CONFERENCE REPORT

15th International Roundtable on Media and Religion & Spirituality in Asia

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1. Introduction

The 15th International Roundtable organized by the Asian Research Center for Religion and Social Communication (ARC) and the Department of Peace Studies, International College, Payap University, was held in Chiang Mai, Thailand, from 1–2 November 2025. With the theme *"The Media and Religion & Spirituality in Asia",* the conference convened scholars, practitioners, and activists from across Asia and beyond to explore the intersections of media, religion, and spirituality in contemporary society. The event combined plenary sessions, panel discussions, and parallel roundtables, offering a rich tapestry of perspectives on how media technologies shape religious practices, public scholarship, and social justice.

The conference began with an interfaith ritual, cultural performances, and welcome remarks from representatives of Payap University and ARC. Rev. Dr. Kenneth Dobson, Dr. Le Ngoc Bich Ly, and Ms. Phyllis Mann emphasized the importance of dialogue across traditions. At the same time, Dr. Anthony Le Duc highlighted the Center's mission of fostering communication and collaboration in Asia. The ceremony set a tone of inclusivity and intercultural exchange, underscoring the conference's commitment to advancing peace and understanding.

2. Keynote Address: Charismatic Technologies and Religious Affordances

Dr. Heidi A. Campbell, Professor of Communication at Texas A&M University and Visiting Professor at NUS-Singapore, delivered the keynote lecture on *"Charismatic Technologies and Religious Affordances: Cross-Religious Reflections on AI and GPTs and the Asian Context."* Drawing on affordance theory, Dr. Campbell examined how Generative Pre-trained Transformers (GPTs) embody both technological

and religious affordances, enabling ritual, scriptural engagement, and personalized spiritual dialogue across Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim contexts.

She critiqued the rise of "technological clergy" who promote AI without fully considering its impact on human experience, urging scholars to adopt a middle ground that critically evaluates both tensions and possibilities. Campbell's analysis of over 100 religious apps revealed strategies of replication, mediation, and transformation, highlighting how charismatic technologies can democratize access to sacred texts while raising ethical questions about authenticity, authority, and community. Her call to reframe religion and technology as collaborators rather than competitors resonated strongly with participants, situating Asia as a vital site for comparative research on digital spirituality.

3. Panel Discussion: Religion, Media, and Public Scholarship for Social Justice

The panel organized by the Desmond Tutu Centre for Religion and Social Justice featured Dr. Lee-Shae Scharnick-Udemans, Dr. Sarojini Nadar, and Dr. Thandi Gamedze. Their dialogue foregrounded the ethical and liberative dimensions of engaging media for public scholarship.

- **Dr. Scharnick-Udemans** emphasized the co-construction of meaning by media and religion, advocating for media literacy as a theological imperative. She warned against the commodification of religious symbols and stressed the need to challenge hierarchies embedded in media systems.
- **Dr. Nadar** reflected on her journey as an African feminist scholar, citing Edward Said's notion of the public intellectual. She shared experiences of using radio, television, and opinion writing to confront gender-based violence and religious patriarchy, reminding scholars to speak on issues that disturb them, echoing Archbishop Tutu's advice.
- **Dr. Gamedze** introduced *Freedom Theology South Africa*, a bingo-inspired educational game narrating the church's resistance to apartheid. She highlighted the pedagogical power of games and traditional media in fostering critical consciousness and historical memory.

Together, the panelists underscored that public scholarship is not merely about visibility but accountability to communities. Their insights bridged African and Asian contexts, reinforcing the conference's transnational ethos.

4. Parallel Roundtables

The heart of the conference lay in its parallel sessions, which showcased diverse research across themes of digital faith, AI and spirituality, media ecology, hermeneutics, feminist theology, and cultural studies.

4.1. Digital Faith and Online Evangelization

Papers explored the transformative role of digital media in mobilizing Filipino Catholics, the feasibility of virtual parishes, and the creative adaptation of religious icons into memes. Discussions highlighted both the power and perils of digital evangelization, emphasizing the need for discernment in balancing tradition with innovation.

4.2. AI, Technology, and Spirituality

Scholars examined theological experiments with AI, reflections on Asian spirituality, and the role of video games in religious engagement. The session revealed how digital narratives and algorithmic logics reshape religious discourse, while raising questions about authenticity and pastoral care in AI-mediated contexts.

4.3. Media, Ecology, and Social Ethics

This roundtable included papers on green media's influence on environmental narratives, Buddhist peace education in Myanmar, and Catholic online preaching in the Philippines. The discussions emphasized the ethical responsibilities of media in addressing ecological crises and promoting social justice.

4.4. Texts, Theology, and Digital Hermeneutics

Participants analyzed biblical interpretation in digital contexts, postcolonial exegesis, and streaming as public pedagogy. The session underscored how digital hermeneutics challenge traditional authority structures while opening new spaces for epistemic freedom.

4.5. Gender, Power, and Feminist Theologies

Papers critiqued patriarchal authority on social media, examined Christian Zionist media statements, and explored decolonial approaches to biblical texts. The roundtable highlighted feminist theology's role in exposing systemic injustices and reimagining inclusive communities.

4.6. Asian Culture, Religion, and Film

Presentations analyzed anime adaptations, Vietnamese mediumship practices, and the digital ritualization of grief following Pope Francis's death. These studies illustrated how film and media serve as sites of negotiation between tradition, modernity, and spirituality.

4.7. Religion, Community, and the Public Sphere

This session examined media's role in shaping communal narratives, from critiques of masculine religious authority to explorations of trust and tensions in Indonesia's religious landscape. The discussions reinforced the importance of media as a public sphere for theological and ethical reflection.

4.8. Emerging Themes

Across sessions, several themes emerged:

- **Media as a site of liberation and contestation**. Scholars emphasized the dual role of media in reproducing hierarchies and enabling resistance.

- **AI and charismatic technologies**. The integration of GPTs and religious apps highlighted both opportunities for democratization and risks of alienation.

- **Public scholarship and accountability**. Participants stressed that visibility must be coupled with responsibility to communities.

- **Intercultural and transnational dialogue**. The conference fostered exchanges across African, Asian, and Western contexts, enriching comparative perspectives.

- **Ethics of representation**. Questions of authenticity, misrepresentation, and epistemic justice permeated discussions, urging scholars to remain critically engaged.

5. Conclusion

The 15th International Roundtable demonstrated the vitality of scholarly engagement at the intersection of media, religion, and spirituality in Asia. By bringing together diverse voices, the conference illuminated how digital technologies are reshaping religious practices, public scholarship, and social justice movements. The keynote and panel sessions provided conceptual anchors, while the parallel roundtables showcased the breadth of ongoing research. Ultimately, the event affirmed that knowledge must not only interpret the world but also participate in its transformation, echoing the prophetic call for scholarship that is both critical and courageous.

CONFERENCE ABSTRACTS

Keynote

Charismatic Technologies and Religious Affordances: Cross-Religious Reflections on AI and GPTs and the Asian Context

Heidi A. Campbell

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This presentation explores the intersection of artificial intelligence and religion through the lens of "charismatic technology," a concept that positions technology as a mediating force with spiritual resonance. Drawing on affordance theory, it examines how Generative Pre-trained Transformers (GPTs) embody both technological and religious affordances—facilitating ritual, scriptural engagement, and personalized spiritual dialogue across Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim contexts. Through cross-religious content analysis of Religious GPTs, this study reveals how these AI tools replicate, mediate, and transform religious practices, offering new modes of accessibility, interactivity, and pluralistic engagement. It critiques the dominant role of the "technological clergy" and calls for deeper reflection on the religious affordances of AI design. By situating GPTs within Asian sociotechnical imaginaries, the presentation highlights the need for comparative, culturally grounded research on AI's role in shaping spiritual life, authority, and community. Ultimately, it advocates for ethically attuned, cross-religious dialogue in emerging tech development.

