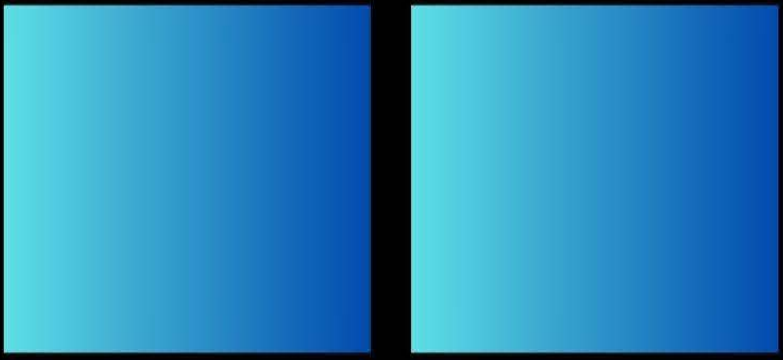
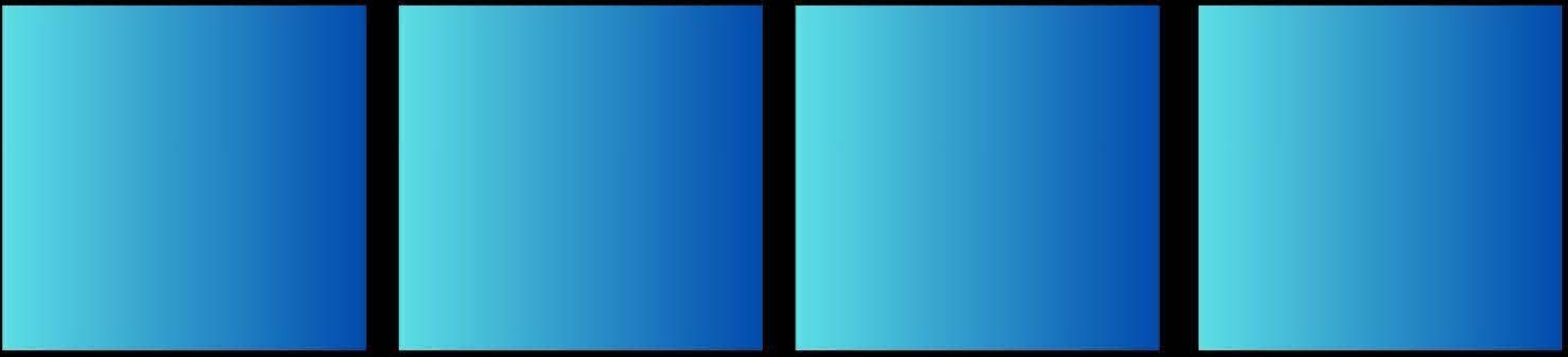


2023



The Digital Religion Yearbook

The Network for New Media, Religion and Digital Cultural Studies



The Digital Religion Yearbook 2023

Edited by Heidi A Campbell and Alessandra Vitullo
Editorial Assistance by Meg Boone and Grayson Sparks

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This publication was envisioned by the Network for New Media, Religion, and Digital Studies in order to highlight important research and scholarship being produced in the increasingly diverse, interdisciplinary, and international field of Digital Religion Studies.

Digital Religion Publications

An Imprint of the *Network for New Media, Religion & Digital Culture Studies*

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The Digital Religion Yearbook 2023

The aim of the Digital Religion Yearbook is to spotlight important research, emerging scholars, and top contributions to the growing field of Digital Religion studies. The yearbook is organized and published by the Network for New Media, Religion, and Digital Culture Studies.

The Digital Religion Yearbook 2023

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Director's Note

Welcome to the Third edition of the *Digital Religion Yearbook*

Since 2021, the Digital Religion Yearbook (DRY) has allowed the NMRDC to take stock of the important emerging research, scholars, and news enriching the field of digital religion scholarship in order to help researchers stay up-to-date and ready for what awaits us in the year to come. For my first editorial as associate director of the Network for Media Religion and Digital Cultural Studies (NMRDC), I would like to draw attention to the extraordinary work that has been done in the year 2023, even if our publication of this yearbook is a bit delayed.

The past year has indeed been exceptionally rich and full of changes for our Network, and I'm proud that my role is one of those. Heidi Campbell, who has always had the farsighted vision of making this specific discipline a shared workspace, has been given to Giulia Evolvi, who serves as Assistant Director for the Network, and me, as the Associate Director, the honor of supporting the work of the Network. Subsequently, we reshaped its whole structure by inviting a new effervescent and vibrant team of scholars to join us as the new advisory board. This 2023 DRY is also an occasion to introduce each of their works to you. In the "Scholars to Watch" section, it is possible to see all their expertise and research interests, and by continuing the reading, you will also discover the top 10 articles published in the field and the "Students to Watch" developing digital religions research.

As if that wasn't enough, 2023 is also the year in which we created a brand-new website at digrel.com. The website will be updated with all the latest news around digital religious studies and was launched during the Digital Religion Award ceremony, where Sana Patel from the University of Ottawa was recognized for her research on "Hybrid Imams: Young Muslims and Religious Authority on Social Media."

So please forgive us for this delay, but after thirty years of research, digital religion has established itself as an important field of study, and that required a complete overhaul. Joking aside, we have all noticed how the unfortunate spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has certainly helped to increase interest in the discipline. During the pandemic, the virtualization of our daily lives has led to a rapid rise in digital religious practices. This phenomenon has allowed this field to consolidate its place as a theoretical and methodological framework that intersects social, religious, media, and communication sciences.

The increasing visibility of digital religion scholarship became evident in the 2023 American Academy Religion, where an entire panel was dedicated to "New books in digital religion: asking the hard questions." Here, the books of Campbell & Bellar (2023), Dyer (2023), Echchaibi & Hoover (2023), and Peterson (2022) precisely highlighted how digital religion studies demonstrated in a very short period the potentialities to enter into dialog with some of the most profound questions related to the study of contemporary religiosity. Digital religion creates a new space for observation, a "third space" that offers researchers an opportunity to study religions from a unique perspective. A space that accommodates new and alternative forms of religious expression outside the boundaries of the traditional institutions. A collectively or individually created third space becomes a new space for listening by accepting human

complexity and diversity. A third space that allows people to shape their own religious experience.

