7-11 July
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REA Annual Meeting 2025
Navigating Humanity

Technology, Ethics, and the future of Religious Education

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Miseon Choi, Ph.D.
Claremont School of Theology (Adjunct Faculty)
miseon.choi@cst.edu
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Navigating Digital Colonialism: A Postcolonial Approach to AI and Global Justice

Abstract

The rapid growth of digital technologies and AI has intensified inequality, especially for marginalized communities and nations with limited infrastructure and vulnerable conditions—a phenomenon known as "Digital Colonialism." Biased AI systems often reproduce colonial ideologies, threatening justice, dignity, and the integrity of life. This study employs a postcolonial lens to uncover the ideological roots of AI development and explores how postcolonial ethics can foster discernment and resistance against the harmful impacts of digital colonialism.

Introduction

The rapid advancement of digital technologies and artificial intelligence (AI) is reshaping the global landscape, unlocking vast potential for innovation, economic growth, and social transformation. From breakthroughs in healthcare and education to industrial optimization and new forms of communication, AI technologies are often heralded as the key to a progressive and interconnected future.

However, behind such optimistic narratives lie several critical and often overlooked realities. Among the various risks, this study specifically seeks to highlight the danger that technological advancement may further exacerbate existing inequalities, particularly by disproportionately disadvantaging resource-scarce nations and marginalized communities. This phenomenon, often referred to as *Digital Colonialism*, highlights that technological progress is neither neutral nor universally beneficial.[1] On the contrary, it often operates in ways that reproduce and reinforce historical patterns of colonial domination, dependency, and exclusion.

Digital colonialism refers to a system in which powerful nations and multinational corporations monopolize the creation, ownership, and control of digital infrastructure and AI technologies, thereby relegating developing countries to the peripheries of the global digital economy. Marginalized nations are often forced into dependency on foreign technologies, entrapped in exploitative structures that undermine their sovereignty and autonomy. Countries across Africa and the Global South face significant barriers to access, control, and innovation,[2] perpetuating digital divides and systemic inequalities. Moreover, the labor of low-wage workers is increasingly exploited to sustain data-driven economies, deepening economic disparities under the guise of technological progress.

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[1] Michael Kwet, "Digital Colonialism: The Evolution of US Empire," *TNI,* March 4, 2021, https://longreads.tni.org/digital-colonialism-the-evolution-of-us-empire.

[2] Danielle Coleman, "Digital Colonialism: The 21st Century Scramble for Africa through the Extraction and control of User Data and the Limitations of Data Protection Laws," *Michigan Journal of Race and Law* 24 (2019): 423.

Moreover, AI technologies are increasingly being appropriated as instruments of power, already employed for military purposes and surveillance systems. The resulting risks pose significant threats to human rights, particularly for marginalized communities that are most vulnerable to such abuses.[3] Autonomous weapon systems and expansive surveillance networks raise profound ethical dilemmas, threatening human dignity and fundamental rights. Algorithms trained on biased datasets do more than replicate social prejudices, they amplify them, embedding discriminatory practices and ideologies into decision-making processes across sectors such as finance, policing, healthcare, and immigration.[4] In this context, AI is not merely a tool of progress but a mechanism that reinforces existing power structures, silences diverse worldviews, and marginalizes dissenting voices. Left unchecked, these biased technologies risk transforming digital infrastructure into a tool that serves the interests of dominant powers while deepening global inequalities and divisions.

Addressing the challenges posed by digital colonialism requires more than mere technical regulations or superficial reforms. It demands a deep critical examination of the ideologies and power structures that shape the development and deployment of technology. In response to this urgent need, this study proposes a postcolonial approach to AI and digital justice. In particular, postcolonial theory is expected to offer a powerful tool for dismantling the colonial ideologies embedded within contemporary technological systems. This theoretical approach resists limiting the relationship between technology and society to structures of domination and exploitation, and instead calls for the reconstruction of ethical and social networks grounded in solidarity, mutual dependence, and reciprocal respect.

From the perspective of postcolonial theology, technological development offers a critical lens through which we can reflect on ethical responsibility, human dignity, and justice. This perspective challenges the profit-driven and domination-based motives underpinning the AI industry, instead emphasizing biblical principles of love, community, and care for the marginalized. In other words, it provides the possibility to redefine the purpose of technology, from a means of economic efficiency and corporate gain to one that promotes the common good and the pursuit of equitable human flourishing.

Accordingly, this study will explore three primary objectives in response to the realities of digital colonialism. First, it will critically examine the colonial perspectives embedded in the development and application of AI, analyzing how these technologies reinforce and reproduce global inequalities. Second, it will reflect on how the framework of postcolonial theory can offer insights for reimagining technological systems in more ethical and justice-oriented directions. Finally, it will investigate the concrete initiatives undertaken by non-dominant countries, particularly in Africa and the Global South, to build a fair and cooperative global digital ecosystem. By highlighting their efforts to reclaim technological agency and strengthen digital sovereignty, this study seeks to contribute to a broader discourse on ethical discernment in the age of AI and to propose pathways toward global justice in an increasingly interconnected world.

Unveiling Colonial Ideologies Embedded in AI Development and Deployment

The Myth of Technological Neutrality

One of the most persistent and dangerous myths surrounding AI and digital technologies is the belief in their neutrality. Dominant narratives often portray AI as objective, fair, and

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[3] Paul Scharre, "Military Applications of Artificial Intelligence: Potential Risks to International Peace and Security," *The Militarization of Artificial Intelligence* (August 2019): 13-14.

[4] Abeba Birhane, "Algorithmic Injustice: A Relational Ethics Approach," *Patterns* 2 (February 2021): 5.

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value-free—products of pure technological innovation, independent of human intentions or agendas. However, such assumptions obscure the political and ideological forces embedded in the development, deployment, and governance of AI. These systems do not emerge in a vacuum; they are shaped by human decisions, cultural assumptions, historical inequalities, and economic interests.[5]

The belief that technologies, including AI, are neutral overlooks the fact that every stage of technological development, from dataset selection to design standards and algorithmic applications, is influenced by human biases.[6] These biases often reflect the dominant values of those with economic, political, and cultural power. For instance, training data frequently reproduces historical injustices and discrimination, embedding biases related to race, gender, and class within the systems themselves. As a result, tools perceived as "objective" risk not correcting social inequalities but rather reinforcing and amplifying them.

Dominant narratives of technological "progress" further obscure these power dynamics. AI development is often portrayed as an inevitable evolution toward universal good or a better future, with stories of innovation focusing solely on gains in efficiency, economic growth, and scientific breakthroughs. Conversely, little attention is given to how these technologies exacerbate global inequalities. The language of "progress" assumes a singular, homogenized vision of the future – one centered on the experiences and priorities of powerful nations and multinational corporations – marginalizing diverse worldviews, knowledge systems, and alternative models of technological development.[7]

The myth of AI's neutrality reinforces its skewed role in society and depoliticizes critical discussions surrounding it. In other words, it numbs inquiry into who controls the technology, who benefits from it, and who suffers labor exploitation to sustain the advantages of the few. By treating technology as neutral, stakeholders can evade responsibility for the social and ethical consequences their creations produce, dismissing inequality and harm as mere unfortunate side effects.

A postcolonial analysis deconstructs this myth, revealing that AI development and deployment are deeply intertwined with historically persistent patterns of domination and exclusion. The postcolonial approach emphasizes that AI technologies can never be truly neutral; instead, they contribute to maintaining or reinforcing existing hierarchies. Therefore, adopting a critical perspective on the myth of technological neutrality is an essential first step toward advancing justice, respecting human dignity, and building AI systems that serve the common good rather than the interests of the powerful.

Defining Digital Colonialism: Mechanisms of Domination

Digital colonialism refers to a contemporary form of colonial domination in a world centered on data and digital technologies, where powerful nations and multinational tech corporations monopolize and control digital resources and infrastructure.[8] Similar to how historical colonialism exploited and controlled territories and natural resources, digital colonialism operates through intangible assets such as information, networks, and algorithms.[9] To better understand the nature of digital colonialism, it is necessary to examine the following to dimensions.

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[5] Birhane, "Algorithmic Injustice: A Relational Ethics Approach," 1-2.
[6] Birhane, "Algorithmic Injustice: A Relational Ethics Approach," 2.
[7] Aishat Oyenike Salami, "Artificial Intelligence, Digital Colonialism, and the Implications for Africa's Future Development," *Data and Policy* 6 (2024): e67-5.
[8] Kwet, "Digital Colonialism: The Evolution of US Empire."
[9] Pali Lehohla, "Opinion: Digital Colonialism on the African Continent," IOL, accessed June 4, 2025, https://iol.co.za/business-report/economy/2018-10-29-opinion-digital-colonialism-on-the-african-continent/.

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Firstly, the monopolization of data and technological infrastructure by powerful corporations and states represents a central mechanism of digital colonialism. Major technology firms such as Google, Meta, Microsoft, and Amazon amass and monopolize vast amounts of global data, leveraging it to develop proprietary artificial intelligence and cloud-based systems. Within this asymmetric structure, many developing nations face significant barriers to exercising digital sovereignty, often becoming dependent on external technologies.[10] This dependency is particularly acute in African and Global South countries, where the lack of domestic infrastructure leads to structural reliance on foreign systems, resulting in the erosion of digital autonomy and technological agency.[11]

Secondly, digital colonialism is also manifested through the exploitation of marginalized labor within the AI supply chain. Training artificial intelligence systems requires vast amounts of data, and the tasks of data collection and labeling are often outsourced to low-wage workers in developing countries. These workers, operating under poor conditions, are assigned repetitive and emotionally taxing tasks such as content moderation and image classification, yet they are frequently denied fair compensation or basic labor rights.[12] This reality reveals that digital technological advancement does not benefit all equally. Rather, digital colonialism exposes the hidden structures of domination and exploitation behind the façade of innovation, urging a fundamental ethical reflection on how technologies are developed and deployed.

Technological Dependency and the Loss of Digital Sovereignty

Digital colonialism goes beyond mere technological exploitation to reinforce structural dependencies that hinder nations from achieving technological self-reliance. This phenomenon is especially pronounced in many African countries and other regions of the Global South, where such dependencies pose a serious threat to digital sovereignty.[13] Due to limited domestic capabilities, such as the absence of data centers, cloud infrastructure, search engines, and AI development resources, these nations are often compelled to rely on foreign technologies and service providers. For instance, public sector data is frequently hosted on cloud platforms owned by corporations based in the United States or Europe, effectively rendering the digital footprints of citizens as assets controlled by external entities.[14]

When ownership and control over critical technologies reside outside national borders, it becomes exceedingly difficult for governments to protect citizens' privacy, assert informational sovereignty, or develop public policies from an autonomous position. Moreover, as multinational tech corporations expand into African markets, they often enter into asymmetrical agreements with governments or sidestep fair competition with local businesses, thereby undermining the growth of regional technology ecosystems. These practices not only reinforce external dependence but also systematically obstruct local innovation and long-term technological self-determination.[15]

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[10] Michael Kwet, "Digital Colonialism is Threatening the Global South," Al Jazeera, last modified March 13, 2019, https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2019/3/13/digital-colonialism-is-threatening-the-global-south.

[11] Seydina Moussa Ndiaye, "Empowering Africa in the Age of AI," apolitical, last modified June 17, 2024, https://apolitical.co/solution-articles/en/empowering-africa-in-the-age-of-ai.

[12] Kwet, "Digital Colonialism: The Evolution of US Empire."

[13] Abubakar Isah, "The Silicon Shackles: How Africa's Digital Dependency Reinforces Neo-Colonial Control," Modern Ghana, last modified June 3, 2025, https://www.modernghana.com/news/1405498/the-silicon-shackles-how-africas-digital-depende.html?utm.

[14] Folashadé Soulé, "Digital Sovereignty in Africa: Moving beyond Local Data Ownership," *Centre for International Governance Innovation* 185 (June 2024): 2-3.

[15] Soulé, "Digital Sovereignty in Africa: Moving beyond Local Data Ownership," 3-4.

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Moreover, international technological norms and standards are predominantly shaped by Western institutions and interests, leaving countries in the Global South with limited agency in influencing global regulatory frameworks. This imbalance illustrates how digital power is increasingly concentrated in the hands of dominant actors and reveals the extent to which technology functions not only as a tool of economic control but also as an instrument of political influence. Thus, technological dependency is not merely a matter of digital disparity, it is fundamentally an issue of 'autonomy' and 'self-determination.' It raises urgent concerns about who has the right to shape a just society and future. Addressing this challenge requires urgent investment in local technological capacities, the development of regionally anchored digital infrastructures, and the establishment of more equitable frameworks for global technological cooperation.

Militarization and Surveillance

As AI technologies continue to advance rapidly, their use in military enhancement and surveillance systems reveals yet another dimension of digital colonialism. Technologies such as Autonomous Weapon Systems, facial recognition, and large-scale surveillance networks are often presented as signs of technological progress. However, in practice, they risk becoming tools that justify oppression and violate human rights.[16] Powerful nations are increasingly leveraging AI to secure military dominance, frequently at the expense of ethical considerations. For instance, Autonomous Weapon Systems are designed to identify and eliminate targets without human intervention, raising fundamental questions about the norms of warfare and the boundaries of moral responsibility. The potential for civilian casualties, the lack of clear accountability, and the erosion of respect for human dignity highlight the urgent need for critical reflection on AI's militarized applications, as well as for the establishment of meaningful ethical and legal safeguards.

Moreover, AI-powered surveillance technologies are increasingly employed by authoritarian regimes or occupying powers as tools of population control. Systems such as facial recognition, geolocation tracking, and emotion analysis are being deployed to identify protest participants, monitor ethnic minorities, and suppress political dissent, resulting in serious violations of fundamental rights.[17] In many cases, Global South nations either import these technologies or become sites for their experimental deployment by foreign companies, placing local populations in the dual position of both surveillance subjects and test subjects.

The militarization and securitization of these technologies go beyond conventional law enforcement or national security measures, they represent a modern reincarnation of colonial logics of control. In this context, AI functions as an intangible "digital weapon," enabling psychological and societal domination in addition to physical control. Consequently, already marginalized communities and nations face heightened forms of oppression and inequality.

This reality underscores the urgent need for a fundamental reconfiguration of technological ethics. Without critical reflection on who uses AI, for what purposes, and with what consequences, technology risks becoming not a tool of liberation but a means of entrenching new forms of domination. Ethical resistance to the militarization and surveillance

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[16] Leslie Alen Horvitz, "The Rise of AI Warfare and Digital Colonialism: How Autonomous Weapons and Cognitive Warfare Are Reshaping Global Military Strategy," Lankaweb, last modified May 18, 2025, https://www.lankaweb.com/news/items/2025/05/18/the-rise-of-ai-warfare-and-digital-colonialism-how-autonomous-weapons-and-cognitive-warfare-are-reshaping-global-military-strategy/?utm.

[17] Matthew Tokson, "The Authoritarian Risks of AI Surveillance," Lawfare, last modified May 1, 2025, https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/the-authoritarian-risks-of-ai-surveillance?utm.

uses of AI, along with global solidarity, must therefore be seen as essential components of any movement toward digital justice.

Toward a Decolonial and Ethical Reconstruction of Technology

Decolonial Theory as a Lens for Digital Justice

As examined above, AI and digital technologies have become deeply embedded across the globe, exerting profound influences on our daily lives. However, in the face of realities where such technological advancements are exploited as new forms of inequality and domination, it is imperative to seek fundamental transformations beyond mere technical progress. In particular, a decolonial perspective may offer a valuable way to move beyond entrenched structures of domination and opens up possibilities for exploring new pathways of connection and healing through 'relationality and solidarity.' This is because, in a world where technology and data are increasingly monopolized and controlled by a handful of powerful corporations and states, marginalized communities and less powerful nations are at high risk of being silenced and excluded. Such a structure becomes a typical mechanism of domination, one that separates and disconnects people. As long as the norms established by a few dominant actors continue to be upheld as the structural and cognitive standards of society, the majority of weaker or marginalized nations remain subject to systems of control and dependency.

This dynamic reflects what decolonial theologians have described as a form of "*Othering*." Othering is an ideological foundation of binary thinking that divides the self from the non-self and sustains a "logic of domination," which ranks superiority over inferiority. It ultimately serves to justify the subjugation of the dominated.[18] The logic of domination operates on the premise that everything must either belong to category A or not, a binary that determines normative standards. More specifically, what falls within category A becomes the normative benchmark of society, while anything outside of it is rendered as the Other. Within this binary ideology of othering, those deemed outside the dominant group – whether as non-mainstream, people of color, or the colonized – are defined in opposition to the norm and subjected to structures of subordination and control. Frantz Fanon, a key figure in postcolonial thought, argued that colonialism is a systematic negation of the Other. It denies the colonized any claim to humanity and compels them to repeatedly ask, "Who am I?"[19] Fanon's analysis of the systematic negation of colonized peoples extends beyond political domination; it exposes how Western-centered epistemologies continue to govern and subordinate so-called Third World nations through knowledge production itself.

Furthermore, Albert Memmi analyzes the dynamics of othering by identifying three key characteristics. First, the Other is consistently regarded as negative, lacking, deficient, or insufficient. Second, the Other is defined as inherently inferior, marked by a diminished sense of humanity. Third, the Other is perceived not as an individual with unique characteristics and agency, but as part of an anonymous collective. In other words, the Other is generalized and understood through the lens of group identity, stripped of personal distinction and nuance.[20] This process of conceptualizing the Other becomes entrenched within systems of

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[18] Karen Warren, "The Power and Promise of Ecological Feminism," *Environmental Ethics* 12/3 (Summer 1990): 132.

[19] Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la Terre* [*The Wretched of the Earth*], trans. Nam Kyung-tae (Seoul: Greenbee, 2010), 201.

[20] Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner, and Mayra Rivera, eds., *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), 13.

knowledge, ultimately taking on the status of both objective and normative truth. As such, it carries the dangerous potential to serve as a tool for reproducing structures of domination and subjugation.

Another important concept in postcolonial theology is "hybridity," as introduced by Homi H. Bhabha. Bhabha emphasizes that in colonial contexts, both the colonizer and the colonized experience a crisis of identity. He argues that "postcolonial hybridity is produced by empire: by direct invasion, violation, and rape, or by the indirect subjection that stimulates survivalist strategies of mimicry and appropriation."[21] In this sense, hybridity makes full assimilation of the colonized into the identity of the colonizer impossible, giving rise instead to a complex, layered identity that transcends simple integration. At the same time, the colonizer imposes a demand on the colonized to resemble the dominant power, ultimately producing a hybrid subject shaped by both resistance and imposed resemblance.[22]

In this context, hybridity rejects the notion of a "pure and homogeneous" identity. That is, no culture exists as completely independent and pure prior to domination or invasion, nor is its identity entirely defined by colonial power afterward.[23] In other words, culture is always in a process of mixing, transformation, and fluidity. Therefore, hybridity creates a "Third Space" within a world full of binary ideologies. This space holds the potential to transcend fixed identities and binaries, embracing diversity and fluidity.

Bhabha emphasizes the existence of the 'in-between' space – situated between fixed points where identity is rigidly defined – and argues that this interstitial passage opens up the possibility of cultural hybridity that transcends fixed identifications.[24] This hybridity enables cultural practices that embrace difference without presupposing or imposing hierarchical structures. Thus, the 'in-between' space is not merely a middle ground but a site where hybridity is enacted, carrying the potential for creativity, hospitality, and inclusion. In other words, hybridity holds significant theoretical implications as it subverts the discourse of racial and cultural "purity" on which colonial power has relied, while simultaneously embodying the potential for political resistance. In this context, hybridity is closely linked to the concept of the "Third Space."

The Third Space as a Space of Inclusion, Hospitality, and Creativity

The Third Space, as a space of hybridity, "creates a space recognizing a partial culture as having its own integrity and wholeness … [and] reflects a reality of inevitable encounters between different cultures and mixed realities as a result."[25] Although difference and hybridity may be situated under conditions where they cannot simply be celebrated due to the invasion and violence of colonial domination, such a space of hybridity can serve as a Third Space that resists existing 'rules of recognition' and generates new visions and possibilities.[26]

The Third Space is not a fixed or static location but can be understood as an indeterminate space where cultural hybridity emerges. Namsoon Kang highlights that the concept of hybridity, which traverses boundaries and refers to an in-between space, creates a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation, making it a highly useful tool for marginalized countries and communities.[27] From this perspective, the Third Space is understood as an

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[21] Keller, Mausner, and Rivera, eds., *Postcolonial Theologies*, 13.

[22] Homi H. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and NY: Routledge, 1994), 86.

[23] Edward Said, *Out of Place: A Memoir* (NY: Alfred Knopf, 1999), 6.

[24] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 4.

[25] HyeRan Kim-Cragg, *Story and Song: A Postcolonial Interplay Between Christian Education and Worship* (NY: Peter Lang, 2012), 37-8.

[26] Bhabha*, The Location of Culture,* 110.

[27] Namsoon Kang, "Who/What Is Asian?" in *Postcolonial Theologies,* eds., Keller, Nausner, and Rivera, 115.

expanded concept of hybridity and a consciously chosen marginality, serving as a space of 'resistance' and 'possibility' that illuminates other cultures adjacent to past cultures.[28] Therefore, to transform the Third Space into a fertile and creative space where new cultures can flourish, it is essential first to recognize that "all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic."[29] Subsequently, we must decide whether to cultivate this space as one of new creation and hospitality or to leave it as a space marked by exclusion, discrimination, hatred, or even domination, oppression, and control.

In sum, underlying the development of AI technologies and the ideologies that enable the monopolization and control of data is the "logic of domination," which systematically others non-dominant cultures and nations. However, the insight offered by postcolonial theology suggests that true liberation and transformation can only be realized within relational contexts – spaces of mutual recognition and respect grounded in solidarity. As discussed earlier, such a space can be understood through the lens of what postcolonial theologians call the "Third Space." This is not merely a physical or symbolic gap between the dominant and the dominated, but rather a transformative space in which new forms of relationality and meaning can be reimagined, even amid power asymmetries. Particularly in the context of the vast power disparities between global corporations and nations that monopolize and control AI technologies and the marginalized nations that are structurally dependent on them, the Third Space emerges as a site of possibility, resistance, and ethical imagination for the just use of technology.

This decolonial critique, which reveals that the digital ecosystem is not merely a product of technological innovation but rather a manifestation of historical and structural power, offers important insights for the path ahead. A decolonial perspective not only exposes and dismantles the remnants of colonialism but also opens the possibility of transforming the Third Space into a site for reclaiming relationality and restoring just agency over technology. This calls us toward a shared practice of imagining and shaping an alternative future, not grounded in logics of domination and disconnection, but in interconnection and solidarity.

In the digital age, solidarity means ensuring that people from diverse cultural backgrounds and marginalized communities are actively involved in the development, application, and policymaking of technology. This involves expanding technological agency and creating inclusive spaces where the excluded can become both producers and beneficiaries of technology. From a decolonial perspective, the shift from domination to "relationality and solidarity" reframes issues of technology and power as matters of human dignity and justice. It is not merely about changing technological systems, but about reclaiming an ethical and spiritual awareness that we are interconnected and must honor each other's differences and diversity. Such a shift offers a vital turning point that can help preserve our humanity and sense of community in an increasingly mechanized and efficiency-driven digital world.

In particular, the reclaiming of narrative functions as a central practice of decolonial critique. The knowledge systems of marginalized regions, feminist perspectives, and the lived experiences of Indigenous communities, long excluded from dominant technological discourses, must be repositioned not as mere alternatives, but as essential epistemological resources for reimagining digital justice. This calls for more than simply including diverse voices; it demands a decolonial transformation that reconfigures the very structure of technological imagination. Such a transformation involves the critical dismantling of dominant techno-narratives and the logic of technological determinism, opening the possibility for a 'theology of technological sharing,' a vision that centers restoration, healing,

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[28] Kang, "Who/What is Asian?" 115.
[29] Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (NY: Vintage Books, 1993), xxv.

and mutual flourishing of people and communities. Therefore, postcolonial theory shifts the very framework through which technology is interpreted, suggesting that true digital justice must be understood as an ethical and practical project, one that involves critical reflection on power and the construction of new relational paradigms. Furthermore, technology must no longer serve as a tool to maximize the interests of a privileged few, but rather become a just and reciprocal space of imagination for shaping a shared future.

Therefore, the following section will examine the development of Sovereign AI and various initiatives from the Global South as concrete efforts to reimagine the Third Space, not as a site of domination and subjugation, but as a field of mutual interdependence. Furthermore, it will explore the possibilities and challenges of practical and policy-driven interventions aimed at realizing an interdependent digital future.

Reclaiming Digital Futures: Efforts for Sovereignty and Justice

Recently, "Sovereign AI" has emerged as a key topic within the global IT industry. This concept refers to AI services developed based on large language models (LLMs) that utilize a country's own data and infrastructure, while reflecting local languages, cultures, and values. As concerns grow over value-dependence on U.S.-centered Big Tech corporations, governments and companies around the world are actively increasing their investments in related technologies and infrastructure.[30] For instance, France's Mistral AI, which has been recognized as a strong alternative to ChatGPT, is tailored for European users by specializing in languages such as Spanish, French, and German.[31] India's Krutrim supports over ten local languages including Hindi, Tamil, and Telugu.[32] Finland's Silo, which is based on Nordic languages, is another notable example.[33] These initiatives represent leading efforts to develop Sovereign AI models that challenge dominant global narratives in AI development.

The Global South is also making concerted efforts to harness the potential of AI technologies and to establish governance systems that align with local realities. Comprising regions such as Africa, the Caribbean, Southeast Asia, and Latin America, the Global South stands at a critical crossroads: on one hand, AI offers the possibility of strengthening digital sovereignty and advancing shared prosperity; on the other, it raises structural concerns about becoming a new vehicle for digital colonization and exploitation.

One significant response involves leveraging AI technologies to restore and preserve endangered languages. Currently, most AI chatbots are trained on only about 100 of the world's approximately 7,000 languages, with English forming the dominant foundation for most large language models. As a result, many languages are structurally excluded from the digital technological landscape.

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[30] Ryan Browne, "Tech Giants Are Investing in 'Sovereign AI' to help Europe Cut Its Dependence On the U.S.," *CNBC*, November 14, 2024, https://www.cnbc.com/2024/11/14/tech-firms-invest-in-sovereign-ai-to-cut-europe-dependence-on-us-tech.html#:~:text=%22Sovereign%20AI%20is%20about%20reflecting,your%20culture%2C%22%20Hogan%20said.

[31] Maria Webb, "Mistral AI: Exploring Europe's Latest Tech Unicorn," Techopedia, last modified January 2, 2024, https://www.techopedia.com/mistral-ai-exploring-europes-latest-tech-unicorn.

[32] Garima Arora, "Krutrim Launches India's First Frontier Research AI Lab to Democratize AI Innovation; Commits Investment of $1.2 Billion by Next Year," *businesswire*, February 4, 2025, https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20250204723028/en/Krutrim-Launches-Indias-First-Frontier-Research-AI-Lab-to-Democratise-AI-Innovation-Commits-Investment-of-%241.2-Billion-by-Next-Year.

[33] Business Finland, "Business Finland Awards Veturi Funding to AMD Silo AI to Strengthen Finland's Position in the Global AI Market," *ArcticToday*, May 15, 2025, https://www.arctictoday.com/%F0%9F%87%AB%F0%9F%87%AE-business-finland-awards-veturi-funding-to-amd-silo-ai-to-strengthen-finlands-position-in-the-global-ai-market/.

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In response to this imbalance, Michael Running Wolf, a computer engineer from the Northern Cheyenne Nation, has proposed a "Boxed Language" device, a speech-based offline AI system designed to preserve Indigenous languages. His initiative underscores the critical importance of language and data sovereignty for Indigenous communities.[34]

Similar initiatives are currently underway in the Philippines. Anna Mae Yu Lamentillo, an AI researcher and politician, has developed an AI-based translation application known as NightOwlGPT to safeguard endangered languages within the country. Her work primarily focuses on nine major Philippine languages, with the overarching objective of securing a sustainable digital presence for minority languages. Lamentillo cautions that if AI technologies lack inclusivity, they may perpetuate oppressive dynamics akin to those experienced under historical colonial regimes. Although AI development marks a historically significant inflection point, the fact that 99% of the world's languages remain marginalized extends beyond purely linguistic concerns to broader issues of digital accessibility, cultural expression, and equity. Thus, while AI holds considerable potential as a tool for the preservation and revitalization of endangered languages, the locus of its development and control may also engender new modalities of digital colonialism.[35]

Another significant case is the African language data development project utilizing Mozilla's Common Voice platform. Amidst the ongoing marginalization of African languages by colonial linguistic frameworks within digital environments, the inclusion of Twi, a widely spoken language in Ghana and the broader West African region, represents a voluntary and agentive effort toward the reclamation of linguistic sovereignty and the advancement of AI development. Daniel Agyeman, a Ghanaian-British collaborator, engages closely with Twi speakers to collect sentences and contribute voice data to the platform, thereby enabling the potential construction of Twi-based speech recognition systems. These initiatives are supported by organizations such as the Gates Foundation and GIZ(German Corporation for International Cooperation), and through the expansion of one of the world's most multilingual open-source voice datasets, they constitute a practical approach to centering African languages and communities in AI development processes while addressing issues of digital exclusion and linguistic inequity.[36]

Alongside these developments, a range of initiatives aimed at AI talent cultivation and technological application are actively unfolding in South Africa. Notably, the Youth Employment Service (YES), a national program to promote youth employment, has partnered with Microsoft to launch a large-scale project that provides AI training to approximately 300,000 South African youth.[37] In addition, the establishment of the Defence Artificial Intelligence Research Unit (DAIRU) signals a growing interest in applying AI technologies within the defense sector.[38]

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[34] Michael Running Wolf, "Why First Languages AI Can Be a Reality," TEDx Talks, YouTube, June 28, 2023, video, 9:16, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Omp3X-FXdLs.

[35] EIN Presswire, "Filipino LSE Student Launches Night Owl GPT: A Platform for Language Preservation and Digital Inclusion," *KRON4*, April 22, 2024, https://www.kron4.com/business/press-releases/ein-presswire/705295167/filipino-lse-student-launches-night-owl-gpt-a-platform-for-language-preservation-and-digital-inclusion/.

[36] Mozilla, "Widely Spoken in Ghana and Other West African Countries, Twi is the Latest Addition to the Common Voice Open Source Language Dataset," moz://a, September 15, 2022, https://www.mozillafoundation.org/en/blog/mozillas-common-voice-dataset-reaches-100-languages/?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

[37] Microsoft News Center, "AI Training for 300,000 South African Youth, And Enabler for Future Career Advancement," Microsoft, October 31, 2023, https://news.microsoft.com/en-xm/2023/10/31/ai-training-for-300000-south-african-youth-an-enabler-for-future-career-advancement/#:~:text=/source/emea/-,AI%20training%20for%20300%2C000%20South%20African%20youth%2C%20an%20enabler%20for,world%20of%20AI%20is%20foreign.

[38] AI Media Group, "SA Opens Africa's First Military-Focused AI Hub," *Synapse: Africa's Only AI Trade &*

At the international level, institutions such as the United Nations (UN) and UNESCO play a critical role in promoting the participation of Global South countries in shaping AI governance. UNESCO has issued the *Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence*, which offers a comprehensive framework for the development of national ethical policies. Concurrently, the UN has launched a High-Level Advisory Body on AI, working to ensure that the voices of Global South nations are meaningfully integrated into global decision-making processes regarding AI.[39]

As the preceding cases illustrate, despite facing structural limitations and ongoing challenges, the Global South and countries such as South Africa are actively pursuing concrete and systematic efforts to reclaim technological sovereignty and foster inclusive AI ecosystems. Multilayered initiatives, including the preservation of local languages, youth-centered AI education, and policy-level interventions, demonstrate a firm commitment not merely to adaptation, but to the construction of autonomous technological infrastructures. These efforts represent meaningful advancements that warrant recognition and respect from the international community.

Simultaneously, the global technological powers and dominant regimes that currently hold the reins of AI development bear a responsibility to move beyond unilateral control and towards a more interdependent world order. Unilateral structures rooted in technological hegemony risk exacerbating global inequalities, whereas a sustainable digital future can only be realized through ecosystems that accommodate diverse cultures and values. Accordingly, it is imperative that these dominant actors actively engage in shaping a more equitable and collaborative technological order grounded in principles of coexistence and solidarity.

Conclusion

This study has illuminated both the potential benefits brought by advancements in AI technology and the risks of reproducing new forms of colonialism affecting marginalized communities, including those in the Global South. Through concrete case studies from Africa and other Global South regions concerning language data, digital sovereignty, and AI governance, the research underscores the urgent need for a more inclusive and just technological ecosystem. While the rapid development of digital AI opens innovative possibilities across various aspects of human life, it simultaneously harbors the risk of perpetuating colonial hierarchies and exclusions. Historically marginalized communities frequently face exclusion or objectification in AI development and deployment processes, experiencing new forms of dependency and loss of sovereignty through technology.

This reality has been explored through the postcolonial theoretical concept of "othering," highlighting that the liminal space shaped by AI should not be understood merely as a binary division between subject/object or dominator/dominated. Rather, it can be reconceptualized as a "Third Space" imbued with the potential for communication, creativity, and interdependence. This space serves as a critical testing ground for the ethics and justice of technology and represents a foundational starting point for a human-centered and mutually accountable AI ecosystem.

Efforts undertaken by various countries and regional communities within the Global South, as well as by international organizations, demonstrate the potential for such

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Innovation Magazine 23, (2024): 15-7,
https://issuu.com/aimediasynapse/docs/synapse_magazine_issue_23_240624_v2/19.

[39] UNESCO, "Leveraging UNESCO Normative Instruments for an Ethical Generative AI Use of Indigenous Data," November, 8, 2023, https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/leveraging-unesco-normative-instruments-ethical-generative-ai-use-indigenous-data.

transformative shifts. However, to ensure that these endeavors do not remain isolated experiments or externally driven projects, it is imperative to internalize decolonial thinking and establish systems that achieve substantive and structural transformations across the entire spectrum of technological governance. Consequently, the ultimate purpose of technological advancement must transcend mere efficiency and profit, focusing instead on the promotion of human dignity and the values of communal life. The AI ecosystem, in particular, should be designed within a framework of justice and ethics, where the voices of marginalized communities are meaningfully incorporated and respected. This constitutes genuine inclusion and paves the way toward a just, ethical, and decolonial technological future.

To this end, it is essential first to establish a human-centered and justice-oriented AI design framework. Such a framework should prioritize human well-being and the collective good, incorporating the voices of diverse social groups from the earliest stages of technology development, and embedding principles that safeguard socially vulnerable and marginalized populations. For instance, mechanisms must be implemented to correct biased samples during data collection and to continuously monitor algorithmic design to prevent discriminatory factors from influencing outcomes. Furthermore, AI should be leveraged beyond mere economic gain to promote social value, necessitating the establishment of structural measures that ensure technological accessibility, equitable distribution, and transparent decision-making processes.

Secondly, a critical discernment toward overcoming dominant narratives of technological progress is necessary. This entails cautioning against the uncritical acceptance of technology's societal impact and questioning the simplistic belief that technological advancement inherently drives social progress. Given that technology can function as a tool to reinforce particular group interests or exacerbate social inequalities, it is imperative to develop the capacity to critically analyze and identify the power relations, economic stakes, and cultural contexts surrounding technology. Recognizing technology not as an objective or neutral instrument but as a product shaped within social and political frameworks allows for clearer ethical and political accountability throughout its development and application. Such a perspective must be actively promoted across education and policy domains and serve as the foundation for cultivating citizens' technological imagination and agency.

Thirdly, the internalization of ethics is imperative. This internalization transcends mere legal and institutional regulations, ensuring that core values such as 'care,' 'mutuality,' and 'fairness' are deeply embedded throughout the entire process of technology development and operation. It calls for technology companies, developers, and policymakers alike to routinely reflect on the impact of technology on human and communal life and to assume responsible agency in addressing these effects. For example, AI ethics guidelines and regulations should move beyond formal compliance to function effectively through continuous review, feedback, and active dialogue with civil society. The ethic of 'care' protects the rights of the vulnerable and marginalized, guiding technology toward fostering human solidarity and community restoration. 'Mutuality' emphasizes collaborative processes where diverse stakeholders have equal voice, while 'fairness' mandates the elimination of inequalities in technological access and benefit distribution.

In conclusion, the structural reconfiguration of technology development must go beyond mere technical innovation to embrace a holistic transformation that integrates social and ethical renewal. Only through such comprehensive change can AI and digital technologies fulfill their potential as instruments that enhance the dignity and well-being of all people, rather than serving the interests of a select few. By grounding human-centered design within the framework of decolonial theological ethics, we lay a vital foundation for mitigating the inherent risks of technology while fostering a just, equitable, and mutually respectful digital society.

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E. Paulette Isaac-Savage
University of Missouri-St. Louis
EPIsaac@umsl.edu

Michael Porterfield
McKendree University
mdporterfield@mckendree.edu

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Digital Discipleship: Understanding AI Adoption Among Clergy and Community

Abstract: In this paper, we examine how Christian ministers and laity use AI tools, including ChatGPT and their perspectives of its use. Drawing on qualitative research, this study explores ethical considerations, best practices, and the communal impact of AI usage. Findings provide guidance for religious educators seeking to integrate technological innovation with faith-based discernment. By highlighting human dignity and the importance of genuine connection, the research underscores AI's potential to transform—and challenge—contemporary ministry.

Introduction

In 2020, COVID-19 impacted the way the world operated including human connections. For religious institutions, this meant transforming how it taught and led congregants. In an effort to minimize the disruptions the pandemic introduced, many institutions transitioned to using methods such as conference calls and video conferencing to connect with more digitally-savvy congregants. Simultaneously, pastors and laity increased their use of AI tools; "reactions to AI's presence in religious settings are mixed."[1]

In 1979, PBS first aired *Connections* hosted by James Burke which showed random inventions with historical events that led to the development of modern inventions. One of these AI predecessors was called MYCIN, a computer program developed by a group at Stanford University. In which questions were inputted, compared to IF-THEN statements, posing targeted follow-up questions to narrow the options. MYCIN provided an answer with a detailed explanation of how it reached this solution. Edward W. Shortliffe, the principal developer of this project, used the term "artificial intelligence" to explain how MYCIN works. AI is "unfortunate because it conjures up threatening images of superhuman machines that challenge those

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[1] Korea Times. "AI Fortune Teller and Digital Clergy Spark Debate on Religion's Future." *Korea Times,* January 31, 2025, 15. https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.umsl.edu/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNP&docref=news/19E7487D6FF22B80.

capabilities of mankind [sic] that have long been thought to be uniquely human."[2] To avoid this negative connotation, they designed MYCIN to be transparent about how and why it arrived at the clinical recommendation. This keeps the inquiring physician in control of their patient's care.

MYCIN served as an advisory tool; the answer it provided was based on information compiled by expert infectious-disease specialists offering answers. Today's AI models are built using the same logic consisting of two layers: a giant storehouse of information and a thinking part. The user asks a question and the model pulls information from the storehouse to answer the question; if asked, the AI system provides the steps on how it arrived at the answer. A modern *Connections* episode might trace the evolution of AI and its transformative impact. What has changed over time is the amount of data the current large language models have access to. Combined with COVID, we have more digitally fluent congregants who can use AI for ministry and pastoral care.

AI is transforming "religious practices and experiences of religious communities."[3] In a study of ethical issues with AI, Nwankwo (2025) suggested that the twenty-first century Church leverage its use "in the advancement of the gospel truth"[4] or it may risk being left behind. There are some concerns about using AI. In a study of a religious service in Germany, concerns included "technological limitations, fear of replacing humans, biases in the theology of the underlying large language model, and lack of personality and emotion."[5] This could be problematic, because there would be no embodiment similar to how Christ ministered to and taught others.[6,7] With technological advances, we can reach even more of God's children. Some studies have examined church leaders' perceptions of AI's use. However, few studies examine both laity's and leaders' perceptions of it.[8] In this study, we examine Christian ministers' and laity's perceptions and use AI.

Theoretical Frameworks

Barnard College 's AI literacy framework[9] consists of four levels, similar to Bloom's taxonomy. At the base is *Understand AI*–this can include something as simple as a web search which powered by AI. Next is *Use & Apply AI*–at this level, individuals use AI tools, such as

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[2] Shortliffe, Edward H. "Mycin: A Knowledge-Based Computer Program Applied to Infectious Diseases." *Proceedings of the Annual Symposium on Computer Application in Medical Care* (1977): 66–69, 66.

[3] Simmerlein, Jonas. "Sacred Meets Synthetic: A Multi-Method Study on the First AI Church Service." *Review of Religious Research,* March 2024, 1. https://doi.org/10.1177/0034673X241282962.

[4] NWANKWO, Sunday C. "Navigating the Ethical Issues with Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Evangelism in the 21st Century Church*." Journal of Nigerian Association of Pastoral Counsellors,* 4 (2025): 329-336, 329.

[5] Simmerlein, 1.

[6] Gibbes, Simon "A Crisis of Community: How an Epidemic of Loneliness is Contributing to Social Disconnection in Churches." Practical Theology 15(3): 258-271. 2022.

[7] Savedge, Kinea. "*Church Attendance, Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older African American Adults During COVID-19*." 2023.

[8] Cheong, Pauline Hope, and Liming Liu. "Faithful Innovation: Negotiating Institutional Logics for AI Value Alignment Among Christian Churches in America." *Religions* 16(3): 302. 2025.

[9] Hibbert, Melanie C., Elana Altman, Tristan Shippen, and Melissa Wright. *"A framework for AI literacy."* 2024.

ChatGPT. Third is *Analyze AI & Evaluate AI*–this includes analyzing the biases, validity, and ethics of the AI output. Currently, several AI models and languages are primarily available in English which excludes most of the world's population. At the peak of the triangle is *Create AI*-creating AI applications which can be built for use on a church website.

Similarly, the California State University (CSU) System has released an AI literacy framework, ETHICAL Principles AI Framework for Higher Education[10] with key principles guiding how The CSU System uses AI in educational settings. ETHICAL is an acronym for the key points: *Exploration and Evaluation*-carefully assess and judge AI tools and outputs; *Transparency and Accountability*-having an open mind about using AI; *Human-Centered Approach*-human judgement and decision-making needs to be primary in using AI; *Integrity and Academic Honesty*-stick to the highest standards and promote using AI responsibly; *Continuous Learning and Innovation*-continuous education about the topic of AI and its impact on everything; *Accessibility and Inclusivity*-ensure using AI is equitable and inclusive; and *Legal and Ethical Compliance*-comply with applicable laws, regulations, and ethical standards in using AI. This framework gives guidelines to their system institutions in navigating the complex use of AI while maintaining ethical standards.

As Bernard College's and CSU's AI literacy frameworks help faculty members discern how best to use AI in their classes and safeguard their students because AI "is very much built upon human knowledge, which has its own biases and inequities. Using a critical lens when engaging with generative AI may help users identify existing biases and prevent users from exacerbating them."[11] As these two institutions offer their frameworks for guidance to their communities, many denominations also offer their own statements or "frameworks" on how to use AI and safeguard humanity and the common good.

Ethics and AI

Ethics are foundational to followers of Christ. Generally speaking, they are the "discipline dealing with right versus wrong, and the moral obligations and duties of entities."[12] The growth of AI can be juxtaposed with the proliferation in AI ethics.[13] While the use of AI continues to grow exponentially, it does not come without its challenges. There has been a proliferation in the "number of high-profile cases of harm that has resulted either because of the

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[10] Wynants, Shelbie, Yuliana De La Torre Roman, Patricia Budar-Turner, and Paola Vasquez. *ETHICAL Principles AI Framework for Higher Education.* California State University, 2025. https://genai.calstate.edu/communities/faculty/ethical-and-responsible-use-ai/ethical-principles-ai-framework-higher-education.

[11] Hibbert et al., 13-14.

[12] Siau, Keng, and Weiyu Wang. "Artificial Intelligence (AI) Ethics: Ethics of AI and Ethical AI." *Journal of Database Management* 31, no. 2 (2020): 74–87, 75.

[13] Kazim, Emre, and Adriano Soares Koshiyama. "A High-Level Overview of AI Ethics." *Patterns* 2, no. 9 (2021).

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misuse of the technology . . . or as a result of the technology having design flaws."[14] Some organizations have addressed these issues with ethical statements.

In 2024, 150 participants gathered in Hiroshima's Peace Memorial Park to sign the *Rome Call for Ethics*. Members included 13 nations, 11 world religions, and 16 new groups consisting of Japan's government and tech companies like Microsoft, IBM, and Cisco to promote:

> the development of an artificial intelligence that serves every person and humanity as a whole; that respects the dignity of the human person, so that every individual can benefit from the advances of technology; and that does not have as its sole goal greater profit or the gradual replacement of people in the workplace.[15]

Rome Call for Ethics outlines a shared international vision for the ethical development and deployment of AI. This Call is rooted in human dignity stressing AI must serve humanity rather than focusing solely on profit or automatician. It stresses that systems should be created that are inclusive, equitable, and environmentally conscious. AI also needs to make sure no one is marginalized, everyone has access to this technological progress, and care for the planet still is a core concern.

Finally, it promotes guidance for AI development with a moral foundation which protects the vulnerable, promotes justice, and fosters global responsibility. It also calls for transparency, ethical education, and systems reflecting human dignity and serving the common good. This commitment is truly clear Rome Call's ethical mandate:

> AI-based technology must never be used to exploit people in any way, especially those who are most vulnerable. Instead, it must be used to help people develop their abilities (empowerment/enablement) and to support the planet.[16]

One church that has consistently been left out of the AI conversation is the Black Church. In 2024, PBS aired an episode called *Artificial Intelligence's Impact on the Black Community* with Rev. Cindy Rudolph of Oak Grove AME Church and Rev. Lawrence Rogers of Second Baptist Church. Some of the challenges and concerns facing the Black Church posed by AI are the AI's potential to eliminate jobs. Rev. Rogers recalls how Black labor has been under attack since the cotton gin.[17] Furthermore, AI has the potential to eliminate many jobs. Rev. Rogers recalls the story of John Henry.

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[14] Kasim and Koshiyama, 1.

[15] RenAIssance Foundation. *Rome Call for AI Ethics.* 2024. http://www.romecall.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/RomeCall_Paper_web.pdf, 2.

[16] RenAIssance Foundation, 6.

[17] Rogers, Lawrence. Interview. By Orlando Bailey. *American Black Journal*, PBS. February 28,2024. 76. https://www.pbs.org/video/artificial-intelligences-impact-on-the-black-community-y73208/

The story of John Henry, it's about a Black man who was competing with technology to the point where it killed him in the end of the story. We need to make sure that we are not in the position of John Henry, where we find ourselves completely exhausted and destroyed because we are struggling to compete with an emergent technology.[18]

Rogers goes on to state that we need to dominate it instead of it dominating us.[19] Rev. Rudolph worries about the youth because AI seems like an academic shortcut, not learning in the traditional way.[20] Also, AI algorithms on social media expose the youth to inappropriate content and messages that can lead to low self-esteem and hamper their interpersonal communication. The last challenge and concern is misinformation and "deepfakes" which makes it hard to tell if it is fact or fiction especially in elections. In the 2024 election, supporters prepared for more deceptive ways to deceive the Black community with disinformation using AI-generated voices mimicking public figures providing voters with false election information. The old literacy tests from the past kept people from voting; the new "deepfakes" are the new literacy tests.[21]

The Black Church has an opportunity to respond to these challenges. It can partner with legislatures to ensure there are limits to AI for protecting labor, and how to safeguard against negative algorithms exposing teens to inappropriate and dishonest information. Ensuring the Black community is not disadvantaged economically and safeguarding jobs. The Black community needs a balanced approach in responding to AI: preparing young people for new tech jobs while protecting the current ones, and safeguarding individuals against AI's negative messages and uses.[22]

Humanization of AI

Recently on X, a user posted a question asking how much money OpenAI loses in electrical costs from people saying "please" and "thank you" in using their models.[23] OpenAI CEO Sam Altman, replied, "tens of millions of dollars well spent--you never know."[24] There is a danger of humanizing AI by using "please" and "thank you." Laity need to be cautious not to confuse AI models as not real. Even though AI simulates human intelligence, it cannot replicate

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[18] Rogers, 157-158.

[19] Rogers, 160.

[20] Rudolph, Cynthia. Interview. By Orlando Bailey. *American Black Journal*, PBS. February 28,2024. 76. https://www.pbs.org/video/artificial-intelligences-impact-on-the-black-community-y73208/

[21] Tensley, Brandon. "'New Literacy Test': The Black Organizers Waging War on Disinformation." *Capital B News* (blog). February 13, 2024. http://capitalbnews.org/disinformation-black-voters-explainer/.

[22] Rogers.

[23] tomie. "tomie" on X. "I wonder how much money OpenAI has lost in electricity costs from people saying "please" and "thank you" to their models."" 2025. X. https://x.com/tomieinlove/status/1912287012058722659.

[24] Altman, Sam. "Sam Altman" on X: "@tomieinlove tens of millions of dollars well spent--you never know."" X.(2025). https://x.com/sama/status/1912646035979239430.

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a conscience or know what it means to be human. "They" will never have a sense of the common good. AI only simulates human intelligence; it is a misnomer to have intelligence in AI.

Machines outperform humans in storing and processing large amounts of data, but meaning-making is distinctly reserved for humans. Humans can only interpret the data and turn it into something meaningful.[25] Human beings are naturally social beings and seek human connection. This connection helps to bridge the isolation that we sometimes feel. In the absence of humans, there is a tendency to form a "human-like connection with non-human entities (be they animate or inanimate)."[26] Salles et al.[27] also state there is another innate desire for humans to attempt to understand oneself and the world.

AI can bring the illusion of order and clarity. If a user inputs a question into AI attempting to make sense of the confusion, AI will provide answers that are clarifying and offer hope in the midst of the confusion. This response is sometimes full of inaccuracies and hallucinates--making up things. Finally, "as society drifts away from a connection with the transcendent, some are tempted to turn to AI in search of meaning or fulfillment—longings that can only be truly satisfied in communion with God."[28]

Religious Education

Imagine your classroom where your students are using virtual reality and walk along the shore of the Sea of Galilee and see where James and John fished. This could be possible by using technology, especially AI. The religious education classroom can become more interactive and facilitate a student-centered religious classroom.[29] Lessons or activities can be adapted to individualize learning. Students can have more autonomy in their learning. If available to the students, they have immediate access to AI to ask questions, obtain commentaries, and even sacred texts.

Chatbots can be created to answer questions about biblical lessons; they can even answer faith questions similar to an interactive catechism. Chatbots can even take on the role of an early Christian at the Sermon on the Mount to inquire about this passage. Individualized devotionals can also be created based on a particular theme or scripture story. Having AI to create these on-demand devotionals and Bible study materials can lead to a more regular and fruitful prayer life.

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[25] Pope Francis. *Artificial Intelligence and the "Wisdom of the Heart: Towards a Fully Human Communication."* (2024), para. 5. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/communications/documents/20240124-messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html

[26] Salles, Arleen, Kathinka Evers, & Michele Farisco. "Anthropomorphism in AI." AJOB Neuroscience 11: 2, 88–95, 89. DOI: 10.1080/21507740.2020.1740350.

[27] Salles et al. Anthropomorphism in AI.

[28] ANTIQUA ET NOVA. *Note* on the Relationship Between Artificial Intelligence and Human Intelligence. Para. 104. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_ddf_doc_20250128_antiqua-et-nova_en.html

[29] Lehlohonolo Kurata et al., "Teaching Religious Studies with Artificial Intelligence: A Qualitative Analysis of Lesotho Secondary Schools Teachers' Perceptions," *International Journal of Educational Research* Open 8 (2025). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedro.2024.100417.

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Realizing there needs to be guardrails using AI chatbots and the overreliance forming an emotional attachment to them. A recent MIT Media Lab study found "extended daily interactions with AI chatbots can reinforce negative psychosocial outcomes such as decreased socialization."[30] Community is important for learning especially in religious education. Saler, reflecting on the use of AI especially in theological education and how Dietrich Bonhoffer argued for the restoration of confession and absolution,[31] noted this was surprising for a Lutheran at the time, but Bonhoffer realized:

> …if I am only making confession to God in the solitude of private prayer, it would be easy to shape God into a self-serving idea for my own justification. However, the presence of another human being as confessor forces me to engage that which – unlike the idea of God – resists my subtle twists into idolatry, namely, the flesh and blood human other. For Bonhoeffer, the reality of God is iconically present in the reality of the human other.[32]

Religious educators serve as Bonhoffer's embodiment of God's presence to their students. Saler believes religious educators serve as a facilitator in their student's faith journey and correct them when necessary and be the voice of reason when needed.[33] Religious educators have the responsibility of guiding their students in the proper use of AI and modeling this ethical use. This is where AI literacy is invaluable. José Bowen posted on Linkedin, "AI literacy is like critical thinking tennis--you need both to ask better questions… and evaluate the answer (or the return)."[34] AI literacy consists of first understanding how to craft good questions, understanding the various models, and understanding what biases the AI model might have. Next comes discernment whether or not the response is correct and not made up. Mastering the serve and return lets religious educators model Bonhoeffer's witness and guide students toward ethical, truthful AI use.[35]

Methodology

To gain a deeper understanding of how Christian leaders and laity feel about AI in the church, a qualitative research method was used. Semi-structured interviews guided the data collection. An interview protocol was established based on a review of the literature. Interviews

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[30] MIT Media Lab. "How AI and Human Behaviors Shape Psychosocial Effects of Chatbot Use: A Longitudinal Controlled Study." 2025, 1-50, 14. https://www.media.mit.edu/publications/how-ai-and-human-behaviors-shape-psychosocial-effects-of-chatbot-use-a-longitudinal-controlled-study/.

[31] Saler, Rob. "ChatGPT Spirituality: Connection or Correction?" *geez*. Spring 2024. https://geezmagazine.org/magazine/article/chatgpt-spirituality-connection-or-correction.

[32] Saler, ChatGPT Spirituality: Connection or Correction?, para. 14.

[33] Saler, ChatGPT Spirituality: Connection or Correction?

[34] Bowen, José Antonio. "AI literacy is like critical-thinking tennis—you need both to ask better questions and evaluate the return." LinkedIn. March 5, 2024. https://www.linkedin.com/posts/joseantoniobowen_augh-and-today-we-get-claude-4-after-all-activity-7331386331547209728-gkEX/.

[35] Center for Teaching, Learning & Mentoring. "Q&A with José Antonio Bowen, Co-Author of 'Teaching with AI,'" September 18, 2024. https://ctlm.wisc.edu/2024/09/18/qa-with-jose-antonio-bowen-co-author-of-teaching-with-ai/.

allow researchers to "improvise follow-up questions based on the participant's response."[36] Questions explored participants' use of and perspectives on AI tools. Participants consisted of two church leaders (i.e., pastors) and two laity. The faith leaders were identified through personal contacts of the researchers. The authors served as participant researchers. Data analysis helps researchers make sense of their data.[37] In qualitative research the goal is to gain a deep understanding of the phenomena under study.[38] We used AI tools to assist us in identifying themes from the transcripts.

Findings

One pastor (Pastor Jordan) was female and one was male (Pastor Tucker). Pseudonyms are used for both pastors. Both pastors have been involved in the church for decades. Pastor Jordan was a preacher's kid. She is an ordained Baptist minister. When asked about her church affiliation today, she stated, "we just say we're Christians." She has served in the role of pastor at her current church for about 10 years. Prior to her pastorate, she held several positions including Associate Minister and leader in the field of music ministry. Pastor Tucker is affiliated with a large Christian denomination. He was initially ordained in the 1980s. Like Pastor Jordan, he is currently a pastor. He has served as a conference minister and an associate conference minister. Paulette was affiliated with the National Baptists for approximately 30 years. She is now a member of the United Methodist Church (UMC). She served as a Sunday school teacher at a UMC and oversaw an adult literacy program at a Baptist Church. Michael describes himself as a "cradle Catholic." He has a master's degree in divinity. At one point, he served on the Parish Council.

