Summer School
Religious Belonging and Digital Media
Erfurt, 22.09.2025 – 26.09.2025

Programme

15:00   Opening (*Sebastian Rimestad, Christoph Günther, Anna Neumaier, Giulia Evolvi*)

16:00   Lecture 1, *Astrid Mattes*

Young Believers Online - mapping on- and offline identifications of urban religious youth

-        Dinner

20:00   Film screening

TUESDAY, 23.09.2025

09:00   Participant Presentations I

-        Lunch

13:30   Workshop I, *Sebastian Rimestad*

What does it mean to "belong" to a religion?

15:45   Workshop II, *Giulia Evolvi*

Veils, Crosses, and Selfies: Religion and Gender Online

18:00   Lecture 2, *Anna Neumaier*

A Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy? Methodological Approaches to Digital Religion

-        Dinner

WEDNESDAY, 24.09.2025

09:00   Participant Presentations II

-        Lunch

13:30   Workshop III, *Alessandra Vitullo / Nesrine Mansour*

Tradition vs. Innovation. Rethinking religion in the Age of AI

15:45   Workshop IV, *Christoph Günther*

Audiovisuality on social media platforms and how to engage with it

18:00   Lecture 3, *Sarah Riccardi-Swartz*

Radical Recruitment: Cybernetic Cartographies of Religious Conversion

-        Dinner

THURSDAY, 25.09.2025

Excursion

FRIDAY, 26.09.2025

09:00   Participant Presentations III

-        Lunch

13:15   Conclusion / Outlook

Lectures

LECTURE 1: ASTRID MATTES

YOUNG BELIEVERS ONLINE – MAPPING ON- AND OFFLINE IDENTIFICATIONS OF URBAN RELIGIOUS YOUTH

Although growing awareness of their own diversity in terms of religion, ethnicity and language has become a characteristic feature of many European societies, political responses to this superdiversity are often one-dimensional attempts to pin down a collective identity. In stark contrast, we see that young people growing up in diverse urban areas make identifications in multiple, flexible ways, both in their physical surroundings and in digital spaces.

"Young Believers Online" is an interdisciplinary, explorative research project interested in the conceptualization and visualization of on- and offline identifications of urban religious youth. We asked how young religious people in superdiverse urban settings negotiate their multiple belonging on- and offline, and used innovative methods and digital tools to answer this question. Building on the increased interest in belonging - both in terms of "religious belonging" and "politics of belonging" - we explored processes of identification. YouBeOn re-conceptualized the multiplicity and multi-layeredness of the often used, but under-theorized concept belonging. Based on the analysis of 41 qualitative interviews with young believers from Vienna, we developed a refined approach to religious belonging as as "digitalized", "translocalized" and "adapted". Together with experts in Digital Humanities, we created the YouBeOn Map, an application that visualizes links between physical locations, online activities and individual constructions of belonging.

LECTURE 2: ANNA NEUMAIER

A HITCHHIKER´S GUIDE TO THE GALAXY? METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO DIGITAL RELIGION

In this lecture, I will give a broad overview over different methodological approaches to researching Digital Religion, their potentials and difficulties as well as their relation to possible research questions. In a second part, I will focus on digital ethnography as an example of how to transfer a well-established approach of ethnology and qualitative social research to digital media as a new field of research. In this context, we will also discuss questions of research ethics and at least briefly touch on legal and technical issues.

LECTURE 3: SARAH RICCARDI-SWARTZ (VIDEOSTREAM)

RADICAL RECRUITMENT: CYBERNETIC CARTOGRAPHIES OF EASTERN ORTHODOX CONVERSION

This talk explores the role of technological democratization, social media kinship, meme culture, and algorithmic influence in religious conversion processes. Through case studies, I show how Orthodox Christian content producers craft output that is part of the larger historical work of White Christian Americans to advance civilizing discourses aimed at converting and moralizing publics. I argue that the rite of conversion

evolves in the digital environment into a form of religious radicalization, aimed not only at personal growth but at broader social transformations based in curatorial conventions. In creating online catechetical content, far-right Orthodox digitally subvert the longstanding structures of institutional Church authority, providing a path toward dissident Orthodoxy that is crowdsourced, curated through meme culture, emojis, and vernacular forms of authority. Finally, I gesture to how the crowdsource catechism process leads to an increasing enchantment for converts with the Russian Orthodox Church and Russian post-Soviet social policies. As the online conversion process radicalizes seekers to a particular ideological lane of Orthodox thought, it provides a built-in form of community, social boundaries, and a manifesto of morality.

Workshops

WORKSHOP I: SEBASTIAN RIMESTAD

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BELONG TO A RELIGION?