However, while much has been done in these nearly thirty years of research to examine the space of digital religion, much still remains to be done about the time of digital religion. As the research of the “Students to Watch” points out, the question of sacred/religious time has always remained an implicit but constant feature in digital religion studies, without ever receiving any special or dedicated attention.

So, as well as an apology for the delay in publishing this 2023 DRY, this introduction is also an invitation to our readers to consider this new research path. The question of time should be considered as a new potential area of research that could allow us to expand the complexity of this already multi-layered online presence of religions by providing an even more comprehensive framework of what happens to the elementary forms of religious life when they are practiced online.

Moreover, engaging with this new perspective would certainly help to assemble the next Scholars, Students, and Papers “to watch” section for the 2024 Digital Religion Yearbook.

Alessandra Vitullo, NMRDC Associate Director
Sapienza University of Rome (Italy)

Handwritten signature of Alessandra Vitullo, consisting of the name 'Alessandra Vitullo' written in a cursive script.

Annual Essay:

The Prophetic Grey Zone

By Heidi A Campbell

Each yearbook will open with an "annual essay" from a notable scholar in the field of Digital Religion Studies. This issue features an essay by Heidi A Campbell, Director of the Network for New Media, Religion, and Digital Culture Studies, a leading scholar in the field.

In the summer of 2023, during a discussion with other scholars at Wurzburg University in Germany on the prevalent popular discourse about AI technologies, I presented the idea of the "Prophetic Gray Zone." One of my colleagues raised the problematic issue that much of the AI debate in the public media seemed focused on the perception that there were clear categories by which artificial intelligence development and use could be evaluated as either simply "good" or "bad." "But what about the gray areas?" they said, as the claims about the nature of new technologies are often based very much on the position of the individual making such value judgments.

Reflecting on the prevailing binary narratives employed in such discussions about technology, I contend that these "good" versus "bad" judgments often oversimplify the complexities inherent in emerging innovations. In my research, I refer to these binary oppositions as direct oppositional categories, which need close attention to create more nuanced and suitable categories for mapping and evaluating such conversations.

Drawing on personal experiences from a conservative upbringing, I recognize the human tendency to perceive the world in black-and-white categories. However, as I delved into scholarly pursuits, particularly within the realm of AI technologies, I identified the essential in-between space—what I now term the prophetic voice. This space, crucial for scholars navigating uncharted territories in digital media, religion, and cultural studies, challenges the conventional either-or narratives prevalent in discussions about technology and media.

Having been a student of Clifford Christians, a prominent figure in communication ethics, I am drawn to his concept of prophetic communication and media. This framework posits that the prophetic voice is one called to reveal hidden truths, pursue scholarly and spiritual revelation in their work, and adopt a God's eye view of technology. Such traits involve the development of a holy and scholarly discernment that enables them to speak truth to power—an imperative in the contemporary landscape characterized by misinformation, myth, and populism.

I argue that the idea of the "Prophetic Gray Zone" draws from the deep well and tradition of media theory that seeks to see and evaluate the impact of media on society critically. This starts with the work of the post-World War II Frankfurt School's examination of propaganda and media coming out of the Nazi Regime in Germany. The Frankfurt school first paid scholarly attention to the dichotomous nature of the media and its ability to function as a force for cultural change or mass deception. Influential thinkers like Adorno and Horkheimer first presented the idea of

media as a culture industry, a system of production controlled by societal powerbrokers where mass media are used to create and present standardized messages for a broader society whose meanings are accepted and unquestioned by the media. This suggests the communication media are controlling and consciously subverting human agency, prominent fears that have also been raised about the current generation of AI. However, Habermas, also a member of the Frankfurt school, later went on to suggest that media can be made part of the public sphere. Here, the media serves as a public space created by media that allows individuals to share diverse views and opinions and where the best (and ideally most ethical) ideas would rise to the top. This offers a much more positive view of mass media as a space of empowerment, encouraging diversity and social engagement. Whether media serves as a source of control or empowerment, freedom or limitation is based on the societal relationships created around and within the media systems themselves. This idea about the complexity and nuanced understanding of the media environment sets the stage for understanding the complexities within the current discourse on AI technologies.

Media theory has also been strongly influenced by the development of the British Cultural Studies approach to the media, and most notably, the work of Stuart Hall. Cultural Studies of media suggest our understanding of media systems is incomplete without paying careful attention to the meaning specific audiences make out of media content, alongside the dominant systems of cultural meaning-making. Hall's work questions the truth promoted by dominant social structures and studies the communication process and the meaning it makes. His approach opens the door in media studies to the recognition that media is neither fully good nor bad, but the evaluation of media is more of a "Gray Zone." It recognizes we live in a world of diverse perspectives based not just on the cultural space and historical moment in which we are situated but on the unique experience and values we bring to that space, which shapes how we understand and represent the world.

Stuart Hall played a prophetic role in the study of media by questioning social structures, framing popular culture as a space to understand cultural beliefs, and rejecting the idea that all media audiences share similar monolithic views or interpretations. I argue that this perspective has also influenced the study of Media, Religion, and Culture, as founding scholars in our field, like Stewart Hoover, found common ground with the Cultural Studies Approach to media. As the fifth president of the International Society of Media, Religion & Culture, I echo the importance of studying media in the 21st century from such a fruitful approach.

Over the last 25 years, Media, Religion, and Culture studies have evolved from a gathering space for Media, Communication, Religious Studies, Sociology, and Theological Scholars to incorporating academics from various backgrounds. This includes scholars in computational linguistics, semiotics, area studies, psychology, anthropology, political science, and many other disciplines. It has been an area of study that has offered an 'open-door policy' to anyone who seeks a critical and nuanced exploration of how religion and media interact with one another in various local and global cultures.

It has also encouraged innovative methods in this study, many taken from cultural studies approaches, such as interviews, audience studies, and ethnography, which have enriched our scholarly exploration. Digital Religion Studies also follows along in this growing tradition, focused on everyday cultural and religious activities emerging around digital, social, and mobile media and how their exploration can speak to our understanding of broader social structures and power dynamics.