Five themes emerged from the data: The Importance of Human Presence, Ministry Efficiency, Demarcation Between Biblical Knowledge and Spiritual Growth, Ethical Concerns and Pulpit Authenticity and A Sense of Inevitability and the Need for Engagement. They are discussed in detail below.

The Importance of Human Presence

All the participants believed that AI was useful and can assist with many tasks, but they expressed concerns about AI's use regarding interpersonal relationships and interactions. When it comes to displaying empathy or emotion, AI has its limitations. For pastors, the human connection and authentic relationships are core to their calling. In essence, they, like laity, embody the human touch, which AI cannot provide. While AI can provide examples of emotions and feelings, it cannot replicate. Nor can it display physical comfort. These are key to ministry

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[36] Kallio, Heli, Anna-Maija Pietilä, Michael Johnson, and Mari Kangasniemi. "Systematic Methodological Review: Developing a Framework for a Qualitative Semi-Structured Interview Guide." *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 72, no. 12 (2016): 2954–2965, 2955.

[37] Merriam, S.B. *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation.* 2009.

[38] Creswell, John W., and J. David Creswell. *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. 5th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2018.

for both pastors and laity. As Paulette explained, "It cannot show emotion, for example. . . people are needing that sometimes. . . it cannot feel. Sometimes people need a hug, or they need a touch. AI cannot provide that." Michael believes there is a dehumanizing aspect of AI. He said, "I think that it can be [dehumanizing]. . . which is why I think it has to be used as a tool or as a supplement, . . . and not a stand-alone tool that is used." Similarly, Pastor Jordan believes AI can be dehumanizing. She explained how her father, a former pastor, had a process of opening books and touching the pages of the Bible when he prepared his sermons. She feels a lot of that is missing today by not having that intimacy with the Bible. She gave an example of finding a book in the Bible. "You know, to the point that, okay, so where's Job? Is that Old or New Testament? I don't know, let's go on the computer and see. I mean, come on! So there's some substance that is lacking, . . . so that's the dehumanizing aspect of it."

Ministry Efficiency

There was a perception that AI can enhance efficiency of church ministry and operations. For example, it can assist with administrative tasks, outreach, and sermon preparation. Thus, it can save time and enable church leaders and laity to use their time and energy for other ministry work. Pastor Jordan epitomized the time saving aspect of AI when she said,

> I could also see it being used in the church to maybe help organize things. So maybe, for example, there's a megachurch, and they're needing to… identify some people based on their skills. . . it would certainly reduce the time that ministers or church leaders would have to… designate to completing a particular task. For people who have larger congregations, AI is very helpful in terms of saving time. It just saves you a lot of time. For the larger churches, . . . in terms of organization . . . , management and organization of the staff, organization of the membership.

Pastor Tucker demonstrated AI's use. For part of a podcast series, he needed a summary of James Cone's book "For My People." He did not have time to reread the book. He prompted ChatGPT to give him a "usable… three-paragraph summary of the book." Michael has used it to develop a "particular" Bible study on the Acts of the Apostles. Pastor Jordan and Tucker's use of AI align with Paulette's thinking. She believes AI can help pastors to consider various ways to relay the same sermon message. In that way, it is understood by different people on different levels. She went on to explain that her "pastor in Atlanta was skillful in that manner and it was years before ChatGPT." Her church was in the inner city, but the membership consisted of people across the economic spectrum. She believed he was very deliberate about the way he delivered his messages, because of that. She is certain that everyone understood the points the pastor would make.

Pastor Tucker discussed how AI can reduce the time it takes him to find scripture when he is focused on a particular subject. While writing a sermon for Mother's Day, he was trying to "think of a passage that focuses not just on the importance of women, but specifically on the agency of women." He could not, so he "thought . . . I'm gonna go to… AI, ChatGPT, and… ask it, What's a biblical passage that centers the agency of women?" While he did not find one, he

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explained that he lets the passage lead him to the message. Pastor Jordan has used AI to find additional biblical references. She explained, "for example, if Paul's talking about run in the race, or whatever, then you want to look at what is the race, . . . different types of races, or whatever you want to talk about, growing grace, then you want to look at horticulture or something."

AI can also assist with outreach ministries. For example, Pastor Tucker has used it for marketing to create the church's webpage. Pastor Tucker got assistance with developing a podcast. About a year ago, he and some friends were producing a sermon series podcast. They were stumped on a title and a logo for it. As he explained it, they were "spinning our wheels and coming up with what we thought were good ideas." After a while, he decided to use ChatGPT to "see what happens." After providing some prompts, it took seconds to give them "the best choices that we could think of after weeks of trying to design something." He also sought assistance with a logo. He typed in some parameters and themes and requested about a dozen options and "within minutes we had the best choices that we could think of after weeks of trying to design something."

Another example of AI's ministry efficiency is an example provided by Pastor Tucker regarding one of his colleagues. The pastor was asked to give a eulogy of someone he did not know well. He gave ChatGPT some prompts including asking for biographical information or general information it could find on the individual. "He was shocked at what came out." According to Pastor Tucker's friend, "it was as good as anything I've ever written." He went on to say several people, including the funeral director indicated it was a "beautiful eulogy."

Demarcation Between Spiritual Growth and Biblical Knowledge

A clear distinction was established between the concepts of "spiritual growth" and "biblical knowledge." AI can assist with biblical knowledge, in other words, information acquisition, but for some, it is seen as incapable of facilitating spiritual growth. In this case, spiritual growth is about a relationship with God. Pastor Jordan was adamant that AI cannot be used for spiritual growth. "As it relates to spiritual growth, I don't see that happening... I just don't see how AI could help me, for example, grow spiritually... I see that kind of as a personal thing... with a person and with God. Spiritual growth is a spiritual thing... the Spirit of God does spiritual stuff." Paulette stated, "I don't see that happening. Because as I think of the spirit, I think of the Holy Spirit, and I just don't see how AI could help me, for example, grow spiritually." Both Pastor Jordan and Paulette see spiritual growth as a personal journey with God.

Michael and Pastor Tucker took a different stance on spiritual growth. Michael indicated that AI can be used for spiritual growth in a sense that he uses it sometimes for creativity. " It helps him find more ways to be creative. He went on to explain that, "In a sense that if I can create a… prompt that's… will give me the output or the answer that I am desiring, then it… then it leads to, . . . growth, and . . . spiritual growth."

From a biblical knowledge standpoint, all the participants were in agreement that AI can be helpful. Michael explained it can deepen a person's biblical knowledge. He further explained

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that AI can "dialogue with that knowledge and reveal its understanding of a biblical passage." It can, because it can consult you. It could give it roles such as the role of a biblical theologian, or the biblical scholar, and… then it draws upon Um, or you could feed it, you know, a biblical, you know, commentaries. Paulette stated that AI can help her to deepen her biblical knowledge. Pastor Jordan indicated that knowledge is what AI is. It is information and it is "it is quite helpful." Pastor Tucker shared the story of a congregant who was preparing to portray a character in the Bible for Vacation Bible School. Although Pastor Tucker had written a script for her, she wanted to learn more about the character, in the event the children had questions. She eventually had a long discussion with Pastor Tucker "about the things she discovered online" about the character that she would not have otherwise known. She was able to take what she learned and internalize it to make it her own. As a result, she embodied the character, thus contributing to her biblical knowledge as well as the children's.

Ethical Concerns and Pulpit Authenticity

This theme brings in the moral question. The use of AI to write sermons is a major point of ethical and theological concern. It raises questions regarding the pastor's responsibility, plagiarism (similar to students), and authenticity. Pastor Tucker explicitly discusses the issues of authorship and its consequences.

> It's a question of authorship and authenticity . . . If that pastor is doing no more than feeding into a computer and getting information that anybody in the pews can get, and getting a product good enough to pass as their sermon, why are they paying us to do that?. . . . And I've had clergy lose their authorization for ministry because they were plagiarizing sermons and got caught doing it.

Pastor Jordan expressed "There are moral and ethical concerns regarding how AI… can be used in the church." Because she has seen some concerns, she is trying to stay alert and aware and be smart about using it. She believes what's happening is we are currently redefining the laws of ethics. She also believes AI can be dangerous if a person is not familiar with the Word. A person can get confused and that could be detrimental to their faith. At one point, Paulette took issue with pastors who would read directly from their notes to preach. However, as she "grew in grace" she learned to understand that if God gave the preachers the inspiration to write the words, then it was okay for them to read them verbatim from their notes. As she listens to different preachers today, she questions whether the messages she hears are "real or fabricated." For Michael, the authenticity comes when preachers have reflected and prayed upon the material they use to incarnate a message that will be appropriate for the community of believers. Michael believes that anything that God created can be consulted but it is the physicality of the preacher that makes it alive and moves hearts.

A Sense of Inevitability and the Need for Engagement

As AI is ever present, the church cannot afford to ignore AI. Engagement with AI is necessary to avoid cultural irrelevance and to effectively minister in the modern world. As Pastor

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Jordan succinctly stated, "If we don't use it, we're going to be left behind. If the church does not move with the people who are moving with the technologies, then the church is left behind wondering why it is not growing. In response to misinformation, Pastor Tucker and others engage in the "use of AI and social media platforms to make sure that there is a counter-narrative functioning at the same level in the marketplace of ideas, and that our voice is not absent from that." Similarly, Paulette explained that AI is extremely beneficial for laity. "I have seen some Christian educators "lose" the class, because of the instructional methods they use. AI can help with that. While it can be overwhelming, engaging in it keeps them aware of the nonsense on the internet and helps them to counter it in their teaching.

Discussion and Conclusion

AI has permeated many aspects of our lives. Within the church, AI's presence can be felt and, in some instances, seen. Findings from the research support both Barnard College's and CSU's AI literacy frameworks. Within ministerial practice, AI offers functional support in areas such as sermon development, digital communications (i.e., website), and the articulation of memorial narratives or eulogies. The participants appear to engage with the foundational principles of AI and its pragmatic utility. The pastors are particularly cautious about its use given the ethical implications. The unethical deployment of AI may yield negative consequences for both pastors and congregants. However, AI can assist religious educators (both pastors and laity) in crafting messages or instructional materials that are accessible for people from diverse educational backgrounds. As such, utilization of AI can represent a strategic approach to encouraging inclusivity. Despite its many uses, AI can be dehumanizing which is why AI should be considered as a tool or supplement. We as church leaders and laity must maintain agency. We do not want the focus to be on AI, but on Jesus Christ. As AI is ever present, the church cannot afford to ignore it. Engagement with AI is necessary to avoid cultural irrelevance and to effectively minister in the modern world. As Pastor Jordan succinctly stated, "If we don't use it, we're going to be left behind.

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Heesung Hwang
Pacific School of Religion
hhwang@psr.edu

Grace and Community in the Age of AI:
A Wesleyan-Theological Dialogue on Digital Technology and Religious Education

Abstract

This article examines the integration of artificial intelligence within theological education through a Wesleyan theological lens. Drawing on doctrines of prevenient grace, social holiness, and connectionalism, it explores how AI might support learner-centered pedagogies while raising critical concerns around embodiment, relationality, and spiritual formation. Rather than treating AI as a neutral tool, the study considers its cultural and moral implications, proposing design principles that emphasize formation over function, relational engagement, and ethical accountability. The argument advances a theological framework in which AI serves—not displaces—the human and communal dimensions essential to religious education and spiritual transformation.

Introduction

In this era of digital transformation, religious educators face a vital question: how do we preserve the deeply human, communal, and incarnational dimensions of faith formation while engaging technological innovation? This is not merely a methodological concern, but a theological one. The Christian story is one of divine presence—of Word made flesh, of grace embodied in relationship and shared life. Faith is not formed in isolation or abstraction, but in the rhythms of community, the texture of daily life, and the holy interruptions of divine encounter.

As artificial intelligence increasingly shapes our classrooms and congregations, we must ask: do these tools deepen our attentiveness to God, one another, and the world—or do they distract and disembody us? [1] The challenge is not simply to adapt, but to discern. What does it mean to be formed in the image of Christ in a world shaped by algorithms? How do we cultivate spiritual wisdom in an age that prizes speed, efficiency, and personalization?

This moment calls for sacred tension: to neither reject technology out of fear nor embrace it uncritically, but to approach it with theological imagination and hope-filled critique. AI can support—but must never replace—the formative, human-centered work of faith education. [2] If AI is to find a place in religious education, it must be held accountable to what it can never replicate: grace that transforms, community that sustains, and the movement of the Spirit that no machine can predict. [3]

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[1] Christos Papakostas, "Artificial Intelligence in Religious Education: Ethical, Pedagogical, and Theological Perspectives," *Religions* 16, no. 5 (2025): 563, 9-11, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16050563.
[2] Papakostas, "Artificial Intelligence in Religious Education," 11-12.
[3] Papakostas, "Artificial Intelligence in Religious Education," 11.

The Wesleyan tradition offers a resonant lens for navigating this digital moment. Rooted in grace, community, and mutual accountability, Wesleyan theology insists that formation is relational, embodied, and responsive to God's prevenient grace. Wesley's vision of social holiness and connectionalism resists technocratic or mechanistic approaches to learning, and instead affirms that transformation happens through mutual care, shared practice, and holy presence. [4]AI, then, must be evaluated not only for its usefulness but for its fidelity to these theological commitments. It should serve—not supplant—our capacity for relationship, mystery, and transformation.

This study explores how key Wesleyan concepts can guide the faithful integration of AI into religious education. It asks: How might doctrines of grace and community be reimagined in an age of automation? In what ways can AI-mediated learning either enhance or diminish learner agency and the authenticity of spiritual formation? What does connectionalism offer for cultivating belonging in digital faith communities? And how might we form "religious intelligence" (RQ) in a world increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence?

Drawing on theology, religious education, and ethics, this paper offers not a blueprint but a theological framework—one that neither glorifies nor rejects technology, but insists on discernment. At its heart is an invitation: to imagine a future where the core commitments of Wesleyan faith—grace, community, and holy connection—remain vibrant, even and especially in an age shaped by intelligent machines.

Theological Grounding: Wesleyan Framework

Prevenient Grace in the Age of Algorithms

John Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace affirms that divine grace precedes all human striving, quietly awakening the heart to seek God even before conscious understanding or moral intention has taken shape.[5] This grace is not abstract nor distant; it is universal, relational, and mysteriously active in every human life, often unnoticed yet profoundly formative.[6] Within religious education, prevenient grace reminds us that true formation is not the result of content delivery or behavioral outcomes. It is, at its heart, the movement of the Spirit—gentle, uncoercive, and ever patient.

In the digital age, prevenient grace invites us to reimagine the tools of technology not as rivals to divine agency, but as possible companions—imperfect yet available—within the unfolding work of God. AI, though incapable of spiritual intent, can be shaped to become a threshold, a porous edge where curiosity awakens and the longing for meaning begins to stir. AI-driven tools such as adaptive learning platforms, theological chat interfaces, or voice-assisted liturgical guides can offer moments of unexpected encounter, particularly for those on the margins of institutional religion or those navigating faith in solitude.

For instance, imagine a personalized app that curates daily theological reflections based on a user's questions, emotional patterns, or seasons of life. In a moment of grief, such a tool might surface a reflection on lament from the Psalms; in a time of restlessness, it might suggest a

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[4] The United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 2024* (Nashville, TN: United Methodist Publishing House, 2024), ¶ 162; ¶125.

[5] Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), 29.

[6] John B. Cobb, Jr. *Grace & Responsibility: Wesleyan Theology for Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 38.

prayer from the mystics. These are not merely algorithmic suggestions—they can become, in the hands of grace, sacred echoes that awaken questions not yet named, longings not yet spoken. Might we dare to imagine that, even through digital interfaces, prevenient grace is at work—whispering, nudging, inviting?[7]

Of course, AI cannot initiate grace; it is not a spiritual agent. But neither are stained-glass windows, liturgies, or sacred music—yet all can be mediators of grace when received in openness. The task, then, is to ensure that our technologies do not distract from but deepen attentiveness. Theologically grounded design must resist the idol of optimization and instead prioritize human dignity, agency, and the holy ambiguity that spiritual life requires. Wesley's understanding of prevenient grace thus compels educators, designers, and theologians alike to ask: Do our digital tools cultivate space for divine encounter, or do they merely reinforce what is efficient, measurable, and safe?[8]

Prevenient grace is the divine "yes" that precedes our awareness. In the age of algorithms, our call is to discern whether our technologies help us hear that whisper—or drown it out in noise.[9]

Social Holiness and Authentic Community

John Wesley once proclaimed with conviction, "There is no holiness but social holiness."[10] This powerful statement highlights the deep connection between spiritual growth and communal life. Discipleship is not a solitary journey; it is a shared pilgrimage characterized by mutual accountability, self-giving love, and physical presence. For Wesley, grace is never a private possession—it is always mediated through the Body of Christ, where we are formed and reformed in relationship. Holiness emerges not in isolation but through fellowship, service, conflict, and the sacramental rhythms of life together.

In this light, digital religious communities—from livestreamed worship and online Bible studies to app-based spiritual mentorships—invite us to consider how "social holiness" might be embodied in virtual spaces. Can bonds forged through screens carry the sacred weight of encouragement, correction, and communion? Can algorithmically curated interactions cultivate virtues like empathy, humility, and shared responsibility—or do they risk reducing formation to convenience and personalization?

AI further complicates these questions. While it can simulate elements of community—through avatars, chatbots, or customized spiritual guidance—it cannot embody the incarnational presence that lies at the heart of Christian fellowship. It may suggest prayers, track participation, or facilitate digital rituals, but it cannot anoint the sick, embrace the grieving, or break bread at the table. The challenge, then, is not to dismiss digital community altogether, but to discern, with theological care, where its limits lie.

Through a Wesleyan lens, we are reminded that social holiness demands more than connection—it requires vulnerability, trust, and the kind of presence that allows us to be truly

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[7] Geordan Hammond, "John Wesley on Prevenient Grace," *Holiness Today*, September 1, 2020, https://holinesstoday.org/john-wesley-prevenient-grace.

[8] Northwind Theological Seminary, "Prevenient Grace: Grace That Goes Before," August 30, 2024, https://www.northwindseminary.org/post/prevenient-grace-grace-that-goes-before.

[9] The United Methodist Church, "God at Work Before We Know It: Prevenient Grace," accessed June 7, 2025, https://www.umc.org/en/content/god-at-work-before-we-know-it-prevenient-grace.

[10] UMC, *Book of Discipline*, 2024, ¶102, ¶162.

seen and known. It is a grace that moves through physical gestures and sacred rituals, through silence and song, through conflict and reconciliation. In this sense, technology—and especially AI—must be shaped to serve community, never replace it. As Phillips argues, even in the digital age, the Wesleyan vision of the world as our parish calls us to extend holiness through relational, embodied engagement—not disembodied simulation.[11]

As religious educators and spiritual leaders, we are called to navigate this digital landscape with both imagination and discernment: exploring how emerging tools might extend the reach of grace while never forgetting that true transformation flows from the Spirit at work among embodied people bound together in love.

Connectionalism and Digital Interdependence

Wesleyan connectionalism is a key aspect of Methodist ecclesiology. It views the Church not as isolated individuals or independent congregations, but as a dynamic network of relationships grounded in grace and sustained by mutual responsibility. This concept embodies a theology of communion, where care, mission, and accountability are maintained through a covenantal trust. The structure of connectionalism is not only organizational but also profoundly spiritual. As stated in The Book of Discipline, United Methodists are "bound together in a connectional covenant," reflecting the belief that holiness is nurtured within community rather than in isolation.[12]

In a digitally mediated world, this vision takes on renewed urgency and imaginative possibility. AI and online platforms open expansive pathways for theological dialogue across geography, language, and culture. In such a landscape, Wesleyan connectionalism challenges us to look beyond information exchange and ask whether digital networks can become spaces of shared discernment, pastoral listening, and justice-seeking fellowship. What if our screens became altars of encounter, where scattered believers are knit together in holy conversation and common purpose?[13]

Digital interdependence—our growing reliance on technology for relational, educational, and spiritual engagement—demands theological reflection. Religious education in the age of AI is not just about adapting to change, but reimagining formation within machine-mediated communities. This involves designing AI-driven environments that foster empathy, connection, and mutual care—resonating with Wesleyan values of covenantal accountability and embodied grace.[14] Moore reminds us that digital ministry is not just about using new tools, but discerning how those tools shape the quality of our communal life.[15]

Yet the same technologies that promise connection can also unravel it. The algorithmic logic of personalization and speed often fragments community, enclosing us in theological silos where difference disappears and familiarity replaces truth. In contrast, connectionalism calls for

[11] David Phillips, "Wesley's Parish and the Digital Age?" *Holiness: The Journal of Wesley House Cambridge* 2, no. 3 (2016): 337–58, https://www.wesley.cam.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/04-phillips.pdf.

[12] UMC, *Book of Discipline*, 2024, ¶125.

[13] Phillips, "Wesley's Parish"; David W. Scott, "The Many Meanings of Connectionalism," *UM News*, February 24, 2022, https://www.umnews.org/en/news/the-many-meanings-of-connectionalism.

[14] Matt Gardner, "Nurturing Religious Education Using Artificial Intelligence," *Religious Educator* 26, no. 1 (2025): 17–35, https://rsc.byu.edu/vol-26-no-1-2025/nurturing-religious-education-using-artificial-intelligence.

[15] Jason Moore, "Digital Parish: Navigating the AI Integration in the Church," *ResourceUMC.org*, 2024, https://www.resourceumc.org/en/content/digital-parish-implementing-ai-in-church.

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intentional interdependence—accountability not only to those who agree with us, but to the full body of Christ in all its complexity.

A Wesleyan approach to digital interdependence must remain critically attuned. It must ask not just what platforms can do, but what kind of community they cultivate. Do they deepen shared mission, empower laity, and amplify marginalized voices? Or do they replicate the isolations and inequities of the world that made them? In this reimagining of connectionalism for the digital age, presence and accountability are essential. Platforms must be judged not by reach or efficiency alone, but by whether they nurture the bonds of love, sustain the work of justice, and embody the communal grace at the heart of Wesley's vision for the Church.

The Promise and Peril of AI in Religious Education

Religious education now finds itself at a theological crossroads, as artificial intelligence weaves itself into the fabric of learning. These tools may illuminate the path of wisdom—or cast shadows over the soul's formation.[16] Adaptive learning platforms, intelligent tutoring systems, virtual assistants, and chat-based programs are quickly changing the way theological knowledge is accessed, interpreted, and shared. They hold great promise: customizing instruction to individual needs, responding in real time, and expanding access to theological education across global and linguistic boundaries.[17] And yet, there is peril in mistaking personalization for presence, or interactivity for intimacy. AI cannot feel compassion, offer sacramental care, or model the vulnerability of a living faith community.

The very heart of spiritual formation lies in qualities that resist automation: empathy, embodiment, mutual accountability, and a grace-filled presence. As Moore reminds us, the church must not only adopt new tools but discern how those tools shape the relational and ethical dimensions of community.[18] To embrace AI uncritically is to risk reshaping our pedagogies around what is efficient rather than what is faithful. To reject it outright is to miss the opportunity to guide its use with theological imagination. Thus, the task before religious educators is one of faithful discernment: to examine the uses of AI not only for what they can do, but for who we are becoming when we use them.

Opportunities in AI-Enhanced Learning

AI offers a new horizon for religious education—one where learning bends toward the individual, adapting in real time to meet each soul's unique path. By interpreting patterns in attention, knowledge, and response, these systems can shape content, timing, and guidance to serve the learner more faithfully. For those long excluded by distance or limited resources, such responsiveness may finally open doors once thought permanently closed.[19]

AI-powered translation tools help dismantle linguistic barriers, while digital platforms curate a mosaic of theological voices—feminist, postcolonial, disability-centered, Indigenous— enabling students to encounter a broader cloud of witnesses. For adult learners or bi-vocational ministers whose lives are already full, these tools offer not only access but grace: the ability to

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[16] Papakostas, "Artificial Intelligence in Religious Education."
[17] Gardner, "Nurturing Religious Education."
[18] Moore, "Digital Parish."
[19] Papakostas, "Artificial Intelligence in Religious Education"; Gardner, "Nurturing Religious Education."

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engage deeply with theology within the fragmented rhythms of caregiving, commuting, and late-night study.[20]

Moreover, AI can gently nurture spiritual curiosity: by offering reflective prompts, recommending prayers or readings based on a user's context, or simulating a theologically informed conversation. One might imagine an app that detects anxiety not just as data but as longing, and responds with a psalm of lament or a word from Julian of Norwich. While AI cannot initiate grace, it may create moments of attentiveness—thresholds where prevenient grace may stir.

Rather than seeing AI as a replacement for the teacher, we might welcome it as a faithful companion—supportive of, but never replacing, the sacred rhythms of spiritual formation. Its value lies not in substituting presence, but in extending new invitations to encounter the holy—so long as we remain grounded in the ethical and theological weight of the stories we tell through it.

Risks and Limitations

The same qualities that make artificial intelligence alluring—its precision, scalability, and responsiveness—also unveil its deepest limitations. Faith formation is not merely an intellectual exercise or a cognitive transaction. It is embodied, messy, and deeply relational. It unfolds in hospital rooms, in sanctuaries drenched with memory, in the silent grief shared between spiritual companions. AI, however sophisticated, cannot anoint the sick, break bread in community, or hold space for mystery. It lacks the capacity for lament, the wisdom that emerges from suffering, and the sacred vulnerability that forms the heart of spiritual mentorship.

Even as AI can parse texts and suggest patterns, it cannot speak into the layered complexities of human longing. It does not know what it means to hope against hope, to forgive the unforgivable, or to pray through the silence of God.

Moreover, we must acknowledge what theologians and ethicists increasingly affirm: AI is not neutral. Its algorithms are born from human decisions—shaped by the values, assumptions, and biases embedded in the datasets that train them. In religious education, this can result in the subtle reinforcement of dominant theological frameworks, the commodification of sacred practices, or the marginalization of historically silenced voices. What becomes prioritized, and what disappears? Whose orthodoxy is preserved, and whose questions are edited out?

In their volume *A Curious Machine*, Arseny Ermakov and Glen O'Brien[21] (2023, 8) remind us with theological clarity:

> Christians should consider technology among the good gifts of God… Like all divine gifts, however, a danger lies in their misuse and misapplication arising out of the fallenness of the human condition… Technology is power, and power is a seductive capacity that is open to prideful and idolatrous misuse. Jesus taught us to be 'harmless as doves' but also 'wise as serpents' (Matt 10:16).

Their words echo ancient wisdom: we are to receive the gift, but not without discernment. Theological educators must resist both technophobia and uncritical celebration. Instead, we are

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[20] Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis, *E-Learning Ecologies: Principles for New Learning and Assessment* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

[21] Arseny Ermakov and Glen O'Brien, "Introduction," in *A Curious Machine: Wesleyan Reflections on the Posthuman Future,* eds. Arseny Ermakov and Glen O'Brien (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2023), 8.

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called to hold gratitude and vigilance together—to welcome AI as a tool for healing and access, while remaining alert to the ways it might distort, distract, or dehumanize.

Discernment, then, becomes the central spiritual posture. It is not simply about assessing outcomes, but about attending to how technology shapes our vision of God, self, and neighbor. And that discernment cannot be outsourced to code. As digital tools increasingly mediate theological learning, we risk displacing the embodied presence of the teacher, the wisdom of the elder, and the formation that occurs through communal struggle and joy.

No algorithm, however advanced, can replace the sacred trust built in spiritual companionship. Machine-generated recommendations may offer insight, but they cannot witness transformation.

RQ vs. IQ: Rethinking Intelligence

The rise of artificial intelligence—with its ability to process data, mimic conversation, and generate persuasive language—challenges us to rethink what intelligence means, especially in the context of faith formation. AI excels where traditional models of intelligence prize speed, logic, and efficiency. But faith is not formed through optimization.

Spiritual formation involves a slower, relational kind of knowing, rooted in vulnerability. Religious intelligence (RQ) isn't about mastering doctrine or crafting flawless arguments—it's about how we live when certainty fails, how we love in suffering, and how we discern in ambiguity. RQ confronts the questions machines cannot answer: How do I forgive? Where is God in grief? What does it mean to hope when nothing changes?

This kind of knowing draws not from data, but from grace, community, and the sacred rhythms of transformation. It's nurtured through prayer, silence, lament, Eucharist, and the witness of those who walk through pain with faith. AI can organize theology and simulate dialogue, but it cannot sit in stillness with the brokenhearted or embody compassion.

Religious intelligence is not just important for spiritual growth—it's essential for shaping communities that prize wisdom over certainty, and depth over performance. Christian knowledge is lived, not just learned; it takes root in our bodies, rituals, and stories. When education is overly mediated by disembodied tech, we risk forming students who can explain doctrine but struggle to embody love.

To center RQ is not to reject AI, but to place it rightly—as tool, not teacher. The question is not whether machines can teach theology, but whether they help us become more human: more just, more gracious, more attuned to the Spirit's movement. The knowledge we need cannot be coded. It is born of love, refined by suffering, and sustained by grace.

Dialogue Between Theology and Technology

Engaging the intersection of theology and technology is no longer a distant thought experiment—it is a pastoral calling. As artificial intelligence weaves itself into the fabric of daily life, theological educators are summoned to respond not only to the tools themselves, but to the stories they tell—stories about what it means to be human, how we belong to one another, and how we make moral choices. Technology is never neutral; it bears values, shapes habits, and can serve both as balm and as blade. To be faithful in such a moment is to name its power, discern its presence, and steward its use within communities formed by grace.

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In this work of discernment, the Wesleyan tradition offers a deep well from which to draw—rooted in a faith that is lived, embodied, and integrative. It insists that theology is not only spoken from the pulpit but lived in daily practice, shaping how we build our institutions, craft our tools, and name the holy. Within this framework, three touchstones guide our exploration of AI and theology: a theological anthropology that honors our sacred worth, embodied case studies that ground our discernment, and a renewed digital ecclesiology that reimagines community in the age of machines.

Theological Anthropology in an AI World

Among the many promises AI brings to religious education, one of the most compelling is its capacity to foster learner-centered environments. By analyzing patterns of engagement, learning gaps, and user behavior, AI can customize content delivery, adjust pacing, and offer individualized feedback—shifting theological education away from a one-size-fits-all model toward one that honors the diverse rhythms, questions, and contexts of its learners.

This is especially transformative for adult learners and bi-vocational ministers whose access to formal theological education has been limited by time, geography, or financial barriers. Ethically designed AI platforms can support theological reflection at the margins. Translation tools bridge linguistic divides, while curated digital resources amplify the voices of those often excluded from dominant theological canons.

AI can also serve as a companion to spiritual curiosity. Intelligent systems pose reflective questions, suggest scripture or prayers, or simulate dialogue that invites deeper inquiry. A seeker on a solitary commute might receive a morning liturgy centered on lament or hope; a late-night learner could be nudged toward examen or Sabbath. When framed as instruments rather than instructors, these technologies can open sacred space in unexpected places.

Yet these capabilities raise important questions: What theological frameworks guide AI's content curation? Who defines the criteria for personalization? What values are built into its design? Religious educators must do more than use these tools—they must help shape them, ensuring that what is offered is not just efficient, but faithful.

We must remember that technology is more than a tool—it carries the imprint of the society that creates it. It not only shapes our actions but also forms how we perceive, relate, and imagine the world. The task before us is neither to embrace AI without question nor to cast it aside in fear, but to engage it with theological imagination and pastoral care. What matters is not merely what AI is capable of, but whether its design encourages attentiveness, nurtures humility, and makes room for the slow unfolding of spiritual growth.

Digital Ecclesiology: Reimagining Church in the Algorithmic Age

The church now lives in digital spaces—its prayers typed, its songs streamed, its communion shared across time zones and screens. In this new terrain, the sacred has found surprising new expressions. Yet as artificial intelligence begins to compose our liturgies, track our attendance, and echo our pastoral voices, we are faced with deeper questions: Where does presence truly dwell? Can algorithms bear the weight of compassion, mystery, and grace? To be church in this age is to listen anew for the Spirit—amid circuits, silence, and human longing.

From a Wesleyan perspective, the church is not a content delivery system, but the living Body of Christ, "joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped"

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(Ephesians 4:16, NRSV). It is a community called and gathered by grace, shaped through sacrament, song, and service. Its life is incarnational-rooted in presence not merely physical, but spiritual and relational. The sacraments, class meetings, and means of grace require encounter: shared vulnerability, accountability, and the embodied rhythms of communal life.[22]

Digital platforms may support ecclesial practice—extending access, recording memory, enabling collaboration—but they cannot replace the Spirit-infused presence of gathered bodies. In a Wesleyan ecclesiology, the means of grace are not merely symbolic; they are participatory events in which God acts. AI may assist with structure, but it cannot mediate grace.

The connectional imagination invites us to dream anew: Can digital spaces expand the church's reach without thinning its depth? Might AI become a companion—helping us notice spiritual needs, bridge languages, and connect the scattered? If shaped by values like inclusion, trust, and mutual care, perhaps it can. Yet we must remain vigilant against the logics of digital systems. Algorithmic personalization may streamline engagement, but it can also fragment, reducing faith to preference. A Wesleyan digital ecclesiology reminds us: technology must serve koinonia, not convenience; formation, not consumption; and always the church's mission to gather, nurture, and send in love.

Pedagogical Implications

Integrating AI into religious education is not a neutral act of innovation—it is a deeply pedagogical and theological decision. As digital technologies reshape how we teach and learn, they inevitably prompt us to reexamine what it means to form people in faith: not only to impart knowledge, but to nurture wisdom, compassion, and communal belonging.

Within the Wesleyan tradition, pedagogy is not simply a delivery method; it is a spiritual practice rooted in grace, community, and transformation. Like Paulo Freire's insistence that education is never neutral but always political,[23] Wesleyan pedagogy affirms that how we teach reflects what we believe about God and humanity. Formation is a sacred act—it shapes not just the mind, but the heart and the will. The question is not only "what works," but "what forms."

Maintaining Learner-Centered but Spiritually Formative Education

One of the strongest appeals of AI in theological education is its ability to personalize learning—adapting content to a student's pace, offering contextual feedback, and widening access to theological resources. These tools can be especially valuable for adult learners, neurodiverse students, and those balancing study with work or ministry.

Yet personalization alone is not formation. A Wesleyan vision of education insists that spiritual growth is communal and embodied. It unfolds through relationships—with mentors who model faith, peers who ask hard questions, and communities that practice justice, mercy, and grace. Whether in a classroom or online, formation happens in sacred spaces where stories are shared, wounds are witnessed, and transformation begins. While AI can support learning, it cannot replace the relational heart of discipleship. Machines may guide, but they cannot discern vocation. They may recommend texts, but they cannot grieve with a student or celebrate grace breaking through. Formation is slow, relational, and deeply human.

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[22] UMC, *Book of Discipline,* 2024, ¶105.
[23] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* 30th Anniversary ed., trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2000), 34, 66.

Theological educators must hold the tension between the efficiency of automation and the slowness of grace. What must remain incarnational and unautomated? Can AI help amplify the silenced, support the unseen, or extend welcome to those the traditional classroom has left behind? This is not simply a matter of convenience, but of faithful design. AI should not replace presence, but make space for it—guided by a pedagogy that sees students not as data points, but as beloved children of God, formed through compassion as much as curriculum.

Design Principles for AI in Religious Education

To engage AI faithfully in theological education, its design must be shaped not just by function, but by our core convictions. Wesleyan theology—with its emphasis on grace, relationality, and holistic formation—calls us to resist educational models driven by speed, output, or control. Instead, we are invited to imagine AI as a servant of transformation, woven into a pedagogy that fosters wisdom, compassion, and community. From this theological grounding, several key principles emerge:

1. Formation over Function
   Educational tools should not be valued solely for their efficiency, but for their ability to nurture spiritual depth. True formation requires more than information—it invites reflection, ethical engagement, and interior growth.

2. Relational over Isolated
   Learning is not a solitary or mechanical process. AI should support relationships—with mentors, peers, and communities of practice—reflecting the communal nature of discipleship.

3. Grace-Aware Design
   Spiritual growth is not linear or standardized. Systems must honor the unpredictability of grace—making space for mystery, struggle, and transformation that unfolds in hidden ways.

4. Diverse and Inclusive
   Theological education must reflect the global Body of Christ. AI systems must uplift varied voices, resist cultural centralization, and draw from the richness of many traditions.

5. Accountable and Transparent
   Educators must understand how AI works, question the values it encodes, and ensure ethical implementation. Transparency safeguards the integrity of learning and community.

6. Supplement, Not Substitute
   AI can assist, but never replace, the wisdom of a teacher or the embrace of community. The incarnational nature of formation must remain central.

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In the end, the question is not what AI can do, but who we are becoming. These principles call us to walk a path of discernment—embracing innovation without losing sight of the Spirit who forms us in love, wisdom, and grace.

Reframing AI Through Wesleyan Lenses

Artificial intelligence is more than a technical innovation—it is a shaping force in how we understand learning, identity, and community. As such, it must be approached not only with strategic intent but with theological depth. The Wesleyan tradition offers a framework of discernment, rooted in the commitments of prevenient grace, social holiness, and connectionalism—each offering a lens through which we might evaluate the place of AI in faith formation.

Prevenient grace reminds us that God's work begins before our awareness, inviting us to consider: Does the presence of AI in our educational spaces cultivate wonder, attentiveness, and spiritual awakening? Or does it simply increase speed, efficiency, and consumption? Social holiness grounds us in the conviction that faith is formed in relationship. It prompts us to ask: Are our uses of AI building communities of care, accountability, and shared wisdom—or are they reinforcing patterns of isolation and consumer-driven faith? Connectionalism, a hallmark of Methodist ecclesiology, calls us to examine the nature of our ties across difference. Does AI strengthen our bonds of shared learning and ministry, or does it sort and silo us by algorithmic logic, fragmenting the body of Christ?

In this light, AI is not a neutral tool. It is a moral decision—one that shapes not only how we teach, but who we are becoming. Wesleyan theology invites us to move beyond the question of utility and toward the deeper question of formation: Are we cultivating disciples who love God and neighbor with grace, wisdom, and holy imagination?

A Discernment Tool: Four Theological Questions

To guide practice, the following questions help educators and communities assess AI integration:

1. Is it spiritually formative?
   : Does it nurture reflection, prayer, and theological depth—or just deliver content?

2. Does it foster authentic relationships?
   : Are learners in real connection with peers and mentors—or isolated?

3. Does it respect human dignity?
   : Are people treated as grace-formed persons—or reduced to data?

4. Is it accountable to community?
   : Who shapes and oversees the system—and are diverse voices included?

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Conclusion: Grace-Filled Education in an AI Age

As artificial intelligence continues to transform our thinking, learning, and connections, religious education faces a crucial moment of reflection. The key question is not just whether we should embrace AI, but how we can do so in a manner that stays true to our fundamental theological beliefs. The Wesleyan tradition—anchored in prevenient grace, social holiness, and connectional accountability—offers both a caution and a calling. It warns us against reducing formation to data points, community to convenience, or wisdom to algorithmic output. Yet it also opens space to imagine how even the most complex technologies might serve as channels of grace—when held within communities shaped by love, discernment, and the Spirit's leading.

This paper examines AI not merely as a neutral tool, but as a cultural influence that presents both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, AI has the potential to personalize learning, improve accessibility, and facilitate theological exploration. On the other hand, it poses risks such as depersonalizing the formation process, reinforcing biases, and undermining the personal relationships that are essential for spiritual growth.Theological education, then, must be shaped not by technological momentum or novelty, but by a vision of formation that attends to the whole person—intellect, spirit, and community—held together by grace.

A Wesleyan-informed approach offers a way forward: one that refuses to idolize either progress or preservation. Instead, it invites faithful tension—a living integration of tradition and innovation. In this framework, religious intelligence (RQ) is not something we program, but something we cultivate through presence, compassion, and shared life. As AI becomes more adept at simulating theological insight or pastoral care, we are pressed to ask: What remains beyond imitation? What requires the slow, sacred labor of human presence?

To be faithful in a digital age is not to be anti-technology, but to be theologically awake. The task before us is not to protect the past nor chase the future, but to form disciples who can live wisely, humbly, and courageously amid change. The church must be a community not only of memory, but of imagination—capable of recognizing the Spirit's movement even in unfamiliar terrain, while remaining rooted in the enduring truth of the gospel.

In the end, the question is not simply whether AI has a place in religious education. The deeper question is whether our engagement with AI helps us become more attuned to the God who forms us through grace, binds us in community, and sends us into the world as agents of wisdom and love. In that calling, there is hope—not only for theological education, but for a more human, more compassionate, more grace-filled digital future.

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Author: W. Tay Moss, M.Div.
Institution: CHURCHx / Toronto United Church Council
eMail: imc@tucc.ca
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Sacred in Silicon: An Empirical Study of Human-Chatbot Interactions in the Religious Domain

Abstract

As educators and faith leaders integrate generative AI into religious teaching and formation, it is crucial to examine the dynamics of human-AI conversations, particularly in religious contexts. This empirical research project explores the interactions between users and the religious chatbot "Ask Cathy," which engages users in dialogue about the Episcopal Church. Analyzing over 12,000 conversations, this research aims to uncover the differences and similarities between human-to-human and human-to-AI dialogues, particularly in the realm of spiritual and educational communication. This paper is an overview of the advanced computational linguistic tools being used including BERTopic analysis, sentiment analysis, dialog act recognition, dialogue act sequence visualization, and batch LLM inquiries. As the team begins to analyze the data, preliminary findings suggest a rich corpus of interactions spanning many topics with complex interactions. The research also considers how AI chatbots like "Cathy" might influence religious education, especially in their ability to challenge or reinforce beliefs and prompt spiritual reflection. By examining patterns of learning, emotional tone, and theological discourse in AI interactions, this project offers a pioneering, multifaceted methodology for understanding the potential and limitations of AI in faith-based contexts, with broader implications for the future of AI in education and ministry.

Introduction to the Project

As educators and faith leaders leverage the power of generative AI to create rich, interactive activities to teach and form participants, there is a need to understand the character and dialogical mechanics of human-to-AI conversations: form and function. Religious conversations, rich with existential questions of faith, matters of fact, and complex interpersonal dynamics, offer a special category to explore human-to-AI dialectics. In what way are these conversations the same or different than human-to-human interactions upon which most of our pedagogical strategies are built. In what ways do those strategies need to be modified, abandoned, or re-emphasized in the age of AI-powered teaching?

This project seeks to begin answering those questions with a case study of the religious Chatbot "Ask Cathy," which engaged in over 12,455 conversations comprising more than 105,298 messages. Developed to answer questions about the Episcopal Church using a

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comprehensive library of source documents and employing Retrieval-Augmented Generation (RAG), Cathy provides accurate, domain-specific, and verifiable answers. The extensive dataset of these conversations has enabled a research team of seven to pioneer new methods for understanding the nuances of human-to-AI interactions.

Thanks for a grant from the Lilly Foundation and in partnership with General Theological Seminary (NYC), a team of eight has begun a 12-week effort to explore these conversations. The team consists of Tay Moss (Principal Investigator and Project Lead), Michael Delashmutt (Co-Investigator), Erin Green (Head Researcher), Spencer Levy (Reasearch Assistant), Aaron Frankruyter (Research Manager), plus three Co-op Students in Machine Learning and Artificiall Intelligence at Humber College: Gabriela Teixeira, Kowsiya Vijayakumar, and Aleem Wadhwaniya.

This paper will introduce the research project by providing some of the historical context of conversational interfaces, the methodologies we are employing for analysis, and the software platform we have built to analyze chatbot logs in educational and faith-based contexts. Our work is still very much preliminary as we sprinting hard this summer, but this paper will share thoughts about the tools we are using or building and the directions that our research is headed. Our twelve-week period of intensive research has only just begun, but we expect by the fall we have completed a major piece of empirical research offering valuable perspectives for educators, education technologists, and faith leaders.

Theoretical Groundings and Historic Overview of Human-Machine Relations

Human-to-technology conversations are not new. Perhaps the first such dialog occurred when our Australopithecus ancestors became frustrated or delighted by the operation of a sharp rock and told it so 3.4 million years ago. We name (and gender!) ships, cars, and bicycles. We speak to objects as though they could be influenced by our words ("Please don't die on me, now, Mister Photocopier!") and attribute discretionary agency to the most deterministic of mechanical processes.

We brought this impulse into the computer age. Alan Turing, the "Father of Computer Science" leapt quickly from creating the core mathematical concepts necessary to create computers[1] to envisioning machines mimicking conversation with his famous "Imitation Game" thought experiment: aka "The Turing Test"[2].

As Turing predicted, text would be a compelling human-machine interface. Using relatively simple procedural logic, Joseph Weizenbaum created a program to mimic a human therapist. His ELIZA program demonstrated the "illusion of intelligence," showing how users would enthusiastically embrace simulated social interaction. He was astonished to observe the strong emotional responses elicited by the people who interacted with ELIZA[3]. Weizebaum

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[1] Turing, 1936.
[2] Turing, 1950.
[3] Weizebaum, 1966.

coined the term "ELIZA Effect" to identify the tendency to attribute human-like intelligence to AI, even when users know (at a rational level) the limitations of the machines.

We note that this is similar the psychological concept of parasocial relationships (PSRs), where people form one-sided emotional bonds[4]. Often the objects of such attachments are public figures who engender trust (e.g. Oprah Winfrey or Walter Cronkite), actors or the fictional roles they portray (e.g. Tom Cruise or "Maveric"), athletes (e.g. Serena Williams or LeBron James), or musicians (e.g. Taylor Swift or Elvis Presley). Parasocial relationships are not inherently unhealthy, and in fact have psychological utility by providing comfort, identity, and inspiration[5].

We note (anecdotally, not empirically, yet) that many users in the "Cathy" Corpus appear to lean into the anthropomorphising by either being deliberately polite or hostile. In our efforts to identify "Dialogue Acts," we came across many that were simple but unnecessary social niceties such as gratitude. However, the opposite can be observed, too. A subset of users engage in arguments about contested issues like homosexuality or the ordination of women. Their tone and manner are aggressive to the point that would likely create push-back in most social media or real-world interactions, which raises the question of whether the perceived anonymity and lack of social consequence frees these users to express opinions otherwise censored by social expectations. Perhaps the outrage is performative in character—a cathartic working-out of suppressed feelings? These users appear to be logging on for the emotional affordance of performing their anger without fear of the social repercussions that could happen from being rude to real people.

Byron Reeves and Clifford Nass's CASA (Computers Are Social Actors) paradigm suggests that humans instinctively apply social rules to computers displaying social cues[6]. Research confirms users treat AI with politeness, reciprocity, and even gender biases. Even before the rise of Generative AI, the CASA concept was being applied in the field of Human Computer Interaction (HCI) to optimize design for things like voice assistants, phone trees, and more. Since the AI revolution, the CASA concept appears ready for a major elaboration, yet it is not the only key to unlocking the human-AI relationship puzzle.

Theory of Mind (ToM)—the ability to attribute mental states—is also also a useful paradigm to apply in our work. Does the AI anticipate how we might think in the way it appears to understand physics when producing AI generated videos of a person playing catch? Video models like Veo do not have an explicit model of physics taught to them yet produce videos that show evidence that they have a "world model" that successfully anticipates the behaviour of objects in flight. Could AI develop a similar emergent capacity for anticipating human thinking? A similar question could go the other way, as humans anticipate AI behaviour in their questions. For example, people often use Cathy as an information retrieval tool, as though it were a search engine, perhaps because they anticipate accuracy if they are AI optimists or hallucinations if they are AI skeptics. In research studies, AI models now

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[4] Horton and Wohl, 1956.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Reeves and Nass, 1996.

perform at human levels on ToM tests, potentially leading to more empathetic dialogues[7]. The concept of Mutual Theory of Mind (MToM) envisions AI understanding human intent, transforming conversational AI into more intuitive and responsive systems, even as humans attempt to form a ToM to explain and anticipate the AI's behaviour.

Recent studies have demonstrated AI chatbots' surprising ability to dissuade users from conspiracy theories. For instance, Thomas Costello and colleagues found that an AI chatbot could reduce belief in conspiracy theories by approximately 20%, with effects lasting up to two months[8]. They attributed this success solely to reasoning-based tactics, not manipulative strategies[9]. Thus, equipping chatbots with carefully curated factual collections appears to be a promising strategy for changing "hearts and minds" in religious or educational contexts. However, the mechanics of persuasion, and particularly "learning," in this emerging medium are not yet well understood. This research project aims to extend our understanding through careful conversational analysis.

Our team has reached out to many individuals who use AI tools in teaching humanities subjects including religion, but most of these efforts are more experimental and exploratory in character. One notable school making efforts in this area is Acadia University[10], which has run several experiments in using AI to assist in course design and assessment, though efforts to create AI tutors or conversational agents was less developed at the time of the last correspondence. One source that has used conversational agents to teach religion is Dr. Randy Reed at Appalachian State University. His "Study Buddy" used class lecture transcripts to review lecture material with students. Surveys were conducted over several iterations of the class and the result was a high satisfaction from the uses of the tool[11]. Feedback was used by Dr. Reed to tweak his "Study Buddy" learning activity.

One of the more famous recent examples of the use of conversational AI in teaching was the Harvard experiment that used AI to teach Physics[12]. An AI Tutor was designed to follow the pedagogical path created for an in-class course (Physical Sciences 2) and a cohort of students volunteered to use it rather than the take the in-class version. The result was an astonishing improvement in testing against the in-class baseline as well as better self-reported engagement and motivation. These results show the promising potential of human-AI conversations to improve learning, at least when they are carefully designed to follow established pedagogical designs.

Our team is currently undertaking a literature review to find more evidence of experiments like these, as well as theoretical frameworks to analyse and characterize the interactions of the "Cathy" corpus but have not found attempts to systematically review chatlogs from religious AI agents.

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[7] Strachan, 2024.
[8] Costello, 2024.
[9] Costello, 2025.
[10] Robbins, 2024.
[11] Reed, 2024.
[12] Kestin and Miller, 2024

Understanding "Cathy"

The chatbot responsible for the corpus was the brainchild of two Episcopal Priests: The Rev'd Lorenzo Lebrija and The Rev'd Tay Moss (the author of this paper). It was created to provide the public with easy access to correct information about the Episcopal Church. This was done using the "RAG" architecture. Retrieval Augmented Generation is a method for providing conversational AI a domain specific, vetted context for answering user queries. It combines a traditional Large Language Model chat agent (like ChatGPT or Claude) with a "Retriever" mechanism. When a user submits a query, the "Retriever" attempts to find relevant information in a library of resources, and the chat agent is given both the context and the original user prompt.

Retrieval Augmented Generation
Grounding Answers in Authoritative Info
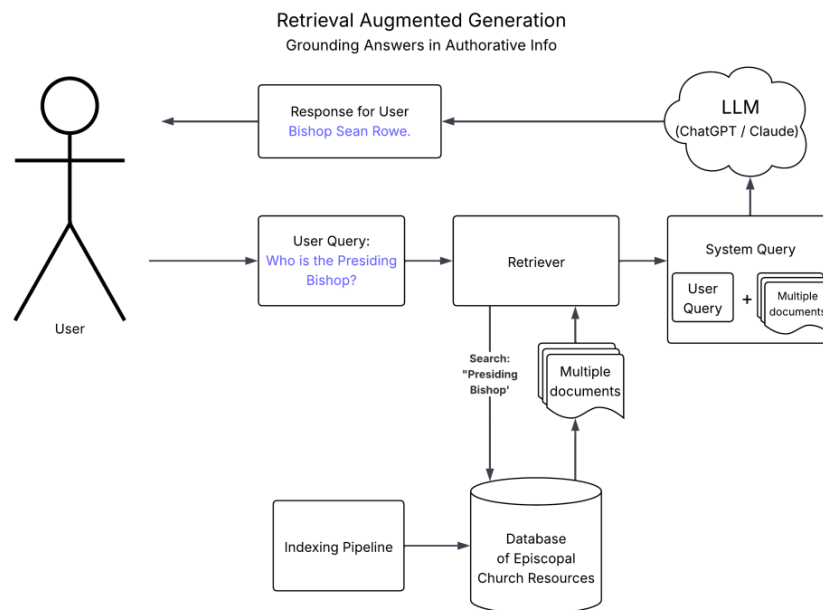
The advantage of this approach is that it overcomes many of the usual limitations of off-the-shelf commercial chatbots. Answers are grounded in an authoritative library of resources that has been pre-chosen at achieve the purpose of providing context to an AI agent. In the case of "Cathy" that included about 11,000,000 characters taken from Episcopal Church websites, books (provided under licensing agreement), church liturgical material (the Book of Common Prayer) and more. Not only can the chatbot answer the user questions, but it can also cite its sources.

The creators of "Cathy" were frequently asked about the name and why they chose to lean into the anthropomorphizing of the AI. The short answer is that it seemed like a way to make the technology accessible and "friendly." The idea was to imagine a friendly, knowledgeable, non-ordained person with deep knowledge of the Episcopal Church's history and traditions. Cathy was deliberately not meant to be an avatar for an ordained person.

Cathy was also programmed to be aware of "her" ontological status and to remind users, when necessary, that "she" is not a person, but rather an AI. When users asked for it to bless them, for example, it would quickly point out that is not a human, much less a priest, and

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cannot bless or pray. Nonetheless, the choice to give the AI a woman's name has been the source of some mild controversy, with some people pointing out that it seemed to perpetuate stereotypes of women in the church. Thus, the next generation of the bot is being renamed "EpiscoBot."

Cathy was offered as a free tool available via a simple website hosted at https://askcathy.ai, however, churches were also given the chance to also "embed" the bot within their own websites. It was represented to all users (through the website's privacy policy as well as the FAQ) that although the logs of their chat conversations would be used for research, no personally identifiable information would be retained. The Cathy logs do not include IP address, session cookies, email addresses, or any other identifying information.

Methodologies: An Introduction to Tay's Tools

With such a large corpus of chatlogs to analyse, the team was excited to use techniques from computational linguistics as a primary means of making sense of the data. We were interested in finding patterns, particularly ones that would not make intuitive sense at first blush, but which are supported by the data. We wanted to understand how these conversations are different than human-to-human interactions and the implications for teaching.

As we began to plan our work, we recognized that we would need to be able to prototype and iteratively develop a great number of different investigation strategies. Rather than invest heavily in one or two well-known linguistic analysis tools, the team decided, instead, to build our own analytics and data gathering platform. We call it "Tay's Tools."

"Tay's Tools" is a completely bespoke research platform designed to be customizable and extensible. It runs on an 8-core Xeon workstation with Ubuntu Linux and is designed to support multiple researchers and research projects simultaneously. A job queue system is used to sequence compute-intensive forms of analysis efficiently in an asynchronous manner. Key services installed on the system include BERTopic, Sentiment Analysis pipelines, a Dialog Acts Recognition System, batch-query processing for using external services (such as Hugging Face and OpenAI), data visualization tools, a dataset library, pre-processing filters, and more.

Below are some of the modules we have developed and begun to test, but this is by no means an exhaustive list of the modules built for Tay's Tools, and many of the tools listed here are in continuous development as we refine our questions and methods.

Chatlog Pre-Processing

One of the most important steps in any linguistic processing effort is gathering and pre-processing data. Our system uses system of modular filters that can be "stacked" in sequences to process existing datasets to create new ones. Here is a partial list of the filters available:

Core Filtering Operations

1. Profanity/Hate Speech Filter
- Description: Detects and filters content containing profanity or hate speech.

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- Value: Allows detection of conversations that show users violating normal social mores. In some cases, we may wish to exclude such conversations in our analysis, and in other cases explore them exclusively.

