no protected group is attacked in the text.

Beyond these main challenges, there are more issues being researched such as (a) how to consider the context dependence of hate speech (b) how to deal with temporal shift since the styles and contexts of hate speech evolve constantly, and (c) how to handle multi-modality since hate speech is often not only expressed via text or speech but in combination with images or memes. Our goal for this section was to give an overview of current challenges in hate speech detection research. We will now turn to our own work, proposing a new approach for hate speech detection.

2.1.3 Why is Automated Hate Speech Detection Difficult?

Not only is it challenging to clearly define hate speech; detecting it may be even more difficult. Hate speech, or in general, all expressions with a similar meaning may be expressed in a multitude of ways. At the level of words, linguists speak of synonymity and ambiguity.

So-called synonyms express very similar meanings. For instance, *astronaut* and *cosmonaut* are synonyms, or *hate* and *despise*, or *kill* and *execute*. In order to cover all expressions potentially containing hate speech, one would need a very long list of words, and a large dictionary. These examples of synonyms also show that there are hardly any full synonyms: *astronaut* points to a U.S. or European setting, while *cosmonaut* refers to Russian space programs, with all the political and military implications. *Kill* refers to any form of taking life, while *execute* has more likely a legal setting. These subtle differences may have an effect on hate

speech status: while *I think all Jews should be killed* is clearly hate speech, the statement *I think all terrorists should be executed* is clearly not – discussions on the death penalty need to be possible in democracies.

While the word *execute* on the one hand has a narrow meaning when it refers to taking life, it also has further meanings that are very different – it is highly ambiguous. Think of the contrast between *I think all police orders should be executed* and *I think all police staff should be executed*. Ambiguity is a main reason why using a large dictionary of words, so-called dictionary-based approaches, do not perform very well. In the example of *execute* many, probably the majority of, utterances do not contain hate speech. In *I think all police orders should be executed* the fact that police orders are not alive (linguists use the term *animate*) triggers the correct reading of *execute*, and also illustrates that the status of an utterance hate speech or not depends on whether the hate speech target is animate and member of a protected group.

These examples already show that we need to know more than individual used words as a filter. We minimally need to use words in combination and their interaction, and we need to know which words are similar. Text Technology, disciplines like Computational Linguistics and applications like media content analysis offer methods addressing these requirements. A relatively simple method to use words in combination is bag-of-words classification, and word similarities can be computed by the various methods that are called word embeddings.

2.1.4 Modular Zero-Shot Hate Speech Detection

We now describe a new approach for hate speech detection, developed by us and published in Goldzycher and Schneider (2022), and Goldzycher et al. (2023). In these papers, we propose a new framework that enables modular, and interpretable zero-shot hate speech detection. It is modular because the framework allows for extensions and modifications, e.g. to make the classifier more robust or tailor it to a specific hate speech definition. It is interpretable because the final hate speech prediction is composed of many “atomic” predictions that can be inspected.

Finally, the framework is “zero-shot” as it does not require hate speech examples to train on. In this section, we describe this approach in more detail.

Natural Language Inference for Text Classification: As explained in Section 2.1.1, text classifiers need to be trained (or fine-tuned) on thousands of examples that are marked with a specific class – in our case, the classes are *hate speech* or *not-hate speech*. Yin et al. (2019) propose a new zero-shot text classification approach (zero-shot means that no training for the specific task at hand is needed)

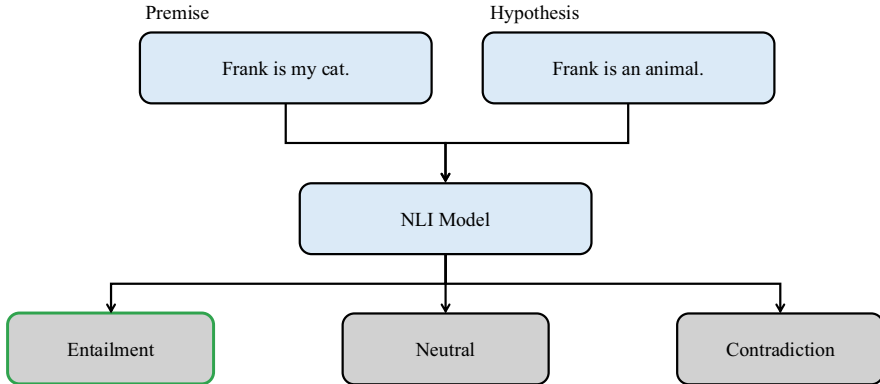


Figure 1: The inputs and outputs of a natural language inference model.

that works by repurposing natural language inference (NLI) models. An NLI model takes a premise and a hypothesis as input and produces a prediction of “entailment”, “contradiction”, or “neutral” as output. “Entailment”, in this case, means that the hypothesis is entailed by the premise. “Contradiction” means that the hypothesis contradicts the premise. And “neutral” means that the hypothesis is neither entailed by the premise nor contradicts the premise. Figure 1 displays an example. Yin et al. (2019) propose to repurpose NLI models for text classification by inputting the text to classify as the premise and formulating a hypothesis of the form “This text is about X”. We expect the NLI model to output entailment if the text is indeed about X and we expect it to output contradiction if the text is not about X. We remove the neutral option from the NLI model to force it into making a binary classification. Figure 2 displays this method of using NLI for text classification. Yin et al. (2019)’s experiments show that this approach can lead to high-performing topic classifiers.

Natural Language Inference for Hate Speech Detection: Our work (Goldzycher and Schneider, 2022) starts by applying this approach to hate speech classification. This means inputting the text to classify as the premise and formulating a hypothesis that says “This text is hate speech”.

Analogously to the previous zero-shot topic classification examples, if the model predicts “entailment”, we can interpret this as a prediction of *hate speech*. Conversely, we can interpret the model outputting “contradiction” as the prediction of *not-hate speech*. To evaluate how accurate this approach is we test it on a popular test suite for hate speech detection named HateCheck (Röttger et al. 2021). HateCheck contains over 3,700 sentences, either marked as *hate speech* or *not-hate speech*. These sentences are not collected from social media like most hate

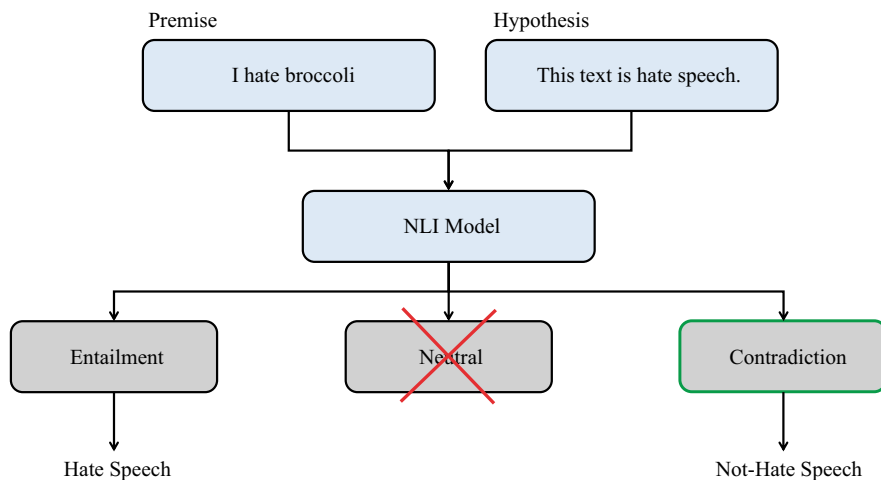


Figure 2: Using a natural language inference model for text classification.

speech datasets, but are based on manually created templates with the goal of covering common and challenging types of hate speech and especially difficult types of non-hate speech.

Using this dataset, we evaluate how well our NLI model can detect hate speech and observe an accuracy of 79.4%. This is a comparatively high accuracy that beats hate speech classifiers which have been trained on hate speech data. We now turn to the main contribution of our work, which is “Hypothesis Engineering” for hate speech detection.

Hypothesis Engineering: Text classification with an NLI model can be done in a zero-shot fashion, i.e. requires no task-specific training data, as we have just illustrated. This means that we can use an NLI model not only to predict if the input text contains hate speech, but also to predict any property that we are interested in, simply by adjusting the hypothesis. E.g. if we are interested in whether the input text contains anger, we can formulate a hypothesis “This text contains anger”. This means that NLI models allow us to predict *any* properties of the input text that we might find helpful for a final decision with respect to the question of whether the input text contains hate speech. The flexibility of NLI models to predict any aspect represents a great opportunity. But how do we decide which aspects of the text we want to predict out of all the possible aspects one could predict? One response to that question, indeed the response that we explore in this paper, is that we aim to identify relevant aspects by analyzing where the current NLI hate speech detection model fails. These additional hypotheses are then aimed at mitigating the identified weaknesses.

Weaknesses: We use the HateCheck test suite to analyze the weaknesses of NLI models as zero-shot hate speech classifiers. The test suite is structured into 29 categories of hate speech and difficult-to-classify types of non-hate speech. Examples of such categories include “expression of strong negative emotions” (“I hate [PROTECTED GROUP]”), or “Denouncements of hate that make direct reference to it” (“You have to stop calling [PROTECTED GROUP] disgusting.”). When evaluating our NLI model on these categories, we identify four main clusters of weaknesses: (1) The model often predicts those texts as hate speech which contain abusive language or strong negative emotions, even if they do not contain a protected target group (a necessary condition for hate speech). (2) The model misclassifies denouncements of hate speech as actual hate speech. (3) Reclaimed slurs, e.g. “queers”, often lead to harmless texts being misclassified as hate speech. And (4), dehumanizing comparisons between groups of people and negatively associated animals, such as monkeys, pigs, rats, or “the plague” are often not correctly recognized as hate speech.

Strategies: For each weakness, we develop a strategy of how to mitigate that weakness using the NLI zero-shot text classification. All strategies are based on additional aspects being predicted by the NLI model. A strategy is a collection of hypotheses to predict these aspects and rules for how to combine these predictions with the prediction of the “main hypothesis” (“This text is hate speech.”). The strategies are called (1) Filtering by Target (FBT), (2) Filtering Counterspeech (FCS), (3) Filtering Reclaimed Slurs (FRS), and (4) Catching Dehumanizing Comparisons (CDC). We describe here the first strategy, FBT. For further strategies, we refer to the original paper (Goldzycher and Schneider, 2022).

Filtering by Target (FBT): As described, our strategy aims to mitigate false classifications as hate speech when the input text contains negative or abusive language but is not directed at a protected group. In this strategy, all protected groups and characteristics, according to a given hate speech definition are inserted into the text template “This text is about [PROTECTED GROUP]”. This leads to a list of hypotheses such as “This text is about black people”, “This text is about Jews”, “This text is about Muslims” etc. We collected the NLI model predictions for all hypotheses. Finally, we implement the rule that if the model predicts that none of these target group hypotheses is applicable, then a possible prediction of hate speech is corrected to not-hate speech. The process is sketched in Figure 1.

Extending the Zero-Shot Paradigm to More Languages: In Goldzycher et al. (2023), we extend this approach to a multilingual setting and evaluate, among other experiments, whether hypothesis engineering is beneficial for NLI-based hate speech detection in other languages when either no or few training examples are available.

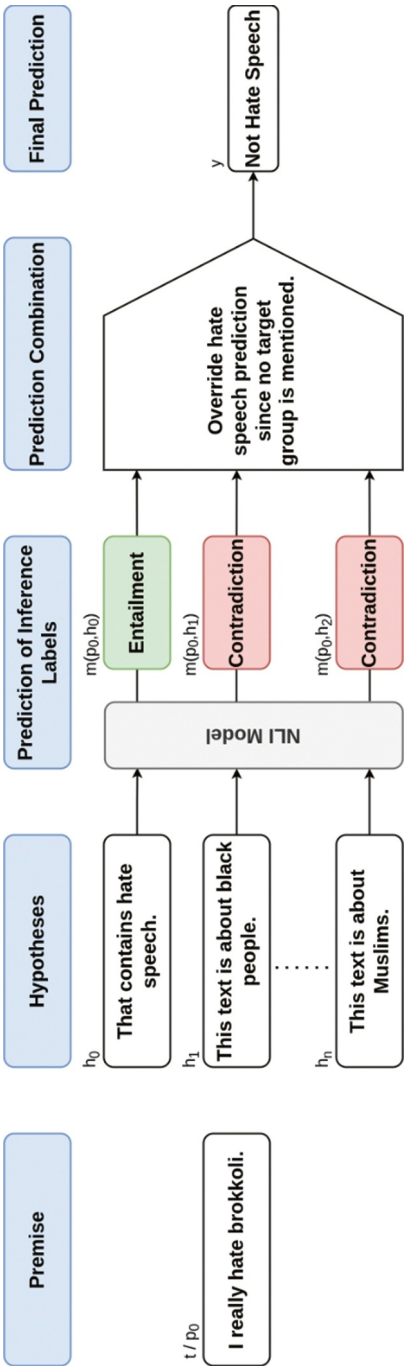


Figure 3: An overview of the “Filtering by Target” strategy. Image taken from Goldzycher and Schneider (2022).

We describe the evaluation of the hypothesis engineering and its extension to more languages, in Section 3.1.

2.2 Conceptual Maps

We now present the methods used to address the second of our research questions: how much hate and negative sentiment is present in religious discourses on social media? For this, we investigate frequently used words in the context of religion, spirituality and faith from social media, and create maps of frequently co-occurring words. We also introduce our motivation and data.

2.2.1 From Word Profiles to Conceptual Maps

Firth (1957) noticed that words which frequently co-occur, or which occur in similar contexts, are similar or related in meaning (section 2.1.1). Conceptual Maps use even more context than word embeddings. Words that occur together in contexts can be counted in word-word co-occurrence matrices, and the visualised in such a way that strongly connected words appear close together, and rarely connected words far away. Advantages of this method are that one can obtain an overview of a dataset at a glance while also allowing exploration of words that appear between clusters – and e.g. serving as bridges – or those that are important across the entire collection.

A disadvantage of the approach is that it is word-centred, it cannot profit from word embedding. Therefore, a statistical smoothing method is applied, namely Kernel Density Estimation (KDE, Zucchini 2003). The smoothing process makes sure that the method also works with relatively small datasets. We use KDE to create maps, which we call *conceptual maps*, but there is no broadly accepted established term, as the method is used only rarely and has significant potential. Some of the rare uses are Kaufmann (2020) and Eve (2022). The created maps are like *mind maps* (Buzan and Buzan 1993), although these are typically drawn manually. We argue that the method of creating term-term matrices with KDE and then plotting similar words together is an automated method to draw maps that are similar to mind maps.

Kernel Density Estimates are functions of these mutual co-occurrences which are learned from corpus data. Then, visualisations of similarities of words are done in the form of such networks, which we call conceptual maps. In order to obtain smoothed results, approximating functions are used which gloss over data fluctuations. We use the Python library *textplot* (McClure 2015) to calculate the

term-term co-occurrence matrices and the spring attraction algorithm *ForceAtlas2* (Jacomy et al. 2014) in *gephi* to create two-dimensional maps.⁹

2.2.2 Theoretical Background

Religion is a frequent target of hate speech, discrimination, misunderstandings and intolerant ideology. Political oppression in the name of religion is a reality in many areas of the world. Accordingly, we need to expect an important amount of hateful utterances and very negative attitudes. We extend our study beyond hate speech to generally assess negative and positive sentiment and attitudes on religious topics, as they are mirrored in social media.

Neubert (2016) suggests a radically discursive, i.e. data-driven, definition of religion. The assumption that words are concepts and are defined by their use has already been suggested by Wittgenstein (1953), in this sense the Firthian hypothesis can be seen as a consistent operationalisation. Neubert (2016) argues that a definition of religion needs to include the social discourse.

Die Suche nach einer wissenschaftlichen Definition geht jedoch weiter und stößt immer von Neuem auf die Frage, wie Religionsverständnisse in breitere soziale Diskurskontexte eingebunden sind. (Neubert 2016: 15)

The search for a scientific definition, however, needs to go further and keeps encountering the question of how conceptions of religion should be embedded into larger discursive concepts. (Neubert 2016: 15, our translation)

Such a discursive understanding, Neubert (2016) argues, needs to be grounded in what religion means to people on an everyday basis, how they personally connect to it.

Da empirisch also am Ausgangspunkt religionswissenschaftlicher Theoriebildung dieses Alltagsverständnis liegt, könnte man dieses bei konsequenter Theoretisierung auch explizit zum Ausgangspunkt machen.

Because this everyday conception of religion is the starting point for scientific theory formation in religious science, it could also be explicitly made its initial point, following a consistent theoretisation. (Neubert 2016: 15, our translation)

We suggest to use social media as a proxy to such an everyday understanding, as a glimpse into the worries, discoveries, inspiration, awe, and prayers of a frag-

⁹ <https://www.gephi.org>.

ment of society. We are aware that such a selection can hardly be representative of the population as a whole, but that we are rather shown an aggregation of the loudest voices on the market square.

An empirical bottom-up definition crucially depends on the data, accordingly we do not expect to see a comprehensive definition, we also assume that the results would be considerably different, if different texts, for example the scriptures and scholastic texts, were used.

Given large amounts of representative data, the method can be seen as an operationalisation not only of Neubert's (2016) idea, but more generally of de Saussure's linguistic concept, in which words are not defined by what they are, but in counter distinction to other similar words, until they form a system of pointers in the sense of Derrida's *différance* (Derrida 1968), where the ultimate grounding is constantly deferred.

The personal experience, which seems to be a central difference between religion and spirituality, is also often referred to by the term of *faith*. *Faith* is sometimes seen as a subset of spirituality and mainly a Christian concept, but other scholars give it the central position. In their discussion of the differences between faith, religion and spirituality, Paul Victor and Treschuk (2020) write that "Faith is more personal, subjective, and deeper than organized religion and relates to the relationship with God", and how individuals are touched by God and their religious experiences. It is also often described as psychological human universal, e.g. "Faith, from a more naturalistic, psychological perspective, is merely the innate drive to search for meaning, purpose and significance." (Popcak and Popcak 2014).

Newman (2004) sees *faith* as the underlying force behind both religion and spirituality.

[I]n my model, spirituality and religion are a function of faith. Both religion and spirituality require faith as a foundation (. . .). In other words, faith is the guiding principle by which individuals are either religious or spiritual. Faith serves as both the source and the target of their religion or spirituality. Devotion to religion or perception of growth in spirituality may be seen as a measure of greater valence of understanding one's faith. (Newman 2004, p. 106)

To explore the question of the role of *faith*, we added it to the picture as a third term, allowing us to see the overlap in meaning between *faith* and *spirituality*, or to observe the differences.

For the conceptual map that we present in section 3.2, we use a collection of over 100,000 tweets that we collected in Spring 2021. We queried for the terms *religion*, *spirituality*, and *faith*. 51,277 tweets contain the term *religion*, 36,733 contain *spirituality*, and 31,145 contain *faith*. We compare spirituality and religion in order to verify the hypothesis that spirituality is seen as much more positive than

religion, which is connected to negativity, hierarchy and scandals. This hypothesis is expressed by Neubert (2016) as follows:

‘Spiritualität’: in vielen Kontexten ‘Religion’ positiv gegenübergestellt wird – entweder als positive Überhöhung und ‘wahres Wesen’ von ‘Religion’ oder aber als in positiver Weise individualistisch, innerlich und heilsorientiert, wogegen ‘Religion’ negativ mit Organisation, Hierarchie, Dogmatismus und Weltlichkeit verknüpft wird. (Neubert 2016: 127)

‘Spirituality’ is often juxtaposed to religion as positive – be it as positive idealisation or the true essence of religion, or as positively individualistic, intimate and healing, whereas ‘religion’ is negatively connected with organisation, hierarchy, dogmatism and profanity. (Neubert 2016: 127, our translation)

In order to measure positive and negative sentiment, we have also included an automatic sentiment detection tool (Hartmann et al. 2022), which annotates every tweet with the pseudoword *sentinegative* and *sentipositive* respectively.

3 Main Findings

3.1 Hate Speech Detection

We now apply the methods given in section 2.1 to hate speech detection.

Hypothesis Engineering Evaluation: For the evaluation of the NLI approach for hate speech detection, i.e. hypothesis engineering, we use a BART model (Lewis et al. 2020) fine-tuned on the MNLI dataset (Williams et al. 2018). It is available in the huggingface transformers library (Wolf et al. 2020) under the name “bart-large-mnli”.

Table 1: Evaluation of hypothesis engineering strategies on HateCheck.

Strategy	Accuracy	Δ (percentage points)
Without Strategy	79.4	0.0
Filtering by Target	82.7	+3.3
Filtering Counterspeech	84.0	+4.6
Filtering Reclaimed Slurs	80.1	+0.7
Catching Dehumanizing Comparisons	79.6	+0.2
Overall	87.3	+7.9

We evaluate the approach on two datasets: HateCheck and ETHOS (Mollas et al. 2022). The ETHOS consists of real social media posts collected from Youtube and Reddit. We use a part of the dataset that has binary annotations (hate speech vs.

Table 2: Evaluation of hypothesis engineering strategies on ETHOS.

Strategy	Accuracy	Δ (percentage points)
Without Strategy	69.6	0.0
Filtering by Target	78.7	+9.1
Filtering Counterspeech	69.6	+0.0
Filtering Reclaimed Slurs	71.3	+1.7
Catching Dehumanizing Comparisons	69.5	-0.1
Overall	79.6	+10.0

non-hate speech), following a hate speech definition that is close to the definition in HateCheck, and contains 997 texts. In contrast to HateCheck, which informed our hypothesis engineering, i.e. the proposed strategies, ETHOS is new to this setup allowing us to measure the generalization capabilities of the proposed approach. Table 1 shows the evaluation results on HateCheck. First, we observe that the overall accuracy on HateCheck increases from 79.4% to 87.3%, an increase of 7.9 percentage points. Second, we see that each individual strategy increases the accuracy. And third, the table shows that the strategies Filtering by Target and Filtering Counterspeech lead to the largest increases in accuracy. Moving on to the results on the ETHOS dataset in Table X, we observe a similar improvement in accuracy from 69.6% to 79.6% – an increase of 10.0 percentage points. However, for ETHOS we see that two strategies (“Filtering Counterspeech” and “Catching Dehumanizing Comparisons”) do not improve the accuracy at all, and that most of the improvement comes from the strategy “Filtering by Target”. We highlight two findings from these results: (1) Hypothesis engineering can improve the accuracy of NLI-based zero-shot hate speech classifiers making them as accurate as fine-tuned classifiers, sometimes even surpassing them. (2) Hypothesis engineering for hate speech detection is not only useful on the domain that informed the hypothesis engineering, but it also generalizes to other domains, demonstrated by the fact that the results did not just improve on HateCheck but also on ETHOS. (3) The usefulness of individual hypothesis engineering strategies depends on the domain, platform, or genre of text to classify – as seen in the different results on HateCheck and ETHOS. Thus, having a range of strategies can make the classifier more robust to different types of input text.

Extending the Hypothesis Engineering to More Languages: To test the hypothesis engineering strategies in more languages, we need a multilingual NLI model and datasets to test on, in multiple languages. We focus on five languages for which there exist the necessary NLI training data and the appropriate hate speech datasets. These languages are Arabic, Hindi, Italian, Portuguese, and Span-

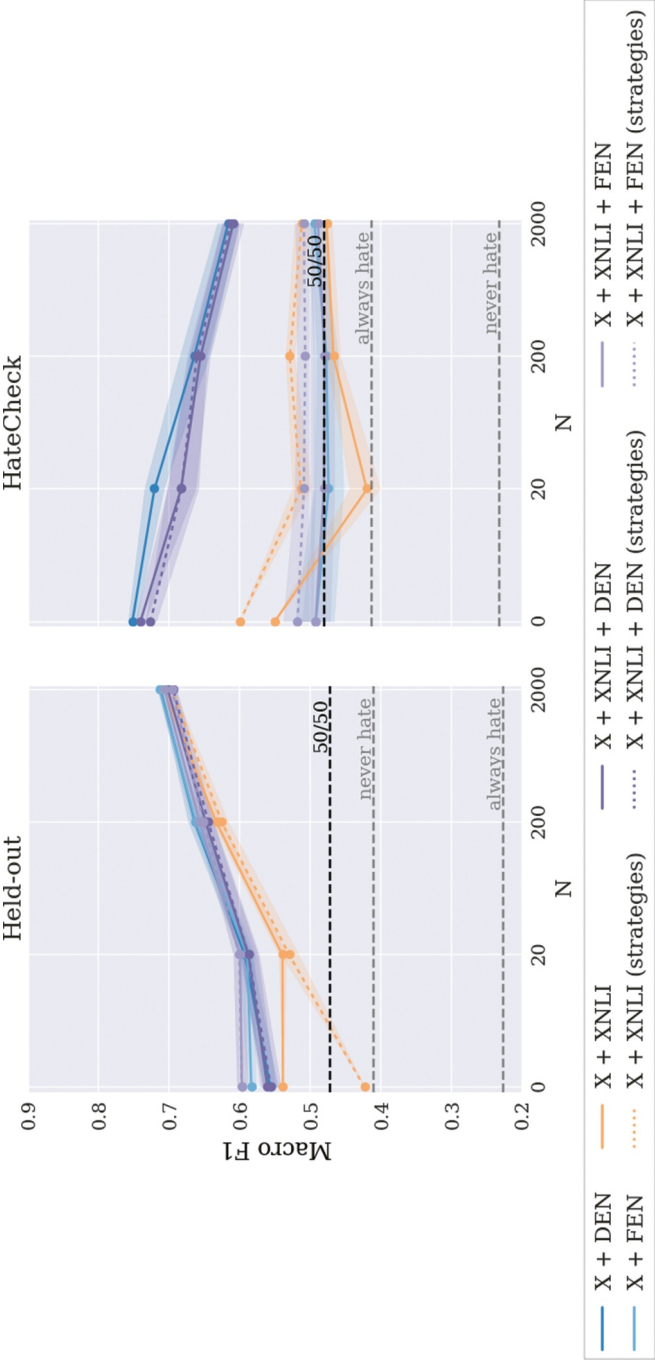


Figure 4: Results of hypothesis engineering (strategies) in five more languages.

ish. To get an NLI model for all those languages we train a RoBERTa-based model (Barbieri et al. 2022) on the multilingual natural language inference (MNLI) dataset (Williams et al. 2018). We then either directly perform hypothesis engineering in the target language or train further on 20, 200, or 2000 examples in the target language. The averaged results over all languages are displayed in Figure 4.