Looking ahead, the Academy faces a number of important and crucial questions about its current state and future trajectory in an era dominated by virtual reality, augmented reality, and AI. While the binary discourse in public discussions about AI is still pervasive, it needs to be dismantled with careful and thoughtful scholarship. Media, Religion, and Culture Studies, along with other areas of scholarship, are being called to a crucial moment of critical study and approaches. The questions surrounding AI technologies present an opportunity for scholars to explore and draw attention to the in-between spaces and gray zones that exist within previous conceptual dichotomies and categories about technology.

Debates in the summer of 2023 around new AI laws in Europe highlight growing tensions between corporate interest and government regulators about who will most influence the standards set for AI technology oversight. An analysis of media discourse I conducted found strong conflicting values between these two groups centered around the themes of technological progress, human-machine dynamics, innovation, and market advancement. Overall, the debates were centered around broad claims about whether AI was predominantly good or bad for humanity, without much recognition that the answer might actually be both. I suggest what is needed is the voice of the "Prophetic Gray zone," which speaks to both the affordances and losses while showing how we live within the tension of the in-betweenness of these technologies and the environment they are creating. To navigate this complex landscape, I assert scholars must seek to cultivate and adopt a prophetic perspective. Scholars must acknowledge debates, speculate on alternative perspectives, and offer middle-ground solutions.

To live out a scholarly life in the prophetic gray zone-- in both Media, Religion and Culture, and Digital Religion studies-- I invite scholars to consider five provocations.

First, Speak More Truth to Power:

- As a scholar, I assert the importance of engaging in truth-telling that transcends traditional academic roles. In an era marked by misinformation and populism, scholars must shed light on hidden truths and offer insights into critical issues, even if they are uncomfortable.

Second, Embrace Action Research:

- I advocate for scholars to immerse themselves in the communities they study, fostering collaboration and actively contributing to their advancement. This participatory approach signifies a departure from detached observation to a more engaged research model.

Third, Be Self-Reflexive about our Implicit Biases:

- This provocation urges academics, including myself, to critically examine implicit biases when selecting theories or messages. Acknowledging the influence of chosen frameworks is vital to ensure a balanced and insightful exploration of topics.

Fourth, Empower Marginalized Voices:

- Recognizing the growing focus on marginalized voices in academia, I call for scholars to go beyond securing a seat at the table and actively work towards creating opportunities for those traditionally underrepresented.

Fifth, Adopt a Humble and Others-Oriented Approach (Academic Kindness):

- In my academic practice, I endorse a humble and others-oriented approach, promoting "academic kindness." This involves actively seeking ways to assist others, spread hope, and contribute to a positive and constructive academic community.

In summary, these provocations collectively underscore the need for scholars, including myself, to play an active and socially responsible role within the academic sphere. Advocating for truth, engaging in collaborative research, recognizing biases, amplifying marginalized voices, and embodying kindness are essential components of this commitment. Only through striving to create a "prophetic gray zone" can Media, Religion, and Culture studies thrive.

Top 10 Articles in Digital Religion Research for 2023

Each yearbook will feature a list of top scholarly articles published that year in Digital Religion studies. These articles are selected based on recommendations received from the NMRDC advisory board as well as select scholars. They represent some of the best and most innovative work in the field. Please note these articles are presented alphabetically by sorting authors' last names rather than in numerical order.

Bagdogan, S. (2023). Hands-On (ly) Vlogging: How Turkish Muslim Women Perform "Modesty" and "Piety" in Self-Branding on Their YouTube Cooking Channels. *Social Media+ Society*, 9(2).

<https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231166446>

Studies examining the self-branding efforts of women producers of online content have proliferated in recent years. Typically focused on the production of content by young, white, and highly educated middle-class women in the West, such scholarship has predominantly conceptualized women's online self-branding as a function of neo-liberal and postfeminist values centered around notions of "commodified femininity" and "mediated intimacy" along with consumerism and individualism. In contrast, this article examines the sociocultural values underlying the self-branding practices of Turkish Muslim "housewives" from relatively underprivileged backgrounds who have recorded, performed, and monetized their cooking skills and, arguably, their values on YouTube. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 12 leading Turkish women vloggers, combined with digital ethnographic research into their online profiles and content, my analysis reveals the importance for these vloggers of ensuring their online performances and personae comply with and embody the Islamic values of feminine piety and modesty. By highlighting the importance of social positionality in research on gendered self-branding, my findings problematize dominant conceptualizations of women's online self-branding as a postfeminist undertaking. In reality, Islamic values are active online, embodied by Turkish Muslim women cooking on YouTube in a way that is empowering for them but also under negotiation through the participatory culture of the Internet.

Berger, A. & Golan, O. (2023). Online religious learning: digital epistemic authority and self-socialization in religious communities, *Learning, Media, and Technology*.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2023.2169833>

Over the past two decades, the internet has become a central platform affording lay learners access to a multiplicity of experts. While these outlets empower lay learners, they create competition amongst clerical and knowledge authorities. This article addresses the question:

how is religious authority understood and negotiated by learners, and in turn, how do they evaluate authoritative sources? Twenty-six in-depth think-aloud interviews were conducted with Religious-Zionists in Israel on their internet sourcing practices. Findings uncovered four strategies employed when sourcing information online: (1) Generating a reliable source network based on the learners' social and primordial affiliations. (2) Complexity-based sourcing practices stem from learners' uncertainty in their ability to autonomously attain a satisfying answer. (3) Fitting an appropriate source to queries based on their availability and prestige. (4) Negotiating a learner's autonomy in a particular field of knowledge based on the social or epistemic norms that govern it.