Different religions have different ways of conceptualising "religious belonging". In pre-modern societies, belonging to a religious community was a natural fact of life and questioning this adherence was the exception. In contemporary "Western" society, it is no longer the default to belong to a religious community, enhancing the academic reflection of what it means to belong to a religion.

The two texts I have provided is first, an introduction to the Christian theological discipline of "ecclesiology" and an outline of recent developments in terms of the Islamic community in Indonesia. In the workshop, we will discuss these two texts: How does reflecting on ecclesiology chime in with belonging to various Christian denominations and harbouring a religious identity? Do other religious communities have an ecclesiology? To what extent is belonging to a Christian Church (or other religious organisation) tied to locality and community? Why did Islam in Indonesia change as it did – was it (only) technological modernisation, political change, or a change in "ecclesiology"? Is a similar change visible in your research fields?

Readings for the workshop

Paul Avis, "Introduction", in Oxford Handbook of Ecclesiology, ed. by Paul Avis, Oxford University Press 2018, p. 1-30. (extract)

François Gauthier, Religion, Modernity, Globalisation. From Nation-State to Global Market, Routledge 2020, p. 233-253

Open Access: https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/oa-mono/10.4324/9780429276033/religion-modernity-globalisation-fran%C3%A7ois-gauthier

The study of religion, and religion and media in particular, has long neglected gender; however, as Mia Lovheim (2013) argues, this risks reducing religious practices and knowledge to male experiences, thus considered as "the norm." As a result, the tendency is to overlook women's agency or consider women's empowerment as impossible within religious environments (Mahmood, 2005). On the contrary, a focus on gender helps incorporate embodied and lived experiences (McGuire, 2008). Furthermore, it opens up venues to look at intersectional characteristics (Crenshaw, 1991), including migration backgrounds, different sexual orientations, and belonging to various socio-economic environments. The incorporation of gender in the study of religion is relevant for the field of digital religion, in particular, for two main reasons: first, women can more easily find venues of expression and even establish businesses through online platforms (see, for instance, Nisa, 2018; Quilty, 2022); second, the Internet can unfortunately provide a fertile terrain for online misogyny (Ging & Siapera, 2018), which needs to be studied also regarding religious women (Topidi, 2024). Therefore, the online religious experiences of women and gender/sexual minorities are far from monolithic, with some pushing for religious feminisms, others just narrating their everyday lives online, and some others defending religious-based patriarchal norms. Given this complexity, the present workshop aims to discuss the following questions: What are the theoretical approaches to studying digital religion and gender? What kind of methodologies and positionalities can we assume to study the subject? What research avenues can we open by incorporating gender in digital religion?

Readings for the workshop

Lövheim, M., & Lundmark, E. (2019). Gender, Religion and Authority in Digital Media. ESSACHESS – Journal for Communication Studies, 12(2(24)), Article 2(24).

Starkey, C., Tomalin, E., & Halafoff, A. (2022). Women, religion, and digital counter-publics: Introduction. Journal of Contemporary Religion, 37(1), 1–8. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13537903.2022.2030122.

The lecture aims to explore the complex and evolving relationship between religion and technological innovation, offering a theoretical framework that spans from the era of traditional media to the age of artificial intelligence. Beginning with the foundational theories of digital religion, the session will trace how religious practices, beliefs, and communities have been reshaped by Information Communication Technologies (ICTs). It will then examine how emerging technologies—particularly AI—are transforming religious imaginaries, ethical debates, and ritual life, with a special focus on the Catholic Church.

Drawing on interdisciplinary approaches between sociology of religion, communication, and sacred architecture and spaces studies, the lecture will provide a critical lens through which to understand how religious actors navigate the tension between tradition and innovation. Particular attention will be paid to current debates around the transformation of religious authority, experience, and practice, highlighting both the challenges and opportunities that AI presents for contemporary religious thought and life

Building on this foundation, the workshop will then turn to practical applications of AI in the study and design of sacred space. Through a series of case studies and experiments using generative AI tools such as ChatGPT (DALL·E), we explore how algorithmic systems attempt to visualize the sacred, often reproducing biases or flattening theological nuance. We will analyze how AI-generated representations of sacred architecture and ritual spaces raise epistemological questions about authenticity, cultural erasure, and commodification. In parallel, we will discuss how large language models and AI-driven storytelling tools are being used to simulate liturgical scripts, generate devotional texts, or speculate new religious futures.

Together, these theoretical and applied perspectives aim to equip participants with a deeper understanding of the role AI plays in reshaping religious thought, experience, and spatial imagination while promoting critical engagement with the tools that now mediate our most sacred meanings.