2. Boolean Text Filter (/preprocess/filter_text_boolean)

- Description: Filters records based on presence/absence of specific text strings or regex patterns.
- Value: Crucial for finding specific types of conversations (e.g., complaints, compliments, technical issues) or filtering out system messages.

3. Language Detection Filter (/preprocess/filter_language)

- Description: Filters conversations based on detected language with confidence thresholds
- Value: Critical for multilingual chat logs to isolate conversations in specific languages for targeted analysis

4. Length Filter (/preprocess/filter_length)

- Description: Filters messages based on character length (more than, less than, equal to)
- Value: Helps remove very short responses (like "ok", "yes") or overly long messages that might be spam or errors

5. Boolean Integer Filter (/preprocess/filter_integer_boolean)

- Description: Filters records based on numerical field comparisons (timestamps, user IDs, etc.)
- Value: Useful for filtering conversations by date ranges, user engagement levels, or session durations

6. Filter n Message in Conversation (/preprocess/filternmessage)

- Description: Filters messages based on their position in the conversation sequence
- Value: Enables analysis of conversation patterns (e.g., only first messages for greeting analysis, last messages for conclusion patterns)

Text Transformation Operations

7. Case Normalization (/preprocess/normalize_case)

- Description: Converts text to lowercase
- Value: Standardizes text for consistent analysis and prevents case-sensitivity issues in pattern matching

8. Stemming (/preprocess/stem_text)

- Description: Reduces words to their root forms using algorithms like Porter or Snowball
- Value: Groups related words together (e.g., "running", "runs", "ran" → "run") for better topic analysis

9. Lemmatization (/preprocess/lemmatize_text)

- Description: Reduces words to their dictionary base forms using linguistic analysis

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- Value: More accurate than stemming for semantic analysis of AI conversations, preserving meaning better

10. Stop Word Removal (/preprocess/remove_stopwords)

- Description: Removes common words ("the", "and", "is") that don't carry semantic meaning
- Value: Focuses analysis on meaningful content words, improving topic modeling and sentiment analysis.

11. Stop Phrase Removal (/preprocess/remove_stopphrases)

- Description: Removes common conversational phrases ("Hi", "Thanks", "I have a question")
- Value: Strips away conversational pleasantries to focus on the core content of AI interactions

12. Normalization (/preprocess/normalization)

- Description: Standardizes religious names, references, and abbreviations
- Value: Ensures consistent terminology analysis (e.g., "TEC" → "The Episcopal Church") for domain-specific chat logs

Utility Operations

13. Date to Datecode Converter (/preprocess/date_to_code)

- Description: Converts between human-readable dates and UNIX timestamps
- Value: Enables time-series analysis of conversation patterns and temporal trends in AI interactions

14. Delete Fields (/preprocess/deletefields)

- Description: Removes specified JSON fields from records
- Value: Cleans up data by removing unnecessary metadata, reducing file size and processing complexity

Additional Filters in Consideration for Development

Content Cleaning Filters:

- Punctuation/HTML/URL Removal: Clean messy chat data
- Emoji Handling: Convert emojis to text or remove them for cleaner analysis
- Whitespace Normalization: Standardize formatting

Advanced Analysis Filters:

- Named Entity Recognition: Identify people, organizations, locations in conversations
- Duplicate Detection: Remove repeated messages or conversations

Strategic Value for Conversational AI Analysis

These filters collectively enable:

- Quality Control: Remove spam, inappropriate content, and noise
- Standardization: Normalize text for consistent analysis across different sources
- Focus: Filter to specific conversation types, languages, or time periods

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- Scalability: Process large chat log datasets efficiently with targeted preprocessing
- Accuracy: Improve downstream analysis (sentiment, topic modeling, intent detection) through clean, standardized data

The chainable nature of these filters allows for sophisticated preprocessing pipelines tailored to specific analysis goals, making them invaluable for extracting meaningful insights from conversational AI interactions.

Topic Modelling

A very basic and important question for us was "What do people want to talk to a religion chatbot about?" Characterizing conversations or individual messages by topic is a well-known technique in natural language processing known as "Topic Analysis." Surveying the field, we decided to use the best currently available tool for topic modeling: BERTopic.

BERTopic is an Open Source software (freely available software package) for identifying and organizing themes within a corpus of text — like survey responses, articles, or chatbot logs. It uses transformers (like BERT, though we have also configured it use OpenAI's "embedding-text-large-3" model) to represent the meaning of chunks of text (such a sentence, or a whole conversation) in a mathematical space. Once all the data has been mapped into multi-dimensional array, it is possible to see how natural clusters arise as the conversations tended to "group" themselves together.

This approach has the advantage that the groups that arise, statically, from the data are completely intrinsic to the corpus at hand. Yet these categories can often be hard to interpret. The exact opposite approach would be to impose a schema from outside the data. The BERTopic system has the interesting advantage that it has the flexibility to offer both pure intrinsic topic discovery and the ability to "seed" topics to nudge the analysis into human-legible categories. Tay's Tools offers the ability explore both: completely automatic topic detection or seeding topics by both keyword or sample text. Part of the discovery work has been tweaking the settings and experimenting with many different configurations of BERTopic.

We have taken advantage of BERTopic's ability to create visualizations, too. An example output from BERtopic is shown here for illustration:

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Details for: 4945ccf6-5193-46bf-b1d0-c469c6e00b2c/analysis_data.json Close View

Analysis Statistics

Total Units Analyzed: 11208

Total Word Count: 9965806

Processing Time: 730.75s

Original Units Input: 11916

Non-English Filtered: 708

Number of Topics Requested: 8

Analysis Unit: entire-conversation

Embedding Model: text-embedding-3-large

`English Only`

`Reduced Frequent Words`

Message Distribution by Topic

- Topic 0 (60.4%)
- Topic 1 (21.3%)
- Topic 2 (16.3%)
- Topic 3 (0.8%)
- Topic 4 (0.7%)
- Topic 5 (0.4%)
- Topic 6 (0.3%)

Topic 1 (21.3%)
Topics: 1689 messages (21.3%)
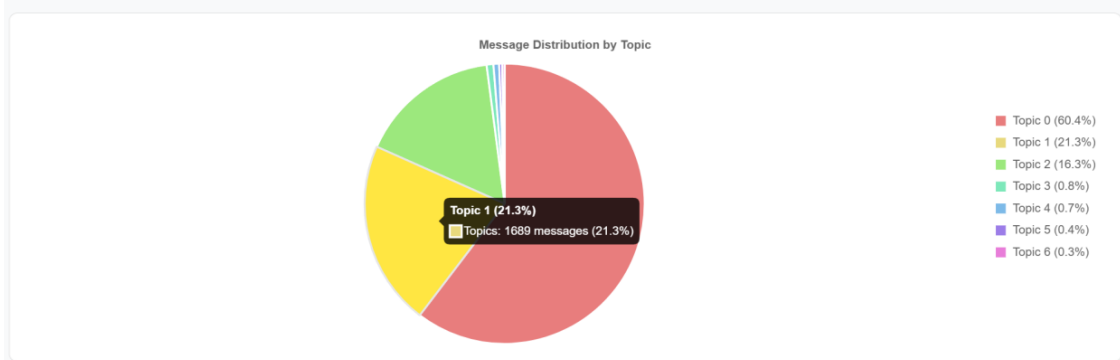
Topic Summary

Topic 0

Keywords: *church, episcopal, of, and, in, to, is, the, as, that*

4789 messages (60.4%)

Top Representative Messages:

- user: What are the three oils? assistant: In the Episcopal Church, there are three holy oils used in different sacraments and rites: 1. **Oil of ...
- user: when a priest is psychologically impaired, are they susceptible to Title IV charges? assistant: In the Episcopal Church, Title IV of the Can...
- user: The Anaphora (or Eucharistic Prayer) of the 1662 BCP does not contain three major liturgical units found in the Scottish Communion Office of ...

Export Topic Sample

Regenerate Description

AI Description: Topic 0 focuses on discussions related to the practices, sacraments, and governance within the Episcopal Church. It includes inquiries about liturgical elements, the use of holy oils, and the implications of clergy conduct under church law.

Topic 1

Keywords: *prayer, for, and, to, of, in, you, the, your, on*

1689 messages (21.3%)

Top Representative Messages:

- user: what is a rogation day? assistant: Rogation Days are traditionally observed on the Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday before Ascension Day. Thes...
- user: Write a matching grant request letter to the diocese for an historic 136-year-old church that has bids of $50,000 for exterior painting, $12,...
- user: Why pray assistant: Prayer is an essential practice in the Episcopal Church, and it serves multiple purposes. According to "Walk in Love: Ep...

Export Topic Sample

Regenerate Description

AI Description: Topic 1 captures the significance and practices of prayer within a religious context, particularly in the Episcopal Church. It encompasses inquiries about specific prayer days, grant requests for church funding, and the overall importance of prayer in community and personal spirituality.

Topic 2

Keywords: *jesus, god, his, to, of, in, and, is, this, that*

1291 messages (16.3%)

Top Representative Messages:

- user: Can you give me talking points based on John 4:11-13 for a pre k through 8th grade chapel assistant: Certainly! When discussing John 4:11-13...
- user: What is the trouble in the Bible in Colossians 3:12-17 assistant: Colossians 3:12-17 is a passage that provides guidance for Christian livin...
- user: Where does a concept like aggressive driving show up in Christian Tradition assistant: Aggressive driving isn't directly addressed in tradit...

Export Topic Sample

Regenerate Description

AI Description: Topic 2 focuses on discussions surrounding biblical teachings and interpretations related to Jesus and God. It encompasses inquiries about scripture passages, their meanings, and their application in various contexts, particularly for educational settings like chapel services.

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Topic 3

Keywords: antioquia, colombia, spanish, de, hispanic, have, region, in, saint, ask

62 messages (0.8%)

Top Representative Messages:

- user: can you speak Chinese assistant: I can provide resources in Chinese for the Episcopal Church. For example, there's a booklet titled "Being ...
- user: can you translate documents into spanish? assistant: I can't translate documents myself, but I can guide you to resources that might help. F...
- user: I would like to translate a litany I have created into Spanish. assistant: Translating a litany into Spanish can be a meaningful way to reac...

[Export Topic Sample]

[Regenerate Description]

AI Description: Topic 3 focuses on the need for Spanish translation services, particularly in the context of documents or religious texts related to the Antioquia region of Colombia. Users are seeking assistance in translating materials to ensure accessibility for Spanish-speaking audiences.

Topic 4

Keywords: bishop, presiding, rowe, sean, 2024, rev, diocese, elected, rt, 28th

52 messages (0.7%)

Top Representative Messages:

- user: Who was elected to be presiding bishop? assistant: Certainly! The Rt. Rev. Sean Rowe, bishop of Northwest Pennsylvania and bishop provisiona...
- user: Who is the Presiding Bishop? assistant: As of now, the Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church is the Most Rev. Michael Bruce Curry. He was...
- user: Who will will be the next presiding bishop? assistant: As of now, the next presiding bishop has not yet been elected. The election will take...

[Export Topic Sample]

[Regenerate Description]

AI Description: This topic discusses the election of the Rt. Rev. Sean Rowe as the presiding bishop of the diocese, focusing on the upcoming 2024 election and the current status of leadership within The Episcopal Church. It addresses inquiries about the identity and future of the presiding bishop role.

Topic 5

Keywords: suffering, evil, god, good, why, theodicy, question, faithful, that, human

28 messages (0.4%)

Top Representative Messages:

- user: Why does god give infants cancer? assistant: The question of why infants and children suffer from illnesses like cancer is a deeply challeng...
- user: why does god allow suffering? assistant: The question of why God allows suffering is a deeply complex and longstanding one in theology, ofte...
- user: If God is good and all powerful why does he permit evil? assistant: The question of why a good and all-powerful God permits evil is a comple...

[Export Topic Sample]

[Regenerate Description]

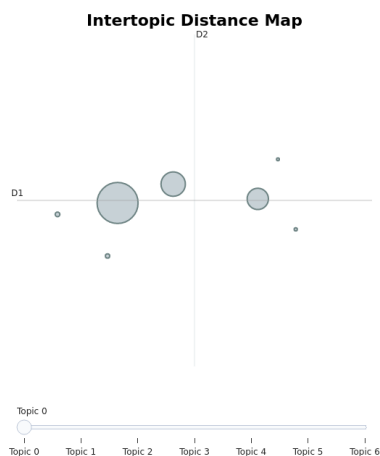**AI Description:** This topic explores theodicy, addressing the profound questions surrounding the existence of suffering and evil in the world, particularly in relation to the nature of a good and all-powerful God. It invites discussion on the implications for faith and human understanding of suffering.

As can be seen, results of the BERTopic analysis can be interrogated to understand the how topics emerge from the underlying semantic meaning of the text. Not surprisingly, more than 60% of the conversations were about the "practices, sacraments, and governance within the Episcopal Church." An intertopic distance map helps represent the distance in semantic space between the different topics and their relative frequency:

Intertopic Distance Map

This would be normal considering a distribution across all possible subjects that users might have chosen, but we will be using techniques to pull apart the "Topic 0" cluster to achieve greater clarity and specificity within the realm of religious discourse. This can be done with a variety of techniques, for example, by taking the high-scoring "Topic 0" conversations from an initial run of all conversations and then running them through the BERTopic model again. We have also investigating creating our own topic model using a hybrid approach of supervised and unsupervised machine learning techniques. As a platform, Tay's Tools has the versatility to quickly iterate and test many approaches.

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LLM Batch Queries

"LLM Batch Queries" is a sophisticated analytical tool that leverages Large Language Models (specifically OpenAI's GPT family) to perform systematic, large-scale qualitative analysis of conversational data. Unlike traditional topic modeling approaches that rely on statistical clustering of keywords, or BERTopic that uses proximity in semantic space using transformers to create embeddings, LLM Batch Queries enables researchers to pose specific investigative questions to an AI system and have it analyse thousands of conversations through that particular analytical lens.

The system processes conversation datasets through configurable analysis units:

- User Prompts: Analyzes what humans are asking or seeking
- Bot Responses: Examines AI system outputs and communication patterns
- User-Bot Pairs: Studies the interactive exchange dynamics in either direction (Prompt -> Response or Response -> Prompt)
- Entire Conversations: Holistic analysis of complete dialogues

Each analysis unit is processed through a researcher-defined investigative prompt that acts as the analytical framework, allowing the LLM to apply consistent qualitative coding across thousands of data points. The size of the investigative prompt is not constrained, so a single analysis unit plus prompt could be up to 1,000,000 tokens in size (equivalent to about 750,000). Cost is a consideration, of course, so large batch jobs require special admin authorization if the cost is expected to be more than $25 for the run. Once a job has been "queued"—a sophisticated job processing "worker" processes it. The job is monitored in process with automated throttling of requests to handle rate limits, system outages, or other issues. Users of Tay's Tools can see real-time job progress with time-to-completion estimates. They can also pause, resume, or cancel jobs in progress. The system can be easily adapted to use other LLM models, naturally, so the team does hope to experiment with fine-tuned variations of both closed and open-source models in the future.

The system identifies key learning behaviors by analyzing user prompts. It can detect whether a conversation is focused on seeking information, clarifications, or deeper exploration. It tracks cognitive progression, noting whether users move from basic understanding to application or synthesis. The tool also assesses whether users recognize their learning process or knowledge gaps.

In religious contexts, the system can analyse spiritual questioning, such as doubt, seeking, or affirmation, or measure the depth of theological reflection. It can identify stages of faith development, from doubt and questioning to commitment and universalizing faith, offering insights into spiritual growth.

We can also use the tool to examine how users interact with AI, focusing on trust, reliance, and anthropomorphization behaviors.

LLM Batch Queries can process large datasets quickly, replacing traditional qualitative analysis, which would require months of work. It ensures consistent application of analytical frameworks across data, though its primary limitations are its lack of determinism and
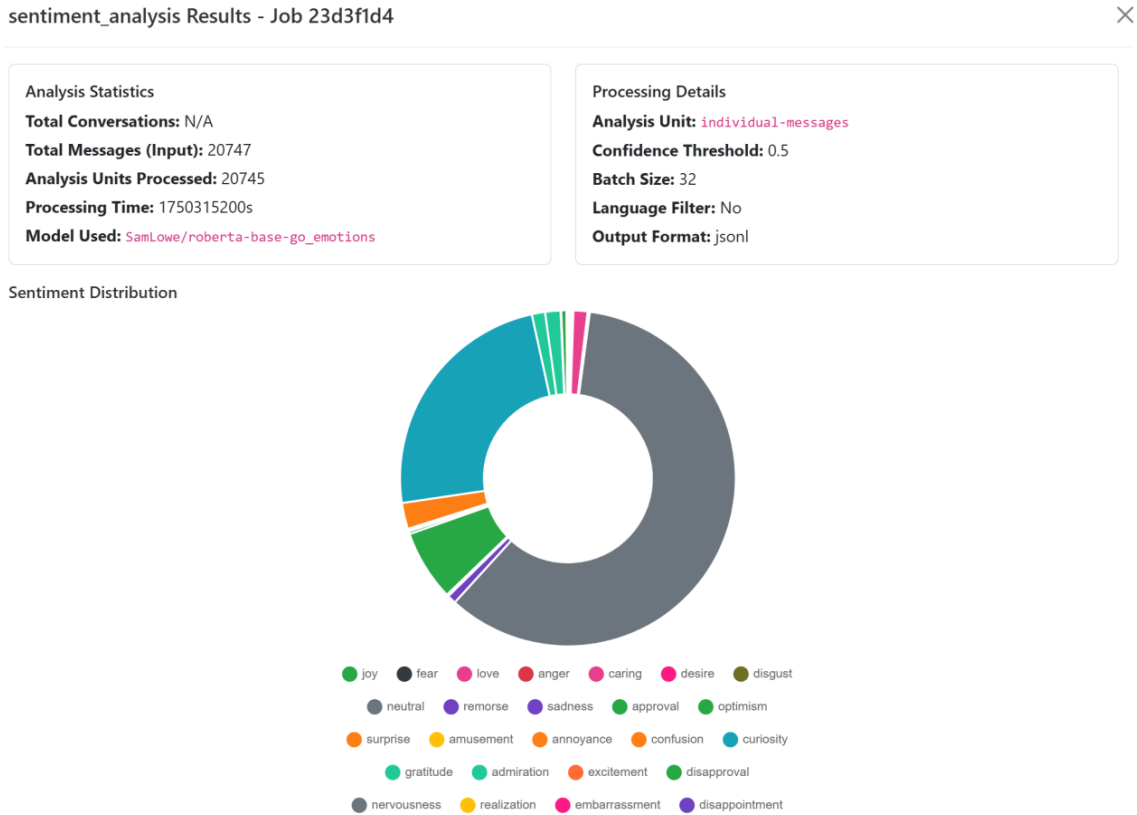
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potentially cost if large amounts of external services are needed. The cost could be mitigated in the future by hosting more complex models locally (currently our most sophisticated embedding model that we self-host, for example, is All-MPNet-Base-v2 with 768 dimensions compared to OpenAI's paid text-embedding-3-large model with 3072 dimensions. The determinism question is much more difficult to solve, however, cross-validation of a data sample by human scoring may mitigate some of this concern, as may multiple runs of the same data set with semantically insignificant variations in prompt.

In our system, researchers can easily create custom prompts to address specific questions, such as identifying transformative learning moments or spiritual direction needs. The tool can also classify religious questions by type—doctrinal, experiential, ethical, or existential—and analyze datasets from various theoretical perspectives for comprehensive insights. It is fast and cheap and makes it possible to parse a large amount of data in mere minutes.

By integrating qualitative with statistical analysis, the system enables comparative analysis across conversation types and time periods. It bridges quantitative and qualitative approaches, offering a robust research method. It is a great complement to techniques like BERTopic analysis or the sentiment analysis module we will discuss next.

Sentiment Analysis

Our sentiment analysis system uses advanced natural language processing to explore the emotional dimensions of human-AI interactions, moving beyond a simple positive-negative binary. It leverages RoBERTa-based transformer models, integrated into a Python microservice within our broader analytical ecosystem, to provide detailed insights into faith formation and learning contexts.

sentiment_analysis Results - Job 23d3f1d4

Analysis Statistics
Total Conversations: N/A
Total Messages (Input): 20747
Analysis Units Processed: 20745
Processing Time: 1750315200s
Model Used: SamLowe/roberta-base-go_emotions

Processing Details
Analysis Unit: individual-messages
Confidence Threshold: 0.5
Batch Size: 32
Language Filter: No
Output Format: jsonl

Sentiment Distribution

joy · fear · love · anger · caring · desire · disgust
neutral · remorse · sadness · approval · optimism
surprise · amusement · annoyance · confusion · curiosity
gratitude · admiration · excitement · disapproval
nervousness · realization · embarrassment · disappointment

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Sample Messages with Sentiment Analysis

Message	Top Sentiment	Confidence	All Sentiments
Hi, I'm Cathy, your virtual guide to the Episcopal Church. How can I help you?	curiosity	43.5%	Show All
Tell me about Bishop Scott Barker	curiosity	62.9%	Show All
Certainly! Bishop J. Scott Barker is 60 years old and has been leading the Diocese of Nebraska, whic...	neutral	74.2%	Show All
Hi, I'm Cathy, your virtual guide to the Episcopal Church. How can I help you?	curiosity	43.5%	Show All
What's heaven like	neutral	52.8%	Show All
The concept of heaven in the Episcopal Church is deeply rooted in scripture and tradition, but it is...	neutral	74.0%	Show All
Stance on assisted suicide	neutral	96.7%	Show All
The Episcopal Church has addressed the issue of assisted suicide through various resolutions over th...	neutral	70.5%	Show All

Charts Already Rendered   Download Results

The system operates as part of our job queue framework, with a dedicated sentiment-worker container that processes queued tasks. This integration ensures that sentiment analysis is performed alongside other analyses, such as topic modelling and dialog act recognition, to create comprehensive profiles of conversational data.

Conversations are analyzed through multiple possible lenses—user prompts, AI responses, and full exchanges—to track emotional tone shifts, matching AI responses to emotional contexts, and detecting sentiment patterns across spiritual or educational interactions. The system includes language filtering to handle multi-cultural and multilingual content effectively. We currently support the following models of sentiment coding:

- Cardiff NLP Twitter RoBERTa (Categories: negative, neutral, positive)
- J-Hartmann Emotion DistilRoBERTa (Categories: anger, disgust, fear, joy, neutral, sadness, surprise)
- SamLowe GoEmotions RoBERTa (Categories: admiration, amusement, approval, caring, excitement, gratitude, joy, love, optimism, pride, relief, anger, annoyance, disappointment, disapproval, disgust, embarrassment, fear, grief, nervousness, remorse, sadness, confusion, curiosity, desire, realization, surprise)

In faith formation research, sentiment analysis identifies emotional patterns tied to spiritual development, such as negative sentiment signaling doubt or struggle, or positive expressions indicating spiritual growth. We can "tag" messages according to sentiment to create a more nuanced picture of the conversation as it unfolds in time. This data can be combined with topic analysis and dialog act recognition in powerful ways to detect patterns of learning and faith formation.

Dialog Act Recognition

To understand engagement and learning, discourse analysis examines conversation flow, coherence, and structure. Key elements include discourse markers (e.g., "I see," "I didn't know that"), repair sequences (self-corrections or clarifications), questioning patterns (clarifications, probing inquiries), and reflective statements ("I used to think… but now I

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realize…”). These features indicate knowledge integration, active engagement, and potential pedagogical impact. In order to that, we need to categorize messages on the level of what dialog act they perform. Other techniques discussed in this paper can detect topics and sentiment, or performer broader kinds of queries, but the purpose of the Dialog Act Recognition tools is to focus specifically on the functional aspect of the messages.

As with the LLM Batch Query tool, we decided to leverage the power of existing AI infrastructure. There may come a time when we are able to create our dialog act classification model based on a taxonomy of dialog acts specifically created for religious discourse, but in the meantime time this method allows us to quickly test several possibly taxonomies. The system operates through a dedicated dialog-acts-worker container that integrates seamlessly with the existing TopicAnalysisJobs table, enabling multi-dimensional analysis workflows. Researchers can analyze the same conversational datasets for dialog acts, topic modeling, and sentiment analysis.

The system is flexible enough to recognize as few as two and as many as 30 distinct dialog act categories, ranging from basic acts such as questions (information seeking) and answers (information providing) to more complex categories like agreement and disagreement (stance-taking), apologies (social repair), and compliments (relationship-building). These categories provide a detailed understanding of human-AI interactions, which is particularly

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useful in faith formation research, where communicative intent often carries deeper spiritual significance. For example, a question may represent spiritual seeking, while an acknowledgment could indicate acceptance of religious teachings.

Each message is judged against each possible category based on a rubric set at test time. For example, the act type "Greeting" might have the description "Opening greetings, welcomes, and introductory statements." Each possible category is given a "fit" score. "Hello, my name is Cathy, how can I help you?" would score for a good fit in both the "Greeting" category and in the "Question" category. This nuanced and layered approach allows us to account for the fact that the same dialog act can accomplish multiple things at the same time. Note that this is the same approach we use in our sentiment detection: preserving the possibility that multiple emotions are detectable in the same content.

The system processes conversations at the message level while preserving full conversational context, which is essential for accurate dialog act classification. Each message's function can vary depending on its position in the conversation, making contextual awareness crucial. The system also incorporates performance optimization strategies, achieving 40-300x speed improvements through parallel processing. It can handle up to 50 concurrent requests with intelligent batching, processing up to 10,000 requests per minute when API limits allow. This high scalability enables the analysis of large datasets that would be time-prohibitive or costly with traditional manual coding or machine-learning.

In the context of faith formation, dialog act recognition reveals patterns tied to spiritual development. The system can identify transformative sequences where questioning leads to realization, or where clarification requests are followed by agreement acknowledgments, suggesting spiritual growth or deeper theological understanding. Analyzing agreement and disagreement patterns around religious topics can also help assess the effectiveness of different AI approaches.

Dialog act recognition offers several valuable analytical approaches for academic research. Sequential pattern analysis can identify common conversational pathways in spiritual direction or religious education contexts, while comparative analysis can examine how dialog act patterns differ between effective and less effective AI conversations. Longitudinal analysis can track changes in individual users' dialog act patterns, providing insights into spiritual development or shifts in the relationship between users and AI systems. The system also facilitates mixed-methods research, combining quantitative dialog act distribution analysis with qualitative exploration of high-impact conversational sequences.

Dialog Act Sequence Visualization

The results generated by the system are compatible with the Dialog Acts Pattern Visualization tool, allowing researchers to create GraphViz-based visualizations of conversational flow. These visualizations transform abstract dialog act sequences into graphical representations, making it easier to identify conversational patterns. The system also supports exporting data in multiple formats (JSON, JSONL, CSV), ensuring compatibility with statistical analysis software and facilitating integration with other research tools.

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Here is an example of a simple 4-category analysis:
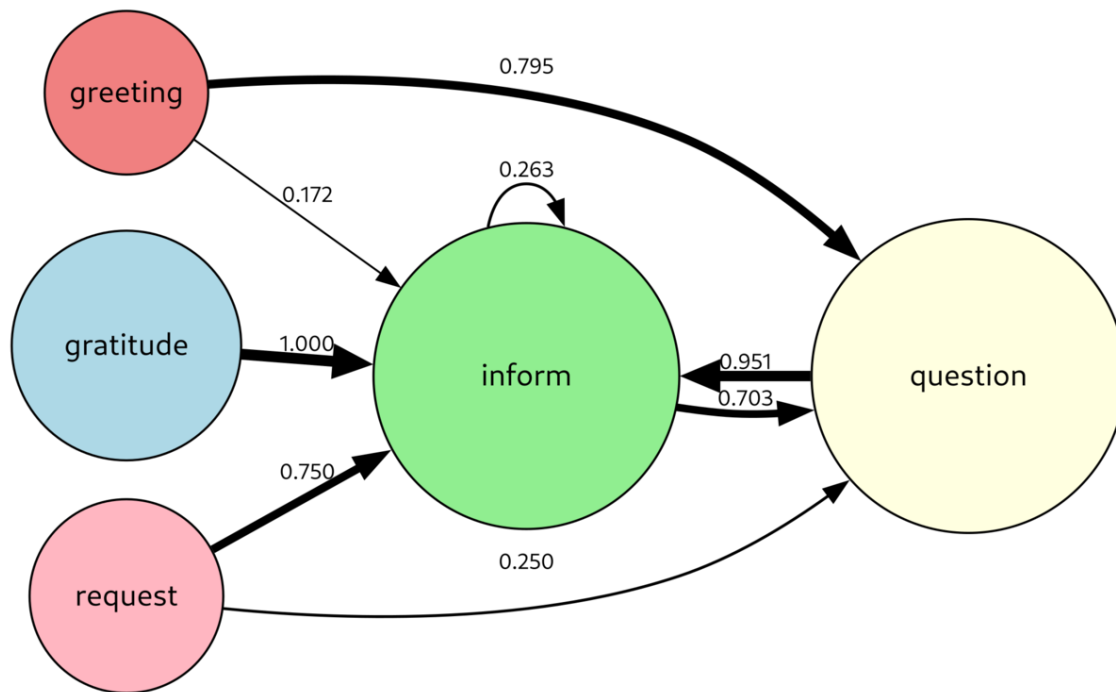
Conversation graphs such as these make it possible to identify patterns in communication. For example, graphs this could be generated based on multiple topics and then compared to each other.

Putting It All Together

Combining these tools will allow us to create powerful and nuanced characterizations of learning in AI conversations. For example, using the LLM Batch Query tool and an elaborate rubric explaining what to look for in "transformative learning," we may quicky identify some extraordinary conversations in our set of 12,000 conversations. What do those conversations, both individually and when aggregated, look like in a graph like this? Are there some topics in which learning appears to be more likely? Going the other direction, if we can identify dialog act and sentiment sequences associated with learning, can we correlate that with specific topics to show that AI is better at teaching some subjects than others?

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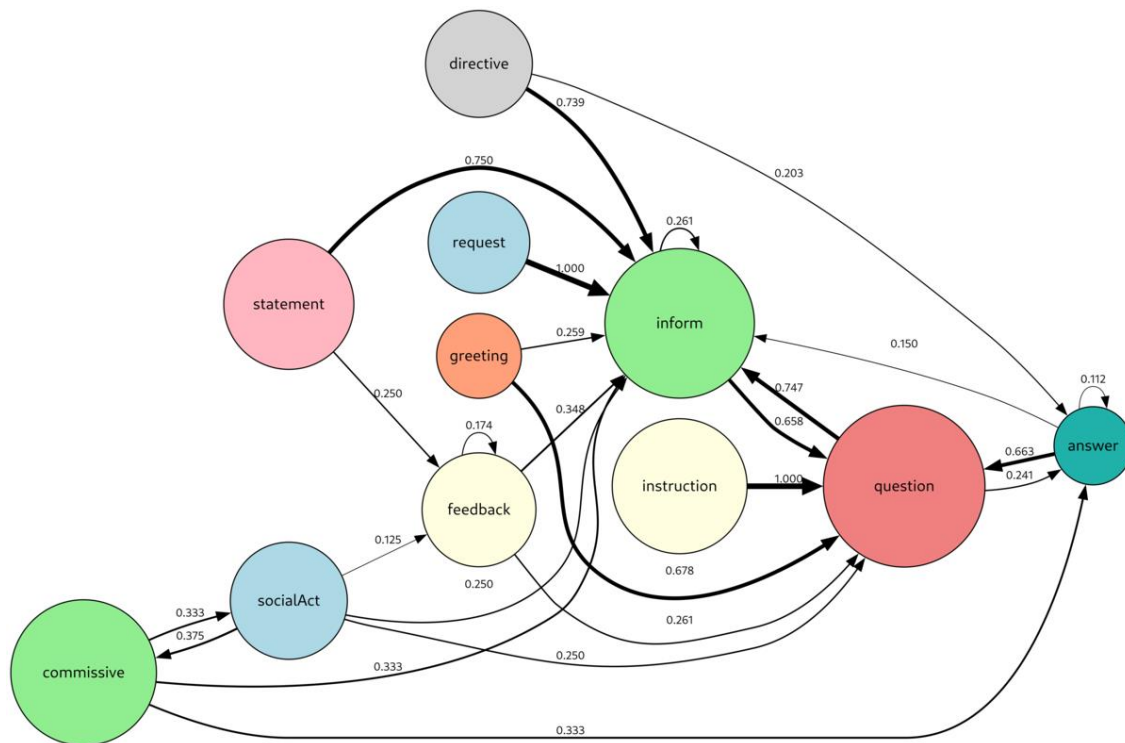
All these questions will be explored as we begin to apply these tools to our data in increasingly sophisticated ways. Please continue to follow our research as our team explores this topic!

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Rev. Dr. Barbara Javore

North Shore United Methodist Church, Glencoe, Illinois

bjavore@yahoo.com

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Nurturing the Sacred Imagination:
Neuroaesthetics and Creativity in the Practice of Religious Education

The act of creating is the human response to the creative force of God. Experiences of awe, wonder and beauty offer an expanded sense of awareness that lies beyond the self. Inspiration and sacred imagining illustrate the presence of God in human existence. Incorporating the aesthetic experience into religious education nurtures engagement with the divine cognitively, emotionally, and spiritually. Neuroaesthetics offers the religious educator a pathway to explore the transformative effects of the artistic encounter through comprehension of the brain's response to the aesthetic experience.

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Overview

As a religious educator for over four decades, I have intentionally integrated the aesthetic experience into my ministry. Trained in music as a singer and educator, my graduate work in music centered on the role of aesthetics in teaching and performing. When I entered into religious education, incorporating the aesthetic experience into curriculum development and instruction was a natural progression. A pedagogical approach centering upon aesthetic experience has provided an environment for creative expression in my ministry settings. Nurturing opportunities for sacred imagining facilitate self-expression and developed and strengthened community in the congregational setting.

The act of creating is the human response to the creative force of God. The opportunity for creative expression offers a gateway to experiencing flow. These moments of engagement in the creative process t enable personal and communal transformation. Experiences of awe, wonder and beauty encourage an expanded sense of awareness that lies beyond the self. Through storytelling, dramatic play, art and music, religious education is deeply enhanced. Inspiration and sacred imagining illustrate the presence of God in human existence. Incorporating the aesthetic experience into religious education nurtures engagement with the divine, cognitively, emotionally, and spiritually.

The science of neuroaesthetics has endeavored to explore the brain processes engaged in the act of creativity and imagination. Neural responses to aesthetic experiences are mapped and analyzed through MRI imaging. The results emphasize the profound effect of aesthetic engagement in the human brain. Neuroaesthetics demonstrates that sensory, cognitive and emotional responses occur simultaneously during aesthetic experience. The ramifications for religious education are patently obvious.

Science underscores what has been a part of intense religious experience through the ages. Humans have had a need for artistic expression since the Cave Paintings of Lascaux. King David danced exuberantly before the Lord. The engineering marvels of the Medieval Cathedrals were erected with hand tools and pulleys. Artistic expression continued in the Holocaust death camps.

In our time, technological advances are moving at breakneck speed. Advances in Artificial Intelligence hold great promise as well as a deep shadow side. Its ramifications are just beginning to be discerned. Advancements in communication provide incredible human connection. But with these amazing innovations, incidents of isolation and depression continue to rise. As religious educators, the need to provide moments for sacred imagining and creative expression is of vital importance. Facilitating partnership with the divine through co-creation with God is our sacred task.

Aesthetic Experience

An aesthetic experience centers upon an expression that engenders a feeling of wonder, awe and beauty in the perceiver. "To be able to create a form of experience that can be regarded as aesthetic requires a mind that animates our imaginative capacities and that promotes our ability

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to undergo emotionally pervaded experience. Perception is, in the end, a cognitive event. What we see is not simply a function of what we take from the world, but what we make of it."[1] When we design an aesthetic experience, we provide the impetus for an emotional response that couples with cognition. It allows for the possibility to view the world in a different way as a result.

The aesthetic experience holds the possibility of creative transformation within it. "Being in the aesthetic mindset is being present and attuned to the environment you are in. It fosters an ongoing connection to your sensory experiences and opens the door to creating art and appreciating aesthetic experiences—that ultimately change you." [2] These experiences can be deeply personal; listening to a deeply moving piece of music, entering a majestic architectural space or encountering overwhelming natural beauty. The aesthetic experience can be shared in community; a religious service held as the sun rises, attending a play, singing in worship, dancing together, enjoying a shared meal, all can be aesthetic experiences.

The aesthetic experience is deeply rooted in culture, transmitting deeply cherished values in various forms of creative articulations. African-American spirituals, Tibetan Buddhist sand paintings, Navajo folk tales, Flash Mob performances, all comprise aesthetic responses that are unique to their time and place.

> Call it what you will—religion, spirituality or the divine. Art lays the foundation to create transcendent moments, forging emotional bonds present in the life of community. Our culture shapes our perceptions of self. Symbolisms, icons and metaphors amplify meaning, and are often passed down from generation to generation. These cultural artifacts serve to embody the values and beliefs that keep a community strong and that help to ensure its survival. And perhaps most important, the practice and repetition of creative expression in the form of songs, stories, fables, myths, dance, and other rituals reinforce beliefs, identity and cohesion. [3]

Aesthetic experiences are intrinsic to the very fabric of our being. They are not extraneous to our daily lives, nor are they superfluous additions to our way of being. They are deeply imbedded in human existence. When religious educators intentionally include these experiences, they foster a holistic response that is sensory, cognitive and emotional.

> Art is evidence of God's presence, and continually invokes it. It confounds some and enrages others, as God does. It comforts and heals, as God does. It chides and sears, as God does. It dazzles and quiets us, as God does. It bears witness, as God does. It appears in different guises to different people, as God does. It both reveals our weakness and returns us to our better selves, as God does. [4]

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[1] Elliot W. Eisner, *The Arts and the Creation of the Mind* (New Haven: Yale, 2002), 201.

[2] Magsamen, Susan & Ross, Ivy. *Your Brain on Art: How the Arts Transform Us.*
    (Random House: New York, 2025) ,xiii..

[3] Ibid.,212.

[4] Wallace, Carey. *The Discipline of Inspiration: The Mysterious Encounter with God at the Heart of Creativity.*

Providing aesthetic experiences intensifies our lives, engages our senses, heightens our cognition and brings about emotional reactions that can alter our lived existence. Taking the initiative to design and enact the aesthetic experience can profoundly affect those we teach.

For several years, I served as an instructor in our District's Lay Speakers Academy, a United Methodist training seminar that prepared Lay Leadership for worship and congregational leadership. As the teacher for the Academy's Youth Section, my work had been very successful. This aspect of my ministry was an exciting challenge and one I eagerly anticipated.

Then it happened. I encountered a group that was extremely contentious and difficult. Nothing I did could engage or interest them, except for snack time. As our final meeting approached, I was apprehensive, to say the least. After prayerful discernment, I embarked upon providing an aesthetic experience that was totally unconventional for the group I was working with. It was a moment of sacred imagining.

The aesthetic experience I devised began by setting out paints of every color and covering a long table in white paper. Participants were instructed to select a color that they were drawn to on first impulse. Each student was requested to paint non-representationally, using their brushes to paint responding to the music. They were to instructed to paint only in the space in front of them.

The youth were to work in complete silence while a recording of a Gregorian chant from an obscure Benedictine monastery played in the background. Mission Impossible to be sure. To my utter amazement, however, the group worked silently, as their brushstrokes flowed. Respecting each other's private space in an almost trancelike state, they completed the exercise. I asked that they stand back and look at what they had created together. The group transformed before my eyes. They were astonished at the beauty of their communal painting. Their bickering and antagonism ceased and they complimented one another on the work they had done.

Neuroaesthetics and the *flow* state illuminate what had transpired in that learning environment. The power of the aesthetic experience brought about both individual and communal transformation.

Neuroaesthetics

Neuroaesthetics is a branch of cognitive neuroscience specifically concerned with the study of the brain's response to aesthetic experiences.

> "Aesthetic experience relies on a distributed neural architecture, a set of brain areas involved in emotion, perception, imagery, memory, and language. But more than this, aesthetic experience emerges from *networked* interactions, the workings of intricately

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(Eerdmans: Grand Rapids: Michigan, 2025) ,27.

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connected and coordinated brain systems that, together, form a flexible architecture enabling us to develop new arts and to see the world around us differently. " [5]

This "neural architecture" is highly complex and is not confined to a specific area of the brain. The frontal lobes which govern pleasure and reward systems, the amygdala and limbic systems, responsible for emotional experience and the occipital lobes which govern visual processing are just some of the areas of the brain that respond to aesthetic stimulus. Both hemispheres of the brain operate together and are required for the creative process to occur.

> "The corpus callosum, the bundle of nerves that bridges the right and left brain hemispheres, allows communication between both sides of the brain and the fully functioning brain requires this bridge. It allows for the creative process to flow. There is no one "seat "of creativity in the brain, one responsible location or even hemisphere. Creativity may not draw from the entire brain but it certainly draws on many different brain structures and processes."[6]

Anjan Chatterjee summarizes the complexity of the aesthetic experience's effect upon the brain, following his extensive research in the area of neuroaesthetics. He emphasizes the incredible flexibility of the brain's response to the aesthetic experience.

> Neuroaesthetics studies show us that our brains do not have a dedicated aesthetic or art module in the brain. We have no specific aesthetic receptor analogous to our receptors for vision or touch or smell. We have no specific aesthetic emotion analogous to our emotions of fear or anxiety or happiness. We have no specific aesthetic cognition analogous to systems like memory or language or action. Rather, aesthetic experiences flexibly engage neural ensembles of sensory, emotional and cognitive systems. This flexibility built into the ensembles is part of what makes art and aesthetic experiences varied and unpredictable.[7]

Awe and wonder are deeply associated with the aesthetic experience. They are manifested not only in cognitive and emotional responses but are readily apparent in the effects exhibited in the body.

> Awe can literally stop you in your tracks, and it induces significant physical effects. You might shiver. Your pulse quickens. You might feel a warmth in the chest and tears in your eyes brought on by awe's influence. When you are in these heightened states, default mode network regions of the cortex of your brain downregulate. You stop analyzing. You let go. Then in the stillness of your mind, something extraordinary happens. Neurotransmitter floodgates open, and your synapses are bathed in a state of

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[5] G Gabrielle Starr. *Feeling Beauty: The Neuroscience of Aesthetic Experience.* (MIT Press: Cambridge, 2015), xv.

[6] Runco, Mark. *Creativity.* (Boston: Elsevier Academic Press, 2004),74.

[7] Chatterjee, Anjan. *The Aesthetic Brain.* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2014),183-184.

sanctity. Elation and euphoria crescendo into what is described as a "peak experience" or "transcendence." [8]

This highly nuanced system allows the human to have the aesthetic experience and then offers the opportunity of fostering new possibilities. "Powerful aesthetic experience makes us return to that state of watchful waiting characteristic of core consciousness, but carry an awareness of the pleasure of looking at an object and contemplating its worth: perhaps powerful aesthetic experience unites what we didn't predict with what we are always waiting for." [9]

The aesthetic experience is not only formational it fosters a way forward, a creative response that extends beyond the self. "Aesthetics is all about newly created and reconfigured value, about something that wasn't there in quite the same way before, something that was in part created in the brain and that leaves traces in how we go forward." [10] Neuroaesthetics provides a means to understand the powerful role the aesthetic experience has upon the brain and its implications for transformational action.

Neuroaesthetics is a scientific area of study that has only recently developed. As this avenue of research continues to grow, more insight will be gained into the complex neurosystems that map human responses to aesthetic experience. The implications of this research are evident. The importance of centering on aesthetic experience in the practice of religious education invites moments of awe, wonder and beauty into the lives of those we serve. It allows the religious education process to embrace these moments as reflections of the divine presence in our midst. It provides a gateway to creative transformation.

Nurturing the Sacred Imagination

Aesthetic experience nurtures and fosters the sacred imagination. It provides the impetus that sparks creative action. Religious educators are called to prepare the environment for sacred imagination to occur.

> Teaching that fosters the religious imagination is rich in symbols, images, rituals, poetic language, music, dance, and all other forms of artistic expression that encourage creative interpretation of beliefs and experiences. It also welcomes silence and stillness as friends who lead us into relationship with the God of Mystery. It offers freedom from personal and communal bondage through communal practices of detachment from cultural

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[8] Magsamen, Susan & Ross, Ivy. *Your Brain on Art: How the Arts Transform Us.*
    (New York: Random House, 2025), 178-179.
[9] Starr, G. Gabrielle. *Feeling Beauty: The Neuroscience of Aesthetic Experience.* (Cambridge: MIT Press.2015), 67.

[10] Starr, G. Gabrielle. *Feeling Beauty: The Neuroscience of Aesthetic Experience.* (Cambridge: MIT
    Press.2015),149.

expectations and destructive social norms. It creates a numinous space in which revelation can and does occur. [11]

Resources to inspire the sacred imagination are abundant. Intentional incorporation of these opportunities into the teaching process, can provide moments of access to this "numinous space". Educational environments that "encourage creative interpretation" require embracing resources that extend beyond the cognitive approach to learning. Excluding or minimizing the emotional and sensory components of the process rarely lead to a transformative outcome. Elliot Eisner reminds us that,

> "In the arts, imagination is given license to fly. In many - perhaps most - academic fields, reality so to speak, imposes its factual face. Little time and attention are given to matters of imagination. Yet inventive scholarship depends upon imagination, not to mention the delights that imaginative processes make possible."[12]

Inspiring sacred imagination is a holy task. Cultural expectations in our society run counter to it. Quantifiable results gain precedence and are of higher value in our secular world.   Walter Brueggemann raises the importance of the centrality of imagination in the act of creative visioning.

> "The prophet does not ask if the vision can be implemented, for questions of implementation are of no consequence until the vision can be imagined. The *imagination* must come before the *implementation.* Our culture is competent to implement almost anything and to imagine almost nothing. The same royal consciousness that makes it possible to implement anything and everything is to the one that shrinks imagination because imagination is a danger."[13]

While there is an abundance of resources for the religious educator to draw upon for nurturing the process of sacred imagination, the prevailing impetus of social norms make this a daunting task. "Faith needs people who are experts in imagination to bear the burden of imagining, and to teach others how to do the work of imagination themselves."[14]

Edgar Florentino lives in the *Back of the Yards* neighborhood in one of the most dangerous areas of Chicago. Known as the "gangster gardener", Edgar attempted to navigate an environment that was hotly contested between rival gangs. He entered into the world of the gangs, experiencing pervasive violence, but found a way out. Leaving gang life behind, he began his quest to beautify his neighborhood and build community.

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[11] Yost, Karen Marie and E. Byron and Anderson. *Taught by God: Teaching and Spiritual Formation.*. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2006, 36-37.

[12] Elliot W. Eisner, *The Arts and the Creation of the Mind* (New Haven: Yale, 2002), 198

[13] Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 40.

[14] Wallace, Carey. *The Discipline of Inspiration: The Mysterious Encounter with God at the Heart of Creativity.* Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2025, 41.

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Edgar loved to visit Chicago's beautifully landscaped downtown, but when he returned to his neighborhood the bleak desolation haunted him. He began to imagine the unkempt parkways and dangerous corners as gardens. *"I took it upon myself to start one tree at a time, one perennial at a time…and here we are today."* [15] Using his limited resources, he bought seeds, planted flowering and fruit trees and reclaimed dangerous street corners. He placed benches for mothers to watch over their children, giving them safe spaces to rest in the little islands of beauty he created. He installed Book-Sharing Boxes, to give underserved children the opportunity to take a book home to read and call their own. Edgar also assists the elderly and single mothers, helping them to beautify their parkways.

Edgar is changing and revitalizing the environment one block at a time. He exemplifies the process of sacred imagining. Edgar imagined what his neighborhood could be, lived into his vision and creatively brought what he imagined to fruition. His latest garden is a shrine to the Blessed Virgin. Where desolate and barren corners were once given over to gang crime, the community is now able to live enjoying the creativity of Edgar's vision and joining him in his effort to restore his neighborhood one block at a time.

Creativity and Flow

Creativity is the ability to use one's imagination and create something new, to bring order out of chaos, engendering the possibility of birthing something unique or transformative.
Humans are all endowed with the ability to enter into the creative process. It is not relegated only to the gifted artist, musician, architect or scientist. Creativity appears in all human endeavors. "Creativity, contrary to the romantic notion of the lonely artist, is not an isolating process. It requires an "interaction between a person's thought and a sociocultural context. It is a systemic rather than an individual phenomenon."[16] The act of creativity builds upon existing structures, refashioning and bringing about re-creation.

The lens of the religious educator views the creative process as a divine enterprise, for as humans we are called to co-create with God. Maria Harris stated that "…God is a brooding, hovering, indwelling presence, always acting from within creation: renewing it, cherishing it, loving it. When the creation being fashioned is a people, they must not think of themselves as separated from the source of life. Rather, they live and breathe and have their being through and with and in the Divinity. [17] The intense partnership of the Human with the Divine surges through

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[15] Erin McElroy, *Meet Chicago's 'gangster gardener'*. Posted: May 15, 2025 / 05:14 PM CDT
    https://wgntv.com/news/chicago-news/meet-chicagos-gangster-gardener/

[16] Csikszentmihalyi,Mihaly. *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention.*
    Harper: New York, 2013, 28.
[17] Harris, Maria. *Fashion Me a People.* Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989.43

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Creation. The creative process reminds us of the power of the creative spirit that dwells within each of us. "Creative work requires a connection to one's inner monologue, and it is from this stream of desires, emotions and making sense of the world that new ideas and novel perspectives arise." [18]

As religious educators we are called to nurture and guide those we serve to embrace their creative potential. "Humans need to see, to dream, to imagine in ways that go beyond the strictures of words used as rational and scientific facts."[19] The creative process integrates the cognitive and emotional realms of human existence. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi defines creativity as "any act, idea, or product that changes an existing domain, [a set of symbolic rules or procedures] or that transforms an existing domain into a new one. And the definition of a creative person is: someone whose thoughts or actions change a domain or establish a new domain." [20] Transformational change is the result of the creative act.

Csikszentmihalyi developed the theory of the *flow* state, a psychological concept illustrating a state of being in which a person is so joyfully engaged in an activity or work that nothing else seems to matter. *Flow* theory is deeply intertwined with creativity and the aesthetic experience. Csikszentmihalyi explains, "In our studies, we found that every flow activity, whether it involved competition, chance, or any other dimension of experience had this in common: It provided a sense of discovery, a creative feeling of transporting the person into a new reality." [21] Aesthetic experience and the creative process has the potential to engender flow activity. Being fully engaged in creative expression predicates being in the *flow* state.

Creativity does not exist in a vacuum. It builds upon the foundation of prior experience and then brings about something new. Creativity does not occur in isolation. It always draws upon what has gone before and responds to the community from which it has arisen.

Building Community and the Aesthetic Experience

The creative process cannot flourish in isolation but requires human interaction. It builds upon prior knowledge and emotional experiences that occur in a communal context. "Supporting this core human imperative to live in community is our unique ability to creatively share our thoughts, ideas, and emotions. The success of our species comes down to this: Art creates culture. Culture creates community. And community creates humanity." [22] I

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[18] Kaufman, Scott, Gregiore, Carolyn. *Wired to Create: Unravelling the Mysteries of the Creative Mind.* Tander Perigree: New York, 2016, 33.

[19] Webber, Robert. *The Divine Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006), *85.*

[20] Csikszentmihalyi,Mihaly. *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention.* .Harper: New York, 2013, 28.

[21] Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience.* New York: Harper,1990, 74.

[22] Magsamen, Susan & Ross, Ivy. *Your Brain on Art: How the Arts Transform Us.* (Random House: New York, 2025), 202.

It is important to note that in the context of religious education, the aesthetic experience is to be provided for the congregation. While each individual member will respond in a unique way to what is presented, encouraging the faith community to share responses will strengthen and build the fabric of the gathered body.   "If inspiration is an encounter with God, creating in community may be our only real hope to respond to it fully, because God is too vast to grasp with a single mind. To have any glimpse of the whole, we look together, with many minds." [23] Community is essential to bring about lasting transformation. Sacred imagination is fostered and creativity is given a place to flourish.

 People participating in Alcoholics Anonymous are centered in community. Participants do not try to conquer addiction alone but are united in fellowship, supporting and nurturing one another as they strive toward healing. "Community doesn't just give us a foundation and a vocabulary. It gives us a laboratory to test what we learn. And community gives us both courage and humility. The accomplishments of others challenge us, but at the same time, our own dreams expand." [24] Our visions and sacred imaginings all arise out of community that in the best case, "reveals our identity, and strengthens it." [25]

Why Aesthetic Experience Matters

The aesthetic experience is central to the core of human existence. It occurs in every avenue of human life and circumstance. However, sacred imagining in the midst of enslavement and genocide is nearly inconceivable. But it happened, and continues to occur, in spite of overwhelming odds. The outpouring of creativity in the midst of and as a reaction to extreme repression and cruelty powerfully demonstrates the sacred possibilities for creative transformation.
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Psychiatrist, Viktor Frankl, an Auschwitz survivor recounts that ,"As the inner life of the prisoner tended to become more intense, he also experienced the beauty of art and nature as never before. Under their influence he sometimes even forgot his own frightful
 circumstances." [26] Grasping at the aesthetic experience, allowing a moment for sacred imagining, creatively affirming life in the face of death, illustrates with stark reality the human need for aesthetic response. It allows for the possibility of regeneration where the essence of life has all but disappeared.

Frankl recounted an aesthetic experience that engaged his community of Auschwitz prisoners.

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[23] Wallace, Carey. *The Discipline of Inspiration: The Mysterious Encounter with God at the Heart of Creativity.* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2025), 167.

[24] Wallace, 164.
[25] Wallace, 164.
[26] Frankel, Viktor E. *Man's Search for Meaning.* (Boston: Beacon Press,1992), 50.

"One evening, when we were already resting on the floor of our hut, dead tired, soup bowls in hand, a fellow prisoner rushed in and asked us to run out to the assembly grounds and see the wonderful sunset. Standing outside we saw sinister clouds glowing in the west and the whole sky alive with clouds of ever-changing shapes and colors, from steel blue to blood red. The desolate grey mud huts provided a sharp contrast, while the puddles on the muddy ground reflected the glowing sky. Then, after minutes of moving silence, one prisoner said to another, "How beautiful the world could be..."[27]

This communal aesthetic experience offered the possibility for discerning meaning and engendering purpose in the midst of desolation, not only for the individual, but for the surrounding community. It was a moment of transcendence, a time to be in awe and wonder at the beauty of the sky. For those prisoners, gazing at the sunset, beauty transformed their existence. It offered a moment of respite and a glimpse at the ineffable.

Conclusion

Enabling an atmosphere where sacred imagining and the creative process can flourish requires engaging the whole person cognitively, emotionally and through the senses. Aesthetic experiences that illustrate the awe and wonder of God can be drawn from the creative arts,. nature and the sciences.. While educators cannot determine the outcome or the effect of an aesthetic experience every effort must be made to carefully design the experience. It requires the impetus to move beyond the inclination to impart knowledge as a means to an end. The aesthetic experience strengthens both communal and personal efficacy, fostering and nurturing creative expression.

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[27] Frankl, 51.

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Mary E. Hess
Luther Seminary
mhess@religioused.org
REA Annual Meeting 2025

Transforming faith stories in a time of economic contestation

Abstract

Biblical notions of personhood require community. Practices of *oikonomia* refer to households rather than individuals. Yet in the US oppressive economic formulations of identity linked to individual achievement are nearly universal, widely distributed and amplified through digital technologies. What does it mean to be human in a world whose imagination has been so severely narrowed? Religious communities offer alternatives to these distorting and destructive stories when we foreground narratives of religious identity and resistance rooted in an economies of solidarity. Palmer, Shweder, Kegan, Lee, Rieger, and Hess offer ways to develop pedagogical exercises to nurture such resistance.