Fröh, J., & Robinson, M. R. (2023). Digital (Religious) Communication and Social Resilience: A Theoretical Model and Proposal.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4356501>

This article looks at the relationship between digital communication and "community resilience." The importance of, in particular, narrative communication of meaning for community resilience has been highlighted by Houston et al.(2015b). These narratives are recognized to have quantified themselves in communities' digital communications, thereby rendering themselves accessible to empirical assessment. From this perspective, we present a model for measuring community resilience quantitatively. Existing resilience models from research on ecological, mechanical, and community resilience were combined via their shared resilience trajectories to design the model. One significant advancement of this focus on digital communications and community resilience assessment consists in the qualities characterizing such communications as both communicators' own self-prompted communications while also being quantifiable. This enables reconstruction and analysis of a more organic communication environment than that made accessible in survey-based approaches while also capable of achieving a higher level of representativity than ethnographic or case study approaches.

Guzek, D. (2023). When partisan groups get access to the digital society: re-voicing religion in Poland. *Information, Communication & Society*, 26(6), 1177-1192.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2021.1994628>

In recent years, radical voices of all kinds have become increasingly visible due to digital platforms. Within this context, issues connected with religious diversity have received little attention. However, valuable insights can be gained from examining how radical religious advocates embrace digital strategies, using their own marginality to ironically oppose religious diversity. This article discusses the discursive strategies of the Polish far-right, their approach to religious diversity, and their iteration practices. It focuses on the discursive strategies and practices of far-right leaders of opinion in Poland opposed to religious diversity that have worked to narrow Christian values to a reinvented idea of traditional Catholicism. In this, they use techniques of language and narrative control, with intentional repetition playing a key role. My research suggests the need for an intricate understanding of these processes, in which Poland's

far-right movements shape identities through shifting religious norms in often hidden practices of religious exclusion.

Kołodziejska, M., Fajfer, L., Hall, D., & Radde-Antweiler, K. (2023). Religious media settlers in times of deep mediatization. *Religion*, 53(2), 199-223.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2022.2083032>

This article follows the actor-centered approach in studies on deep mediatization and religion with the aim of introducing the concept of ‘media settlers,’ which refers to how churches, being corporate actors, actively use digital media and respond to the trends and consequences of deep mediatization. In so doing, churches undertake actions defined as strategies intended to both expand and maintain community – and assert authority. The article draws on the results of qualitative analyses of the media ensembles of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church and Orthodox Churches in Poland and the UK, along with interviews with media professionals from these churches. The conclusion is that the media settlers concept expands and develops our grasp of the religious-social shaping of technology [Campbell, Heidi A. 2010. *When Religion Meets New Media*. London: Routledge] by investigating how religious organizations actively shape their media to attain institutional goals and, in consequence, transform their media ensembles.

Margolis, P. (2023). Virtuality: A Theory of Digital Judaism (s). *Modern Judaism: A Journal of Jewish Ideas and Experience*, 43(2), 187-211.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/mj/kjad007>

Digital media enable new possibilities in Jewish life and lived religion. This "digital Judaism" combines elements of Jewish tradition with the capabilities to create, modify, and transform digital objects in novel ways. It builds on American media history and has been greatly accelerated in response to the exigencies of the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–2021. The Internet, as a form of media, functions as an amplifier of human capabilities and Jewish possibilities that can be integrated into Jewish life. This creates the contemporary online–offline media ecology to which I apply the theoretical concept of "virtuality." Virtuality extends and builds upon Heidi Campbell’s religious-social shaping of technology (RSST), Michael Satlow’s "maps" for defining Judaism, Uzi Rebhun’s study of symbolic Judaism, Ananda Mitra and Rae Lynn Schwartz’s concept of online/offline cybernetic space, and Jack Wertheimer’s remix concept.

Marler, W., & Hargittai, E. (2023). "Doesn’t Seem Like a Place to Interact, or Interact Well": Motivations to Discuss (and Not) Science and Religion on Social Media. *Socius*, 9.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/23780231231157685>

Incivility in online discussions is an ongoing concern in academic and popular circles alike. Although social media offers the possibility for meaningful discussion, research has identified many barriers to this potential, including disrespectful interactions, echo chambers, misinformation, and participation gaps. Most such scholarships focus on just one topic of discussion, however. By comparing two domains of exchange, the authors are able to examine whether and how the subject of conversation may influence online experiences. The authors analyze interviews with 45 adults from across the United States about their experiences discussing science and religion on social media. People approached the two topics differently, which influenced whether they contributed to related conversations. The intrusion of politics into conversations across both topics broadly limited participation. Curiosity, knowledge, and interacting in private groups or with strangers encouraged joining discussions. Understanding participation dynamics across topic domains is fruitful for future research on the social media public sphere.

Morse, T. (2023). Digital necromancy: users' perceptions of digital afterlife and posthumous communication technologies. *Information, Communication & Society*, 1-17.

Technologies of digital afterlife and posthumous communication are more developed than ever, and the possibilities for communicating with digital representations of people who perished are coming to fruition. Studies about digital engagement with death reveal contradicting trends. Whereas technologies designed for interacting with the dead have thus far failed, users reappropriate means of online communication that were not intended to facilitate communication with the dead – to facilitate precisely this practice. This article searches for a fuller understanding of the changing attitudes toward death in light of emerging intentional posthumous communication technologies (PCTs). Drawing on a national survey of Israeli Internet users, the study explores contemporary attitudes toward death and the digital afterlife and analyzes users' perceptions of emerging PCTs. Findings indicate that whereas the general public is still reluctant to adopt such technologies, online activity and willingness to access digital remains are significant predictors for considering digital interactions with the dead.

StępniaK, K. (2023). Communicating the sacred in religious advertising in light of the mediatization of religion theory and research on digital religion. *Church, Communication and Culture*, 8(2), 285-307.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/23753234.2023.2244537>

The main research problem of the article is the communication of the sacred in the Catholic Church in light of the theory of mediatization of religion and research on religion in the era of digital media. Communicating the sacred takes place through various channels and in various ways. One of its carriers is religious advertising, a special type of visual communication used more and more often in the Catholic Church. It occupies an important place in the social

processes taking place, such as secularization and desecularization, and in the religious practices of internet users. The text presents the results of the author's research conducted using the method of focus group interviews on religious advertising, its definition, typology, and goals as well as the elements of the sacred present in it. Religious advertising should be treated as a new, completely separate type of advertising whose inherent part *and sine qua noncondition* is the sacred. Religious advertising is a form of visibility of religion in public space and a way of communicating the sacred in public space.