Readings for the workshop

Campbell, H. A., & Vitullo, A. (2016). Assessing changes in the study of religious communities in digital religion studies. Church, Communication and Culture, 1(1), 73–89. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23753234.2016.1181301

Vitullo, A., Campbell, H. A., Mastrofini, F., & Di Pietro, F. P. (2025). From Radio to AI. Old and new trends in the Catholic Church's approach to technological innovation. Church, Communication and Culture, 10(1), 45–59. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23753234.2025.2474812

This workshop will make participants acquainted with a range of approaches to (audio)visual data on social media platforms. It premises that audiovisual media are complex sensory stimuli and require researchers to attend to text, speech, sound, and image at the same time. According to their individual research questions, participants will learn to disentangle the techno-social setting within which the respective media is embedded from the media itself and its various layers of meaning in order to then – in a second step – link their insights of these aspects to produce a coherent narrative.

Moreover, in this hands-on workshop the group of participants will act as a brain trust to collaboratively analyse visual data provided by the participants themselves. We will hone our capacity to employ different methods of visual analysis, working as a team that integrates a variety of ways of seeing and hearing in their exploration of visual material on social media platforms.

Assignment: Participants working with visual material are asked to submit a selection of up to five images or videos posted on a social media platform by sending a link to the respective publication alongside with a set of up to two research questions to christoph.guenther[at]uni-erfurt.de no later than midnight of September 14, 2025.

Readings for the workshop:

Günther, Christoph (2023), 'Conceptualizing Contemporary Audiovisual Daʿwa', in Ayşe A. Akca, Mona Feise-Nasr, Leonie Stenske and Aydın Süer (eds), Practices of Islamic Preaching: Text, performativity, and materiality of Islamic Religious Speech, Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, pp. 61–74. DOI: https://www.degruyterbrill.com/document/doi/10.1515/9783110788334-004/html

McLeod Cramer, Lauren (2019), '"A Very Black Project": A method for digital visual culture', in Lisa Patti (ed.), Writing about Screen Media, London, New York: Routledge, pp. 122–30.

Schreiber, Maria (2017), 'Showing/Sharing: Analysing Visual Communication from a Praxeological Perspective', Media and Communication, 5: 4, 37–50.

Further Reading:

Patti, Lisa (ed.) (2019), Writing about Screen Media, London, New York: Routledge.

Banks, Marcus (2001), Visual Methods in Social Research, London: Sage.

Participant Presentations

1. *Hosea Wenyaa Kituyi*
   Pentecostal Churches social media use for Christian mission. A case study of the New Life Church, in Kenya.

2. *Joseph Sedgwick*
   The ongoing friction of contemporary Paganism and digital religion

3. *Katharina Yadav*
   Navigating Digitality. A Typology-Based Analysis of Pastoral Agency in the Face of Digital Church Communication Practices

4. *KJ Ananthapadmanabhan*
   How to be "moderate" in a high-tech world? Negotiating Religion and Morality with Technology within a Hindu Nationalist Organisation in South India

5. *Elsa Correia Pereira*
   Feminist evangelicals using the internet to negotiate belonging discussing theology

6. *Anna Pazio*
   Beyond Adaptation: Religious Tech Companies as Active Shapers of Deep Mediatization

---

WEDNESDAY, 24.09.2025

7. *Aída Velasco Morla*
   How is TikTok interreligious?

8. *Jan Phillipp Hahn*
   Framing Muslims as intolerant

9. *Leoni Wohlfart*
   Interviews with content creators about construction of differences in Christian content creation

10. *Anirban Mukhopadhyay*
    Metaphors and WhatsApp: Religion, mediated Publics, and Nationalism in India

11. *Jasmin Eder*
    Audio-visual elements in Ahmadiyya

12. *Mehmet Özgün Özkul*
    Nasheeds (a capella group songs) as online storytelling

13. *Gabriela de la Vega*
    Political messages by female Christian influencers

14. *Sasha Prevost*
    Returning to Judaism via Zoom: Making Modern Religious Identities in the Digital Age

15. *Alice Bakradze*
    Orthodoxy in Migration: Digital Religious Practices Among Georgian Women in Italy

16. *Priyanka Sinha*
    Digital Media Anchored Democratisation of Religious Practices: Gender and Religious Belonging among the Brahma Kumaris of India

17. *Fitri Murfianti*
    Sociocultural Interactions and Playful Citizenship: Investigating Ramadan Memetic Videos on TikTok

18. *Yuanjie Zhang*
    Live Faith: Exploring New Forms of Religious Transmission on Chinese Social Media through Live Streaming