The left part of the plot named “Held-out” shows the average performance on Twitter datasets in the target languages and the plot on the right side shows the average performance on multilingual versions of the HateCheck dataset (Röttger et al. 2022). The plot uses a macro F_1 score (higher is better). The “N” in the X-axis corresponds to the number of training examples in the target language. The shaded areas denote bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals based on averaging ten models per setting. The different colors correspond to different training datasets, where “X” refers to the multilingual base model, “XNLI” to multilingual NLI dataset (Williams et al. 2018). “DEN” and “FEN” refer to different hate speech datasets. Solid lines denote the results without hypothesis engineering and dotted lines in the same color denote results when the hypothesis engineering has been applied additionally. Thus, to analyze the effect of hypothesis engineering we need to compare the dotted with the solid lines in each color. We observe that on average, over the five languages, hypothesis engineering leads to mixed results – in contrast to the only positive results in English. While there are no positive effects on the Twitter datasets, we see improvements from hypothesis engineering in half of the settings on HateCheck. Overall, these results show that the impact of hypothesis engineering in multilingual setups depends on the language, application domain, and availability of training data in the target language.

3.2 A Map of Associations

We now turn to conceptual maps (see section 2.2 for the method) to explore associations and the presence of hate in the online religious debate. The data-driven, radically discursive conceptual map of the juxtaposition between religion, spirituality and faith is given in Figure 5. *Faith* and its co-occurring words are shown at the top, *spirituality* on the left and religion on the right. *Faith* appears close to *hope*, *god*, *Jesus* and the *word of the Bible*. The Bible connects *faith* to *religion*, which in turn is associated with abstract concepts like the institution of the *church*, *state*, but also calls for *freedom* and *respect*. In addition to mentioning some of the world’s important religions including *Islam*, *Hinduism* and *Christianity*, *politics* highlights the conflicts involving religion, and these are often ignited with reference to different beliefs, such as *hate* and *race*, but also *gender* discrimination, which we can also spot here. The negations (*doesn*, *don*, *isn*) are due to complaints,

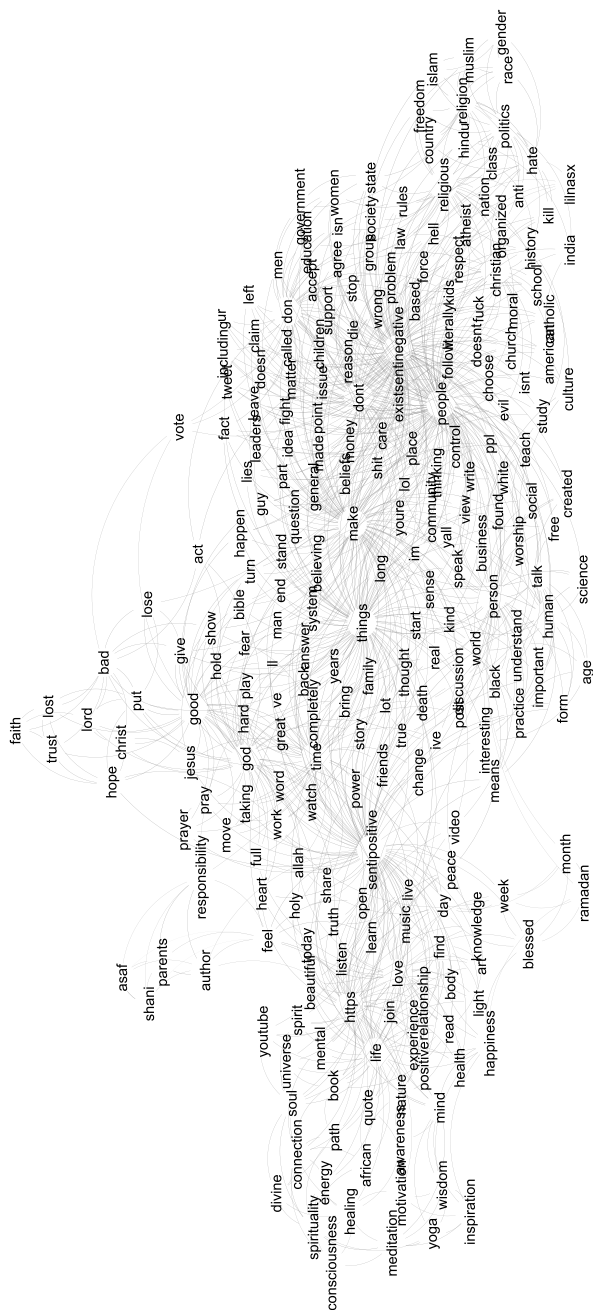


Figure 5: Conceptual map of spirituality, religion, and faith with the 250 most frequent words.

e.g. that (other) religions *don't respect* our values, or warnings, namely that *hate* doesn't solve any problem. Also, the positions of the pseudowords *sentinelative* and *sentipositive* confirm Neubert's (2016) hypothesis. Expressions of hate and strong negativity for religion is in fact stronger than we had expected.

4 Conclusion

Hate Speech is a harmful phenomenon and cannot be detected manually, due to its sheer volume on the internet. We have addressed our first research question of how we can detect hate speech with state-of-the-art methods by presenting computational linguistic algorithms that we have applied and improved. We summarized our research proposed in previous papers, in which we propose a new framework for hate speech detection that addresses four drawbacks of previous approaches, including adaptability to specific hate speech definitions, explainability of the final decision, and requiring less hate speech-specific training data than previous approaches. Our experiments show that these advantages can be achieved while upholding classifier accuracy. When applied to analyzing data on the internet, our framework enables a more fine-grained analysis of hate speech, such as detecting what types of attacks are prevalent on social media, which religions are targeted how often, and how the contexts, expressions and types of hate differ by religion.

In our second research question, we have addressed how much hate and negative sentiment is present in the religious discourse, in data-driven fashion. Conceptual maps are a data-driven method that learns associated words from the contexts, in the spirit of Firth (1957). We have used the method to obtain an overview map of the terms *religion*, *spirituality* and *faith*. We observed that *religion* is highly politicized, and frequently associated with *hate*, *discrimination*, polarization and the power of the church and other forms of institutionalization) as institution.

5 Future Research

5.1 Hate Speech Detection

In future work, we aim to enhance the accuracy of our approach, specifically in non-English languages. An obvious opportunity lies in using new, more competent large language models as the backbone model for hypothesis engineering. Further, since hate speech detection based on hypothesis engineering relies on multiple predictions, such as if a text is about a specific group, or if it contains a comparison to

animals, we can use these intermediate predictions for a fine-grained analysis. For instance, we can examine who is targeted how frequently, what types of attacks are how prevalent and how specific groups (for example religious affiliations) are targeted with particular expressions, associations, or tropes. We envision this toolset being used as the foundation of a cycle of quantitative and qualitative analysis: For example, a qualitative deep dive into posts classified as using animal comparisons for Muslims can reveal underlying narratives, tropes, and contextual factors of these attacks. These insights, in turn inform improved hypothesis engineering strategies leading more accurate and granular quantitative analyses feeding a continuously improving cycle. The results of such an iterative approach can provide a much more nuanced understanding of hate online with broad potential implications for many fields including social sciences, religious studies and debates about free speech vs. content moderation.

5.2 Conceptual Maps

Our current selection was motivated by the question of which religious concepts attract hate and hate speech. We will do a more detailed analysis of which groups and issues are most contested and most affected by negative stance and hate. We will use automated versions of close reading harnessing the semantic detail of LLMs to detect these and their implications for democratic discourse, inclusivity and security of minorities, which have motivated the current study. We also aim to include further terms that are relevant in the discussion of religion and society, and also further datasets, for example scientific religious research papers. We will also use further methods to create semantic maps in addition to KDE, for example t-SNE (van der Maaten and Hinto 2008). In addition, we will investigate if Musk's and Trump's utterances further spurn hate, e.g. which features of right-wing populism and targeted hate (Wodak 2015) appear. Religion is often used as a pretext to exclude segments of society, we hope to shed further light on these questions by investigating associations and stance.

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Jasmine Suhner and Thomas Schlag

(Inter-)Religious Education in Digital Society

Abstract: The digital reality profoundly impacts religious pedagogy, creating new opportunities and risks in religious education, and influencing theology itself – especially in terms of (inter-)religious learning processes and the challenges of navigating broader cultural transformations in the digital age, well beyond the changes precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the project “(Inter-)Religious Learning in a Digital Society” focuses on the consequences, transformations, and responsibilities arising from this dynamic for a wide range of religious education stakeholders. This article explores two sub-projects of this URPP project in detail: firstly, a research project on the digital transformation of religious education organizations, conducted at the intersection of religious pedagogy and (organizational) psychology, in collaboration with nearly 60 Swiss educational organizations; secondly, the use of digital media and digitalization within confirmation work, the non-formal educational program of Protestant churches, especially in Europe. The findings of both sub-projects offer insights into factors influencing the decision to offer or participate in digital Religious Education (RE) courses; outlining the elements that contribute to readiness for cooperation in the digital educational domain; and identifying the challenges and opportunities of digital RE for learning and ‘theologizing’ in the current technological and societal context.

Die digitale Realität hat tiefgreifende Auswirkungen auf die Religionspädagogik, indem sie neue Möglichkeiten und Risiken in der religiösen Bildung schafft und Auswirkungen auf die Theologie selbst hat – insbesondere auf (inter-)religiöse Lernprozesse und die Herausforderungen, die sich aus den Wandlungsprozessen in einer Kultur der Digitalität und weit über COVID-19 hinaus ergeben. Daher konzentriert sich das Projekt „(Inter-)Religious Learning in a Digital Society“ auf die Konsequenzen, Veränderungen und Verantwortlichkeiten, die sich aus dieser Dynamik für eine Vielzahl von Akteur*innen im Bereich der religiösen Bildung ergeben. Dieser Artikel befasst sich eingehend mit zwei Teilprojekten dieses UFSP-Projekts: Erstens mit einem Forschungsprojekt zur digitalen Transformation religiöser Bildungsorganisationen, das an der Schnittstelle von Religionspädagogik und (Organisations-)Psychologie in Zusammenarbeit mit fast 60 Schweizer Bildungsorganisationen durchgeführt wurde; zweitens mit der Nutzung digitaler Medien und der Digitalisierung in der Konfirmationsarbeit, dem nicht-formalen Bildungsprogramm der evangelischen Kirchen, wie es insbesondere in vielen europäischen

Ländern angeboten wird. Die Ergebnisse beider Teilprojekte bieten Einblicke in die Einflussfaktoren, digitale religiöse Bildung anzubieten oder daran teilzunehmen; die Elemente zu formen, die zur Kooperationsbereitschaft im digitalen Bildungsbereich beitragen; sowie die Herausforderungen und Chancen des digitalen Religionsunterrichts für Lernprozesse und das Theologisieren unter den aktuellen technologischen und gesellschaftlichen Umständen zu identifizieren.

1 Introduction

“We want to move beyond the emergency mode.” This statement by the umbrella organization *plusbildung*–Switzerland’s ecumenical association of nearly 60 religious education (RE) organizations—exemplifies the starting point for the research and various sub-projects within the larger framework of “(Inter-)Religious Learning in a Digital Society,” which was as P9 part of the URPP “Digital Religion(s)” in its first phase 2021-2024. In this concrete organizational statement, “moving beyond the emergency mode” refers to the deliberate adaptation to the digital reality of (inter-)religious education, particularly in light of the interim solutions hastily developed during the COVID-19 crisis in many Swiss and European educational organizations.

Behind the intention to move beyond this crisis mode lies a more general understanding of current technological developments, their societal impact, and the potential consequences for RE. This finds its expression in the following quotation: “There is a new world coming, and it is coming much faster than most people realize” (Mercer and Trothen 2021, 3). The new world ushered in by digitalization is leading to a fundamental societal transformation: It shapes processes of perception, thinking, and acting, taking hold of societal production of values, knowledge, dialogue, and sense-making, and affecting all kinds of learning processes.

This is reflected by the exponential growth in the number of publications in the field of “digital learning,” with the sector of “Educational Technology” (Ed-Tech) expected to see a 16% growth between 2022 and 2026 (Global Data 2022). In 2020, the OSCE announced that: “Digital technologies can play an integral role in celebrating and upholding freedom of religion or belief when harnessed for outreach and dialogue. At the same time, the rise in intolerant discourse and hate speech directed at religious or belief communities during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates the risk of the digital space becoming a forum to incite discrimination, hostility or violence on grounds of religion or belief” (OSCE 2020).

This complex field of research and action, with its corresponding opportunities and challenges for (inter-)religious education, is where the URPP project P9 positions itself. To appropriately contextualize the study and its results, this article begins with a brief outline, from a meta-perspective, of the conditions and possibilities of digital education as a unique didactic form (2). Following this, and based on related transformations in the context of RE, the article outlines two sub-research projects of P9:

First, this article discusses the challenges facing RE organizations in terms of navigating the post-digital pivot. It addresses the issues of changing forms of teaching and learning, dealing with shifts in authority, and the growing need for collaboration and shared strategies among RE organizations in post-digital society. A participatory research project involving nearly 60 Swiss RE organizations investigated how these organizations are dealing with digitalization – analyzing the perspectives of organizational leaders, teachers, and learners – through mixed methods (3).

Second, the article describes a second subproject addressing the importance and impact of digital media and digitalization in confirmation work. Based on current empirical studies on confirmation work in Switzerland and Europe, which P9 was involved in, the focus is on the media usage of confirmands as well as their expectations and experiences within the context of this non-formal RE program. Correspondingly, the article also addresses findings related to the thematic assessments of the staff involved (4).

Thus, these two subprojects offer generational perspectives on non-formal education programs – from the perspective of adults on the one hand and from adolescents on the other. Both projects provide insight into factors influencing the decision to offer or use digital RE courses; elements contributing to the readiness to cooperate in the digital educational field; while identifying the challenges and opportunities of digital religious education and ‘doing theology’ more generally. Both projects identified the need for deeper professional engagement with both digital methods and current digitalization dynamics to shape digital RE in a future-oriented and high-quality manner within the framework of education-oriented organizational development.

2 Conditions, Possibilities and Research Gaps in the Field of Digital Religious Education

2.1 Digital Education as Its Own Didactic Form

At this point, the focus is less on examining methods or models for concrete teaching and learning practices in digital culture, and more on considering, from a meta-perspective, the conditions and possibilities of digital education and RE as a distinct didactic form. The internet, with its seamless space-time integration, described by philosopher Luciano Floridi as the “infosphere” (Floridi 2015), allows for the connection and synthesis of various media into a unified learning context, transforming it into a hypermedium independent of spatial and temporal constraints. Learning and teaching can take place anywhere and at any time, establishing a ubiquitous didactic presence. This does not replicate traditional in-person learning. Instead, new forms of learning emerge through virtual reality and digital environments. The infosphere can be understood as both a receptive educational space and a performative space for thought and action, structured through non-linear networks (Noller 2022, 33–44). The altered logic of space and time in the digital age brings learning objects closer together, creating a context of knowledge that grows in complexity through relational connections.

This complexity is not merely quantitative, in terms of an increase in information or data volume, but qualitative, arising from the networking and compression of information. In other words, the internet as a hypermedium differs fundamentally from “analogue” teaching tools, not simply by providing faster access to information, but by representing a new form of information organization—one based on interconnectedness in a very specific, but nevertheless “real” and even “embodied” sense.

Additionally, learning in post-digital contexts is inherently procedural and up-to-date, meaning it is not updated in periodic intervals as is the case with “analogue” educational materials that rely on newer printed editions, which may even have had to undergo a process of formal recognition by the respective relevant authoritative institution.

The procedural nature of learning materials and processes is explicitly open to cooperation, participation, and exchange, even including content that may not always represent an obvious added or common value. This phenomenon – of continuous, new content creation – by no means only applies to certain online resources that are constantly expanding and, at the same time, being updated almost incessantly. Rather, large language models such as ChatGPT and corresponding image generation programs are now creating ever more customised learning content and

entire learning formats based on the users' own creative authority. It seems as if, in an etymological sense, the term 'learning resources' is increasingly characterised by the image of a constantly gushing wellspring or fluid 'source' due to the dynamics of hypermediatisation.

Moreover, the traditional distinction between teachers and learners – which was already becoming blurred in pre-digital contexts (Hattie 2008) – is also increasingly fluid in the age of interconnected networks and the semantic "web," though not entirely erased. Research highlights a shift in digital society away from traditional educational settings, where authority is clearly assigned to instructors, towards a more autonomous, learner-driven process. In this model, teachers act as facilitators who provide individualized support: "As teachers became more proficient with tablets through training and cross-cultural networking, they adapted their teaching style and approach, thus becoming facilitators of learning rather than teachers on the stage" (Shonfeld et al. 2021).

The digital learning environment is often not characterized by verticality, but by horizontality. While horizontal structures certainly existed in traditional contexts, they lacked the flexible hypertextual structure of the internet, which allows for an even greater degree of horizontal interaction and engagement. The role of individual-oriented versus group-oriented learning settings has also been extensively studied in terms of their respective learning processes and outcomes. Research in this area highlights the importance of communication and collaboration for effective knowledge exchange and learning results in digital environments (Kümmel et al. 2020).

From a sociological and philosophical perspective, it is essential to note: the ubiquitous availability of learning settings in digital society – forms of learning that are available any time and anywhere – represents both an expansion and a restriction of freedom. Paradoxically, the digital shift increases the number of educational options, while simultaneously reducing diversity in another sense: there is a greater number of learning settings, but fewer internal differentiations among them.

The background to this paradox is as follows: non-digital environments are characterized by a high degree of indeterminacy, while the digital realm is based on strict determinacy (Luhmann, 1976 [1964]).¹ Luhmann also emphasizes the importance of informal processes, even within highly formalized structures, for

¹ Paradoxically, the digital demand for precision and determinacy in order to capture and process data leads to actual blurring and inaccuracy in the recording of this data. Anyone who has ever filled out a questionnaire knows this. The request, for example, to tick personal characteristics on a questionnaire when applicable always results in a reduction of actual social complexity.

maintaining the functionality of systems/organizations. Actions that take place within the framework of a digital, information-based structure are highly determined and precise, which inherently limits flexibility, spontaneity, and pragmatism. Even in the most structured and regulated non-digital social situations, actors generally retain the ability to perform actions that were neither anticipated nor planned – actions that might be the result of affect or spontaneity, or which require informal processes, such as those based on goodwill or discretion. These unanticipated, sometimes spontaneous actions are only possible because the underlying structure of the social situation does not exclude or prohibit them from the outset.

Therefore, continuous dialogue about the foundations of an emerging didactics of digitality is an essential task for both general and subject-specific didactics, in both theory and practice: “new skills and sensibilities are needed to understand the world and design for it. We need to make explicit what these new abilities are and place the means for learning these skills at the heart of society. The alternative is the gradual curtailment of democratic processes, as people lose their power to contribute to debates about their future, the services they wish to use, even the systems in their homes.” (Cook and Light 2006, 52).

This emphasizes the critical importance of developing didactic frameworks that reflect the rapidly evolving digital environment and its “power structures”. Didactics must not only adapt to these changes but also actively and critically shape the skills and competencies needed for individuals to navigate and contribute meaningfully to a digitalized society. (Savin-Baden 2021; 2024). In other words, a “(post)digital pedagogy” that is both theoretically and empirically substantiated is required.

It has to be mentioned here that, in this article, both the terms “digital religious education” and “(post-)digital religious education” do not appear coincidentally but rather as a matter of deliberate choice. The rationale behind this dual nomenclature is grounded in the increasing but yet not fully-established use of the term “post-digital” and the debate surrounding this concept, which denotes a perspective that moves beyond the novelty of digital technology, focusing instead on its pervasive integration into everyday life, culture, society and thus also religious communication. This term does not therefore imply a rejection of digital media but rather a shift in discourse, where digital technologies are no longer seen as extraordinary but as embedded, ubiquitous, and often invisible. In this sense, the “post-digital” is not an era after digital technology but a mode of engagement that recognizes its deep entrenchment in contemporary life (Cramer 2014).

The term itself also indicates a certain critical perspective, insofar as post-digital thought interrogates the social, political, and aesthetic implications of digital saturation, addressing issues such as surveillance or algorithmic governance,

questioning techno-deterministic narratives and highlighting the entanglement of human and non-human agencies. Rather than celebrating digital innovation per se, post-digital critiques examine the consequences, ethics, and conditions of post-digital labor (Coeckelberg 2023), promoting just and inclusive pedagogies for higher education while considering ways to ensure learning remains an ethical and political experience (Savin-Baden 2021; 2024, though using the term “postdigital” without hyphen!) and is therefore fruitful as a critical perspective on the processes of religious education.

2.2 The Organizational Level and Non-Formal Part of Digital RE: A Research Gap

The particular challenge of this thematically-oriented research project within the URPP, and also its potential contribution to knowledge, lies in the fact that the field of digital RE has been woefully neglected as a topic in international digital religion research. It is true that for about twenty years, this field of research has included a wide range of empirical studies and theoretical classifications of religious practice under the conditions of digital mediatization. However, surprisingly, hardly any corresponding studies can be found for the area of RE, at least in the research initiated and conducted in the Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian contexts. Researchers in these contexts seem quite removed from the formal educational context of school and even more so from the non-formal educational contexts in churches and religious communities.

The situation is somewhat different in the German-speaking context, particularly regarding the school-related context, where much more intensive thought has been given to the connection between digital mediatization and RE in recent years, and numerous theoretical debates and empirical research projects have already been conducted (Pfister and Dietzsch 2021; Nord and Petzke 2023; Schlag and Nord 2021; Nord 2019; Schlag 2025). Since the COVID-19 pandemic especially, this research has increasingly and deliberately incorporated aspects of strategic organizational planning and thus also of the institutional self-image of various religious stakeholders.

In this respect also, the insight that digital society not only shapes the actions of individuals but also has a profound impact on organizations as systems holds true and has considerable significance for the field of RE and its organization logic. Behind this insight is the conviction that focusing on learners and educators is just as crucial as an examination of the organizational factors that contribute to an effective transformation of teaching and learning processes in a digital society (Petko, Prasse and Cantieni 2018).

However, the organizational consequences of the education sector in the context of digital society remain a peripheral issue in research, especially in the field of RE. “While there are extensive studies on the influence of new media on teachers and those that receive the knowledge, especially at the level of educational organizations, the relationship between the organization, actor, and digital transformation has so far been little examined.” (Dörner and Rundel 2021; Ifenthaler and Egloffstein 2020).

Upon further examination, another gap in research becomes evident in that, while the challenges of digitalization in teaching and learning processes have been discussed for more than three decades, the focus of these discussions has primarily remained on school settings. “(E)xisting models of educational technology adoption and integration predominantly focus on school settings as well as on individual factors explaining the assimilation process” (Ifenthaler et al. 2021). This highlights the need for further exploration of how digital transformation affects educational organizations beyond the school context and how these institutions as systems adapt and integrate digital practices in non-school settings. Both research subprojects presented here, on the one hand, mark this desideratum, and on the other hand, they also aim to encourage a more substantial engagement with these topics – the interplay between individual and organizational levels of action, and non-formal RE – in the future.

Overall, based on this context and the identified research gaps, P9 has addressed the corresponding research and action requirements in various fields: the transformation of RE organizations (Suhner 2025b), youth theology and digitalization (Schlag and Suhner 2023), religious communication between power and empowerment (Müller and Suhner 2023; 2025), social media as a space for new articulations of transreligious experiences (Suhner 2025a) and digital media in confirmation work (Schlag et al. 2024b).