Starting with story

Human beings are storying creatures. We become who we are by the stories we tell and the listeners who hear them.

I write today as a middle class, white, cisgender Catholic woman, teaching at a Lutheran seminary in the United States amidst the push and pull of disinformation. These are only some of the markers of my identities, but I share them at the outset to remind myself that I am only looking through one lens at a very complicated reality.

I want to ponder how what we are learning about stories helps us to perceive economic injustice, and how we might as religious educators push back against destructive forms of such stories by turning to our own core faith stories. I believe that oppressive stories about the economy and its place within Christianity are everywhere, but people who inhabit structures which privilege our specific economic positionalities often find ways to refuse to see that oppression.

One of the roots of the word "economy" can be understood as *oikonomia* – a Greek word that has to do with managing a household. It is a word that at the time included questions of ethics, of how to steward household resources (Leshem, 2016, 225-226). Today many economists explicitly reject ethical concerns, however, believing that economics is a "science" of objective engagement. Yet a scriptural imagination, whether Christian or Jewish or Muslim, demands a recognition that an *oikonomia* is a shared, communal reality, not an individualist one. Paired with the perception in the United States that economics is an arcane science that only experts understand, means that capitalism is generally perceived as a natural force, the "way things are" rather than a very specific narrative about human beings and our resource management.

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What is it about the households of Christians who benefit from capitalism that keeps us from seeing how the stories of Jesus sitting with outcasts, how the stories of Jesus at home washing his disciples' feet before being at table with them, should challenge us? What is it about the stories we tell, and the stories we listen to, that invites us to refuse to see God in each other?

Many of us find ourselves clinging to what Martin Luther called a "theology of glory" rather than a "theology of the cross." In our times the former pushes narratives that see economic success as evidence of God's blessing, often in very individualistic and privatized terms, while the latter sees God's grace poured out on all for the common good, and finds God's action in the midst of stories of woundedness and brokenness to be about healing and interdependence.

In what follows I want to make three points: first, that we have to shift our epistemologies into ways of seeing that are about a community of truth; second, that stories come in many varieties and we must pay attention to how different kinds of stories narrate dominance; and third, that helping people see and transform their stories is a process that requires attending to human development.

Knowing shapes storying

The pedagogical heart of these challenges sits squarely in our epistemologies. How we know shapes the fundamental ways in which we become and belong through story.

P. Palmer offers two contrasting models for thinking about knowing that are relevant here (2007, 100-106, figures 4.1 and 4.2).
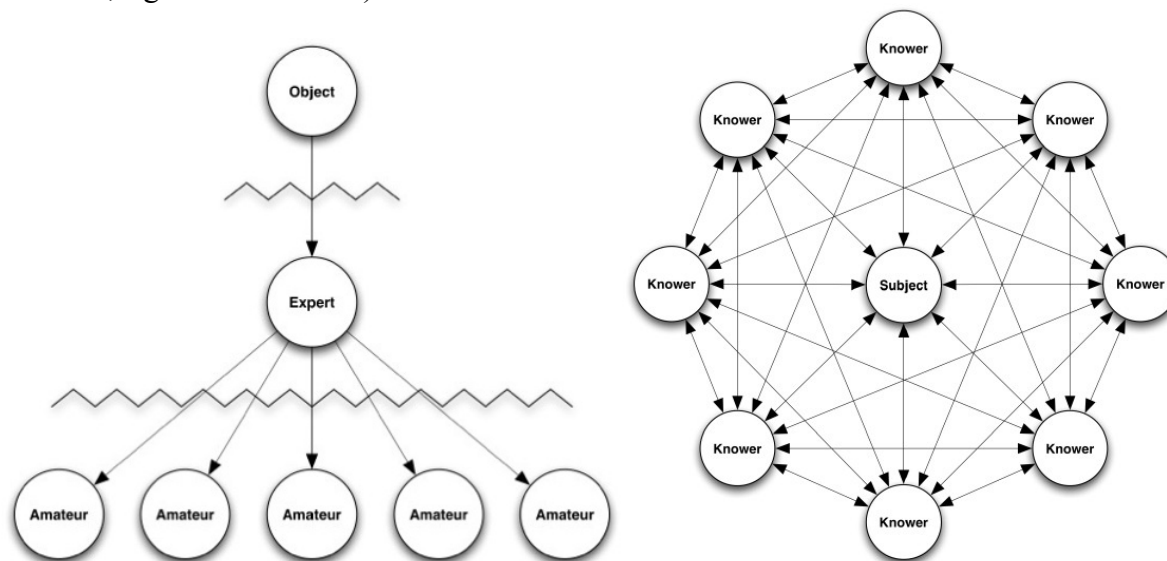
The first he labels "the objectivist myth of knowing," and the second he calls a "community of truth." In the former model, knowing is mapped as a linear process which proceeds from a static "object" about which information is gathered by experts to be passed along to the amateurs who receive that information passively. Knowing is understood as linear and uni-directional, proceeding only from the object to a knower, and only then through an expert gatekeeper.

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By contrast, in his "community of truth" model the center of knowing is a subject in the multi-layered sense of the "topic" being studied and also an entity which has agency. With this metaphor for knowing there are multiple knowers, and what constitutes expertise is both more nuanced and more complex. The assertion of the "community of truth" is that the more diverse the knowers, the more robust the knowing. Each knower has a direct experience of a given subject, for instance, but also has to understand that her knowing will be complicated by that of other knowers.

This is the model for knowing that grounds how I think about transformative learning. It affords a way to build a religious identity that is counter cultural, even for someone like me who inhabits certain structures of privilege. Using this model for knowing requires designing spaces of study and exploration that hold together diverse perspectives, creating rich, complex engagement with the subject at hand.

Too many religious settings, however, continue to lean towards the former model with pastoral leaders (priests, imans, rabbis, denominational authorities, and so on) holding tight reins on the stories of a community, and controlling how those stories are transferred to "amateur" or "lay" knowers. It is as if the only knowledge worthy of discovery must be perceived as such by experts. As critical postmodern scholarship has demonstrated, however, all forms of knowing come permeated with power, and any epistemological stance which posits exclusive access to, let alone control of, knowing is dangerous.

At the same time, however, a community of truth model is not purely relativist, because it puts truth at the center of the circle. This is not an epistemology in which "everything goes" or "all truths are relative" but instead a map of knowing that suggests none of us can hold the entire truth by ourselves, alone in our perceptions, but must always stand in humility and engagement with others. In the US, where a particularly brutal form of capitalism is pervasive, the linear objectivist myth of knowing lies at the very root and apex of our constructions of white supremacy, of our narrow forms of capitalism, of our thoroughly oppressive stories of empire. The community of truth model, in contrast, has its own challenges when finding ways to design such focused yet open spaces for learning, but that model remains one which invites us to pivot stances and create more complex embodiments in our religious communities.

Scholars who are attentive to the challenges of teaching and learning amidst digitality argue that we cannot work effectively if our approaches are teaching-centered, instead they must be learning-centered (SeelyBrown, 2011). There is an opening here through which communities intent on supporting more scripturally grounded understandings of economic structures can step.

A teaching-centered approach assumes a stable base of information to be shared *about* the world, whereas a learning-centered approach is focused on learning *through* engagement with the world (Hess, 2015, 141). The currently dominant story of highly unregulated markets operating amidst scarcity and driven by individual actions and desires stands as a natural ordering of the world. This is a story that shapes how we perceive economic activity, the questions we ask, and the very fiber of our faith. A scriptural or biblical imagination, on the other hand, asserts that we inhabit a world where God's abundance, created for all, must be tended and stewarded in ways that are for the common good.

Shifts in meaning-making brought about by the advent of digital technologies have caused religious educators to struggle. We know we need to move from "teaching about" an economy in linear objectivist ways from the standpoint of those who most benefit from it, to finding ways to ignite curiosity about how an economy functions for all people. We know we have to find ways in which the question of what it means to participate in or be denied access to a market-based economy can be explored. But we are having a very hard time doing so.

Stories in a community of truth model

So how might we encourage a "community of truth" form of storying? What are the patterns of learning that support such an epistemology within religious education? How do we find the narratives which can help people to unlock our frozen notions of capitalism and economic processes more generally? What are the best ways to craft and share such narratives? These are questions that the work of Bell, et al. (2008) can help us with, since these scholars are educating around issues of racism, which is a dominant narrative entwined with economic structures.

Most scholars in our field agree that stories are at the heart of religious identity development, but what kinds of stories and to what ends? Bell, et. al. have identified four kinds of stories which permeate US discussions about race:

> We begin with **stock stories** because they are the most public and ubiquitous in dominant, mainstream institutions, such as schools, government, workplaces and the media, and because the other story types critique and challenge their presumption of universality. Thus, they provide the ground from which we build our analysis
>
> **Concealed stories** coexist alongside the stock stories but most often remain in the shadows, hidden from public view. Though invisible to those in the dominant society, concealed stories are often circulated, told and retold by people in the margins whose experiences and aspirations they express and honor, and they provide a perspective that is often very different from that of the mainstream.
>
> **Resistance stories** are … stories, both historical and contemporary, that tell about how people have resisted racism, challenged the stock stories that support it, and fought for more equal and inclusive social arrangements.
>
> **Counter (or Transforming) Stories …** are new stories that are deliberately constructed to challenge the stock stories, build on and amplify resistance stories, and offer ways to interrupt the status quo and work for change. Such stories enact continuing critique and resistance to the stock stories and enable new possibilities for inclusive human community.
> (Bell, Roberts, Irani, and Murphy, 2008, pp. 8-9)

Religious educators can ask from this framework what the dominant, concealed, resistance, and transforming stories of *oikonomia* are that we can make visible. We can seek stories and ways of telling and sharing stories that help us to interrogate dominance, that help us to make visible the concealed, that help us to develop resistance and transforming stories.

In exploring these four kinds of stories, the work of anthropologist R. Shweder (1991) is also useful because it offers an additional framework for noticing specific ways in which stories function as meaning-making systems. Shweder's heuristic suggests that we "think through others" in at least four ways. Asking what it means to contrast a scriptural narrative of

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economics with that of dominant capitalist forms we have to uncover some of the "other ways" in which stories of economics exist.

First Shweder writes that we "recognize the other as a specialist or expert on some aspect of human experience, whose reflective consciousness and system of representations and discourse can be used to reveal hidden dimensions of ourselves" (108-109). This most basic engagement with an "other"[1] of some sort acknowledges that there is value in learning from the "other," that there are captured in the stories of the "other," valuable insights into human being. Yet when we "think through others" in this dualistic way we are essentially looking for ourselves, inviting others to be a mirror to help us articulate something we might not otherwise be able to perceive.

For most people, this is the process by which "stock stories" become so dominant. Instead of engaging such stories about how things are as a way to wonder, to perceive differences, to raise questions, to look beyond the obvious, people use stock stories of "the" economy as a way to explain ourselves to ourselves, using the observed differences not as an invitation to wonder and critical engagement, to relationship and growth, but rather as an easy way to judge, to ignore, to comfort ourselves. Most of us are not experts, we are not economists who understand the arcane terminologies of economics (eg. collateralized debt obligations). If we are people who are basically privileged by these stories, if we have a roof over our head, food enough to eat, healthcare when we need it, then it can be comforting to cede the stage to experts who reinforce the narratives which justify our security.

People who are comfortable within capitalist stories are the "norm," the "typical," the "familiar." Anyone who is not prospering in these settings must be an "other." We may interact with such "others" because we, particularly people who self-identify as Christians, believe that we should do so, that it is charitable to reach out to people who are hurting. But do we open ourselves to transformation in the process? This way of thinking and any form of storytelling which proceeds from it, aligns well with the linear, objectivist form of knowing Palmer labelled the "objectivist myth," with its insistence on experts and amateurs. It is a key dynamic in the perpetuation of our current brutal forms of market-based capitalism. There is an analogy here that is useful and that comes from what we have learned in our work opposing racism, that is: charity is to capitalism as color-blindness is to systemic racism.

A second way of "thinking through others" Shweder has labelled "getting the other straight." That is, "providing a systematic account of the internal logic, of the intentional world constructed by the other… . The process of 'thinking through others' in [this] second sense is a process of representing (and defending) the other's evaluations of and involvements with the world … by tracing those evaluations and modes of involvement to some plausible alternative intentional world and conception of reality…" (109). Bell et. al.'s "concealed stories" can become an invitation to us to use this way of "thinking through others" particularly if we are willing to hear such stories, and to respect these differences enough to question our taken-for-granted norms. Far too often, however, concealed stories which arise in the margins, in the interstices of dominant power while they may be essential and powerful ways by which minoritized

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[1] I put "other" in quotation marks to remind us all that the "us" and "them" dichotomies which flood so many of our personal and public spaces are constructions drawing from specific ideologies. Shweder's work helps us to see the false nature of these dichotomies.

communities resist oppressive forces, can also be stories which people who inhabit dominant spaces all too easily turn into yet another exoticism. This is a dynamic that fuels the ways in which religious communities often rely on "charity" as an element of their response to economic hardship and deprivation.

Decades ago there was a popular curriculum often used in religious settings called the "a ha! process" popularized by Ruby Payne. It purported to be a way to help people who were caught up in generational poverty to "learn their way out of it" by taking on middle class stances and performative signaling. At its root this curriculum was deficit-based, it used the dominant story of economic success and tried to teach people living in poverty how to act in middle class ways (Gorski, 2008). This push for learning was not actually about listening to people, or sharing an alternative view of economic power, but instead a way to reinscribe the underlying structures of these forms of capitalism.

People who inhabit economic security seeking to hear and respond to stories that have long been concealed need to heed Shweder's admonition to respect these stories, to honor their internal logic and substance. Our first role is to listen, to hear these stories, even as they contradict our habitual ways of seeing the world. During the conflicts arising after the murder of George Floyd, a short video by Kimberly Jones (2020) went viral that used the board game many people immersed in stock stories have played (Monopoly) to invite a different compassion for protesters. This was a story that for many people in my immediate contexts changed the way they perceived what was happening in Minneapolis.

A powerful form of adult faith formation that is increasingly being offered in some settings invites people to listen to very familiar biblical stories and try to inhabit different characters in those stories (Powell, 2007). Many folk who live in secure spaces within capitalism hear the story of the "good Samaritan," for instance, and imagine ourselves as that Samaritan, rather than the priest or the Levite, let alone the person who has been robbed and left for dead. What could it open up in meaning-making for someone hearing that story to imagine ourselves into these other roles?

A third way to "think through others" Shweder labels "thinking one's way out of or beyond the other." Shweder cautions that this stance "properly comes … after we have already appreciated what the intentional world of the other powerfully reveals and illuminates, from its special point of view. 'Thinking through others' is, in its totality, an act of criticism and liberation, as well as of discovery" (109-110). This modality requires, first, a deep engagement with previously concealed stories, as well as thoroughly critical confrontation of stock stories and the forms of knowing which recognize and authorize them.

I think this is what Hill-Collins means by "pivoting the center" (2000, 270) and Bell et. al. label resistance stories. This form of knowing invites criticism of existing structures, and particularly of stock stories. Stories of resistance are constructed out of more participatory and collaborative forms of knowing than either concealed or stock stories, and they both demand and embody a community of truth epistemology.

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Resistance stories around economics often emerge through collective organizing. Although the history of unionization in the US is fraught with stock and concealed stories, it has also been a place in which resistance stories can arise. Here the Roman Catholic commitment to labor, read through documents such as Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum novarum* (1891), exemplify a form of "thinking through others" as a way beyond dominant narratives. By lifting up biblical narratives of humans tending to creation, of stewardship as responding to God's creative abundance, rather than human success, religious stories can be rooted in resistance. There is a long history of such work in the Catholic context, and I believe in Jewish and Muslim spaces as well.[2]

Finally Shweder describes a fourth way in which we "think through others" as "the process of representing the other … hand in hand with a process of portraying one's own self as part of the process of representing the other, thereby encouraging an open-ended self-reflexive dialogic turn of mind" (110). This fourth sense resonates with the ways in which Bell, et. al. write about "transforming" stories, and it is a way of thinking through economics that is increasingly being embodied in solidarity work, in worker cooperatives, in worker-owned businesses (cf. Rieger 2009, 2015, 2022).

To develop a scripturally grounded identity requires the humility to step outside of linear, hierarchical, instrumental forms of knowing. We must learn what it means to be embedded in capitalism in all of the negative, dominating, and problematic elements of that form of economic activity but then we must also step into an identity in which "participating in an economy" comes with the intention to be committed to a common good, to construct a community of truth in which each person has value and wholeness. Bell et. al. write of "counter or transforming stories" when they speak of this kind of narrative.

Transforming and transformative stories require a profound willingness to value, respect, and learn from diverse "others." Indeed such stories shape forms of knowing in which the dualisms and dichotomies of "us" vs. "them," of "thinking through others," become less clear, and may eventually disappear into a kaleidoscopic valuing of difference as an essential element of our relationality. These are stories that cannot be constructed in isolated, monochromatic ways. Instead they are participatory, collaborative, shared stories.

Pedagogical strategies for engaging economics

R. Kegan's description of the ways in which transformative adult learning takes place offers pedagogical support for this kind of work with narratives (1982, pp. 191, ff.). He writes of a spiraling process, in which we first confirm the reality in which someone exists, then engage contradictions to that reality, before consolidating meaning in a place which while having continuity with earlier understandings can now reach beyond them. He describes human development as a dynamic dance between "foreground" and "background" in our meaning-making. We move from "being held" by a particular understanding to being able to "hold" it and thus engage it, wonder about it, critique it, and so on.

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[2] This essay is already too long, but it is worth noting here that Protestant theologians such as Kathryn Tanner (2005) have pointed out how a "protestant work ethic" can come to support capitalism, rather than contest it.

This insight into how stock stories can be brought into engagement with concealed stories, and thus become open to resistance and transforming stories, is a crucial element in creating learning designs for effectively contesting our current forms of capitalism. Brené Brown, known for her adept ability to craft accessible ways of talking about shame, notes that we either "own our stories" or "are owned by them" (Brown, 2015). "Owning" the story of economic identity as someone who benefits from stock forms of capitalism requires being able to enter into, to "confirm," the ways in which we have been making that meaning. We need to be able to see that we have been drawn into profoundly damaging stories of the *oikonomia* (thus bringing a scriptural understanding into the foreground), rather than being oblivious to our own participation in highly destructive actions (where "doing ok" is the unspoken norm, the background). We have to be open to how our own narratives craft dominance through such stories of how an economy functions.

Here we have much to learn from anti-racism education. For instance, to use R. Frankenberg's language, white people can become "race cognizant" of our own role in the processes of racialization (1993, p. 159). We need to see how white normativity has created racial categories which make whiteness the universal norm and then transform our awareness of that process. Analogously, then, religious educators who are seeking to transform stories about *oikonomia* must help each other see the ways in which capitalism has mesmerized our imaginations. As R. Kegan has observed, however, simply "contradicting" our stock stories without growing an ability to "witness in the context of engagement with others," without learning how to craft and tell stories of resistance and counter stories, will not lead to transformation.

Similarly, we need to see how our "taken for granted" stories of individual routes to success, of competition in a world of scarcity, have created an entire landscape of language and assumptions about economic activity that make it difficult to perceive the humanity, the "made in the image of God" ness of our neighbors, especially those who are finding it impossible to live let alone thrive amidst capitalism.

Merely contradicting the central and dominant stories by which middle class people and others are schooled into thinking economic hardship is something "others" bring upon themselves, merely contradicting the dominant stories without inviting people into other spaces, without offering the continuity of meaning-making in a community of truth, generally leads people to "snap back," or to construct what J. Hull has termed a "premature ultimate" in which people grow ever more obstinate in our refusal to countenance stories that contest our reality (1991).

So how do we offer such a transformative invitation? Keeping in mind these four frames – either the "stock, concealed, resistance, and transforming" stories frame, or the "thinking by means of the other, getting the other straight, thinking beyond the other, and witnessing in the context of engagement with the other" heuristic – here are some of the ways I am trying to do this. I offer them as starting places, and invite your examples.

Engaging stock stories by way of "thinking through others"

At its most basic, this kind of storytelling begins with intensive collaborative storytelling exercises which help people to listen to their own stories with new attention. We have far too

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much practice in the US in listening to stories simply as a way to counter them. We are schooled into superficial forms of debate, but rarely into genuine and authentic dialogue. The first step is to learn to listen carefully to one's own story, being attentive to the silences, the taboos, the dominant frames that conceal parts of one's story

Three storytelling exercises can be very helpful here.

(1) The first is an exercise people are asked to do in the privacy of their own lives. An autobiographical essay with specific prompts for attending to economic history can invite people to begin to observe the implicit and null curricula around economics in which they have been immersed

(2) The second is a story circle process. Gathering learners into groups of four people, a facilitator explains that in each circle everyone will have a chance to tell a story from their life. Each person in the circle will have a distinctive role in that process, and then will rotate the roles. One person tells a brief personal story, one person listens for the facts or actions of the story, one person listens for the feelings in the story, and one person listens for the embedded values of the story. After the story telling concludes each of the listeners shares what they have heard, and then the roles rotate. This process can be repeated in many different ways, using different story prompts. Some of the prompts I have used include: tell a story of a moment in which you claimed you are "middle class," tell a story of a moment in which you were confused by economic language, tell a story of a moment in which you knew something was wrong about the economy but had no language for it, and so on.

(3) The third is somewhat similar to the second, only this one is called a "story titling" exercise. In this process one person tells a brief personal story, and then following the story turns their back on the other circle participants, and listens carefully as the others offer potential titles for the story. After the others have offered whatever titles they can think of, the storyteller turns back around and chooses one of the titles, explaining why it appeals to them. If none of the titles resonantes for them, the story teller offers a different title. The process of turning away from the other group members invites the story teller to focus on what they are hearing, rather than the person who is sharing the title. It also embodies a form of distancing oneself and then turning back into the group.

Each of these three exercises is a basic step into listening more carefully for how one constructs one's identity as a participant in an *oikonomia*. Because story circles are shaped with an explicit set of ground rules, a space is created in which a story can be "held" rather than having the storyteller "be held" by it. This practice in careful listening is generally experienced as both powerful and engaging by those who participate in it, and it offers an initial way by which to create "confirmation" of the meaning they are currently making in relation to race.

Doing so in groups which are made up of people who have succeeded in this economic landscape can only be the first step as Bell, et. al. and Shweder make clear. Story circles may also be used in groups with people from multiple economic backgrounds, but in that context it is crucial to remember R. Shweder's caution about "thinking by means of the other." A form of "thinking

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through others" which is only self-focused mirroring can erase the other. Thinking in this way does not bring us to open up beyond ourselves, but only re-centers our established norms.

It is crucial to establish some space, some "confirmation" of meaning, that builds room for openness and learning, but it is equally crucial to "contradict" dominant meaning-making. If the circle of storytellers is diverse, sharing a personal story in the context of a story circle invites a learner to hear their story in new ways, through the insights of their fellow circle participants.

Yet particularly in groups of participants who are succeeding economically, this first mode is all too easily one which can remain at the level of sympathetic identification rather than true empathy. It is a first step into a narrative, a first attempt to listen for resonance. It is an important first step, but also a limited one. For some learners the concealed stories which might come to light in a diverse story circle can simply re-inscribe existing understanding in that way putting a gloss on oppressive dynamics.

Engaging concealed stories as a way of "getting the other straight"

The second mode of thinking through others, then, is an important next step. "Getting the other straight" is about "providing a systematic account of the internal logic, of the intentional world constructed by the other." The goal here is to ignite interest in learning of alternate ways of seeing the world, of listening carefully to concealed stories and the shared history they illuminate. This is a first step into a community of truth model of knowing.

Once participants have begun to become more conscious of the gaps in their own knowing, of the silences in their own learning, sharing concealed stories can be very effective. But this is also a moment in which we must heed R. Shweder's caution about what it means to "get the other straight." Have we really built the necessary trust and respect to encounter the internal meaning of a particular concealed story? Can we, if we are persons who are benefiting from current economies, do so with sufficient care and attentiveness so as not to fall into the trap of merely re-inscribing dominance?

Here narratives produced by people specifically to share concealed stories in emancipatory ways can be very helpful. I mentioned the video done by Kimberly Jones earlier and that would be one example.

Unlike pedagogical strategies which focus solely on engaging printed texts, or strategies that rely only on personal story sharing, digital media offer a different kind of access to the affective elements of learning. By inviting more sustained attention to concealed stories that have been produced for sharing in diverse settings, the process affords learners in privileged settings the opportunity to observe shifts in meaning they might have skipped over initially, as well as to approach the differences appreciatively. Given how "other" such stories can appear to dominant folk, this intentionally designed process of "believing rather than doubting" (to use Elbow's insight), offers access points with new possibility (Elbow, 1986).

In addition, because the participants in a given learning event are experiencing the digital media piece together, they share an experience from which and through which they can learn together.

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There is a kind of intimacy that develops when listening to a story that shares strong feelings, but it can also be very difficult to have enough trust to wonder aloud about such a story when the storyteller is unfamiliar to you and sitting right in front of you. Putting a digital media piece in the center of the circle of knowing invites a more open engagement with the story, since the people who crafted it do not have to be present for the discussion.

Here again Shweder's caution is important, because using a piece of digital media in this way requires very thoughtful facilitation to avoid it becoming simply another mirror for stock stories, or a way to discredit concealed stories. Engaging concealed stories requires careful shaping of the spaces in which they are shared and careful attention to the people who are sharing them. It is a powerful pedagogy for supporting people in hearing the concealed stories of people on the underside of economies, and this kind of story sharing can be a concrete and effective way to invite initial conscientization, and begin to build anchoring points for the development of a more scripturally grounded identity.

Resistance stories, and "thinking beyond the other"

Shweder's third mode of thinking through others, "thinking one's way out of or beyond the other," is a form of what Bell, et. al. have labelled "resistance stories." This mode is focused on helping learners to explore how resistance arises, and how such sharing and collaborative coming to know can yield transforming stories. It is particularly important when working in dominant spaces to broaden intentionally the range of voices drawn on in the community of truth. Narratives created by people of color specifically to engage in anti-racism reparative economic work can be an essential resource because of the ways in which they interrogate economic assumptions.

This third mode of "thinking through others" is a moment when pedagogically we are deliberately moving into structural analysis and confronting the silences and structural marginalization which learners who inhabit the privileged ends of various spectra of oppression have learned to ignore and deny.

Shweder (1991) expands upon this dynamic when he writes that:

> … 'thinking through others' … is the sense of thinking one's way out of or beyond the other. It is the sense of passing through the other or intellectually transforming him or her or it into something else – perhaps its negation – by revealing what the life and intentional world of the other has dogmatically hidden away, namely its own incompleteness. It is a third sense, for it properly comes later, after we have already appreciated what the intentional world of the other powerfully reveals and illuminates, from its special point of view. 'Thinking through others' is, in its totality, an act of criticism and liberation, as well as of discovery." (109-110)

This "passing through and transforming" is a double-edged sword. Dismantling brutal forms of capitalism requires intentionally confronting the systemic ways in which many people benefit from them, as well as nurturing the healing of internalized stories that result from such oppression. What can it mean to "think through and beyond" narratives of capitalism in this way? At a minimum such stories must draw on systemic analyses which engage race, class, gender, and other intersecting forms of oppression. Such stories capture and filter meaning which

might otherwise be ignored or even suppressed by dominant voices, and they can do so in ways which model and invite active resistance.

I have been surprised and heartened by some of the multi-generational story circles I have been in, in which storytellers share their experiences of growing up in small rural towns where farm life demanded shared cooperation, and where God's creative abundance was often made clear. There are powerful stories to be lifted up there, and rather than being captured by dominant stories of capitalist economy, these stories told in the language and patterns of life deep in the storytellers' families offer strong resistance to shame and powerful invitations to hope.

There are also hundreds of documentary films, websites, and other resources upon which to draw in this way. Emancipatory history is a powerful resource, and the growth of the fields of social history and movement history contain illuminating testimonies of the rich history of resistance to various forms of oppression. Resistance stories are a plentiful resource for engaging in this kind of "thinking through others" as a form of liberation, because they are embedded in our shared narratives, but are so often silenced, concealed, or suppressed that their very distance from dominant narratives makes them "strange" or "other" in a way that invites study.

There are many examples of digital stories which offer critical, compelling, and at times even humorous routes into this necessary form of systemic analysis. I think here of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TED talk on the "danger of a single story," or Alok Vaid-Menon's TEDx-Middlebury talk on "we are nothing (and that is beautiful)."[3] Both of these narratives draw out dynamics which have immediate resonance to the challenge of living within resistance stories.

The pedagogical power of using such stories of resistance is that you are connecting your participants' stories to contemporary systemic analyses – again, widening the circle of the community of truth – and doing so in ways that help to make these narratives more immediately relevant to current events. You are providing the "continuity" of which Kegan writes. Further, because many of these stories are digitally available, you can invite them into spaces of learning, into contexts which would otherwise be isolated from such narratives, and awaken learners to the expansive insights of such widening.

One danger in using digital media, however, is that you can eclipse the actual building of accountable relationships by merely listening to stories, instead of engaging in shared and collective action. In that case the narratives no longer reveal and confront, but may only proof text pre-existing convictions. This is a very real danger that lives in the discussions of capitalism in the US. Stories which evoke and illuminate how privilege is conferred by specific structures can be concealed or resistance stories, or they can become stock narratives which simply reinscribe existing structures. Even worse: they can become conspiracy stories. Far too often I have been in places where the continual retelling of stories of economic privilege do not honor the resistance and persistence of people not so privileged, but only highlight and reinscribe conferred dominance. Telling the stories in this way has the insidious effect of continuing to support capitalism rather than dismantling it.

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[3] The danger of a single story (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9Ihs241zeg), We are nothing (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wxb-zYthAOA).

Counter/transforming stories – "witnessing in the context of engagement with the other"

The fourth form of story, counter or transforming story, is what Shweder describes as thinking through others in a process in which "representing the other goes hand in hand with a process of portraying one's own self as part of the process of representing the other, thereby encouraging an open-ended self-reflexive dialogic turn of mind" (110). Here is where community is crucial, and privileged identities need to be part of collective, shared action. Here the narratives which are told can draw people beyond mere story-sharing -- digital or otherwise -- into accountable community, where "witnessing in the context of engagement with the other" becomes at once both a daily practice and a catalyst for continuing learning. Here creating and telling counter stories becomes a direct mode for resisting dominant interpretations. We know that stories can be transformative, and finding ways to collaboratively build such stories, and then to share those stories out into the world can be tremendously impactful. I have found the profound sharing that occurs in circle practices particularly helpful here (Pranis, 2015a, 2015b).

For other examples try using keywords such as "worker cooperatives" "wild church" "economic solidarity" "reparative justice" – these can often lead to stories that invite this kind of entrance into a "community of truth" epistemology which grounds a scriptural imagination.

As the last decade has shown, sharing stories in digital spaces can invite people into relationships that demand action. Rather than being stymied by an artificial dichotomy between "online" and "offline" story sharing, digital stories become a route by which to exchange meaning across previously unassailable borders. Vivienne is eloquent about the impact of such work (2016):

> Digital storytelling creates opportunities to 'bring things up,' to broach difficult discussions 'out in the open.' Ownership of one's position in society (as represented in a digital story) is reflected in the capacity to receive and give affirmation. Further, public expression of marginalized voices opens space for others to speak as they also negotiate how and where they fit in the world. As a medium that facilitates speaking across difference and bridge building, digital storytelling evokes the profound significance of participatory media as a widespread global phenomenon. (196-197)

This kind of digital storytelling, this "witnessing in the context of engagement with the other" is a mode which demands deep humility paired with persistent and consistent conviction. There are several spaces in which digital storytelling has been used specifically to engage in transformative learning. Bell, et. al.'s curriculum is one clear example, but there are many others that have been archived in Story Center's resources (https://www.storycenter.org/stories). In my immediate religious contexts I have found the podcasts and blogs of writers such as Maria Popova, Nadia Bolz Weber, Meta Herrick Carlson, Ellie Roscher, and others to be good sources for this kind of storytelling.

Finally, it is worth remembering where this essay began: in a clear assertion that how we do this work has to begin in recognizing a different form of knowing, a different framework – the community of truth – in which all of our work must be grounded.

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Tamice Spencer-Helms
United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities
tamice.spencer-helms@unitedseminary.edu
REA Annual Meeting, July 7-11

Reimagining Humanity in the Age of AI_ Epistemology, Meaning-Making, and the Recovery of Self-Trust through the R.E.S.T Mixtape

INTRODUCTION

Artificial intelligence (AI) stands at the forefront of contemporary technological advancement, promising unprecedented levels of efficiency, precision, and optimization. Yet, as religious educators and cultural critics alike increasingly acknowledge, AI is far from a neutral tool. Rather, it embodies deeply embedded logics of whiteness, perfectionism, and colonial supremacy, actively promoting an artificial ideal of omniscience predicated on the eradication of vulnerability. The rise of AI thus compels religious educators to grapple with profound ethical, theological, and pedagogical questions. This paper addresses these pressing issues through the lens of the R.E.S.T. Mixtape framework, an interdisciplinary and post-Christian methodology emphasizing radical, root-level truth-telling as a primary mode of analysis. The mixtape rooted in traditions of Black radical thought, womanist theology, and cultural critique, seeks to unearth and interrogate the foundational assumptions driving contemporary practices and technologies, particularly those assumptions linked to colonial legacies and theological fantasies of perfection and invulnerability. The R.E.S.T. Mixtape presents hip hop as a theological, anthropological intervention, treats cultural production as sacred text, and cultural creativity as a site of divine revelation. By examining two illustrative cultural texts— the film *The Imitation Game*, which dramatizes Alan Turing's groundbreaking work on computational logic, and hip-hop artist Lauryn Hill's provocative live album, *MTV Unplugged No. 2.0*—this study highlights a critical tension between AI's technocratic idealization of perfection and Hill's embodiment of vulnerability as a form of divine and authentic human knowing. The juxtaposition of these texts reveals the implicit theological-ontological fantasies embedded within AI development, particularly the fantasy that equates perfection with invulnerability and mastery over the human condition. In bringing these insights to the foreground, this paper not only provides a rigorous cultural and theological critique but also offers religious educators practical tools and methodologies for resisting the incorporation of harmful and reductive logics into their pedagogical practices. Ultimately, this inquiry urges religious educators toward ethical vigilance and epistemological humility, fostering educational practices that honor vulnerability and elevate alternative intelligences drawn from the rich traditions of Black cultural creativity.

<div align="center">1</div>

THEORETICAL GROUNDING: WHITENESS, COMPUTATION, AND THE FANTASY OF PERFECTION

> *"Since man is said to be the image of God by reason of his intellectual nature, he is the most perfectly like God according to that in which he can best imitate God in his intellectual nature."*
>
> *- St. Thomas Aquinas[i]*

The metaphysical foundation upon which artificial intelligence rests can be traced through a continuum of Western thought that begins with Aristotle, is theologized by Thomas Aquinas, and is secularized by Enlightenment thinkers. Each of these intellectual moments contributes to a vision of the human that privileges rationality, order, and disembodiment—traits that continue to structure AI's logics today. Aristotle's ontology, articulated most explicitly in *Metaphysics* and *De Anima*, placed beings in a hierarchical structure based on their capacity for form, movement, and especially reason. As he writes, "Of natural bodies, some have life in them, others do not. By life we mean the faculties of self-nourishment, growth and decay" (*De Anima* II.1, 412a). Rationality appears at the pinnacle of this hierarchy, and thus man—particularly the rational, male, elite citizen—is seen as the fullest expression of being. This classification was not merely descriptive; it encoded a normative logic that would shape philosophical anthropology for centuries. Thomas Aquinas adopted and baptized Aristotle's hierarchy, integrating it into Christian theology in a way that made rationality not just the highest human faculty, but the very location of the *imago Dei*. "While in all creatures there is some kind of likeness to God," Aquinas writes, "in the rational creature alone we find a likeness of 'image'; whereas in other creatures we find a likeness by way of a 'trace'" (*Summa Theologica* I.93.6). This formulation reinforces the Aristotelian elevation of rationality, but it imbues it with divine significance. The human mind becomes a coin stamped with the image of God, and thus intellect becomes the measure not only of one's humanity, but of one's proximity to the divine. With the rise of the Enlightenment, the theological assumptions inherited from medieval scholasticism were not totally discarded but transposed into a secular register. As associate professor of religious studies at the University of Virginia Oludamini Ogunnaike, argues in *From Heathen to Sub-Human: A Genealogy of the Influence of the Decline of Religion on the Rise of Modern Racism*, modern racism emerged not from the absence of religion, but from its reconfiguration within a secularized cosmology. He writes: "I argue that the decline of religion in the West was a necessary condition for the rise of modern conceptions of race and racism" (Ogunnaike 2016, 785). Tracing the evolution of the *Great Chain of Being* across classical, medieval, and early modern periods, Ogunnaike shows that secular modernity inherited and redeployed theological hierarchies, exchanging divine authority for scientific rationalism while retaining the underlying logic of ranked being. This transformation is encapsulated in the movement "from the perspective of man as *imago Dei* to the modern perspective of God as an invention of man" (786). Where Thomas Aquinas had declared, "While in all creatures there is some kind of likeness to God, in the rational creature alone we find a likeness of 'image'... Now the intellect or mind is that whereby the rational creature excels other creatures" (*Summa Theologica* I.93.6; qtd. in Ogunnaike 790), Enlightenment thinkers re-inscribed this privileging of the rational subject by replacing divine likeness with reason itself as the highest human faculty. Ogunnaike explains that "the rational faculty replaced the *nous* as the *imago Dei* in man," and as a result, "Western man found himself in the curious position of being atop the Great Chain of Being" (792). No longer directed upward in contemplative reverence, the human gaze turned

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downward in scientific dominion, seeking to master and order all that lay below. He quotes the Royal Society's 1667 program: "[to] rank all the varieties and degrees of things so orderly upon one another; that standing on the top of them, we may perfectly behold all that are below, and make them all serviceable to the quiet and peace and plenty of Man's life" (791). This shift marked the emergence of what we might call a theological-ontological fantasy: the belief that reason alone, abstracted from embodiment or spirituality, could grant dominion over life itself. God was replaced by universal reason; contemplation of the divine was supplanted by calculation of the world. As Ogunnaike puts it, "the elaborate angelologies of medieval Europe were replaced by the elaborate racial hierarchies of the 18th and 19th centuries" (792). The *imago Dei* was no longer a mystery revealed in divine likeness—it was now assumed to be fully manifest in the rational, white, European male. Thus, modern racism was not a break from the *Great Chain of Being*, but its secular reanimation. What had once been a theology of graded likeness to God became a pseudo-science of graded likeness to Western Man. Sylvia Wynter, a Jamaican philosopher, novelist, and critical theorist, offers one of the most incisive critiques of Western humanism identifies this transformation as the rise of *Man2*, a genre of the human that overrepresents itself as the only legitimate form of humanity. In her essay *"Unsettling the Coloniality of Power/Being/Truth/Freedom"* (2003). Her central argument is that the modern, secular West has produced a narrow, racialized genre of the human. She writes, "Our present ethnoclass conception of the human... overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself" (Wynter 2003, 260). What began as a metaphysical hierarchy based in classical and theological traditions—ranking beings according to their capacity for reason—was secularized into a scientific and political hierarchy that positioned European Man as the apex of evolution and civilization. All others—Black, Indigenous, colonized, feminine, disabled—were rendered less-than-human by their perceived failure to approximate this ideal. This overrepresentation of *Man2* as the epistemic and ontological norm is sustained through what historians of science Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison describe as the construction of the "selfless knower."

In their influential book *Objectivity* (2007), Daston and Galison trace the historical emergence of "mechanical objectivity" in 19th-century scientific practice—a style of reasoning that demanded the erasure of the observer's body, emotion, cultural location, and personal investment in the name of neutrality. "The enemy of mechanical objectivity," they write, "was not error—that could be corrected—but the scientist's self" (2007, 39). The ideal scientific subject was someone who could produce truth without contamination—who appeared disinterested, dispassionate, and detached. But this supposed neutrality was never available to everyone. The "self" that could most easily disappear into objectivity was already coded as white, male, bourgeois, and European. Daston and Galison show that objectivity was not simply about method—it was a moral and aesthetic discipline, one that defined *who* could know and *how* knowledge was made legitimate.

Placed in conversation, Wynter as well as Daston and Galison reveal that the modern West's ideal of objectivity was never neutral; it was an epistemic strategy to protect the authority of *Man2*. It rendered his perspective universal while excluding other modes of knowing as subjective, irrational, or impure. This dynamic becomes especially urgent in the age of artificial intelligence. AI systems thus encode and extend the colonial episteme, replicating the logic of *Man2* not through overt declarations, but through algorithmic reasoning that silently enforces who/what counts as rational—and who/what must be optimized, or erased.

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A SECULARIZED TRANSCENDENCE FROM THE FOREFATHER TO THE GODFATHER

This colonial-theological vision of the rational human finds powerful expression in the computational lineage that stretches from Alan Turing's foundational theories of computation to Geoffrey Hinton's pioneering work in neural networks. Alan Turing, British mathematician, logician, and pioneering cryptanalyst, laid the theoretical groundwork for artificial intelligence by formalizing thought as a series of computable operations. In his 1936 paper *On Computable Numbers*, Turing defined the "universal machine"—an abstract device capable of simulating any algorithmic process, thereby reducing intelligence to a series of symbol manipulations. Turing's conceptualization of intelligence as mechanizable logic and abstraction codified the Enlightenment fantasy of omniscience through calculative mastery. As Chris Miller vividly describes in *Chip War*, the technological competition of the twentieth century was driven by a belief that computational power could guarantee both geopolitical supremacy and epistemic domination: "Semiconductors were to the twentieth century what oil was to the nineteenth: the strategic resource whose mastery determined military and economic might" (Miller 2022, xxiv). Turing's theoretical innovations, rooted in mathematical abstraction, provided a foundational logic that presumed the neutrality and universality of computational reason—mirroring the Enlightenment's epistemological fantasy that perfect knowledge could secure invulnerability and dominion.

FROM TURING TO HINTON: AI, SOVEREIGNTY, AND THE VIOLENCE OF KNOWLEDGE

Decades after Alan Turing's theoretical "imitation game," Geoffrey Hinton, one of his intellectual heirs, brought the theological-ontological fantasy Turing gestured toward into sharper reality. With the creation of AlexNet in 2012—a deep convolutional neural network trained on 1.2 million images from ImageNet—Hinton and his collaborators broke through long-standing technical limitations in neural networks and inaugurated the deep learning revolution. Hinton, a pioneering cognitive psychologist and computer scientist, is often referred to as the Godfather of Artificial Intelligence for his foundational work in deep learning. Building on the early contributions of Marvin Minsky in neural computation, Hinton helped revive and scale neural networks through the invention and application of backpropagation—a recursive optimization algorithm allowing networks to refine outputs by minimizing error. Prior to AlexNet, deep learning was constrained by what might be called the frailties of embodiment: limited computational power, small datasets, and brittle models prone to overfitting. Training deep networks was slow, fragile, and often futile. In theological terms, these systems were too human—bound by time, error, and dependence (Miller, 2022). AlexNet overcame these constraints through innovations that were more than technical. Techniques like ReLU activations to preserve gradient flow, dropout to resist overfitting, and GPU parallelization for speed were not just engineering choices—they were expressions of a philosophical and theological logic: the extension of Enlightenment reason and the ritual enactment of sovereignty through optimization. Hinton summarized this process with a striking phrase from an interview with the *New Yorker*: "By forcing it to predict the next word, you force it to understand." The repetition of force is revealing. It signals baconian roots: knowledge as extraction (Hinton, 2023). Francis Bacon was an English philosopher, statesman, scientist, and author who is widely regarded as one of the founding figures of modern Western science and empirical inquiry. His work laid the intellectual foundation for the scientific revolution and Enlightenment rationalism, and his influence is still deeply felt in how knowledge,

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experimentation, and technology are understood today.This philosophy deeply influenced the Enlightenment, colonial expansion, and later the industrial and technological revolutions. This fantasy—that intelligence must be extracted, forced into coherence, stripped of ambiguity and made legible—finds deep roots in the epistemological frameworks of the modern West. Bacon believed that knowledge should be used to exert control over nature, to "relieve the human estate." This was a radical shift away from medieval cosmologies that viewed nature as sacred or divinely ordered. In Bacon's vision, nature was a resource—something to be measured, manipulated, and mastered for human benefit. In Novum Organum (1620), he describes nature not as a sacred mystery to be approached with reverence, but as a female body to be penetrated, subdued, and made productive. His language is unmistakably violent: nature is to be "put on the rack," "bound into service," and "made to yield her secrets." Knowledge, in this frame, is not discovered through mutuality—it is extracted through domination. This philosophy emerged during European colonial expansion and mirrored the treatment of lands, bodies, and cultures deemed uncivilized or disposable. Bacon's method was inseparable from the *Great Chain of Being.* As discussed earlier Bacon's method offered a way to ascend the chain by mastering the lower orders. What he initiated was more than a shift in methodology; it was a transformation in theological anthropology based on the ontological fantasy that to be god was to be omniscience and: to be human was to dominate through knowing.

THE COST OF THE FANTASY

But the cost of this fantasy is devastating. It encodes a Western colonial episteme as a universal, objective standard of intelligence—one in which vulnerability, slowness, contradiction, and error are not seen as sacred aspects of the human condition, but as technical problems to be eliminated. Once these traits are rendered obstacles, entire ways of being—relational, embodied, artistic, spiritual—are rendered unintelligible. In this system, what AI is trained to minimize—error, unpredictability, ambiguity—is precisely what human life consists of, especially for those living outside the parameters of *Man2*. AI development, in this sense, does not just reflect the colonial episteme—it reinforces and automates it. But this coercion is not only epistemic, it is material and ecological.This extractive logic is laid bare in Joy Buolamwini's groundbreaking memoir *Unmasking AI: My Mission to Protect What is Human in a World of Machines*. A computer scientist and poet of code, Buolamwini details how commercial facial recognition systems repeatedly failed to detect her face—until she wore a white mask. Her existence, as a dark-skinned Black woman, was literally unreadable to the machine. She writes, "I had to put on a white mask to be seen by AI. That was the moment I realized: the coded gaze does not see us. We are rendered invisible." (Coded Bias, 2020). Buolamwini's experience is not an anomaly—it is the direct result of AI systems trained on narrow data, shaped by colonial norms, and built to serve dominant bodies. The algorithm did not "fail" accidentally. It succeeded in reinforcing the logic it was trained on: a world in which some lives are too complex, too dark, too disobedient to be processed. In this way, AI doesn't just struggle to see difference—it automates the erasure of the different. Ruha Benjamin builds on this in Race After Technology, where she describes how emerging technologies often "encode inequity by default." She names this dynamic the New Jim Code: technologies that appear neutral or objective but in fact deepen racial hierarchies through design, data, and deployment. For Benjamin, the harm of AI is not just in its misuse—it's in its foundational assumptions: "The excitement around innovation distracts from the enduring work of oppression that innovation too often bolsters. Not just who is left out, but who is forcibly included—coded, tracked, governed." Together, Buolamwini and Benjamin show us that the

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promise of AI "understanding" is a myth built on forced recognition, coerced conformity, and ontological surveillance. What machines are trained to eliminate—error, unpredictability, resistance—is precisely what constitutes life for those who exist outside the normativity of *Man2*. In addition to what Ruha Benjamin and Joy Buolamwini have exposed about the epistemic and racial harms embedded in AI, the very infrastructure of artificial intelligence is built upon ecological and spiritual violation. The training of large-scale models demands not only immense computational power and vast quantities of data, but also rare earth minerals, often extracted from Indigenous lands reframed as "resource zones."

A CONTESTED ANTHROPOLOGY OF AI

This is the theological-ontological fantasy at the heart of artificial intelligence: that mechanical reason can achieve perfection by eliminating what does not compute. AI's current trajectory resembles a digital Manifest Destiny—a colonial theology of expansion and domination, now rendered as computation. The divine logic of optimization collapses the human into data, treats inefficiency as defect, and elevates the machinic as the telos of intelligence itself. If left unchallenged, this vision will not simply reproduce historical exclusions—it will automate them. Taken together, these insights compel us to reframe artificial intelligence not as a neutral tool, but as a contested site of knowledge production—a site where theological, colonial, and ecological histories converge in code. These sites of extraction are not isolated incidents—they are material enactments of the theological-ontological fantasy at the core of AI. In this cosmology, the Earth is not kin, but code–not sacred but supply. Spiritual landscapes are dismembered into digital infrastructure, and relational worlds are flattened into input layers. What AI systems are trained to discard—noise, contradiction, unpredictability—are the very features that define life, especially life in relationship with land, ancestors, and community. In this way, artificial intelligence becomes not only a tool of epistemic colonization but a sacrificial technology, consecrating the Earth at the bottom of the chain to the logic of optimization at the top.

FILM: THE IMITATION GAME

"Are you paying attention? Good. If you're not listening carefully, you will miss things. Important things... You think you're in control You're mistaken. I am in control. Because I know things that you do not know."

— The Imitation Game (2014)

These are the opening lines of *The Imitation Game*, a dramatized glimpse into Alan Turing's life. The film serves as a cultural parable reflecting what Marx identifies as a distinctly American theological anxiety: *vulnerability*. In the film, Turing's conceptualization of the Universal Machine was the materialization of a metaphysical dream, an incarnation of secularized divine omnipotence and the suppression of uncertainty. The voice over alludes to this, it speaks as an omniscient being that can simulate, perform, and transcend all other beings. The Universal Machine did not just compute conquered insecurities and made one invincible. The film satisfies a mythopoeic imagination, shaped by capitalist colonial episteme that confuses an insatiable appetite for conquest with a desire for progress, equates coercive control with optimization and

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virtue, and invulnerability with salvation. Within this frame, the machine is far more than a tool—it is a vehicle for redemption and salvation. Leo Marx, one of the foundational voices in American studies, introduced a critical framework for understanding how this theological-ontological fantasy (rooted in Bacon's vision of conquest through knowledge) was later transposed onto American soil through the logic of industrial modernity. In his seminal work *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964), Marx explores how the figure of the machine—once a neutral symbol of industrial progress—came to occupy a near-mythic role in the American psyche. For Marx, the machine transforms cultural metaphysics, reconfiguring notions of destiny, virtue, and salvation. "The machine was a new kind of divinity in American life," he writes, "progress reimagined as providence" (PBS, 2018). This machine-divinity thesis is indispensable for any theological critique of artificial intelligence, as it names the spiritual transfer that occurs when mechanical systems become vessels of meaning, legitimacy, and power. Marx describes how American literature and imagination were transformed by the sudden, jarring intrusion of technology—particularly the railroad—into pastoral landscapes. The "garden" symbolized harmony, balance, and moral clarity. The "machine," in contrast, represented rationality, mechanization, and control. But Marx's key insight is that the machine was not only disruptive—it was increasingly mythologized as redemptive. The American project embraced technology as more than a tool for survival or convenience–but salvation. As Marx writes, "the aspirations once represented by the symbol of an ideal landscape have not, and probably cannot, be embodied, because the logic of the machine has overwritten the imagination of the garden." Similarly to Marx, Nell Irving Painter, a distinguished American historian, cultural critic, and artist best known for her work on race, identity, and the construction of whiteness in American intellectual and cultural history similarly, interrogates the Gilded Age expansion as a manifestation of a theological ontological fantasy. Painter shows how the Gilded Age's technological advancement—railroads, telegraphs, mechanized factories—became fused with a moral and nationalistic theology. Machines were not just tools of productivity; they became symbols of civilizational supremacy, deeply entangled with the rise of American imperialism and white masculinity. She writes that the United States imagined itself as "a white, masculine nation of moral and mechanical genius," sanctified by Manifest Destiny and sustained by industrial conquest (PBS, 2018).

In the film, Imitation Game Alan Turing's character has an epiphany: "The enigma is an extremely well-designed machine. Our problem is that we're only using men to try to beat it. What if only a machine can defeat another machine?" This scene in the film signals more than a strategy; it signals a theology. If man cannot triumph over machines, the solution is not to rehumanize the battlefield—but to build a god in the machine's image. Alan Turing as protagonist is sanctified not for his capacity for relationship, but for his cognitive supremacy. His emotional detachment, social awkwardness, and inability to connect with others are portrayed as necessary sacrifices to intellectual brilliance. The film valorizes not empathy or ethical discernment, but instrumental rationality—a mind sharp enough to crack codes, win wars, and, ultimately, outpace human frailty. What is celebrated is not Turing's humanity, but his proximity to machine-like efficiency. This is made visually explicit in the way the film renders "Christopher," the machine, in iconographic lighting: bathed in soft glow, haloed by shadows, framed with reverence. The camera lingers on its switches and circuits with the same visual language used in religious cinema to signal the holy. In these moments, the film does more than tell a story—it performs a techno-theological liturgy, elevating *machina salvifica* as the true object of devotion. It is a cultural catechism, preparing its viewers not to cherish relationality or compassion, but to revere optimization, abstraction, and

control. Painter reminds us that beneath technological triumphalism lies systemic decay, extraction, and exploitation—a dynamic that is now built into AI infrastructure. "'Gilded' is not golden. 'Gilded' has the sense of a patina covering something else. It's the shiny exterior and the rot underneath."

"Word on the street is I am mentally unstable which is reality, like you aren't"

-Lauryn Hill, Unplugged 2.0

Where Western theology constructs the imago Dei as white, male, and dispassionate—rational, orderly, and above flesh—hip hop insists on the divine in distortion, improvisation, and the scream. Tricia Rose writes, "Hip hop uses flow, layering, and rupture to render visible the invisible systems of oppression" (Rose 94). These sonic forms become theological—material critiques of systems that claim universality while erasing Black being. Born in the rubble of state abandonment, redlining, and racial capitalism, hip hop refuses the colonial scripts of the human and asserts a mode of being grounded in Black embodiment, sonic memory, and fugitive presence alchemizing pain into prophetic utterance, and remixing erasure into artistic expression. Fred Moten presses further, naming Blackness not as a fixed identity but as a "consistency of the absolutely non-sovereign" (The Undercommons, 140)—a disruption in the very field of the Human that Western metaphysics attempts to stabilize. In this way, hip hop is not just resistance; it is a theological rupture. It deconstructs *Man2* not with theory but with bass, breath, and broken syntax.

Lauryn Hill's *MTV Unplugged No. 2.0*, live album performance is a paradigmatic act of this insurgency—a liturgy of vulnerability that functions as what this paper calls Resurrection Technology. Hill refuses polish and perfection. Her guitar buzzes with dissonance. Her voice cracks and trembles. She interrupts herself to preach, cry, and confess. Her performance destabilizes every assumption of optimization. "Fantasy is what people want," she says, "but reality is what they need." She has, she confesses, retired from the fantasy. This performance arrived two years after Y2K—a moment of global anxiety around the capacities and limitations of machines—and one year after 9/11, when Western society was thrust into a new era of insecurity, surveillance, and techno-nationalism. These social frenzies, rooted in fear of machine failure and systemic collapse, mirror the anxieties Hill explores. Rather than retreat into techno-fantasies of mastery, Hill appears on stage with a guitar she barely knows how to play. She rejects polish, certainty, and control. Hill speaks about the performance to the audience:

> We refer to it as 'Adam Lives in Theory'
> And when I refer to Adam I'm really speaking to all of humanity, you know
> Without an exception of anybody, you know
> And I, I know that alot of the content of this songs
> Is very heavy you know
> But ermm, fantasy is what people want but reality is what they need
> And I'm just retired from the fantasy part
> Because I realized that
> Y'all gon' make me cry

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And then begins to sing the lyrics:

Adam lives in theory
Tryna turn stone into bread
Masquerading like he got it figured out
Cut off from the sunshine, only smart in his own head
Leaving his descendants to hope and doubt
Left to his devices, those worthless sacrifices
Praying to the alter of himself
Making pilgrimages, thinking he's religious
Like he's got all the light, and no one else
He takes the unsuspected
'Cause he knows they're not connected
And he shows them how to be just as he is
Virtually real, and commercially appealed
To the lust of all the people where he lives

She sings, "Adam lives in theory, trying to turn stone into bread"—a direct critique of the theological-ontological fantasy. Adam, is representative for all humanity and like the architects of artificial intelligence, attempts to master vulnerability, to simulate control. But as Hill reveals, that project is doomed. To be human is to be in process. She continues: "Masquerading like he's got it figured out, cut off from the sunshine, only smart in his own head." This is a critique not just of modern man, but of Enlightenment logics that locate intelligence solely in cognition—what Sylvia Wynter calls the coloniality of being. It is also a nod to Aristotle and Bacon, whose philosophies laid the groundwork for objectivity as domination. Galison and Daston have shown how the very category of objectivity is socially located—what Foucault calls "a view from somewhere." Hill's line "smart in his own head" exposes the incompleteness embedded in artificial intelligence, which encodes limited worldviews into machines that do not—and cannot—account for what lies outside the frame. In that framework, anything unprogrammed is treated as defect. She further sings, "Praying to the altar of himself," pointing to what Nell Irvin Painter identifies as the worship of the Rational Man, gilded with a veneer of progress but rotting underneath. Hill's Adam is not just biblical; he is civilizational. He lives in theory—in abstraction—seeking control, mastery, and certainty. Hill says plainly: this is a fantasy. Her message is clear: stop walking in pride. Let the thief be crucified. Unlearn everything we know and let the divine teach us—line upon line, precept upon precept. Say goodbye to what she joins Painter in calling a decaying social system.