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Panel

Religion, Media, and Public Scholarship for Social Justice

Lee-Shae Scharnick-Udemans, Sarojini Nadar, Thandi Gamedze

Desmond Tutu Centre for Religion and Social Justice,

University of the Western Cape, South Africa

The Desmond Tutu Centre for Religion and Social Justice takes a broad and generative approach to the conceptualisation of scholarly engagement with religion and media, and to its study as intertwined fields of intellectual and public inquiry. The Centre's research and teaching are organised across five intersecting focus areas: Religion, Gender, and Sexuality; Religion, Ecology, and Economy; Religion and Media; Religion, Race, Politics, and African Religions; and Religion, Education, and Epistemology. What brings us together, as individual scholars and as a collective, is our shared commitment to research and teaching that serve the struggle for social justice in all its forms including gender

justice, racial justice, economic justice, environmental justice, and epistemic justice. We hold two mottos close "Advancing Knowledge, Advancing Justice" and "Critical Scholarship, Courageous Action".

The Centre's work continually explores the dynamic relationship between public pedagogy and public scholarship recognising that knowledge production is not confined to the academy, but is co-created through critical engagement with communities, media, and other public platforms. This commitment reflects our contention that scholarship must not only interpret the world but also actively participate in its transformation. It is within this vision of engaged, decolonial, feminist and dialogical scholarship that we situate our new partnership with the Asian Research Centre for Religion and Social Communication (ARC).

In this panel presentation, Senior Researcher and Associate Professor Lee Scharnick-Udemans reflects on how the Centre has foregrounded the study of religion and media as an integral part of its research agenda, and why this focus is essential to its pursuit of social justice through scholarship. Drawing on her work within the critical discursive tradition, Scharnick-Udemans explains how religious diversity,though constitutionally protected and rhetorically celebrated, remains structured by profound inequalities of power and visibility and that these are produced and sustained through political economies of religion and media.In doing so, she will show how the Centre's commitment to studying religion and media contributes to its larger mission of advancing social justice through decolonial and critical scholarship,one that recognises the power of discourse to both reproduce and resist inequality, and that insists on the transformative potential of research that engages public life and popular culture as a site of moral and intellectual struggle.

The Centre not only studies religion and media, but also uses media as a platform for public scholarship creating spaces where research on religion, gender, race, and justice can be made accessible, participatory, and transformative.Professor Sarojini Nadar, Director of the Tutu Centre and the Desmond Tutu SARChI Chair in Religion and Social Justice is a world renowned and leading scholar of religion and gender. She will reflect on her work as an African feminist scholar of religion, sharing how she has engaged media as both a tool and a technique of public scholarship for social justice. Nadar will discuss how feminist theological insights and public media engagement intersect to challenge patriarchal, colonial, and epistemic hierarchies, while advancing justice.

Finally, Senior Researcher Thandi Gamedze, whose work lies in the area of Religion, Education, and Epistemology, will discuss her innovative approach to public scholarship through creative and participatory methods. Drawing on both poetry and interactive game design, she explores how artistic and playful mediums can serve as tools for critical reflection, community engagement, and decolonial education. One of her key projects, Freedom Theologies: South Africa, is a game-activity that employs a bingo-adjacent methodology to facilitate engagement with accessibly curated yet often marginalised narratives of the South African Church's role in the anti-apartheid struggle. Through such imaginative pedagogical tools, Gamedze foregrounds how creative practice can become a form of public and critical pedagogy, inviting participants/students to engage deeply with questions of history, justice, and religion.

The panel will conclude with an interactive Q&A session, inviting participants to reflect on how religion and media in their many forms can serve as vital spaces for decolonial and justice-oriented scholarship, pedagogy, and practice.

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Digital Media's Power and Perils in Mobilizing Filipino Catholics for Socio-Political Involvement

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The media serves as a double-edged sword. While its pervasive and widespread reach offers significant benefits, it also presents notable risks to individuals, communities, and organizations like the Catholic Church. In recent years, the rise of various social media platforms and advancements in communication and digital technology have significantly awakened the consciousness of Catholics regarding their call to embrace authentic Christianity that aspires towards eternal life, all while remaining engaged and proactive in socio-political matters. This also exposes them to various initiatives and programs, enriching their understanding of how they can contribute to the Church's socio-political initiatives. However, the use of digital media without well-defined boundaries and specific guidelines can lead to increased polarization, both within the Catholic community and between Catholics and non-Catholics. Such polarization can foster echo chambers that promote narrow perspectives or distorted views of reality.

To maximize the benefits of digital media while mitigating its associated risks for the Catholic community, this paper will employ the see-judge-act framework to analyze the issue. It will begin by examining how the Catholic Church in the Philippines has effectively leveraged digital media and platforms to engage and mobilize its members. Subsequently, it will evaluate the advantages and opportunities presented by digital media as well as the challenges it poses to fostering greater social involvement among Filipino Catholics. Furthermore, the paper will analyze digital media—considering its opportunities and risks—through the lens of Church teachings. Finally, it will propose strategies to enhance the advantages of digital media while minimizing potential dangers.

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Holy Hacking: Soul Habits for AI Engagement

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This paper examines the dynamic intersection of spirituality, ethics, and artificial intelligence (AI), proposing a framework for mindful and ethically grounded engagement with emerging technologies. Under the concept of Holy Hacks, the presentation introduces the cultivation of "soul habits" as a set of spiritual practices that equip those engaged in ministry and pastoral care to navigate the digital age with discernment, intentionality, and depth. Rather than approaching AI as a purely technical or utilitarian tool, the framework emphasizes holistic integration, inviting users to reflect on how technology shapes attention, relationships, and vocational purpose.

Drawing on theological reflection and practical wisdom, Holy Hacks situates AI within broader conversations on human flourishing, ethical responsibility, and spiritual resilience. It further contributes to empirical scholarship by presenting findings from a recent study conducted with pastors across diverse contexts. It also examines pastors' levels of awareness, knowledge, and current use of AI in ministry settings, highlighting both the opportunities and challenges of integrating digital tools into pastoral practice. Results reveal a spectrum of engagement, ranging from cautious experimentation to deeper concerns about dependency, surveillance, and ethical implications.

By combining theoretical insights with lived experience, this paper argues that cultivating soul habits such as attentiveness, critical reflection, communal discernment, and practices of rest can foster conscious engagement with AI that honors both technological innovation and spiritual integrity. Ultimately, Holy Hacks aims to equip religious leaders and communities with resources for navigating AI in ways that deepen, rather than diminish, their call to human and spiritual flourishing.

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Fratelli Tutti and the Path to Fraternity in Digital Communication

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In an increasingly digitized world, communication technologies have transformed how individuals relate, engage, and build communities. This paper explores the ethical and spiritual implications of digital communication through the lens of Fratelli Tutti, Pope Francis' third encyclical on fraternity and social friendship. Drawing on Catholic social teaching and key Church documents (Inter Mirifica, Communio et Progressio, and Aetatis Novae), the study examines the Church's evolving response to media culture and its moral responsibilities. It analyzes the challenges digital platforms pose to human dignity, including the erosion of privacy, the rise of social media addiction, and the decline of authentic dialogue. At the same time, it highlights the potential of digital media to foster encounter, empathy, and solidarity when guided by values of truth, love, and respect. Employing theological reflection and academic research, the paper proposes a reimagined digital culture grounded in universal fraternity, personal encounter, and responsible engagement, one that aligns technological advancement with the common good. Ultimately, it offers a call to action: to cultivate a "culture of encounter" that restores

human connection in digital spaces and reflects the Gospel's vision of inclusive and compassionate community.