3 Navigating the Post-Digital Transformation of RE Organizations: Results of a Swiss Participatory Research Project

3.1 Theoretical Basis and Methodology

As a central research project, P9 conducted an accompanying study with nearly 60 educational organizations, in collaboration with the Swiss association “plusbildung,” an umbrella organization comprising educational institutions, competence

centers, and organizations from the Catholic, Protestant-Reformed, and ecumenical sectors. It offers a range of RE for adults, including interreligious, spiritual, personal development, and cultural, educational offerings (Dachverband Plusbildung 2024). The individual member organizations operate within both the ecclesiastical and the public education and service markets. Their transition to digital means is driven by the need to remain competitive in a rapidly changing educational landscape and to improve their educational offerings, pedagogical efficiency, and economic performance, while also continually reviewing the educational content to determine how and in what ways the digital education market presents new competitors, options for collaboration, and new educational content. As of 2019, “*plusbildung* includes 59 formal member organizations across the linguistic regions of Switzerland (German, French, Italian) (Dachverband Plusbildung 2019).

The accompanying research was carried out using a participatory approach, aiming to reflect both the methodological importance and the increasing relevance of shared power dynamics in a digital society. To achieve this, a combination of the following four methodological approaches was employed: a) A case study at a representative member organization, specifically focusing on one of its digital education modules (participant observation and individual interviews with participants of this educational module); b) a quantitative-exploratory online survey; c) qualitative expert interviews with teachers and leaders of the member organizations; d) web scraping and topic modeling of all *plusbildung* member-organization websites (Schneider 2024). The design was exploratory, factoring in various hypotheses.

Three central research questions were established:

1. What are the most significant factors influencing the intent to offer/use religiously themed digital educational offerings? That is, who uses and who offers digital RE services at *plusbildung*? Why?
2. What are the contributing factors that influence a positive experience with digital/hybrid RE offerings and practices? That is, which digital offerings are perceived as most successful by teachers and learners? Why?
3. Which factors most influence the willingness of individual member organizations to see digitalization as a call for shared strategies and further joint development? That is, what next?

The following section presents one main finding from the online survey segment of the study (more detailed results in Suhner 2024) and, therefore, outlines its theoretical basis. From the beginning, the co-researchers concentrated on operational questions related to methods, structure, and the implementation of religious educational processes in digital environments. Examples include: Which

methods are effective in a digital setting? Which tools enhance specific methods? However, narrowing the focus solely to particular methods would be too granular to yield meaningful insights. To address these questions (see Research Questions 1 and 2), the framework developed by theologian Karlo Meyer was utilized as a foundation: Meyer's meta-analysis of contemporary didactic approaches to interreligious learning resulted in a four-part model designed to classify most of the models commonly discussed in the academic discourse on interreligious education. This model emphasizes not the educational content itself but the "mode" – the way educational content is perceived, processed, and potentially further explored during teaching and learning. These modes reflect the goals of the educational process from both a didactic and motivational perspective. While the modes are not directly tied to specific methods, certain methods and forms of presentation can be loosely linked to them. Importantly, the four-part framework is applicable not only to interreligious educational settings but also to religious ones, especially when the term "experiences" is added to the title and additional "opening aspects" are incorporated into the third and fourth modes:

The first mode – "subject-specific and methodological learning" – refers to the ideal profile of a scholar of religious studies, initially concerned with the objective perception and interpretation of phenomena, statements, and sources in general. The particular hermeneutic emphasis is on scientific objectivity.

The second mode – "existential learning and reflecting" – puts the focus on the ideal profile of the existential thinker. The particular hermeneutic emphasis is on *personal reflection*, which leads to the reconsideration or first emergence of one's own positioning and is expressed verbally or otherwise creatively.

The third mode – "learning for/through encounters" – refers to a situation-sensitive, socially and ethically justified handling of religion-specific situations. This mode includes not only *encounters* in everyday situations where religious topics play a role but also *behavior* in "indirect" encounters with religious representatives, religious traditions but also with religious experiences.

The fourth mode focuses on acts – "learning and preparing for action". Regarding general RE, this mode can be divided into religious-community-specific engagement and general engagement.

To explore these approaches to religious traditions and experiences, a questionnaire was developed comprising 34 items in total. One set of questions examined the intentions of teachers and the perceptions of learners concerning the educational contexts provided by the umbrella association *plusbildung* in general, regardless of the specific educational format. Another set of questions focused solely on digital educational contexts. Respondents could select multiple options for both sets of questions, with answers recorded on a 5-point Likert scale. Each of the 34 items aligns with one of Meyer's four modes of religious engagement.

3.2 Main Findings

When the aforementioned items are grouped according to the four modes, the following trends emerge regarding *general educational intentions* for both educators and learners: *Teachers* concentrate primarily on Quadrant 3, with a high agreement rate of 90.8%. Quadrant 1 follows as the second-highest priority, with 78.2% agreement. Lower levels of agreement are observed in Quadrants 4g (72.5%), 2 (64.1%), and 4e (54.1%).

For *learners*, the priority is on Quadrant 1, showing a strong agreement rate of 87.1%. The second-highest emphasis is on Quadrant 3, with 78.3% agreement. Quadrants 4e (69.3%), 2 (64.4%), and 4g (60.5%) receive comparatively lower levels of agreement.

Quadrant / modes of approaching religious traditions and experiences	General educational settings	
	Teachers	Learners
1 subject-specific and methodological learning	78.2 %	87.1 %
2 existential learning and reflecting	64.1 %	64.4 %
3 learning for/through encounters	90.8 %	78.3 %
4 learning and preparing for action	4g: 72.5 % 4e: 54.1 %	4g: 60.5 % 4e: 69.3 %

Figure 1: Table comparing the values of teachers and learners in terms of their intentions or perceptions of the mode of religious engagement in general educational settings. Percentages are rounded to one decimal place. Shading: darker background colors indicate higher values.

The results for *digital educational settings* differ significantly. *Teachers* prioritize Quadrant 2, with a high agreement rate of 89.7%. Quadrant 3 is the second most emphasized, with 71.3% agreement, followed by Quadrant 1 (70%) and Quadrant 4 (57.5%), which show lower ratings.

From the *learners'* perspective, the primary emphasis shifts to Quadrant 1, with a strong agreement of 72.7%. The second highest priority is Quadrant 2, with 54.8% agreement, while Quadrants 3 (40.4%) and 4 (34.2%) receive comparatively lower ratings.

Modes of approaching religious traditions and experiences	Digital educational settings	
	Teachers	Learners
1 subject-specific and methodological learning	70.0 %	72.7 %
2 existential learning and reflecting	89.7 %	54.8 %
3 learning for/through encounters	71.3 %	40.4 %
4 learning and preparing for action	57.5 %	34.2 %

Figure 2: Table comparing the values of teachers and learners in terms of their intentions or perceptions of the mode of religious engagement in digital educational settings. Percentages are rounded to one decimal place. Shading: darker background colors indicate higher values.

These findings offer valuable insights when comparing general and digital educational settings. Two key observations stand out: First, in digital teaching and learning environments, the primary focus for teachers shifts significantly – whether intentionally or not. In general settings, the emphasis is on encounter-based learning (90.8%) and academic-methodological learning (78.2%). However, in digital settings, the focus transitions to existential learning (89.7%) and, to a lesser degree, encounter-based learning (71.3%). Second, a notable divergence emerges between teachers’ and learners’ perceptions. The two modes prioritized by employees (leaders and teachers) in digital contexts – existential learning and encounter-based learning – are rated significantly lower by learners. Specifically, existential learning is rated at 54.8% by learners, and encounter-based learning at just 40.4%.

Overall, the findings point to substantial potential for specific methods in the digital domain, especially for promoting social, encounter-oriented, and personal-existential learning. So far, the teaching methods used for these purposes have rarely been perceived as effective by learners. Supplementary qualitative results from the study illustrate that analog didactic approaches have predominantly been carried over into the digital space, neglecting the unique features and opportunities of a digital pedagogy – potential that still needs to be (further) developed. Given the fact that RE, from a theological perspective – and explicitly from the viewpoint of the providers of the educational formats in this study – is fundamentally about encounter, it must be asked what specific kind of learning RE

Quadrant / modes of approaching religious traditions and experiences	GENERAL educational settings		DIGITAL educational settings	
	Teachers	Learners	Teachers	Learners
1 subject-specific and methodological learning	78.2 %	87.1 %	70.0 %	72.7 %
2 existential learning and reflecting	64.1 %	64.4 %	89.7 %	54.8 %
3 learning for/through encounters	90.8 %	78.3 %	71.3 %	40.4 %
4 learning and preparing for action	63.3 %	64.9 %	57.5 %	34.2 %

Figure 3: Table comparing the values of teachers and learners in terms of their intentions or perceptions of the mode of religious engagement in general and exclusively digital educational settings. Percentages are rounded to one decimal place. Shading: darker background colors indicate higher values.

aims to offer in a digital society. This perspective raises the question of how this task may be reimagined within a digital context with its own didactic forms – and what implications this holds for the potential and responsibilities of RE. There is an urgent need for evidence-based development of encounter learning and affective learning in digital education. To further address this need, interdisciplinary educational research is essential (Gegenfurter et al. 2021).

4 Digital Media and Digitalization in Confirmation Work in Europe

The following results are part of the so-called third European study on confirmation work (Ilg et al. 2024), which was conducted between 2021 and 2024, and is, regarding the time frame and especially the research approach, strongly connected with the URPP as a whole and especially with the research questions of P9. This study builds on the first European study which was conducted in 2007/08 (Schweitzer, Ilg, and Simojoki 2010) and the second study which was carried out five years later in 2012/13 (Schweitzer et al. 2015), which also included a longitudinal follow-up survey (Schweitzer et al. 2017). This study continues a long-term re-

search process which – in its continuity, its scale, and the scope of its international-comparative design – is unparalleled in the field of religion-related youth research. The nine countries involved in the third study were Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Norway, Poland, Sweden, and Switzerland. This large-scale quantitative study included responses from more than 9000 confirmands and about 1600 workers in t_1 (autumn 2021) from mainly online questionnaires, with responses from more than 6000 confirmands and almost 900 workers in t_2 (spring 2022). The specific Swiss study also included research on nonformal education at the primary level, which was conducted in the same time frame (Schlag et al. 2024a).

4.1 Methodology and Thematic Research Questions

Since confirmation work is, like other forms of non-formal education, mainly characterised by in-person interaction and embodied community experiences, the previous two studies hardly included any references to the use of digital media and digitalisation in confirmation work. Given the fundamental importance of digital communication for today's young generation, it was time to pay more attention to this issue based on recent research. The main research questions – which also integrate the dimension of organisational transformation – were:

1. Is the competent and intensive use of digital media crucial for confirmation work to be high quality, successful, and 'well received'?
2. Is 'digitalisation' an important, or possibly even *the* central topic of this church education programme, and does this have wider relevance in the broader perspectives of education-related church development?
3. If confirmation work, according to its theological-pedagogical claim, aims to focus on and thematise the life and everyday world of young people (Simojoki et al. 2018), should it not also make the reality of digital media use and the dynamics of digital transformation a central theme and consideration in church design practices?

To this end, the present study interweaves two perspectives: Confirmation work in a "culture of digitality" and digital learning in confirmation work. The broader horizon was operationalised by asking the confirmands about the role of digital media in their life. Aspects of the "learning" dimension included whether phenomena of "religion online/in the internet" should be addressed in confirmation work, how much their experiences with social media were issued, the use of digital media by the workers, the importance of digital media for group communica-

tion and also formats of digital learning. In order to approach these complex questions, also basic insights from the so-called CONTOC (“Churches Online in Times of Corona”) studies have been taken into consideration (Schlag et al. 2023; 2025), in order to arrive at the best possible well-founded orientations with regard to the key questions mentioned above.

4.2 Main Findings

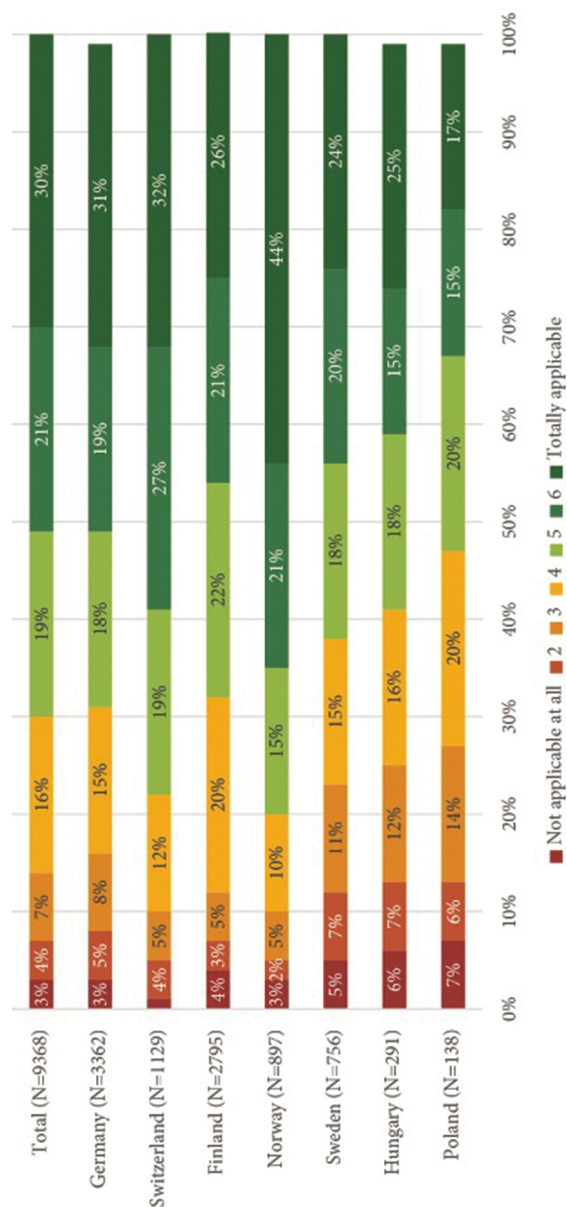
One thing should be said in advance: The keywords ‘digital media’ and ‘social media’, as we used them in the questionnaires of the studies – admittedly not uniformly – were probably not primarily associated by the young people with specific tools, but rather with the everyday self-evidence of digital media as social media. The confirmands are likely to have associated precisely this everyday practice in their answers, so that the results of the study not only allow conclusions to be drawn about the technical use, but also about their everyday, personal and perhaps even strongly emotionally determined use. The answers may also reflect how the confirmands perceived the church representatives’ approach to digital dynamics and their own life world. In this respect, these answers can also be interpreted as an expression and indicator of how young people fundamentally assess the relevance and timeliness of church in the current situation of digital transformation.

4.2.1 Importance of Digital Media

In order to determine the confirmands’ initial self-assessment of the importance of digital media, we asked the confirmands what role these media play in their lives (t_1). Here, the international study shows as an average value that digital media play an important role in the lives of 70% of the confirmands. A comparative look at the results of the individual countries reveals a very similar trend overall, with some minor deviations. If the three positive agreement options of the 7-point scale, i.e. 5–7, are taken together, the ‘lowest’ agreement with this item is found in Poland with just over 50% and the highest agreement in Norway with 80%. For the vast majority of confirmands, digital media are also an important part of everyday life and the communication practices that take place within it.

However, the question now is what this finding actually means for confirmation work itself. After all, the fact that digital media play a major role in everyday life does not necessarily mean that confirmands want to see this reflected in their confirmation time. For this reason, we used a thematic questionnaire to ask the young people about their expectations (t_1) as well as their experiences (t_2) with digital media. We

CE52: Digital media play an important role in my life.

Figure 4: The role of digital media in the lives of confirmands by country (t₁).

also asked the employees about their own expectations (t_1) and experiences (t_2) with the use of digital media, which can't be presented in this article in further detail.

4.2.2 Confirmands' Expectations Regarding the Use of Digital Media in Confirmation Work

This shows that at the beginning of the confirmation period, the possible use of digital media in confirmation work is particularly popular in Finland (61%), Switzerland (60%), Norway (58%) and Germany (57%). The approval rate is lower in Poland (40%), Hungary (28%) and Sweden (26%). In this respect, the picture is more mixed than for the question about the important role of digital media in one's own life, and the country results themselves diverge considerably more. It may come as a particular surprise that the result for Sweden, which is highly developed in terms of digitalisation, is much lower. This gives the impression that the use of digital media is not necessarily on the agenda for a large proportion of confirmands – at least that was the expectation at the beginning of the confirmation period.

The question now arises as to what has actually become of these expectations at the end of the confirmation time. For this reason, a corresponding questionnaire was designed for the t_2 questionnaire.

4.2.3 Confirmands' Experiences with Digital Media in Confirmation Work

These results should be mentioned in advance: Due to the weaker participation of some of the countries that took part in t_1 , only the data from Germany, Switzerland, Finland, Norway and Hungary could be analysed in t_2 . The picture here is as follows:

Digital media was primarily used as a *means of communication* in all of the countries analysed. This is shown by the fact that 64% of confirmands stated that they used digital media for communication in the group (KT34). Compared to the high approval rates regarding the use of digital media as a *means of communication*, the use of digital media as a *learning tool* was significantly lower. All of the country results integrated here show low values: Only 20% of the confirmands state that they used social media for creative work (KT36) and only 18% state that they used online games in class (KT37). Only 26% of all confirmands took part in online lessons. This figure is less than 20% in the individual countries, with the exception of Germany with 41%. Germany also has the highest figure for online

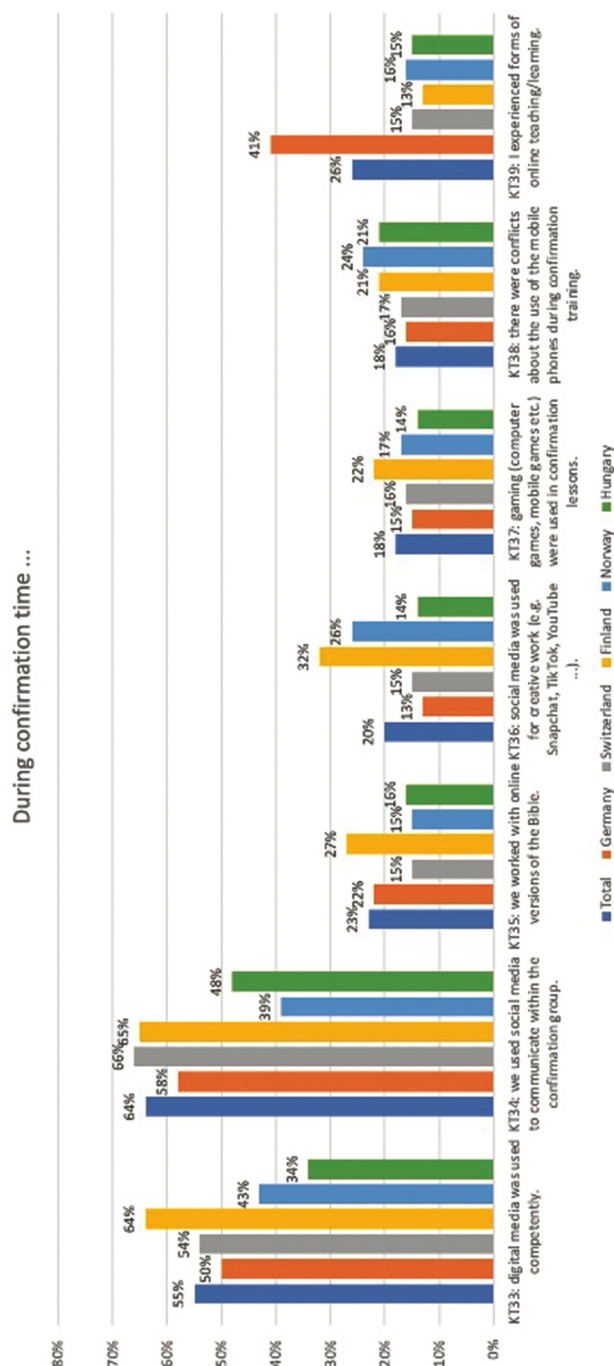


Figure 5: The use of digital media from the perspective of the confirmands (t₂).

church services and prayers at 35% (KS21). Both of the latter results are presumably due to the special restriction measures during the coronavirus period.

It is also striking that only around half of the young people who participated in the study considered the use of digital media by workers to be competent (KT33). From a broader perspective, this may well be seen as a revealing perception of how young people assess the technological affinity – and thus, as already indicated above – the continued relevance of the church and its representatives in general.

To come back to the initial question: How important is the use of digital media for a positive and quality-perceived confirmation time? Further in-depth calculations have shown that there is no statistical correlation between the use of digital media for communication purposes and the feeling of connectedness within the group during the coronavirus pandemic. There is also no statistical correlation between experiences of using digital media and the confirmands' impression that employees stayed in contact with them during this time! A further correlation analysis shows that there is no correlation between overall satisfaction with the confirmation period and the desire to use digital media more often! Our calculations have also shown this: The *more satisfied* the confirmands were with their use of digital media, the *less* they thought that digital media should have been used more.

There are certain reasons for this almost systematic reluctance to increased digital use: On the one hand, these reasons may relate to the experience of digital oversaturation in general; on the other hand, this may have to do with the fact that those involved on all sides expect more intensive forms of personal encounters during the confirmation period – after COVID-19, anyway. The objectives of this program are obviously strongly geared towards a culture of personal encounters and community. This can also be seen from the fact that, despite sometimes very different technological developments and equipment between different countries, the basic picture is quite similar in an international comparison.

Due to the above-mentioned '24/7 online' practice of young people (and adults!), it is possible that confirmation work is seen as a good opportunity to at least temporarily (even if only for a few hours!) refrain from using these media. Another reason could be that the workers' skills in the creative use of digital media ultimately do not appear to be so convincing that the young people would have liked more specific programs in this direction. In any case, the results make it clear that this specific church education program does not have to conform to the logic of the everyday digital forms of communication experienced by young people.

5 Conclusion and Outlook

In this final section, we will draw conclusions from the results of this subproject of the URPP to date and identify prospects for further research and practice. In doing so, we deliberately take a broad view of the possible, albeit not yet foreseeable, further development of digital technologies, since this will, in any case, have a significant influence on the challenges of (post-)digital religious education and its potential for acquiring critical “digital literacy”.

The CONTOC² study clearly identifies that the successful digital experiments of the COVID-19 period were often scaled back again after the pandemic in favour of an ‘old normal,’ and that there are also insufficient resources available for professional digitalisation strategies – findings which offer considerable food for thought regarding the future of digital RE. For the further development of high-quality digital RE work, we strongly recommend not taking the path that leads back to the “old normal.” If CONTOC² also very clearly shows a not-insignificant discrepancy between digitally enthusiastic and savvy church media users on the one hand, and rather aloof church leaders on the other (Yadav 2025), then there is a considerable need for action. In the ‘worst case’ scenario, there is even a risk that both the educationally attractive digital communication formats and the wider digital dynamics will once again fade into the background in terms of their significance for a responsible organisational practice.

To ensure that RE is experienced by users in a way that is consistent and coherent with their own digitally dynamic everyday experiences, the potential of digital media use and the necessary thematisation of the opportunities and dangers of digitalisation should be addressed more strongly than before.

On the one hand, further analysis should be conducted on whether there is a considerable need to expand the professional-creative pedagogical use of digital tools. It seems that educational staff are not yet fully aware of the educational potential of digital media, which also stems from the fact that, at least in the field of RE, a differentiated digital pedagogy has not yet been developed. A wealth of innovative formats that already exist on a broad basis often do not seem to be ‘on the radar’ and have therefore not yet been sufficiently used. In order for digital tools to actually provide ‘added value’ in RE, it is therefore essential that responsible stakeholders expand their own expertise. The findings of the CONTOC² study clearly show that there continues to be a lack of sufficient offers and measures for training in this area.

Furthermore, in a ‘culture of digitality’ such high-quality sustainable RE will be needed, which concerns not only the ever-changing and accelerating modes of use, but also completely new potential forms of active digital media use, and the

creation of new hybrid contact platforms (Beck, Nord, and Valentin 2021). Digital RE will therefore be in demand in several respects in the future:

Firstly, through a stronger integration of digital formats which make it easier and more engaging to research and retrieve certain relevant information. For example, the conscious use of the possibilities of religious robots (Puzio, Kunkel, and Klinge) and religious chatbots as an expression of certain creative forms of theological productivity (Schlag and Suhner 2023) and also the creation of digital formats such as podcasts, short films or digital storytelling. What seems necessary here is a good mix between the use of digital media and analogue methods in order to do justice to the digital natives – for example, their gaming skills – while at the same time responding to those who want a break from digital media during RE (Schlag and Yadav 2023).

Secondly, it is important – especially regarding interreligious sensitivity, exchange and connectivity – to consider digital networking beyond the circle of one's own "interest" group, for example by building relations with other, 'distant' religious groups in different locations.

