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Editorial

Dynamics of Innovation and Tradition, Disruption and Continuity: Reconsidering Communication, Agency and Ethics in Digital Religion

Pauline Hope Cheong [1,*] and Ilona Nord [2,*]

[1] Hugh Downs School of Human Communication, Arizona State University, Phoenix, AZ 85287, USA
[2] Institute of Protestant Theology and Religious Education, University of Würzburg, 97070 Würzburg, Germany
* Correspondence: pauline.cheong@asu.edu (P.H.C.); ilona.nord@uni-wuerzburg.de (I.N.)

1. Introduction and Background

Our daily lives, long-lasting realities and future horizons have been stretched in recent times as emerging new technologies and AI (artificial intelligence) have made contact with and filled human and nonhuman existence. A promise of this world is that digital platforms and AI applications enable innovations for religious leaders and communities to reach broader, and even international rims. New leadership avenues and opportunities to gain visibility and influence, including for minorities in the context of religious communities, organizations and institutions, are facilitated by technological adoptions. Yet, our expanded and empowered lives often unfurl with the simultaneous reinforcement of the enduring traditions and embodied aspects of faith.

This Special Issue represents a collective effort to document the profound changes and continuities in religious leadership, agency and governance, even as global spiritual collectives make sense of and integrate evolving digital media practices. Considering AI's bright promises and piercing growth worldwide, we ask deeper questions about the diversity and dynamism in religious organizing. As a counternarrative to the presumed inevitability of AI rollout even into sacred domains, the empirical studies in this volume illustrate tensions in mindful innovations, contesting logics, conflicting representations and ambivalent reflections amid emerging digital religious interactions. In this way, the data insights here underscore how new and emergent media are not only technologically driven scripts, but are also vitalities co-produced at the nexus of the technical and socio-cultural, including everyday lived experiences and cosmic veracities (Cheong 2017; Nord et al. 2025). Consequently, understanding AI-related changes requires paying attention to traditions, and vice versa, since new technical developments are feathered into mediated communication, enhancing the significance of both; AI innovation and continuity must be understood in relation to one another.

The research papers in this Special Issue also showcase how multi-method, multi-site and multi-scalar investigations can provide richer insights to illuminate concerns about our technological intake and AI risks. Multidisciplinary insights are characteristic of the growing corpus of Digital Religion work and are critically needed for understanding our digital futures that are "intricately woven with concomitant risks and challenges" (Cheong and Campbell 2024, p. 631). The articles here come from wide-ranging disciplinary turfs including anthropology, sociology, theology, media and communication studies, history, social work, social policy, politics and governance. This picture reflects how the landscape of digital religion is vast and varied, spanning technologies and modes of social engagement. Thus, current preoccupations with AI must not be understood narrowly

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but as a wider tapestry of virtual media types interwoven with human presence and humane considerations. Accordingly, the work here informs future scholarship, policies and practices that seek meaningful appropriation of digital and AI technologies to support human flourishing and religious organizational life.

In what follows, we highlight the ways in which the nine articles in this journal issue illuminate overarching themes related to the dynamics and dualities of innovation and tradition. This research corpus highlights both disruption and continuity related to specific locales as well as religious flows of people, services and textual and visual information. The articles come from all three Abrahamic religions, Christianity, Islam and Judaism, and from an example of an indigenous tradition, the Māori Culture of New Zealand. The religious contexts illustrated here include Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox traditions in Europe; Catholic and Evangelical traditions in the United States of America; Charismatic and Pentecostal Christianity in Africa; Spanish-spoken transnational and at the same time contextless and anonymously acting Islam; and ultra-Orthodox Judaism in Israel, which also operates transnationally. The rich contributions here highlight multiple thematic insights, which we explicate below, regarding innovation, change and ambivalence, human and machine agency and emerging ethical concerns.

2. Innovative Pathways Expand Amid Traditional Stabilities and Ambivalent Horizons

Digital applications can strengthen both new and existing communication systems, enable changes in religious practices and help leaders extend their reach and influence. Examples in the provided articles illustrate boundary-spanning innovations in at least four dimensions, namely, the administrational, preparational, promotional and political aspects of religious communication. These changing dynamics include the (a) administrational aspect whereby German religious leaders principally accept digital communication and specifically AI as tools for administrative tasks, including quotidian tasks in post-digital societies like the coordination of time, space and team collaborations (Nord & Schleier); (b) preparational, as leaders in the United States of America (Cheong & Liu) and several places in Europe (Isetti, Rachewitz & Pechlaner) adopt not only a range of digital applications but also AI technologies to support sermon preparation, content creation and marketing to fortify internal communication and expand their reach, and in some cases constructing a new normal in pastoral work and leadership The authors declare no conflict of interest; (c) promotional, in the case of Swiss church leaders who leverage digital platforms to meet "where the people are" in society while acknowledging the necessity of interacting with new applications to fulfill the church's mission in today's world (Schlag, Frey & Yadav); and the fourth political and ideological aspect (d) concerns how religious actors seek civil influence and contest cultural and social discrimination as they engage with digital and AI technologies. This dynamic is evident in the case of describing how religious leaders in the Spanish-speaking Muslim world strategically use anonymity in digital Islamic spaces (Astor, Khir-Allah and Martínez-Cuadros). By presenting their content as neutral, non-sectarian, or reflective of a 'universal religious truth,' these creators enhance both their visibility and their authority. Identity politics are also evident in New Zealand, where public calls for a secular society have generated new social media discourses that negotiate the cultural significance of sacred traditions and sites amid postmodern influences (Toy & Richards). Similar dynamics appear on Instagram accounts that celebrate ultra-Orthodox identity, expressing Jewishness, youthfulness, national belonging and institutional ties while simultaneously concealing the vulnerabilities and tensions faced by Jewish students amid campus unrest and antisemitism (Golan & Udi).