Ter Laan, N. (2023). "Assalamu 'Alaykum, Can We Add This Sister?": WhatsApp Group Chat as a Homemaking Practice among Dutch-speaking Muhajirat in Morocco. *Religion and Gender*, 13(2), 206-226. <https://doi.org/10.1163/18785417-01302006>

This article examines the use of a WhatsApp chat group by Dutch and Belgian Muslim women (born or converted), who are considering or made hijra (religiously inspired migration to a Muslim country) to Morocco. I argue that WhatsApp plays a crucial role in facilitating and narrating these women's migration by providing a support network and shaping a gendered sense of community and religious belonging. Drawing on theories of religion and gender, migration, and digital media, I conceptualize WhatsApp in the context of hijra to Morocco as a social practice of homemaking that helps alleviate the precarious conditions these women find themselves. This article also illustrates the complex entanglement of offline and online realities by highlighting how my interlocutors' interactions in this WhatsApp group foster a trans-local Muslim 'sisterhood' that informs their offline practices and experiences of hijra to Morocco.

Vitullo, A., & Mastrofini, F. (2023). Catholic Church's Communication in the Era of Bergoglio: Balancing Tradition and a New Leadership. *Religions*, 14(2), 194. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14020194>

Nowadays, several pieces of research underline the international impact of Pope Francis's messages and actions far beyond the Catholic community, especially thanks to the effects of his online presence. In the same year of his enthronement, Pope Francis was already the second most-followed world leader on Twitter—just behind former U.S. President Barack Obama—and is currently the most active and followed religious leader on Instagram. But how can we understand and frame Bergoglio's media influence today? How and why did Bergoglio end up becoming a religious celebrity? This paper aims to properly answer these questions by placing Pope Francis's media resonance in a larger perspective, analyzing—together and separately—three elements that will allow us to include or exclude the reasons for his communicative success: 1. the doctrinal framework of the Church's communication, 2. the Pope's statements regarding the use of digital media, and 3. his personal communication abilities which combine with his new vision of the Church. The analysis of these elements allows us to highlight how

Francis's celebrity is not due to a renovation of the social doctrine of the Church but rather to a new personal understanding of Catholic leadership.

Weng, E. (2021). Contesting empire religion: coloniality and sticky media discourses. *Culture and Religion*, 22(2), 164-183.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14755610.2023.2255305>

The concept of religion in settler-colonial Australia is intricately intertwined with whiteness and Christianity and was introduced during colonization. Its influence is evident not only in its integration into Australian society but also in the exclusionary measures within religious communities. Due to Australia's colonial history, 'religion' is often narrowly interpreted, with a conservative, moralistic lens influenced by Eurocentric perspectives. This interpretation tends to have an affective 'sticky' dimension that generates significant media discussion. This paper examines the prevalence of 'empire religion' in media discourses and aims to uncover and critique the presence of coloniality in discussions about religion. By adopting a decolonial lens to explore Australian religions and spirituality, this paper argues that sticky media discourses on religion can be seen as reverbs of Australia's 'colonial wound.' These reverbs collectively serve as an active resistance and deconstruction of coloniality, urging for greater truth-telling, healing, and a more comprehensive understanding of Australian religions and spirituality.

Scholars to Watch

Each edition of the Digital Religion Yearbook features a list of scholars who are engaged in Digital Religion research and/or specific projects that are likely to make a significant impact on the field by tackling understudied topics or approaching key questions within the field in novel ways.

In this yearbook, scholars from the newly constituted advisory board of the network were chosen to highlight. Scholars are presented in alphabetical order by last name, rather than in a numerical ranking.

Erica Baffelli

Professor of Japanese Studies at The University of Manchester (UK).

Biography

She is interested in religion in contemporary Japan, with a focus on groups founded from the 1970s onwards. She is co-editor, with Michael Stausberg and Alexander Van Der Haven, of the open-access publication Religious Minorities Online [degruyter.com] (De Gruyter). Publications include Erica Baffelli and Norihito Takahashi eds. "Religion and Minority in Japanese Contexts" Special issue of *Religion, State, and Society*, 51, 3, 2023; Erica Baffelli, Jane Caple, Levi McLaughlin, and Frederik Schröer, eds. "The Aesthetics and Emotions of Religious Belonging: Examples from the Modern Buddhist World." Special issue of *NVMEN: International Review for the History of Religions*, 68, 5-6, 2021; Erica Baffelli, Fabio Rambelli and Andrea Castiglioni eds. *Handbook of Religion in Japan* (2021); Erica Baffelli and Ian Reader *Dynamism and the Ageing of a Japanese 'New' Religion* (2019); *Media and New Religions in Japan* (2016).

Projects

Her recent research projects focused on religion in contemporary Japan, religion and media, new and minority religions, religion, gender and violence, and Buddhism and emotions. She is currently PI on a Leverhulme Research Project on "Fear and Belonging in Minority Buddhist Communities" (2023-2027).

John W. Borchert

Lead for Social Innovation and Public Scholarship, Director of the Network for the Cultural Study of Videogaming, and Lecturer in the Religious Studies Department at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Biography

Having received his Ph.D. from Syracuse University in 2021. He is interested in how religious practices and media technologies intersect across American religious histories, particularly their impact on embodiment and death. He teaches on gaming, American religion, death, Christianity, and religion and media technology. John is Co-Chair of the Death, Dying, and Beyond Unit of the American Academy of Religion and serves on the board of the *gamevironments*, the only journal on religion and video gaming.

Projects

Dr. Borchert is currently writing a manuscript on death, gaming, and posthumanism under contract with Routledge.

Pauline Hope Cheong

Professor at the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication, Arizona State University.

Biography

Pauline Hope Cheong has her Ph.D. from the Annenberg School of Communication, University of Southern California), is a Professor at the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication, and the Zebulon Pearce Distinguished Teacher of the Social Sciences at Arizona State University. Her award-winning research on communication technologies and culture includes examining religious knowledge and authority, digital access and inequalities, and emerging technologies, including Big Data, Internet of Things & Artificial Intelligence (AI) perceptions, practices, and policy. She has co-led and funded collaborative and global research projects, with her work in more than 100 articles and books. She is the co-editor of the forthcoming *Oxford Handbook of Digital Religion*.