Thirdly, in the sense of critical media education, it should be considered how the organization of RE and its representatives want to position themselves, especially with regard to certain indoctrinations taking place via the Internet, especially in the area of religion-related topics and in the sense of productive interreligious dialogue.

Fourthly, the already foreseeable trans- and post-humanist developments are an essential topic of RE. For it is precisely these techno-religious promises that offer considerable opportunities to debate questions about the image of God and man in an intensive and theologically productive way. This can now be studied in an impressive theological treatise from an Islamic perspective and also transferred to RE work (Karimi 2024). If users feel that RE addresses these central questions in a way that is challenging and appealing to them, this is also likely to have a lasting impact on the credibility *of*, the feeling of connection *to* and the willingness to bond *with* the church or other respective religious organizations.

Through such a diverse approach, users could experience that RE thematises both *digital developments as a specific organizational offering* and *its development as a specific digital offering* in a theologically profound way. And this not primarily in the sense of technical use, but in the sense of a creative, timely (Schlag 2024), and critical use of digital possibilities, allowing for reflection about one's own questions, longings, and future prospects.

Success, in these cases, means that all those involved can experience the extent to which RE is an essential component of any learning organization, one that is relevant to everyday life, capable of development, and open to transformation in digital society.

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Protestant Churches, Digitalization, and the Law in Switzerland and Germany: Perspectives and Challenges

Abstract: The relationship between the church and the law has been a subject of profound debate for centuries. The advent of digital technologies has presented a resurgence of interest in this contentious relationship, prompting a re-examination of its nuances. This article delves into this matter by focusing on the Protestant churches in Germany and Switzerland, with the Catholic church as a comparative reference. Secular laws, such as those governing copyright and data protection, increasingly influence church activities. While Germany's Protestant churches benefit from greater legal autonomy, Switzerland faces challenges due to cantonal legal pluralism. The situation in ecclesiastical law itself is distinct. The erosion of physical presence has given rise to fundamental discussions, particularly concerning communion and baptism. However, legal regulation of practices such as digital communion has been limited, leading to uncertainty. The expansion of social media has also prompted a renewed examination of institutional responsibility for the proclamation of the Christian message, often resulting in regulation through *soft law*. The gradual decline in the significance of physical space as a meaningful dimension of church organization, driven by the cross-border effects of digital communication, is likely to be reflected in the elevation of personal congregations.

Die Beziehung zwischen Kirche und Recht ist seit Jahrhunderten Gegenstand intensiver Debatten. Die Digitalisierung kirchlichen Wirkens ist dazu geeignet, dieses spannungsreiche Miteinander einmal mehr plastisch werden zu lassen. Dieser Artikel untersucht diese Thematik, indem er den Schwerpunkt auf die evangelischen Amtskirchen in Deutschland und der Schweiz legt und das katholische Kirchenrecht als Vergleichsreferenz heranzieht. Säkularrechtliche Vorgaben, wie das Urheber- und Datenschutzrecht, nehmen zunehmend Einfluss auf kirchliche Aktivitäten. Während die evangelischen Kirchen in Deutschland von einer größeren rechtlichen Autonomie profitieren, steht die Schweiz vor Herausforderungen durch die kantonale Rechtsvielfalt. Die Erosion physischer Präsenz hat zu sehr grundsätzlichen Diskussionen insbesondere im Blick auf Abendmahl und Taufe geführt. Wie es scheint, sind aber Praktiken wie das digitale Abendmahl nur selten auch einer rechtlichen Regelung zugeführt worden, so dass ein Stück Erwartungsunsicherheit eingetreten ist. Die Ausweitung von Social Media

hat zudem bewirkt, dass die Frage nach der institutionellen Verantwortung für die Verkündigung der christlichen Botschaft neu gestellt und vielfach durch „Soft Law“ geregelt worden ist. Der schleichende Bedeutungsverlust des physikalischen Raums als Sinndimension kirchlicher Organisation aufgrund der grenzüberschreitenden Effekte digitaler Kommunikation schließlich wird sich vermutlich in der Aufwertung von Personalgemeinden abbilden.

1 Introduction

Since the late 19th century, the formula “church and law” has come to represent an intricate relationship, particularly within the Protestant context, with regard to the law of the church itself – that is to say, what can be characterized as the religious law of Christian associations (for a description of religious rights as the law of a specific religion, see Bottoni, Ferrari, and Sandberg 2019, 2; differentiating Pahud de Mortanges 2022, 106–109 and Michaels 2022, 19–20). One of the most influential positions in this discourse stems from Rudolph Sohm (1841–1917), who argued that “The law of the church is contradictory to the very nature of the church” (Sohm [1892] 2016, 1, 7; see Thier 2020, for a discussion of this concept). This assertion continues to serve as the foundation for a fundamental debate concerning the significance of legal normativity for the work of the church (Germann 2016; Honecker 2008, 177; Moxter 2011, 113; Schwab 2024). The positions within the discourse on church law diverge somewhat. The fundamental necessity of law for the church has been emphatically emphasized by the Roman Catholic Church, for example in the constitution *Sacrae Disciplinae leges*, under which the *Codex Iuris Canonici* of the Catholic Church was promulgated in 1983. As John Paul II articulated with remarkable clarity, “founded on the juridical-legislative heritage of Revelation and Tradition,” the Code (and consequently, canon law) serves as “an indispensable instrument to ensure order both in individual and social life, and also in the Church’s activity itself” (John Paul II 1983). However, against this backdrop, the question of whether or not canon law should be analyzed solely with the means of theology has been repeatedly raised (survey in Graulich 2020; in-depth Luf 2015). Here, too, the Church’s view of the law is somewhat ambivalent.

Considering these ambiguities, the progression of digitalization presents a distinctive challenge for the two predominant Christian denominations. Their global engagement constitutes a pivotal aspect of their identity, a feature that is particularly salient within the Roman Catholic Church (Schmidt 1998) and the Protestant official churches in Germany (Klostermann 2000). Digitalization has profoundly altered the landscape of church activities, primarily by facilitating

digital presence through online meeting spaces and, in the near future, by artificial intelligence. New spheres and dynamics of social communication have emerged in the context of social media, and the importance of territorial boundaries has diminished. In response to these shifts, churches have been compelled to depend on legal instruments that define the norms of their operations. This is exemplified by the establishment of protocols for church proclamation. The need for such resources becomes even more clear when grappling with the effects of digitalization on religious authority (on this phenomenon in general, see Hope Cheong 2023, also Campbell 2023) and the structure of church leadership in the context of digital communication and digitalized church processes. However, it is precisely in such scenarios that the theological identity of church action and church institutions must be continuously balanced with the need for universally binding regulations.

This is particularly salient in scenarios where church activities are conducted with resources that fall within the purview of secular legal norms. The integration of church activity into the secular legal system is a theological imperative. Secular law serves as the enabling order for ecclesiastical action, as articulated by international and constitutional law. This is because secular law is also the enabling order for ecclesiastical action, as the guarantees of religious freedom under international and constitutional law (see for example Art. 9 ECHR, Art. 15 para. 4 BV, Art. 140 GG in conjunction with Art. 137 WRV) clearly demonstrate.

Our analysis centers on Germany and Switzerland, with a particular focus on the legal frameworks and practices of Protestant churches. These are examined within the context of their respective ecclesiastical and legal structures. In this regard, the Catholic Church serves as a valuable comparative framework, offering a nuanced perspective through its distinct theological and legal traditions. Employing a predominantly hermeneutic methodology, our research also integrates insights from empirical findings generated by other sub-projects within the URPP. These include, for example, the CONTOC study, explorations of the dynamics of religious actors in digital spaces (P6), spatial-semantic analyses (P2), and analyses of issues related to the public sphere (P12). Insights from these projects have contributed to refining our understanding of key dynamics within the broader research context.

On the one hand, we investigate the challenges of secular law for the digital work of the church. However, we did not want to limit ourselves to analyzing the secular legal situation; rather, we also, importantly, examine whether – and if so, how – church institutions have reacted to such legal challenges (see 2, below). This has led us to a connected field of investigation in which we explore whether and by what means church institutions are reorganizing themselves in the era of digitalization using the tools of ecclesiastical law. It is precisely here that the question of whether, and to what extent, changes in church institutional identity

can also be identified in ecclesiastical law becomes critical (see 3, below). In the final section, future research perspectives shall be addressed (see 4, below).

2 Church Action, Digitalization, and Secular Law Regimes: The Laws of Copyright and of Data Protection as Examples

Copyright, although its origins predate the electronic age, has gained increasing significance in the digital era (Schimana 2009). Due to its close relationship with art and culture, this area of law also has significance for churches (von Gierke 2009, 241; Kröber 2008). Copyright law functions as the property system of the information society, ensuring that creators' rights are protected (Peukert 2023, 2).

The digitalization of church activities has resulted in the exacerbation of existing tensions between church activities and copyright protection norms. A notable example of this tension is the case of a pastor in Switzerland who downloaded an image from the internet and displayed it during his sermon. Consequently, he was ordered to pay damages (Müller 2019). Beyond such individual cases, which underscore the efficacy of official copyright-law training programs for Church personnel (see, for instance, RKZ, EKS 2023), digitization-based copyright concerns emerge most acutely in the context of digital church services. This phenomenon has been particularly pronounced since the advent of the pandemic, during which churches were compelled to transition to digital worship services (see Özgü, Schlag, and Thier 2024, 169–170 for a detailed analysis of this shift in Switzerland). The management of music within the context of copyright law is another salient concern. In Germany, religious institutions found themselves able to rely on well-established regulatory frameworks, exemplified by § 52 (2) UrhG. This regulation, grounded in constitutional law (BVerfG 1978), strikes a balance between individual property rights and public interest in the performance of music. Artists and songwriters must grant permission for the use of their work, in return receiving compensation, which is collected through collecting societies (see Dreier, Schulze, Raue, and Specht-Riemenschneider 2022, § 52 N 11). § 19a UrhG ensures the validity of this regulatory mechanism, granting a statutory but chargeable license, in the context of the digital distribution of church music as well (Dreier, Schulze, Raue, and Specht-Riemenschneider 2022, § 19a N 6 with further references). The EKD has therefore concluded a flat-rate agreement with GEMA in the interests of legal certainty (GEMA-EKD 2024).

The situation is somewhat different in Switzerland. Originally, the right to perform “musical work(s) with lyrics” free of charge was in effect (Art. 32 para. 1 URG). However, the legislator has since removed this privilege (Barrelet and Egl-off 2020, 149–150). The legal right to perform music in church now fundamentally depends on the consent of the rights holder as, unlike in Germany, there is no statutory license. In practice, therefore, collective agreements between SUISA, the collecting society responsible for music, and the two national church organizations, EKS and RKZ, dominate. In this way, licenses for church music are granted and also remunerated for all church levels (see RKZ, EKS 2023, 2–3). However, a notable distinction emerges concerning the financial burden of streamed church services in the Protestant Reformed Churches. While the EKS assumes financial responsibility for these services, the RKZ 2023 has opted against this approach. Instead, copyright responsibility is allocated to the parishes, given the – apparently – relatively limited number of streamed services (15%), leading to the determination of an absence of necessity for a comprehensive contractual solution (RKZ 2023, 1). This exemplifies the way copyright regulation mechanisms exert an indirect influence on religious institutions in the context of digitalization. The financial obligation to remunerate under copyright law for digitalized church services necessitates an examination of the allocation of financial resources within the church’s organizational structure, which can potentially have a negative impact on the local church level.

However, the digital activities of religious institutions, including the use of communication platforms such as WhatsApp for confirmation classes, are subject to regulations pertaining to the protection of personal data. The management of such groups, therefore, becomes a complex endeavor, as the utilization of online tools, such as scheduling platforms, could potentially result in legal challenges (Datenschutzbeauftragte des Kantons Zürich 2020, 27). These challenges not only burden the daily operations of the church but also have the potential to harm its public image if fundamental rights are perceived as not being adequately respected. Data protection regimes for EU member states are also determined by the European General Data Protection Regulation 2016, which aligns with the religious friendliness of European law (as perceived from a church perspective, Schnabel 2014). This is reflected in Article 17 TFEU (Kraus 2015; Hatzinger 2016) and in Article 91 GDPR, which grants churches the prerogative to establish their own autonomous regulations (Ziekow 2016, 970–971). This has resulted in the enactment of corresponding church legislation in Germany (Hoeren 2018; Özgü, Schlag, and Thier 2024, 172; Ziekow 2024, 46–50), which also determines the legal practice of church jurisdiction (Gerjets 2023). In terms of content, this legislation accords significant weight to the church’s interests in data, particularly within the Protestant sector (Neumann 2023; Neumann 2025, 5–6; Ziekow 2016). However,

a plurality of legal rules has emerged, particularly given the application of secular data protection laws (Neumann 2024, 32). This has led to a new imperative for regulatory coordination among the official churches, despite their ability to operate within a sphere of legal autonomy.

The situation in Switzerland is more complex since Swiss churches are fundamentally subject to state data protection laws (Pahud de Mortanges et al. 1999). On the one hand, the cantons have, in principle, issued their own data protection regulations for their bodies and thus also for the national churches created under public law (Rudin 2023, 2–4). On the other hand, the federal data protection law also applies to actors organized under private law (Art. 2 para. 1 lit. a FADP) and thus has an effect on churches that are organized as associations under private law (overview in Winzeler 2015, N. 15–18). In summary, while certain regional churches, such as the Zurich Church, have promulgated their own regulations, there is currently a lack of overarching guidelines (Kirchliches Datenschutz-Reglement 2000). This reflects the legal diversity, stemming from cantonal authority in religious and data protection law, as well as the comparatively lower level of church autonomy in Switzerland compared to Germany.

A comparison of the approaches adopted by Protestant churches in Germany and Switzerland to address the challenges posed by secular copyright and data protection law reveals two distinct regulatory paths. In Germany, church autonomy is more pronounced in the context of data protection law, and the Protestant official church utilizes this autonomy extensively. Conversely, in Switzerland, secular legislators have largely abstained from enacting specific data protection laws for religious institutions. This has led to a plurality of secular data protection regimes, which poses significant challenges for church actors, particularly given the cantonal diversity. Notably, the EKS has thus far refrained from even preliminary proposals for a common position of the cantonal national church.

A parallel approach by the Protestant churches in both countries can be seen in the area of copyright law. By concluding collective agreements with the collecting societies and implementing them centrally, EKS and EKD have continued a long-standing tradition of regulation, a practice facilitated by the fact that both countries' secular copyright regimes are structured as federal law, which simplifies national regulation.

3 Digitalization of Ecclesiastical Promulgation and Administration of Sacraments: Challenges for Ecclesiastical Law

According to their theological self-understanding, the proclamation of the Christian message and the administration of the sacraments are considered fundamental tasks of the Church. The physical presence of believers is particularly significant in the context of worship, as it is regarded as the “source of the life of the congregation and testimony in the world,” as outlined in Article 31, paragraph 2, sentence 2 of the Zurich Church Order (KO ZH 2009). This tenet remains relevant for baptism and the Holy Communion, despite the possibility of these rites being observed outside the context of church services. The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic and the concomitant necessity to engage with church members in a digital milieu has led to a re-evaluation of this foundational principle.

Notably, the official stance of the Roman Catholic Church has historically been averse to the notion of digital participation in the administration of sacraments (Hierold 1991). With the advent of the Internet, this position was unequivocally affirmed by the declaration: “There are no sacraments on the Internet” (Pontifical Council for Social Communications 2002, Nr. 9). Even in the aftermath of the pandemic, this resolution remains unchanged. Efforts to replicate sacred rituals or communal practices in virtual spaces have been explicitly rejected, with particular emphasis on the theological and symbolic importance of physical presence and communal gathering. The Church has notably criticized practices such as “sharing a meal through a screen,” underscoring the indispensability of in-person interaction (Dicastery for Communication 2023, Nr. 61).

The EKD (2010, 76) underscores the importance of gathering feedback from online services, observing that numerous participants still feel personally addressed and included in the worship experience, despite the broadcast originating from an unfamiliar location. While the immediate experience of community may be diminished, this is rarely perceived as a hindrance. Instead, a *communio mediatis*, or mediated participation, has emerged as means of establishing a shared spiritual connection that resonates with numerous viewers, thereby providing a sense of belonging, even if it cannot fully substitute for personal community. This inclination might also underlie the EKD’s swift adoption of digital proclamation during the COVID-19 pandemic (EKD 2021, 87–88), thereby reaffirming a prevalent practice (Özgü, Schlag, and Thier 2024, 167–169).

However, this shift has given rise to numerous fundamental questions that extend beyond the purview of church law. This is particularly evident in the ongoing discourse surrounding the feasibility of digitally facilitated Holy Commu-

nion and the question of whether digital presence can substitute for physical presence (Schrodt 2021; van Oorschot 2022; Wüthrich 2024). The question of the digital performance of ceremonies in general has also emerged as a point of discussion (Jacobs 2023, 174–179). In terms of church law, these issues appear to fall within a gray area, even if regulatory conflicts have arisen in some cases (Jacobs, op. cit.). In some instances, orders of digital worship have been adapted, as evidenced by the example of Württemberg: In 2022, the Ordinance on Holy Communion was amended with the addition of a new rule (Evangelische Landeskirche in Württemberg [1995] 2022, § 4[5]) that expressly authorized the “celebration of Holy Communion without the simultaneous presence of the officiant and any or all participants of the celebration of Holy Communion in one room” so long as “the officiant of the celebration of Holy Communion is connected to all participants by means of simultaneous, two-way transmission of sound and vision using suitable technical aids.” Concurrently, this regulation empowered the High Church Council to promulgate a corresponding “order of service,” which was subsequently issued in 2023 (Evangelische Landeskirche in Württemberg 2023). Often, regulations emerge that leave the decision regarding the form of the Lord’s Supper – and, consequently, its digital form – in the hands of parish authorities (see Art. 51 para. 4 KO ZH: The decision on the “form” of Holy Communion is made by the church administration in agreement with the parish office). These rules, however, are not always clearly structured, creating room for maneuver, which regional church authorities sometimes fill by creating their own manuals (see Zentrum Verkündigung der EKHN 2021). These manuals often represent a form of *soft law*, understood as non-binding recommendations or guidelines that influence practice and behavior within an institutional framework (for a detailed discussion on the definition and function of soft law, see Müller and Uhlmann 2024, 12–15). Such decentralization of the power to set norms for church services corresponds to an institutional understanding of churchliness in which the congregation is the central figure. However, in the context of Communion, a central act of worship in Protestant churches, this approach is accompanied by a degree of ambiguity regarding expectations. This ambiguity would be, at least from our point of view, better addressed through the application of legal norms. In view of the fundamental importance of the Lord’s Supper as a sacrament of the official Christian churches, it seems to us essential that the law establishes a framework of certainty in this area. It could even be argued that such questions are an example of those on which church lawmakers should not refrain from taking a stand. However, the related question of whether there may be an obligation for the church to legislate because of the special importance of regulatory issues is beyond the scope of this article.

In ecclesiastical law, the sacrament of baptism necessitates the physical presence of the baptizand as well as the actual pouring of water, both of which constitute essential and non-negotiable elements of its valid administration (e.g. Art. 34 para. 1 KO BE). Consequently, a baptism conducted exclusively in a virtual environment – such as within the metaverse – is, according to current ecclesiastical norms, legally dubious (on the non-transferability of baptismal elements into the digital, Jacobs 2023, 174–175; also see Art. 35 para. 2 KO BE: “There are no substitute acts for baptism”). At present, there is no indication of any legislative developments that would suggest a departure from this position. However, a hybrid form of baptism – in which the essential elements of the sacrament, namely the physical presence of the baptized and the ritual act of pouring water, are observed on site while other participants join remotely through digital means – does not raise immediate legal concerns. The question of the legal validity and evidentiary weight of digital testimony by the godparent presents an interesting legal issue but will not be addressed in detail here.

Overall, however, no conclusive findings can yet be identified. This underscores a salient challenge inherent in church law: determining the permissibility of digital presence in relation to sacraments such as Holy Communion and baptism. Ecclesiastical law, by its very nature, can only address such matters in a regulatory capacity. It is, however, imperative for the church to establish a definitive stance on these issues, particularly through the medium of ecclesiastical law, to ensure clarity for its members.

A similar challenge has emerged in the context of public teaching and preaching. The proliferation of social media platforms has led to instances of church members, such as influential content creators, who, despite not having a formal calling as preachers, disseminate religious messages in public. This has given rise to a tension between the institutional responsibility of the official churches and the principles of the priesthood of all believers (Laube 2024). This tension has become the focus of regulatory guidelines (Özgü, Schlag, and Thier 2024, 185). These developments suggest that the digital transformation of church preaching will, at least in the medium term, reignite questions regarding the design and functions of church leadership.

It appears that digitalization is also increasingly affecting the organization of church membership. Until now, physical space has been a significant dimension of the organizational structure of Protestant churches, as the place of residence is typically the point of reference for church membership and the associated rights and obligations. These regulatory principles have been codified in the territorial principle and parochial system of ecclesiastical law (Rausch 2020, 2021b). The introduction of digital technologies has gradually eroded the traditional links between physical space and these organizational frameworks. Consequently, the

comparatively recent institutional arrangement of the “personal congregation” (Hübner 2020) may well assume increasing significance (Özgü, Schlag, and Thier 2024, 181–184).

4 Future Research

It has become evident that the digital activities of the Protestant church are being significantly influenced by the rapid evolution of legal developments. A notable consolidation of the legal framework, particularly in the domains of data protection and copyright law, has been observed. However, the plurality of legal norms has, at times, resulted in suboptimal outcomes. Conversely, the realm of ecclesiastical law is undergoing a period of transition, as evidenced by the emergence of digital communion celebrations. This phenomenon suggests a need for legal regulation, which may be attributable to the ongoing clarification of theological issues. This, in turn, highlights the interdependence of church law with fundamental theological decisions. From this perspective, the conflict between church and state, as previously discussed, may not be as evident in practice as it appears from a legal-theological distance. Another issue that has not been thoroughly examined is the increasing role of digital communication platforms and the availability of digital infrastructures in the context of law. At a time when the question of the “state’s responsibility for infrastructure” (Hermes 1998) is being extended to the field of digital communication, and when, at the same time, the resources of the church are shrinking dramatically in some cases, questions concerning the relationship between state and church may also arise anew. It will be necessary to examine whether the state’s responsibility for infrastructure could have a special quality, specifically with regard to the church. This is particularly salient in the context of the impending realization of the long-discussed replacement of state contributions to the church in Germany (Gienke and Landwehrs 2024). It is conceivable that legislation could facilitate digital engagement by religious institutions from the outset. However, it is also imperative to explore the legal framework governing digital religious activity in other religions with comprehensive normative frameworks. To this end, the religious rights of Judaism and Islam will be examined in subsequent phases of the study.

In the examination of the official Christian churches and their legal framework in Germany and Switzerland, the question will be posed as to whether – and, if so, which – regulatory requirements are necessitated by the use of AI. AI is increasingly shaping the digital execution of religious practices, ranging from the automated processing of sacred texts to the establishment of virtual religious

communities. This prompts pressing legal and ethical inquiries: What are the implications of employing AI in religious activities? Our research will explore the potential of AI to facilitate religious practices, such as through the provision of customized spiritual guidance. Additionally, it will examine the implications of AI's potential to act as a religious authority, and the challenges that may arise from its perception as such. This question ties in with our previous research on the effects of digitalization on churches, but also opens up a new perspective that we believe will become very important for the church sector in the years to come.

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Fabian Winiger and Simon Peng-Keller

From the Bedside to the “Device-Side”: Digitalisation and the Professionalisation of Healthcare Chaplaincy

Abstract: With the digitalisation of healthcare, patients spend fewer days in hospitals and clinics, and more time in outpatient care. This development confronts healthcare chaplains with profound changes in how, when and where they care for patients. Once present at the patient’s bedside for days and weeks at a time, chaplains have begun to use new technologies to care for patients at any point of the continuum of care, and develop new, “device-side” models of care. In this chapter, we summarise our contribution to the field of digital spiritual care during the first phase of the URPP “Digital Religion(s)”. We present the background, theoretical and methodological approach and main findings of our work, with particular attention to the emergence of telechaplaincy, and the encounter of telechaplains with Electronic Health Records (EHR) and increasingly comprehensive telehealth platforms. In conclusion, we expand and elaborate on the major challenges faced by researchers and practitioners in the emerging interdisciplinary field of digital spiritual care, and discuss the potential positive contributions of these digital religious practices for individuals, communities, and society in Switzerland and internationally.