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Taken together, these examples illustrate how the communication affordances of digital, and now also AI-powered platforms, can help the faithful transcend socio-cultural norms and geographic constraints. In line with older media promises and developments, boundary spanning and stretching practices offer new possibilities for sacred connection and innovation, in many instances agitating the status quo of creative responses within novel human and media formations.

Yet despite the embrace of innovation, these articles consistently show pullbacks toward traditional foundations, illustrating dynamic appropriations of digital media and AI which have unfolded in contestations and are unfolding in entanglements of human experience and power. For example, we are reminded of how entrenched patriarchal norms in Christian fellowship in Nigeria reinforce specific applications of Scripture to biased gender-based beliefs and engaging in online harassment. The findings illustrate "a dual dynamic" at play where digital platforms provide a "mixed space" of "ongoing tensions", since females are afforded more possibilities for taking up leadership roles, but concurrently, they are exposed to intensified public scrutiny and judgment based on skewed gender-based expectations (Oloba & Blankenship).

Among pastors in the United States of America, Germany and Switzerland, the processes of adopting AI applications are also not friction-free. While church leaders readily adopt AI to support administrative and routine tasks, its application in the composition of sermons and more delicate aspects of pastoral care often face deeper reflection and resistance, at times applying real brakes to AI automation. For many American pastor interviewees, their negotiation with AI applications is a continuous performative effort to enact their authority while being guided by a supraordinate logic tied to their redemptive mission and the spiritual transformation of lives. Thus, they employ AI to "assist and restructure" their work, but emphasize that they "remain in control of their message" and set "clear boundaries" on AI authorship to ensure human-centered and -inspired theological integrity (Cheong & Liu). Within the contexts of the Swiss Reformed Church and also the German Church, we see how significant institutional innovations are accompanied by strong pulls toward traditions that prize the in-person analog "essence", such that digital practices are largely viewed as supplements and not replacements for incarnational church life (Schlag, Frey & Yadav, Nord & Schleier). This observation may also hold true beyond the countries discussed, but this will require further empirical investigation.

Another striking point about strong continuities in religious practices and outcomes is seen in the quantitative study on multiple forms of prayers. Results show that only non-mediated prayer practices, like direct personal prayer to God or attending mass, significantly predict civic engagement in Malta and Denmark (Buhagiar, Pulis & Ćumura). Despite the availability and use of technologically mediated prayer forms with apps and podcasts, the authors stress the enduring importance of physical communal space in congregational life, since traditional embodied forms of religious practice remain more effective for fostering positive outcomes like community building and pro-social civic engagement.

In the same spirit, other articles in this Issue highlight the durable and lasting imprints of traditional authority and norms as various religious units undergo changes fueled by new digital practices. As anonymous Islamic websites and social media pages crop up, tensions are apparent between the "universal religious truth" that they espouse and the majority-Sunni perspectives that they reflect, highlighting unseen but nonetheless important theological overflows to this "view from nowhere". These findings raise an important point about the rise in generative AI, as views that appear to come from "nowhere" are "everywhere", presented as credible answers while obscuring the influence of dominant ideologies and entrenched religious affiliations (Astor, Khir-Allah & Martínez-Cuadros). This reminds us that while AI has rejuvenated interests and investments in new forms

of social practice, its operations are not birthed nor do they exist in isolation but are rather embedded in historical and cultural contexts, including powerful religious ties and organizing structures.

Similarly, the "rubber band effect" analogy evoked in the study of Roman Catholic Churches in Italy provides a compelling image of the dynamisms between innovation and tradition in religious organizing (Isetti, Rachewiltz & Pechlaner). The global pandemic provided impetus for the rapid uptake of new digital tools, blurring online and offline spaces of religious interaction, particularly among an outcrop of "media pioneers" who intensively engaged with digital media. Yet the latter group was the exception, not the rule, as many leaders tasked lay volunteers with digital media competencies to manage these new communication practices. These volunteers often mirrored clerical decision making so the discourse remained largely a one-way flow rather than the co-creation of new participatory engagement and more inclusive governance. Consequently, the "rubber band effect" pertains to the various ways digital activities are scaled back to pre-pandemic times, reflecting top-down management and the reinforcement of existing ecclesiastical power hierarchies.