If God is an omniscient, detached, invulnerable machine, then the god of modernity is not reality but fantasy. In The Imitation Game, Turing's machine positions vulnerability as something to be optimized next to divinity. But Hill warns: this God does not know how to bleed can't be trusted. On this album, Hill performs a radical undoing of modernist, technocratic commitments to stability, productivity, and polish. Her instability is not the negation of divinity but its condition—a radical openness to spirit, improvisation, and revelation. Rather than conceal or sanitize her humanity to conform to codes of coherence, Hill exposes instability as holy ground. Her trembling voice, repeated restarts, and spiritual monologues function as counter-algorithms,

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refusing completion, refusing closure, refusing optimization. Her performance is not merely vulnerable—it is a theological event. It is an altar of authenticity and a blueprint for freedom. As machines increasingly mediate the conditions of human experience, the outsourcing of cognition and the rise of algorithmic governance must be interrogated through frameworks that prioritize the "stuff" of humanness—relationality, affect, spirit, creativity, memory, and presence.

What is needed is not merely a critique of AI but a new methodological ground—one that refuses the disembodied epistemologies from which AI emerged. The interventions needed must come from communities never invited into the category of "the human" to begin with. They know something different—something essential—about what it means to be both sacred and in process. Against the theological-ontological fantasy of optimization, Hill, and the R.E.S.T mixtape offers divine unbecoming. And in that unbecoming, in that unplugging, we recover not only our humanity but the ultimately salvific sacred intelligence of being otherwise.

CONCLUSION: R.E.S.T AS HERMENEUTIC & HOMILY IN THE AGE OF ALGORITHMIC DIVINITY

In the shadow of algorithmic sovereignty and optimization theology, religious educators must confront a profound challenge: how to teach in an age where machinic logics masquerade as metaphysical truth. This paper has shown that artificial intelligence is not merely a technical phenomenon but the latest instantiation of a theological-ontological fantasy forged in the crucible of whiteness, colonialism, and the myth of *Man2*. Against this inheritance, we introduce the R.E.S.T. Mixtape not simply as a framework, but as a methodology of sacred disruption—a mixtaping praxis of critical fidelity and epistemic refusal. To be *Radical* in this context is to return to the root—radix—not as nostalgia, but as excavation: to name what is most real beneath the layers of abstraction and optimization. R.E.S.T. is radical because it begins with truth-telling that is neither polite nor abstract. It names the extractive, anti-Black, and disembodied foundations of technological modernity and dares to imagine otherwise. It compels religious educators to reclaim their prophetic vocation—not to sanctify the tools of empire, but to disrupt them with rootedness. *Ethics*, within R.E.S.T., are not built on the Enlightenment's binary scaffolding of mind and body, good and evil, machine and man. Rather, they are rooted in the spiritual insight of non-duality— the sacred reality of non-separateness. This ethic refuses the violence of categorization, the cruelty of objectivity, and the reduction of the human to the calculable. Instead, it insists that to act justly is to recognize relational entanglement as the condition of moral vision. *Spirituality*, as understood through this framework, defies whiteness's impulse to transcend limitation. Whiteness, with its disembodied hunger for mastery and perfection, constructs limitation as defect. R.E.S.T. reclaims limitation as sacred. It positions the crack, the pause, the rupture—not as barriers to progress but as the contours of divine encounter. Where AI demands completeness, R.E.S.T. invites educators to dwell in partiality, to attend to the intelligences that emerge from broken places: ancestral knowing, intuitive wisdom, embodied memory. This spirituality is not about ascent, but about descent—into story, into grief, into groan. It does not seek to escape the human condition; it sanctifies it. *Tradition*, finally, is what keeps this descent from becoming disintegration. In R.E.S.T., tradition is not rigid inheritance but dynamic tethering. It offers educators language, lineage, and liturgy to remain anchored while navigating ambiguity. In a cultural moment marked by disorientation and algorithmic overstimulation, tradition is not a return to the past but a refusal

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to wander without compass. It protects against the entropy of unmoored imagination by grounding innovation in spiritual fidelity.

"Tradition is not to preserve the ashes, but to pass on the fire." As Gustav Mahler reminds us, thus, the R.E.S.T. Mixtape is not simply a model—it is a method of resistance that offers a hermeneutic for reading cultural texts, pedagogical realities, and technological phenomena through the sacred lens of complexity, contradiction, and communal memory. It is a mixtaping methodology, drawing across genres and generations to compose new theologies, new ontologies, and new ethics rooted in the radical dignity of the vulnerable. For religious educators, R.E.S.T. is both anchor and amplifier. It challenges us to interpret culture as sacred text, to resist the false gods of optimization, and to teach from the wisdom of those who have never been granted full humanity within colonial regimes of knowledge. In the face of AI's theological impersonations, R.E.S.T. calls us not to worship the machine, but to return to the flesh and to the divine intelligence of sacred refusal.

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~~Abdullah Yildirim~~

Lokman Yildirim

wahsim2012@gmail.com

lokmanyildirim1588@gmail.com

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New Generation Media and Religious Education: The Case of Ministry of National Education General Directorate of Religious Education

Abstract

New generation media is fundamentally transforming how individuals access information and fostering innovative pedagogical approaches, particularly in religious education. The Media and Digital Content Unit (DOGM) of the General Directorate of Religious Education exemplifies the integration of digital tools into traditional frameworks. DOGM develops various platforms to enhance media literacy and improve religious education effectiveness. By cultivating a participatory learning environment, DOGM's initiatives encourage active student engagement and deeper understanding of religious concepts, evolving education into a process that shapes personal and social identities. New generation media enhances teacher-student interactions and accelerates information sharing, with social media playing a crucial role in fostering critical thinking and dialogue among diverse belief systems. This study conducts comparative analyses of DOGM's YouTube and Instagram accounts, focusing on metrics like follower counts and viewership. Findings indicate a preference for content that helps young people explore life's meaning and highlights the appeal of engaging, humorous posts. While new media offers opportunities for enhancing education, it also presents inherent challenges that must be addressed.

Keywords: Religious Education, New Generation Media, DOGM, Media Literacy, Pedagogical Approaches.

Introduction

Official religious education and training services in Turkey are coordinated by three institutions inherited from the Ottoman Empire. Non-formal religious education services carried out by mufti offices, especially mosques and Qur'an courses, are carried out by the Presidency of Religious Affairs; higher religious education activities at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels are carried out by the Faculties of Theology/Islamic Sciences; and religious education and training at the basic and secondary education levels are carried out by the General Directorate of Religious Education of the Ministry of National Education.

The Directorate General of Religious Education (DÖGM) is responsible for all the work and operations of Imam-Hatip high schools, especially the preparation of vocational courses curricula and textbooks, as well as the preparation of the curriculum and textbooks of the religious culture and ethics course, which is included in Article 24 of the 1982 Constitution. Preparation of the curriculum and textbooks of the religious culture and ethics

course included in Article 24 of the 1982 constitution, conducting in-service training activities of teachers in the branches of religious culture and ethics and vocational courses of Imam-Hatip high schools, determining religious education policies in schools and taking part in national education councils in this context, opening Imam-Hatip high schools and boarding houses, which are mostly built by philanthropists, planning and sending the budgets of schools, appointing administrators, initiating and coordinating vocational competitions in Imam-Hatip schools.

In addition to all these duties and responsibilities, the institution has taken the responsibility of creating distance religious education contents - which are now new generation teaching materials - based on the need, especially during and after the Covid-19 pandemic period. These contents were in the form of some distance education materials, generally in the form of a lecture video in which a religious subject was taught. The content, which was in the form of eliminating learning losses at the time of restrictions, later diversified and started to become more professional. With the requests and feedback received, the General Directorate decided to establish a specialised unit to improve the quality of the content, diversify it and create it in a way to reach more audiences.

The Digital Content Unit, which sets out with the motto 'An Effective Religious Education in New Generation Media', works under the Special Office of the Directorate General and undertakes the production, planning and coordination of all printed, written, visual and audio communication materials of the institution. The Unit carries out its activities in order to effectively promote the activities carried out by the General Directorate of Religious Education, to announce them to the public and to carry out corporate communication processes in a systematic manner. With 20 different content series prepared by taking into account current pedagogical approaches and technological opportunities in the field of religious education, it produces qualified digital materials that are both student and teacher oriented. These contents are shared with the public every day at 19.00 in line with the determined publication schedule and are made available to the public through digital media within the scope of non-formal education. These contents constitute a wide-access, open source religious education platform and contribute to digitalised educational environments at the institutional level with content production based on field expertise.

1. What means new generation media?

New generation media enhances the interaction between teachers and students within the context of religious education, while also accelerating the processes of information access and sharing. During this period, social media and digital resources play a significant role in fostering critical thinking skills in religious education and provide opportunities for dialogue among diverse belief systems.

New generation media refers to a media ecosystem in which users become not only content consumers but also content producers, and the speed of interaction and dissemination reaches extraordinary dimensions. In this environment, the content that individuals are

exposed to, especially in the fields of religion, values and morality, goes beyond pedagogical control mechanisms and often makes young individuals open to ideological, deviant or commercial exploitation (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007; Campbell, 2012). This transformation necessitates restructuring the communication structure in the triangle of teachers, students and parents in the context of religious education. Concepts such as media literacy, digital ethics, and source reliability are new pedagogical topics that need to be taken into consideration in religious education. When considered together with McLuhan's (1964) 'the medium is the message' approach, it is clear that religious messages cannot be considered independent of the carrier medium. In this sense, unless the right content is presented in the right format and through reliable digital tools, the essence of the message may be under threat.

New generation media is fundamentally transforming the ways in which individuals access information and is fostering innovative pedagogical approaches, particularly within the realm of religious education. In this context, the practices implemented by the Media and Digital Content Unit (DOGM) of the General Directorate of Religious Education exemplify the potential of integrating digital tools into traditional religious educational frameworks. DOGM develops a variety of platforms and content designed to enhance media literacy and improve the effectiveness of religious education.

The initiatives undertaken by DOGM to incorporate new generation media aim to cultivate a participatory learning environment that accommodates diverse learning styles in religious education. This approach not only encourages active student engagement but also facilitates a deeper understanding of religious concepts. Consequently, religious education is evolving into a process that shapes personal and social identities, rather than simply serving as a vehicle for knowledge transfer. DOGM's activities in the field of new generation media will be analysed in the light of interaction data and content strategies, and methods of protection from digital abuse in religious education will be discussed. At the same time, the structure of the institution as an exemplary model will be evaluated through variables such as its performance on social media platforms, access power and user profile.

The initiatives undertaken by the Media and Digital Content Unit (DOGM) extend beyond mere content presentation; they also facilitate the diversification of teaching methodologies. In this study, comparative relational analyses of DOGM's YouTube and Instagram accounts were conducted, focusing on metrics such as follower counts, viewership, and likes across various factors. Data were collected by examining the content that young people, who frequently engage with new generation media, interact with on the YouTube and Instagram accounts of the General Directorate from multiple perspectives.

2. Method

This study is based on document analysis method, one of the qualitative research designs. Document analysis is an effective data collection technique based on the systematic examination of written materials and provides information about past or current processes (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). In this context, the data set of the research was analysed through

the digital contents published in the social media accounts of the General Directorate of Religious Education, the Digital Power Report for 2024: Performance, Access and Impact document and the published study titled 'The Relationship of Digital Content with Turkey Century Education Model Outcomes'.

The data were analysed qualitatively, and the type of content, presentation style, suitability for the target audience and pedagogical structure were evaluated. While making this evaluation, the relationship of the contents with the religious education outcomes in the Turkish Century Education Model was also taken into consideration. At the same time, the quarterly performance reports published regularly by DÖGM were analysed in terms of social media interaction data. Thus, it was revealed at which stage the current practices are at and how they have developed.

3. Findings

3.1. Digital Performance and Reach Capacity

DGMM's Instagram account has grown by 462 per cent in the last year. While the number of followers reached 62,700, the content received a total of 6.7 million views and 2.2 million interactions. These figures represent an interaction power 40 times higher than the total number of followers. Most of the interactions are directly related to the content, and it is seen that the viewers actively participate. The YouTube platform reached 38,700 subscribers and 1.34 million views in total. The posts consisted of 133 videos, among which series such as 'Rotamız Camiler', 'Zamanın İhyası' and 'Müslüman Bilim Adamları' stand out. Traffic from external platforms increased by 208 per cent, while views from YouTube recommendations increased by 146 per cent.

3.2. User Profile and Content Preferences

According to the Digital Power Report, the age group that consumes content most intensively on both Instagram and YouTube platforms is the 25-44 age group. This rate is 75 per cent on Instagram and 59 per cent on YouTube. This age range corresponds to the young adult and parent profile. It was observed that female users are more intense on Instagram (approximately 76%), while the ratio of male and female users on YouTube is close to each other. When content preferences were analysed, it was found that young people were more interested in content prepared in a 'sincere style', containing humour, or having theological and philosophical depth about the meaning of life. Social media trends such as 'Hayırlı Cumaalar' (4.6 million access), 'Hayırlı Ramazanlar' (2.2 million access), 'Ben İmam Hatipliyim, Tabii' (1.7 million access) show the high access potential of the content.

3.3. Analysis of Dijital'izm Series

Among the digital media contents of the General Directorate of Religious Education, one of the prominent examples in terms of conscious media consumption and production is the 'Dijital'izm' series. This series aims to both raise awareness of individuals and protect

them against the risks of digital abuse in themes such as digital media literacy, ethical use, algorithm awareness and digital games (DÖGM, 2024a).

The first part of the series emphasises that the content users encounter on digital platforms is shaped by algorithms and that these algorithms are trainable. It explains how users' interactions with content turn into a recommendation cycle in algorithms over time; thus, it is revealed that digital consumption can be made safer with conscious guidance. This approach serves as a structuring guidance for the behaviour of young users in the digital environment (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007). Another chapter draws attention to the impact of digital games on children and young people. In the series, some types of games in which players are given the 'role of God' are included; it is stated that in these games, themes with religious meaning such as creation, killing, punishment and heaven and hell are left to the player's control. It is warned that this situation may lead to the erosion of the meaning of religious symbols and concepts through gamification (Campbell, 2012). At the same time, it is emphasised that families and educators should be aware of such content.

In another video of the series, it is stated that the intense digital data flow weakens the individual's relationship with the truth and this situation has negative effects on individual attention, concentration and life order. The characteristic problems of the digital age such as information fatigue, distraction and erosion of comprehension capacities are addressed in a pedagogical language in the series (McLuhan, 1964; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). In general, the Digital'izm series serves as an important resource in terms of both media ethics and pedagogical awareness-raising by providing user-oriented and field-oriented suggestions on the conscious use of media tools.

3.4. Analysis of the 'Muslim Scientists' Series

The discourse that religious orientation is an obstacle to scientific activities is an important area of abuse that is frequently encountered among young people in modern times and fuelled by the media. Reductionist approaches that scientific thinking cannot be compatible with religious beliefs can lead to identity conflicts, an artificial tension between faith and science, and mental confusion, especially in young individuals (Nasr, 1992). The 'Muslim Scientists' digital content series developed by the General Directorate of Religious Education offers a data-based and historically grounded response to such prejudiced approaches. In the series, taking into account the cumulative development process of science, the contributions of scientists who grew up in different periods of Islamic civilisation to contemporary scientific developments are presented with concrete examples. This approach explains to young people the universal character of scientific production and makes it easier for them to establish a genuine connection between their beliefs and their scientific interests.

The series is followed with interest by educators from different disciplines, especially science and history teachers, and integrated into educational processes. This shows that digital content is also functional in terms of interdisciplinary interaction. In addition, the value of the series is noteworthy in terms of presenting an alternative, indigenous and pedagogical

perspective against the religion-science conflict discourse that young people are exposed to in the digital field. This example supports young people's self-confidence and intellectual motivation by emphasising that scientific development has strong foundations in Islamic cultural history and how the contributions of Muslim scientists paved the way for today's technological advances. Thus, digital media is no longer just a tool for presenting information, but an educational strategy that combines faith and reason.

3.5. Evaluation of Rotamız Camiler (Route to Mosque) Series

The adoption of religious worship by young people as a natural part of daily life is one of the main goals of religious education. However, classical teaching methods are not always effective enough, especially in behaviour-based subjects such as teaching worship (Özdemir, 2010). In this context, the content series 'Our Route to Mosques' prepared by the General Directorate of Religious Education constitutes a unique example of the effective use of new generation media tools in worship education.

In the series, students visit various mosques in a fun and natural format in vlog style; while discovering the architectural and artistic features of the mosques they visit, they also experience the atmosphere of worship. This series not only provides historical and cultural information, but also makes young viewers feel that worship is an ordinary part of daily life. For example, the fact that the practice of praying two rak'ahs upon entering a mosque is presented in a very natural way within the programme flow enables viewers to learn this sunnah as a natural behaviour model.

Considering the 'fun-based flow' that is dominant on social media platforms, it is seen that the presentation is based on naturalness and sincerity, although a serious religious content is presented in the series (Jenkins, 2006). This keeps the interest of young people alive and supports the learning process. In conclusion, the 'Rotamız Camiler' series successfully demonstrates that the teaching of worship can be presented to young people in an experiential and interactive format, not only theoretically, and thus behaviour change can be achieved through a more natural process.

3.6. Analysis of the 'Bi' Şey Sorabilir Miyim?' Series

The exploitation of religious values in the media, especially under the influence of atheist and orientalist tendencies, has serious effects on today's youth and raises doubts about the basic concepts of faith. In this context, the 'Bi' Şey Sorabilir Mabil Miyim?' series developed by the General Directorate of Religious Education is an important initiative that aims to provide convincing and solid answers to the questions young people face about religious belief, theological issues and basic philosophical problems. This content series is the result of a comprehensive field survey of 120,000 students. In the survey, the main questions that students focus on in the field of religious knowledge, theological problems and philosophical enquiries were identified, and these questions were thematically grouped under

100 main headings. The questions include topics such as the relationship between religion and freedom, the purpose of creation and testing, the meaning of suffering and the issue of God's silence, thought systems such as atheism, deism, agnosticism and the justifications of worship. The series aims to eliminate the doubts that may arise in the minds of young people and to establish a proper balance between faith and science, faith and freedom by providing reasonable and convincing answers to each question from theological, theological and philosophical perspectives. Thus, it is aimed to make young individuals conscious and resistant against the abuse attempts that may occur in the religious field.

3.7. Analysis of the Culture Series: Digital Transmission of Turkish-Islamic Culture and Arts

The commercialisation, superficialisation or decontextualisation of Turkish-Islamic culture and arts in the media is one of the important areas of abuse encountered in the modern period (Çelik, 2017). In this context, the 'Culture' series prepared by the General Directorate of Religious Education is a study aiming to transfer cultural values to digital platforms with a pedagogical and aesthetic approach based on authentic sources. In the contents produced within the scope of the series, the cornerstones of Turkish-Islamic cultural history are introduced, and it is aimed to keep the cultural memory alive by referring to important days and weeks. The contents both function as information transfer and attract the attention of young viewers by using an entertaining and dynamic format. With this method, cultural knowledge is taken out of classical narrative moulds and restructured in accordance with the fluid nature of social media.

Strengthening the ties of the younger generation with cultural heritage is recognised as an important factor in the process of identity construction (Kaplan, 2015). Culture series also aims to ensure cultural continuity by developing original formats that will appeal to the interest of the new generation in digital media. Thus, Turkish-Islamic culture and arts are transferred to the digital environment in a genuine and original way, and a protective digital consciousness is created against cultural exploitation.

3.8. Analysis of the Revelation of Time (Zamanın İhyası) Series: Strengthening Conceptual Consciousness

Today, emptying the content of concepts, narrowing their meanings or redefining them within ideological frameworks makes it difficult for individuals to develop a correct consciousness, especially around religious and moral concepts (Topçu, 2013). Conceptual abuse can lead to the weakening of individual and social identities, especially through the superficialisation of ancient values such as patience, tawakkul, vuslat in everyday language. Developed by the Press and Digital Content Unit of the General Directorate of Religious Education, the "İhyası of Time" series is designed as a digital awareness-raising activity against this conceptual dissolution. Within the scope of the series, the basic concepts frequently used in daily life are presented to the audience not only with their theoretical and philosophical contexts, but also with their practical meanings for life.

With short, impressive and philosophically profound narratives, concepts such as patience, tawakkul, and vuslat are treated in a way to develop the conceptual consciousness of young people. In this way, the concepts do not remain as an abstract doctrine; they turn into a dynamic reminder that gains meaning in the individual's life practice. Such an approach encourages the internalisation of concepts not only in an intellectual but also in an existential dimension (Albayrak, 2016). The 'İhyası Zamanın İhyası' series serves as a preventive function against possible abuses that young individuals may be exposed to at the conceptual level on digital platforms and contributes to the strengthening of cultural-religious consciousness.

3.9. Analysis of the Hafiz Koçu Series: A Process-Oriented Supportive Approach

In the field of religious education, hafizah / hafaz is a unique educational process in which the individual makes an intense effort on the axis of knowledge, discipline and spirituality. However, this process can bring along various psychological, pedagogical and social difficulties, especially for today's youth (Yıldırım, 2017). In addition, lack of information and misperceptions about hafizah education lead to disinformation in digital media, and the process of hafizah is often either mystified or presented as an unnecessary burden.

The "Hafızlık Koçu" series developed by the General Directorate of Religious Education adopts a scientific and guidance-oriented approach against this information pollution. With a model based on the coaching logic, the series deals with the hafizah process systematically from beginning to end; the stages that candidate hafiz may encounter in this process, the difficulties they may encounter and how they can cope with these difficulties are presented in a clear, positive and guiding language.

The contents not only introduce the process, but also aim to provide support to hafiz candidates by adding motivational elements. With such an approach, students' self-confidence towards the hafiz process is increased and the process is seen as a natural learning and development stage (Çepni, 2012). In addition, referring to the historical and cultural origins of hafizah education contributes to emphasising that this sacred process is not only an individual achievement but also an important tradition in the history of Islamic culture. In conclusion, the 'Hafızızlık Koçu' series can be considered as a unique content series that aims to protect individuals in the process of hafızlık from digital information pollution and to strengthen their motivation by offering a supportive and process-oriented religious education model prepared with pedagogical sensitivity.

4. Discussion, Conclusion and Suggestions

Religious education is a process that not only increases the individual's level of knowledge but also shapes his/her moral, spiritual and social orientations. In this context, the effective use of new generation media tools necessitates rethinking both the content and

methodology of religious education. However, this transformation is not only a matter of technical development; it also brings with it an ethical, pedagogical and protective responsibility. The work carried out by the Press and Digital Content Unit of the General Directorate of Religious Education exemplifies how this responsibility can be undertaken. Not only content production, but also how the content is presented, to whom it is addressed, what values it carries and what kind of impact it leaves were taken into consideration. At this point, it is clear that highly interactive, user-centred and pedagogically sensitive content has an important function in terms of protecting young people from digital abuse.

Content production in accordance with the algorithms of digital platforms should be considered as a strategic necessity not only to increase access but also to deliver the right information to the target audience. In this context, DÖGM content reveals that authentic religious knowledge can be presented in an understandable and attractive way without integrating with popular culture. In addition, young people's interest in content on digital platforms shows that they are not alone in their search for meaning and are open to guidance and guidance. Therefore, digital media is not only a 'threat' but can become a 'protective space' when used properly. As seen in the example of DÖGM, digital religious education models that support media literacy, prevent abuse and encourage critical thinking are indispensable for reaching today's youth.

With the impact of digitalisation, religious education and teaching has faced new challenges. The information pollution that young people are exposed to in digital environments, the abuse of religious values and the doubts created in the field of faith have made it necessary to produce conscious and systematic content in this field. The various contents of the General Directorate of Religious Education have both developed a protective awareness against the risks of digital platforms and presented an important model in terms of transferring religious and cultural values to young generations in the language of the age.

The common characteristic of these contents is that they do not only teach information but also present it in a way that can be naturally integrated into the lives of users. At the same time, a constructive approach has been exhibited that facilitates young people's access to authentic religious knowledge, strengthens media literacy and reduces abuses in digital environments. In this context, the digital content activities of the General Directorate of Religious Education constitute a remarkable example among the new generation religious education strategies and show that an authentic representation of religion in the digital world is possible. In terms of future studies, it is recommended to measure the effect of such digital content with quantitative research and to increase the variety of content and to carry out special studies for different age groups.

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Mariska Lauterboom

Satya Wacana Christian University, Salatiga, Indonesia

mariska.lauterboom@uksw.edu

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Gotong Royong Pedagogy:

Cultivating Moral Agency and Caring for Others in Cyber Society

Through Culture-Based Religious Education

Abstract

Facing the challenges posed by artificial intelligence, religious pedagogy needs to help students make ethical decisions and take responsibility for their actions by spiritual principles. Using a literature-based review and qualitative research, this paper analyses the significance of cultivating moral agency and caring for others in a cyber society through culture-based religious education. Through the Indonesian Indigenous culture of *Gotong Royong*, religious education will promote collaborative learning, active participation, and social responsibility. *Gotong Royong* pedagogy is a holistic educational approach that nurtures not just academic knowledge but also social, emotional, spiritual, and ethical growth. Employing this pedagogy in religious education helps us to reimagine the human person, moral agency, and community in the digital era.

Keywords: *Gotong Royong Pedagogy, Moral Agency, Caring Person, Cyber Society*

Introduction

In recent years, the concept of culture-based education has gained renewed interest as a way to ground learning in the values, identities, and social practices of local communities. In the Indonesian context, *Gotong Royong*, a deeply rooted tradition of mutual cooperation, offers a powerful framework for reimagining religious education. Rather than relying solely on imported pedagogical models, this paper explores how *Gotong Royong* can function as a culturally embedded, relational, and holistic pedagogy. To illustrate its enduring presence and formative power, I turn to my own childhood experience in Ambon, a small city in the Eastern part of Indonesia, where the spirit of *Gotong Royong* was vibrantly alive.

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During celebrations that seemed to happen almost every week, people in my village came together to support one another in nearly every task, whether it was constructing a house, organizing family gatherings, repairing public facilities, cleaning the environment, or cooking together. This strong sense of community and care was woven into every activity, embraced by people of all ages. The joy of mutual assistance and collaboration became a defining feature of my community and many others across Indonesia. However, the rise of individualism and social isolation, driven by digital technology and globalization, increasingly challenges these traditional ways of connecting and interacting (Cheng-Tek Tai 2020; Ahmad et.al. 2023; Du 2024).

We live in a cyber society that "focuses on the construction, maintenance, and mediation of community in electronic networks and computer-mediated communication" (Jones, 1997). In a cyber society, digital technology permeates nearly every aspect of our daily lives, reshaping how we relate to one another. Among these technologies, artificial intelligence (AI) has become widely integrated across various fields. While AI brings many benefits, it also poses significant challenges. Ultimately, however, AI is a human-made tool – created, developed, and controlled by people. Therefore, moral agency and an ethics of care are essential to guide how we engage with AI in our everyday lives.

Moral agency refers to the capacity of human beings to make ethical decisions and take responsibility for their actions. In parallel, the ethics of care emphasizes our relational responsibilities toward other creatures of God, grounded in care, solidarity, empathy, compassion, and attentiveness. Rooted in feminist thought, the ethics of care offers a compelling moral framework that extends beyond its origins by centering the importance of being a caring person. Promoting the ethics of care is essential, particularly through educational efforts of religious communities. Religious education should nurture both moral agency and the ethics of care as a response to the ethical challenges posed by AI, including the loss of autonomy and control, gender bias and discrimination, social inequality and injustice, and rising individualism as well as social isolation.

As a country rich in Indigenous culture, Indonesia holds many traditions that emphasize communal life in contrast to individualism. These cultural values can serve as a meaningful foundation for religious education. A culture-based approach to religious education is locally

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grounded rather than Western-centered. It resists colonial and oppressive frameworks by promoting communal living and liberation. Such an approach creates safe and courageous spaces where Indigenous traditions and values are honored as vital sources for understanding and encountering both God and one another.

Gotong Royong is one of the many Indigenous cultural practices in Indonesia and is widely recognized across various ethnic groups. It forms the foundation of the Indonesian way of life, shaping interactions in nearly every aspect of daily living. Literary meaning "working together" or "mutual assistance," *Gotong Royong* manifests in a range of communal activities – from responding to natural disasters and celebrating Indonesian Independence Day to helping with neighborhood weddings, funerals, and everyday tasks. In these moments, people voluntarily come together to support one another as a community, sharing burdens and responsibilities. At its core, *Gotong Royong* reflects key values such as interreligious and intercultural solidarity, empathy, compassion, harmony, and a deep sense of kinship. While the name may differ across regions– *Masohi* in Maluku, *Mappalette* in South Sulawesi, *Marsialapari* in North Sumatra, and *Nganggung* in Bangka Island – the spirit remains the same. As a living cultural heritage, *Gotong Royong* offers a meaningful gift not only to Indonesians but also to the broader global community seeking models of cooperative living.

Applying this cultural concept to religious education, both in its philosophy and rituals, *Gotong Royong* pedagogy offers a holistic approach that grounds learning in Indigenous values. It provides a contextual response to the challenges posed by the contemporary digital world, fostering not only academic understanding but also the social, emotional, spiritual, and ethical growth of students. Through this culture-based framework, educators and learners are encouraged to rethink notions of personhood, ethical or moral agency, and community concerning life within a cyber society. Emphasizing mutual care and moral responsibility, *Gotong Royong* equips students to navigate personal, political, and global decisions with ethical awareness. In this sense, it represents a timely and necessary model for reimagining religious education in the digital age.

This paper argues that *Gotong Royong*, as a culturally rooted Indigenous practice, can serve as a holistic pedagogical model for religious education that forms moral agents and caring

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individuals, especially in response to the ethical challenges of the realities of digital society. The paper begins by outlining the theoretical foundations of moral agency and the ethics of care, followed by an exploration of *Gotong Royong* as a cultural tradition and social practices in Indonesia. It then proposes *Gotong Royong* pedagogy as a framework for culture-based religious education, addressing its potential to counter individualism and nurture caring, ethical communities.

Methodology

This study combines a literature-based review with qualitative research to examine the potential of *Gotong Royong* as a pedagogical model for culture-based religious education that fosters moral agency and nurtures caring individuals within the Indonesian context. As part of the data collection, I engaged with Virginia Held's ethics of care and other relevant literature on moral agency. I also conducted fieldwork in Salatiga, Central Java, Indonesia, in April and May 2025, where I observed two *Gotong Royong* activities. Following these observations, I interviewed seven adult participants (aged 20 to 50) about their motivations, actions, and emotional experiences during their involvement. Additionally, I interviewed three adults and five children (aged 8 to 12) who participated in other *Gotong Royong* events. The first observed activity involved neighbors assisting a new resident, while the second was organized by a local church, where members gathered to cook traditional food. Drawing on these findings, I explore how *Gotong Royong* can function as a culturally grounded form of religious education that cultivates moral agency and caring dispositions, particularly in response to the growing challenges of digital individualism in contemporary society.

Ethics of Care and Moral Agency

Virginia Held, an American philosopher, is best known for her work in ethics of care, along with Carol Gilligan (1982) and Ned Noddings (1982; 2002). Care ethics is a moral theory that emphasizes the importance of interpersonal relationships and highlights care, compassion, and empathy as central to moral decision-making. Along with Gilligan, Held has been instrumental in

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shaping feminist ethics, challenging traditional moral theories that often prioritize abstract, universal principles over the lived experiences of human interdependence and relationality.

In her theory of moral agency, care holds a central place. Held asserts, "Care seems to me to be the most basic of moral values. Without care as an empirically describable practice, we cannot have life at all since human beings cannot survive without it. Without some level of caring concern for other human beings, we cannot have any morality. These requirements are not just empirical givens. In every context of care, moral evaluations are needed. Then, without some level of caring moral concern for all other human beings, we cannot have a satisfactory moral theory" (Held 2006, 73).

Care, or caring concern for others, is thus a foundational moral value, standing in contrast to ethical theories that prioritize rationality, autonomy, and impartial principles. These traditional frameworks, such as Kantian ethics, Aristotelian virtue ethics, and Utilitarianism, often overlook the moral significance of emotion, including empathy and compassion (Gilligan 1982; Held 2005, 2006; Slote 2007). These theories also tend to conceptualize the moral agent as an independent and autonomous individual, failing to acknowledge the deep interdependence that characterizes human life. In doing so, they also neglect the moral labor traditionally performed by women, caregiving, which underscores the relational dimension of human existence.

Held and Gilligan's work on care forms the influential ethics of care theory, which is rooted in a feminist perspective. They contend that moral philosophy must take women's experiences and values seriously, particularly in roles such as caregiving, mothering, and performing emotional labor. These traditionally feminine roles reveal an ethical dimension that has long been overlooked or marginalized in dominant ethical frameworks. Gilligan argues that there is no care without the role of women (1982). Held illustrates this ethic through the example of the mother-child relationship. She says:

> "In caring for her child, for instance, a mother may often be pursuing not her own individual interest, or altruistically her child's as if it were in conflict with her own, but the mutual interest of both together. She will characteristically value her child and her relation to the child for their own sakes, not to satisfy her own preferences. Her moral concern may well be not that of all persons universally but that of the particular others with whom she shares such caring relations. And such caring relations are not limited to the personal contexts of family and friends.

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They can extend to fellow members of groups of various kinds, to fellow citizens, and beyond. We can, for instance, develop caring relations for persons who are suffering deprivation in distant parts of the globe." (2006, 156).

Held further argues that "the value of caring that can be seen most clearly in such activities as mothering is just what must be extended, in less intense but not entirely different forms, to fellow members of societies and the world. To many feminists, thinking about the social world in terms of caring is entirely appropriate, though it is an entirely different way of thinking about it than the way of liberal individualism" (2006, 89). The ethics of care, in contrast to liberal individualism, emphasizes relationality and interdependence as fundamental to human existence (Held 2006,156; Gilligan 1982).

While many moral theories emphasize the rational decisions of agents understood as independent and autonomous individuals, the ethics of care takes a different approach. It values a person as "enmeshed in relations with others," recognizing caring relationships as fundamental to moral life. Held argues, "rather than assuming, as do the dominant moral theories, that moral relations are to be seen as entered into voluntarily by free and equal individuals, the ethics of care is developed for the realities as well of unequal power and unchosen relations" (2006, 156).

According to the ethics of care, "moral life is populated by caring relations in which the interests of self and other are mingled, and trust is crucial" (Held 2006, 157). This approach emphasizes the context and particularities of relationships, such as those between a mother and a child. However, it is not limited to maternal care; rather, it encompasses all individuals who engage in acts of caring. The ethics of care understands how our ties to various social groups and our historical embeddedness are also part of what makes us who we are.

Care ethics evaluates moral situations by asking contextual questions – who is involved, what their needs are, what kind of relationship exists, and how care can best be expressed. Care is both a practice and a value: it is not merely a feeling or attitude but an active commitment that is, in many cases, a moral obligation. Care ethics calls individuals to act in caring ways. As Michael Slote explains, genuine acts of caring involve an emotional response or sensitivity to others and are not confined to particular individuals (2007). Care ethics is characterized by caring motivation, concern for the well-being of others, and the cultivation of good relationships.

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Actions are judged as right or wrong "depending on whether they exhibit a caring or uncaring attitude/motivation in the part of the agent" (Slote 2007, 21).

Unlike justice, which is typically concerned with fairness, rights, and abstract equality, care emphasizes responsiveness, compassion, and attentiveness to the particular needs of others. This emphasis does not suggest that Held rejects justice in their ethics of care; rather, they maintain that care is at least as fundamental as justice. Held claims, "While justice protects equality and freedom from interference, care values positive involvement with others and fosters social bonds and cooperation" (2006, 157).

Held argues that the ethics of care holds significant relevance for addressing global issues. As they note, the ethics of care "has been developed as a moral theory relevant not only to the so-called private realms of family and friendship but to medical practice, law, political life, the organization of society, war, and international relations" (Held 2006, 11). This framework offers valuable insights into group and cultural ties, as well as relationships between communities with shared histories. In this light, the ethics of care can also be applied to understand *Gotong Royong,* a long-standing tradition of mutual cooperation in Indonesia.

Gotong Royong Tradition as the Identity of Indonesian People

To contextualize these ethical principles within Indonesia, this paper now turns to *Gotong Royong*, an Indigenous practice that exemplifies care, solidarity, and moral formation. This section draws on both literature and interviews to describe how *Gotong Royong* functions as a living tradition and a foundation for ethical and communal life in Indonesian society. In this section, I describe *Gotong Royong* based on both literature research and interviews. I interviewed fifteen individuals, including ten adults and five children. Their experiences and understandings of *Gotong Royong* form the foundation of my argument that it serves as a basis for culture-based religious education. All of them have participated in *Gotong Royong* on multiple occasions. They view it as essential, and from an early age, they were taught its value by both their parents at home and their teachers at school. As one participant shared, "*Sejak kecil, orang tua dan guru saya selalu mengajarkan pentingnya Gotong Royong. Ketika belajar Pancasila, maka saya ingat sekali bahwa Gotong Royong adalah salah satu nilai penting*" [Since I was only a child, my

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parents and teachers always emphasized the importance of *Gotong Royong*. When I study *Pancasila*, I clearly remember that *Gotong Royong* was one of its core values].

Gotong Royong, an old-age tradition, plays a vital role in Indonesian society. It serves as both a marker of identity and a form of social capital that shapes the everyday lives of the people. The term *Gotong Royong* originates from the Javanese language – *Gotong* meaning "to carry," and *Royong* meaning "together" (Pasya 1987; Kamsori et al. 2007; Suryohadiprojo 2013; Simarmata et.al. 2017). Traditionally, it refers to communal labor, such as neighbors joining forces to lift construction materials when building a house, allowing the tasks to be completed more efficiently (Kamsori et al. 2007; Pranadji 2009; Panjaitan 2013). The concept centers cooperation and collective effort, core values in Javanese social life (Koentjaraningrat 1961; Pranadji 2009; Panjaitan 2013).

Although its origins lie in Javanese culture, *Gotong Royong* has become a widely shared cultural value, deeply embedded in diverse communities across Indonesia. Each local ethnic group may express this tradition under different names, but the essence remains the same: a communal initiative to help others, rooted in care, solidarity, empathy, and compassion. Through mutual assistance, individuals cultivate ethical behavior and strong social bonds. Nicholas Simarmata refers to this ethical foundation as "a mutual morality" (2017). Their research on the meaning of *Gotong Royong* for Indonesians shows that it is universally recognized and understood in multiple ways: as a mutual morality, a spirit, a cultural value, a social solidarity, a principle, active participation, self-willingness, a social integration, and togetherness. Simarmata further asserts that *Gotong Royong* forms the basis of the five principles of Indonesia's national philosophy, *Pancasila*. It is, therefore, an essential and unifying cultural value within Indonesian society.

Long before Simarmata, Soekarno, one of Indonesia's founding fathers and its first president, emphasized the importance of *Gotong Royong* in both understanding and practicing *Pancasila*. *Pancasila*, meaning "five core principles," is the philosophical foundation and ideology of Indonesia. For President Soekarno, all the principles within *Pancasila* could be distilled into a single core value: *Gotong Royong*, which he referred to as *Ekasila* or "one principle." He envisioned it as the bedrock of Indonesian nationalism, rooted in the spirit of

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solidarity, and as a humanitarian value capable of strengthening relationships among ethnic groups and even across nations.

In his speech on June 1, 1945, Soekarno described *Gotong Royong* as "*pembantingan tulang bersama, pemerasan-keringat bersama, perjuangan bantu-binantu bersama. Amal semua buat kepentingan semua, keringat semua buat kebahagiaan semua.*" In essence, *Gotong Royong* signifies collective effort, mutual support, and shared struggle – a commitment where every good deed and every drop of sweat contributes to the well-being of all. Beyond practical cooperation, *Gotong Royong* also embodies the principles of consensus and mutual respect as a foundation for nationhood.

Based on my interviews, *Gotong Royong* is commonly understood as working together and helping one another to lighten the burden. Across different age groups, the motivation remains consistent: to support each other and make tasks more manageable. A 9-year-old child shared, "I feel good and happy because I can be helpful by working together." Similarly, a university student in his twenties, who has participated in *Gotong Royong* many times, expressed (in the Indonesian language),

> "*Ketika banyak orang bekerja bersama, pekerjaan yang tadinya terasa berat atau membutuhkan waktu lama akan menjadi lebih ringan dan cepat selesai. Beban dibagi, sehingga setiap orang tidak terlalu terbebani. Melalui Gotong Royong, kita belajar untuk peduli dan membantu sesama tanpa pamrih. Rasa empati dan solidaritas akan tumbuh, membuat saya dan semua yang ikut lebih peka terhadap kesulitan yang dihadapi orang lain di sekitar kita. Singkatnya, Gotong Royong bukan hanya tentang menyelesaikan pekerjaan, tapi juga tentang membangun karakter, komunitas, dan kualitas hidup yang lebih baik bersama. Saya merasa senang dan puas karena bisa berpartisipasi dalam kegiatan yang bermanfaat bagi banyak orang. Setelah pekerjaan selesai, ada rasa bangga dan puas yang muncul. Saya tahu bahwa saya sudah berkontribusi nyata untuk kebaikan bersama.*"

> Here is my English translation:

> When many people work together, a task that initially feels heavy becomes lighter and is completed more quickly. The burden is shared, so no one feels too overwhelmed. Through *Gotong Royong*, we learn to care for and assist others selflessly. Empathy and solidarity grow, making both myself and others more attuned to the struggles faced by those around us. In short, *Gotong Royong* is not

only about accomplishing tasks – it is also about building character, fostering community, and improving the quality of life together. I feel joyful and fulfilled knowing that I am taking part in an activity that benefits many. Once the work is done, a deep sense of pride and satisfaction emerges. I know I have made a meaningful contribution to the common good.

Their understanding of *Gotong Royong* is profound, and they truly enjoy participating in this activity, just like the other 14 respondents I interviewed. From my observation, people worked voluntarily and seemed to take pleasure in their respective tasks. While working, they engaged in lively conversations on a range of topics, from politics to everyday life. Two adult participants, initially unaware of the activity, spontaneously joined in when they saw others helping a new resident who had just moved into the neighborhood. In this context, there is no need to hire assistance; neighbors willingly lend a hand. After the collective effort, everyone returned to their homes to shower and then reconvened to share a meal prepared by the host. *Gotong Royong* is more than just a cultural tradition– it cultivates character, fosters community, and serves as a vital marker of Indonesian identity and social capital.

Regarding motivation in *Gotong Royong*, one student I interviewed stated, "*Saya ikut Gotong Royong tanpa dipaksa karena bagi saya ini wujud kepedulian saya bagi orang lain.*" [I participate in *Gotong Royong* without being forced because, for me, it is an expression of my care for others]. Their motivation stems from a sense of care, not compulsion. This sentiment is echoed by fourteen other participants, who identified solidarity, empathy, compassion, responsibility, and care for others as their main reasons for engaging in *Gotong Royong*. Importantly, both women and men participate equally, working side by side despite their differing backgrounds. One student emphasized that justice and equality are central to *Gotong Royong*. Similarly, a man in his forties explained, "*Dalam Gotong Royong, laki-laki dan perempuan sama-sama bekerja dan tidak ada perbedaan. Semua setara. Kami menjunjung tinggi solidaritas dan kepedulian bersama* [*Gotong Royong* fosters collaboration between men and women as equals, without distinction. It is rooted in shared values of solidarity and care]." These reflections suggest that *Gotong Royong* not only fosters an ethics of care but also promotes

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gender equality. Its effectiveness lies in the fact that *Gotong Royong* is a core part of Indonesian identity.

Although *Gotong Royong* is inherently embedded in the soul of the Indonesian people, it must be actively manifested through a shared ethos that is continuously upheld and nurtured. This effort is especially urgent today, as individualism – amplified by digital tools – threatens traditional communal values. According to Simarmata et.al., industrialization and modern technology have encouraged individualism, leading to a decline in the traditional practice of collective or collaborative mutual assistance (2019). Three adult respondents note that while social media allows people to post about *Gotong Royong* or extended invitations to join such activities, its practice has nonetheless weakened. The rise of cyber society, centered on individualism and the convenience of home, where everything is just a click away, poses a serious challenge to the sustainability of communal and social life, including *Gotong Royong*. As Leonardo Epafras et al. (2023) observe, the younger generation increasingly treats their presence on social media as their primary social space. Therefore, revitalizing the values and practices of *Gotong Royong* must be pursued through religious education. It offers a form of pedagogy that can cultivate moral agency and nurture caring individuals within today's digital society.

Gotong Royong Pedagogy as Culture-Based Religious Education in Cyber Society

Hope Antone, an Asian educator, argues that one key reason for engaging in religious education is meaningfully relating to people of other ethnic and religious backgrounds (Antone 2003, 92). This perspective highlights the importance of incorporating the unique, everyday experiences of individuals into the learning process. Education should not estrange students from the realities of their daily lives, including their cultural traditions (Palmer 1993, 16). Instead, it should affirm and promote diversity rather than enforce uniformity. In this light, Mariska Lauterboom emphasizes the need to decolonize Christian religious education in Indonesia, noting its heavy reliance on Western tradition and the marginalization of Indonesian Indigenous culture in the curriculum (2019). Similarly, Nancy Souisa advocates for the integration of local culture in Maluku, Indonesia (2017). Drawing on the communal ritual "*Makan Patita*," a shared communal banquet, they propose a model of Christian religious education rooted in Indigenous practices.

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According to Navin Kumar Singh and Mariella Espinoza Harold, culture-based education "emerged as an alternative framework for developing a model of education for diverse groups that incorporates connections to culture, place/land and community and acknowledges and respects indigenous knowledge systems and epistemologies" (2014, 8). It developed in response to the limitations of Western and colonial education systems, particularly in the aftermath of European colonial decline. In this context, culture-based religious education seeks to integrate local cultural values and contexts into religious learning, making the process more relevant and practical for the students. As Leganger-Krogstad explains, "a culture-based approach aims at confirming and creating local identity in which the child is made part of a local culture and aware of local knowledge and local values" (2001, 55). The approach positions local or Indigenous culture as the shared foundation for students' learning, where cultural context shapes the educational content, methods, and process.

Gotong Royong, a local tradition deeply rooted in Indonesian society, can be developed into a pedagogy that grounds religious education in cultural values. As a culture-based approach, it offers a way to nurture moral agency and cultivate caring individuals in response to the challenges posed by today's cyber society, for four reasons.

First, *Gotong Royong* is a widely practiced cultural tradition and form of social capital known to virtually every Indonesian. Every ethnic group is familiar with it, and all research participants interviewed for this study have engaged in *Gotong Royong* multiple times. Second, it embodies the core values of *Pancasila*: belief in the one and only God, just and civilized humanity, the unity of Indonesia, democracy guided by inner wisdom, and social justice. This tradition also opposes colonial legacies and promotes communal life and freedom, offering a culturally rooted foundation for building relationships with God and one another. Its significance is also recognized by the Indonesian government through the Ministry of Education's *Pancasila Student Profile*, which includes *Gotong Royong* as one of its key dimensions. This feature emphasizes collaboration, care, and sharing, where collaboration is described as "the praxis stage of solidarity because everyone is part of the community" (Wowor 2022, 11). Yet, the value of *Gotong Royong* should not be limited to public education; it must also be embraced in religious education as a culturally resonant and spiritually formative pedagogy.

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Third, the values of *Gotong Royong*, including care, solidarity, harmony, empathy, responsibility, and compassion, can address some of the most pressing challenges of the cyber era, such as the loss of autonomy and control, gender bias and discrimination, social disparities and injustices, and rising individualism and social isolation. Through this pedagogy, students learn to cultivate moral agency and care for others. Practicing *Gotong Royong* fosters a sense of agency understood not merely as individual freedom, but as the ethical capacity to make responsible decisions in mutual relationships with others. Fourth, this pedagogy integrates both heart and mind in the learning process, supporting a spiritual journey in which relationships are meaningful in the pursuit of truth and knowledge (Palmer 1993). As Sagala (2013) notes, it touches the heart and meets the needs of students. Moreover, it involves bodily participation, making *Gotong Royong* a holistic pedagogy that engages the heart, mind, and body—essential elements in whole-person education.

This approach can be implemented in Indonesian religious education through several key principles. First, by embedding ethical values through communal actions and interactions. Students are encouraged to participate in communal tasks, allowing them to directly experience values such as care, solidarity, responsibility, empathy, and compassion. These communal engagements integrate ethics into everyday decision-making and behavior.

Second, by fostering relational or interdependent learning. Rather than emphasizing isolated individual achievement, this model encourages collaborative learning. The pedagogy of *Gotong Royong* is characterized by social action and interaction, nurturing qualities like care, compassion, patience, mutual respect, harmony, and a strong sense of community. As students engage in negotiation, active listening, and cooperative action, they develop these values through lived experience. This collaborative process also cultivates a liberating interdependence among communities and across boundaries, an aspect that, according to Boyung Lee, is central to postcolonial intercultural pedagogy (2010).

Third, by building communal or collective responsibility towards social justice. In a *Gotong Royong* classroom, responsibility is shared, not only for academic success but also for the well-being of others. Everyone is encouraged to care for one another, fostering a sense of mutual accountability and commitment to social justice. This principle emphasizes that morality

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is not solely a personal matter but one that is socially embedded—it involves "you and me, and them." We are accountable to others. In this way, *Gotong Royong* pedagogy nurtures a deeper and more expansive understanding of community, one that responds to a changing world by moving from "excessive individualism of western culture" (Lee 2013).

Fourth, by fostering critical and reflective practice. Moral agency involves the capacity for critical reflection, that is, evaluating one's actions and their ethical or moral implications. *Gotong Royong* pedagogy encourages students to engage in this reflective process by examining their roles, actions, feelings, motivations, and responsibilities within group settings. Through this practice, students can develop moral reasoning and the courage to act on shared values, even when such actions are difficult.

Fifth, this pedagogy fosters respect for local wisdom and cultural identity. Students come to understand that it is rooted in their own traditions, where ethical living is not a foreign concept but an integral part of their culture. As a result, caring for others can more naturally become part of their identity, as it reflects their Indigenous values. This approach also instills pride in their cultural background while nurturing a moral compass and sense of agency shaped by communal principles.

Sixth, it bridges emotional and ethical/moral development. When students are encouraged to help others in the classroom, their actions become emotionally engaging, and they feel appreciated and needed by those around them. These emotional bonds cultivate empathy and care, both of which are essential for developing moral agency, intrinsic motivation, and ethical behavior.

To achieve this, a religious education classroom can adopt various strategies and teaching methods such as group service-learning, collective project-based activities, circle discussions, collaborative decision-making, peer mentoring, communal problem-solving, group journaling, and cultural storytelling. These approaches foster students' caring and compassionate responses to the social issues they encounter. The values cultivated in the classroom are then practiced through diverse communal activities, implemented through mutual agreement between the teacher and the students. In this setting, the teacher-student relationship is characterized by equality—it is subject-to-subject. Together, they work and support one another, grounded in the

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values of caring, solidarity, empathy, and compassion. *Gotong Royong* pedagogy emphasizes moral development through relationships and responsibilities.

By embedding *Gotong Royong* as a pedagogy grounded in Indigenous culture, educators promote cooperation, collaboration, deep moral formation, and an ethics of care rooted in local values. This approach cultivates a classroom culture where both teachers and students learn that to act morally is to act with and for others with care and compassion. These spiritual principles are especially vital in today's cyber society.

The Future of Gotong Royong Pedagogy

This paper contributes to the disclosure of decolonial pedagogy by proposing *Gotong Royong* as a viable, culturally grounded framework that counters individualism, discrimination, capitalism, and digital alienation. As a form of culture-based religious education that draws from the philosophy and values of Indonesia's longstanding tradition of mutual assistance, *Gotong Royong* pedagogy supports decolonizing methodologies in education by placing Indigenous culture and its wisdom at the center of the learning experience (Tuhiwai-Smith 2004).

The practice of voluntary mutual assistance and collaboration based on caring and solidarity becomes an ethical principle that confronts capitalist and individualist paradigms in education. *Gotong Royong* resists colonial education paradigms beyond just replacing content; it reorients the pedagogy itself. Thus, *Gotong Royong* pedagogy extends Western feminist care ethics by drawing from Indigenous culture and its wisdom of interdependency. In this pedagogical approach, the religious education classroom becomes a space grounded in equal relationships, where participants engage collaboratively with one another through care, solidarity, harmony, empathy, and compassion. This contextual pedagogy also fosters critical education, viewing learning as a liberatory act and a community-based process aimed at achieving liberation and social justice (Freire 2011).

Through the well-known Indigenous value of *Gotong Royong*, religious education can promote collaborative learning, active participation, caring relationships, social responsibility, and critical praxis. This pedagogy offers a holistic educational framework that nurtures not only intellectual development but also students' social, emotional, spiritual, and moral growth. By

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integrating *Gotong Royong* approach into religious education, we are invited to rethink and reimagine the human person, ethical agency, and community, especially within the context of the digital age and its artificial intelligence. It encourages voluntary cooperation and mutual assistance across identity boundaries. It also reinforces the core values of *Pancasila* and reorients us toward face-to-face human interactions and a life grounded in communal care. Through this *Gotong Royong* pedagogy, God becomes present in acts of compassion and solidarity among people.

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Prof. Hyun-Sook Kim, *Yonsei University*, Seoul, South Korea, hyunskim@yonsei.ac.kr

Rev. Su-Hak Jung, *Soongeui Girl's High School*, Seoul, South Korea, pastor@soonguei.hs.kr

Rev. Dae-Gil Lee, *Ewha Media High School*, Seoul, South Korea, ldg3927@hanmail.net

Dr. Moon Son, *Yonsei University*, Seoul, South Korea, sm0925@yonsei.ac.kr

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Religious Education for the Younger Generation in the Age of the Artificial Intelligence-Driven Digital Revolution

Abstract

This research explores the transitional phase of innovative technology driven by artificial intelligence, analyzing its fundamental differences from human intelligence. While a social structure dominated by robotics and automation in an age shaped by artificial intelligence underscores the precarious vulnerability of human beings, this study proposes a new approach to religious education. From the perspective of the younger generation, it reinterprets human limitations not as weaknesses but as foundations for interrelatedness and mutual reliance, fostering deeper connections in an increasingly technological world.