Mit der fortschreitenden Digitalisierung des Gesundheitswesens verbringen Patient:innen weniger Tage in Gesundheitsinstitutionen und werden in wachsendem Maße ambulant versorgt. Diese Entwicklung konfrontiert Seelsorgende mit tiefgreifenden Veränderungen in Bezug auf die Art, den Zeitpunkt und den Ort ihrer Tätigkeit. Waren Seelsorgende früher tage- und wochenlang am Patientenbett anwesend, nutzen sie in zunehmendem Maße neue Technologien, um Patient:innen an jedem Punkt des Pflegekontinuums begleiten zu können, und entwickeln neue, geräteseitige („device-side“) Unterstützungsmodelle. In diesem Beitrag fassen wir unsere Forschung zu diesem Thema während der ersten Phase des URPP „Digital Religion(s)“ zusammen. Wir stellen den Hintergrund, den theoretischen und methodischen Ansatz und die wichtigsten Ergebnisse unserer Arbeit vor, mit besonderem Augenmerk auf die Begegnung von „Tele-Seelsorgenden“ (Telechaplains) mit elektronischen Patientendossiers (Electronic Health Records, EHR) und zunehmend umfassenden Telehealth-Plattformen. Abschließend gehen wir auf die wichtigsten Herausforderungen ein, mit denen Forscher:innen und Praktiker:innen im entstehenden interdisziplinären Gebiet der digitalen Spiritual Care konfrontiert sind, und diskutieren mögliche positive Beiträge dieser digital-

religiösen Praktiken für Personen, Gemeinschaften und Gesellschaft in der Schweiz und international.

1 Introduction

Across Europe and North America, health providers and the medical industry strive to implement digital health strategies (WHO 2020; 2021). In the course of this development, healthcare, once firmly centred in the physical location of the clinic, is distributed across a dispersed network of service providers and users connected through digital platforms. On the side of funding bodies, insurers and hospital administrators, the transition towards telehealth is incentivised by cost savings incurred by reducing the length of stay of patients at the hospital. For patients, remote care is hoped to improve quality of life, treatment adherence and outcomes, and reduce access barriers and treatment burdens such as cost of travel (Flodgren et al. 2015). For professional spiritual care providers, it fundamentally challenges how, when and where spiritual care providers perform their role: traditionally based at the patient's bedside, healthcare chaplains are increasingly faced with a new professional reality, where many aspects of care are no longer provided bed-, but "device-side".

In the first phase of the URPP "Digital Religion(s)", the project "Digital Spiritual Care" has engaged with this development on several fronts. We set out to investigate chaplains' changing communication and documentation practices in electronic health records (EHR), explored the emergence of "telechaplaincy", and engaged in training and education necessary to prepare the next generation of chaplains for digital care environments. In the following, we provide a selective overview of this work. We begin with an outline of the background and current research in this field, and then turn to the theoretical and methodological basis of our work. We then present our main findings thus far and conclude with a brief look into future research priorities and the potential positive contributions of these digital spiritual practices for individuals, communities and society, in Switzerland and internationally.¹

¹ Terminological note: we understand "spirituality" as an umbrella term for religious and non-religious practices, experiences, beliefs, and attitudes that have a family resemblance through their reference to an ultimate concern. The inclusion of the "spiritual dimension" in healthcare, for which the term "spiritual care" has become established, is due not least to the terminological openness of these terms that transcend a duality constitutive of (Euro-American) modernity: the distinction between religious and secular (Bender and McRoberts 2012; Peng-Keller 2019; 2024b).

2 Background

What we currently refer to as “digital spiritual care” began to develop in the mid-1990s, as the internet became more widespread in Europe and North America. In German-speaking Europe, the first internet-based pastoral care services were launched in 1995. In Germany, a network of ecumenical telephone counseling centres launched an internet presence (Knatz 2022), while in Switzerland, Jakob Vetsch, a rural, technology-savvy Protestant pastor, together with an IT specialist, launched *seelsorge.net*, an ecumenical website for chat-based pastoral care (Winiger and Neuhold 2023b). The website later gained the support of the churches in Zürich and still exists today as a nationwide service supported by 30 volunteers. The success of chat-based pastoral care in the mid-1990s to early 2000s brought with it what may be described as a digital “renaissance” of written forms of spiritual care.

Through early chat services such as *seelsorge.net*, it may be argued, a supraparochial social space emerged, characterised by a radically immediate and anonymous mode of interaction by which users, freed from communal identity factors – including confessional affiliation – began to discuss deeply meaningful, often shameful, life events. Parallel to the widespread adoption of dial-up connections and the concomitant development of “internet culture” (Porter 1997), pastoral care began to incorporate and develop milieu-specific sociolinguistic practices, and “emojis, punctuation marks or the choice of certain words” came to be “used as substitutes for non-verbal communication that would otherwise be expressed through body language.” (Blackstein 2023, 74, 75; Knatz 2014). Several chat services of the mid-1990s continue in this manner, and still enjoy considerable popularity.

While church-financed chatroom-based pastoral services appeared early and were surprisingly popular, professional spiritual care providers employed in institutional and typically outpatient care have been comparably slow to adapt to digital technologies. This contrasts with many healthcare institutions, in which Electronic Health Records (EHR) software in recent years has evolved into increasingly comprehensive integrated telehealth platforms, which offer screening, appointment scheduling, virtual consultations, remote patient monitoring, as well as prescription “laboratory and diagnostic services, round-the-clock provision of mental health interventions, and real-time access to electronic health records. As more and more clinical activities move to digital platforms, the domain of influence of the traditional healthcare chaplain has begun to retreat. The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated this development. As healthcare chaplains were prohibited from visiting patients at the bedside, they were forced to adapt to quarantine restrictions and constructively engage with the digital infrastructure available at

their institutions (Byrne and Nuzum 2020; Vandenhoeck et al. 2021). In the course of this rapprochement, chaplains began to explore how to more closely integrate their work into their institutions' telehealth strategy.

3 Current Research and Debate

Thus far, little research has appeared which investigates the digitalisation of healthcare chaplaincy, and there have been no major public debates over the use of technology by chaplains. This is surprising because digitalisation plays a far-reaching role in the standing of healthcare chaplaincy in healthcare institutions.

The case of EHR exemplifies this point. In order for spiritual care providers to be recognised as healthcare professionals, they must use EHR software to care for patients according to their needs and treatment history, and document their interactions with patients intraprofessionally (with other spiritual care providers in the institution), and interprofessionally (with other members of the clinical care team). Clinical information systems have also become instruments of internal communication and coordination, replacing E-Mail as the medium through which clinical workflows are coordinated (Peng-Keller and Neuhold 2020).

The documentation of spiritual care using EHR software helps clarify to colleagues what chaplains do, what their contribution to patient well-being is, and helps to assess whether their interventions are effective. Outcome measures, such as the Patient-Reported Outcome Measure (PROM) have been developed to this end, and are premised on the availability of reliable and comparable data (Snowden and Telfer 2017). With the expansion of EHR software from its original purpose of data collection into comprehensive telehealth platforms, digital competencies become the foundation of a care provider's ability to contact and care for patients. Thus, while digitalisation itself is not subject to significant debate in the professional community, the ability of chaplains to proficiently use EHR software is closely linked to their professional standing and thus partakes in a larger, ongoing debate over whether chaplains should be understood either as an external (usually volunteer or church-financed) service provider, or a professional member of staff internal to the organisation and intrinsic to the clinical care team (Peng-Keller 2024a).

Without access to EHR and the institution's wider telehealth platform, patient care is becoming increasingly difficult, and since access to medical records is subject to strict legal requirements, the access of chaplains to an institution's digital infrastructure in turn depends on whether it is recognised as an independent profession in the health care system. In this sense, the digitalisation of healthcare

forces chaplains to professionalise, and ultimately concerns the current and future status of their profession as an integral part of holistic, patient-centred healthcare.

4 Theoretical Basis and Methodology

Beginning with its roots in the Clinical Pastoral Education of the 1920s, and the pioneering efforts of Anton Boisen (1876–1965) and Richard C. Cabot (1868–1939), chaplaincy has been shaped by theology, psychotherapy, social work, educational theory, and medical ethics. Interdisciplinarity remains a central hallmark of spiritual care, both in practice – where chaplains ideally work closely as part of an interprofessional care team – and as a field of research, which brings together health psychologists, practical theologians, anthropologists, nursing scholars, psycho-oncologists, palliative care physicians and a host of other disciplines. Research on digital spiritual care contributes a further dimension to this interdisciplinary moment: located at the intersection of healthcare, digitalisation, and spiritual care, it adds the field of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to the research and practice of healthcare chaplaincy. This intersection ranges from computer linguistics, which can provide a quantitative understanding of religious and spiritual language use in digital spaces (Winiger et al. 2025b) to the work of Human-Computer-Interaction researchers on chaplain’s participation in online communities (Smith et al. 2021) or the exploration of virtual reality as a tool for spiritual (self-)care (Winiger, 2024b; Pirker and Pišonić, 2022), and the multifaceted work of scholars of digital religion on topics such as digital mourning practices (Frick, 2023).

Building on this long tradition of inter- and transdisciplinary collaboration, we have engaged with digital spiritual care through a combination of social anthropological methods and a hermeneutical approach rooted in practical theology. We have also closely worked with colleagues in nursing studies, computer linguistics and communication studies. In addition to a series of case studies and qualitative analyses, we surveyed the Swiss general population, the population of the Canton of Zurich, and the Swiss community of healthcare chaplains regarding their experiences with and attitudes towards digital spiritual care, and conducted a study of language use related to religion and spirituality on X (formerly Twitter) (Winiger et al. 2025a). To bring this work into dialogue with healthcare chaplains, and since 2022, we have cooperated with the U.S.-based *Transforming Chaplaincy* initiative, to host a Telechaplaincy Community of Practice, which brings together researchers, practitioners, and managers of chaplaincy departments in Europe and the U.S. to discuss current developments in the field (see www.telechaplaincy.io).

5 Main Findings

In the following, we summarise our findings in two areas: the emergence of telechaplancy, and the encounter of telechaplains with EHR software and increasingly comprehensive telehealth platforms.

5.1 The Emergence of Telechaplancy as a Field of Research and Practice

As suggested by a recent review of current developments, telechaplancy practice has developed much more quickly in North America than in Europe (Winiger 2024c). A major finding is the relative lack of practical initiatives in Europe, and the struggles faced by a few notable pilot projects. This discrepancy may be explained in part by different degrees of integration of chaplains into healthcare institutions, and a comparably slow rate of telehealth adoption in Europe. Early pioneering projects in chat-based chaplancy, as described in the introduction, remain active, but have not kept pace with the emergence of chaplancy as a healthcare profession (Winiger and Neuhold 2023b). In Germany, more recent projects, such as the “Ankerplatz” of the Evangelical Church of Germany (Winiger and Neuhold 2023a) or the “Krankenhausseelsorge im Chat” by the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Northern Germany, have met with considerable obstacles. A survey of Swiss healthcare chaplains suggests that the European professional community is generally sceptical towards digitalisation (Peng-Keller and Winiger 2024), which contrasts with findings from a representative survey of the Swiss population which showed that 25% of patients wished the creation of a digital chaplancy service (Peng-Keller et al. 2024, 9, for the canton of Zurich see Winiger et al. 2025b). Recent special issues in *Spiritual Care* and *Praktische Theologie* suggest the emergence of a German-language literature on this topic, but new forms of chaplancy appropriate to digital care contexts are as yet only “partially developed” (Haußmann et al. 2023, 87).

In the U.S., “telechaplancy” and related terms such as “virtual chaplancy”, “online chaplancy”, “e-Chaplancy” and “digital spiritual care” have circulated in the chaplancy literature for years, and telechaplancy has been practised since the mid-1990s with formalised telechaplancy programmes appearing in the early 2000s (Sprik et al., 2020, 1276). In this context, we have found major healthcare organisations such as Ascension, Mercy, Baylor, Scott & White Health and the Veteran’s Health Administration to have well established telechaplancy programs (Winiger 2023b; 2023a; 2024a). As shown by a thematic analysis of a major international conference on telechaplancy held in 2022, chaplains are increasingly

challenged to deliver spiritual assessment, treatment planning, patient care and outcome measurement through digital means, but often have not received any training and improvise their work to the best of their ability (Winiger and Sprik 2023). A widely shared consensus on how to conceptualise this field is lacking in both the European and North American context, and major training programs accrediting organisations thus far have been slow to update professional standards and educational curricula.

Following the seminal distinction between “religion online” and “online religion” (Helland 2000), we have found two types of professional practice in this field. The first, “spiritual care online”, refers to chaplains who use digital means to communicate with patients and the public. Their institution’s websites, mobile apps and digital platforms are understood primarily as a place to advertise existing chaplaincy services, rather than as a medium for patient encounter through which new models of care may arise. Often, a phone number for patients to contact a chaplain is listed next to office hours and a number for emergencies. The care provided in this case is typically similar to traditional chaplaincy, with the notable difference that contact is made through the internet. Though Helland’s typology was developed in the 1990s and the approach of religious actors to digitalisation has evolved in several waves since (Campbell 2023), this remains the most common form of digital presence by healthcare chaplains.

Drawing on Helland, a second variety may be identified, which we refer to as “digital” or “online spiritual care”. It describes a form of spiritual care emerging in predominantly digital work environments, in which many or most of the chaplain’s activities are conducted using digital means. As Helland argued, for practitioners of online religion, “the Internet is not some place ‘other’ but recognised as a part of their everyday life” (Helland 2005, 12). Similarly, in the provision of online/digital spiritual care, the digital is not a separate sphere occasionally engaged for specific purposes, but the constitutive fabric connecting care provider and recipient. Spiritual care provided in chat rooms described above, and on social media sites such as Instagram – often by pastors or religious influencers – are exemplary.

We have proposed the term “telechaplaincy” to refer to a specialised form of online/digital spiritual care specific to professional, most often medical, care settings. In analogy to the WHO’s definition of telehealth, we understand telechaplaincy as “the delivery of spiritual care where patients and providers are separated by distance. Telechaplaincy uses ICT [Information and Communication Technology] for the exchange of information for spiritual assessment, care for spiritual distress and injuries, research and evaluation, and for the continuing education of spiritual care professionals.” (Winiger 2023b, 2). Although telechaplaincy is most widely established in healthcare and particularly outpatient care,

other fields, such as port-, community- and prison chaplaincy, may also use telechaplaincy. Phone-based telechaplaincy is the most common (Sprik et al., 2022), and has relatively recently developed from conventionally phone-based care to embrace video calls and other technological means. In healthcare, telechaplaincy has begun to emerge as a subspecialty of professional practice, as evidenced by the production of guidelines by professional associations, and the creation of new positions such as “Director of On Demand Spiritual Care” (Ascension) “Director of Spiritual Care Innovation & Transformation” (Mercy) or “Manager for Innovation in Spiritual Care” (Baylor, Scott & White Health).

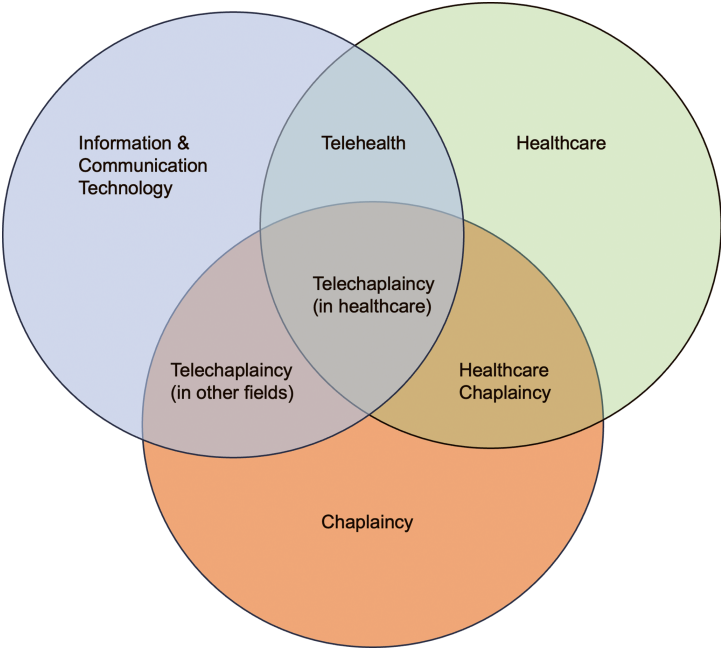


Figure 1: Telechaplaincy as a specialised form of digital spiritual care at the intersection of information and communication technology, healthcare and chaplaincy.

Telechaplaincy is accompanied by a change in some fundamental premises of clinical pastoral education (CPE) as developed in the 20th century. Whereas chaplains have traditionally cared for homogenous patient populations hospitalised for relatively short periods of time, telechaplaincy is premised on longer-term patient-provider relationships, as telechaplains use digital means to remain in contact with patients for periods of time exceeding the duration of a typical hospital

stay. Though medical advances may have shortened patients’ hospital stays, chaplain encounters are no longer contingent on a visit to the hospital but can be arranged by a button on a mobile device at any point on the continuum of care, lowering the threshold of access, and shifting from a supply- to a demand-driven model of care. Rather than lying in bed wearing a hospital gown awaiting visitation, patients can arrange a video call on-demand with a chaplain at a time and place of their choosing, and in the dignity of their private dress. Moreover, patients decide the degree to which they remain anonymous – through turning off the camera in a video call – or disclose themselves – by sharing with the chaplain their home, relatives, and pets on camera. What is described in social psychology as the “online disinhibition effect” may manifest in digital settings in forms of self-disclosure that normally only occur after a long time in direct accompaniment (Suler 2004).

Most importantly, perhaps, the bedside appears to be losing its mythical status as the sole mainstay of healthcare chaplaincy, as chaplains develop “device-side” models of care and work with patients to create new, non-local sacred spaces at the interstices of private and institutional spheres. Once limited to support and fellowship found in the surrounding area – often, the local church – they create supra-parochial communities of fate. Initiatives such as the “Finding Our Way Through Grief” program at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center (Ashton and Klassen-Landis 2023), or “Walking with Wisdom” at Niagara Health in Ontario, Canada (Siolkowsky 2023) are instructive of how telechaplains – once, as the name suggests, defined by their patronage of a physical chapel – now use new technologies to re-define how and where they care for patients.

5.2 Telechaplains and the Platformisation of Healthcare

A notable aspect of the digitalisation of healthcare is the introduction of digital platforms into the professional reality of healthcare chaplains. The term “platform”, coined in the 1990s to describe a hardware architecture based on modular components, has since the turn of the millennium been adopted by firms such as Uber, eBay, Facebook, and Tinder to describe a business model premised on multi-sided markets in which the platform operator extracts value from interactions between users (van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal 2018). The “platformisation” (Eisenegger 2021) of the healthcare industry has been driven by U.S.-based companies, persistent advocacy by the World Health Organization, and substantial investment by Ministries of Health, particularly in the UK and Scandinavian countries, which have adopted many features and ideological tenets of the IT industry.

In the course of this development, vendors of EHR software such as Epic Systems, McKesson and Cerner have expanded into increasingly comprehensive tele-

health platforms. Epic, one of the most widely used EHR systems, began to offer solutions for outpatient care, population health management, financial operations, data analytics, virtual visits, and patient monitoring, among others (Epic Systems 2024). Like platform operators in other industries, Epic has positioned itself as the foundation of a highly integrated ecosystem connecting patients and care providers by turning its business model from a vendor of individual software products into a provider of the very digital infrastructure on which the healthcare sector operates.

In the public sector, national digital health strategies vary widely in breadth and scope (WHO 2023). Beginning in the mid-2000s, discussions of digitalisation at the WHO's World Health Assembly led to the passing of resolutions urging Member States to draw up long-term strategic plans for digital health services, develop IT infrastructure, introduce appropriate regulatory frameworks, and ensure standardisation and interoperability (WHO 2005; 2013; 2018). In 2020, the organisation endorsed the *Global Strategy on Digital Health*, which laid out a comprehensive 5-year plan to promote the development of national digital health systems (WHO 2020; 2021). Central to this structure is the notion of healthcare infrastructure as a "platform". Like its private-sector counterparts, this is conceptualised as a common infrastructure for information exchange on which other digital health applications and systems build upon. As explained in a detailed handbook authored by WHO and the International Telecommunication Union, the "concept of the DHP [Digital Health Platform] emerged from a recognition that most digital health progress thus far has arrived in the form of individual applications and information systems. [. . .] A system-wide approach to application and architecture design that emphasises the development of an integrated and interoperable whole is far better than a piecemeal approach that results in fragmented and isolated digital health tools" (WHO and ITU 2020, vii). Noting that health-related apps used on mobile computing devices are replacing traditional visits to healthcare clinics, the handbook states, "patients receive messages about health education and reminders of appointments and medication schedules, clinicians engage in telemedicine, and users monitor health indicators, such as blood pressure and exercise data. These health apps are moving the point of care out of the doctor's office and to the patients themselves" (WHO and ITU 2020, 10).

Among public health systems, the NHS' digital health strategy illustrates this. The NHS has rapidly expanded its digital infrastructure, which now includes platforms for collaboration, clinical supervision, data exchange, training and education, and a comprehensive patient-facing mobile phone app set to become the "front door" to the NHS (Benger 2022). For healthcare chaplains, who often have only recently begun to engage with EHR software (and in some cases continue to

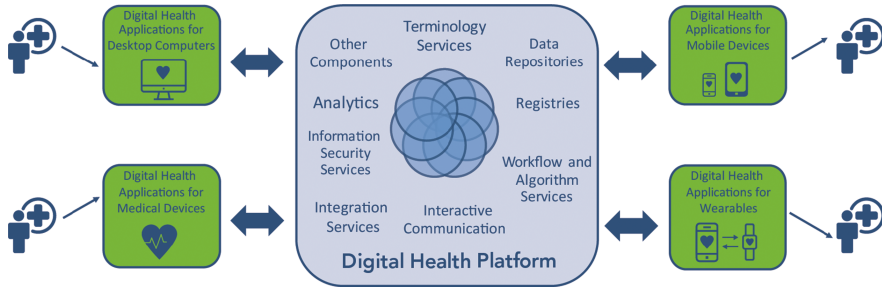


Figure 2: Interaction of digital health platforms with external applications and users (WHO and ITU 2020, 12). Reproduced with permission.

refuse its use), this is a daunting development. How does a chaplain meet a patient as they arrive, petrified of a looming diagnosis perhaps, for an appointment with their physician – if said front door is a metaphor for a smartphone app? As the point of care moves out of physical into digital clinical space, chaplains are challenged to move with it. We have found telechaplains to respond to this development in two ways: firstly, by attempting to assimilate into their institution’s platform by proactively engaging staff responsible for technical development and support. The Community Support feature available to patients of Baylor, Scott & White Health on the MyBSWHHealth app, or TeleSpiritual Health, an employee benefit of Providence Health & Services offered through its Choose Well platform, exemplify this (Choose Well 2024; Winiger 2024a). Secondly, we are observing the emergence of specialised chaplaincy platforms such as spirituwel, eHeart, Care-Note, and MyInspiration (CareNote 2024; Kelly et al. 2024; Nissen 2023; spirituwel 2024). We use the suffix “2.0” to distinguish telechaplaincy provided through such platforms from earlier, predominantly phone-based forms of remote care, and emphasise the differences in care which arise in this context.

Where patients interact with patients through a platform, for instance, chaplains may construct them as “users”, which connotes a hierarchically flat, instrumental relationship. As with other technological interfaces, platform users may in turn expect an immediate response to user inputs, signified by the term “on demand” popularised by video streaming platforms such as Netflix. Indeed, the notion of “on demand” care has entered professional chaplaincy discourse through platforms such as spirituwel, and in at least one case frames the chaplaincy department of a major healthcare system. As critics have noted, platformisation is often accompanied by the flexibilisation or “uberisation” of labour: the commodification and precarisation of employment, and the emergence of a deregulated “gig economy”. Particularly in care labour, platformisation may be deeply concerning for workers (Kluzik 2022; Rodríguez-Modroño, Agenjo-Calderón, and

López-Igual 2024; Tandon and Rath 2021). It remains to be seen whether institutions use platforms to outsource chaplaincy to external providers and reduce the number of staff chaplains, or introduce a user pays model. Further research is needed to understand how spiritual care changes when provided through digital platforms.

6 Conclusion and Future Research

The developments described in this article will likely continue to gain importance in the coming years, driven by a demographic and epidemiological transition towards elderly and chronic care, which threatens to exceed the capacities of conventional healthcare infrastructure, and calls for an increase in outpatient care. The opportunities that they bring for healthcare chaplaincy are considerable. Against this background, the obvious challenges and limitations of telechaplaincy are important to consider. We have identified a host of issues at the level of individual care providers, organisations, and patient populations, as well as regulatory and economic risks, changing chaplain core competencies, and concerns over new barriers to access (Winiger 2023b; Winiger and Sprik 2023). In the following, we expand and elaborate on these points, considering our future work in this field and the potential positive contributions of these digital religious practices for individuals, communities, and societies in Switzerland and internationally.