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From the Altar to the Screen:
The Transformation of Religious Icons into Memes and Youth Engagement with Faith

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Icons have long served within the Church as sacred artistic representations of God, the Blessed Mother, and the heavenly hosts. Across both Western and Eastern traditions, they are not merely decorative but are revered as objects of veneration—honored and respected in ways that echo ancient practices. This tradition traces its roots to the reverence shown toward the Ark of the Covenant and the sacred imagery of Solomon's Temple in the Old Testament, and continues through the Apostolic Era (Narinskaya, 2012). Today, many of these same icons are finding new life in the unpredictable world of internet memes. This paper examines the transformation of religious icons into memes and what this reveals about contemporary youth attitudes toward faith. Importantly, it highlights how young people engage with religious imagery through memes in ways that feel relevant, meaningful, and accessible within a digital age (Campbell, 2017). Drawing on Ferdinand de Saussure's (1916/1983) semiotic theory of the sign, which highlights the arbitrary yet meaningful relationship between the signifier (the form) and the signified (the concept), the study explores how memes reconfigure sacred symbols through digital means. This transformation also aligns with Bolter and Grusin's (1999) concept of remediation, which describes how new media reshape older communicative forms into culturally resonant content. From a psychological standpoint, memeification functions as a means for youth to negotiate meaning, emotion, and identity in their religious engagement. Theories on identity formation, humor, and cognitive consistency shed light on how these digital expressions influence the way young people relate to and redefine religious values. Specifically, Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) explains how memes allow youth to express their religious identity within the age of social media, while Albert Bandura's concept of observational learning highlights how such behaviors are modeled and reinforced within peer groups. While religious memes often challenge sacred norms and create cognitive dissonance between reverence and humor, McGraw and Warren's (2010) Benign Violation Theory and Festinger's (1957) Cognitive Dissonance Theory suggest that youth may

reinterpret both memes and their religious understanding in ways that make faith more relatable and personally meaningful.

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Virtual Catholic Parishes: A Feasible Reality?

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During the global lockdown caused by the pandemic, many parishes took advantage of social media platforms and technology to livestream Masses and other liturgical celebrations, hold catechism classes, and other spiritually formative activities. They also created venues for dialogue and discourse on Catholic faith and morality. Even as the world returned to normal, this practice in the Church continued.

The liturgy, faith, and moral and spiritual formation align with the teaching and sanctifying mission of the Church, which must be carried out under the direction of a particular pastor or parish priest and the overall guidance of the diocesan bishop, whose jurisdiction is primarily defined by territoriality or physical location. While the option to participate in Mass virtually and nurture one's faith through digital platforms can assist those unable to attend their local parish for liturgical celebrations and can significantly aid in the intellectual faith formation of believers, it lacks an essential component—the authentic sense of communion that can only be fully experienced through interaction with real people.

Through content analysis, the paper will investigate the impact of the use of digital and social media platforms on the participation of Catholics in their respective parishes. Next, the paper will examine the nature and essential elements of a parish and its pastoral functions through the lens of Vatican II's ecclesiology and the Code of Canon Law. Finally, it will evaluate the feasibility of establishing virtual Catholic parishes in light of theological and canonical theories and principles.

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Preaching with AI: A Practical Theological Experiment

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Artificial intelligence (AI) is now part of everyday life, and even the church is starting to see its impact. One new use of AI is in preaching, where tools like ChatGPT can help pastors prepare

sermons. While this technology brings convenience, it also raises questions about doctrine, pastoral care, and the spiritual life of the church. I noticed that no field-tested guide exists for how pastors can use AI responsibly in sermon preparation.

To explore this, I conducted a practical theological experiment with eleven pastors. Over four Sundays, each pastor preached sermons created with ChatGPT. I then gathered feedback from three groups: A total of 480 church congregation responses who gave blind feedback about clarity, relevance, and spiritual impact, ten ordained elders who evaluated 40 sermons on doctrine, Scripture, clarity, and pastoral tone, and the pastors themselves (who reflected on usability, spiritual connection, and future use).

The findings show that AI-assisted sermons can be clear, relevant, and spiritually meaningful, but they also have limits in doctrinal depth and biblical exegesis. Based on these results, this study develops a field-tested AI Prompt Guide to help pastors and lay leaders use ChatGPT in ways that strengthen clarity and accessibility while keeping faithfulness, pastoral care, and context at the center of preaching.

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East or West Home is the Best: AI and Asian Spirituality— A Critical Reflection

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This research critically examines the interaction between AI and Asian spirituality, assessing whether technological innovations align with or disrupt the core values embedded in traditions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, Sikhism, and Confucianism. While AI offers promising possibilities, such as enhancing meditation practices, automating spiritual education, and facilitating ethical decision-making, it simultaneously raises concerns about diminishing human intuition, human empathy, emotional depth, and moral reflection. Asian spirituality emphasizes harmony between the mind, body, and universe—an essence that AI, despite its vast capabilities, struggles to replicate. This critical reflection explores the intersection of AI development and Asian spiritual traditions, interrogating whether the proverb "East or West, home is best" holds relevance in navigating the tensions and synergies between technology and spirituality. While AI's foundations are largely rooted in Western techno-scientific paradigms—emphasizing efficiency, progress, and material outcomes—Asian spiritual philosophies, such as Buddhism, Taoism, Sikhism and Hinduism, prioritize interconnectedness, mindfulness, and harmony with nature. This paper examines the foundations, learning models, key features and logical framework of Asian Spirituality and its relevance in the context of todays modern technological developments such as digitality and AI tools. Ultimately, this reflection argues that a balanced integration of AI and Asian spirituality requires humility, interdisciplinary collaboration, inclusion, communion and a rejection of techno-utopianism. By grounding AI development in Spiritual enlightenment, social engagement, and moral integrity; humanity might forge a path where technology serves not as a disruptor but as a bridge between East and West, tradition and modernity. The

challenge lies in ensuring that "home"—whether interpreted as cultural heritage or universal human dignity—remains at the heart of innovation and transformation; tradition and science; and doctrine and service.

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Engaging Religion in Digital Video Games

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The integration of digital media into religious propositions and materials presents various challenges. While it enables convenience and at times wider access to faith-based content, issues such as digital divide, technological literacy, and content authenticity arise. In addition, not all religious communities enjoy equal access to devices or reliable internet, thus delimiting availability. Concerns about maintaining doctrinal integrity in a rapidly changing digital landscape also raise complications in some instances. Additionally, over-reliance on digital materials ran the risk of diluting traditional faith practices and face confrontation from some adherents. Despite these difficulties, digital media offers opportunities for dynamic engagement and connection.

For a long time, in many religious communities like in the Philippines, religion and religious constructs are largely understood in traditional senses provided in catechetical manuals. For this reason, religion is preached in either print or oral media. But what if religious categories and concepts are communicated in virtual language? What correlates can be assigned to religious constructs in virtual digital imagination? The present study provides critical insights into the digital transposition of religious constructs as a way of introducing and communicating religious or catechetical constructs using a locally produced video-based digital game. The local digital video game will serve as a primary material of analysis to understand the dynamics behind the transposition. This study excludes an analysis of the effectiveness of the material in conveying catechetical message among its users. The discussion opens an encouraging valuation of the significance of the digital virtual world in the articulation of catechetical material in digital categories. Overall, this review offers a commentary into the possibilities of integrating digital media in religious instruction and pastoral formation.