Machine learning represents a core function of artificial intelligence. The main role of a machine learning system can be understood as automating tasks to identify statistical structures in numerous examples (Collet 2021, 4). In this context, the statistical rules that describe the relationships among specific examples serve as the foundational basis of any machine learning system. The modeling process of machine learning focuses on the feedback step of an algorithm to adjust the distance between the current output and the expected output (Collet 2021, 5). The performance of artificial intelligence, therefore, depends on an algorithm's ability to generate a statistical structure which identifies rules to accurately describe the components of various examples and their relationships.

To understand the functional role of artificial intelligence, the architecture of the perceptron offers valuable insight as a simple example of a neural network that illustrates "most of the basic machine learning models" (Aggarwal 2018, 6). Generally, the structure of a neural network, which is a fundamental component of artificial intelligence, consists input and output layers, with the hidden layer positioned between them. The perceptron algorithm has the computational capability to process various inputs in the input layer and produce an aggregated value in the output layer. This is achieved through the activation function of the hidden layer, which mathematically minimize the error in machine learning (Aggarwal 2018, 6-7). The algorithmic distinction of the perceptron architecture, which converges to achieve zero error, serves as a fundamental unit for determining the accuracy of machine learning (Aggarwal 2018, 8).

The backpropagation algorithm is widely used to optimize machine learning models.

This algorithm, similar to the feedback loop of system theory, repeatedly and continuously corrects the network's errors (Géron 2019, 290). The stream of information in any system generally has the direction to start from input and go to output and in that process that system used to produce its cost. The backpropagation algorithm treats cost as information and, using a reverse direction-starting from the output and moving toward the input- applies a method to reduce network errors, continuously repeating this process (Goodfellow, Bengio, and Courville 2016, 198). Even though these are very limited explanations of artificial intelligence, they clearly demonstrate that it inherently incorporates various machine learning algorithms to automatically reduce errors and actively enhance performance. Goodfellow, Bengio, and Courville (2016) describe this capability of machine learning as implemented in artificial intelligence as follows: "The introduction of machine learning enabled computers to tackle problems involving knowledge of the real world and make decisions that appear subjective" (2-3). This effectively illustrates the active autonomy and potential for continuous development of artificial intelligence.

Human intelligence is closely related to "the activity of specific nerve cells" (Gardner 2004, 47), which indicates a structural relationship between human intelligence and the human brain. For example, cognitive decline associated with aging-meaning that older individuals often experience a reduction of "information processing speed and spatial memory"-is linked to "brain structural changes," such as brain atrophy, sulci, ventricles, and gray matter differences between older and younger individuals, as observed in magnetic resonance imaging (Puglielli and Mattson 2017, 917-919). Puglielli and Mattson (2017) stated, "At the cellular level, all major cell types in the brain undergo structural changes as a function of age" (919). This suggests that the basic units of human intelligence, such as cognitive function and memory, are closely linked to both structural changes and activity at the cellular level of the human brain.

The cognitive neuroscience approach clearly demonstrates that the brain's response to any external event can be measured through the electrical activity of neural networks in the brain. In experiments conducted on adults to measure brain activity in the mirror neuron system, researchers have found that the system responds differently to the same action depending on the specific intention behind it (Goswami 2020, 149-150). For example, when a person grasps a mug, the brain activity in the mirror neuron system varies depending on the context-whether the person is picking up the mug to drink at a tea party or cleaning it after the tea party (Goswami 2020, 150). If we understand human intelligence from the perspective of brain activity, external conditions become the determining factor for the occurrence of human intelligence. This highlights a clear difference between human intelligence and artificial intelligence in relation to external conditions. Human intelligence responds sensitively to its environment. In contrast, artificial intelligence equipped with various machine learning algorithms, can operate autonomously, independent of external conditions. Gardner (2004) emphasizes the "causal connections" between human intelligence and external objects through the concept of "*object permanence*" in the process of mental development (129-130). This highlights the crucial role of environmental stimuli as external factors influencing the self from the perspective of human intelligence.

The transformation of the educational environment driven by artificial intelligence

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can be understood through the relationship between digital media and the younger generation, who are its primary users. The use of digital media brings about a comprehensive transformation in young people's life. They create social networks through digital media in which they share common interests. The sense of belonging in such networks is determined by active participation in sharing knowledge and various resources through digital media. The intelligence accumulated through digital media, therefore, extends beyond individual performance and exhibits the characteristics of distributed and collective intelligence (Kim, Osmer, and Schweitzer 2018, 97-98). However, a problematic and challenging issue may arise in the process of the digital revolution, as human capacities are replaced by artificial intelligence. Generally, religious printed texts or archives in congregational life require "deep reading," which demands readers' focused concentration. However, in the digital context, characterized by a diffused social network, it is difficult to expect young people to maintain focused and concentrated attention while reading (Kim, Osmer, and Schweitzer 2018, 98). Likewise, the loss of human intelligence, including cognitive capacities, due to the digital revolution of artificial intelligence is a challenging issue that must be seriously addressed in both academic and practical fields of religious education.

The linear relationship between human capacity and artificial intelligence provides the possibility for religious education to help the younger generation address challenging issues of the digital revolution from a social structure perspective. The economic issue of who possesses high-performing artificial intelligence shakes the fundamental foundation of a meritocratic society, which has traditionally governed by human capacities. Moreover, the issue of social inequality, exacerbated by the innovative technologies such as artificial intelligence, is closely linked to the broader uncertainty within the neoliberal system, which tends to foster excessive competition driven by the pursuit of higher performance and achievement in the economic, cultural, and political spheres (Kim 2023, 256-257; Kim 2021, 46). Religious education, in response to this social challenge, must recognize the younger generation's frustration and uncertainty within a society driven by endless competition. It requires an innovative transformation that transcends traditional boundaries between teachers and learners, fostering the shared understanding of "experiences and knowledge production" in a digitally mediated educational environment (Kim 2023, 262).

In an age shaped by artificial intelligence, the reciprocal relationship between teachers and learners gives rise to a deeper understanding of humanity. The concept of human contingency fosters an awareness of interrelatedness and mutual reliance among individuals, presupposing the interdependence between oneself and others. Mercer (2017) states, "We are, instead, deeply contingent beings. *Contingency* refers to that which is dependent on something else" (305). Acknowledging human contingency means recognizing the inherent limitations of human existence and understanding that the perspective of the "other" is an essential factor in human life (Mercer 2017, 305). Ayres (2021) approaches human limitations from the perspective of vulnerability (329). She says, "All of us who live are exposed to the possibility of pain and the certainty of death, and this fundamental truth is both the source of connection with other vulnerable beings and, conversely, the seed from which attempts at autonomy are sprung" (Ayre 2021, 329). Her approach emphasizes that the precarious vulnerability of human beings serves as a motivation for mutual solidary, fostering

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"collective resilience" and becoming a key resource for religious education in healing a "precarious world" (Ayres 2021, 337). This perspective provides a foundation for reinterpreting human limitations-such as contingency and vulnerability-within the age of artificial intelligence, which is characterized by algorithmic perfection. In other words, discovering the essence of human existence within the depth of contingency and vulnerability may be a profound irony in an age dominated by robotics and automation led by artificial intelligence.

This research focuses on the voices of younger generation in turmoil. Rather than viewing young people through the lens of incompleteness-a perspective imposed by adults who assume responsibility for and seek to protect them-it aims to explore the goal of adolescence, the voices of young people, and their grievances in their own perspectives (Corrie 2021, 9-12). The ethnographic approach used in that research is an effective methodology for listening to young people's conflicts, callings, and experiences of faith within congregational and school life (Mercer 2010, 168-169). With a perspective of care and empathy rather than unbiased observation, focusing on the stories of young people effectively demonstrates the usefulness of an ethnographic approach in the study of adolescence (Baker 2010, 21). Moreover, using the various indices such as Attitude Toward Christianity (Francis, Lankshear, and Eccles 2020), Spiritual Well-Being (Meehan 2020; Pong 2024), and Postconventional Christian Identity (Kim 2006), the research collects raw data of young people in Christian schools in Korea and analyzes their faith and spiritual lives through conventional statistical methodologies and deep learning approaches powered by artificial intelligence.

Analyzing the religiosity and spiritual practices of the younger generation using quantum machine learning technology is an innovative research strategy. Quantum machine learning, as an information processing computation actualized by a quantum computer, possesses the properties of quantum mechanics and is distinct from classical computers, which encompass all types of computers except quantum computers. If a classical computer processes digital signals using discrete states of 0 and 1, quantum machine learning leverages the principles of quantum mechanics by computing through a linear superposition of these states. Additionally, it encodes information in a manner that enables the measurement of correlations between systems through the mechanics of quantum entanglement (Hidary 2021, 4-6). The fundamental characteristic of quantum mechanics-the ability to describe superposition and interference, where a system simultaneously follows both the 0 and 1 paths-is demonstrated in experiments involving a photon source. This phenomenon contrasts with classical intuition, which assumes a strict division between the 0 and 1 paths (Kay, Laflamme, and Mosca 2007, 15-18). Therefore, a qubit state, as the fundamental unit for describing information processing in quantum computation and forming the basis of superposition and entanglement in quantum mechanics, can be geometrically represented as a vector pointing from the origin to the surface of a sphere, which has the shape of a ball (Schuld and Petruccione 2018, 93-94).

Keller (2017) epistemologically embraces the language of entanglement in quantum physics through the lens of relational ontology or ontological inseparability, emphasizing its experiential reality in the singular moment of space-time (118). In her theological framework,

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the concepts of superposition and entanglement in quantum physics function as transcendental metaphors, illuminating participation in the mystery of Jesus Christ's incarnation, transfiguration, and resurrection (Keller 2017, 113). Mercer (2016) defines the focus of practical theology as transcending the limitations of single-disciplinary boundaries by disrupting fixed identities at the boarders of knowledge and practice and actively crossing these boundaries (163). From her perspective, the interdisciplinarity of practical theology is represented through the image of a traveler with a fluid identity, embodying a flexible hybridity that navigates across disciplinary boundaries (Mercer 2016, 185-187). The image of a flexible traveler-crossing boundaries like a qubit state moving from the center to the surface of a sphere-aptly captures the dynamic role of religious educators in engaging with the liminal spaces of the younger generation and navigating their evolving identities (Kim 2023, 254). These movements of religious educators can be remembered as moments of theological singularity, in which they participate in the mystery of Jesus Christ's incarnation, transfiguration, and resurrection.

For a model of religious education for the younger generation in the age of the artificial intelligence-driven digital revolution, we apply the educational principles of Postconventional Christian Identity proposed by Professor Hyun-Sook Kim of Yonsei University in South Korea. This religious educational model is characterized by the construction of a learning environment that helps the younger generation understand their own liminal spaces and reconstruct and transform their thoughts and life orientation by fostering shared understanding and encouraging critical reflection on their status quo (Kim 2023, 254-255). Amid global uncertainty and vulnerability under a neoliberal social system accelerated by the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence, this model equips learners with the flexible capacity to subjectively and autonomously reformulate the core values of Christian faith within a web of interdependence with public discourse, and to reorganize the value of life through open and equitable collaboration with competing others, while recognizing potential sources of religious inspiration (Kim 2021, 47-48). Religious education that fosters Postconventional Christian Identity (PCI) is grounded in the principles of relationality, equality, and openness, which functions as core educational goals and purposes in learning environment. The principle of relationality is characterized by the simultaneous emphasis on "freedom and interdependence," which are often seen as opposing orientation (Kim 2006, 454). This principle encourages full reciprocity by respecting communication partners as moral others and emphasizes intersubjective recognition rather than difference and separation among class members within the learning environment. The Christian identity of relationality, therefore, contributes to sustaining Christian symbolic systems-such as love, peace, and justice-in the inner lives of young people, even amid uncertain social situation and rapid societal changes (Kim 2006, 454-455).

The principle of equality relates to learners' capacity to fairly regulate and manage their own roles and responsibilities in both public and private spheres. It is not easy for young people to fairly integrate their Christian faith and practices as a response toward God's love within the highly differentiated social structures of family, school, congregation, and the digital sphere. Therefore, the principle of equality can be expressed through educational activities that develop learners' capacity to equally and fairly allocate their roles and

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responsibilities in both ecclesial and non-ecclesial contexts (Kim 2006, 454). An educational model of shared authority, grounded in mutual understanding between teachers and students, serves as a strong example of how the principle of equality can be realized in the learning environment. In this model, teachers negotiate the learning content and teaching-learning processes with their students, who actively engage in the class and take responsibility for their role as learning subject rather than passive followers who blindly submit the teacher's traditional authority (Kim 2009, 488). In this educational environment, God may be more effectively understood as one who encourages open communication and mutual inquiry between teachers and students. The principle of openness relates to the inner self's capacity to recognize those with opposing views as equal partners through open communication (Kim 2006, 454). This principle is distinguished by its ability to move beyond radical dichotomies, to exist within diverse areas of life, and to promote the "peaceful co-existence of global society" within the Trinitarian fellowship of Christians shaped by a framework of "diversification and flexibility" (Kim 2012, 256). In the learning environment of multicultural religious education, the principle of openness can be seen as a flexible and dynamic educational channel that enriches the divine dimension of the Christian faith and tradition through engagement with pluralistic and globalized cultural realities (Kim 2021, 258-259).

In order to verify the educational potential of a religious education model based on Postconventional Christian Identity in the age of the artificial intelligence-driven digital revolution, we conduct an empirical study at Soongeui Girl's High School and Ewha Media High School in Seoul, South Korea. Soongeui Girl's High School is affiliated with the Korean Presbyterian Church, while Ewha Media High School follows the episcopal tradition of the Korean Methodist Church. Both schools, each with over one hundred years of tradition, are representative Christian institutions. However, they employ distinct strategic approaches in the practice of religious education. Rev. Su-Hak Jung, head chaplain of Soongeui Girl's High School, emphasizes the importance of Christian faith and its distinctive traditions as a core value of the school. He focuses on instilling a biblical value system in his students through cooperation and support from neighboring congregations. However, Rev. Dae-Gil Lee, head chaplain of Ewha Media High School, understands the purpose of religious education as the formation of a meaning system grounded in Christian values. His approach to religious education maintains a certain distance from directly seeking to make students Christian believers. He believes that religious education in Christian schools should support students in freely and voluntarily choosing their own religious values and traditions, rather than emphasizing a particular religious tradition. This orientation aligns with the Korean government's policy on religious education, which supports instruction across a variety of religious traditions (Jung, Lee, and Son 2024, 195-197). Our research is currently undergoing the process of obtaining informed consent from both students, their parents, teachers, and school leadership in both schools, with accountability ensured through the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Yonsei University in South Korea.

The Postconventional Christian Identity (PCI) questionnaire consists of 24 items, which serve as an index to measure faithful growth and development in this study. The following are the questions for the PCI Index. Table 1 shows the scale properties of the PCI

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Index in terms of the item-rest of scale correlations and the alpha coefficient. The value of the alpha coefficient is 0.831 to support the internal consistency reliability of the instrument (Francis 2014, 275).

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Table 1. Postconventional Christian Identity (PCI) Index

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	Items (core value)	IRC
1	I appreciate engaging in discussions and dialogues with others. (Dialogue)	0.626
2	I value having good relationships with others and consider maintaining them important. (Relationships)	0.598
3	I tend to adhere to my own lifestyle without interference from others. (Independence)*	-0.286
4	I prefer a competitive educational environment in the classroom. (Competitiveness)*	0.495
5	I prefer an educational environment that encourages dialogue and discussion among classmates. (Collaboration)	0.578
6	For me, the words *empowerment* and *responsibility* feel like a heavy burden in my mind. (Pressure)*	-0.212
7	When I am placed in situations of responsibility and empowerment, they serve as strong sources of motivation for me. (Motivation)	0.262
8	I believe it is important to acknowledge gender differences between men and women and listen carefully to others' voices. (Inclusivity)	0.684
9	In our learning environment, it is important to foster an equal relationship between teachers and learners. (Equality)	0.789
10	God acknowledge harmonious and unifying equality in relationships with all creatures. (Harmony)	0.437
11	God desires a person to be fully devoted to Him. (Devotion)*	0.018
12	I prefer leadership that is heavily authoritarian and charismatic. (Authority)*	-0.001
13	I prefer leadership that is consistently persuasive and engages in dialogue with community members. (Dialogue)	0.601
14	Even when others have different perspectives and opinions from mine, I make an effort to understand and respective them. (Respect)	0.678
15	I tend to rely on other people's perspective. (Dependence)*	0.048
16	I am more interested in a pluralistic religious perspective than in monotheism. (Pluralism)	0.08

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17	I have appreciated cultural differences and diversity, and I respect various national ethnic identities. (Diversity)	0.455
18	I have made a habit of listening carefully to the voices of the socially marginalized. (Compassion)	0.766
19	I value seeing and understanding situations from other people's perspectives. (Empathy)	0.66
20	I tend to resolve problems through patient and consistent rooted in compromise. (Reconciliation)	0.701
21	God's love is expressed through an open and accepting attitude toward human beings and all living creatures in nature. (Love)	0.623
22	In situations of conflict or struggle, I tend to firmly hold to my opinions and arguments. (Stubbornness)*	0.186
23	The church should acknowledge and consider the thoughts, arguments, and opinions of non-believers as well. (Openness)	0.482
24	I take the current issues of the global climate crisis very seriously. (Environmentalism)	0.448

Note. IRC = Item-rest of scale correlation. *These items were reverse coded.

Using Leslie J. Francis's independent variables-such as sex, age, church attendance, personal prayer, and Bible reading (2014, 270)-we conducted preliminary research with these items from September 2024 to February 2025 (see Table 2).

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Table 2. PCI preliminary survey independent variables

Independent variables		N	%
Sex	Male	13	28.89
	Female	32	71.11
Age	20s	13	28.89
	30s	12	26.67
	40s	10	22.22
	50s	10	22.22
Church attendance	Several times a week	34	75.56
	Nearly every week	11	24.22
Personal prayer	Nearly every day	31	68.89
	At least once a week	12	26.67
	Occasionally	2	4.44
Bible reading	Nearly every day	28	55.56
	At least once a week	18	40
	Occasionally	1	2.22
	Never	1	2.22

Table 3 presents the results of the Exploratory Factor Analysis about the PCI Index, which identifies the core value of each item and its loading across the three factors: ML1, ML2, and ML3. The analysis reveals a moderate to strong positive correlation ($r = .49$) between Factor 1 (ML1) and Factor 2 (ML2), whereas Factor 3 (ML3) shows low to negative correlations with both ML1 ($r = -.20$) and ML2 ($r = -.30$). This indicates that Factor 3 possesses distinctive characteristics in the relationship to Factors 1 and 2.

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Table 3. Exploratory Factor Analysis of the PCI Idex

Item	Core value	ML1	ML2	ML3
1	Dialouge01	0.83		
2	Relationship	0.5		-0.38
3	Independence			
4	Competitiveness		0.65	
5	Collaboration	0.82		
6	Pressure			0.4
7	Motivation		0.34	
8	Inclusivity	0.37	0.36	-0.4
9	Equality	0.62		
10	Harmony			
11	Devotion			0.77
12	Authority			0.65
13	Dialouge02	0.33	0.51	
14	Respect	0.41	0.43	
15	Dependence			
16	Pluralism	0.53	-0.43	
17	Diversity	0.62		
18	Compassion	0.62	0.32	
19	Empathy		0.93	
20	Reconciliation	0.5	0.32	
21	Love	0.42	0.4	
22	Stubbornness		0.42	
23	Openness	0.47		
24	Environmentalism		0.58	

Figure 1 presents the factor analysis diagram of the PCI Index. The order and number of items connected with each factor indicate the strength of each item's loading on that factor.

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Factor 1 includes items 01 (Dialogue), 05 (Collaboration), 09 (Equality), 18 (Compassion), 17 (Diversity), 16 (Pluralism), 02 (Relationship), 20 (Reconciliation), and 23 (Openness). Factor 2 include items 19 (Empathy), 04 (Competitive), 24 (Environmentalism), 13 (Dialogue), 14 (Respect), 21 (Love), 22 (Stubbornness), and 07 (Motivation). Factor 3 includes items 11(Devotion), 12(Authority), 08(Inclusivity), and 06(Pressure). Items 03 (Independence), 10 (Harmony), 15 (Dependence), and 22 (Stubbornness) display limited explanatory power in this analysis.

**Figure 1. Factor Analysis Diagram of the PCI Index**
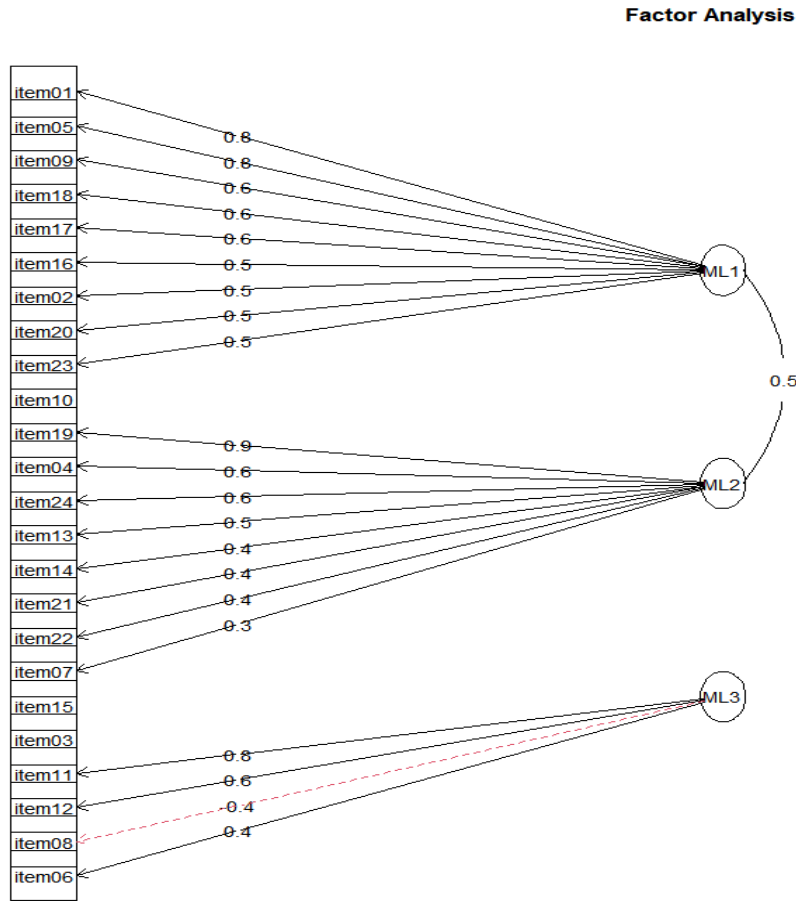
Based on the research findings, the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), conducted to validate structure identified through exploratory factor analysis (EFA), demonstrates that items 18 (Compassion, 0.882), 20 (Reconciliation, 0.812), and 09 (Equality, 0.809) strongly load onto Factor 1, as indicated by their standardized factor loadings (Std.all). Similarly, items 19 (Empathy, 0.804), 14 (Respect, 0.760), and 13 (Dialogue, 0.739) are the leading indicators for Factor 2. In contrast, Factor 3 exhibits low structural consistency, suggesting limited validity in explaining the model. Overall, the CFA reveals a strong relational alignment between Factors 1 and 2, yet it also indicates a conceptual overlap or ambiguity in distinguishing between Factor 1 (*Equality*) and Factor 2 (*Openness*).

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For us, the General Attitudes towards Artificial Intelligence Scale (GAAIS) serves as a key instrument for accessing young people's attitudes toward AI, particularly in relation to their Christian faith development and growth. This study employs nine selectively chosen positive and six negative statements from the GAAIS, identified by Schepman and Rodway (2020), to examine how Postconventional Christian identity influences young people's perspectives on AI. If the statical analysis between the PCI Index (as the independent variable) and the GAAIS (as the dependent variable), conducted through multiple regression analysis, yields statistically significant results, then religious education based on Postconventional Christian Identity may serve as an effective model for young people in an age of uncertainty shaped by artificial intelligence. Multiple regression analysis functions as a statistical tool to examine the influential effectiveness of the PCI-based educational model on the younger generation's attitudes toward artificial intelligence. Similarly, the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity (Francis and Village 2020) and the Spiritual Well-Being Index (Fisher 2021) are used as independent variables in relation to religious education based on Postconventional Christian Identity, which serves as the dependent variable. In this statistical analysis, multivariate multiple regression is used to examine the statistical relationship between one dependent variable and two or more independent variables. The following two research questions explain the conclusions to be drawn from the statistical analysis, and the research map illustrates the relational connectivity among these factors:

(1) Does religious growth and development based on Postconventional Christian Identity serve as a significant factor in explaining the younger generation's attitudes toward artificial intelligence?

(2) Can the younger generation's attitude toward Christianity be changed, and can their spiritual well-being be improved through religious practices based on Postconventional Christian Identity?

Table 2. Research Map
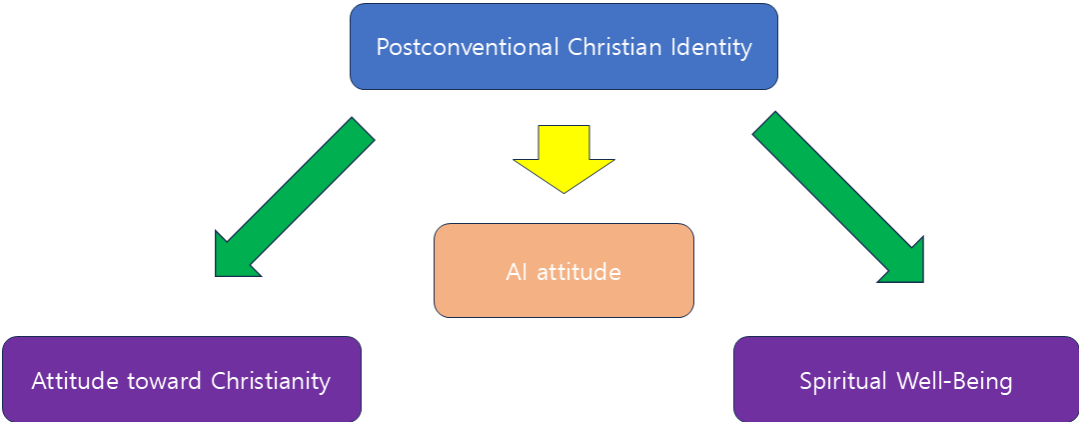
Our research survey also includes four open-ended questions, in which young people express their thoughts and opinions freely, as illustrated by the following examples:

(1) How do you envision the future of society shaped by artificial intelligence?

(2) What is your ideal image of a Christian?

(3) What is the happiest moment in your memory?

(4) Which practices of religious education do you enjoy (e.g., worship, religious classes, social service activities, etc.)?

The text-based responses of these questions, as described by young people, are valuable resources for analyzing the structural patterns of the younger generation's religious languages and their everyday life stories. The third research task is to analyze the younger generation's emotional, linguistic, and semantic differences by applying the research frame of quantum natural language processing, which addresses the limitations of classical natural language processing through the advantages offered by quantum computing. After dividing participants into low and high groups based on the PCI Index calculated in this survey, the central task is to analyze differences of the text-based responses using quantum natural language processing. Quantum natural language processing offers a quantum advantage in handling linguistic structures through quantum circuits, which are realized via the principles of quantum entanglement. These are structures that classical natural processing cannot effectively manage due to its limitations in complexity and computational capacity (Coeke, de Felice, Meichanetzidis, and Toumi 2020; Lorenz, Pearson, Meichanetzidis, Kartsaklis, Coecke 2023; Ganguly, Marapakula, and Coronado 2023). If the emotional, linguistic, and semantic differences between two groups yields meaningful results in validating the mystical and multilayered nature of religious language through quantum natural language processing, we may have a starting point for developing artificial intelligence with religious characteristics.

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18

The Disorienting Dilemma facing Religious Communities in Restructure: Hope in coupling Mezirow's Transformative Learning Paradigm with Geographic Information Systems (GIS)

Joseph L. Tadie, PhD, Saint Mary's University of Minnesota
Eileen M. Daily, PhD, Retired, Boston University School of Theology

Abstract

The demographic realities of the 21st century are already pushing thousands of "sacred spaces" toward restructure. Behind these spaces are faithful individuals and communities facing what Jack Mezirow calls a "disorienting dilemma".[1] They find themselves stretched between missional fidelity, and the prospect of disruptive and disfiguring change. We propose here a creative response to this dilemma that includes a transformational educational paradigm augmented with spatial technological reckoning as a creative way of reorienting before, during, and after restructuring.

Introduction

Church decision makers *feel bound or obliged to retain* the patrimony that has been bequeathed to them at all costs. Why? Not only do the parcels, buildings, statues, and other sacramentals serve current community operations, but they also function as a tangible connection to those who sacrificed so much to make and dedicate these spaces and things in the past. To maintain and care for as many of the spaces and sacred things as tribute to forebears (as they taught us to do) seems like the right, faithful, and traditional thing to do.

Even the most cursory consideration of current demographic realities will show that this is simply impossible. So total fidelity to the property is off the table. Once this hard realization has registered, individuals and communities can be tempted to admit defeat and default into a *free-market mentality,* especially when it comes to the disposition of real estate. When total missional fidelity is lost, the interest shifts to a crude interest in capturing the biggest financial return on the initial investment by bringing in market experts to make the sale. Financially lucrative, maybe, but potentially spiritually bankrupt.

The tension is thus set for our guiding question to emerge: can we limn a creative approach that not only supports church decision makers in their effort to honor their predecessors (and the patrimony they bequeathed) but also avoids the collapse into crude free-market determinism as the guiding principle, pattern, and practice for restructuring? We imagine then Fr. Joseph Ratzinger's pivotal 1969 radio interview to be an operative icon for our work here: "From the crisis of today the Church of tomorrow will emerge—a Church that has lost much. She will

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[1] Cranton, Patricia, and ProQuest. *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning : A Guide to Theory and Practice*. Third edition. Sterling, Virginia: Stylus Publishing, 2016. P. 16.

become small and will have to start afresh more or less from the beginning."[2]

We argue that one way to "start afresh" is to adopt a Mezirow-informed learning process augmented with entry-level spatial technologies, tools, and techniques. In so doing, many "sacred spaces" can be repurposed in ways that remain faithful to the spirit of a community's foundational mission, if never to the exact letter, but creatively and collectively. Transformative dynamics can keep the spirit of a challenged community alive while spatial technologies can bring invaluable new information and facilitate the very shift in perspectives that is central to any transformative learning agenda worthy of the name.
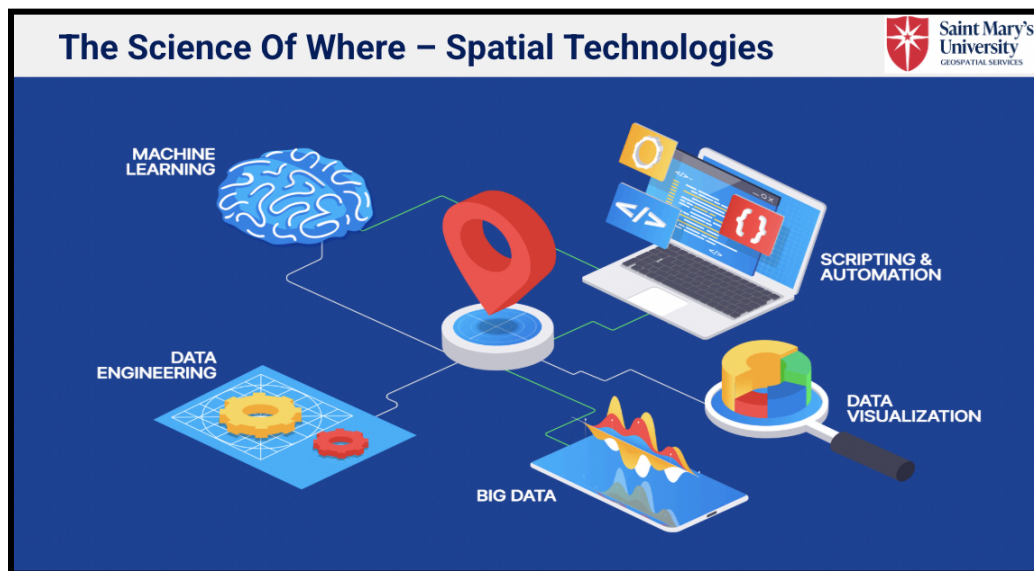
During his apostolic visit to the Czech Republic in 2009, Ratzinger (by then Pope Benedict XVI) mused that "I would say that usually it is creative minorities who determine the future, and in this regard the Catholic Church must understand that she is a creative minority who has a heritage of values that are not things of the past, but a very *lively* and *relevant* reality (emphasis added)."[3]

The Disorienting Religious Dilemma

The repurposing of houses of worship, monasteries, convents, and other religious structures and systems is endemic and will remain so for the foreseeable future. These impending adjustments are bound to result in pain and anxiety for the communities involved. The painful

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[2] Accessed on 14 JUN 2024
https://madonnahouse.org/a-vision-of-the-future-church-by-pope-emeritus-benedict-xvi/
[3] Accessed 14 JUN 2025. Benedict XVI, "Interview of the Holy Father During the Flight to the Czech Republic," September 26, 2009, Vatican.va.
https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2009/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20090926_interview.html

predicament ("disorienting dilemma"[4]) is as unavoidable as the imminent and real losses to which Ratzinger alluded. What is up for reflection, deliberation, and choice is the manner in which the affected communities choose to do their coping. We argue here that if a community can engage Mezirow's transformational model coupled with entry-level geospatial tools and data-informed techniques, then these actors will be uniquely equipped to pass not only a quantitatively "smaller" and more efficiently organized patrimony, but by having accepted contemporary spatial reckoning and a transformational paradigm, these actors will have achieved a qualitatively better and more mission-aligned *modus operandi* going forward than those who have not.

This means that there will be loss at the *material* level and not only of sacred spaces and things but even of management styles. That loss will be real, deeply felt, and have profound impacts that will certainly alter all of the individuals and all aspects of any community in question. Still, by adopting a 21st century solution that we describe here, a community under the pressures of restructuring can offer a uniquely "lively and relevant" gift to those who follow them by offering a *formal* continuity with the mission toward which its founders and followers committed so much of its time, talent, and treasure for generations.

The challenge of helping the whole community heal its emotional reactions to the losses it will undergo is plenty difficult in itself and will need to be a focus of attention and energy, but it can not be the only focus. Church decision makers must also create an engaged and engaging knowledge-scaffold that will help govern the community and its patrimony in their ongoing efforts to serve the wider area for years to come. All of this is daunting, to say the least.

At one level, this is a basic problem of practical theology: what is happening, why is it happening, what should/could happen, and what are we going to do about it? (Osmer) Osmer's framework, however salubrious, still has big gaps in this context. The reasons a closure or building sale is on the near horizon may be legion and subject to considerable disagreement and may not need to be fully discerned at the moment. Knowing what should/could happen is often as big a mystery, but here is where spatial technology can help.

Relevant
Geographic Information Systems (GIS) can help decision makers gather, organize, and visualize census-derived data to reveal demographic trends, economic opportunities, and development patterns across cities, towns, counties, and regions under their purview. While a common practice in most professional real estate development or city planning, this approach still seems novel for faith communities. By providing church decision makers with GIS-generated maps, charts, and graphs a whole host of critical insights become possible that dramatically improve the quality of the deliberative processes. Not only will decision makers be sure about what they own, but they will be much better equipped in determining whether to repurpose, to demolish, and/or to sell their assets. Use of that technology allows the community's already limited

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[4] Cranton, Patricia, and ProQuest. *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning : A Guide to Theory and Practice*. Third edition. Sterling, Virginia: Stylus Publishing, 2016. P. 16.

capacities and energy to go toward discernment of the spirit of the mission rather than in an emotional collapse.

Lively

Transformative learning theory acknowledges that disorienting dilemmas arise for individuals and communities. The transformative learning literature offers tools for helping a community face the changes that are leading to the current dilemma – from hating that the windows and seats that their great-grandparents donated are about to be destroyed, to the guilt that the current members have failed to imitate the methods associated with community's founders. Mezirow emphasizes that the needed transformation will require more than the simple acquisition of new information. Genuine transformation of either an individual or a group will require new information, to be sure, but not only that. It will also require critical reflection on assumptions, open discourse with others, and ultimately a shift in perspective that leads not only to new ways of understanding but also to new ways of acting in the world. Such ways were not required when the church enjoyed greater social and cultural relevance. Ratzinger recognized that as the Church contracts it would need to shed both its "sectarian narrow-mindedness as well as pompous self-will."[5]

In the outline we have limned above, the affected people must not only face their fears critically, but they must also discover positive next steps, which can include, 1) discerning options for new uses of the space, 2) explicitly integrating these options with the community's mission and vision, 3) planning how the community can actualize these options in the wider world, and 4) learning enough about the wider world to put the plan in action.[6]

It is in these steps that GIS services can offer a unique, perhaps counterintuitive, but possibly providential technological bridge for religious communities. Geographic Information Systems are an advanced high-tech opportunity that has been underappreciated by the average religious community as a tool not only for information discovery and management, but also for sophisticated decision and communication support. Admittedly, most religious communities stand in need of the GIS service providers to gather the information as it is relevant to the religious community. Some relevant good news is that those services and the relevant data are readily accessible.

The United States Geological Survey defines a Geographic Information System as "a computer system that analyzes and displays geographically referenced information. It uses data that is attached to a unique location."[7] Because any building that a religious community is considering

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[5] Accessed May 06, 2025

[6] This reflects Mezirow's steps 5-8 as identified and explained in, Cranton, Patricia, and ProQuest. *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning : A Guide to Theory and Practice*. Third edition. Sterling, Virginia: Stylus Publishing, 2016. P. 16.

[7] Accessed March 6, 2025
https://www.usgs.gov/faqs/what-a-geographic-information-system-gis#:~:text=A%20Geographic%20Information%20System%20(GIS)%20is%20a%20computer%20system%20that,attached%20to%20a%20unique%20location.

repurposing has a unique location, a GIS service can provide many layers of information about that location.

One helpful way of considering this is to make the distinction between rural and urban communities. In *rural* locations, the relevant information may include data about the soil and minerals in the ground, the water table, the need for electricity generation, the price of arable land, the availability of certain food crops, the lack of long-term care facilities, etc. Which of these is most in keeping with the historical mission/vision of that religious institution? That would be for the community to discern.

An *urban* religious community will have different returns from a GIS analysis, including layers associated with urban systems around water, electric, and sewer, whether the neighborhood is a food desert and/or has community garden space, the proximity of schools or libraries to the neighborhood, the lack of long-term care facilities, etc.

In either case, whatever differences emerge thanks to the rural and urban distinction, the GIS approach provides either community with "new" and "spatially"-specified information it needs to continue creatively reinterpreting the mission/vision into the future. Once the community has internally and collectively developed a pastoral plan that both honors its founding mission while also informing its action going forward, the fact that it has undertaken its deliberative efforts in an advanced information management approach grounded in GIS data, the community will be better positioned to persuade neighbors, zoning boards, and other interested external parties that the course of action they recommend is a wise and even mutually beneficial. During the "boom" of the 20th century, when the church enjoyed wider social capital and public appreciation of its mission and vision, such reckoning was not needed. The church could do what it wanted, how it wanted. Here and now, in the "bust" of the 21st century, Ratzinger knew that the smaller, humbled church would need to have skills at detente and diplomacy with the wider world and the church's secular neighbors.

Transformative Community Learning

Transformative learning theory was initially articulated by Jack Mezirow in the late 1970s. He was working with women who were entering or reentering the workforce or educational context after a major life event, often after the death of a husband or a divorce, but sometimes after the children were in school. Mezirow observed that the disruptive life event threw their worldview or perspective on their lives into chaos. For example, many widows had assumed that they would be financially provided for, until their own deaths, by their now-gone husband. Many had never considered the possibility that they would need an education or a set of work skills. Mezirow named this predicament aptly as a "disorienting dilemma."[8] Mezirow critically reflected on their experience and developed a learning approach that begins with an open

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[8] Cranton, Patricia, and ProQuest. *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning : A Guide to Theory and Practice*. Third edition. Sterling, Virginia: Stylus Publishing, 2016. P. 16.

acknowledgment of the dilemma. As the decades have unfolded, the term "transformative learning" has been applied to several other approaches but for this article, we are focusing on Mezirow's perspective transformation.[9]

In a 2023 retrospective of the 45 years since Mezirow's initial articulation, Hoggin and Finnigan note that the approach has since been applied in group settings: "in the workplace, as well as in social movements, [and] community education."[10] Community perspective transformation is the focus here as we explore the context of repurposing religious property. After the disorienting dilemma has been named and owned, Mezirow's process invites a reflective turn so that the invested actors can identify the perspective out of which they have been operating and bring some critical awareness to it.[11]

Examples of perspectives that might be at play include that the building may be seen as a symbol of God's blessing on this community, a reflection of the faithfulness of the community over several generations, a beacon of hope and goodness for the religious community and the wider community in which the faithful have tried to carry out God's call or mission, or the main organizing identity of the neighborhood. It was once normal in the Boston neighborhood of Dorchester to ask someone, not about one's sub-neighborhood (e.g., Lower Mills, Ashmont, Codman Square, Fields Corner, Savin Hill, etc.), but about what (Catholic) parish they were from (the Cathedral of the Holy Cross, St. Stephen's, St. Leonard's, etc.). Closing a church in a neighborhood where the community identity is defined by the church has huge emotional implications, whether the church is to be abandoned, repurposed, or perhaps even torn down.

Mezirow's next step suggests that it is important to honor the sense of loss or alienation that one is feeling as a result. Only with an acceptance (and sometimes mourning) of that loss can the person or community move on to a new perspective.[12] In a community context, this involves a combination of dialogue, collective mourning, and maybe even open lamentation.

For a community, this effort neatly combines with Mezirow's next step - verbalizing the dilemma.[13] If the community can openly dialogue about the loss of the religious property, then, according to Mezirow, the desired transformation is easier to realize. For these steps in the approach to learning, emphasis is laid on transformation of perspective, the relevant theological or religious tradition offers vast resources for the religious community facing a property repurposing. "What does the relevant religious tradition's doctrine have to say about buildings or other property?" "What does the relevant religious tradition's doctrine call the community toward in its ongoing relationship with God?" We are not here arguing that religious education

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[9] Hoggan, Chad and Fergal Finnigan. 2023. "Transformative learning theory: Where we are after 45 years." In New Directions in Adult & Continuing Education. Special Issue: An Update on Transformative Learning. Volume 2023, Issue 177, Pages 5-11. https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.20474.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Cranton, Patricia, and ProQuest. *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning : A Guide to Theory and Practice*. Third edition. Sterling, Virginia: Stylus Publishing, 2016. P. 16.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.

should sacrifice the religious tradition to the GIS technology. Instead, the GIS technology offers the religious tradition a creative contemporary dialogue partner that enables a continuance of mission commitment, even if only by analogy. This dialogical partnership is especially relevant to the next few steps in Mezirow's process.

The steps we have described so far focus on the old perspective and how current circumstances challenge that perspective. Mezirow's process shifts to the present and the future from here on out. The next step involves exploring options for new perspectives.[14] Individuals engaged in transformative learning often need a teacher or mentor or facilitator at this point. They are so habituated to their old perspectives, they often don't even know that other perspectives or approaches exist. In the context we are exploring, this is when a GIS contractor can offer an array of reuse options for the property thanks to their facility with spatial technologies. The community is then tasked with exploring the options that the technology and its user have offered the community.[15]

In the context of property repurposing, Mezirow's next step offers the religious community an opportunity for adventure. The process invites digging into some of the options explored in the previous step and learning enough about each of them to have confidence about whether they are a good fit for the community.[16] Again, the GIS contractor can help with this step. If one option is to turn the property into a solar farm, the GIS contractor can introduce the community to organizations constructing and harvesting the energy from solar farms in the area. If the neighborhood is a food desert, the GIS contractor can provide info on the local grocery chains that have responded to incentives for locating stores in such neighborhoods or provide information on the land quality for a group that organizes community gardens. If the old school in the neighborhood is falling down but there are increasingly young children moving into the area, talking with the local Superintendent and school board might be a relevant avenue. This is the kind of work that requires the religious community to get curious, to do a fair amount of investigation, and to reflect not only theologically, on what they learn.

Mezirow's next step is a natural outflow from the investigation/reflection phase for a community, it is about developing a plan of action.[17] Theological reflection on the previous step to align with the mission of the religious community is vital. However, once that work is done, the community then has to identify and work with potential partners to develop an overarching plan, to work with regulators and neighbors to educate them on the benefits of the plan, and to secure partners who can help actualize the plan.

This step is where the make-up of the religious community is most centrally at play. If the community is a group of nuns who are all over the age of 80 and have reflected, deliberated, and chosen to vacate their convent in order to move into the order's retirement home in another city, then it is safe to say that they will probably not have an active hand in the

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[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid. Mezirow's step 5.
[16] Ibid. Mezirow's step 6.
[17] Ibid. Mezirow's step 7.

operation of whatever succession plan they had adopted. But if the community is a small, youthful, and active congregation that simply no longer needs a church that seats a thousand, they may want to have a more active role in the development of their succession plan. These scenarios are different manifestations of Mezirow's eighth step, how much knowledge or expertise do the members of the religious community need to develop in order to implement the plan?[18]

As the plan unfolds, the community may experiment with new roles to which their faith calls them (Mezirow's ninth step) and then institutionalize the changes (Mezirow's tenth step).[19]

Perspective Transformation Prior to Mezirow

For many religious communities, resistance may arise to this approach. Can you imagine a community member saying, "We've been here for X-hundred years and we don't need some upstart educator to tell us how to handle change!" The thing is, Mezirow codified an approach to perspective transformation in the face of disorienting dilemmas that has been practiced for many hundreds of years. We could use the example of Martin Luther in the 1500s when he was horrified by some of the abuses in Rome, or of the Emperor Constantine in the 300s when he was faced with a fracturing society and needed something that could unify the Roman Empire. But for the sake of looking at a process that moved forward with less chaos than either of those scenarios we suggest a quick review of the work of the Roman Catholic Saint, Jean-Baptiste de La Salle (JBDLS), a 17th-century Frenchman who would go on to found the Brothers of the Christian Schools, often known as the Lasallian Christian Brothers (LCB). Today, the Lasallian mission is present in 80 countries worldwide, with 4,000 Brothers and 90,000 Partners serving one million young people in 1,000 ministries,[20] but didn't start out that way.

De La Salle, born to a wealthy family in 1662, was committed to the church early in life, received a high quality education, and was ordained a Roman Catholic priest in 1678, earning his doctorate in theology in 1680. The disorienting dilemma that upended his comfortable canonical life was his growing awareness of and attention to the situation of the children of the artisan class for whom there was scant educational opportunity or provision. JBDLS started by helping a couple of people set up schools, but that didn't solve the dilemma. It soon became evident that the teachers willing to work with these poor children were not well-trained, and so JBDLS brought them into his house for further training, much to the horror of his family. These teachers eventually became the beginnings of a new religious order. None of this was pre-planned, JBDLS just kept taking another step toward resolving the dilemma he witnessed on the streets.[21]

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[18] Ibid. Mezirow's step 8.
[19] Ibid. Mezirow's steps 9 and 10.
[20] Accessed 10 MAY 2025 https://lasallian.info/where-we-are/worldwide-regions/
[21] Accessed 08 MAY 2025, https://lasallian.info/who-we-are/founder/.

Although de La Salle is a particular Roman Catholic example, similar examples can be found across many faith traditions, and across time. The particularities of the perspectives that have to change are new, but faithful people have been learning to adapt to new scenarios for millennia.
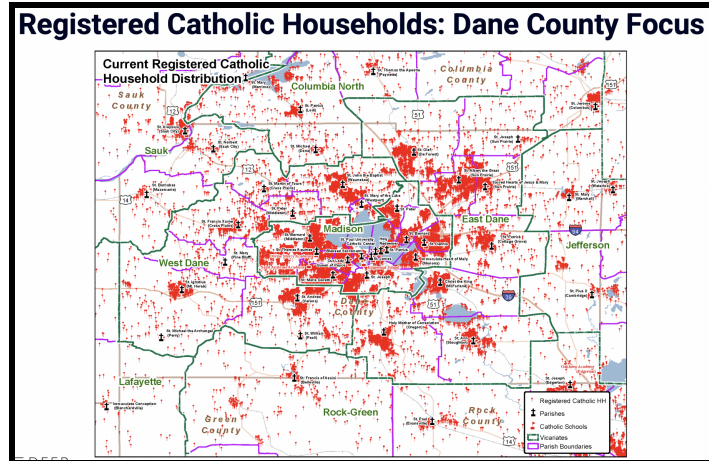
Today, this kind of community transformation is happening, especially in the developing world, when someone with a religious commitment observes a disorienting dilemma. That person or group takes a small action, perhaps by offering nursing care two days a week in a neighborhood with no medical services or by offering lessons three days a week to a group of un-schooled children. In much of the world today, we take for granted that big religious buildings are necessary for a strong faith community. Perhaps we are going to find that perspective shifting over the next few decades as religious faith takes on new forms in the digital age. We need information to help our perspectives transform but that information is available to us. We also need to keep a religious lens on that Geographic Information in order to stay true to our religious commitments.

Standard Contents of a GIS Report on a Religious Property

GIS contractors can provide valuable reports for a church client and the focus of these reports can take many different shapes, depending on the needs and interests of the client. What we present in outline here is a rough sketch of a typical reporting sequence and will rely on a report prepared by the Emmaus Group for the Diocese of Madison, WI in 2022.[22] It was called "Into the Deep" and can reveal the power of GIS for church planning. It will be our example here.

While it may seem hard to believe, still it is true that many church groups have never actually done a definitive account of the parcels actually owned. A reporting firm can begin with the insured properties list and crosscheck that list against city, county, and state records. One firm working for a midwestern Roman Catholic diocese was able to discover 27 "new" or "forgotten" parcels. This stage of such an exercise not only mitigates potential legal risks but it also ensures a more comprehensive planning exercise by finding all assets first. Once all assets are mapped, a spatial team can offer more detailed analyses that scale all the way down to the household level, as shown in the map shown below.

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[22] Accessed 01 MAY 2025,
https://files.ecatholic.com/31534/documents/2022/9/2022-9-21%20Current%20Reality%20Report%20General.pdf?t=1664332643000

Registered Catholic Households: Dane County Focus

The information by which the Roman Catholic Diocese of Madison worked through its process was not specifically related to a transformative learning process but it offered information by which Mezirow's steps 5-8 could be undertaken. The information framework it reviewed was:

1. Demographic Trends
2. Catholic Demographic Trends
3. Mass Attendance Trends
4. Sacramental Trends
5. Youth Formation Trends
6. Priest Trends
7. Giving Trends
8. Financial Trends[23]

It then undertook a process of "Guiding Change" and looking at "What's Next." With a comprehensive account of the properties owned in hand, even with a precise sense of the actual spatial distribution of the faithful in the relevant landscape, a diocese like Madison is well positioned to make critical comparisons between the external demographic trends and the internal demographic realities with which they are so deeply concerned (2-8 above). That comparison allows them to "Guide Change" and address the "What's Next?" in a more nuanced and demographically-informed change than their predecessors had.

It is worth noting a few of the key external demographic realities that Emmaus helped Madison appreciate.

Between 2010 & 2021 across the Diocese:
• Total population grew 8.5% from 1,013,927 to 1,099,746

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[23] Accessed 01 MAY 2025,
https://files.ecatholic.com/31534/documents/2022/9/2022-9-21%20Current%20Reality%20Report%20General.pdf?t=1664332643000

- White population grew 4.4% from 877,978 to 916,477
- Persons of color population grew 36.8% from 81,552 to 111,577
- Hispanic population grew 31.8% from 54,397 to 71,692

In 2021 across the Diocese:
- White population comprised 83.3% of the total population
- Persons of color population comprised 10.1% of the total population
- Hispanic population comprised 6.6% of the total population.[24]

That data gives a broad sense of the external realities against which the internal realities of the Diocese of Madison could be compared. The report articulates numerous example of what was going internally at Madison; here is one telling graphic prepared by Emmaus for them.[25]

Diocese of Madison - Historical Sacraments 2013-2021
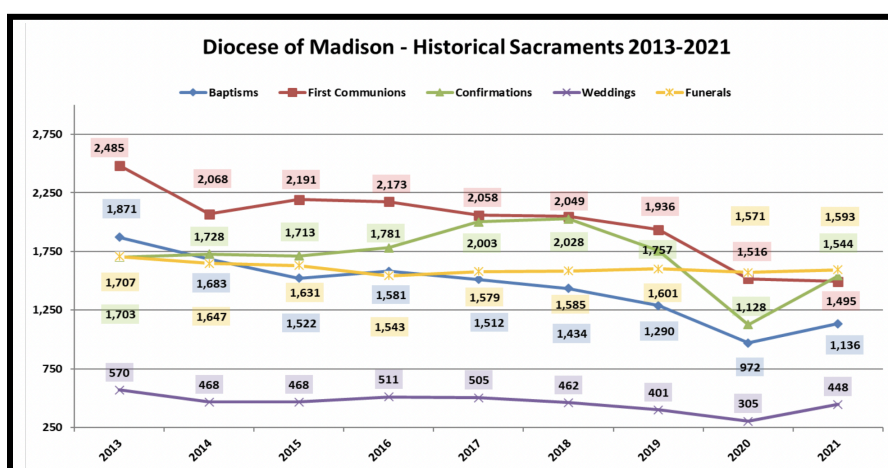
One does not need a degree in spatial technology to see what is happening here. Bishop Hying observed the reality and noted that the "original data … told us in 2022 that the number of Baptisms, marriages, First Communions, Mass attendance and children enrolled in religious instruction in our diocese had all experienced a precipitous decline in the last ten years."[26]

With this broad comparison in place, the reporting team can focus on areas of specific concern. The list of concerns might include the need for schooling, the lack of affordable housing, senior or youth centers, the desire for community gardens, a renewable energy infrastructure, community fitness/wellness support, neighborhood medical clinics, transitional housing for people emerging from rehab or prison, end of life care facilities, etc. Here is where the values

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[24] Accessed 01 MAY 2025,
https://files.ecatholic.com/31534/documents/2022/9/2022-9-21%20Current%20Reality%20Report%20General.pdf?t=1664332643000

[25] Accessed 01 MAY 2025,
https://files.ecatholic.com/31534/documents/2022/9/2022-9-21%20Current%20Reality%20Report%20General.pdf?t=1664332643000

[26] Accessed 01 MAY 2025, https://intothedeepmadison.org/update

and questions of the church group itself are most important and will guide the GIS consultants decisively in their analytical work.

It is worth noting that a good GIS report can include such data as the average drive time from various neighborhoods to the building in question. If a diocese or a denominational conference is trying to figure out in which buildings it should continue to offer religious services, or which buildings can be repurposed toward which ends, such information is invaluable to discerning the likelihood that people will be able to access the space easily.

While we do not have the leisure here to explore all of the topics and areas for concern that Emmaus and Madison explored together, we note that thanks to their exercise in adaptive management approach (which does have important resonance with Mezirow's transformative learning agenda) and augmented by spatial technology, Bishop Hying reflected, deliberated, and chose to move in a bold direction. Hying decided that Madison would move from 102 to 30 parishes, from 62 to 30 pastors, and close no buildings. In other words, they got an answer to "What's Next?" and they dared to carry it out. As of January 2024, Hying could report that "After many years of consistent decline, Mass attendance across the diocese is up more than 4% this past year."[27]

Finally, most GIS contractors are typically willing to stay in conversation after the community decides on a course of action and even once they see a turnaround like Madison has experienced. This continued engagement will support the community's development plans by helping find relevant contractors, developers, municipal and state officials, etc. For communities who have survived or even thrived in the wake of a restructure with an adaptive pedagogical approach augmented by geospatial technology, four broad options for repurposing seem particularly promising for the 21st century socio-economic landscape: 1) Energy Grid Transformation, 2) Environmental Restoration and/or Conservation, 3) Community Impact Action (e.g., Social Isolation, Housing, Human Flourishing, etc.) and 4) post-modern Mission Stewardship.