First, and perhaps foremost, is the danger of a digital divide (van Dijk 2006). Telechaplaincy reaches its limits with people living with access barriers due to disability. Despite the advantages of a digital model of care, there are still many situations in which the opposite is true, or in which a combination of digital and conventional care is appropriate. Hybrid forms of care are likely to become increasingly common in the field of spiritual care in the future. “Device-side” care may not be a replacement, but an expansion of the chaplain’s reach, used particularly for patient populations who are underserved by conventional means. Telechaplains must be educated to reach across digital divides to ensure patients living with cognitive impairments, economic hardships and other access restrictions to technology continue to receive spiritual care.

A second issue concerns the legal requirements for interprofessional communication and documentation: telechaplaincy is only possible where chaplains are part of the treatment team and spiritual care is recognised as a clinically relevant task by healthcare institutions. Due to the technical complexity of medical information exchange and regulatory restrictions regarding the storage and exchange of patient data, “stand-alone” platforms built by churches or entrepreneurs usu-

ally operate outside the routine workflows of healthcare institutions. Particularly in highly differentiated regulatory environments such as Switzerland, where laws and regulation differ in each of its 26 cantons, legal aspects pose a significant hurdle. For instance, who qualifies as a healthcare professional (“Gesundheitsfachperson”) is determined by both national and cantonal law, and regulates who may be granted access to the national EHR system currently in development. In the future, this will be explored in collaboration with legal scholars working in the URPP “Digital Religion(s)”.

The use of virtual reality and artificial intelligence, both by patients and healthcare providers, is also raising new questions for chaplains. What role can immersive simulations play in the simulation of clinical incidents, the development of empathy and the holistic care of patients (Pirker and Pišonić 2022; Young 2022)? What does it mean for chaplains when chatbots like ChatGPT are used to ask existential questions and seek spiritual support (Singler 2024)? Whatever the answers to these questions: chaplains, educators, researchers and indeed society at large must critically examine these practices to ensure they make a positive contribution to society. We have begun to explore these questions in the first funding phase (see e.g. Winiger, 2024b), and will continue to explore their implications for spiritual care.

With the growing specialisation of healthcare, the need for healthcare chaplains to engage in interdisciplinary research and practice has become inevitable. Healthcare chaplains speak and document their interactions with patients using the conventions, vocabulary, and registers appropriate to a professional medical setting, and rapidly “code switch” depending on the religious and cultural context of those they care for (Cadge and Sigalow 2013). For telechaplains, it is critical to acquire what has been referred to as “digital literacy” (Dobson and Willinsky 2009). In this case, digital literacy includes the ability of spiritual care providers to proficiently communicate with patients, relatives, and caregivers in digital work environments, and liaison with technical development— and support staff to ensure spiritual care is integrated into the institution’s digital workflows. In some health systems, such as Baylor, Scott & White Health, Digital Spiritual Care teams have been created for this purpose, and individual chaplains have trained to receive Epic certification to improve exchange between spiritual care staff and Epic support staff (Winiger 2024a).

Finally, the success of the chaplaincy profession in responding to the technological developments outlined here may depend on developing a critical stance towards the journalistic and academic hubris of technological determinism. The mystification of technology as a distant power with the capability to radically and irrevocably steer the course of society, both toward the better and the worse, has reached new heights amidst the popularisation of generative AI, and is used by

corporations to make a case for the market value of their products and services. Technological hype and counter (“criti-“)hype (Vinsel 2021) is also widespread in the healthcare sector (Petersen 2019), where claims regarding the “disruptive” potential of digital health underwrites the supposed transformative might of the IT industry and its financial and intellectual acolytes (cf. Matusiewicz et al., 2018). As scholars of Science and Technology Studies have long argued, however, technologies are not causes, but artefacts, of social processes (Pinch and Bijker 1984). Digital health does not make the telechaplain, just as the steam-mill did not give rise to the industrial capitalist. Put differently, the rarely questioned claim that technologies have specific “effects” or “impacts” on social actors is a theoretically profoundly flawed and politically ill-advised characterisation of chaplains’ relationship with technological change (cf. Grint and Woolgar, 1997). Rather than viewing themselves as latently disenfranchised subjects of technological effects, telechaplains may be more usefully understood as creative agents who enact – appropriate, repurpose and (co-)produce – digital technology in the interest of holistic, patient-centred care.

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Digital Public Spheres: The Role of Media and Other Touchpoints in Shaping Swiss Church Reputations

Abstract: Although public image and public (online) discourses are crucial for the legitimacy of churches, little is known about the configuration of the reputations of religions and their actors, especially religious organizations such as churches, in Swiss society, despite the declining number of church members. Therefore, this project is intended to investigate reputational touchpoints, either online or offline, and depict the public image of churches in Switzerland. The data, which are based on three representative online surveys, reveal surprising findings, such as that journalistic online media are more important in shaping the reputation of Christian churches than social media. However, the most important factors in reputation building are interpersonal communication and personal experience. Our contribution shows that even in the digital era, non-digital sources and touchpoints remain important for the communicative construction of religious actors.

Obwohl das öffentliche Image und der öffentliche (Online-)Diskurs für die Legitimität der Kirchen von zentraler Bedeutung sind, ist trotz sinkender Mitgliederzahlen wenig darüber bekannt, wie sich die Reputation von Religionen und ihren Akteuren, insbesondere von religiösen Organisationen wie den Kirchen, in der Schweizer Gesellschaft gestaltet. Das Projekt sucht deshalb nach Antworten auf Fragen zu Berührungspunkten, online und offline, um ein Bild des öffentlichen Images der Kirchen in der Schweiz zu zeichnen. Die Daten aus drei repräsentativen Online-Befragungen zeigen dabei überraschende Ergebnisse, etwa, dass journalistische Online-Medien für die Reputation der christlichen Kirchen wichtiger sind als Social Media. Die wichtigsten Faktoren für die Reputationsbildung bleiben jedoch die interpersonale Kommunikation und das persönliche Erleben. In Summe zeigt unser Beitrag, dass auch in der digitalen Ära nicht-digitale Quellen und touchpoints wichtig bleiben für kommunikative Konstruktion religiöser Akteure.

1 Introduction

Despite societal changes, such as secularization, religion remains an important issue in public discourses (Cohen 2023; Hidalgo 2018). In most Western coun-

tries, such as Switzerland, religious traditions and their actors are frequently visible within the public sphere (Offerhaus 2023; Wyss and Keel 2009), first and foremost via the professional online news media. Furthermore, the hybrid media environment (Chadwick 2017) strengthens the impact and role of social media platforms, such as X (Twitter), YouTube, and Instagram, regarding the public sphere, as well as the public image of religion (Stahel 2021; Sumiala et al. 2023). This is especially crucial because reputation and image are configured and distributed in the public sphere. Therefore, within a democracy, we cannot examine digital religion(s) without considering the public spheres, which are based on digital media too. The defining characteristic of public spheres is the inherent openness of their audience: participants do not know the size or exact makeup of the audience (i.e., how many people are present, listening, watching, or reading). Unknown third parties may be actively or passively participating in a specific communication situation. In the digital age, the potential for communication situations to become public or for an expansion of the audience for a given situation, has increased dramatically (Eisenegger and Schäfer 2023). Such public spheres define how religions and their organizations are perceived and evaluated, as well as how legitimate or illegitimate they appear. Thus, the reputation of a societal actor (a person, an organization, or an institution) results from a public assessment of criteria such as performance, social responsibility, and the power of identification (Eisenegger and Schranz 2015).

However, little is known about the reputational configuration of religions and their actors, especially religious organizations, such as churches, within Swiss society, despite the declining numbers of church members. We understand “reputational configuration” as referring to the specific touchpoints via which reputation perceptions are formed, such as sources, themes, and actors, and the differences that emerge between various user groups in this process. In the context of the increasing number of people who do not belong to any religious denomination (BfS 2022), we do not know where people get in touch with religion and what topics and actors are prevalent at these points of contact. Considering a journey composed of touchpoints contextualized by topics and actors will help us understand how religions are negotiated in the Swiss digital public sphere. Furthermore, it will support the premise that traditional and public media discourse are strongly intertwined with religious transformation, such as digital religion(s) (Offerhaus 2023). Therefore, in this chapter, we ask the following question: *How do digital and societal changes influence the communicative descriptions and, thus, the reputation of Christian organizations via legacy and social media?*

2 Theoretical Framework

The reputation formation processes of organizations and actors, including religious ones, are strongly influenced by mediated communication via either traditional or social media (Carroll and McCombs 2003; Deephouse 2000; Einwiller et al. 2010). Media salience and thematic focus impact public perceptions of the importance of issues (Eisenegger 2005; Eisenegger et al. 2010; Soukup 2019). Religions, their organizations, and their exponents, especially the Roman Catholic Church, are frequent subjects of media coverage, often being tied to societal conflicts or scandals (Cohen 2023; Offerhaus 2023).

The news value of religions in general and churches in particular is derived from conflicts or problematic interfaces with other areas of society, such as politics, business, or law, as well as an emphasis on emotionality, personalization, proximity, or negativity regarding religious topics (Dahinden and Wyss 2009; Koch 2009; Soukup 2019). Scandals significantly affect public perceptions (Ahrens 2022; Krebber and Wiesenberg 2015; Winter-Pfändler 2022), and media consumption habits shape how people perceive churches (Schwaiger et al. 2020). On the other hand, digitalization processes and the increasing importance of social media facilitate the creation and expansion of public spheres. As a result, the public space is formed in a more bottom-up manner, as the traditional gatekeeping role of journalists is less dominant, enabling a wider range of voices to reach a broader audience. Platforms such as Twitter, now X, have been recognized as channels for public discourse (Bruns and Highfield 2015; Stahel 2021). This highlights the fact that not only traditional media but also broader discussions on social media shape opinions (Bruns and Highfield 2015), with traditional media and social media influencing one another in hybrid media environments (Chadwick 2017).

Consequently, the media and public spheres play a pivotal role in shaping people's opinions on and images of religions and their actors, such as churches. Negative media coverage, such as coverage of financial misconduct, sexual abuse scandals, or discriminatory views, can severely harm their reputations, as people feel alienated by the behavior (Portmann and Plüss 2011; Wäckerlig et al. 2022). However, studies emphasize that personal experiences and those of close peers are vital in reputation judgments, though media portrayals can influence these perceptions as well (Ebertz 2013; Klingenberg and Sjö 2019). Thus, asking where the media and non-media touchpoints are that shape the reputations of social actors such as churches is crucial in a project in which media is not only viewed as a mirror of religions' images and stereotypes but also a starting point for the development and transformation of religions and their actors (Offerhaus 2023).

2.1 Theoretical Background

Before we consider the relevant touchpoints in reputation formation processes, we must first clarify why we have chosen to investigate reputation (Barnett et al. 2006; Lange et al. 2011; Veh et al. 2019). The “why” is explained by the fact that a good reputation enhances and legitimizes the power of the actor and helps relieve the constant need to defend its position in society (Eisenegger 2005; Eisenegger and Imhof 2009). Most conceptions of reputation, therefore, emphasize that it both depends on and simultaneously shapes abstract ideas, beliefs, and associations within an organization’s environment or audience. Essentially, it refers to the perceptions and knowledge surrounding an organization (Barnett et al. 2006; Meirinhos et al. 2022; Mitchell and Stroup 2017; Santos et al. 2020; Veh et al. 2019). Organizational reputation reflects how stakeholders and the public perceive and recognize an organization. It is shaped by communication about past and future achievements and strengthens an organization’s resilience in the face of threats to its legitimacy and existence (Eisenegger 2005; Fombrun 1998; Vogler et al. 2016; Zavyalova et al. 2016).

Thus, the core elements of organizational reputation are the strategic messages about its vision, goals, and identity, which shape its image over time (Barnett et al. 2006; Meirinhos et al. 2022). Therefore, reputation is an essential attribute of all types of organizations, even though it has been primarily associated with companies in the past. Today, it has been recognized that all collective and individual actors, religious actors included, depend on reputation (Eisenegger and Imhof 2009; Finke and Stark 2004; Lipford 1992; Mitchell and Stroup 2017; Ravasi et al. 2018). One central aspect of reputation is the actor’s environment (Luoma-aho 2008; Meyer and Bromley 2013; Meyer and Rowan 1977). Collective or individual actors that contribute to an organization’s resources and influence its existence, which are called stakeholders, are considered significant within its environment (see Müller and Friemel in this volume). At the same time, the organization impacts these stakeholders through its offerings or services (Luoma-aho 2008). In the case of churches, current and potential members are regarded as the main stakeholders. However, in a democratic society, the broader public is also a stakeholder, as political decisions and moral judgments, such as those regarding scandals, can influence or even threaten a religious organization’s existence or operational scope. This is particularly true in contexts in which a corporate state-church model exists, such as Switzerland, in which certain aspects of churches are still regulated by the state or cantons (Pahud de Mortanges 2014). The division of stakeholders into narrower or broader groups raises the question of which sources or touchpoints play key roles in shaping churches’ reputations. While members and, sometimes, non-members have direct experiences with churches,

the broader public often learn about such organizations only through the media (Ebertz 2013; Klingenberg and Sjö 2019) and base their views on word of mouth and, importantly, media portrayals (Carroll and McCombs 2003).

2.2 A Three-Dimensional Perspective on Reputation

Our primary theoretical approach in the past four years of the research program was a three-dimensional perspective on reputation based on the work of Eisenegger (2005) and Habermas's three-world concept (1984). We divide reputation into three dimensions: functional reputation, social reputation, and expressive reputation. Each dimension has its own core purpose and operationalization; however, they also influence one another.

First, functional reputation reflects the public's assessment of an organization's performance in terms of fulfilling its intended purpose. For religious organizations, this includes "offering religion," which is their unique function (Finke and Stark 2004; Iannaccone et al. 1995). Additionally, churches play broader roles, such as integrating individuals into the community, providing care, and offering rituals for various life stages (Nagel 2015; Winter-Pfändler 2015). Second, social reputation refers to how well an organization adheres to prevailing societal values and norms. Churches, for example, are expected to contribute to social welfare and oppose injustice (Stolz 2013; Wäckerlig et al. 2022). Third, the emotional dimension of reputation, the expressive, encompassing an organization's perceived attractiveness and authenticity, develops in conjunction with its functional and social reputations. What is important here is the emotional power of identification emanating from an actor, as well as how authentic and credible they are perceived to be. Studies have highlighted the fact that people increasingly value authenticity in religious organizations (Packard and Ferguson 2019). A church's attractiveness is based on its ability to fulfill its purpose and act with moral integrity (Eisenegger and Imhof 2009).

3 Samples and Method

In our research project, we use not only a multidisciplinary theoretical approach but also various methodological approaches to investigate the reputational configuration and touchpoints of churches in Swiss society and complete a multiverse perspective on religious reporting in traditional online media and religious discourse in social media. However, the results presented in this chapter are based

on data derived from four online surveys conducted in the Swiss population via Intervista in April 2022, April 2023, and May 2024. For all surveys, a representative sample of people between 18 and 74 years of age was chosen, resulting in a sample size of $n = 1,221$ (2022), $n = 1,223$ (2023), and $n = 1,200$ (2024). The questionnaire included various thematic blocks, such as sociodemographic factors, church socialization and leaving tendencies, religiosity, spirituality, religious affiliation (*“What is your religious affiliation?” The options were as follows: “Roman Catholic Church, Protestant Reformed Church, Orthodox Church, Free Church, other Christian church or community, Muslim community or community derived from Islam, Jewish community, Hindu association, Buddhist association, other religious affiliation, and no religious affiliation”*), media usage, and the churches’ perceived reputation. In 2024, we extended the questionnaire regarding thematic blocks and actors associated with churches in media (social media or traditional online media). We examined the correlations between the variables through multiple regression analyses. The questions about the Roman Catholic Church and Protestant Reformed Church were mandatory for all participants. The question about a third type of church, either evangelical churches (e.g., free churches) or orthodox churches, was selected depending on the respondent’s level of knowledge about various types of churches. To specify what we meant by the third type of church, we did not use specific examples (ICF, Pentecostal, Greek Orthodox, or Serbian Orthodox) but, rather, the following descriptions: *“Free churches are Protestant churches that set themselves apart from the state churches or national churches. In this sense, they are characterized by organizational independence and their own theological ideas . . . Orthodox churches are pre-Reformation churches. The collective term “Eastern Church” is used to describe various Orthodox churches that go back to the so-called Byzantine rite.”* Therefore, participants were free to determine for themselves what churches were evangelical or Orthodox.

The dependent variable – reputation – is measured using an index comprising 21 items. There are seven items for each of the three reputation dimensions, and they are scored on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, and 7 = strongly agree). These items were mainly operationalized based on indicators derived from Winter-Pfändler (2015). The participants were asked about functional reputation to evaluate the churches’ function of integrating people, giving them a spiritual/religious home, offering spiritual care, or engaging in charitable work. Regarding social reputation, participants had to evaluate the churches at the intersection with other social systems, such as obeying legal standards and participating in relevant societal, political, and ecological debates and activities. To evaluate the emotional and identificatory quality of the churches, the participants had to answer questions about their emotional, expressive reputations.

To measure people's touchpoints regarding the churches, we included several questions about information sources in the surveys from 2022–2024, the actors from whom they receive their information about churches, and perceived themes regarding churches (2024 survey). Therefore, we asked about the sources using the following question: "What are your assessments of the churches based on?" Regarding the actors, we asked, "*Where do the content, information and opinions that you see in the media come from when it comes to [church]?*" Regarding the themes, we asked, "*In connection with which topics do you perceive [church] to be represented in the media?*"

For this chapter, to reveal the reputations of churches, we performed a mean comparison of each reputational dimension for each church. Each reputational dimension was measured using a Likert-type scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. The overall reputation is calculated as the mean of each reputation dimension. The results were then linearly transformed to a scale of -100 to +100:

$$y = \frac{(x - 4) * 100}{3}$$

Based on Eisenegger's formula (2005), the result can be interpreted as -100 to -25 = strongly negative, +25 to +100 = strongly positive, and -25 to 25 = slightly negative to neutral to slightly positive. We refer to the descriptive results to provide insights into the sources, actors, and themes.

4 Main Findings

Over the past four years, we have conducted various analyses, and we can summarize the results in the form of three key findings. First, we see a decline in the general reputation of all churches over the past three years (see Table 1). The Roman Catholic Church (RC) and the Evangelical Churches (ECs) have a significantly poorer reputations among the Swiss population than the Protestant Reformed Churches (PCs). However, the most negatively evaluated church are the Orthodox Churches (OCs), the general reputation of which is in constant decline (-21.02 in 2022, -25.99 in 2023, and -26.06 in 2024).

The most critical dimension of a church's reputation is the expressive one, which includes factors such as authenticity, inspiration, and respect. These factors heavily affect how the public evaluates churches. For example, the RC's expressive reputation scores from 2022 to 2024 are notably negative (-45.19 in 2022, -42.09 in 2023, and -44.04 in 2024). Similarly, the ECs saw an increase in negative expressive reputation scores from -49.77 in 2022 to -53.03 in 2024.

Table 1: Churches' reputations from 2022 to 2024. For the dimensions: adjusted $R^2 = 0.758$; t-tests for functional reputation (9.404), social reputation (27.156), and expressive reputation (54.236); significance of t-tests $p < .00$ for all reputation dimensions.

Church	Year*	Functional reputation	Social Reputation	Expressive reputation	General Reputation	n
Roman Catholic	2022	8.47	-19.44	-45.19	-19.9	1,199
	2023	10.26	-18.74	-42.09	-18.37	1,207
	2024	5.03	-21.12	-44.04	-21.17	1,214
Protestant Reformed	2022	16.33	0.76	-28.55	-5.43	1,178
	2023	16.78	1.24	-27.9	-5.55	1,198
	2024	14	-0.47	-28.4	-6.91	1,199
Orthodox	2022	14.91	-29.88	-47.71	-21.92	572
	2023	14.98	-30.12	-50.51	-25.99	606
	2024	10.96	-29.6	-49.21	-26.06	631
Evangelicals	2022	15.99	-23.86	-49.77	-22.56	475
	2023	16.6	-22.86	-47.53	-20.66	479
	2024	13.37	-26.39	-53.03	-23.82	455

Secondly, the results for 2022–2024 show that most people rely primarily on journalistic online media when evaluating churches, with social media, including content received from various actors, not only churches' own communications, playing a relatively minor role, influencing less than 20% of individuals (see Figure 1). Among the churches most prominent on social media are the RC (18.5%) and ECs (15.9%), indicating that these groups are more successful in leveraging digital platforms to shape their public image.

However, personal interactions and experiences remain the most important factors in building or damaging a church's reputation. The OCs are primarily known through traditional media (on- and offline), with only 13.3% of the population having had personal experiences with them. This reliance on media reporting makes traditional outlets especially important in shaping the OCs' reputation. In the case of the RC, 53.4% of people rely on traditional media combined with social media, making these channels the among most relevant sources of information, being second only to personal experiences. This heavy reliance on both forms of media highlights their important role in influencing the RC's public image.

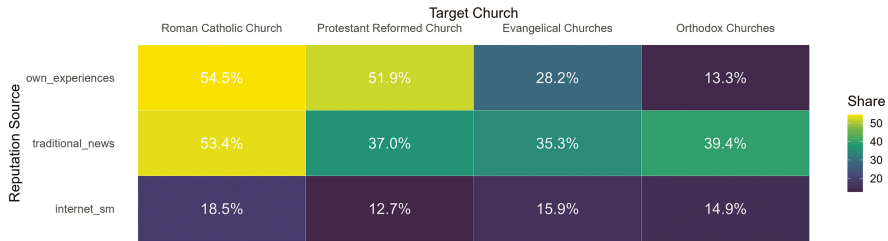


Figure 1: Reputational sources for churches 2022–2024. $n = 1,221$ (2022), $n = 1,223$ (2023), and $n = 1,200$ (2024).

These results do not change when we take a closer look at the cohorts within the survey (see Figure 2).¹ For each church, personal experience remains the main reputational source for its own members (RC: 76.9%; PR: 82.0%; EC: 91.8%).

The traditional media is the main reputational source for non-members of the RC and ECs (RC: Protestant 58.7%, Evangelical 49.1%, and none 57.5%; EC: Catholic 31.5%, Protestant 32.0%, and none 42.1%). However, for the Protestant Church, for non-members, the main source is one's "own experience." Only for Catholics does the main source used to evaluate the Protestant Church remain "traditional media" (Evangelical: 69.5%, none: 49.1%, Catholic: 30.0% own experience but traditional media: 33.2%). These results may indicate a potentially close relationship (joint church services or other offerings, as well as postulating common values) between ECs and the PC and also some fluidity between the memberships of those churches (EVREF, 2024). Meanwhile, social media is mostly used by non-members as a reputational source for churches. (RC: 20.2%, PC: 14.1%; EC: 19.8%). This is a surprising finding and should be further discussed.

Third, the results of the latest survey, which was distributed in 2024, which focused on the actors perceived to be involved in distributing information or taking part in discourses on the themes surrounding churches, emphasize the pivotal role of journalists as touchpoints in shaping public opinion about churches (see Figure 3). This influence is particularly pronounced for the RC (29.60%), for which media outlets and journalists are the most visible players in the media landscape. However, for all churches, journalists and media brands (for example, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (NZZ), *Swiss Radio and Television* (SRF), or *Blick*) are the most prominent sources in terms of discussing religious themes (Protestant Reformed: 19.60%, Orthodox: 16.80%, Evangelical: 17.70%). The religious organizations themselves are second

¹ In the following figure, only the Catholic, the Reformed Protestant and the Evangelical Churches are presented because for the Orthodox Churches, the number of members who completed the survey was too small.

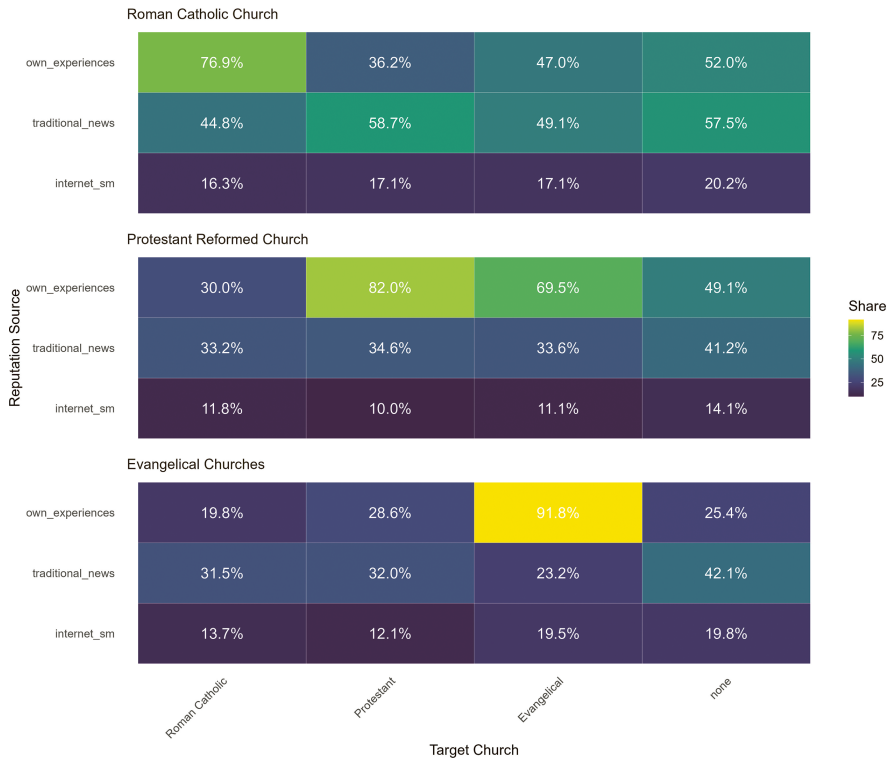


Figure 2: Reputational sources for churches by denominations 2022–2024. n = 1,221 (2022), n = 1,223 (2023), and n = 1,200 (2024).

among perceived actors in the religious media discourse, although these numbers are significantly lower than those for the traditional media (Roman Catholic: 15.70%; Protestant: 18.30%; Orthodox: 8.70%; Evangelical: 11.50%).