Projects

Her latest research projects include examining practices of clergy leadership and principled innovation in the nexus of AI, faith, and culture. She is also a Co-Principal investigator of a comparative five-country study on AI, responsible urban innovation, and governance (funded by the Australian Research Council). Her award-winning, multi-method research on the socio-cultural implications of communication technologies has been published in more than 100 articles and books. Dr. Cheong is the Co-editor of *Thinking Tools on A.I., Religion and Culture*, and *The Oxford Handbook of Digital Religion* (Oxford University Press, 2024).

Damian Guzek

Associate professor at the Institute of Journalism and Media Communication, University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland.

Biography

His research is driven by questions related to media consumption and digital media, religions, and political communication. He is a PI of the project 'Papal Authority Transformed by Changes in Communication' and Polish coordinator of the 'T4ERI' Horizon 2020 project. After a doctorate in Katowice, he has been involved in several research projects in digital communication, religion, and politics at Uppsala, Edinburgh, Loughborough, and Masaryk.

Projects

"Papal Authority Transformed by Changes in Communication." The project is funded by the National Science Centre, Poland, under the scheme Opus 18. The project team wants to determine to what extent the form and contents of the Pope's authority are subject to changes under the influence of transformations that communication is presently undergoing. It is about understanding how the deep mediatization of the papacy relates to the growing tensions between objectivist and existential Catholicism. Next, we want to understand the digital media space's role in shaping the new face of the pope's authority, both from the perspective of papal statements in media and according to media users who consume media coverage of Francis. More at: <https://papalauthority.us.edu.pl/>

Rita Marchetti

Associate Professor at the Department of Political Science of the University of Perugia Italy.

Biography

She teaches courses in “Sociology of Digital Media” and “Media and Political Systems in the Digital Age.” Her main research interests are digital religion, political communication, and the relationship between media and corruption. Her work has appeared in a number of peer-reviewed journals, including *Social Media + Society*, *Journal of Religion in Europe*, *Religions*, *The International Journal of Press Politics*, *European Journal of Communication*, *Journalism*, *Journalism Practice*, *Journalism Studies*, and *The Communication Review*.

Projects

RE-PUBLIC (Religion in Public: Forms and Dynamics of Religious Publicization in Italy), funded by MUR (2023-2025). The RE-PUBLIC project aims at investigating the dynamics of religion publicization in the media debate (legacy and social media), focusing on how "religions are made public" and what is the "public use of religion" over a 20-year period (2001-2022). The analysis specifically investigates how religious actors can shape the agenda of public debate and impose frames on issues of critical importance for democratic debate, how non-religious actors strategically use symbols and religious discourses and for what purposes highlighting changes over time, as well as the dynamics of religion-related dissemination of information within social media, and disinformation/misinformation practices related to the use of religion. The study employs a mixed-method research design, combining quantitative and intensive qualitative case-study analyses with an intensive qualitative case-study analysis.

Carlo Nardella

Associate professor of Sociology in the Department of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Milan, Italy.

Biography

His research is primarily concerned with issues of the social construction of reality and social change, with particular attention to cultural factors and communication. Specifically, he has conducted research on popular religiosity, the use of religious symbols in the public space, the relationship between religion and marketing, the framing of Pope Francis's apostolic journeys by international news media, and the repurposing of former church buildings for new uses. Nardella has published, among other things, the first major study on religion and advertising in Italy (*La migrazione dei simboli: Pubblicità e religione*, Guerini, 2015). He is also co-author of a monograph on the controversies sparked by the appropriation of religious symbols outside the religious domain (*I simboli contesi: Simboli religiosi tra rappresentazioni pubbliche e conflitti giuridici*, Utet, 2023), editor of a volume on the renewed public presence of religions in Western societies (*Religioni dappertutto: Simboli, immagini, sconfinamenti*, Carocci, 2023) and guest-editor of three special issues of international and national academic journals (*Sociologica*, 2014; *Problemi dell'informazione*, 2019; *Religions*, 2024). Currently, he is at work on his third monograph, *Symbolic Economy*, with Routledge. Recipient of the British Sociological Association's Peter B. Clarke Memorial Prize and nominee for the Harvard Society of Fellows, Nardella was a visiting scholar at the University of Pennsylvania's Center for Global Communication Studies in 2010 and the University of Colorado Boulder's Center for Media, Religion and Culture in 2017 and 2018.

Projects

Nardella is currently PI of a research project titled "Religion in Public: Forms and Dynamics of Religious Publicization in Italy" (2023-2025), funded by the Italian Ministry of University, analyzing the new public roles of religions between two international watershed events: the attacks of September 11, 2001, and the global crisis fueled first by the Covid-19 pandemic and now by the Russia-Ukraine war.

Kerstin Radde-Antweiler

Professor of Religious Studies and deputy spokesperson for the ZeMKI at the University of Bremen, Germany.

Biography

Her research focuses on mediatized religion, mediatization theory, video gaming, Christian traditions, and ritual studies. She authored several articles and co-edited several volumes and special journal issues, including *Handbook of Journalism and Religion* (Routledge 2020), *Mediatized Religion in Asia* (Routledge 2019), and *Methods for Researching Video Games and Religion* (Routledge 2018). Most recently, she co-authored a book on *Minority Churches as Media Settlers Negotiating Deep Mediatization* (Routledge 2023). She is editor-in-chief of *gamevironments*. She is a founding member of the International Academy for the Study of Videogaming and Religion (IASGAR).

Projects

The Changing Role of Religion in Societies Emerging from Covid-19 [RECOV-19]. The project was funded through the Trans-Atlantic Platform (T-AP) for the Social Sciences and Humanities, a collaboration between humanities and social science research funders from the Americas and Europe. It received an award under T-AP's 'Recovery, Renewal and Resilience in a Post-Pandemic World' program.

RECOV-19 is a three-year, multi-disciplinary research project analyzing the role of religion in societies emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic. The project investigates whether or to what extent the role of religion has changed during the pandemic in five contexts: Canada, Germany, the Republic of Ireland/Northern Ireland, Poland, and Russia & Belarus. It has three main areas of investigation: discourses around health, illness, and science; changing relationships between religions and the state; and religious adaptations to the digital world.