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Decoding Digital Narratives: Performance Criticism as a Biblio-Hermeneutical Lens

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The paper explores Performance Criticism as an emerging hermeneutical tool within biblical studies, emphasizing its relevance in the context of digital storytelling. It highlights the ancient oral traditions that shaped biblical texts, arguing that the Bible evolved through storytelling, public readings, and performances. This study underscores the constitutive, epistemic, and critical dimensions of story performance. Through oral performances, biblical stories conveyed emotional depth and cultural resonance, engaging audiences with their communal and contextual relevance. The text delves into the interplay between performer and audience, illustrating how memory, emotion, and embodiment enhance storytelling. It argues that ancient scribes, far from being mere transcribers, were active participants in preserving and reshaping the stories for their communities. By engaging with the performative nature of biblical texts, Performance Criticism offers a dynamic interpretative framework that integrates historical, rhetorical, and social analyses. Furthermore, the paper advocates for re-appropriating biblical storytelling as a powerful communication paradigm in contemporary faith contexts. The rediscovery of memorization and internalization enriches the performance, fostering holistic engagement that connects mind, body, and spirit. By emphasizing storytelling's transformative potential, the study proposes it as a medium to renew biblical communication and influence cultural paradigms.

This hermeneutical approach bridges the gap between ancient oral traditions and modern interpretative needs, making biblical narratives more accessible, engaging, and relevant in today's digital and post-literate culture. Performance Criticism thus emerges as a vital tool for re-imagining biblical communication in ways that resonate across time and cultures.

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Spreading the Gospel in the Digital Age: Catholic Reflections on Social Media through Almusalita

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Social media has become a vital tool for evangelization, reflection, and faith-based engagement in the Catholic Church. This study explores how Almusalita, a digital apostolate founded by the late Fr. Luciano Felloni, utilizes platforms such as Facebook and YouTube to share the Gospel, inspire faith, and build community. With its creative blend of Filipino cultural identity and accessible digital catechesis, Almusalita has emerged as a model of digital apostleship. The research focuses on three areas: the effectiveness of Almusalita's content in fostering Catholic faith formation, the role of Catholic digital evangelists in shaping online engagement, and the impact of social media on community-building and interfaith dialogue. Originally designed as a mixed-methods study incorporating surveys, interviews, and content analysis, this paper presents findings primarily from a survey of Filipino Catholic audiences in the Diocese of Novaliches. Interviews with digital missionaries and content analysis are identified as directions for future research. Findings suggest that Almusalita provides spiritual

nourishment through daily reflections and online Masses, strengthens prayer routines, and fosters solidarity through online faith-sharing. Respondents emphasized the credibility and authenticity of Fr. Felloni, which increased their trust and engagement. However, challenges were also identified, including digital distraction, superficial engagement, misinformation, and the irreplaceable role of sacramental practice. Ultimately, this study highlights best practices in Catholic digital evangelization while affirming that social media is not a substitute for, but rather a complement to, embodied sacramental life. It demonstrates that faith can thrive online without losing its roots in Catholic tradition, provided digital ministry is grounded in authenticity, theological integrity, and pastoral presence.

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Digital Discipleship for Ecological Justice: Faith-Based Media, Theology, and Climate Advocacy in the Philippines

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This study explores how faith-based digital media in the Philippines functions as a catalyst for ecological consciousness and climate advocacy. Set against a backdrop of severe climate vulnerability and deep religiosity, the research examines how religious institutions, lay movements, youth networks, and interfaith coalitions utilize digital platforms, including Facebook, X, YouTube, and TikTok, to communicate environmental responsibility through theological and cultural lenses. Drawing on Catholic Social Teaching, Papal encyclicals (Laudato Si', Laudate Deum), and indigenous Filipino values (bayanihan, pakikipagkapwa), the research employs qualitative methods, specifically thematic analysis and interpretive phenomenology, to examine content from 2022–2024. The analysis identifies five dominant themes in faith-based ecological communication: creation stewardship, ecological conversion, justice and solidarity, prophetic witness, and communal participation. These themes are expressed through social media posts, liturgical innovations, youth activism, and interfaith campaigns. The study also engages with ethical concerns surrounding religious media, such as performative activism, algorithmic sensationalism, exclusion of grassroots voices, and commodification of sacred symbols, drawing from Filipino scholarship to critique digital theology practices. Recommendations include investing in theological integration, fostering inclusive collaboration with marginalized communities, implementing ethical media training, expanding interfaith networks, diversifying content formats, and establishing impact monitoring tools. Ultimately, the study asserts that digital discipleship is not merely doctrinal, it is a lived, prophetic response to ecological crisis. In reimagining spiritual vocation through digital storytelling, prayer, and civic engagement, Philippine faith communities offer a compelling model of climate-responsive theology.

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Digital Discipleship for Ecological Justice: Faith-Based Media, Theology, and Climate Advocacy in the Philippines

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This study explores how faith-based digital media in the Philippines functions as a catalyst for ecological consciousness and climate advocacy. Set against a backdrop of severe climate vulnerability and deep religiosity, the research examines how religious institutions, lay movements, youth networks, and interfaith coalitions utilize digital platforms, including Facebook, X, YouTube, and TikTok, to communicate environmental responsibility through theological and cultural lenses. Drawing on Catholic Social Teaching, Papal encyclicals (Laudato Si', Laudate Deum), and indigenous Filipino values (bayanihan, pakikipagkapwa), the research employs qualitative methods, specifically thematic analysis and interpretive phenomenology, to examine content from 2022–2024. The analysis identifies five dominant themes in faith-based ecological communication: creation stewardship, ecological conversion, justice and solidarity, prophetic witness, and communal participation. These themes are expressed through social media posts, liturgical innovations, youth activism, and interfaith campaigns. The study also engages with ethical concerns surrounding religious media, such as performative activism, algorithmic sensationalism, exclusion of grassroots voices, and commodification of sacred symbols, drawing from Filipino scholarship to critique digital theology practices. Recommendations include investing in theological integration, fostering inclusive collaboration with marginalized communities, implementing ethical media training, expanding interfaith networks, diversifying content formats, and establishing impact monitoring tools. Ultimately, the study asserts that digital discipleship is not merely doctrinal, it is a lived, prophetic response to ecological crisis. In reimagining spiritual vocation through digital storytelling, prayer, and civic engagement, Philippine faith communities offer a compelling model of climate-responsive theology.

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The Role of Digital Media and Challenges to Buddhist Peace Education in Conflict Affected Myanmar: A Case Study of a Buddhist University in Mandalay

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Abstract

Myanmar has been experiencing a civil war for several decades, creating an urgent need for peace education. Religious groups have initiated peace education programs for the wider community. However, such initiatives face several challenges. Despite their significance, studies on peace education in Myanmar have been rare and even non-existent concerning religious peace education particularly during the on-going conflict situation at the moment. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by focusing on peace education initiatives at a Buddhist university in Mandalay through a qualitative case study. With three objectives: (1) to identify the challenges facing peace education during conflict, (2) to analyze the role of digital media—including the internet, mobile phones, and social media in facilitating peace education, and (3) to explore Buddhist perspectives on the use of digital media by monks in light of the Vinaya discipline, data were collected during the two academic years 2023 and 2024 through questionnaires, interviews, and ethnographic fieldwork. Findings reveal that peace education is undermined by multiple factors. Conflict-related disruptions, like power shortages, internet instability, disruptions in teaching and learning, insecurity and travel restriction , weaken the educational environment. Religion-based limitations, including a Buddhist-centric curriculum, gender discrimination, and less participation in interfaith dialogue, can constrain the scope of peace studies, justice and inclusivity. In addition, insufficient investment in human resources hinders institutional growth. Nevertheless, digital media has become a significant facilitator of teaching, learning, research, and communication. Despite challenges of limited infrastructure, poor connectivity, and low digital literacy, most monks reported extensive use of mobile phones for education, Dhamma propagation, and communication. While many view such use as a positive change, focusing more on its benefits than its drawbacks, concerns remain regarding distraction, misuse, and reputational risks. This study contributes to the limited scholarship on peace education in Myanmar by demonstrating how conflict conditions, Buddhist institutional structures, and digital technologies intersect to shape religious-based peace education.