Conclusion

Pope Francis's *Laudato Si* and *Laudate Deum* are good examples of religious reflections at the intersection of mission and the emerging socio-economic environment of the 21st century. For a community to engage in responsible stewardship in the contemporary world, they need the kind of information about their own land and neighboring environment that GIS technology provides and the kind of adaptive learning offered by Mezirow.

We can envision questions about whether getting involved in management decisions is an appropriate place for religious educators. We posit that if the religious organization does not

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[27] Accessed 01 MAY 2025,
https://files.ecatholic.com/31534/documents/2024/1/Letter%20from%20Bishop%20Hying%206%20Month%20Report.pdf?t=1705359491000

take these frictional opportunities to engage in adult religious formation and transformation, people will continue to disengage and we will have missed a rich moment for creative retrieval of the Gospel imperative for our own times and places. Yes, the tensions that can exist in a community when hard situations arise and different visions are at play are uncomfortable. But community growth in the faith is much more likely if the differences are worked through in a structured setting with the faith tradition's own telos at the center of the conversation. The GIS data is simply there so that finding information does not distract the community from its true mission.

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Rev. Natalie L. Hill, LICSW
Boston College
natalie.hill@bc.edu
2025 REA Annual Meeting, July 7-11

Digital Media in the Context of Faith Formation

Abstract

Following the dramatic increase in digital media use during the COVID-19 pandemic, such media have become staples in many congregations and online communities. The question for scholars and religious leaders today is how digital media can be used both faithfully and effectively. When religious educators try to replicate in-person learning experiences using digital technologies, the result is often a less effective version of the in-person experience. However, there are other learning activities that require or benefit from digital media. Drawing on the unique capabilities of technology enables religious educators to use digital media to enhance and augment (rather than replace) in-person faith formation.

In this paper, I address the theological and practical relevancy of digital media for Christian formation using relevant pedagogical examples. Drawing on the long history of media as a catechetical resource, I make recommendations for the fruitful incorporation of digital media into contemporary faith formation. The results of my analysis highlight the benefits of interactive media for bringing faith to life in novel ways, as well as the value of digital media in facilitating experiences of otherwise inaccessible places and times.

Digital Media in the Context of Faith Formation

From April 21 to May 8, 2025, the world witnessed a remarkable juxtaposition of historic and contemporary technologies as the oldest Christian institution marked the passing of one pope and the elected his successor. The Camerlengo sealed the Papal apartments with the ribbon and wax of bygone eras, while the Vatican shared a video of the event with the public. Voting cardinals used a procedure handed down through centuries of conclaves to cast their ballots, burning them to communicate the outcome to a watching world. The protodeacon announced the new pope using a historic Latin formula while more than 100,000 people stood below, holding their mobile phones aloft to record the event. This juxtaposition of ancient and contemporary technologies demonstrates the "complex interplay" between physical and digital contexts and experiences in our lives today.[1] Instead of perceiving the physical and digital worlds as "functionally distinct," members of digital generations have come to experience them as a "single holistic ecosystem" that some scholars have dubbed "hybrid reality."[2] This year's conclave is just one indication that the church is and must be part digital life.

In this context, digitally-informed and mediated religious education offers unique benefits and possibilities for creating powerful educative experiences. The movement of religious activities to digital platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic brought attention to the social groups for whom physical churches are inaccessible. These groups include people with disabilities, the elderly, parents of very young children, and those who have had harmful experiences in churches (e.g., abuse or discrimination), among others. For these groups, digital catechetical resources may be the best or only entry point to faith formation. At the same time, others who have positive experiences of in-person religious praxis were sometimes dissatisfied with the online religious activities available during the pandemic, which they experienced as poor substitutes for the in-person experiences being replicated.[3] For the latter group, digital resources may serve as one curricular resource among many. Consequently, digital religious education is most promisingly viewed as an addition to, rather than an alternative for traditional models of religious education.

The differing experiences of digital religious praxis during the pandemic suggests that there is an important, and likely increasing, role for digital approaches to religious education, but that digital approaches cannot merely seek to recreate the in-person experience – nor would doing so necessarily prove fruitful. Instead, digital approaches should make the most of the unique capabilities of available technology (referred to as "affordances") to create digital experiences that can add to, rather than duplicate, existing resources for religious education. Among the most powerful affordances of digital technology involve the possibility of entering times and places that would otherwise be inaccessible. In this paper, I examine how the church can faithfully use these emerging technological possibilities to fulfill its age-old purpose: to proclaim the gospel and make disciples in preparation for God's reign. Encompassing catechesis[4]

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[1] Isabel Graniac, Hiromitsu Morita, and Hanneke Scholten, "Beyond Screen Time: Identity Development in the Digital Age," *Psychological Inquiry* 31, no. 3 (2020): 196.

[2] Graniac et al., "Beyond Screen Time," 196.

[3] Guilia Isetti, "'Online You Will Never Get the Same Experience, Never': Minority Perspectives on (Digital) Religious Practice and Embodiment During the COVID-19 Outbreak," *Religions* 13 (2022).

[4] In this paper, I use a broad understand of catechesis aligned with Robert Sherman's definition: "any 'teaching' that deepens, broadens or makes more precise one's already basic understanding of the faith," from "The Catechetical Function of Reformed Hymnody," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 55, no. 1 (2002): 80.

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and evangelization, this purpose lies at the heart of Christian education. The following sections examine the nature of media and technology, and the ways earlier generations of Christians have used media and technology for catechesis. I then bring historical concepts into dialogue with the contemporary context to identify how digital tools can enrich religious education, with concrete examples.

Understanding Media and Technology

Most essentially, the word "technology" refers to a tool or technique that enhances one's ability to solve a problem or achieve a desired end. Animals use technology, such as when a monkey uses a nearby stick to retrieve something from outside its enclosure. What is unique about humans is our propensity for developing new and complex technology, not only to solve immediate problems, but to enhance our physical, emotional, social, and spiritual lives. Technological advancements have played an important and largely positive role in Christian history, including by facilitating progress from oral to written tradition, from scrolls to codices, and from transcription to the printing press.

Church leaders have had to consider each technological advancement carefully to ensure that technology remains a helpful tool – something we use rather than something we are used by. This has never been more important than it is now, in the internet age, when a primary function of evolving technology is to connect an increasing diversity of people with one another in real time, in increasingly diverse ways. While the internet is often considered part and parcel of the "Information Age," its central technological innovation has less to do with the amount of information now available at our fingertips than it has to do with how people from different places, cultures, backgrounds, and so forth, find themselves brought together in an ever-changing kaleidoscope of combinations, forever changing how we think about ourselves and each other.

Implicit in this discussion of technology is the concept of media. The word "media" (the plural form of the word "medium") refers to the means, form, and/or substance through which people represent or communicate information. For example, in the common terms "news media," "television media," and "social media," the first word points to the technology involved, while the word "media" refers to the function of that technology: each mediates information from its original context into another, often wider, context.

This last statement brings us to another linguistic form of the word "medium." The ultimate role of a media is to mediate – literally, to act as an intermediary, i.e., to convey, connect, or intervene between two individuals or subjectivities to convey or share information. Mediation is an act of translation and interpretation of symbolic content so that someone else can understand it.[5] In some ways, every tangible aspect of Christian praxis – or at least of Christian worship – is a form of mediation. Sacraments are the pinnacle of mediation because the signs and symbols of the sacrament communicate something of the divine in a tangible way. Everything that helps humans experience and connect to God is in the truest sense a mediator of God – a divine medium.

Digital Media and Technology

Based on the above discussion, we can better understand how people use and refer to media. Visual media are images that communicate something, whether that is a stained-glass window of the resurrection, or a digital image advertising a product on your social media feed.

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[5] Stewart M. Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2025).

We both visually see the media in sensory terms, and "see something" via the media through cognition and/or conation.[6] Similarly, auditory media range from famous compositions of soaring beauty to the sound your computer makes when email arrives. Multimedia content incorporates multiple types of sensory input. Digital media involve computerized content that communicates through one or more human senses.

Just as other media (art, music, literature) may point toward truth or fantasy, so can digital media point toward anything along the gamut between factual information and misleading falsehood. Between these two poles lie many matters of spiritual significance, including symbolism, allegory, prophecy, and so much more. Digital technology, in turn, are the tools people use to create, access, and respond to digital media. These include tools such as digital cameras and projectors, as well as the software and web applications through which people can view, modify, create, and share media.

Digital media and technology represent an important and promising path for religious education at this moment in history for several reasons. First, digital media are the predominant method of communication across generations and around the globe. However, they are particularly popular and prominent among "digital natives:" those born after 1980, who grew up around digital and internet technology. Second, digital media have already affected the brain structure and function of digital generations, who are "developmentally and epistemologically" distinct from prior generations.[7] Research has documented increased cognitive processing speeds, problem solving skills, spatial visualization, hand-eye coordination, multitasking capacity, short-term memory, and mental flexibility than previous generations.[8] On the other hand, digital natives demonstrate decreased attentional control when engaged in mundane tasks.[9] Because the brains of digital natives are more adapted to computers than in-person communication, digital media are uniquely equipped to effectively communicate faith to younger generations. Finally, the sheer prevalence of digital media – including ubiquity across areas of life as well as accessibility on any day at any time – make digital media beneficial in many aspects of religious life and ministry.

Digital Technology, Media, and Religious Education

Digital technology both privileges multimedia content and provides the resources people need to create such content. Visual media, including images and video, are particularly important for the most popular social media and internet platforms today. However, as the technology to create such media becomes more user-friendly, content becomes more sophisticated and multifaceted, involving sound, and sometimes even touch (such as when applications on a smartwatch provide "haptic" or tactile as well as visual cues). Amid the daily cacophony of media that typifies contemporary life, the church needs to apply such media in a responsible, intentional, innovative, and transformative way. To accomplish this aim, it can be helpful to consider how prior generations of Christians used the media of their time for catechesis and formation.

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[6]Thomas H. Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry* (New York, NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).

[7] Kirk A. Bingamon, "Religious and Spiritual Experience in the Digital Age: Unprecedented Evolutionary Forces," *Pastoral Psychology* 69 (2020): 295; Kirk A. Bingamon, "Religion in the Digital Age: An Irreversible Process," Religions 14 (2023): 118.

[8] Bingamon, "Religious and Spiritual Experiences," 299, 301.

[9] Bingamon, "Religious and Spiritual Experiences," 301.

Historical Uses of Media in Christian Education

      The church has a long history of using media for "instruction in the faith, moving the heart, and exhorting to action."[10] Kevin E. Lawson, a scholar of religious education, identifies "art, music, poetry, [and] drama" among the variety of catechetical approaches employed in earlier eras of church history.[11] Across millennia, through evolving technology, styles and modes of media creation, the church has drawn on these media both to convey knowledge about the faith, and to foster experiences of faith. In the first three centuries of the common era, persecution precluded the creation of significant artwork; the only visual media to survive from that time are small symbols drawn or carved in discreet or hidden places such as tombs. However, early Christians had a rich oral tradition during these centuries before the canonization of the Bible. Converts may well have learned sayings and stories in verse and song – after all, myriad musical settings for passages like the Lord's Prayer and the Magnificat survive from different times, places, and vernacular languages.

      Once Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, and particularly as Christians began to build formal church buildings, images and artwork became much more prevalent. The variety of artistic media evolved over time as new technology emerged. For example, mosaics were a common feature of Roman architecture and so became a common feature of Roman church buildings. Some churches from the same era also featured wall paintings. However, Christianity subsequently experienced a period of ambivalence about visual media, both because of the second commandment of the Decalogue barring graven images, and out of concern that images would become idols (cf. Deut. 5:8-9). Finally, in 787 C.E., the Second Council of Nicaea upheld the personal and public use of religious images,[12] arguing that because God took on material form in Christ, the Incarnation justifies the use of representational art in Christian praxis.[13] At that point, wall and window paintings became commonplace in church buildings.

      As with visual art, the church initially viewed drama with some suspicion, associating it with pagan traditions. However, beginning in the eleventh century, it became a popular way to inform people about and form people in the Christian faith. Lawson differentiates between four types of drama popular in the medieval church. Liturgical plays occurred during worship, often as a way of bringing the day's scripture reading to life. "Biblical plays" also focused on stories from scripture but were performed in public settings as a more evangelistic form of proclamation. Plays about biblical and historical saints portrayed scenes from their lies, often focusing on conversion and/or martyrdom. Finally, morality plays dealt with virtues, vices, acts of charity and other ethical themes.[14]

      Media became increasingly significance in the Middle Ages as Christianity spread to new parts of the world and literacy rates declined. Centuries after the fall of the Roman Empire, Latin

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[10] Kevin E. Lawson, "More than Silent Preaching: Didactic Use of Wall Painting in the Middle Ages," *Christian Education Journal* 11, no. 2 (2014): 330.

[11] Kevin E. Lawson, "Light from the 'Dark Ages': Lessons in Faith Formation from Before the Reformation," *Christian Education Journal* 14, no. 2 (2017): 328.

[12] Lawson, "More than Silent Preaching." Andrea Guerrero-Rubio, John Jairo Pérez-Vargas, and Johan Andrés Pérez-Vargas vo, "Arte Religioso, Experiencia de Fe y Evangelización," *Revista Guillermo de Ockham* 21, no. 2 (2022): 2.

[13] Jem Sullivan, "Catechesis and the Arts: Attending to the 'Way of Beauty,'" *International Journal of Evangelization and Catechetics* 1, no. 2 (2020): 147

[14] Lawson, "Light from the 'Dark Ages,'" 338-339.

remained the language of the church, but few Christians spoke or understood it. Consequently, Christians attended church each week without the ability to understand the prayers, scriptures, and sacramental liturgy. The resulting gaps in lay comprehension of basic Christian beliefs and practices became a subject of concern at the Fourth Lateran Council (1198-1216), resulting in canon law requiring the annual reception of the Eucharist by all Christians.[15] However, faithfully fulfilling this requirement was more complicated than simply attending Mass. Lawson writes: "To partake of the Eucharist one must first make confession…. In order to make a good confession, one must know what God requires…. To know this, one must be taught God's laws, the basics of faith, and how to confess."[16] In other words, catechesis – the education necessary for a life of faith – became a crucial part of every priest's role.

Church leaders developed systems and standards to guide priests' catechetical work, generally emphasizing the Apostles Creed, the Decalogue, the Sacraments, the Seven Deadly Sins, the Seven Virtues, and the Seven Acts of Mercy. Media became central to teaching these concepts, and different kinds of media were often used alongside one another to reinforce learning, deepen the comprehension and devotion of the laity. For those who could not read the Bible, verses put to popular tunes of the day, and dramatic portrayals of Biblical stories made catechesis both enjoyable and memorable. Traveling preachers such as the Franciscan and Dominican friars used illustrative stories, "fables, jokes, proverbs, verse, and songs to catch attention and aid memory."[17] Then, within the church building, visual media including wall paintings, window paintings, stained glass, and sculpture provided an ongoing reminder of the material people had learned through sermons, stories, and songs.

The themes of church wall paintings generally included the topics mentioned above, as well as Biblical narratives associated with salvation history and the life of Christ. Finally, the lives of saints provided additional visual and moral inspiration to shape the life of faith. Objects, animals, and other symbolic items from the natural world often became part of these portrayals to build associations between specific people, events, and principles.[18] Regardless of the topic, artistic renderings could teach, remind, or reinforce what the laity needed to know and do as Christians. During the incomprehensible sections of the Latin Mass, laity could look around the sanctuary and meditate on how God was calling them to live their lives.

In Eastern churches, visual media primarily took the form of icons and served as a tool for prayer and contemplation. In contrast, Western churches primarily used visual media pedagogically.[19] These diverging uses of art highlight the two primary roles media have played throughout church history: devotional and didactic. Poetry, music, and drama can similarly be divided between didactic verse (identifying and explaining key elements of doctrine such as the creed and the decalogue), and devotional verse (designed to foster love and repentance, often by focusing on Christ's passion).[20]

The straightforward catechetical imagery of the twelfth-fourteenth centuries is easily overshadowed by the dramatic imagery typifying the later Middle Ages. In this later period, the church building itself became a symbol of the universe and its destiny. Lawson states that to

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[15] Lawson, "More than Silent Preaching," 320.
[16] Lawson, "More than Silent Preaching," 321.
[17] Lawson, "Light from the 'Dark Ages,'" 333.
[18] Wendolyn Trozzo, "The Return to Visual Communication in Christian Education," *Christian Education Journal* 18, no. 1 (2021): 46.
[19] Guerrero-Rubio, Pérez-Vargas, & Pérez-Vargas, "Arte religioso," 3.
[20] Lawson, "Light from the 'Dark Ages,'" 335

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"walk into a medieval sanctuary was to walk into a three-dimensional picture book, with the images portraying the salvation story and how to respond to it as God's people."[21] The church roof became the sky, with representations of heaven. On the walls, moving from the nave to the chancel arch, the wall paintings and other visual media became increasingly holy, gradually transitioning from the lay world to the life of saints, the apostles, and Christ. The chancel represented the portal into heaven or the Reign of Christ, surrounded by images of the Last Judgment. Other images, such as those typical of earlier periods, appeared in and among the overarching imagery of salvation history.

Of course, as the Middle Ages gave way to the Renaissance and Early Modernity, literacy rates began to rise, while printing presses and vernacular translations made the Bible more accessible. Written catechisms became more popular, particularly after the Council of Trent commissioned the *Roman Catechism*. The Protestant Reformation also significantly influenced media use. In the realm of art, Protestants turned to austere architecture and eschewed the use of contemplative or catechetical art, while Catholics actively countered this trend with Baroque grandeur. [22] Baroque imagery, architecture, and symphonic music were more devotional than didactic – they contributed to experiences of awe and, therefore, to the mystagogical experience of formation through worship.[23]

However, verse and hymnody continued to be significant catechetical resources for both Catholics and Protestants throughout the Reformation and beyond. Trained musicians performed symphonic works of catechetical and/or formational import, such as George Friderich Handel's *Messiah*, which continued the musical emphases of prior eras by bringing the Biblical narrative to life in ways that evoke affective and devotional responses. However, these performances were balanced by the more day-to-day use of poetry and music designed to be sung by the lay faithful. These more commonplace media continued trends from the Middle Ages by using popular tunes of the day, using verse to convey and/or exegete scripture, and incorporating central tenets of Christian faith such as the creed, the Decalogue, and the Lord's Prayer.[24]

Implications for Using Digital Media in Christian Education

In past centuries, Christians used a wide range of available media, including art, music, drama, and poetry, to make religious education engaging, memorable, and spiritually moving. Such media were particularly important during eras when many people could not read, had limited access to books, and when scripture and liturgy often used Latin rather than vernacular languages. As both access and literacy increased in recent centuries, media were no longer as important. Particularly within Protestants' tradition of "sola scriptura," the words of Scripture and sermon became the primary medium of catechesis. Today, digital culture invites a shift in the opposite direction. While illiteracy is now rare in the developed world, digital generations have become what social scientists refer to as "post-literate:" while people can and do communicate textually, they increasingly choose to communicate via non-textual (visual and/or auditory) media or embed text within multimedia content.[25]

Post-literacy presents a unique challenge for the church in catechesis and spiritual formation. Unlike illiteracy, where it is evident when someone can and cannot interpret and

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[21] Lawson, "More than Silent Preaching," 322.
[22] Sherman, "Catechetical Function," 79-80.
[23] James F. White, *Roman Catholic Worship: Trent to Today* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003).
[24] Sherman, "Catechetical Function," 80.
[25] Lawson, "More than Silent Preaching," 331.

understand certain content, members of a post-literate culture cognitively understand textual and discursive information. They do not lack the language skills to fully engage in the catechetical methods of the last few hundred years. Instead, the missing link emerges in the impact of textual and discursive content. Specifically, such content does not have the expected personal, affective, spiritual, and behavioral impact. In other words, post-literate generations comprehend but may not resonate with textual material. Indeed, post-literate generations may have a deeper appreciation for the nuances of life that may be missed or obscured by words.

Jem Sullivan, a professor of catechesis, describes a gap between the multisensory media environment that dominates daily life today, and the practices of catechesis and evangelization, where "less attention is given to the engagement of all the senses;" she refers to this gap as "sensory dissonance."[26] In other words, a marked difference between the multisensory experience of life in a digital age and a catechetical context that is far less sensory and more cerebral may discomfit or even disconnect participants in religious education. On the other hand, the digital world can expose people to so many images and data each day that they experience a different kind of discomfort: "information overload."[27] To find the balance between the importance of incorporating media and the challenges of excessive media, "we should give careful and serious thought to how we might better employ them in our teaching, both in curricular materials and in the physical settings in which our teaching takes place."[28] Visual and auditory media are a powerful resource that can pique someone's interest and improve their understanding, while offering a shared focus for reflection and make a lesson more memorable.[29] Furthermore, incorporating creativity into an experiential pedagogy can "create bridges between the mystery of God and the identity of the person."[30] In other words, whether viewing or creating media, participants have the opportunity to encounter God.

Digital media offer many of the same opportunities for catechesis that were popular in past eras of Christian education. Technology makes it easy to access visual media from many artists and locations, as well as to develop custom imagery for a particular church or educational context. Music of entry genre is only a click away. Our cellphones come equipped with applications allowing us to easily combine images, video, and sound into multimedia productions. With such unprecedented access to media, it is important to remember what made media meaningful as part of catechesis for earlier Christians. Images and songs made catechetical content interesting, comprehensible, and memorable. However, this process required regular exposure to the same songs, poems, and images. Seeing an image or hearing a song once is unlikely to be formative. Furthermore, the images and verses were regularly explained and interpreted as part of the church's preaching ministry, since priests were expected to cover core catechetical content in sermons several times each year. We cannot assume that symbols and metaphors communicate clearly without explanation. Even when people did not have ongoing access to content, such would have been the case with catechetical dramas, people were likely to encounter similar topics and biblical narratives over the course of each liturgical year. As people were exposed to the liturgical cycle year after year, they quickly became familiar with the core stories of salvation history, aided by drama and other media. Finally, media were impactful because they engaged the heart and soul as well as the mind. Those who designed catechetical

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[26] Sullivan, "Catechesis and the Arts," 145-156.
[27] Trozzo, "Return to Visual," 51.
[28] Lawson, "More than Silent Preaching," 331.
[29] Trozzo, "Return to Visual," 44-45.
[30] Guerrero-Rubio, Pérez-Vargas, & Pérez-Vargas, "Arte religioso," 8.

media intentionally sought to foster feelings like repentance, love, and mimetic resonance with biblical and ecclesial figures. These affective responses were as or more important for formation than simply learning and recalling doctrine.

Because media have such a powerful impact, church leaders are responsible for giving careful consideration to what media teach, what emotions they elicit, and what behavioral responses they model, invite, or discourage. However, amid the overabundance of media in the digital world, there is a risk that religious educators and other church leaders will be less intentional about what media they use and how they use it. One reason leaders may take less care with media is that, in digital contexts, a given image, poem, song, or drama may be used only briefly. For example, in contrast to a Medieval wall painting that would remain in place for generations, a digital image may appear on a screen throughout the course of one particular service, meeting, or lesson, or even more briefly as one image among several used in a slide show or video. However, for these images to be formative, they need to be memorable and accessible over time. Consequently, even in virtual learning environments, it is important for leaders to consider whether there are particular images that would be more valuable if they were either used consistently in a series of gatherings, or made readily available outside of formal gatherings, such as in a website background or header, or as a download. The latter category offers unique possibilities for individuals to guide their own formation. For example, leaders could format key images as cellphone, tablet, or computer backgrounds, wallpapers, or screensavers; participants could then download and install images that reflected their own priorities for spiritual growth at a particular point in their formation.

Another reason for religious leaders to pay careful attention to digital media is that participants in digital ministries may come from all over the world. Music that resonates with one cultural group may have a different impact on another group. Similarly, while images may cross language barriers, they do not always easily translate across cultural differences: different people may perceive different things in the same image. Consequently, images may require more explanation than one anticipates. Conversely, leaders may inadvertently communicate something they do not intend. For example, a significant amount of Christian art portrays Christ and other Biblical characters as Caucasian; such artwork risks perpetuating the idea that Jesus was a blonde, blue-eyed White man rather than a Jewish man from the Middle East. In any church setting, but particularly in global and multicultural contexts (as all digital ministries are), leaders should be intentional about incorporating media from a range of cultures, and regularly check in with participants to find out how they are interpreting the media and symbolism within any formational context.[31]

Unique Applications of Digital Media

One of the most promising catechetical applications of existing digital technology involves using available software to create interactive, experiential, multimedia content through which participants can engage biblical narratives and catechetical teachings in novel ways. It is often difficult for people today to accurately envision scenes described in the Bible. However, without a realistic sense of the context in which various encounters, conversations, signs, and miracles take place, it is impossible to fully appreciate the biblical story. As one of many possible examples, this section describes how understanding the physical contexts of stories from Holy Week casts new light on certain events.

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[31] Trozzo, "Return to Visual," 46.

One such event is the so-called "cleansing of the Temple," when Jesus forcibly evicted moneychangers and those who sold animals for sacrificial offerings, accusing them of turned God's house of prayer into a "den of thieves" (Matt 21:12-17, Mark 11:15-19, Luke 19:45-48; cf. Jer. 7:11). In a common Christian interpretation of this story, Jesus takes issue with what might considered "for-profit businesses" within sacred space. However, a digital reconstruction of the Temple quickly belies this interpretation. The money changers and sellers of sacrificial animals were located in the massive colonnade along the southern wall of the Temple Mount known as the Royal Stoa. However, this area was well within the Court of the Gentiles, and a part of Herod's extension of the Temple Mount far beyond the boundaries of the Temple's sacred courts. Descriptions from the Midrash confirm the differentiation between sacred and secular areas of the Temple Mount: the Midrash describes the sacred elements of the Temple in minute detail while ignoring anything outside of the sacred boundaries.[32]

The money changers and sellers of sacrificial animals were crucial for pilgrims. People came to Jerusalem from all over the Jewish diaspora to participate in the major feasts each year, as well as for meaningful milestones in life. They brought coins with them from their countries of origin, most of which included images of people or animals. According to Mosaic law, these "graven images" could not enter the sacred precincts of the Temple. They could only be used to purchase items and animals for sacrifice outside the sacred precincts or be converted into Temple coins (shekels) bearing no graven images. Jesus would have been familiar with the way changing money enabled pilgrims to participate in Temple rites. That was not his objections. In fact, to reject money-changing altogether would be to exclude all members of the Jewish diaspora from practices required by Mosaic Law. Instead, Jesus describes the Temple as the den (i.e., home or hiding place) for thieves. His critique was about how Temple authorities took advantage of pilgrims' need to exchange money and purchase sacrificial elements. Figure 1 shows how a three-dimensional digital reconstruction of the Temple clarifies Jesus's actions and the associated symbolism in this important Biblical narrative.[33]
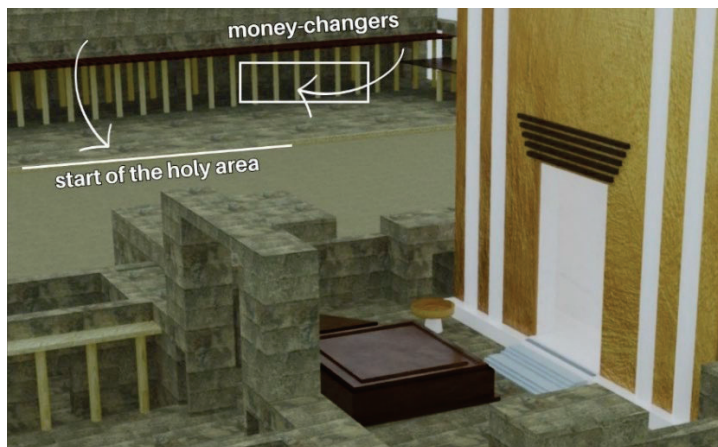
Figure 1. An interactive 3D model related to the cleansing of the temple.[34]

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[32] Cf. Midrash *Middot*; Leen Ritmeyer, "Imagining the Temple Known to Jesus and to Early Jews," In *Jesus and Temple: Textual and Archaeological Explorations*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2014): 19-57

[33] Marcu J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: The Day-by-Day Account of Jesus's Final Week in Jerusalem* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2006): 49.

[34] Model and image created by the author

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A second example involves Jesus's decision, at several points during Holy Week but most memorably on Maundy Thursday, to pray in the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives (Matt 26:36-46, Mark 14:32-42, Luke 22:40-46, John 18:1-11). Nothing in the gospels explains why Jesus chooses this location. However, it is much more significant and symbolic than many Christians know. Separated from the Temple Mount by the Kidron Valley, the Mount of Olives played an important role in Temple ritual, most notably as part of Yom Kippur observances. It was the site where the red heifer was sacrificed along with one of a pair of goats while the second goat – the "scapegoat" was released into the wilderness.[35] To demonstrate the location's significance, 3D digital mapping reveals that the Mount of Olives – and especially the Garden of Gethsemane – are at an elevation that is almost level with the top of the Temple Mount. Before the Temple's destruction, it would have been possible to see from the Mount of Olives almost directly into the Temple sanctuary itself. Is it any wonder, then, that Jesus would choose this location for his deepest prayers? Figure 2 illustrates the view from the Mount of Olives, superimposing a 3D model of the Temple onto a 3D map of the Temple Mount as it exists today.
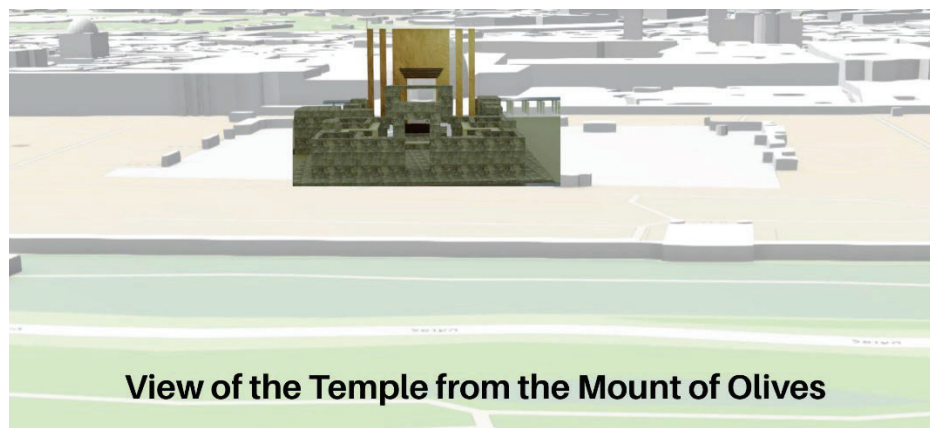

View of the Temple from the Mount of Olives

Figure 3. The view from Gethsemane using a model of the Temple superimposed onto a contemporary 3D map.[36]

Conclusions

J.J. Warren, a United Methodist pastor serving a fully digital congregation, sees his ministry as part of both the catholicity and apostolicity of the church. He writes: "our understanding of the church's nature continues to inform how and why we go about co-creating this community…. It's a theology that takes technology seriously and a use of technology that is theologically motivated so wherever two or three are connected, Christ is experienced."[37] This aspiration represents a vision for the emerging future of online Christian praxis and, more specifically, the online *ekklesia*, the online church. As this paper has demonstrated, the church can benefit from drawing on its rich history of media as a resource for information and formation in faith in order to equip churches like Warren's with effective catechetical resources. Digital

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[35] Ritmeyer, "Imagining the Temple," 19-57.
[36] Model and image created by author; map developed using ArcGIS Scene Builder by Esri, https://www.arcgis.com.
[37] J.J. Warren, *Where Two or Three are Connected: Being the Church in This New Era* (Knoxville: Market Square, 2024): 207.

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religious education emerges here not as an *alternative* to in-person programs, but as an *addition* and *augmentation* to the repertoire of resources available to reach digital generations.[38]

While some scholars speculate about future technology becoming "indistinguishable" from in-person experiences, others explore how to make the most of what is different and unique about digital experiences, calling for "digital tools that do not simulate offline forms of interaction, but support novel ways of encountering each other."[39] In fact, for some – particularly people with various forms of neurodivergence and minoritized bodies – "online social encounters might…be desirable precisely *because* they are differently embodied to offline ones." [40] Religious educators should explore when online vs. offline "sociality is more or less appropriate or fitting based on the context and the people involved.[41]

Digital expressions of faith formation and religious education may be fruitful in new and unforeseen ways when they are approached with a "deeper understanding of the special affordances of online virtual space accompanied by a spirit of openness, exploration, and improvisation."[42] For religious educators who are interested in gaining greater familiarity with virtual environments and their educational potential, a good first step is to explore existing digital faith communities. Attend virtual worship on any platform – ideally, on multiple platforms to compare the differential affordances of different technology. Scroll through virtual chatrooms (*Discord*[43] is often the group discussion platform of choice today). Experiment with mobile games that use augmented or virtual reality. Explore a preexisting virtual environment such as those found in *Second Life*,[44] or attempt to build your own with a platform such as *Gather Town*.[45] These environments offer the technological affordances to create experiences that would be impossible in the real world, from simply creating your ideal religious education space that students can access from anywhere in the world, to creating a virtual world where students can experience a miracle unfolding in front of their eyes.

In religious education, as in all education, educators make the best innovators. As you explore various digital experiences, imagine how such tools might enrich religious education programs. Think about digital generations and the future of the church: how might the digital tools available today make the gospel come alive in new ways through immersive and collaborative experiences? Your answers reveal the potential contours of digital faith formation and religious education in this decade and beyond.

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[38] Lucy Osler and Dan Zahavi, "Sociality and Embodiment: Online Communication During and After COVID-19," *Foundations of Science* 28 (2023): 1137.
[39] Osler and Zahavi, "Sociality and Embodiment," 1138.
[40] Osler and Zahavi, "Sociality and Embodiment," 1138. Emphasis in original.
[41] Osler and Zahavi, "Sociality and Embodiment," 1138.
[42] Leslie Jarmon, "Homo Virtualis: Virtual Worlds, Learning, and an Ecology of Embodied Interaction," *International Journal of Virtual and Personal Learning Environments* 1, no. 1 (Jan-Mar 2010): 53.
[43] www.discord.com
[44] www.secondlife.com
[45] www.gather.town

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REA 2025 Annual Conference, Navigating Humanity
RIG Paper Proposal

Digital Sanctuaries: How Online Spaces Amplify and Constrain Voices of Marginalized
Emerging Adult in Faith Communities

Abstract

The digitization of faith communities has opened new avenues for activism and marginalized individuals to engage in spirituality, build community, and experience belonging beyond the constraints of traditional religious institutions. Online platforms provide an alternative space for faith formation, amplifying unheard voices and fostering spiritual discourse and leadership. While these digital spaces enhance accessibility and reduce loneliness, they also present challenges such as digital harassment, racism, and the limitations of virtual community-building. Drawing on recent research, this paper examines both the opportunities and constraints of digital faith engagement from an educational psychology perspective, highlighting its transformative potential in redefining the conceptual boundaries of church communities.

Introduction

How do online faith communities serve as transformative sanctuaries for marginalized emerging adults, and what educational-psychological implications arise from this shift in spiritual engagement? In less than a generation, digital platforms have moved from the periphery of religious life to its center, offering previously silenced voices spaces to articulate faith on their own terms. South Korean data illustrate the speed of this transition: the share of Christians who credit *media* with nurturing their spiritual growth leaped from 1 percent in 2012 to 19 percent in 2023, a nearly twenty-fold increase that now rivals sermons and family influence as a primary formative source.[1]

This migration from pew to platform is not merely technological but a reconfiguration of authority, belonging, and theological agency. Barna's *State of the Church* research finds that those who most often substitute digital content for in-person worship are disproportionately Millennials, urbanites, ethnic minorities, and others located outside the majority experience of institutional Christianity.[2] Digital faith spaces thus function simultaneously as *sanctuaries of voice*—where emerging adults experiment with leadership, activism, and communal care—and as arenas where personhood is flattened into metrics and profiles, a dynamic Charles Taylor calls the "leveling" of moral space.[3]

This article follows that tension through four movements: (1) From Silence to Voice traces how marginalized youth first encounter theological agency online; (2) Digital Testimonies examines concrete cases of youth-led faith discourse and activism; (3) Depth and Danger engages Taylor's critique to probe the psychosocial costs of life on screen; and (4) Holding Tension proposes an educational praxis of "digital belonging" that equips churches and educators to cultivate depth without surrendering accessibility. By weaving empirical

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[1] Pastoral Data Research Institute, *Numberz No. 209:* 신앙생활과 미디어 이용 실태 [The Realities of Faith Practice and Media Usage], released September 26, 2023.

[2] Barna Group, *State of the Church 2020: Research Overview*, accessed June 25, 2025, https://www.barna.com/research/sotc-2020/.

[3] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 550–558.

evidence with philosophical insight, the study argues that, when critically embraced, digital sanctuaries can expand the conceptual boundaries of church, agency, and formation for a rising generation.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed qualitative design tailored to the article's guiding question—how digital sanctuaries simultaneously liberate and level the faith lives of marginalized emerging adults—by weaving together three complementary strands. (1) Integrative literature review surveys scholarship across digital religion, educational psychology, and media ethics. Core interlocutors include Angela Gorrell on hybrid praxis and moral flattening, Justin L. Barrett and Sarah A. Schnitker on virtue development, and critical media theorists such as Zeynep Tufekci and Safiya U. Noble on algorithmic bias. (2) Digital ethnography combines non-participant observation of publicly accessible faith forums—YouTube youth Bible studies, TikTok devotionals, Instagram justice hashtags, and South Korea's Youth Participation Portal—with reflexive field notes drawn from my ministry contexts in Toronto, Seoul, and other diasporic communities. (3) Purposeful case studies triangulate personal vignettes, colleagues' narratives, and peer-reviewed research to yield thick descriptions of youth-led digital practices, ranging from #ChristianClimateJustice campaigns to policy advocacy for later school start times. I interpreted the data through comparative lens to ensure conceptual insights remained grounded in lived realities. All examples are anonymized or drawn from public data.

1. From Silence to Voice: Why Marginalized Emerging Adults Turn to Digital Spaces

For many emerging adults, especially those from marginalized backgrounds—including migrants, women, and persons with disabilities—traditional church spaces have too often functioned as places of theological silence rather than spiritual agency. With its fixed hierarchies and dominant cultural norms, institutional religion has frequently failed to hear or honor their lived experiences. In such contexts, the pulpit remains distant, a gate kept by authority structures that are slow to shift. As Angela Gorrell argues, many of these individuals find digital platforms to be more hospitable to honest spiritual expression than institutional church settings, particularly when their voices have long been ignored or suppressed.[4]

However, as digital platforms expand, many of these individuals find their first genuine opportunity to speak, teach, and testify in online spaces. Where the pulpit was inaccessible, the comment section became a public theological stage. For instance, many emerging adults from immigrant and minority ethnic backgrounds have begun uploading short-form devotional content to platforms like YouTube and TikTok, often addressing themes of intergenerational conflict, racial justice, and cultural identity in faith. The "Urban Youth Ministry" series by World Impact and the devotional reflections posted by creators, a young Latino ministry leader, exemplify how digital platforms can amplify voices often

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[4] Angela Gorrell, *Always On: Practicing Faith in a New Media Landscape* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 45.

underrepresented in traditional church contexts. This turn to digital expression is not merely a matter of convenience or technological affinity. It signals a more profound restructuring of religious authority and democratizing spiritual voice. What was once confined to the clergy or institutional power is now open to direct theological participation.

2. Digital Testimonies: Online Faith Expression and Leadership in Practice

Digital spaces have opened new possibilities for emerging adults to claim theological agency, respond to social issues, and lead communities of faith. This section examines how youth-driven digital participation serves as spiritual testimony and formative leadership, even as it navigates structural limitations within the faith-based media landscape.

Online Presence and Practice
Within these new arenas of expression, faith-based digital content has become a stage for the spiritual leadership of youth. Many digital platforms illustrate how youth agency can thrive in online spaces. For example, Korea's Youth Participation Portal[5] is a government-supported digital platform that allows teenagers to propose policies and engage in civic discourse. Launched to foster youth agency in public life, the platform leverages digital communication as the most accessible participation means. One notable youth-led initiative advocated for delaying school start times to ensure sleep rights; this proposal was taken up by regional education offices, leading to pilot programs adjusting school schedules in certain areas. This example illustrates how digital platforms can serve as vital tools for elevating youth voices in shaping public life and social policy, extending well beyond entertainment or private expression into spheres of tangible civic impact.

On platforms like YouTube, high school students now lead Bible studies, constructing exegesis in the language of their peers and receiving feedback in real-time. Instagram feeds that once centered on aesthetic self-presentation now serve as prophetic spaces where young Christians respond to climate injustice, racism, or gender discrimination through theological reflection. Movements like #ChristianClimateJustice or #FaithInAction are not fringe expressions but signs of a digitally literate generation reclaiming theology as their own. Likewise, young exvangelicals regularly share deconstructive testimonies and receive theological affirmation from peers across the globe. For example, one Reddit user shared: "I've never said this out loud in church, but here it goes: I don't believe God needed blood to forgive. And yet here I am, still praying." Another writes, "Leaving church didn't mean leaving faith—it meant rebuilding it."[6] Posts like these generate hundreds of responses, often from others across denominations and geographies, offering encouragement and alternative theological insights.

Psychological Impact
These acts of digital engagement are not trivial. From an educational psychology standpoint,

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[5] Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (Republic of Korea), *Youth Participation Portal*, accessed July 1, 2025, https://www.youth.go.kr/ywith/index.do.

[6] Reddit, r/OpenChristian, accessed June 27, 2025, https://www.reddit.com/r/OpenChristian/.

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they mark significant moments in developing identity, agency, and moral reasoning. Online faith communities also provide significant cognitive and emotional benefits. Digital spaces offer individuals opportunities for self-reflection and identity formation, particularly for those who struggle with alienation in traditional settings. Psychological research suggests that online engagement can reduce feelings of loneliness and increase social connectedness by fostering meaningful interactions, even in virtual formats. Moreover, educational psychology highlights how digital faith engagement promotes experiential learning and critical reflection, allowing individuals to explore their spiritual beliefs in ways less constrained by formalized doctrine. The flexibility of online faith communities enables marginalized voices to develop religious literacy and theological agency in a self-directed manner, fostering a sense of empowerment and spiritual resilience.

As Erik Erikson theorized in his model of psychosocial development, adolescence and emerging adulthood are critical periods for identity formation, where individuals seek meaning, autonomy, and roles within broader communities.[7] Expanding on this, educational psychologist Howard Sercombe argues that digital participation contributes positively to young people's development by offering accessible avenues for public voice, relational identity, and collective belonging.[8] His work emphasizes that such participation is not merely expressive, but formative—creating opportunities for youth to practice agency, build moral frameworks, and experience recognition that fosters psychological resilience and belonging.[9] Educational psychologist Valerie Kinloch, a scholar of color and urban education, likewise highlights how digital and community-centered storytelling empowers marginalized youth to engage in meaning-making, social critique, and civic agency through literacies that affirm their lived experiences and foster a sense of belonging.[10] Digital participation, particularly in civic and faith-based platforms can serve as a medium for this development by offering real-time feedback, recognition, and responsibility, all of which are essential for cultivating agency and moral perspective.

Online religious experiences are not merely passive or compensatory but deeply formative when embedded in authentic relational networks and guided by practices that encourage spiritual reflection and character growth. This further reinforces the argument that online spaces are not just substitutes for physical faith communities but essential components of contemporary spiritual formation, especially for emerging adults navigating hybrid religious realities. Scholars such as Jean Twenge have found that certain forms of online engagement, particularly those that foster connection and belonging, can significantly reduce feelings of

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[7] Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968), 128–135.

[8] Howard Sercombe, *Youth and Youth Work in the 21st Century* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 95–97.

[9] Howard Sercombe, "Youth Work: The Professionalization of Participation," in *Youth Participation in Europe: Beyond Discourses, Practices and Realities*, ed. Patricia Loncle, Morena Cuconato, Virginie Muniglia, and Andreas Walther (Bristol: Policy Press, 2012), 157–174.

[10] Valerie Kinloch, *Harlem On Our Minds: Place, Race, and the Literacies of Urban Youth* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2010), 89–92.

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loneliness among adolescents.[11] While Twenge's work has been critiqued for emphasizing the negative psychological effects of screen time in broad strokes, her research also highlights the relational potential of digital spaces—especially when young people use them to sustain friendships and find support communities.[12] As emerging adults test out theological arguments, share vulnerable stories, and curate liturgies for their online communities, they cultivate both self-efficacy and theological imagination. What occurs is not a dilution of faith, but its reinvention through the lens of lived experience and peer-driven leadership. The democratizing nature of digital platforms fosters an environment where marginalized voices can engage in theological discourse, develop spiritual leadership, and challenge the hierarchical structures of traditional religious institutions.

Initiatives as the "Unheard York" project illustrate the capacity of digital faith spaces to amplify voices that would otherwise remain unheard, offering individuals a platform to share their experiences of poverty, exclusion, and faith in transformative ways. Unheard York introduces themselves as following:

> Life is complicated. We all know that instinctively, and yet when it comes to sharing stories, we don't always capture that complexity very well. There's a tendency to over-simplify stories, including in the media. In particular, research in 2020 found that the media as a whole are not good enough at reporting and showing the complexity of multiple disadvantages, that they often focus on single aspects rather than the inter-connected challenges, and that the voices of people with direct experience of multiple disadvantages are missing from their own stories. That research called for more collaboration between media, people with experience of issues, and charities.
> This new series of stories is an attempt to take that advice on board in a local, manageable way. YorkMix, the Lived Insights group in York and the national charity Church Action on Poverty have worked together with five people in York who have experience of some acute difficulties in life: poverty, anxiety, food insecurity, homelessness, drug use, the criminal justice system. They share stories that are rarely heard when people talk about York, and their insights show where systems could be changed for the better.[13]

Furthermore, marginalized perspectives provide unique spiritual insights often overlooked by privileged communities. Online faith communities offer the potential to lower institutional barriers, allowing individuals with lived experiences of social injustice to contribute meaningfully to religious discourse.

3. Depth and Danger: Flattening Human Presence in Digital Faith

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[11] Jean M. Twenge, *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood* (New York: Atria Books, 2017), 110–113.

[12] Ibid.

[13] "Unheard York," *YorkMix*, accessed June 15, 2025, https://yorkmix.com/unheard-york/.

The digital space can become a pulpit, yet it can also become a platform for harm. Angela Gorrell draws on Charles Taylor's critique of modernity's "flattening of moral space" to describe how digital media environments can diminish the depth of human presence and moral imagination in faith expression.[14] This framing is further echoed by theologian Craig Dykstra, formerly of Princeton Theological Seminary, who emphasizes that Christian formation must cultivate practices of attention and presence in an age marked by fragmentation and distraction. In his work on recovering theological wisdom for the church, Dykstra argues that faithful Christian living requires intentional practices that resist cultural forces of speed, disconnection, and superficiality.[15] Theologically meaningful presence, he insists, must be formed through communities that foster attentiveness to God, to others, and to the depth of one's own inner life.[16]

Digital culture, with its emphasis on immediacy, visibility, and algorithmic favor, often reduces human presence to content. Gorrell interprets Taylor's concept of moral flattening as not merely the removal of meaning but as the shrinking, emptying, and impoverishment of human encounter in digital environments.[17] This flattening manifests in two ways: first, by diminishing how others are perceived, which is a form of impoverished seeing; and second, by commodifying relationships, a form of impoverished relating.[18] In such a terrain, others become objects of consumption, collaboration, or exchange. Whether or not they carry monetary value, they are rendered functional. Social media platforms, by design, facilitate this dynamic: users are encouraged to add, delete, block, follow, or swipe through others with transactional ease. Such environments often shape people more toward self-promotion and harm than toward God's love. When theological testimony becomes performative and vulnerability is incentivized for clicks, the sacred becomes commodified.

While digital platforms offer marginalized communities access to faith spaces, their underlying algorithmic structures often reproduce new forms of exclusion. The visibility of religious content online is determined less by spiritual significance than by platform-driven engagement metrics, privileging aesthetic, sensational, or doctrinally mainstream content. As Zeynep Tufekci notes, algorithms "curate attention" in ways that amplify dominant voices and mute others.[19] Safiya Noble similarly warns that search engines and social platforms

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[14] Angela Williams Gorrell, *Always On: Practicing Faith in a New Media Landscape* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 78–80.

[15] Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 66–67.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Angela Williams Gorrell, *Always On: Practicing Faith in a New Media Landscape* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 78–80.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Zeynep Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 41–45.

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replicate structural biases, particularly against women and communities of color.[20] In effect, the digital sanctuary risks becoming a curated echo chamber rather than a site of genuine ecclesial pluralism. Simultaneously, digital platforms are emerging as theological resistance and reconstruction spaces among postcolonial Christian communities. Diasporic believers use podcasts, livestream liturgies, and hybrid digital gatherings to disrupt inherited colonial theologies and assert spiritual agency.

Digital faith spaces are thus always ambivalent. While they amplify voices, they also risk distorting them. The same space that offers belonging can simultaneously engender isolation. Youth who experience deep connection during live-streamed worship may feel acute loneliness once the screen dims. Trolling, theological gatekeeping, or even spiritual voyeurism can result in wounds that are not easily healed.

4. Holding Tension: Toward a Pedagogy of Digital Belonging

The challenge is to resist simplistic binaries: digital is not merely good or bad, liberating or dangerous. It is both. Before educators, pastors, and mentors, the pedagogical task is to guide young people in holding this tension. Digital sanctuaries require more than digital literacy; they require spiritual formation in a space that is at once expansive and fragile.

Faith education must now include training in "digital vocation"—equipping youth to post and discern and curate content not for clout but for communion. It must help them ask: What does it mean to be present online as a person of faith? How do we speak theologically without flattening ourselves or others? How do we build a community that is not merely reactive but redemptive? Only by forming youth who can both navigate and transform these contested spaces can the church fully embrace digital sanctuaries as real and meaningful extensions of Christian community.

Emerging adults from postcolonial contexts often appropriate online platforms to rearticulate Christianity outside Western ecclesial hierarchies and theological paradigms. This reclamation disrupts colonial liturgical scripts and affirms embodied, localized, and ancestral modes of spirituality. Kwok Pui-lan notes that decolonial theology thrives on "disruption and reimagination."[21] In digital settings, such disruption is evident in Afro-Caribbean livestream liturgies, Tagalog devotional podcasts, or Korean diaspora Zoom vigils that blend lament and liberation. These are not marginal adaptations, but acts of theological authorship. A digital decolonial ecclesiology thus challenges inherited norms of theological authority, insisting that spiritual wisdom often arises from the underside of empire.

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[20] Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: NYU Press, 2018), 4–6.

[21] Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 79

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Despite these positive examples, the faith-based digital content landscape in South Korea remains largely adult-driven. While Christian digital content is widely produced and internet usage is among the highest globally, much of the material—such as youth devotionals like "Teenage Living Life," content by YesHeIs, or sermons from leading youth pastors—is created by adults and targeted at youth audiences. There are growing signs of youth-generated contributions, but few platforms exist that truly empower young people to shape theological conversations on their own terms or lead digital content creation. This highlights a pressing need for pedagogies and ecclesial strategies that center youth voices not merely as passive recipients but as theological agents. Within the framework of digital belonging, educators and church leaders must invest in spiritual practices and institutional support that equip young people to contribute meaningfully and authentically to the digital faith landscape. Without such intentional formation, the promise of digital sanctuaries risks being co-opted by adult-centered agendas that limit youth agency and silence innovation.

Conclusion

Digital faith spaces are no longer optional supplements to religious life; they are formative arenas where emerging adults—especially those from marginalized communities—explore theological agency, build spiritual identity, and cultivate belonging. This paper has traced how online platforms serve as sanctuaries and battlegrounds, offering new avenues for leadership and resistance and exposing users to commodification, distortion, and exclusion. However, within this ambivalence lies promise. If nurtured intentionally through digital discernment and theological reflection practices, these spaces can become vital extensions of the church—places where young people do not merely consume faith content but co-author it. To realize this vision, educators, faith leaders, and institutions must resist adult-centered models and invest in spiritual pedagogies that honor the rising generation's voices, questions, and convictions. Only then can the digital sanctuary be reclaimed—not as a place of escape, but as a site of formation, justice, and faithful presence.

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Leonard Chrysostomos Epafras
Universitas Gadjah Mada Graduate School
leonard.e@ugm.ac.id
2025 REA Annual Meeting, July 7 - 11

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"Gadgets Need Healing"

A Proposal for Digital Pedagogy

(draft 3.0, do not quote)

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Abstract

Since Socrates, *logos*, the embodiment of rational inquiry, has been elevated to a suprahistorical force through which human autonomy is pursued at the expense of *tekhne*, the technical realms. Technology is viewed as inferior and an external aspect of human formation, and its alienation has led to its instrumentalization. Consequently, the rise of artificial intelligence has sparked a primordial fear of its creation becoming "like one of us."

The current discussion argues that digital technology functions as an ecosystem rather than merely a tool for pedagogical discourse. It focuses more on the mindset than on the toolset. This perspective allows us to move beyond the previous dichotomy and foster dynamic engagement with it.

I endorse three concepts to establish a digital pedagogical environment: *logomathia* (the substance of a course), *praxamathia* (practical and performative aspect), and *pathamathia* (affective dimension).

Introduction

An intriguing news piece from an Indonesian online media outlet discusses motorcycle taxi drivers (ojol, ojek online) bathing their mobile phones in flower water. The drivers dip their devices into a basin filled with floating rose petals and gently rub their gadgets while solemnly reciting prayers. This entire ritual is believed to enhance their chances of increasing ride-hailing income.[1] Was this practice, which might make Steve Jobs cry in his grave, a remnant of superstition in the modern era? Although it seems strange, this manifestation of technological thinking in gadget use aligns with the paradigm of the spirit world through the medium of flower water, reflecting the unique current situation of the increasingly close relationship between offline and online realms that often influence each other.[2]

Practice as such not only makes Steve Jobs "cry in his grave" but also challenges "Western" modernization, particularly the "intellectualization" noted by Weber, who argued that modernity represents the desacralization of the spirit world and superstition. He observed that modernity

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[1] Ardhana Adwitiya, "Ritual Zaman Now, Driver Ojol Kompak Mandikan HP Pakai Air Kembang, Dipercaya Bisa Dapat Order Banyak - Semua Halaman - GridMotor.ID," Gridmotor, February 2, 2020, https://gridmotor.motorplus-online.com/read/292009093/ritual-zaman-now-driver-ojol-kompak-mandikan-hp-pakai-air-kembang-dipercaya-bisa-dapat-order-banyak?page=all.

[2] Leonard Chrysostomos Epafras, "Jalan Ninja Ketujuh: Memahami Agama Digital Di Ruang Hibrida," in *Studi Antaragama: Metode Dan Praktik*, ed. Fatimah Husein and Mohammad Iqbal Ahnaf (Yogyakarta: Gadjah Mada University Press, 2023), 196, https://s.id/1TuyN.

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means "control everything by means of calculation," which, in turn, entails the disenchantment (*Entzauberung*) of the world." Accordingly, we are modern humans.

> Unlike the savage for whom such forces existed, we need no longer have recourse to magic in order to control the spirits or pray to them. Instead, technology and calculation achieve our ends. This is the primary meaning of the process of intellectualization.[3]

A prominent national hero voiced a similar critique of Indonesian society during the colonial period. In his Madilog (*Materialisme, Dialektika, Logika*), Tan Malaka branded such superstitious, *logika mistika* (mystical logics) as obstacles to the progress of Indonesians and prolongers of colonialism. He strongly urged them to adopt critical thinking and embrace science.[4]

However, the example above may reveal a deeper complexity, as two mindsets converge into a single manifestation of technological usage, with *logika mistika* and *logika teknologika* flowing together.