Ruth Tsuria

Associate Professor at Seton Hall University's School of Communication, Media, and the Arts.

Biography

Her research, which investigates the intersection of digital media, culture, and feminism, has been published in various prestigious academic outlets, such as the *International Journal of Communication* and *Social Media + Society*. She is the recipient of The Inaugural Digital Religion Research Award for her contributions to the field of Digital Religion, and the 2023 Researcher of The Year Award for her impressive publication record, which includes 23 articles and book chapters, and two edited books. Her book, *Keeping Women in their Digital Place: Exploring Jewish Online Discourse on Gender and Sexuality* (Penn State University Press) will be published in the summer of 2024. In addition, Tsuria is the Editor-in-Chief of the Journal for Religion, Media, and Digital Culture.

Projects

Tsuria is currently working on a book proposal on Religion and AI, which is her current main project and focus. She is also cooking a few other projects that examine social media and influencer culture in relation to power and social norms.

Xenia Zeiler

Professor of South Asian Studies at the Department of Cultures, Faculty of Arts, University of Helsinki.

Biography

Her research and teaching are situated at the intersection of digital media, culture, and society, specifically as related to India and global Indian communities. Her focus within this wider field of digital culture is video games and gaming research in India and beyond. Closely related to and supporting this is her other major research areas: In order to understand how digital spaces, such as social media or video games, and more traditional media formats, such as film or TV, shape and are shaped by various actors, she researches and teaches digital religion, popular culture, cultural heritage, and mediatization processes. She is co-editor-in-chief of *gamevironments* and a founding member of the International Academy for the Study of Videogaming and Religion (IASGAR).

More info: <https://researchportal.helsinki.fi/en/persons/xenia-zeiler>

Projects

Her research interests include, but are not limited to, Digital Religion, in particular, Digital Hinduism (and Digital Tantra); video games and gaming; Digital Religion in relation to Cultural Heritage, Pop Culture, and Values; (South) Asian Diasporas and mediatized festival cultures.

Student to Watch in Digital Religion Studies in 2023

In each edition of the yearbook, the NMRDC research team spotlight outstanding student theses or dissertation projects focused on themes of Digital Religion studies. This year, we draw attention to one Master and Two PhD students doing Digital Religion studies projects.

Master's Student

EMANUELE PALUMBO

MA student in Science of Religion
University of Turin

Biography

Emanuele Palumbo obtained his master's degree in the History of Medieval Philosophy at the University of Turin in Italy, with a thesis on the concept of free will in Clement of Alexandria. At the same university, he is in the process of obtaining a master's degree in science of religions. His research interests include the relationship between time and religions, particularly in the context of Digital Religion, and the historical, semiotic, and sociological implications of online temporality.

MA Thesis Project

The issue of the relationship between time and digital religion remains, to date, an unexplored aspect of the *onlife*. This is the primary need from which my research work began: trying to grasp and analyze one of the challenges emerging from the digitalization of religion, namely how the temporal boundaries of online experiences are being redefined. The moment we access the net, we immerse ourselves in a temporal condition that is totally different from the real one and, in fact, we immerse ourselves in a temporal condition that is totally different from the real one and that presents similar characteristics of sacred time. Once digitized, any religious phenomenon becomes an artifact: it needs humans to enter the network, but once this transition has taken place, it remains autonomously online in a potentially eternal dimension, similar to the Heliadian *illud tempus*.

After a brief introductory examination of some theories of sacred time in the XX Century history of religions and some semiotic definitions of temporality and *aspectuality* (to which the first two chapters will be devoted), the focus of the thesis will be on Digital Religion as the condition for experiencing a sui generis temporality. Therefore, my aim is to present what I define here as the *Eternal Turn* - to use a term dear to deconstructionist philosophies - which consists in the dissolution of the temporal limits of the religious and in the opening to infinite possibilities of recovery, reproduction and above all temporal distortion of the phenomenon itself. There will be two lines of development of this path in the third chapter: an ontological perspective (time itself as the object of digitization) and an epistemological perspective (how our perception of digitized religious time changes online).

Finally, in the last part, I will focus on some current examples concerning the construction of highly immersive digital communities, such as Virtual Reality Church or Life. Church in Metaverse. I intend to show how entering such virtual realities highlights the urgency of understanding the temporal nature of such innovations. The materiality of the technological tool - the device perpetually at the disposal of the individual - opens up the immateriality of lived experience, which creates a double binary of temporal determination: my historical time and I are inserted within a digital structure in which all the temporally determined “selves” of other believers meet, without, however, any of these individualities retaining their being-in-time,” with important implications for the flow of our biological life.

Doctoral Students

SARAH EL COUHEN

Ph.D. student in History Anthropology Religion
Sapienza University, Italy

Biography

Sarah El Couhen is a Ph.D. student in the Department of History Anthropology Religions Art Spectacle at the Sapienza University of Rome, and in Social Sciences and Gender at EHESS-CéSor. She obtained a bachelor's in Law from Hassan II University of Casablanca and a double Master's degree in *Comparative Analysis of Mediterranean Societies* from Mohammed VI Polytechnic University of Rabat (School of Governance, Economic and Social Sciences); and in *International Relations – MENA Politics-* from the University of Turin.

Ph.D. Dissertation Project

During my multidisciplinary studies, I gradually realized that her major interest resides in the socio-anthropology of Islam, on which she based the writing of a monograph about the Grand Mosque of Rome. Her training in Social and Religious Sciences - Islam in the contemporary world – of Saint-Louis University in Brussels, as well as several other courses, on the one hand, fostered her interest in gender and female religious authority issues; on the other hand, broadened my focus onto alternative Muslim sacred spaces where a hybrid Islamic religiosity is reinvented thanks to digital technology and the advent of social media.