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Evolving Digital Evangelism: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Catholic Online Preaching in the Philippines

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In the Philippines, digital evangelism has developed into a dynamic form of religious mobilization, shaped by priests, religious organizations, and community-based media ministries. Guided by Craig's Socio-Cultural Tradition of Communication and employing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA),

this study examines how three Catholic digital platforms—Fr. Fiel Pareja's may kasAMA ka! podcasts/vlogs, the Society of St. Paul's PadsCast, and the parish-based Sabins Studio livestreams— construct religious narratives and mobilize faith communities. Data were drawn from selected episodes, homilies, and livestreams, coded across textual, discursive, and social practice dimensions.

Findings show that Fr. Pareja's discourse emphasizes personalized storytelling, emotional resonance, and para-social intimacy, positioning the priest as an "influencer" who appeals to youth and digital natives. PadsCast, by contrast, reflects the institutional voice of the Pauline media apostolate, deploying catechetical clarity, doctrinal authority, and structured branding to reinforce the Church's teaching role in the digital age. Sabins Studio, rooted in parish and community contexts, projects liturgical solemnity and cultural identity while extending participation to diaspora Filipinos; it also integrates crisis response and prophetic commentary in selected homilies (e.g., Bishop Soc Villegas).

Across platforms, the shift from hierarchical preaching to dialogic, mediated, and participatory religious discourse is evident. Digital evangelization emerges not only as an extension of liturgy and catechesis but also as a reconfiguration of Catholic identity, moral authority, and community obligations in the online sphere. By combining the socio-cultural lens of communication with CDA, the study underscores how Filipino Catholic online preaching simultaneously sustains tradition and adapts to contemporary digital culture.

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Digital Ethnography and the Public Visibility of Rice-Merit Networks in Karen Catholic Communities, Northern Thailand

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This qualitative study assesses how digital media practices of Rice-Merit Networks (RMN) in Karen Catholic communities in Chiang Mai Province, Thailand, shape public visibility and communal participation, and examines the core religio-cultural elements of the RMNs. To promote mutual aid, sharing, and solidarity grounded in cultural and religious values, the RMNs were formally formed in March 2002 across 383 villages in the northern Thai provinces of Chiang Mai, Mae Hong Son, Chiang Rai, and Lamphun, which now extend to more than 700. The study employed a digital ethnographic approach supported by semi-structured interviews with parish priests of Betharram Karen parishes, organic intellectuals (OIs), and Karen academicians. With explicit opt-in consent, excerpts from parish/diocesan Facebook pages, YouTube channels, websites of Diocesan Social Action Centre (DISAC), the Research and Training Center for Religio-Cultural Communities (RTRC) Chiang Mai, and parishes and opt-in RMN LINE groups of the RMN coordinators were analyzed as data sources. Research identified four core elements that emerged: ecological safeguarding, sufficiency economy, theology of rice, and Karen holistic worldview. Media analysis showed that rice-merit ceremonies, along with media accounting, contributed to a broader digital-religion dynamic in which local religio-cultural practices are reconfigured through ethnic co-existence; images and narrative circulation shaped and strengthened communal belonging; and OIs' digital practices enhanced public visibility and participation. In 2025, the network documented 67,404 kg of rice, ฿1,086,530 in donations, and 4,807 participants across four zones. In the Betharram subset (69 villages; 2,219 families), Maepon

and Huaytong comprise 59.5% of households, concentrating events and 'media accounting' that amplify welfare visibility. The study also identified practical challenges pointing to future research, including community food security and welfare, climate change and natural disasters, and youth participation.

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Ideological Texture and the Politics of Biblical Interpretation: (Con)texturing Ideologies of Modesty, Authority, and Childbearing in 1 Timothy 2:8–15

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This paper engages 1 Timothy 2:8–15 through the lens of ideological and feminist criticism, examining both the text's ancient ideological texture and its contemporary reception. Building on previous socio-rhetorical work on Pauline texts, I analyze how Paul and conservative Christian blogger Lori Alexander who promotes a literalist, hierarchical reading of biblical gender roles on her platform 'The Transformed Wife' each establish authority within their believing communities. Alexander's interpretation exemplifies the broader backlash against liberation hermeneutics, particularly in the Trump-era political climate, where Black, feminist, and queer readings of Scripture face heightened resistance. By interrogating three key ideological concerns: modesty, authority, and childbearing, I demonstrate how male headship and female subordination are not merely accepted but actively reinforced both in the United States and in South Africa. I conclude by proposing con(text)uring as a methodological approach that critically examines ideological texture within both text and context, offering a productive way to engage with the enduring and often harmful influence of biblical interpretations on gender.

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Re-Reading Luke 10:25-37 in the Digital Age: Postcolonial Exegesis and Filipino Perspectives on Cyber-Neighborliness

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This study offers a re-reading of Luke 10:25-37 in the context of the digital age, with a particular focus on the question posed by the lawyer, "Who is my neighbor?" The parable of the Good Samaritan, as narrated by Jesus, serves as a foundational response to this question, which is examined through the lens of contemporary cyber-contexts. The study employs a method of post-colonial Biblical

exegesis to analyze the power dynamics and historical contexts that have shaped interpretations of the parable, while also integrating a cultural analysis that draws on Filipino concepts of kapwa (shared identity) and pakikipagkapwa (engagement with others). These cultural ideas provide a distinct perspective on the notion of neighborliness, emphasizing relational solidarity and community-building beyond geographic and social boundaries. Through a literary analysis of Luke 10:25-37, the study explores how the concept of neighbor has evolved within various social, political, and religious contexts. Attention is given to how these evolving interpretations regulate the conduct of different groups, particularly in digital spaces. The study concludes by re-articulating the idea of "neighbor" and "neighborhood" in the age of cyberspace, suggesting that digital platforms, as spaces of social interaction, advocacy, and compassion, offer new opportunities for global neighborliness. This re-reading calls for a critical engagement with the cyber-highway as a modern-day platform for cultivating solidarity and ethical action, grounded in both theological reflection and cultural practice.

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As You Seek, So You Are Served: Bhagavad Gita 4.11 and the Logic of Algorithmic Reciprocity

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This paper draws a conceptual parallel between the theology of reciprocal divinity articulated in Bhagavad Gita 4.11 — "Ye yathā māṁ prapadyante tāṁstathaiva bhajāmyaham" ("As people surrender unto Me, so do I reciprocate") — and the logic of algorithmic personalization in social media environments. In this well-known verse, Krishna describes a dynamic and responsive divine relationship, in which the form of the deity adjusts to the mode of the devotee's engagement — whether as child, lover, friend, or teacher (Patton 2005).

While exploring this theological model, I became interested in the way algorithmic systems — particularly those employed by content recommendation engines on platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok — reflect a structurally similar form of personalized responsiveness. Algorithms "reciprocate" user behavior by curating digital experiences tailored to past engagement, often reinforcing belief systems and identity expressions through feedback loops. This has striking implications for how religious content is encountered, affirmed, and embodied in online spaces.

Rather than treating this resemblance as merely metaphorical, the paper situates both traditions — scriptural and digital — within a broader epistemological framework of responsive systems, drawing on scholarship in digital religion (Campbell 2020), Hindu theology (Patton 2005), and media studies (Gillespie 2014; Noble 2018). Through close readings of both textual sources and case studies of devotional behavior in algorithmically shaped spaces, the paper explores how sacred reciprocity is being recontextualized — or perhaps re-enacted — through technological mediation.

This investigation aims to contribute to interdisciplinary conversations around belief, identity, and the performative power of platforms in shaping contemporary religious life.