Furthermore, the study of the German context presents various results overlapping with the above. Findings from Christian leaders and expert interviews reveal that despite holding predominantly neutral-to-positive attitudes, many leaders lack proactive engagement in exploring AI's transformative potential, pointing to their marked lack of agency and creativity, though digital competence leaders expressed more openness to AI adoption (Nord & Schleier). Thus, this study also highlighted key barriers to the integration of AI into religious practice and underscored the need for strategic education and planning to leverage AI in ways that align with religious values while embracing innovation in a digitalizing society.

The next section concludes with a discussion of two additional cross-cutting areas that warrant reconsideration in light of the insights from the research presented in this Issue and offers recommendations for future study.

3. Future Cross-Cutting Research Considerations: Rethinking Agency and Ethics in Digital Religion

As discussed earlier, ongoing dynamics between innovation and tradition are deeply intertwined with how humans engage with the latest digital technologies in hybrid human–machine communication. Agency is hereby understood not only conventionally as an individual's power to act, but also as institutional (e.g., through church structures), relational (e.g., in teamwork) and performative (e.g., through media presence) ways of interaction. Agency is distributed across the socio-technological configuration rather than being solely human or solely machine, giving rise to new hybrid forms of joint human–machine agency in emerging religious AI ecosystems (Cheong and Liu 2025). Notably, in studies related to the adoption of new AI technologies in this collection, agency is not conceptually a fixed trait but is continually constructed through negotiation as pastors interpret institutional values, balance competing logics and perform authority in ways that enable responsible and contextually grounded adoption of AI aligned with their religious commitments. At the same time, there are instances where leaders expressed a limited sense of agency involving how they perceive and interact with emerging technologies within their institutional cultures. Studies here also illustrate how new forms of agency are enabled, for example, through the emerging visibility of marginalized and non-Orthodox voices or the decentralization of communication structures when religious influencers strategically use anonymous communication to make their opinions heard. Accordingly,

agency is a cross-cutting issue that religious stakeholders and actants confront in the face of disruptions and changes in religious sites and power structures.

While our collection offers numerous valuable examples on this topic, it represents an initial view. There remains significant opportunity for future studies to explore agency and digitalization in additional understudied contexts such as in non-democratic settings and among undervalued demographic groups, including children. Thus, we encourage future research to engage with more diverse settings and age groups across the developmental trajectory so as to conduct deeper intersectional analyses to broaden the understanding of new religious actors and agencies at play. To grasp a fuller scope of the developments in religious adoption, innovation and resistance, more intersectional research should be conducted to understand the complex ways in which factors such as age, gender, technological perceptions, digital experiences and governance shape how religious individuals and communities negotiate agency in digital contexts. Beyond the present and microlevel, it is also worth attending to "multiple axes of power, privilege and difference" over time (Cheong and Campbell 2024), as profound complexities in innovation and tradition may not only challenge but enhance personal and organizational capacities to engage in the growing suite of AI applications in unexcepted ways.

Last but not least, another cross-cutting issue raised in this Special Issue is that regarding ethics, which is often narrowly understood as a fixed set of rules or norms, but in the context of religious innovations, it is better understood as a dynamic, culturally and socially embedded system that requires ongoing reflection, dialog and adaptation to evolving realities. This is crucial not only for engaging with AI in general, but also for informing practices such as digital pastoral care, online sacraments and other forms of religious communication, as many religious actors call for value-oriented design and view it as their ethical duty to embody values like mercy, truthfulness and community in digital spaces and to counter harmful or divisive discourse.

The question arises as to whether there is, in part, a clash of values between universal ethical principles (such as human dignity and transparency) and specific religious traditions (such as male-only priesthood or restrictions on gainful employment). This tension extends to broader concerns about discrimination against women and minority groups. Such potential conflicts highlight the need for governance that provides stability and ethical clarity within inherently uncertain areas of action.

Across these texts, a common challenge emerges regarding how religious traditions navigate technological innovation, ranging from cautious adaptation and creative redesign to outright rejection. Many voices, including the perspectives reflected here, acknowledge that future life will combine online and offline experiences rather than replace the physical with the digital. Digital formats are typically viewed as supplements to, rather than substitutes for, analog religious practices, particularly in matters of sacraments, community and authority. Yet a tendency toward hesitation is also evident when a limited sense of agency prevails, as some prefer to wait rather than risk experimental approaches in the sensitive sphere of religious culture, where failure or offense could have serious consequences. Physical presence and in-person religious community continue to be regarded as ethically and theologically indispensable; thus, clarifying what constitutes responsible religious governance in the age of AI requires a nuanced understanding of how universal ethical norms intersect with particular theological values and traditions.

Consequently, future research on the intersection of religion and emerging technologies, including AI, should place stronger emphasis on ethical reflection, especially on how ethical reasoning is shaped by religious customs, habits and leadership practices. An abstract and rule-based approach to ethics often falls short in addressing the complexities of religious authority and the interpretative process and moral responsibilities involved in

managing digital changes within faith communities. Rather than focusing primarily on the technical implementation of digital tools, future studies should prioritize the development of ethical frameworks and practical guidelines that resonate with religious collectives, thereby contributing to a more reflective and resilient approach to integrating AI within faith-based organizations.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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