

Sedláková, Renáta; Guzek, Damian

Digital Religion III: Conference on the constructive and destructive power of religion in a digital environment, SpinPLACE, University of Silesia in Katowice, 17-18 October, 2024

Religio. 2025, vol. 33, iss. 1, pp. 113-116

ISSN 1210-3640 (print); ISSN 2336-4475 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/Rel2025-40583>

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.82248>

License: [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 International](#)

Access Date: 08. 07. 2025

Version: 20250708

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

Digital Religion III: Conference on the constructive and destructive power of religion in a digital environment, SpinPLACE, University of Silesia in Katowice, 17-18 October, 2024

RENÁTA SEDLÁKOVÁ¹ – DAMIAN GUZEK²

1) Faculty of Arts, Palacký University Olomouc, Olomouc, Czechia

• renata.sedlakova@upol.cz • ORCID 0000-0001-9761-978X

2) Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Silesia in Katowice, Katowice, Poland

• damian.guzek@us.edu.pl • ORCID 0000-0002-8138-8128

On October 17-18, 2024, the third *Digital Religion* conference took place, this time under the subtitle *Communication and Excommunication*. While this series of events has been organized since 2021 by a team of researchers from the Department of Communication at the Cyril and Methodius Theological Faculty of Palacký University in Olomouc, the 2024 conference was held at the Institute of Journalism and Media Communication, Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Silesia in Katowice. Its hosts, Damian Guzek from the University of Silesia and Monika Tosik from the University of Lodz, were part of a collaborative team with Renáta Sedláková and Veronika Müllerová from Palacký University in Olomouc, the founders of the tradition, who presented the essential topics they address in their research at the end of the event. The conference, which took place as part of the event Katowice – European City of Science, was opened by representatives of the universities, the vice-rector Michał Daszykowski and Dagmara Głuszek-Szafranec from Silesia, Jaroslav Franc from Olomouc, and Monika Tosik from Lodz.

The highlight of the event was the opening keynote lecture delivered by the leading global expert in the field of digital religion, Heidi A. Campbell, Professor of Communication from the College of Arts and Sciences at Texas A&M University. Campbell focused on the driving forces behind the use of religious discourse on digital media and digital memes as a means of highlighting religious disagreements and boundaries. She emphasized



Religio 33/1, 2025, 113-116.

<https://doi.org/10.5817/Rel2025-40583>

This work can be used in accordance with the Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 4.0 International license terms and conditions (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

the need to understand the shifts of religion within a digitally-mediated culture. According to her, religion represented online predominantly reflects lived religion. In her lecture, she focused on internet memes with religious content, even presenting examples from the Polish environment to illustrate how locals perceive Pope John Paul II. She explained that understanding these memes requires a specific type of memetic literacy, as they rely on reduction, decontextualized discourses, and disarming readers through humour. Building on this, she demonstrated how memes can serve as examples of everyday microaggressions that perpetuate bias and contribute to societal disruption.

In general, the conference provided a space to discuss how digital technologies are reshaping religiosity in today's world. A total of 25 participants from various academic disciplines presented 21 conference papers. Highly resonant themes, such as the hybridization and personalization of faith, ethical challenges, and the transformation of religious communities, highlighted common issues across the digital religious landscape. The discussions demonstrated that researchers from diverse countries, including the USA, the UK, Germany, India, Switzerland, Poland, Belgium, Czechia, Slovakia, Bangladesh, and Zimbabwe, are grappling with similar questions. Scholars emphasized that digital technologies are not merely tools but critical agents that actively redefine religious practices and identities. A selection of the most impactful papers will be summarized.

The hybridization of religious practices, which intensified particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, was addressed several times. Marta Kołodziejska from the University of Warsaw reflected how minority religious organizations in Poland, including Jehovah's Witnesses, struggled to keep their communities united and mobilized. She highlighted how, in response to deep mediatization trends, these religious actors actively shaped their media approaches and usage. They established channels to engage children spiritually and even organized online fitness training with a priest. The phenomenon of hybrid engagement represents a combination of traditional and digital forms of religious life, facilitating the adaptation and consolidation of dispersed communities. However, as the epidemic situation evolved, these more or less *imagined communities* returned to physical spaces, emphasizing that online spiritual activities provide a different experience and thus do not hold the same social value.

Also, Andrzej Adamski from the University of Information, Technology and Management in Rzeszów, researched the period of church closures and focused on the public acceptance of Eucharist broadcast transmissions. His nationwide survey revealed that around 40 % of parishes began broadcasting Sunday Eucharist services over the Internet. Polish bishops emphasized the unity of time and space during these broadcasts, fostering participation through transmission and a sense of spiritual connection.