Streaming the Sacred: Entanglements of Religion, Public Pedagogy and Epistemic Freedom

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In 2024, the Thai crime drama series The Believers, appeared on Netflix worldwide. A dramatised work of fiction it tells the compelling story of three friends with a huge collective debt who develop a successful scheme for stealing money from Buddhist temples. The Believers is a well-crafted entertainment production that offers a surprising, intimate and extended portrait of Buddhism in Thailand. Streaming television has opened novel frontiers for global media circulations and exchanges. Far more diverse viewing options are circulated through these platforms and play a powerful role in contesting the cultural hegemony of the Global North, especially the United States of America. This paper conceptualises The Believers as an example of public pedagogy and illustrates how it performs the dual function of entertainment and education, through the conventions of its genre and its depictions and representation of Thai culture and Buddhism. Located at the intersections of decolonial theories of religion and media studies and reflecting from the South African context, where Buddhism is a microminority religious tradition, with limited public visibility and awareness, this paper explores how streaming media content disrupts the geopolitics of knowledge production and consumption, encourages religious diversity, engenders religious pluralism and advances epistemic freedom.

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Mediatization of a New Imperial Spirituality in Contemporary India

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This article outlines the following aspects with serious consideration: mediatization and empire-building; mediatization and a new emperor; ethical implications of mediatization in India; and concluding remarks. Through this initiative, the nexus among the government, religion, and media is brought to the foreground, as there are initiatives of a new imperial and majoritarian spirituality. While the Constitution of India provides responsible freedom to the press, the media in the country aligns itself with the government as a supportive force and disseminates the authoritarian agenda. The media in the country collaborate with the government and facilitate a new spirituality that emerges around Narendra Modi. While there is an unethical proliferation of media in the country, at the risk of the rights and privileges of subaltern communities, a new emperor and a new empire are introduced to the people.

Religion Devoid of the Spiritual -- Challenges for "Internet 4 Trust" -- Critiquing Hindutva's Politicization of Hinduism and the Challenges for a Digital India

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My paper critically interrogates the present Government's instrumentalization of Hinduism as a political ideology while stripping it of its spiritual essence, with a focal lens on the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya as emblematic case study. The discourse evolves through historical, rhetorical, sociological, and philosophical analyses, culminating in reflections on public perceptions and the temple's sacral erosion as of October 15, 2025. It also looks at the challenges for UNESCO's Internet for Trust (I4T) Initiative within the framework of Digital Governance in a polarized context.

At its core, Hindutva—articulated by V.D. Savarkar (1923) and institutionalized via the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)—reconfigures Hinduism's pluralistic ethos (rooted in Upanishadic dharma, ahimsa, and advaita) into an ethno-nationalist framework excluding minorities like Muslims. Policies such as the Citizenship Amendment Act (2019) and anti-conversion laws exemplify this fusion, fostering "electoral autocracy" that erodes constitutional secularism.

The Ram Mandir emerges as Hindutva's apotheosis and Achilles' heel. Its January 22, 2024, consecration—performed by Modi as quasi-priestly avatar—symbolized reclaimed heritage from the 1992 Babri demolition, galvanizing electoral mobilization since the 1980s Rath Yatra. Yet, the 2024 Lok Sabha defeat in Faizabad (Ayodhya's constituency), untangles a paradox: grievance fulfilment exposed governance voids. This signals Hindutva's plateau: perpetual viraha (longing) sustains it, but delivery demands equity, echoing Gandhi's Hind Swaraj on nationalism's spiritual betrayal.

Public views of the Mandir, per 2025 data, reflect this ambivalence: 22 crore visitors affirm devotional triumph—Surya Tilak rituals evoking "mesmerizing" catharsis, boosting UP's economy (77% urban approval)—yet critiques abound among locals (50-60% footfall dips, vendor inequities) and sceptics (73% decry vote-bank ploy). X sentiments hail it as "civilizational win" for pride, but lament "cringe" aesthetics and politicization diluting sanctity.

Looking at this with Gen Z lenses, it would be interesting to see how this has challenged Digital Governance and what could the barriers be as a result of the erosion of the spiritual. The paper will also take a cursory look at how digital governance in India has been compromised due to the particular way in which the Indian government has chosen to define Nation, Nationhood and Nationalism. These challenges, while universal, intensify in ideologically charged arenas like India's, where I4T's trust-building ethos confronts spirituality's online desecration. Progress hinges on adaptive, inclusive evolution to mitigate harms without eroding pluralism.

Finally, the paper argues affirmatively that Ram faith's spirituality has been expatriated, leaving a monumental husk. Politicization (Modi's avatarism, RSS's Ram Rajya nationalism) and commercialization commodify Ram as a revenge icon, inverting maryada purushottama's ethics. Delays to September 2025 underscore unfinished sacrality, with subaltern fatigue (Dalit alienation) and discursive shifts ("Jai Shri Ram" as assault mantra) evidencing hollowing. In sum, this paper illuminates Hindutva's pyrrhic ascent—triumphing symbolically, faltering materially—risking a "ruined" faith amid inequality and looks at what the challenges are today as a result of this.

Sanctifying Settler Colonialism: An Intersectional Discursive Analysis of Christian Zionist Media Statements

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This paper presents an intersectional discursive analysis of a web statement issued on 10 January 2024 by a group of self-identified South African Christian leaders opposing the South African government's genocide case against Israel at the International Court of Justice. Using a critical discourse analytic framework informed by Michel Foucault's theorisation of discourse and power, the paper examines how the statement's pragmatic, ethical, and theological dimensions work together to translate Zionist political interests into the language of moral and spiritual authority.

Read alongside the Kairos Document of 1985, the analysis situates the 2024 statement within a changing media ecology that transforms how religious authority is produced and circulated. Whereas Kairos theology emerged from a slow, consultative print culture rooted in collective discernment and liberation theology, the 2024 statement belongs to the fast, affect-driven environment of digital media. Its authority derives not from theological rigour but from rhetorical immediacy and emotional resonance.

Across its three fronts, the statement deploys distinctive rhetorical strategies. On the pragmatic front, it invokes national interest and religious freedom to construct a regime of moral reasonableness. On the ethical front, it appropriates feminist and liberationist vocabularies such as "victim blaming" to reframe Israel as the victim and Palestine as the aggressor. On the theological front, it redeploys the language of peace characteristic of apartheid-era church theology, sanctifying inaction under the guise of neutrality.

Drawing on Mitri Raheb's notion of empire's theological "software," the paper argues that the statement exemplifies how digital media now function as moral infrastructure, transforming emancipatory theologies into instruments of ideological power. In doing so, it advances scholarship on religion and media by tracing the shift from the deliberative textuality of Kairos to the affective immediacy of digital circulation, revealing how Christian Zionist discourse in South Africa performs a distinct kind of theological labour that both mediates and moralises empire in the twenty-first century.

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Boundary Markers in Acts 8:26-40: On Decolonising "Othered" Bodies

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Cartography – the scientific name for 'mapping' – sets boundaries to separate places and people. It is, "another name for stories told by winners". Thus, for the marginalized "othered" there is no cartography to relate to because the story it tells, ignores the legitimate presence of their bodies and being. Historically, research and reception history – and by implication sermons – based on Acts 8:26-40 present the racially and sexually 'marked' body of the unnamed Ethiopian eunuch as a literary prop to advance the story of the dominant culture, namely, the missionary task in spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The co-option of biblical interpretation that support colonial endeavours continues to reinforce stereo-typical views of "othered" bodies. Many feminist and womanist theologians, particularly the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, have already established a link between patriarchy and the violation of bodies and being of those "othered" in cultures of patriarchy and kyriarchy. In general, the work of some feminist biblical scholars expose how biblical texts are used in contemporary contexts to justify injustices inherent in racism, sexism, classism and genderism. Framed within a decolonial feminist epistemology, this chapter explores how, when Acts 8:26-40 is read from the "othered" side, through theo-ethical feminist lenses, a different picture of the Ethiopian eunuch emerges. This picture creates spaces for 'othered' bodies to (re)claim their legitimate presence in dominant heteronormative patriarchal cultures that dismiss their 'being' as irrelevant and of no consequence.