In my Ph.D. project, I concentrate on post-2010 Islamic feminisms in Italy and France, combining both in-site and digital ethnography, examining the transformations of these Islamic feminisms in the light of the renovated systems of oppression. The new generation of activists diversifies the tools and strategies of resistance and renegotiates spaces where new identities are (re)built. In this sense, the European field is useful for observing new hybridizations, where both global issues and national experiences require major transformation of modes of action, and the constitution of solidarity networks enhanced by access to digital platforms. This project also questions digital empirical investigation, in which the boundaries between methodology, research object, and empowerment tools are increasingly fluid.

AMNA MAHMOUD

Ph.D. student in the Study of Religion
University of Oslo, Norway

Biography

Amna Mahmood is a Doctoral Research Fellow in the Study of Religions at the University of Oslo, Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages. Her primary research interests are Islam in Scandinavia, gender, and intersectionality. I have a disciplinary background in the Study of Religions and History, with specialization in Islam, Judaism, and the modern history of the Middle East. Since June 2022, I have been co-editor of *Babylon - Nordic Journal for Middle Eastern Studies*.

PhD Dissertation Project

My PhD project explores Muslim feminism in contemporary Scandinavia. Specifically, I look at how a handful of Muslim actors based in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark disseminate Muslim feminism in a Scandinavian context through social media, books, and participation in the public debate. Furthermore, I am interested in what topics, people, issues, and struggles relate to feminism and Islam. I use the analytical lens of DIY culture, counterpublics, and religious authority and explore the online actors' organization, networks, motivations, and activities to make sense of their positions within the Islamic field. My methodological approach is qualitative and includes semi-structured interviews with Muslim online actors and 'hand mining' of content (text, pictures, video, and audio) from social media. My study also draws on textual material such as books, magazine and news interviews, and op-eds.

Publications by the Network for New Media, Religion, and Digital Culture Studies in 2023

Finally, each yearbook highlights key works produced by the NMRDC Director and/or Advisory Board Members to showcase the ways in which they seek to exemplify the continuing advancement and promotion of Digital Religion Studies into new areas. This year, we feature a new book on Digital Religion and the final reports produced by the Tech in Churches During Covid-19 Research Project, a study conducted in conjunction with the NMRDC.

Also this section has another font

Campbell, H. A., & Bellar, W. (2023). *Digital Religion: The Basics*. Taylor & Francis.

Digital Religion: The Basics explores how digital media and internet platforms are transforming religious practice in a digital age and the impact this has had on religious culture in contemporary society.

Through exploring six defining characteristics of how religion is acted out online, including multisite reality, convergence practice, networked community, storied identity, shifting authority, and experiential authenticity, the book considers how digital religion both shapes and is influenced by religion offline. Questions asked include:

- How is religion being performed and reimagined through digital media and cultures?
- In what ways do the practices of religion online merge or correspond with shifts in perspective taking place in offline religious practice?
- How do the key findings of religion online reflect broader social, cultural, and structural practices observed within mobile, networked society?

With case studies and further readings, Digital Religion: The Basics is a must-read for students wanting to come to grips with how religion is changing and experienced through digital media.

Reports from the Tech in Churches During Covid-19 Project (techinchurches.org)

Campbell, H. A., Osteen, S., & Sparks, G. (2023). Report 3: 'We're Still Here': Reflections of the Post-Pandemic Digital Church.

This is the final research report of the "Tech in Churches During Covid-19" research project, a three-year study of churches in Indiana that received funds from the Center for Congregation's Connecting through Technology grant, which focused on the ways technology use during the global pandemic impacted churches experience and outlook. This report presents findings from a survey of 246 church leaders about technological decisions made during the global pandemic. The aim was to better understand churches' engagement with digital media and compare their practices and attitudes toward technology before, during, and after the pandemic. Findings from this report demonstrate a positive shift between 2020 and 2023 in congregational attitudes towards technology and online services. It also highlights how the size of the congregation and

the age of religious leaders making technology decisions influenced the type of digital media used and how churches adapted to digital tools.

The full paper is available electronically at <https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/handle/1969.1/200172>

Campbell, H. A., Daly, J., Osteen, S. A., & Wallace, A. (2023). Report 2: Mission to Serve Tech: Churches " Lock Down" Technology During The Global Pandemic.

This report analyzes data collected from 2700 churches of the Center for Congregations in Indianapolis through the Connect Through Tech grant program between 2020-2021. This report analyzes data gathered from applications to the CTT grant and final reports submitted by these churches in order to learn how churches understand and perceive the role of churches, technology, and how their relationship changed during the first two years of the pandemic as they incorporated digital media into their ministry work. The "Mission to Serve Tech" report explores three key themes: (1) how leaders understanding of the mission of the church may have changed during the pandemic, (2) the general understanding of how churches conceptualize the relationship between church and technology before and then later during the pandemic, and (3) the ways technology created both unique opportunities and new challenges that cause churches perceptions and actions to shift in new ways. Important findings of this report include that most churches (84.7%) used their grant funds to purchase live-streaming services and camera/video equipment (82%).

The full paper is available electronically at <http://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/1969.1/197075>

Campbell, H. A., & Osteen, S. (2023). Tech Trend Paper 5: Churches Still Need Help: A Reflection of Churches' Digital Needs in a Post-Pandemic Era.

Drawing on our findings from our third report, "We're Still Here': Reflections of the Post-Pandemic Digital Church," the research team has produced its fifth and final Tech Trend Paper. Churches Still Need Help: A Reflection of Churches' Digital Needs in a Post-Pandemic Era". This report explores the current challenges and needs that congregations continue to face related to technology use. This report provides another in-depth analysis of key themes raised in the Tech in Churches During COVID-19 Research Project.

The full paper is available electronically at <https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/handle/1969.1/200613>

Campbell, Heidi A; Osteen, Sophia; Sparks, Grayson (2023). Tech Trend Paper 4: Diverse Congregations, Similar Experiences: How Pastors of Different Ethnic and Racial Churches Encountered Similar Issues and Opportunities During the COVID-19 Pandemic.

This paper explores how, despite having differing access to resources and levels of technological preparedness, this study found that congregations from diverse racial and ethnic

backgrounds in Indiana responded surprisingly similarly to the digital shift that was required of their congregations during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The full paper is available electronically at
<https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/handle/1969.1/198162>