Przemysław Kantorski's paper, grounded in cognitive linguistics, also theorized the Eucharist. In his view, medialized liturgy requires digital participants to activate cognitive conceptual metaphors to fully engage with the experience. The medialized Eucharist needs a different conceptualization by participants, even if they are not consciously aware of it. For example, their sense of Christ's presence during a YouTube transmission from an inner chapel creates a "blending space," transforming their living rooms into personal churches. This shift, Kantorski hypothesized, alters how participants perceive their homes.

Monika Tosik, from the University of Łódź, also highlighted media as a transformative element that redefined the concepts of sacred space and time. Drawing on the theory of proximization, she theorized digital prayer walls as spaces accessible regardless of the physical distance between believers, enabling asynchronous prayer interactions across time and space. She argued that "the boundaries are not only blurring but collapsing as the proximization triggers the notions of supertime and superspace."

The personalization of religious experiences was explored by İlknur Gümüş, from Gelişim University, who examined how internet users draw on and combine resources from multiple platforms in their self-presentation. She argued that digital technologies enable users to create individual spiritual narratives by integrating various resources and practices, resulting in a form of personalized spirituality. This personalization can also be observed in spiritually-oriented film production.

A related topic was addressed by Simon Werrett from the University of Chester, who discussed the construction of spiritual relationships in the metaverse, where individuals are represented by avatars. He raised questions about authenticity, asking whether relationships between avatars can truly reflect genuine human connections and whether it is possible to perceive another person's inner self solely through their avatar.

Kajetan Kowalik, from Jagiellonian University, then addressed the topic of conspirituality, offering an intriguing perspective on new religious phenomena by analysing an anonymous religious movement emerging on the Internet. This movement believes that our reality operates as a simulation on some form of technical device and could potentially be shut down. These spiritual groups use digital spaces to draw a distinction between "us" and "them" and adopt exclusive practices of excommunication within the virtual sphere.

The integration of AI into spiritual discourse was explored by Jerzy Gołuchowski, Aleksandra Pethe, and Dorota Marquardt, from the University of Economics in Katowice. The scholars presented their research on chatbots modelled as Catholic clerics, examining their potential for pastoral work. They investigated how sensitive religious subjects, including even "unforgivable sins," could be destigmatized. A key question

which emerged was the issue of digital censorship in the AI models—specifically, what topics can be discussed and what should be avoided—a concern addressed during the interactions between the students and the chatbots.

The conference also addressed the media representation of religion. In a PhD student session, Golam Rabby, from Jagannath University, analysed the portrayal of the Citizenship Act in Bangladesh, while Tasnim Tabassum Munmun, also from Jagannath University, examined media narratives surrounding the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan. Their work highlighted how digital media can function as both a tool of propaganda and a means of resistance, though often to polarizing effects.

This closely corresponded with the findings of an esteemed guest, Elizabeth Poole from Keele University. She opened the first conference panel by analysing online counter-narratives against Islamophobia. Her study demonstrated that while social media platforms offer potential for activism, they often fail to foster meaningful debates or enhance public knowledge. Using examples such as Brexit and the Christchurch terror attack, Poole examined the limitations of solidarity discourses, showing how individuals and groups use digital spaces to share and defend their differing values. Her data revealed that anti-Muslim posts on Twitter were the most retweeted, underscoring the role of the platform in amplifying divisive narratives.

This aligned with findings from another study presented by Rebekka Rieser, from the University of Zürich. Her research team explored how the digital public sphere discusses religion and identified the most prevalent topics over time. Using data from the German-speaking region of Switzerland, the study showed that, in 2022, Christianity was primarily associated with political or religious terms, such as rituals and beliefs. In contrast, Islam was predominantly linked to terms related to ideology and conflict in tweets.

The phrase “God became data”, used by one of the presenters, highlights the paradox of digital religion: while technology expands the reach of religious practices and sustains communities, it simultaneously transforms their fundamental meanings and the understanding of the sacred. The conference demonstrated that digital technologies are more than just platforms for connecting people. They serve as a foundation for new forms of faith and religious identity development, while also posing significant challenges related to ethics, authenticity, polarization, and inclusion.

For more information about the conference, visit <https://www.ethicsin-media.eu/digital-religion24>. We hope to see you in Olomouc in November 2025 for *Digital Religion IV*!