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When Memes Communicate a Mediatized Lived Buddhism: Negotiating the Performance of Religious Heterodoxy and Remixed Bias Religion Online in Popular Internet Memes

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This paper/presentation will explore how internet memes and memetic culture can be seen as a site of production for religious bias and heterodoxy that challenges traditional religious beliefs and identity narratives. This work draws on visual and textual analysis methods to study over 800 internet memes depicting the beliefs and practices of the five major world religions. The study aimed to identify the prominent meme characters and macros used to communicate religious stereotypes. This presentation will present findings on the stereotypes depicted in English and Chinese memes about Buddhism. In both cases, the study found that meme image templates heavily rely both on explicit historical stereotypes and flawed, remixed popular media representation, which informed how Buddhist clergy and believers were depicted through internet memes. These memes often relied on techniques of "othering" to visualize over-generalized and inauthentic depictions of Asian Buddhists The presentation argues that because memes use distinct forms of humor to communicate, this style can obscure the subversive nature of the religious narratives they represent (Campbell, Tsuria & Xid 2025). Drawing on Nathan Crick's theory of propaganda (2022), which argues that communication media are increasingly used to produce and spread a digital rhetoric of persuasive power that consciously and unconsciously seeks to manipulate public opinion on contested issues, this presentation applies this argument to examine how the language of memes can be manipulated to propagate falsehoods that diminish religious groups. This paper also

consider the local and global implications of circulating memes that promoting religious bias and othering especially as they relate to issues of religious tolerance in an increasingly polarized global society.

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Rethinking the Influence of Digital Media in the Practice of *Panaad sa* Camiguin

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Panaad (promise) is a unique popular devotion held annually in Camiguin, northern part of Mindanao, Philippines. As practiced in Camiguin, Panaad is a religious promise expressed by trekking around the sixty-four (64) kilometer circumferential road of the island, culminating in walking uphill to Mt. Vulcan in Bonbon, Catarman, Camiguin, for the Stations of the Cross during Holy Week. For more than five (5) decades, Panaad sa Camiguin has been practiced both by the Camiguinon and non-Camiguinon pilgrims. This paper looks into the convergence of popular devotion and digital media in the popular devotion Panaad sa Camiguin. Through the see-discern-act methodology, this study examines the pivotal role of digital media platforms in shaping the experiences and perceptions of the pilgrims. The SEE part investigates the experiences of the Tigsaad (the one giving the promise) and the risk of falling into Paniid (just looking around). The DISCERN part consults Catholic Church documents such as the Congregation for the Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments' Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy (DPPL), Pope Francis' Evangelii Gaudium (EG) and the Dicastery for Communication's Towards Full Presence, A Pastoral Reflection on Engagement with Social Media. The ACT part forwards pastoral imperatives addressing the tendency of the commodification of Panaad, which will eventually fall into Paniid, the homogenization of the religious tradition, and the danger of eroding embodied experiences. The conclusion of the paper amplifies the critical influence of digital media on how devotees engage with popular devotion, facilitating increased accessibility, connectivity, and community-building, but at the same time pointing out the challenges of digital engagement.

Reconciling Faith and the Rise of New Media: Kierkegaard's Two Ages vis-à-vis the Filipino Popular Piety of Traslación

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The unprecedented global pandemic five years ago has heavily impacted the usual practices we have conformed to, forcing us to adapt to new methods in moving on with life. The Catholic Church is one of the institutions shaken by this dilemma, from a house of God filled with the faithful whispering prayers to a building filled with empty pews, combined with nothing but utter silence. Consequently, the rise of technology and media provided a solution to the ongoing problem. Online masses were utilized so that even in the spaces of the faithful's home, they could participate and be in the presence of God in the Eucharist. In 2022, when the situation had eased, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) urged the faithful to return to attending liturgical celebrations physically to encounter and receive the Lord. A solution has perhaps turned into conformity. While it remains true that the world has to adapt to a "new normal" after the inflictions brought by the pandemic, the question is now raised: How do we reconcile the technological wave of media and the necessity of faith that requires presence? In a seemingly prophetic work, the Danish philosopher and Theologian Søren Kierkegaard differentiates the revolutionary and present ages. Kierkegaard's Two Ages: The Age of Revolution and the Present Age A Literary Review (1846) argues that in the present age, an individual can lose himself in the opinion of the public, which dictates. This paper attempts to appropriate this critique of Kierkegaard vis-à-vis the Filipino popular piety of the traslación, where the image of Christ, known as the Black Nazarene, is followed by a million devotees in a religious procession every 9th of January in Manila. I argue in this paper that faith necessitates a physical sphere to flourish and that new media can offer not just alternatives for the public but also play a key role in the individual's faith.

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Vatican Miracle Examiner as Philosophy of Religion: The Intersections of Faith, Science, and Philosophy in an Anime Adaptation

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Ideas concerning religion are often communicated through popular media, such as anime. One of the anime adaptations that explicitly engages the intersections of religion, science, and philosophy is Vatican Kiseki Chōsakan (2017) or Vatican Miracle Examiner. This anime adaptation centers on a special unit from the Vatican that verifies miraculous phenomena worldwide. In this study, I reflect on how the anime representation communicates religious ideas about miracles, prophecies, and

other spiritual matters to its viewers. This critical reflection reveals how anime promotes a philosophical view centered on the complementary relationship between religion and science. With these in mind, this study proceeds as follows. The first part summarizes and contextualizes the Vatican Miracle Examiner. The second part elaborates on the discernment of miracles through the lens of philosophy, science, and religion. Then, the third part showcases how Vatican Miracle Examiner serves as an allegorical communication of a unique philosophy of religion. Focusing on the mysterious events that transpired and were eventually investigated, the interpretation of their symbolism demonstrates the relevance of the conveyed religious ideas to contemporary times. Lastly, the utilization of artistic communication for religious ideas is considered. This study claims that anime, among other artistic creations, can evoke transformative religious experiences.

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Media as Mourner: The Death of Pope Francis and the Digital Ritualization of Grief

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On April 21, 2025, news broke out about the death of Pope Francis at the Domus Santa Marta in the Vatican at the age of 88. He died because of a stroke, followed by a coma and irreversible cardiocirculatory collapse. As the first Latin American Supreme Pontiff, his papacy was popular and remarkable, characterized by humility, simplicity, love of nature, and commitment to people with low incomes, as exemplified by St. Francis of Assisi. Following his passing, news outlets focused on the Catholic rites of the death of a pope, which involved the certification of death and public display of his body for the faithful to pay their respects, followed by the funeral and burial. In an age dominated by digital technologies, these have gone beyond the Vatican, and the media provided real-time updates and created spaces for people to witness this together. This led to the idea of "media as mourners" by leading the people to participate in the religious mourning. This paper explores the intersection of religion, media, and ritual through the lens of Pope Francis's death. It explores the question: How does the media act as mourner in the death of Pope Francis, and in what ways does this digital ritualization reflect a convergence of Catholic and Asian religious mourning practices? The following themes are discussed in presenting the said theme: Mourning in the Catholic Tradition, Mediatization and Digital Religion as New Spaces of Religious Expression, and Asian Spirituality and Digital Mourning. These perspectives reveal media as co-creators of sacred meaning in contemporary Catholic practice and a broader global spiritual context.

From Living in the Shadows to Facebook Livestreams: The Impact of Social Media on Current Mediumship Practice of Mother Goddesses Worship (*Đạo Mẫu*) in Vietnam

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This paper explores the transformative impact of social media on mediumship practice within the context of Mother Goddesses worship (Đạo Mẫu) in contemporary Vietnam. By examining the ways in which spirit mediums and practitioners utilise social media platforms, the study reveals that these digital spaces facilitate the open expression of belief, foster connections among practitioners, and enable the sharing and promotion of spiritual services as well as the online trade in ritual costumes and objects. Furthermore, social media has become a catalyst for emerging trends directly influencing the ritual practices and increasing the visibility of spirit mediums in today's society, creating generational shifts between younger spirit mediums and their predecessors, who practiced their belief in pre-renovation Vietnam under precarious circumstances. As rituals become more visible and accessible through social media, the interplay between digital and spiritual realms becomes increasingly significant. The findings suggest that social media not only enhances a sense of community among practitioners that transcends geographical boundaries, but also shapes the continuing developments of this traditional practices, contributing to a dynamic landscape of Mother Goddesses worship in Vietnam today. This research underscores the agency and significance of digital platforms, in particular social media, in transforming spiritual expressions and adapting cultural traditions in the modern era.