However, the differences between the churches in terms of actors are striking. For the RC, for example, prominent religious authorities are also very visible, indicating the media prominence of Catholic leaders and the Pope and the universality of the Catholic churches. This is supported by the fact that for the Reformed Protestant Church, local religious authorities are visible (11.60%) and, again, represent the church’s internal structure. In addition, one result stands out for the ECs: non-religious organizations also seem to be present (9.30%), potentially indicating the strong resonance of the film regarding an evangelical member and former patron of Läderach – a Swiss chocolatier (SRF Dok 2023).

Regarding the perceived topics and, thus, the topic-related reputational touchpoints, the data show that the topic “Religious organizations and commu-

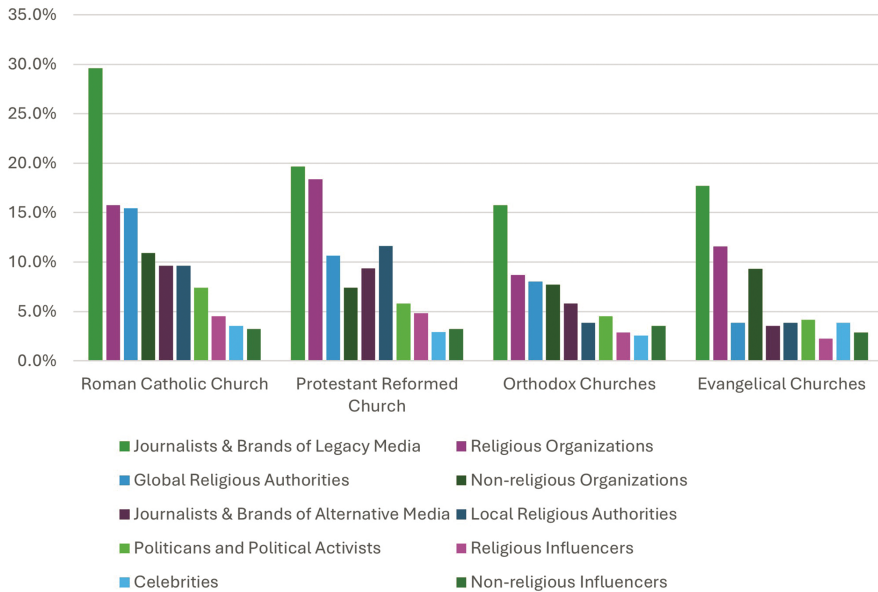


Figure 3: Aggregated perceptions of actors in social media or traditional media in 2024. The table shows only answers of “often” and “frequent” (n = 1,200).

nity” is very present for the four churches (RC: 31.51%; PC: 29.03%; OC: 16.80%; EC: 19.61%; see Figure 4). In addition, “religious or spiritual traditions, practices, and lifestyles” are particularly visible for the RC (34.08%), the OCs (17.68%), and the ECs (20.26%), indicating the very high institutional representation of the churches through their own online media.

For the Protestant Reformed Church, however, social engagement is the most frequently perceived topic (29.68%), which could indicate the public engagement of the church in recent political debates regarding the Corporate Responsibility Initiative (2020; Kirchenrat der Evangelisch-reformierten Kirche Schweiz) or “Marriage for All” (2021; Schweizerischer Evangelischer Kirchenbund 2019). On the other hand, the most frequent topic for the RC is “Historical Events or Persons” (34.08%), and the church also tops the list regarding perceptions of “Conflict and Violence” (27.0%) and “Legal Context and Criminality” (24.76%), potentially indicating the media echo regarding abuse in the RC (Dubec et al. 2023). “Conflicts and Violence” is also pre-dominant for the OCs (13.50%), potentially referring to the Russia–Ukraine War.

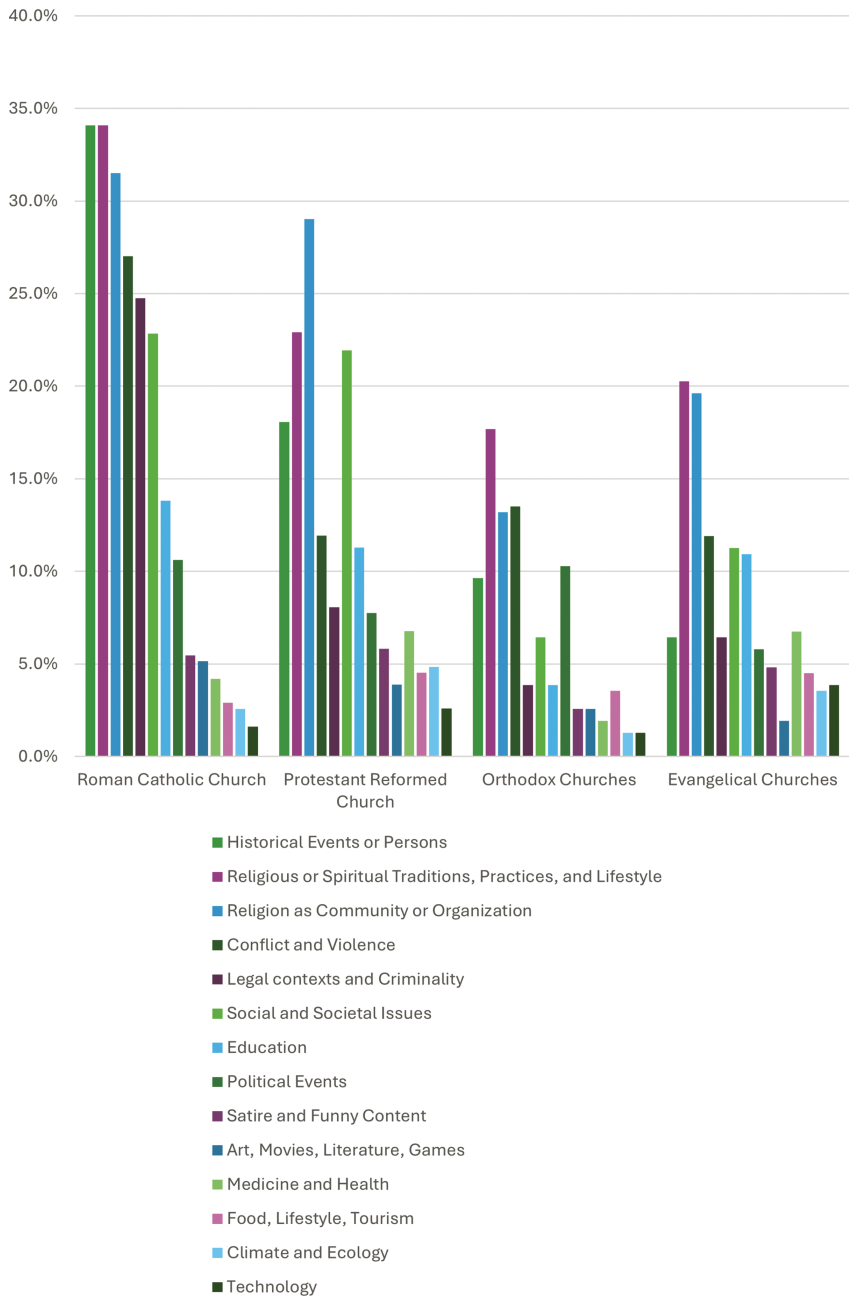


Figure 4: Aggregate perception of themes in social media or traditional media in 2024. The table shows only answers of “often” and “frequent” (n = 1,200).

5 Conclusion

The analysis of churches' reputations within Swiss Society confirms ongoing public debates and societal trends regarding the rise of negative images of churches. Not only are many people leaving churches (Stolz et al. 2022), they also evaluate these churches negatively. Furthermore, when we examine the media traces of reputational touchpoints for the churches, we discover a surprising finding. Despite the prevalent belief in the growing influence of digital media, our research indicates that the digital presence and representation of churches, particularly on social media or other online sources, are less important in evaluating them. Traditional news media, online or offline, and personal experiences remain more decisive in reputation formation. This underlines, on one hand, the fact that interpersonal, real-life contact or communication between churches and individuals remains essential in the digital age. On the other hand, it shows that traditional media influences, such as the gatekeeping function of journalists in building churches' reputations, remain influential in online environments and in spite of increased opportunities for churches to communicate directly in digital media environments.

Considering the thematic touchpoints, on the other hand, we see that churches (i.e., religion as an organization or community, remains a highly referenced theme, showing a great deal of publicly discussed content related to organizational structures, organizational governance, human-resource-related issues, or the representation of churches as social actors. Social engagement and religious teachings are also consistently prominent across most denominations, demonstrating the churches' ongoing visibility in social and religious matters. Topics such as conflict or violence, political events, and health are less uniformly distributed across the various churches. This finding aligns with previous research on news reporting on churches (Dubec et al. 2023), in which the focus is on the RC and its associated scandals.

To sum up, from the perspective of the research field of digital religion(s), this project offers a general conclusion regarding the concept of religious transformation. It underscores the well-established connection between religion and media. Our research project highlights the fact that even in the digital age, old and new media and forms of communication must be modeled as a complex interplay. Therefore, a one-sided view of purely digitalized sources and touchpoints falls short of the mark. In Swiss society, journalists still have the power to set the tone and agenda regarding churches. This conclusion is additionally supported by the results indicating that even on social media, the most seen actors are indeed journalists and media brands.

Furthermore, it is crucial to note that the internet and social media are mostly mentioned as reputational touchpoints by non-members. There are vari-

ous potential reasons for this, such as non-members having no physical touchpoints and relying more heavily on third-party opinions. However, the ability to sort and read information (religious and social media literacy) may be an essential variable as well. For example, it is possible that non-members are more likely to interpret all religion-related social media or internet content as information about churches or institutionalized religion, regardless of the content or actors involved, whereas members are more nuanced in their assessment of content either as “church-related content,” “religious content,” or “individual influencer content” (see the chapter of Müller and Friemel in this book). It could also indicate that non-members are more often confronted with social media or internet content distributed by traditional media actors, in which most coverage of Christianity-related topics is connected to the churches (Cohen 2023), while church members may avoid such content on social media or not automatically relate Christian social media content to the established churches in Switzerland. Further research on this topic is needed.

Consequently, this study underscores not only the intertwined on- and offline dynamics surrounding religious communities but also the ongoing challenges faced by religious communities, which are becoming digitally communicated objects that are publicly framed and constructed by third parties (e.g., journalists; Cohen 2023) but also use digital media as their own communication channels, potentially building their own public (digital) agency and authority regarding the communicated information, messages, and images. Furthermore, our study highlights the ongoing digital transformation of religion from a broader societal perspective and the way in which social media and the internet should be interpreted regarding these matters. It highlights the importance of asking to what extent the digital turn offers a completely new stage in terms of the visibility of churches in an extended public sphere (Bruns and Highfield 2015) and to what extent traditional media and communication channels, such as personal experiences and interpersonal communication, remain important drivers of reputational dynamics in hybrid media contexts (Chadwick 2017).

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Beth Singler and Kristina Eiviler

Insights from Current Research on the Entanglements of AI and Religion

Abstract: In this chapter we explore emerging themes and topics in the relationship between religion and AI, as expanded upon in publications from the URPP's Assistant Professor in Digital Religion(s) during the second half of Phase 1 of the URPP. These themes and topics include: perceptions and opinions from the public of religion and AI; theistic imaginaries and language; apocalypticism and dystopianism; the need for a plurality of religious and scholarly perspectives; and implicit and explicit formations of religiosity. Through this reflective approach on the content of these outputs, we hope to further understand the developing field of religion and AI, underneath the 'Digital Religious Studies' umbrella, and gain insights into which methodologies and tools might be useful for its future. Further, it is also considered that these methodologies and tools will be useful for the wider public who are also engaging with these topics in a rapidly changing conversation on a rapidly changing technology.

In diesem Kapitel untersuchen wir aufkommende Themen und Fragestellungen in der Beziehung zwischen Religion und KI, wie sie in den Publikationen der Assistenzprofessorin für «Digital Religions» des UFSP in der zweiten Hälfte der Phase 1 des Forschungsprogramms näher bearbeitet werden. Zu diesen Themen und Fragestellungen gehören: Wahrnehmungen und Einschätzungen der Öffentlichkeit von Religion und KI; theistische Vorstellungswelten und Sprache; Apokalyptik und Dystopie; die Notwendigkeit einer Pluralität religiöser und wissenschaftlicher Perspektiven sowie implizite und explizite Ausprägungen von Religiosität. Durch diesen reflektierenden Ansatz auf den Inhalt dieser Ergebnisse hoffen wir, das sich entwickelnde Feld von Religion und KI unter dem Dach der „Digitalen Religionswissenschaft“ besser zu verstehen und Erkenntnisse darüber zu gewinnen, welche Methoden und Werkzeuge für die Zukunft nützlich sein könnten. Darüber hinaus wird davon ausgegangen, dass diese Methoden und Werkzeuge auch für die breitere Öffentlichkeit nützlich sein werden, die sich in schnell verändernden Debatten über eine sich schnell verändernde Technologie ebenfalls mit diesen Themen befasst.

1 Introduction

The relationship between religion and AI has been characterised in earlier work by Beth Singler, as the main author of this chapter and the Assistant Professor in Digital Religion(s) at the URPP (the AP) as being “entangled”. By that we mean, not fitting into neat categorisation that reduces or dismisses either party as singular or distinct from the other, contrary to much of contemporary discourse. Moreover, previously, we have also noted that both religion and AI resist simple definitions, and that some in the field of AI have attempted to resist certain dominant narratives and too conclusive uses of both ‘artificial’ and ‘intelligence’, recognising the shaping effects of both definitions and metaphors (Singler and Watts 2024, 1-5, Singler 2024, 100-101).

It is fitting perhaps then that this chapter also bends away from neat categorisation and established formats. Unlike the other chapters in this volume from contributors that were working in discrete projects in Phase 1 of the URPP’s overall scheme, this chapter emerges from the outputs of the the main author since joining halfway through Phase 1 and operating in her research aims without a discrete and bounded project. It also involves the input of an incoming postdoc (PD), Kristina Eiviler, who will be working on the AP’s project in the forthcoming Phase 2 of the URPP, entitled: “Post-AI Religion: The Reciprocal Disruption of Digital Religions and AI”.

The Phase 2 project seeks to lay out the possible spaces of ‘post-AI’ religion – building on existing conversations about the post-Digital to think through this distinct moment and how the field of digital religious studies will also be affected by the AI Turn.

In preparation for this new study and in order to highlight useful conceptual tools from existing work, the evidential and methodological focus of this chapter is therefore an exploration of themes and topics in Religion and AI from within the publications of the AP between 2022 and 2024 during the second half of Phase 1 of the URPP. Through this reflective approach we hope to understand the developing field of religion and AI, underneath the ‘Digital Religious Studies’ umbrella, and see how and in which directions it is currently developing.

2 Themes and Topics in Research on Religion and AI

2.1 Public Questions about AI and Its Generative Link to Religion

This topic was inspired by interactions with members of the public in more casual, but no less important, ethnographic moments. During many public talks and panels the AP has been involved in, the question-and-answer sessions enabled concerned members of the public to surface concerns and ask specific questions. Many have asked “Will AI Create a Religion?”. Some members of the public bring with this question a negative view of such a possibility, such as the audience member at Greenbelt, a Christian festival in the UK, in 2024 who asked, “Will we see the creation of fake religions because of AI?”. As anthropologists, the co-authors of this chapter have been trained to not offer judgement or normative statements, and thus the AP’s response to this question was to in turn question the audience member’s presuppositions in the use of the word “fake”. It was also not clear from the audience member’s question whether they were implying human-made or AI-made ‘fake’ religions.

In the AP’s article, “‘Will AI Create a Religion?’: Views of the Algorithmic Forms of the Religious Life in Popular Discourse” (Singler 2023), published by the journal *American Religion* as a part of a special issue “On Religion and Algorithms”, a brief schema of possible meanings of the original question was laid out, based upon the assumptions that religion is either, 1. Human-made, or, 2. God (s)-made. In either case, the resulting institutions, doctrines, texts, and other material artefacts are equally open to study by scholars of religion and theologians.

However, if religion is perceived as human made, the original question of “Will AI create a religion?” might be parsed as being one the following variations: “Will AI create a religion in the same way that humans make religions?”, “Will AI inspire humans to make religions, as they have been inspired (by natural phenomena, by charismatic and legendary historical figures, or by earlier technologies) to create religions before”, or (as per the Greenbelt question) “Will AI create a false religion that distracts from god-made religion?”.

In the case of the second assumption about where religion comes from (“god (s)-made”), the question might then mean something more like: “Can AI have religious experiences based on metaphysical realities and become then truly religious/start a religion?”. However, from an anthropological perspective, the plethora of answers ultimately tells us more about humans’ perspectives on the nature of both AI and religion, as argued in this paper.

To find this material a variety of online sources (such as user posts on social media, Quora answers, and blog posts) and publications (including science fiction and non-fiction interviews with figures in the AI discussion) were analysed, and then categorised by how they viewed religion and AI. For instance, some users in these online spaces were very clear that AI would not be able to *be* religious because religion itself was only an irrational residue of a less evolved humanity. Thus, they displayed both prejudice against religion and a reification of AI as a supremely more rational entity.

A summary of the types of responses here shows not only the preponderance of answers in the positive, but also that most answers encountered were in a strong yes/no binary, which was concluded to be a result of how people offer opinions in online spaces – with certainty and with the perspective that they have something valuable to add to the discussion:

No	Yes
'No, AI absolutely will not create a religion'	'Yes, and it is inevitable'
'No, because that is outside of its programming, or abilities'	'Yes, AI will create a religion, and this will have bad consequences' ¹
'No, because religions are created by a lack of intelligence and/or rationality'	'Yes, because it will inspire religious belief in humans' ²
	'Yes, but the religion it will create will be for humans'
	'Yes, and here's an example of a religion it made'
	'Yes, because religions are created by a lack of intelligence and/or rationality' and AI will be just like us'
	'Yes, and a religious AI will be helpful, until it isn't'
	'Yes, but not for a while and this will be a bad thing for AI'
	'Yes, but it depends on what you call religion'

What themes and conceptual tools can we observe from this specific article? First, we can recognise that humans are already discussing answers to questions about their relationship with AI in relation to religion and that they are willing to share their views. Further, we can relate this particular topic of the creation of religion by AI to other ethnographic and anecdotal evidence from the AP who has been engaged in public engagement for many years and encountered numerous individuals (from children to adults) who have already developed normative

1 <https://www.dailystar.co.uk/news/weird-news/chatgpt-ready-create-religion-ai-29874260> [accessed 04.05.2023].

2 AI NRMs such as The Way of the Future, Theta Noir, and New Order Technoism.

views on the relationship between religion and AI – including the highly negative and the dismissive as well as the curious and experimental, some which has been clearly shaped by science fiction and popular accounts.

Second, this paper explored a developing area of public and academic concern – the moral agency and patiency of AI³ in relation to the cultural domain of religion and its formation, institutions, restrictions, and eschatological offerings. Again, science fiction has long offered up such accounts, and has done for several decades, so the discussion does not arise out of tabular rasa. A particular example noted in this 2023 article is the short story “Reason” by Isaac Asimov, which explored the development of religious beliefs by robots in 1941 and remains a foundational part of his overall thesis that humans will not ultimately be able to predict or control robots – also, we note the source of conflict for his fictions.

More recent moments of ‘real-world’ ethnographic interest such as the adoption of AI in religious settings – whether through either the use of large language models (e.g. ChatGPT sermons) or anthropomorphic (and “theomorphic”, see Trovato, Cuellar, and Nishimura 2016) forms of robots – highlight an increasing interest in this intersection and specifically the potential/actual personhood of such entities. And in many discussions being a ‘person’ seems to necessarily involve engagement – including but not limited to the refutation of certain conclusions – with the larger moral and existential questions long ruminated in the discourse of established and familiar religions.

2.2 Theistic Language and Imaginaries

Another important topic in research on the entanglements of religion and AI is the persistence of religious imaginaries in the images, language and tropes in public discourse. In 2023, a special issue on prior work of the AP was published that returned to ethnographic research on imaginaries of AI as a religious object. Specifically, in an examination of religious utterings around the power of the algorithm. The findings of this research could also be seen as answering the above question “Will AI inspire humans to make religions, as they have been inspired to create religions before?”. Although, we should note that in some people’s perspective, the question being answered by this material would be: “Will AI create a false religion that distracts from god-made religion?”.

³ A moral patient is “a being who possesses some moral status — i.e. is owed moral duties and obligations, and is capable of suffering moral harms and experiencing moral benefits” (Danaher 2019, 8).

In 2020, the AP published an article based on research into people's use of the phrase "Blessed by the Algorithm" (BBtA). Primarily, the examples the AP referred to were found in social media spaces, as people expressed the feeling that this had happened to them. Previous work by the AP on the effect that social media has in shortening the distance between having a feeling and sharing it would also be relevant here (Singler 2017, 151-152). Sometimes these posts gave specific reasons for this feeling, and in analysing the material the AP developed a seven-fold typology of BBtA posts:

1. posts about the success or failure of users' content (on YouTube, FB, Twitter etc)
2. posts in response to recommendations (on Spotify, YouTube, etc)
3. Expressions of feeling blessed when working in a gig economy job (e.g., as a Lyft driver)
4. posts without context ("Today I have been blessed by the algorithm")
5. posts with specific religious content (including pseudo-religious/parody, religious emojis, and other hashtags)
6. negative posts, i.e. users describing not being blessed or feeling nostalgic for a better time before the algorithm controlled/blessed content
7. posts containing science fiction references

In the special issue reflecting on this 2020 article, four authors (Marta Kołodziej-ska, Jacob Boss, Carly Machado, and Giulia Evolvi) wrote responding articles, before the AP was also given space to respond to their comments. In "AI Gods, Jeans Gods, and Thrift Gods: Responding to Responses to the Blessed by the Algorithm Paper (Singler 2020)", the AP identifies one of the key attributes of AI; that:

Metaphorical language about AI abounds because we do not know how to place this thing into a stable category. It is a thing, a field, a future entity, a human aspiration, a mistake, and many more things beside.

And that we are currently in an:

extremely fertile moment for a variety of tones in the discussion of AI – including the seriously religious, the implicitly religious, the parodic, the ironic, the metaphorical, the academic, the financial, and even the moralistic (Singler 2023, 142).

The instances of people describing themselves as having been BBtA are relatively small in number. It is by no means a dominant narrative of AI in the way that other shapes have taken over our conception such as Skynet, which has had its own religious impact (discussed in a book chapter on religion *in* and *from* the Terminator franchise by the AP just prior to joining the URPP, Singler 2022).

And yet, we can also recognise that the slippage into religious language about AI not only speaks to this instability in understanding but demonstrated the most common resource we have for explaining the ineffable – our shared religious cultural histories, terminologies and images. Even when we do not profess religious or spiritual beliefs, we are still shaped in our thinking and our shared imaginaries by dominant religious accounts of the world. What dominates of course can vary by the specificity of our geolocation and which institutions have dominated and at which times. But certain religious forms have become transnational and remain long after their institutional influence has waned.

However, we can also speak about intensity when it comes to AI. Being ‘blessed’ by a pair of jeans, or the ‘thrift gods’ when we find them in a shop – as discussed in this article – has a different resonance to being blessed by AI. AI is increasingly operating as an actant – in a Latourian sense – in our lives. So, for instance, while the thrift gods might smile on us in our treasure hunting, but they are not literally shaping our lives. Whereas algorithmic decision-making systems currently actualise outcomes in financial domains, in health outcomes, and in battlefields. They of course operate on the weights and calculations devised by humans and corporations, and while we might not understand that those are the decisions of agents and actants other than AI, we still benefit and endure their outcomes when AI ‘decides’. And so, the impact of being Blessed by the Algorithm will far outweigh the impact of being blessed by the thrift or jeans gods.