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Lights, Karma, Action: Altering Life Trajectories Across Chronologies in Contemporary Thai Film

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This paper analyzes how Buddhist ethics, specifically the concept of karma, is evident in the storytelling and themes of four contemporary Thai drama films, selected from the submissions of Thailand to the Academy Awards Best International Feature Film category from 2020-2024.

From a narrative structure lens, flashback is a frequently-used device in these films used to connect past actions with consequences happening much later in the story, with either good or bad outcomes. Using reflexive thematic analysis yield findings which indicate that beyond just exploring karma as a core concept in Thai Buddhist films, the selected films can also be thematized with reference to the Four Noble Truths, the fourth of the Five Precepts, and the life of the historical Buddha. Taking a larger view, these themes taken together represent an "ethical journey" which characters undertake in their struggles overcoming greed and cultivating truthfulness.

This work should be regarded as highly exploratory, not only in area of study but also in methods, theoretical, and analytical framework. Further work can be done to apply this method of analysis across a wider selection of films from different societies as a means of understanding prevailing ethical dilemmas.

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Faith, Frames, and Feeds: A Media-Theological Look at the Passing of Pope Francis

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On the morning of April 21, 2025, Easter Monday, the Vatican's Camerlengo announced the death of the Holy Father Francis. As the world's 1.4 billion Catholics mourned the passing of the first Latin American pontiff, mass media – television, newspapers, social media, online news websites – across different contexts presented and framed the story in distinct and various angles. Not only did it take over the headlines, but also very personal posts – ranging from memorable quotes and words of gratitude to online vigils and eulogies – remembering lived experiences of and with Pope Francis. In light of these competing interpretations and ideological appropriations, this paper analyzes the media portrayal of the death of Pope Francis and its surrounding events through the intersecting lenses of framing theory, mediatization of religion, and public theology. This study investigates how mainstream news outlets, official Vatican reports, Catholic media, and digital platforms constructed meaning around Francis' legacy, the sede vacante, and almost immediate conversations on the "papabiles" as the world anticipates the conclave. This incorporates reports and presentations by the different Philippine media outlets, a local application stemming from the authors' immediate context. Utilizing the framing theory developed by Robert Entman, the first part focuses on how the media depicted Francis' papacy through different narratives – emphasizing themes on Church decentralization, reform, pastoral appropriation of doctrines, synodality, and timeless virtues of mercy and compassion. Furthermore, this explores the media's crucial role in sparking conversations regarding the sede vacante and conclave period. While the election for the next pope is a process of prayerful discernment by the cardinals and not influenced by public opinion, the constant posting of the "papabiles" framed the conclave as a suspenseful political drama rather than a Spirit-led and communion-centered ecclesial discernment. Such an initial presentation is then complemented by Stig Hjarvard's theory of mediatization of

religion. The second part discusses how media — in all its forms and institutions — increasingly influence religious communication and capture global and local attention. The paper argues that the digital feeds through which people now experience papal election and transition — replete with hashtags, instant commentaries, ideological filters, and AI-generated graphics and videos — constitute a new public square where religious and secular (even personal) sentiments meet. Finally, the paper adopts the framework of public theology to critically reflect on the Church's presence in the public sphere. It considers whether the global attention given to papal transitions serves as a moment of kairós — an opportunity to bear witness to ecclesial continuity and Catholic moral vision — or whether it risks reducing the Church's witness to a series of symbolic gestures consumed in a post-truth media environment. This part especially highlights how public theology is shown at the varying societal levels in the Philippines, enriching the communal experience of the events surrounding Francis' death. Through qualitative media content analysis and theological interpretation, this article offers an interdisciplinary approach at the intersection of faith, media, and culture. It argues that a sound and appropriated theology — something that Francis himself embraced — is urgently needed to navigate the increasingly mediatized experience of ecclesial life, particularly in moments of papal transition that are both deeply human and spiritual.

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In Service of the Media: Kerygma & Kenosis

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This paper discusses two distinct periods during which, as a scholar, I was required to engage intensively with the media. Drawing on these two examples, I analyse what this type of media engagement reveals about the relationship between media and religion, particularly through the lens of knowledge economies.

During Pope Francis's visit to Southeast Asia in September 2024, and again following his death in April 2025, numerous media outlets approached me to provide analysis on Catholicism in Asia. As an anthropologist of Christianity in China and a researcher at a leading university in Asia, I am frequently called upon to offer academic expertise on topics such as Catholicism in Asia, Sino-Vatican relations, and the role of Asian cardinals.

At the same time, I also serve as an instituted minister in the Catholic Church, which positions me not only as an observer but also as an actor of Catholicism. By distinguishing between "expert" and "professional"—two forms of authority recognized differently by religious and media institutions—this paper argues that scholars engaging with the media on religious topics must learn to navigate between multiple knowledge economies, which are sometimes complementary but often in competition.

When a scholar finds themselves at the intersection of media and religion, their engagement sheds light on how both religious and media systems attempt to distinguish between academic expertise and professional authority, while simultaneously advancing divergent models of knowledge production and validation.

God, Government, and the Spotlight: Trust, Tensions, and Perceptions in Indonesia's Religious Landscape

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This study explores the interplay between religion, governance, and digital media, examining public trust in state institutions within a pluralistic religious landscape in Indonesia. Using Public Trust Theory as its primary framework, this study explores how perceptions of government fairness, transparency, and representation influence the public's collective trust in government policies related to religion. The study employs a mixed-methods quantitative and qualitative approach, collecting data through a structured survey that examines Indonesian citizens' evaluations of religious inclusivity in governance and the role of social media in shaping public trust perceptions. The findings of this study are expected to highlight key factors that drive or enhance trust in the religious sphere, particularly in the context of contested narratives and current digital amplification. Academically, this study contributes to the interdisciplinary discourse on public trust, religious pluralism, and political communication. Practically, this study offers actionable insights for policymakers, communication strategists, and religious leaders in promoting inclusive governance and reducing tensions within diversity. This research aims to support a more responsive and trust-based approach to religious policymaking in Indonesia's evolving socio-political landscape.

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Making Patriarchy Palatable: A Feminist Critique of Masculine Religious Authority on Social Media

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This paper builds on Sarojini Nadar's concept of palatable patriarchy, first developed in her analysis of Angus Buchan's Mighty Men's Movement in South Africa. We now extend this concept to the digital sphere to explore how masculine religious authority is both legitimised and contested online, in a chosen case study of a 2020 Facebook video by Cape Town imam Dawood Sampson, who announced his intention to take a second wife during South Africa's National Women's Month.

Using Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) and the proposed framework of platformed piety, the paper examines how Sampson's performance combines devotional language that frames his authority as sacred, humour that softens misogyny through laughter, and linguistic intimacy, expressed through the language of Kaaps, that fosters identification and trust. Together, these elements make male control appear natural and morally justified.

While Buchan's revivalist masculinity operated through large-scale evangelical spectacle, Sampson's digital sermon achieves similar effects through affective intimacy and everyday speech. Both cases reveal how religious masculinities across traditions make patriarchy acceptable through humour and holiness.

By tracing these dynamics, the paper contributes to feminist debates on religion, media, and masculinity, showing that patriarchy endures not only through doctrine but through the pleasures that make it "feel right."