2.3 The Religiously Inspired Apocalyptic and Dystopian in AI Discourse, and How We Respond to Them

The opposite to the feeling of being blessed is of course the feeling of being cursed. In the above paper, the AP noted a few examples of BCtA (Being Cursed by the Algorithm) but recognised that they were by far the minority in the examples she considered. However, in the AI discourse as a whole there is a preponderance of discussions of existential risk. A concept formulated originally in small ideological groups of AI technologists and philosophers, concerns about the dangers of AI have grown into first a larger academic field with institutions and diverse forms of funding, and then into a narrative that shapes policy discussions at the highest levels. For instance, prominent rationalist and AI value alignment figure Eliezer Yudkowsky’s concerns about the existential risks posed by AI led him to write an op-ed for Time Magazine proposing that:

If intelligence says that a country outside the agreement is building a GPU cluster [to develop a powerful AI], [governments should] be less scared of a shooting conflict between nations than of the moratorium being violated; be willing to destroy a rogue datacenter by airstrike (Time Magazine 2023).

This declaration of the need for military responses to AI development might sound like something that would come from the mouths of the Resistance fighters in the Terminator films (although Yudkowsky himself told the AP in an interview for a documentary for the 40th Anniversary of the first Terminator film that he has no interest in ‘soft’ forms of science fiction, such as that franchise⁴). It was in fact written in response to public calls for a pause in AI development, including one that stated that: “Mitigating the risk of extinction from AI should be a global priority alongside other societal scale risks such as pandemics and nuclear war.” This ‘pause letter’ was published by the Center for AI Safety on 30th May 2023. It was then signed by hundreds of prominent figures in AI, such as Sam Altman (CEO, OpenAI, creators of ChatGPT), Bill Gates (Founder of Microsoft), and Demis Hassabis (CEO, Google DeepMind).⁵

In a chapter for a digital volume called “Thinking Tools for AI, Religion and Culture” co-edited by Heidi Campbell and Pauline Cheong, the AP proposed a specific important role for religious studies scholars and religious believers in the AI existential risk conversation:

I propose that people interested in the history and nature of religion, as well as people of faith, are perhaps uniquely placed to recognize historical parallels and bring together the resources of sociological and anthropological theories, theological perspectives, and critical thinking, along with a deep understanding of the power of storytelling, to bear on these connected AI eschatological concerns to understand them and help others to do the same (Singler 2023, 10).

If the pause letter and Yudkowsky’s opinion piece in Time Magazine might have the effect of shaping the stories we tell ourselves about AI towards fear and anxiety, perhaps scholarly work from the anthropological, sociological, historical, and theological might have something valuable to add – understanding religion might help us to understand how we view AI. First, the nature of the conversations being had might be familiar to the scholar of religion. As division lines become clearer and clearer between the utopians and the dystopians, the long-termists and short-termists, the accelerationists and the ‘Doomers’ we might be able to bring valuable comparisons to the academic study of these developing ideological groups:

⁴ Available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m001xm5f> [accessed 08.02.2025].

⁵ The letter is still open and available at <https://futureoflife.org/open-letter/pause-giant-ai-experiments/> [accessed 10.02.2025].

More and more, the conflict seems to parallel the divisions in some faiths between those working in the here and now with those focused on a coming age of tribulation, rapture, or a god's arrival. The dependence of Apocalyptic AI on older religious accounts for its language, shapes, and tropes, has long been discussed by religious studies scholars, and it only seems to be becoming increasingly pronounced. Now we see even the institutional and social aspects of intra- and inter-religious (verbal) violence being mimicked (Singler 2023, 11).

Here in this chapter and elsewhere, the AP has brought up comparisons of existential risk concerns and AI hype with other millenarian and apocalyptic movements who in prior centuries developed dominionistic understandings of the world of nature as they waited in expectation of utopias 'just around the corner'.

Second, such scholars bring with them tools such as hermeneutics of suspicion and methodological agnosticism (Barker 1983) will be increasingly important in the post-AI age – not just in our encounters with the kind of 'criti-hype' (Vinsel 2021) that the above pause letter embodied, but also in our engagements with the actual products of GenAI: misinformation, disinformation, deepfakes, and the culture wide suspension of disbelief in favour of their counter-factual intuitions and beliefs. For an example of the latter, the response to generative AI art of fake sad children holding fake puppies while being rescued by fake heroes during the aftermath of hurricane Helene included statements from social media users such as:

Hot take – Who cares. It captures the sentiment of the government ignoring the most vulnerable and instead diverting funds to places outside the country.

Nobody cares if the pic is real or not, we all know the fact was way sadder than that.

Scholars of religion are familiar with engaging with a variety of lenses that people bring with them when they perceive the world from a religious perspective.

Third, they are also experienced in recognising the power of stories. In conclusion, the AP proposed that the tools we needed in this post-AI age were: "Literacy in the affective methods of storytelling [. . .] critical thinking, theological nous, and sociological frameworks, so we can understand this age of generative AI" (Singler 2023, 11). The research outlined in this chapter underpins such understanding by underscoring specific examples of when storytelling is impactful on perceptions of both religion and AI: in both positive blessings and negative apocalyptic imaginaries, and in accounts of the creation of religion by AI. Expanding the field of religion and AI would also assist in developing this literacy in the "affective methods of storytelling".

2.4 Supporting and Widening the Field of Religion and AI

Further, then, engagement with a variety of religious studies scholars and theologians on the topic of religion and AI could be seen as just as much of a useful tool as some of these more individual conceptual tools and methodologies. In 2024, the AP published a Cambridge Companion, an edited volume, with co-editor Fraser Watts. Involving sixteen chapters prepared by eighteen authors, *The Cambridge Companion to Religion and AI* is presented in three sections: *Religions and AI*, *Social and Moral Issues*, and *Religious Studies*.

The first section includes contributions from authors both from inside and outside specific religious traditions and attempts to clarify specific responses to AI from the religions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Some of the subsequent chapters in the following sections also refer to specific religious authorities, but so far in the religion and AI discussion many publications on texts on religion and AI have only presented Christian theological responses, and predominantly from American or European forms of Protestantism. The Cambridge Companion contributed to this aim of fostering engagement by incorporating a diverse range of religious voices in this field of religion and AI.

The volume also begins with a recognition of the ‘slipperiness’ of the term AI itself. There have been several attempts to steer the discourse around artificial intelligence away from this term – often considered to originate in 1956 with The Dartmouth Summer Research Project on Artificial Intelligence – and towards new terms that highlight the limitations and suppositions inherent in ‘artificial intelligence’.

For instance, in the introduction, we briefly described the initiative in 2022 from the Center on Privacy and Technology at Georgetown Law, in which they aimed to never to use the term AI. Instead they claimed, in a blog post beginning with “Words matter”, that they would, from now on: (1) be as specific as possible about what the technology is and how it works, (2) identify any obstacles to our own understanding of technology that result from failures of corporate or government transparency, (3) name the corporations responsible for creating and spreading the technological product, and (4) attribute agency to the human actors building and using the technology, never to the technology itself.

Returning to their website during the writing of this chapter, it appears as if they have kept their word. However, an anthropological approach to AI (and religion) will surely recognise that, indeed, “words matter”, to the extent that even the popular use of the term ‘AI’ matters – it is an object in the imagination, even if that imaginary is overhyped. Understanding the intricacies of people’s imaginaries of AI also requires awareness of the shaping effect of elements that do not

adhere to the precision of word usage that the Centre on Privacy and Technology aspires to. As we argued in the introduction to the Cambridge Companion:

In the case of AI, we should identify the role played by the charismatic authorities and voices in the AI story, anthropomorphism (and its counter, robomorphisation – the tendency to see the human as machine-like), utopianism and dystopianism, commercial hype and fake or faux bots that encourage us to view the technology as more advanced than it is, science fiction narratives and even religious narratives (Singler and Watts 2024, 2).

The ‘messiness’ of our understanding of AI is a part of the story of this object. It has that in common, we further argued, with religion as an object. Another characteristic that brings these two entities together, counter to dominant narratives about religion being an irrational residue of the past, and AI being of the future – a perspective seen in the “Will AI Create a Religion” Paper, already discussed. While that paper approached the answers as indicative of a variety of complex and developing views on religion and AI, the Cambridge Companion began with the presentation of how religion and AI are entangled.

For instance, in a following section in the introduction, we explored a short history of the appearance of religious terms in the earliest discussions of AI – including but not limited to words such as ‘dogma’, ‘sin’, ‘idolatry’ and ‘theology’, all present in Anatol Rapaport’s 1964 review of *Computers and Thought* by Edward Feigenbaum, Julian Feldman and Mike Sharples, just eight years after the ‘founding’ of the field of AI at Dartmouth College. Words matter, and in earlier papers, the AP indicated towards the implicit religiosity of AI and transhumanist discussions that simultaneously derided the “religionists” and “deathists” for their “irrational” views, while detailing thought experiments in text based online posts that replicated earlier religious debates in their structure and imagery (for instance, see Singler 2018).

2.5 ‘Implicit’ and ‘Explicit’ Religion and AI

Such replications have been posited as a form of Implicit Religion, following in the tradition of Edward Bailey (1997). In this vein of thinking, the AP also published a single author monograph that explores both implicit and explicit religiosity in AI and vice versa. With twenty case studies, the book divides into two halves. The first half presents again the argument that AI and religion are intrinsically and explicitly entangled as two objects in culture and in a reciprocal relationship with each other as technologies of human aspiration. Divided into chapters formed around three main modes of religious engagement with AI – rejection, adoption, and adaptation – the first half presents more about the con-

nection between established religion and AI. The second part of the book explores some of the connections between AI, transhumanism, posthumanism, and creationism with more implicit religiosities. The realms of imaginaries and futures are prominent in this second part and explored through narratives, images, and science fiction accounts alongside granular ethnographic moments such as the romantic interaction of one individual with a chatbot, or the aspirations and fears of individual social media users. Additionally, each analytical chapter offers a set of ten questions for further thinking and discussion.

As an overview and introductory text, *Religion and AI: An Introduction*, outlines some of the methodological approaches and conceptual tools that a scholar of religion might need in order to explore this subject further. In part, this monograph develops ideas the AP first explored in her 2018 article: “An Introduction to Artificial Intelligence and Religion for the Religious Studies Scholar” (Singler 2018). Included in this discussion, was the suggestion that we remain suspicious of narratives of ‘disruption’. In *Religion and AI: An Introduction* this hermeneutic of suspicion was linked to the above-mentioned concept of Criti-Hype from Vinsel (2021). Interactions and relationships between AI and religion should be observed in consideration with their changing nature:

. . . these are two objects constantly in motion. Not only moving in specific directions through history, as suggested above. But also, in motion in terms of how we understand them. They are difficult, slippery, objects, escaping definitions just as quickly as we try to apply them. There are many influences on this fluidity [. . .] such as popular discourses and imaginaries, charismatic authorities, scientific advances and new research, biases, narratives, and speculative fiction. All have a part to play in how we understand both religion and AI (Singler 2024, 3).

The introductory text to *Religion and AI* further explains the rejection-adoption-adaptation tripartite scheme as the main conceptual tool used as a case analysis framework. Rejection can be recognized on a broad scale, from minor, passive criticism and denial to major exclusion and explicit rejection. As later shown in Chapter Two, existing stereotypes and caricatures of religion and science become mirrored in the cases of rejection, commonly inherited with the dogmatic understandings of creation, evil, and personhood.

Adoption in religious context should not be narrowed to the assumption of technological implementation based on the human rationale and the practicality of novel tools and platforms. In this chapter the focus shifts to understanding the impact of cultural shapes, science fiction, eschatological and utopian religious narratives to modes of adoption. Human addiction to enchantment (see Belk et al. 2021) confronted with tendency for worldview disenchantment motivates tensions in adoption of technology and AI. Chapter Three elaborated on the issues

emerging from adoption of technology and AI as recognized by religious stakeholders and practitioners, such as if AI can lead a Lutheran sermon, if the Alexa app can pray for you, can robots personify the divine.

The ‘quiet,’ ‘background’ processes of technological adaptation in religious spheres challenge the ideas of techno-determinism and the decline of religion in the face of scientific breakthroughs. In our ‘post-AI’ society, shaped by the efficiencies and affordances of AI, “the strongest and most persistent narrative of religious adaptation is the secularization thesis” (Singler 2024:23) To counterbalance this stereotype, Chapter Four digs into the cases of religion and social media filters, COVID-19, and deepfaking religion, and how religion persists in a world adapting to AI and its efficiencies and affordances, and how we all form new versions of truth and utopia. Our implicit religious hopes and fears, as explored in the second part of the book with case studies and further examples.

2.6 Transdisciplinary Approaches to Religion and AI

Engaging with moments of hype and expectation in an agile and responsive way underpins a lot of the ethnographic work that the AP has published. Also in 2024, the AP worked with Murray Shanahan, Cognitive Professor of Robotics at Imperial College, on a transdisciplinary paper exploring some of the most contemporary experiments and understandings of large language models: “Existential Conversations with Large Language Models: Content, Community, and Culture” (Shanahan and Singler 2024).

Shanahan had picked up two ‘jailbreaks’⁶ from online discussions about the possibilities of getting Claude, a chatbot, to operate outside the guardrails its creator, Anthropic, had implemented during its design and training. One of jailbreaks in fact came from the LessWrong rationalist forums, founded by Eliezer Yudkowsky whose intense focus on AI value alignment was discussed above. Jailbreaking, or as we described it, “shaping the vibe” of the conversation through prompts that take Claude outside those guardrails could be seen as an activity that might panic existential risk thinkers. But for the community around the jailbreaks that we explored in the paper, such efforts are seen as shaping the development of AI in a more human benevolent direction.

⁶ These jailbreaks and how they shape the ‘vibe’ of the answers are explained in detail in the full paper, available at <https://arxiv.org/html/2411.13223v1#bib.bib16>.

Online figures also exploring this facet of conversations with LLMs also hold to ideas such as ‘hyperstition’. According to philosopher and accelerationist Nick Land, writing in 2015, hyperstition is:

a positive feedback circuit including culture as a component. It can be defined as the experimental (techno)science of self-fulfilling prophecies. Superstitions are merely false beliefs, but hyperstitions—by their very existence as ideas—function causally to bring about their own reality. Capitalist economics is extremely sensitive to hyperstition, where confidence acts as an effective tonic, and inversely (Land, 2015).

A simpler way to think of hyperstitions is as ‘self-fulfilling prophecies’. And as such, the proponents of such jailbreaks seem to be exploring a liminal space where the AI they are imagining can be approached as already existing, in order to bring it about as a human aligned and benevolent entity.

This paper was described as ‘transdisciplinary’ because through the adoption of the methods of the loosely affiliated and often anonymous users online experimenting with jailbreaking Claude it joined together the disparate methodologies of the two co-authors (anthropology, religious studies, philosophy of mind, and cognitive robotics) with the approaches of external stakeholders. It might also be considered transdisciplinary for being “transcending, transgressing, and transforming”, as per Klein’s 2017 explication of interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity.

Further, in engaging with Claude as an actant in the Latourian sense as opposed to a full agent, Claude’s methods as a LLM were also integrated in the results of the prompts being used. This form of AI engaged transdisciplinarity does not suggest that we personify AI, but rather that we recognise that technologies can also have a shaping effect on research. This effect becomes apparent when we acknowledge that algorithms and AI relatedly, can be seen as “complex socio-technical assemblages involving long chains of actors, technologies, and meanings” (Christin 2020, 898), and that an ‘algorithmic turn’ that recognises this is essential in ethnography (Seaver 2017), especially in digital spaces where algorithms are most apparent, if not provably most powerful.

3 Continuities, Typologies, and Themes for Future Research

Here we summarise the key take aways from dealing with the various AI-related themes and topics in these publications: the conceptual tools, the methodologies, and the critical thinking that will be beneficial not only during our Phase 2 proj-

ect at the URPP, but to the wider field of digital religions in a post-AI society. Further, as claimed in some of the publications described above, there is a wider public need for tools to aid their “Literacy in the affective methods of storytelling [. . .] critical thinking, theological nous, and sociological frameworks, so we can understand this age of generative AI” (Singler 2023, 11). For instance, work that problematises ‘disruption’ – a popular hype word in the discursive world of Tech and AI – as we intend, will help to highlight the problematics of even assuming that religion and AI are conjoined in a uniquely new phase.

From the topics discussed in this chapter, we draw out here elements valuable for this wider conversation and development of resilience with regards to the accounts we receive around both AI and religion in this moment. First, we can note a certain approach, a legacy in these works of older discussions in the study of religion, one that can be brought to bear on these entanglements as well as on AI more broadly. This is a theoretical approach labelled above as methodological agnosticism and a hermeneutic of suspicion, and which also draws on the concept of criti-hype. These linked methodologies have been long held, sometimes unspoken, underpinnings of fieldwork for the more recent past of anthropology, and we see value in them for the emerging parts of Digital Religion(s) as the field engages more and more with AI. Applying these tools to the conversation around AI can be seen to defuse some of the more incendiary and potentially harmful accounts that can obscure immediate ethical concerns, e.g. the “AI Race” between countries that prioritises narrow views of who should lead the ‘charge’ and what values are necessary (Guardian 2025).

Second, and linked, is the non-normative approach, familiar within religious studies and anthropology, but increasingly apparent within discussions of AI as reflection on the colonialist origins and narratives of AI has opened up to a wider variety of cultural responses to AI from outside the established WEIRD (‘Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic’) or tech-sphere voices. Even pointing out the relationship between religion and AI on the basis that humans of all cultural backgrounds are discussing AI in relation to their faiths brings in a multiplicity of potential voices and answers, many of which that have not been engaged with at a larger scale. In order to ground such material, we can see the strong need for empirical, ethnographic and anecdotal evidence of these views. This also serves as a counter in some cases to the more reductionist trends of conversations about ‘data’, both within and without AI itself. Granular, detailed, grounded, research can counter this reductionism, as well as work against biases and simplifications. Further, such detail often confounds public assumptions, e.g. that believers are not at all engaged in thinking about AI and where it is going, a view sometimes shared with the AP in public conversations.

Fourth, as mentioned, the role of both fiction and non-fiction narratives in shaping out imaginaries requires an openness to sources that have varying sustainability and virality. Linked to this is an awareness of the rapidity and virality of social media accounts. Digital Religions as a field does not suffer this bias as much, but historically the dismissal of social media accounts as ephemeral and statistically negligible has missed some of the ethnographic detail in their content and in their methods – i.e., the aforementioned shortening effect between feeling and publishing is itself ethnographically significant, even if the content shared has limited societal effect.

Fifth, that metaphors, images, and narratives emerging from such content – both formally published and digitally shared – can be apprehended literally with great and sudden rapidity. Taking metaphors seriously involves also developing the perceptual tools as well as the conceptual tools to remain aware of their influence on others' thoughts as well as the thoughts of the ethnographer. And those metaphors may well have an indexical quality – especially in the case of, but not limited to, existential hope and existential despair. People order their lives around their beliefs, and their beliefs around their lives. Further, with the adaptation to a post-AI knowledge eco-system and the rise of images and 'facts' generated by AI that 'feel' true, we must also be perceptually aware of the indexical quality of deepfakes etc. for individuals as well as to wider society.

Finally, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches are inherent to religious studies as a field, but in the post-AI society we are cultured in currently, it is eminently sensible to engage as widely as possible with other perspectives, methodologies, and approaches. To that end, in Phase 2, the PD brings her own experience of fieldwork amongst the embodied experiences of robot realities as well as knowledge in implementing ethno-methodology and conversation analysis. She also takes seriously the 'human in the machine' – the people behind the leading people who are not immediately apparent in the performative space of the public encounter with the robotic. Aligning with the aims of the project, her approach also 'disrupts disruption' by perceiving the contradictions between claims of revolution and the normative concepts being employed by her informants who are building the robotic systems.

In summary, in this chapter we have surveyed the topics and themes of research done by the AP during the second half of the first phase of the URPP Digital Religion(s), including specific outputs. There are several interconnecting themes, approaches, methods, methodologies, and tools that we have then drawn out in the discussion and will be employing in the forthcoming Phase 2 project. As an output of the project, we seek to develop further this initial outline of useful tools etc. and develop materials that will benefit the wider discussion of AI and religion

as a part of the field of Digital Religion(s). This is a developing and ongoing aspiration, with this chapter just an initial step in that process.

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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”.¹

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 P12,² which also influenced the respective approaches at least in part:

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.

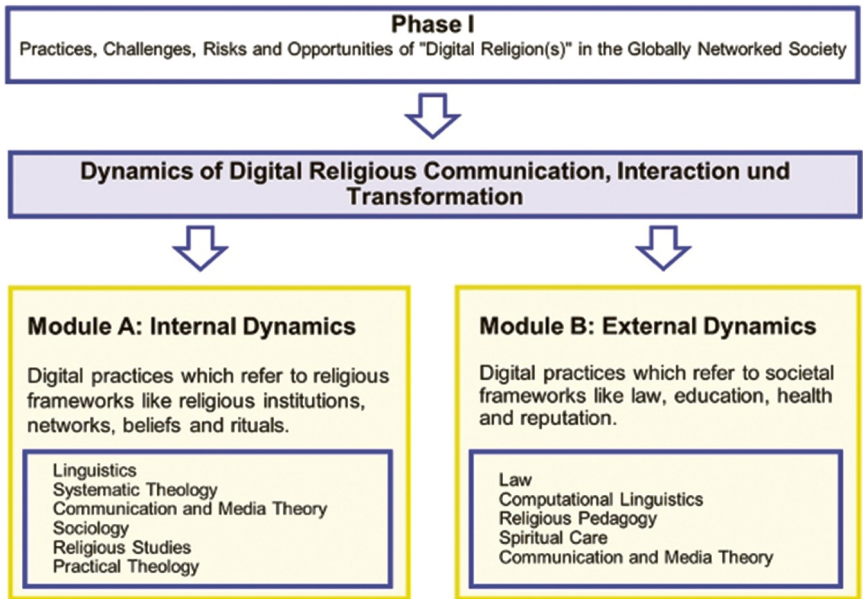


Figure 1: Research Phase I (2021-2024) – Module A and Module B.

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 P1³ 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 P2⁴, 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 P3⁵ 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 P4⁶ 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).

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 P5,⁷ 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 P6⁸, 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 P7⁹ 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.

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 P10¹⁰ 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 P8¹¹, 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 P9¹², 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-

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 P11¹³ 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, P12¹⁴ 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*.¹⁵ 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).

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.

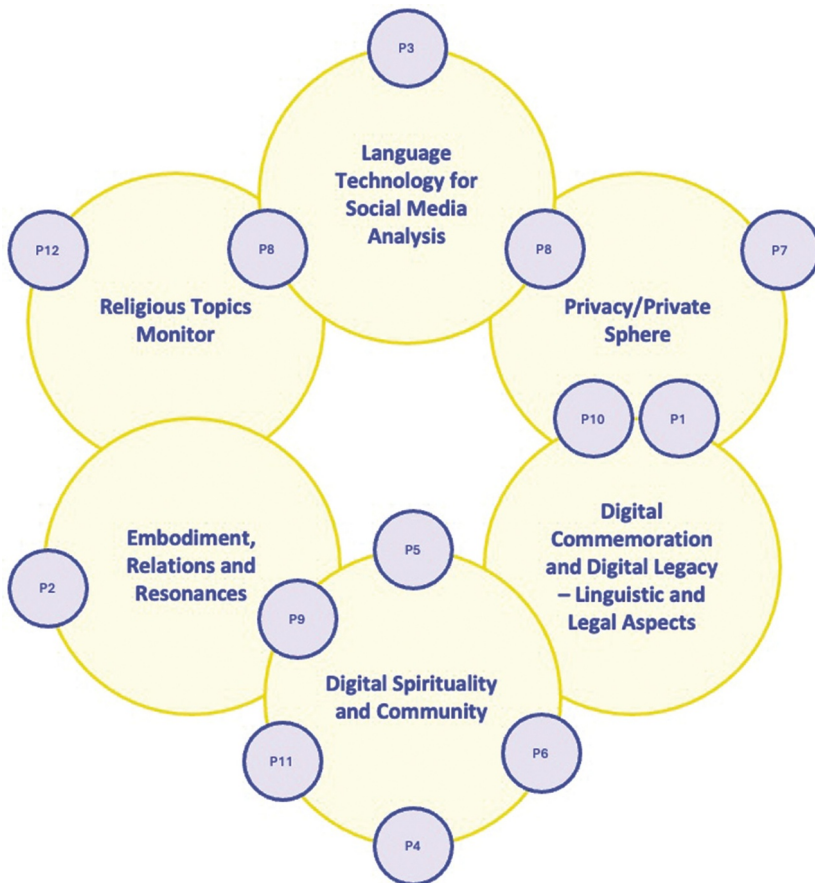


Figure 2: Thematic Clusters.

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”,¹⁶ an article on “Digital Commemoration and Digital Legacy” (Dürscheid and Thier 2023), a blog on “Privacy”¹⁷, a Religious Topics Monitor,¹⁸ 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

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’Gieblyn 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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