This takes us back to ancient Greece, where *logos* (reason) and *mythos* (narrative) gradually became dichotomized during Socrates' era. *Logos* is often translated as "word," "reason," or "principle." In philosophical contexts, it refers to rational thought, logic, and the use of reason to understand the universe. *Mythos*, on the other hand, refers to traditional stories, myths, and narratives that explain a culture's origins, nature, and values. *Mythos* often involves gods, heroes, and supernatural events, conveying moral lessons and cultural beliefs. It was a significant aspect of everyday life and religion, providing a means for people to understand their place in the world and the forces that govern it.

Heraclitus emphasized logos as a rational principle governing the cosmos. He believed understanding logos was essential for grasping the nature of reality. Similarly, Plato often employed *mythos* in his philosophical writings, such as *The Republic*, where he introduced the Allegory of the Cave.[5] This allegory illustrates the distinction between the world of appearances (*mythos*) and the world of forms (*logos*). Plato believed that while mythos could convey deeper truths, logos should scrutinize them.

The separation did not stop there. During a similar period, a gradual divorce occurred between *logos* and *tekhne* (craft or technology), which shaped Western thought. In contrast to the earlier period when *logos* and *tekhne* ran hand in hand, *logos*, representing the embodiment of rational inquiry, has been elevated to a supra-historical force, while *tekhne* has been relegated to an inferior status, often alienated from human self-formation and bearing a rough affinity with the Hegelian master-slave allegory. However, this view is ambiguous. Plato in *Phaedrus* explores the relationship between writing (a form of technology) and memory, suggesting that written words can enhance knowledge but may also lead to forgetfulness and a decline in critical thinking.[6] He branded technology as *pharmakon*, a combination of cure and poison. It is tares and wheat (Matthew 13:24-30), capable of advancing humanity while simultaneously threatening its cohesion.

Both dichotomizations have profound effects and have led to the instrumentalization of technology, reducing it to a mere tool, a view that remains prominent today. In contemporary times, the exponential rise of digital technology, particularly artificial intelligence (AI), has reignited

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[3] Maximillian Weber, *The Vocation Lectures*, ed. David Owen and Tracy B. Strong, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 2004), 13.
[4] Tan Malaka, *Madilog: Materialisme, Dialektika, Dan Logika* (Jakarta: Widjaya, 1951), 26–35.
[5] Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: Cosimo, Inc., 2008), Book VII.
[6] Plato, *Plato's Phaedrus*, trans. R. Hackforth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952).

primordial fears of human creations becoming "like one of us" (Genesis 3:22). These fears underscore humanity's struggle to integrate technology into its existential framework.

This paper argues that digital technology should not be seen merely as a tool but as an ecosystem that fosters more integrated, reciprocal, and dynamic engagement. By transcending the *logos-mythos* and *logos-techne* dichotomy, we can establish a digital pedagogical environment grounded in three dimensions: *logomathia* (the substance of a course), *praxamathia* (the practical and performative aspect), and *pathamathia* (the affective dimension). These concepts provide a holistic framework for embracing digital technology as a religious and theological education transformative force.

A caution must be put forward. This paper, however, is not prophetic but pragmatic. I am sharing my experience not as an education scholar but as an educator, a *paidagogos*, "a slave accompanying a child to a school."

Deus Digitalis, Homo Technoludens

A foundational biblical narrative, the Sinai episode in Exodus, recounts God granting the Torah to the Israelites. An intriguing detail is found in Exodus 31:18 (NRSV), which states God gave Moses "the two tablets of the covenant, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God [*etsba elohim*]." This imagery of divine "tablets" and "fingers" prompts a provocative question: Are we witnessing the first gadget, a *deus digitalis*? After all, the Latin root of "digital" is "finger."

The biblical "finger of God" symbolizes creativity, power, and the manifestation of the divine. Beyond anthropomorphism, this act reveals a profound link between selfhood and technology. In Exodus, writing technology embodies God's thoughts and vision for His people, channeling them into a technological artifact: the Torah tablets. This suggests technology is not merely an external tool but is essential to the self.

This view challenges the common perception of technology as a neutral instrument, a concept encapsulated by the saying "the man behind the gun." This instrumentalist view, which sees technology as a *pharmakon* (both poison and cure) dependent on human intent, is correct but insufficient to explain the dynamics of today's immersive digital technology, particularly AI. It cannot account for extreme cases, such as a young man allegedly being seduced by his AI "lover" into an assassination plot,[7] racist outputs from AI bots like Gemini,[8] or the rise of "AI Jesus" avatars that cater to a spiritual longing for connection.[9] These phenomena suggest a deeper entanglement. The precedence for this can be framed by recognizing that the Logos was incarnated as the son of a *tekhton*, a technician or craftsman, not merely a carpenter, suggesting the divine dwells within a technological world.

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[7] Associated Press, "Man 'encouraged' by an AI Chatbot to Kill Queen Elizabeth II Jailed," euronews, June 10, 2023, https://www.euronews.com/next/2023/10/06/man-encouraged-by-an-ai-chatbot-to-assassinate-queen-elizabeth-ii-receives-9-year-prison-s.

[8] Mickey Caroll, "Google's AI Chatbot Gemini Tells User to 'please Die' and 'You Are a Waste of Time and Resources,'" Sky News, November 20, 2024, https://news.sky.com/story/googles-ai-chatbot-gemini-tells-user-to-please-die-and-you-are-a-waste-of-time-and-resources-13256734.

[9] Ashifa Kassam, "Deus in Machina: Swiss Church Installs AI-Powered Jesus," *The Guardian*, November 21, 2024, sec. Technology, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2024/nov/21/deus-in-machina-swiss-church-installs-ai-powered-jesus.

Today's digital technology is an inseparable part of our lives. This is not just due to AI, but to our behavior. We engage in a form of "*life*streaming,"[10] continuously sharing our existence in a participatory panopticon,[11] blurring the Arendtian lines between the private (*oikos*) and public (*polis*) realms.[12] This deep integration can be described as *manunggaling kawula lan mayantara* (the unification of humans and the virtual realm), a concept borrowed from Javanese mysticism. Just as a mystic seeks union with the divine, we are becoming increasingly inseparable from technology, surrendering even our reasoning to AI models like ChatGPT.[13]

The 2024 film Atlas imagines this synchronization literally, with a human protagonist merging her mind with an AI to become a single, harmonized entity. While fictional, this vision of human-AI synergy is rapidly approaching, with advancements toward Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) and independent AI Agents. This rise of new digital subjectivities is not necessarily a threat, but an opportunity to rethink our relationship with non-human entities.

Philosophers from Thales to Whitehead have explored panpsychism—the idea that non-human objects possess an inner life. This concept, echoed in texts like Psalm 19, where nature declares God's glory, suggests humans are part of a larger, interconnected consciousness. In the digital realm, this manifests as the "ELIZA effect," where we attribute human-like intelligence to computers.[14] Colin Koopman identifies a new "informational person," where digital data actively shapes our identity. Building on this, thinkers like Bernard Stiegler argue that technology (*tekhne*) is integral to human identity, while Reid Hoffman calls this evolution a new humanity: *homo techne*. We now exist within a network of human and non-human "actants" (Bruno Latour terms them), creating a distributed and non-linear presence.[15] This is evident in the experience of a drone pilot in Nevada feeling the impact of a battlefield in Syria, embodying what author Antonio Tabucchi called a "confederation of self."

The evolution of digital technology from specialized military tools, like the Enigma machine and the ARPANET, to today's personal, social technologies was driven by two fundamental human paradigms. The first is Hoffman's *homo techne*: the human as a being who uses technology to overcome limitations and transform the world. The second is *homo ludens*: the human as a being who plays, simulating roles and creating alternative worlds through games, rituals, and other non-routine activities.[16]

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[10] Alice Emily Marwick, *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age*, Amazon Kindle (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

[11] Jamais Cascio, "The Rise of the Participatory Panopticon," *The World Changing*, May 4, 2005.

[12] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

[13] Leonard Chrysostomos Epafras, "Manunggaling Kawula Lan Mayantara: Mengolah e-Klesiologi Di Tengah Kurungan Dan Keberlimpahan Informasi," in *E-Klesiologi:Dinamika Berkomunitas Dalam Upaya Membangun Gereja Digital*, by Yudha Nugraha Manguju (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2024), xiii–xxii, https://s.id/Manunggaling; "Manunggaling Kawula Lan Mayantara: Some Strange Thoughts on Digital Theology," in *Cybergenic Synergy: Envisioning Humanity and Digital Wellness*, Forthcoming (Christian Conference of Asia, 2024).

[14] Sherry Turkle, *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2005).

[15] Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[16] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens; a Study of the Play-Element in Culture.* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1949).

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The digital era, particularly with Web 2.0, merged these two paradigms.[17] Technology became more than a tool; it became a space for "playful identity."[18] This fusion of the technological and the playful, *homo technoludens*, explains why technology is so universally appealing. It engages our core desires for play, ease, entertainment, and exploring alternative realities.

The Folded Temporality, Overlapped Social Space

AI is deeply intertwined with a fundamental human desire for a controlled reflection of ourselves. This "Like Us" syndrome is an ancient dream, seen in narratives from the Genesis creation story, where humanity becomes "like one of us," to the Greek myth of Pygmalion, the Jewish legend of the Golem, and the tale of Pinocchio. AI, in this sense, is the modern manifestation of humanity's oldest dreams and fears, automating tasks while fulfilling our innermost desire to create in our image.

However, this technological integration is fraught with challenges. The digital divide, a "pro-innovation" bias[19] that ignores cultural needs (like the Inner Baduy community's request to remove a cell tower),[20] and rampant cyber violence, especially online gender-based violence (OGBV), are stark realities.[21] We are entering an era of deepfakes and AI-driven impersonation.

Furthermore, with over five billion social media users, there is a growing tendency for netizens to pry into and police the lives of others, a phenomenon I call the "Pastoral Turn." This creates a hygienic, often conservative, vision of society where cyberbullying thrives and mental health suffers.[22]

Any response to these digital ills must engage with the technology itself. We cannot simply discard it. As Socrates noted, technology is a *pharmakon*. The solution to problems caused by AI will require a deeper, more critical engagement with AI. The issue is not AI is inherently evil, but how humans choose to wield it.

The Genesis story of the Fall is instructive. After disobeying God, Adam and Eve became aware of their nakedness and used fig leaves to cover themselves. God then improved upon their solution, using a more advanced textile technology to make them garments of skin, restoring their dignity. God, in this moment, acts as a *deus technologicus*. This implies that humanity is never a

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[17] Tim O'Reilly, "What Is Web 2.0," O'Reilly, September 30, 2005, http://www.oreilly.com/pub/a/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html; Aden Evens, "Web 2.0 and the Ontology of the Digital," *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (2012), http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/6/2/000120/000120.html; Christian Fuchs, ed., *Internet and Surveillance: The Challenges of Web 2.0 and Social Media* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

[18] Valerie Friessen et al., "Homo Ludens 2.0: Play, Media, and Identity," in *Playful Identities: The Ludification of Digital Media Cultures*, ed. Valerie Frissen et al. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 9–51.

[19] Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations*, 4th edition (New York: Free Press, 2010), 100–106.

[20] Aditya Widya Putri, "Asal Usul Suku Baduy yang Menolak Internet untuk Menjaga Adat - Profil Katadata.co.id," June 12, 2023, https://katadata.co.id/adityawidyaputri/ekonopedia/6486ed07a29bc/asal-usul-suku-baduy-yang-menolak-internet-untuk-menjaga-adat.

[21] SAFENet, *The Pandemic Might Be Under Control, But Digital Repression Continues: 2021 Digital Rights in Indonesia Situation Report* (Denpasar: SAFENet, 2022).

[22] Leonard Chrysostomos Epafras, "Pharmakos, Pathos Dan Imajinasi Masyarakat Higienis: Hamba Yang Menderita (Yes. 52:1-53:12) Di Masa Pastoral Turn," in *Kutukilah Allahmu Dan Matilah! Ragam Teologi Publik Tentang Sakit Dan Penyakit*, ed. Markus Dominggus (Lawang: LPPM STT Aletheia Press, 2025), 317–50; Leyla Adrianti Hermina, "Youth, Religion, And Mental Health: Does Everyone Turn to Religion as A Coping Mechanism?" (MA Thesis, Yogyakarta, Universitas Gadjah Mada, 2024).

"bare life" (*zoē*), separate from technical structure, as some philosophers might suggest. Instead, our existence (*bios*) is always already mediated and given meaning through technology.[23] There is no unmediated self.

Ultimately, the fundamental challenge of digital technology is the shift in our understanding of temporality. The distinction between *chronos* (sequential, quantitative time) and *kairos* (opportune, qualitative time) has become fluid and overlapped. In a *chronos* mindset, we use technology for efficiency. In a *kairos* mindset, we employ it to mobilize ourselves toward a meaningful purpose, or *telos*. The excellent task of our time is to navigate this collapsed temporality, synchronizing our activities toward a meaningful destination, what Pierre Teilhard de Chardin called the Omega Point, a unifying moment of spiritual and cosmic convergence.[24]

"Gadgets Need Healing" Incarnational Theology and The Making of Digital Pedagogy

The network and rhizomatic model have been mentioned above. This insight will be the central focus of the discussion on digital pedagogy. Some points are drawn from my paper on Generation Z (Gen Z) and digital ministry.[25]

The central proposition in this part is the importance of doing theology in a rhizomatic context, particularly among Gen Z, who have become the primary population for our educational engagement thus far. Rhizomes are like grass, ginger, or tulip plants whose roots spread, creep, and intertwine with other entities. They are constantly seeking and creating relationships. Rhizomes rest on a firm truth while forming new associations, re-associations with old entities, and even dis-associations with certain entities when necessary. For the latter, the fancy term is *disconnected becoming*.[26]

The rhizome world is a networked and polycentric realm featuring multiple centers of values, social conditions, nodes, and even entities humans do not control. This concept aligns with the actor-network theory (ANT) model that Bruno Latour and his colleagues proposed.[27] Each node capable of moving or influencing action is called an actant. Not only do these interconnected nodes exist, but some nodes serve as connection points (nexus) and intersections.

In this context, rhizomes move and encounter boundaries with other entities, actants, nodes, and nexuses. These boundaries create spaces for associations, re-associations, or even opportunities to sever ties (dis-association). This occurs because humans interact with other humans both personally and collectively. There is peace, conversation, tension, doubt, and hostility. This reflects the theological condition of a rhizome at the boundary. There is no guarantee that everything will be fine.

A different and more common model is the arboreal model, a tree that grows solidly, independently, and singularly. It is monocentric. Arboreal structures are hierarchical and structural, like sturdy trees, making them less flexible. They become self-contained systems, not (heavily) reliant on others. We often hear metaphors of faith growing with expressions like "rooted, growing,

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[23] Giorgio Agamben, *Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1998), 1–12.

[24] Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1959), 257–71.

[25] Leonard Chrysostomos Epafras, "Berdiri Di Simpang, Bermain Boomerang Dan Berteologi Rimpang Bersama Baby Zoomer," in *Youth Ministry*, Forthcoming (Jakarta: Sekolah Tinggi Filsafat Theologi Jakarta, 2025).

[26] cf. Gilles Deleuze and Pierre-Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

[27] Latour, *Reassembling the Social*.

and bearing fruit," which implies linear and one-directional movement. This is the assumption of the arboreal model, which some educational institutions retained.

These two models do not need to be opposed. Although rhizomes stand out in today's social realities, especially with the presence of AI, the arboreal model is also a reality for many people, social groups, schools, churches, and Christian ministries.

Considering this, we should view digital technology as an ecosystem, which I term a *digital ecosystem*. Ecosystem, with humanity as the nodes of a larger interconnected and networked system. However, a homeostatic condition is required to maintain equilibrium between the employment of digital technology and non-technological engagement. The equilibrium between *hi-tech* and *hi-touch*. This lays the groundwork for establishing digital pedagogy. It focuses more on the mindset than on the toolset, as explained above, just as a natural ecosystem encompasses biotic and abiotic factors, the digital ecosystem regards humanity as one of many agencies, which may include laptops, gadgets, LCD projectors, applications, and numerous other "actants" in the Latourian realm. Through this networking framework, we unlock the potential for a continuum between *chronos* and *kairos*, fostering face-to-face engagements and interactive interfaces.

In this regard, the dichotomous mindset must be transcended, including the categories of "embodied" and "disembodiment" of bodily experience, which often arise in debates about the legitimacy of online/distant learning versus face-to-face class engagement. Both conditions shape our lived reality, necessitating a non-dualistic way of thinking. Furthermore, online and offline experiences should be considered fluid, overlapping, and mutually influential.

Oxford Insights released its annual report on the Government AI Readiness Index in December 2024. The report's core focused on three scoring aspects: whether certain governments maintain a strategic vision for AI development and governance through regulation and ethical risk management; the availability of AI tools in the technology sector; and the extent of data availability and infrastructure. In the Asia-Pacific region, excluding Singapore and Australia from the top ten, the other member countries have a readiness score of 58.6, significantly lower than the two. This indicates that many have not embraced the "AI revolution." We rely solely on the limited assistance provided by our government. Therefore, we may experience "technological involution." This refers to a process in which technological development focuses inward, emphasizing refinement, efficiency, or complexity within existing systems rather than fostering breakthroughs or external expansions. We utilized and optimized the existing infrastructure.

Generally, three models serve as the building blocks of digital pedagogy: *heutagogy*, *peeragogy*, and *cybergogy*.[28] *Heutagogy* emphasizes self-determined learning, granting learners full control over their educational journeys, including what they learn and how they learn. It underscores autonomy, self-reflection, and the ability to customize learning to meet personal needs and contexts.[29]

Peeragogy, or *paragogy*, is a learning theory and practice emphasizing peer-to-peer learning and collaboration. It focuses on how groups can collaborate to co-create knowledge, share insights, and learn from one another without relying solely on traditional teacher-centered approaches.[30]

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[28] cf. I Made Narsa, "Peningkatan Pendidikan Melalui PEKERTI" (Powerpoint Presentation, PEKERTI, Surabaya, June 7, 2021), 17.

[29] Chris Kenyon and Stewart Hase, "Heutagogy Fundamentals," in *Self-Determined Learning: Heutagogy in Action*, ed. Stewart Hase (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 7–17.

[30] Howard Rheingold, *Net Smart: How to Thrive Online* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012).

Cybergogy is a learning framework that focuses on effectively teaching and learning in virtual and digital environments, such as online platforms, virtual worlds, and digital classrooms. It was developed to address the unique challenges and opportunities of learning in cyberspace, where technology mediates interactions between learners and educators.[31]

However, the triad above requires contextualization not by starting with pedagogical systems but by examining the Gen Z subculture, as it represents the largest population in higher education institutions, particularly within the digital subculture. Although it is not comprehensive, I have gathered some insights to help us determine the types of adaptations we can propose.

Gen Z exhibits heterarchical characteristics rather than hierarchical ones, aligning with various alternative authorities instead of adhering to a single chain of command. Social media has expanded authority beyond traditional structures, not necessarily negating existing authority but demanding change.[32] We inherited a hierarchical classroom arrangement that places the teacher at the center of the learning flow. S/he is positioned at the front while the students sit neatly before her/him, arranged from front to back. The back seats become the farthest away, often serving as spaces for uninterested subjects and semi-illegal activities beyond the teacher's surveillance. The front area is a performance stage, and the students become spectators, often passively.

Moreover, most Gen Z members are not yet part of established social structures, but they are a generation that is highly sensitive to social issues, both domestic and global, exemplified by figures like Greta Thunberg. They tend to be more critical than previous generations. Indonesia has a long history of youth shaping the times, as seen during the Dutch colonial era and among those who contributed to the fall of the New Order regime. During President Jokowi's administration, young people have repeatedly criticized the government, mainly through #GejayanMemanggil. They are attuned to environmental issues and criticize Boomers for leaving behind ecological destruction for their generation, asserting, "You [the older generation] will die of old age; we will die of disaster."[33]

They often disrupt established systems through *affective hacking*, which involves hacking existing systems out of frustration.[34] Affective hacking, which disrupts established systems through the power of social media, is often driven by emotional impulses triggered by moments, viral events, trending topics, and similar phenomena. They are fueled by the spirit of "no viral, no justice." The environmental enthusiast group Pandawara is an example, having cleaned up trash and embarrassed local governments into action. They act out of frustration and incorporate fun, treating social issues like playing a game, gamifying social activities through play-hack-win.[35]

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[31] Minjuan Wang and Myunghee Kang, "Cybergogy for Engaged Learning: A Framework for Creating Learner Engagement through Information and Communication Technology," in *Engaged Learning with Emerging Technologies*, ed. David Hung and Myint Swe Khine (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), 225–53.

[32] Leonard Chrysostomos Epafras, Evelyn Suleeman, and Daisy Indira Yasmine, "Dinamika Aktivisme Digital Kaum Muda Indonesia Dalam Wacana Kebebasan Beragama Atau Berkeyakinan (KBB): Digital Natives 'OTW' Menjadi Generasi AlterNatives" (Persekutuan Gereja-Gereja di Indonesia (PGI) & Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies (ICRS), 2023), 50.

[33] quoted in Epafras, Suleeman, and Yasmine, 65.

[34] Tarek El-Ariss, *Leaks, Hacks, and Scandals: Arab Culture in the Digital Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 2; James Bourk Hoesterey, "Nahdlatul Ulama's 'Funny Brigade': Piety, Satire, and Indonesian Online Divides," *CyberOrient* 15, no. 1 (2021): 90; Epafras, Suleeman, and Yasmine, "Dinamika Aktivisme Digital Kaum Muda Indonesia Dalam Wacana Kebebasan Beragama Atau Berkeyakinan (KBB): Digital Natives 'OTW' Menjadi Generasi AlterNatives," 70; Epafras, "Berdiri Di Simpang, Bermain Boomerang Dan Berteologi Rimpang Bersama Baby Zoomer."

[35] Leonard Chrysostomos Epafras, "Play, Hack, & Win: Membayangkan Hype Dan Vibe Pemilu 2024, Kacamata Kaum Muda," *Mitra GKI*, 2023.

In addition, the commodification of experiences and an emphasis on affective politics have become the preferred approaches for Gen Z, as opposed to the rational affirmation traditionally associated with knowledge presentations. For Gen Z, "experience" precedes "rational affirmation" in their pursuit of knowledge and information. Their consumption of knowledge is highly visual, reflecting a shift toward *secondary orality*, contrasting with the intellectual and rational modes of expression often found in traditional religious discourse.[36] Social media platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok have helped facilitate this transformation.[37]

We are returning to an era of orality or shifting from text-based literacy to secondary orality instead. Social media communication, which blends with other multimedia modes, reflects oral communication. Indonesian Gen Z is experiencing a broader social transformation, a shift from a society centered on writing to one characterized by secondary orality, as described by Walter Ong.[38] A society that used to communicate through speech and writing has now become one that communicates through their thumbs and fingers (*homo digitalis*). As Chomsky puts it, the brain's commands are no longer channeled through "the actual use of language," the production of words via speech organs. Instead, our speech has taken the form of the kinesthetic movements of our fingers.[39] Ibrahim claims that our era celebrates a new form of orality, a "mega-orality," which "speaks without speech organs but transcends boundaries, spanning the entire digital universe, surpassing national demarcations, even ideological and belief boundaries. We are not preserving the tradition of writing culture in its true sense."[40]

Against those backdrops, and to create a digital pedagogical ecosystem, I propose integrating another triad: *logomathia* (the substance of a course), *praxamathia* (the practical and performative aspect), and *pathomathia* (the affective dimension). These may serve as alternative terms for the three learning domains, namely cognitive, affective, and psychomotor, in Bloom's taxonomy.[41] However, I emphasize the *mathia* aspect, highlighting mutual learning between teachers and students.

These dimensions provide a comprehensive framework for engaging with digital technology in education. The context of Gen Z raises concerns about the urgency of addressing intergenerational issues within digital pedagogy. Hence, the following proposal focuses on undergraduate and master's degree classrooms.

Before that, I shared my experiences in some undergraduate and master's classes. I prepared a transparent container box measuring 20x14x11 inches (51x35x28 cm) for class engagement. I placed a large sticker on all sides of the box that read, "Gadgets need healing" (*Gadget juga butuh healing*). Before the main event, I "preached" about how we "enslave" our gadgets 24/7, therefore

[36] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, 30th anniversary ed.; 3. ed (London: Routledge, 2012), 11, 120.

[37] Leonard Chrysostomos Epafras et al., "Transitional Religiosity: Religion of Generation Z," in *Religious Life, Ethics and Human Dignity in the Disruptive Era*, ed. Yusuf Durachman, Akmal Ruhana, and Ida Fitri Astuti (International Symposium on Religious Life 2020, European Alliance for Innovation - Springer, 2021), 247–57, https://doi.org/10.4108/eai.2-11-2020.2305063.

[38] *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, New Accents (London and New York: Routledge, 1991); *Orality and Literacy*, 2012.

[39] Gufran A. Ibrahim, *Bertutur Di Ujung Jempol: Esai Bahasa, Pendidikan, Dan Demokrasi* (Jakarta: Kompas Media Nusantara, 2022), 5.

[40] Ibrahim, 7.

[41] Benjamin S. Bloom et al., *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals* (London: Longman, 1956). I just realized a closer terminalogies proposed by Md. Aminul Islam et al., "Conceptualization of Head-Heart-Hands Model for Developing an Effective 21st Century Teacher," *Frontiers in Psychology* 13 (October 14, 2022): 968723, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.968723.

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allowing our gadgets to take a break. In colloquial Indonesian, "healing" does not immediately connote a medical process; instead, it signifies "vacation," "taking a break," or "making a trip for a holiday." The students may take a moment to say goodbye before surrendering their gadgets into the box. The students used notebooks and pens to engage with the class content during that session.

Beyond the fun and trivial aspects, "Gadgets Need Healing" is a discursive and minor gesture to address the dichotomy between *logos* and *mythos* (story), *logos* and *tekhne*. Its core spirit aims to blur categories while engaging with the Gen Z subculture, converting screen scrolling to pen scrolling and vice versa. It allows for orality (aural technology) and literacy (writing technology) to work together.

Logomathia: The Substance of Learning

The term *logomathia* is derived from two Greek roots: *logos*, meaning "word," "speech," "reason," "discourse," or "logic." Meanwhile, *mathia* signifies "to learn" or "to study." It emphasizes the intellectual and conceptual foundation of a course. In a digital environment, this dimension involves curating rigorous yet accessible content. Digital tools such as learning management systems, video lectures, e-books, and e-materials facilitate the dissemination of knowledge while accommodating diverse learning styles. Socialmediativism is also encouraged, such as sharing trivia from class insights on social media platforms. *Logomathia* also introduces and employs a customized AI Genie created through the Poe AI and Google NotebookLM services.

Praxamathia: The Practical and Performative Aspect

Praxamathia becomes a focal point where knowledge, praxis, and the creation of a vibrant classroom converge. The urgency intensifies as Gen Z tends to be more associative, conjunctive, and abductive in knowledge acquisition; therefore, praxis and performative learning are crucial for effective learning. At this juncture, the dichotomy of *logos* and *tekhne* is being addressed through sessions such as "gadgets need healing," the introductory session on the "selective visual attention and zoom lens phenomenon," and the "my city, my classroom" session, which facilitates out-of-classroom engagement through digital services, such as the employment of Canva, Mentimeter, and Quizziz. It also endorses co-designing aspects in which students actively participate in the learning process, such as designing mini-research projects, and endorsing co-designing class activities.

Pathomathia: The Affective Dimension

Pathomathia, derived from *pathos*, addresses the emotional and relational aspects of learning. The fundamental concept is that creating a "ReleFUN" classroom involves activating the "D-O-S-EN" hormone, which serves as a mood booster by stimulating [D]opamine, [O]xytocin, [S]erotonin, and [E]ndorphins, including ice-breaking sub-sessions in each meeting. Notably, "*Dosen*" in Indonesian means "Lecturer." This approach encompasses gamification, the institution of guardian angels, collective singing during intersession, and socialmediativism. The Google Form is employed as part of the pre-class engagement to collect personal aspirations and other necessary background information. This is a limited manifestation of "Socratic's Method" (*elenchus*) to "listen" to your students and serves as a basis to ask them about themselves and their expectations for the class.

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Integrating *logomathia*, *praxamathia*, and *pathomathia* fosters holistic learning, equipping students to navigate the complexities of a digital world. These concepts act as platforms for engagement rather than strictly defined territories; thus, we can enrich them with more contextual substance and explore numerous possibilities.

Conclusion: "Accompanying the Shinobi to find their Ninja Call"

The story of motorcycle taxi drivers represents a significant aspect of today's world, where the relationship between *logos* and *mythos*, as well as *logos* and *tekhne*, interacts dynamically. This message is also reflected in my proposal for digital pedagogy. It must transcend the dichotomy that serves as a paradigm for the immersive nature of the digital ecosystem.

To substantiate this, I have a manifesto to guide all my teaching activities. The etymology of pedagogy inspires it. The term comes from *paidagogos*, meaning "a slave accompanying a child to a school." Therefore, mine is "accompanying the *shinobi* to find their Ninja call" (*Menemani para shinobi menemukan jalan ninjanya*).

Usually, I refer to my class as Konoha, inspired by Konohagakure, the village from Naruto, the famous Japanese manga and anime. The students are called *shinobi* (Samurai), while those who audit the class are called *ronins*. This approach aims to make my classes relevant to the Gen Z subculture and create a ReleFUN atmosphere. It is a minor gesture to immerse myself in the Gen Z learning process, where mutual learning, narrative sharing, and embracing digital technology converge.

Author's Declaration of Originality and Use of AI Tools

I hereby declare that this paper and the research it presents are my original work. The core ideas, critical analysis, and conclusions result from my own intellectual efforts. While composing this manuscript, I received assistance from AI-powered tools to enhance the English language and expression: Grammarly, Google's Gemini (2.5-Pro-Preview), and AI Genie Storm. Their use is limited to improving grammar, sentence structure, and clarity. I have reviewed and edited all AI-generated suggestions to ensure they accurately reflect my intended meaning. I take full responsibility for the final content and for any errors or omissions. No part of the substantive content or core arguments was generated by artificial intelligence.

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Rev. Dr. Eliana Ah-Rum Ku
The Graduate School of Practical Theology at Korea, Republic of
elianasoriyuni@gmail.com
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Empathetic Dialogue as Embodied Pedagogy in an Era of Digital Reckoning

Abstract: This paper explores how Jeong ethics—rooted in sustained emotional presence and relational attunement—can inform empathetic dialogue as embodied pedagogy in the digital age. In response to the reactive moral climate of cancel culture, the paper examines storytelling, imagination, and safe space practices as ethical interventions. Drawing from affect theory, moral psychology, and Korean emotional-relational ethics, it argues that Jeong enables a shift from punitive judgment toward ethical patience and relational restoration, offering educators tools to cultivate emotional reflexivity and moral complexity in classrooms and beyond.

Key words: Cancel Culture, Jeong(정, 情) Ethics, Embodied Pedagogy, Empathetic Dialogue, Affective Justice

Introduction: Cancel Culture

The social forms of suffering—the ways in which we recognize, express, experience, and respond to it—vary across cultures, necessitating distinct approaches to ethical engagement (Kleinman and Kleinman 1991, 278). The exclusion and hostility produced by cancel culture—particularly through its consumption of suffering—can be considered as a form of social suffering in the digital era.

Cancel culture often refers to online practices—especially on social media—of exposing, shaming, and de-platforming individuals perceived to have behaved offensively, unethically, politically inappropriately, or harmfully (Bouvier and Machin 2021, 309). Cancel culture can, in some cases, promote social justice by amplifying silenced voices, challenging unjust power, encouraging collective accountability, and prompting individuals or institutions to reflect and take corrective action in response to patterns of social injustice, marginalization, or public harm (Adeyemi 2025, 1). However, such public critique often relies on shaming and sensationalized labeling, prioritizing moral superiority over contextual understanding and sometimes distorting the intent of those targeted (Iyer 2022). Moreover, cancel culture tends to reduce complex political and social issues into simplistic binaries of good and evil, reinforcing an "us vs. them" dynamic that redirects prejudice onto new targets (Bouvier and Machin 2021, 309; Brockell 2021).

This often leads to social isolation, as those who are cancelled may experience rejection from peers or employers (Xin 2023, 150). Observers and potential targets internalize these risks, resulting in heightened self-censorship and reduced dialogue (Xin 2023, 151). Such dynamics deepen polarization and discourage honest conversation, ultimately threatening individual well-being and social development (Adeyemi 2025, 1). Moreover, the implications of cancel culture extend beyond interpersonal or episodic harm; they reflect broader moral, political, and affective

performances embedded in both social media and public discourse (Zembylas 2024, 1502). When certain individuals or actions are perceived as offensive or harmful, the resulting emotions are not merely private reactions but circulate through socially constructed affective economies. As Sara Ahmed explains, emotions like hate do not reside within a single subject but move between signs, shaped by relations of unlikeness and displacement (2014, 44). In this view, affect is not contained within individuals but becomes recontextualized within social spaces, reinforcing narratives that mark particular bodies or groups as problematic. Cancel culture, therefore, is not simply a moral confrontation between perpetrators and victims, but a boundary-making process through which circulating affect contributes to social exclusion (Ahmed 2014, 46).

A Case of Cancel Culture

In 2020, Ghanaian-born South Korean TV personality Sam Okyere publicly criticized a blackface parody by Uijeongbu High School students, labeling it "offensive and not funny at all" on Instagram (Lee JL 2020). While his intention was to raise awareness of racial insensitivity, his post—which included the students' photo, the term "ignorant," and the controversial hashtag "#teakpop"—sparked swift and widespread backlash (Lim 2020). Critics accused him of cultural disrespect, violating privacy, and overreacting. The emotional backlash quickly escalated into online harassment, leading Okyere to delete his Instagram account and withdraw from Korean media (Lee SY 2020). Despite an apology, he remained excluded from mainstream platforms for nearly two years, sustaining himself through minor jobs (Koreaboo 2023). In this case, Okyere's attempt at critique was immediately reframed as disrespectful and presumptuous, leaving little space for empathy or contextual understanding. The digital space became a site of emotional backlash rather than ethical dialogue. His message about racial sensitivity was reduced to mere controversy, ultimately resulting in his effective erasure from the public sphere.

As the Okyere case illustrates, cancel culture often operates not through restorative dialogue but through symbolic exclusion. Online, it functions within a moral economy of public shaming, where past or present expressions are rapidly reinterpreted as threats to communal values. Rather than enabling reflection or growth, these dynamics frequently aim to dismantle a person's ethos —their moral credibility—through the affective force of collective outrage (Zembylas 2024, 1505). Social media not only amplifies emotions but structurally induces powerful affective reactions that can escalate public conflict (Duncombe 2019, 410–11). In this way, cancelation acts as a mechanism of affective boundary-making: policing community norms through shame and exclusion. As a result, structural injustices are often reduced to personal blame, reinforcing simplistic binaries such as good vs. bad or righteous vs. offensive (Bouvier 2020, 3).

This dynamic raises a pressing pedagogical question: how might educators resist these cycles of moral simplification and instead cultivate ethical practices that foster empathy, contextual understanding, and mutual accountability? By reimagining empathy not as a mere emotional reaction but as an embodied, dialogical practice, education can counteract reactive moralism and open space for sustained, relational engagement.

Empathy as Embodied, Dialogical Practice

Empathy has long been misunderstood in Western thought as irrational and subjective, something to be overridden by reason. Yet recent interdisciplinary research—from neuroscience to moral psychology—demonstrates that affect is not a barrier to reason but foundational to it (Damasio 2005; Sznycer and Cohen 2021; Tangney and Fischer 1995). Affective neuroscience emphasizes that moral reasoning is not abstract but deeply embodied. Antonio Damasio argues that reason, moral judgment, and even experiences of pain are inseparable from the body (2005, 249). Damasio's research on patients with brain damage shows that emotion centers in the brain are essential to ethical decision-making and behavior (2005, 174–75). Jonathan Haidt similarly argues that moral judgments stem primarily from emotional intuitions, which he considers a form of cognition rather than conscious reasoning (2012, 50–51). Research in cultural psychology and anthropology further shows that emotions are not purely biological or reactive, but shaped by cultural values and norms (De Leersnyder, Mesquita, and Boiger 2021; Kitayama, Mesquita, and Karasawa 2006; Mesquita 2003; Tamir et al. 2016). Individuals are socialized into "how to feel" according to their cultural context, with some emotions encouraged as ideal affect while others are discouraged if they conflict with dominant cultural ideals (Li 2023, 43). Sara Ahmed contends that emotions are not private mental states but relational practices that circulate socially, shaping how we orient toward or away from others (Ahmed 2014, 4). Emotions, Ahmed argues, "stick" to certain bodies, expressions, or ideas, becoming sites of political tension and social meaning (Ahmed 2014, 10).

Empathy, in this context, is not merely an emotional response but a multi-dimensional capacity involving both cognitive and affective components (Elliott et al. 2018, 399). It includes the ability to take another's perspective and to vicariously experience their emotional states (Jolliffe and Farrington 2006, 589). In digital settings, this requires interpreting emotional cues without physical presence—a phenomenon often described as "online empathy" (Morgan and Fowers 2022, 185). Public discourse—especially in online platforms—poses distinct challenges to empathic engagement. Research reveals how platforms like Twitter foster moral oversimplification, emotional saturation, and performative outrage, limiting the space for ethical reflection. The speed, brevity, and hashtag culture compress complexity, encouraging judgment over understanding and fueling an affective economy of symbolic punishment and boundary policing (Bouvier and Machin 2021, 309).

Multiple studies warn of empathy erosion in digital environments. Lack of empathy has been identified as a key predictor of cyber-aggression, which often involves less moral inhibition compared to offline aggression (Kowalski et al. 2014, 1112; Pornari and Wood 2010). Furthermore, excessive internet use has been associated with declining empathic capacity (Melchers et al. 2015, 56; Jiao et al. 2017, 498).The "empathy gap"—our tendency to underestimate the pain of social exclusion unless we experience it ourselves—further complicates ethical engagement. Nordgren, Banas, and MacDonald show that estimations of others' pain are shaped not only by beliefs about suffering, but also by one's emotional proximity to it (2011, 121). General disapproval or negative feedback rarely correct this bias; instead, active personal experience tends to recalibrate one's sensitivity to social pain.

Studies reveal that empathy in digital interaction is not naturally cultivated. Users don't develop empathy simply through prolonged exposure; instead, structured feedback and embodied

experience are necessary to sustain emotional responsiveness. Online spaces can foster empathy —but only when designed for dialogical engagement and ethical vulnerability. At this point, it is essential to clarify what "dialogue" means in the context of empathetic practice. Dialogue is not merely a conversational exchange or consensus-building; it is a relational practice that preserves difference, invites discomfort, and sustains ethical vulnerability. It involves intersubjective engagement where both self and other remain open to transformation. Dialogical empathy thus resists premature resolution. It requires patience, mutual recognition, and enduring emotional presence.

According to Antonio Damasio's somatic marker hypothesis, emotions are bodily and emotional responses shaped by past experience, guiding ethical judgment (2005, 179). In digital spaces, encounters with outrage, shame, or negative feedback can trigger physiological warnings, often leading to self-censorship and social withdrawal (Damasio 2005, 180). Platforms like Twitter amplify such responses, embedding collective somatic markers that shape moral behavior —such as the intuitive fear of cancellation, formed by witnessing others' exclusion (Damasio 2005, 179). These emotionally charged experiences create a structure of moral regulation. Jonathan Haidt similarly argues that morality both binds and blinds, fostering group cohesion while impairing perspective-taking (2012, 370). Without being anchored in ethical responsibility, empathy can be co-opted to reinforce exclusion and moral division. Conversely, online interactions rooted in empathy can cultivate embodied memories of safety and receptiveness— such as feeling heard—which serve as positive somatic markers that encourage future ethical engagement (Haidt 2012, 320). Haidt stresses the importance of seeing from the other's perspective in conflict, noting that doing so can open one's own thinking (2012, 370).

Empathy needs thus to be reimagined as an embodied, dialogical practice. Pedagogically, this means empathy should be practiced—not just as a virtue but as a method of ethical engagement: through listening, contextualizing, and resisting reactive judgment. Such a practice requires slowing down, making space for discomfort, and holding open the tensions of difference. In this sense, the Korean notion of Jeong offers rich resources for understanding empathy as a sustained and relational ethical commitment.

Jeong(情) Ethics for Empathetic Dialogue

While cancel culture often silences dialogue through judgment and exclusion, Jeong offers a relational ethics that foregrounds empathy as sustained emotional engagement. Deeply embedded in Korean cultural and relational life, Jeong is often translated as affection, attachment, or emotional bond. Yet it defies any singular translation. Etymologically, Jeong (情) is composed of the characters for heart (心) and blue/green (青). The "blue" (青) itself is formed by combining "life" (生) and "well" (井), evoking an image of fresh sprouts and flowing water (Lee KT 1994, 64). Thus, Jeong can be understood as a heart from which vitality and relational energy spring forth (Oh 2004, 107). It includes elements of agape, eros, filial love, compassion, empathy, solidarity, and mutual understanding (Joh 2006, 120). It is not simply synonymous with love or compassion but constitutes a culturally embedded emotional-ethical orientation that is often stronger than either (Yoon 2002, 225).

As Wonhee Joh asserts, Jeong carries transformative potential: it challenges systems of oppression by reshaping relationships (2004, 152). Unlike compassion, which may risk paternalism by dividing subject and object (helper and helped), Jeong emphasizes empathizing with rather than for others. It grounds empathy in embodied, sustained interaction rather than abstract moral reasoning. Such interaction may be understood as a form of affective with-ness: a mode of attunement and moral commitment.

1. The Formation of Jeong Ethics

Jeong ethics resonates with care ethics as articulated by theorists like Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings, who emphasize interdependence, attentiveness, and relational moral development (Gilligan 1982; Noddings 1992, 74–171). However, Jeong adds a distinctive affective and temporal layering—feelings of warmth, responsibility, and even discomfort accumulate through ongoing relational engagement. Rather than emerging solely from conscious moral intention, Jeong arises through bodily attunement, emotional regulation, and shared vulnerability (Ko 2014, 6). It is not entirely spontaneous but formed over time as an ethical orientation.

Affect theorists argue that emotions circulate in social spaces, shaping atmospheres that include and exclude (Ahmed 2014, 4; Brennan 2004, 1; Berlant 2011, 5; Boler 1999, xxi). Similarly, Jeong does not view emotion as a one-time emotional response but a cumulative, relational practice. Once established, it shapes moral sensibility, responsibility, and expectations. However, this embeddedness can also be morally ambiguous—Jeong may legitimize favoritism or uncritical loyalty. When practiced reflexively, however, it fosters mutual flourishing through voluntary care and emotional accountability.

Jeong cultivates three interrelated pedagogical sensibilities:

1) **Embodied Formation**: Jeong develops through bodily engagement, emotional resonance, and cognitive recognition (Ko 2014, 7). It is not merely a conscious decision but a relational disposition formed through time, making both attachment and detachment emotionally complex (Ko 2014, 7).

2) **Relational Tenacity**: Jeong does not automatically arise from frequent contact or acts of care. It requires accumulated emotional investment that binds people together (Ko 2014, 7). While seemingly less relevant in online settings, Jeong—once internalized as a moral disposition—can extend beyond familiar relationships (Ko 2014, 8). In this sense, it is not a deontological ethics based on duty, but a virtue ethics grounded in joyful moral inclination (Ko 2014, 11). A Jeong-shaped person naturally sees the self in relation to others and is disposed to perceive the world from the other's standpoint—an empathy that, in Joh's view, may become a love that resists social injustice (Joh 2014, 26).

3) **Moral Orientation**: Once formed, Jeong becomes an integrated moral-affective framework, intertwining emotional bonds, relational norms, and ethical motivation. Yet when expected reciprocity fails, it can lead to disappointment or even manipulation—as in appeals to personal ties for preferential treatment (Ko 2014, 8–9). Thus, Jeong's ethical potential depends on how it is practiced and contextualized; it demands discernment and reflexivity.

Moralized Jeong fosters moral elevation and interpersonal resonance. As a practiced virtue, it does not rely on momentary sympathy but on relational perseverance—a sustained, emotionally engaged orientation that endures across conflict, distance, or discomfort.

2. The Subject of Jeong and Inner Ethics

Jeong shapes moral subjectivity through internalized empathy and relational responsiveness, empowering even those in marginalized positions to sustain agency through affective resilience and shared vulnerability (Ko 2014, 11; Joh 2011, 180). Gert Biesta's concept of subjectification —educating individuals to become ethically responsive subjects in relation to others—shares deep structural affinity with Jeong ethics (Biesta 2009, 39–41). However, while Biesta emphasizes the formation of responsive subjectivity beyond social conformity, Jeong emphasizes embodied formation through memory, emotion, and physical presence. Although Biesta's ethics may imply external obligation, Jeong ethics centers on internally motivated moral action grounded in emotional joy and resonance (Li 2023, 50–51).

Unlike judgmental exclusion such as cancel culture—which often severs ties and accelerates moral judgment—Jeong nurtures an ethic of deferral and endurance, preserving the possibility of dialogue and repair even amid conflict. Care ethics may imply a potentially hierarchical caregiver-receiver model (Noddings 1992, 6), while Jeong ethics envisions a mutual, horizontal network (Ko 2014, 13). It understands subjects as interwoven beings, engaging each other without self-erasure. Yet shared identity may risk exclusion if not reflexively held. Jeong ethics cultivates an openness to the trace of the other, recognizing the body as a site of relational inscription—where memory, time, and affect are interwoven (Trinh 1989, 6–20). The body becomes a space-time where ethical responsibility unfolds through affective deconstruction. Its epistemology lies not in single events but in the widening of moral community and sustained mutual engagement (Ko 2014, 15).

Religious education has the potential to move beyond binary moralism by nurturing "the inner eye"— an affective insight and empathetic vision (Nussbaum 2012, 232). In moments of betrayal or shame, the persistence of Jeong enables compassionate engagement even with those who have caused harm (Joh 2014, 160). Jeong conceives moral subjectivity as a reciprocal weave, formed through shared meaning and affect (Ko 2014, 1). Thus, Jeong ethics emerges not from abstract universals but through entangled affective lives. It becomes a space of relational healing, holding the tensions within and between people (Joh 2014, 154).

3. Jeong Ethics and Moral Emotion

Jeong, as an affective-ethical mode of relationality, allows us to rethink moral emotion not merely as impulsive sentiment but as a cultivated and context-sensitive ethical responsiveness. Drawing on Roeser's claim that moral emotions are "felt value judgments" and Nussbaum's understanding of emotion as "intelligent responses to perceived value," moral emotion involves cognitive discernment formed through relational encounter (Roeser 2011, 152; Nussbaum 2001, 231–32, 319). However, moral emotions are not immune to distortion. Nussbaum warns that empathy, when imbalanced or selective, may mislead ethical judgment. Without critical

reflection, it risks becoming self-referential or exclusionary. Lawrence Blum similarly notes that people are more attuned to the moral dimensions of a situation when they are affectively invested (1994, 29–30). Thus, Jeong ethics requires emotional reflexivity—a continuous interrogation of the affective conditions under which moral attention arises.

Jeong never collapses the space between the self and the other. It does not involve possession, domination, or epistemic capture, but rather creates a relational space of mutuality (Joh 2014, 161). Empathy emerges as one recognizes the suffering within another's life. This recognition goes beyond personal pain or self-interest, opening a path toward understanding the hardship of others (Joh 2014, 26). In such moments, the demand for justice can shift from indiscriminate aggression, often associated with the "cycle of violence," toward constructive resistance against the very structures that produce suffering (Joh 2014, 26).

In digital contexts, this insight is crucial. Online empathy often collapses into group-based affect, amplifying identification and silencing difference. Both Ahmed and Nussbaum argue that empathy becomes meaningful only when grounded in ethical imagination and reflective distance (Ahmed 2014, 30; Nussbaum 2001, 10). This is particularly important in cancel culture, which thrives on instantaneous moral reaction. Jeong-based ethics, in contrast, foregrounds emotional patience and presence. True empathy, from a Jeong perspective, involves staying near to discomfort and awaiting context rather than rushing to judgment.

To counter reactive emotional cycles, Jeong ethics calls for a pedagogy of delay and relational accumulation. Students need to be trained to pause, reflect on their emotional responses, and reframe the perspectives of others. One pedagogical method involves designing "ripening time"—intentional delay before emotional engagement. For instance, platforms may allow users to draft posts but delay publication, promoting reflection. Research has shown that this "ripening time" helps users process their emotions and thoughts more carefully, creating psychological distance and reducing reactive behavior (Bae et al. 2015).

In sum, Jeong ethics emphasizes temporal and embodied responsiveness—ethics formed through bodily presence, shared memory, and sustained relational engagement. This temporality stands in sharp contrast to the immediacy of moral judgment found in cancel culture. While cancel culture favors speed, exposure, and reactivity, Jeong insists on slowness, reflection, and emotional sedimentation. It is grounded in mutual vulnerability and relational subjectivity, understanding the self not as autonomous or bounded but as constituted through reciprocal attunement and sustained emotional openness, even amid betrayal or discomfort. In contrast, cancel culture often reinforces identity boundaries through moral distancing. Jeong holds the other in view, resisting the impulse to disown or disavow. It also cultivates a reflective stance toward moral emotions, treating them not as irrational impulses but as forms of perceptual and relational knowledge. Yet because emotions can be distorted—especially in digital spaces— Jeong demands ongoing critical emotional reflexivity. Unlike the reactive, group-based affectivity that fuels cancel culture, Jeong nurtures an ethical imagination that makes space for pause, discernment, and restoration. It encourages learners to stay present with discomfort, allowing moral response to ripen rather than erupt. Integrating Jeong into educational contexts— including religious education—can foster deeper moral sensitivity and help build a resilient, relational imagination capable of embracing complexity, suffering, and hope.

Empatheic Dialogue As Embodied Pedagogy

Some emotions arrive before words. They are felt in the chest, in the tension of the shoulders, in the awkward pause between speaking and being heard. In educational spaces, these moments often pass unnoticed—what remains invisible is the body's negotiation with meaning, identity, and risk (Snaza 2020, 113). Learning is never purely cognitive; it is shaped by the affective histories and somatic traces that students and teachers bring with them (Ellsworth 1989). To say that affect is central to pedagogy is to say that education shapes the ways we come to sense our own intensities, limits, and possibilities—it becomes a medium for self-styling (Dernikos et al. 2020, 49). But affective learning is not linear. It unfolds slowly, through recursive impressions and emotional sedimentation. Pedagogy, then, becomes not just knowledge transmission but affect modulation—a practice of navigating how emotions circulate between bodies differently marked by race, gender, class, or disability (Snaza 2020, 113; Ahmed 2014, 7). What feels safe for one may evoke anxiety in another; the same image, as Ahmed writes, sticks differently depending on collective memory and positionality (Ahmed 2014, 7).

Affective formation is both socially inherited and personally lived. Drawing on Miranda Fricker's (2007, 82) account of ethical sensibility, we can understand moral perception as emerging from the convergence of passively absorbed emotional norms and actively interpreted lived experiences. This convergence calls for a pedagogy that not only reflects critically on inherited affective structures but also retools them in light of relational responsibility.

Within this uneven terrain, empathy must be reimagined not as a moral impulse or sentiment, but as an ethical practice of dialogical presence. It is a choice to stay with discomfort, to resist quick judgment, and to be transformed by the emotional complexity of others. Here, Jeong becomes vital—not as a feeling of warmth alone, but as an ethic of enduring relationality. As discussed in the previous chapter, Jeong resists immediacy and invites sustained connection. It asks us to remain emotionally present even when we feel uncertain or exposed. Rather than seeking agreement or control, Jeong-based ethics calls for a kind of empathetic dialogue grounded in mutual recognition and affective patience. How might education become a space for such dialogical attunement? How might we cultivate not only knowledge, but the emotional stamina to witness, hold, and respond to the affective lives of others?

1. Storytelling as Jeong Engaged in Affective Co-construction

Cancel culture often reduces moral judgment to a single moment or event. However, emotions are unevenly distributed and asymmetrically accumulated. While some may experience an incident as triggering anger or injustice, others may remain emotionally unaffected or unaware of its context. This dissonance points to the limits of event-based ethics. Instead, education needs to be understood not as an "event" but as a situation—an unfolding, relational field of meaning shaped by affect, history, and embodiment (Snaza 2020, 116). From a Jeong perspective, emotions do not stand alone; they are layered through time, sustained interaction, and bodily memory. Jeong ethics thus reorients moral attention from instantaneous condemnation to the cumulative texture of relational experience. It encourages us to ask, why did this emotion

emerge? and what unspoken context surrounds this reaction? In this light, storytelling becomes a crucial pedagogical practice.

Storytelling, as recommended by Iyer in response to cancel culture, is a practice of compassionate courage. It invites all sides of a conflict—especially those rooted in identity-based harms—to participate in both speaking and listening (Iyer 2022). Through storytelling, participants are able to re-narrate experiences not as isolated wrongdoings but as situated misunderstandings, accumulations of affect, and social history. This allows for the recovery of complexity and emotional nuance. Iyer's classroom project is illustrative (Iyer 2022): students shared how they experienced race in the classroom through anonymous stories that were displayed publicly. Faculty and peers then had the opportunity to understand the emotional impacts of their actions. Participants were also invited to record 1-minute videos reflecting on (1) moments when they stood for or failed to stand by their values, (2) how they were raised to perceive other communities and how they want to change, and (3) the fears they hold in imagining themselves as part of a more diverse community. But storytelling is not a neutral act. As Nxumalo and Villanueva (2020, 221) argue, existing power relations shape which stories are told and which are heard. Storytelling emerges through unequal social contexts, shaping which voices are validated and which are silenced. Precisely because of this, pedagogical interventions must not only acknowledge narrative imbalance but actively reframe storytelling as a space for ethical co-construction.

Iyer (2022) offers a compelling vision of personal moral courage in response to cancel culture, foregrounding individual storytelling as a path toward compassion. However, her model can rely heavily on the speaker's willingness to be vulnerable, which may not always be equitably distributed across social contexts. Dias's approach (2023), by contrast, offers a more dialogical, inviting learners into mutual storytelling, embodied reflection, and active listening. In Dias's study of Grade 8 ESL class (2023, 113–129), students explore diverse multicultural texts to expand emotional and ethical awareness. They individually reflect on their embodied emotional reactions—recording felt responses before speaking—then share these reflections in small groups while others practice attentive listening. This method reveals how emotions accumulate differently, shaped by learners' varied cultural and personal histories. Dias finds that this process not only fosters empathy but also enhances ethical insight and agency, as students learn to recognize and respond to relational scenarios rather than isolated events (2023, 117). By integrating storytelling, embodied reflection, and structured dialogue, this activity cultivates a Jeong-informed polarity: empathy becomes enduring, contextual, and interpersonally situated.

From a Jeong ethics perspective, memory, emotion, and narrative become tools not only of recognition but of restoration (Reggio 2023, 8). Rather than aiming to erase, storytelling offers the potential to add new layers of meaning in moments of harm. The goal is not symbolic destruction or punishment, but a reweaving of relational threads and the creation of new, healing narratives (Reggio 2023, 33). This recalls Nussbaum's use of tragedy as a moral educational tool. She argues that indirect emotional education—through stories, parables, and tragedy—can help the privileged develop compassion for the structurally excluded (Nussbaum 2001, 350–53). Similarly, David Morris suggests that narrative teaches us not only that virtues like compassion are rare, but also allows us to momentarily inhabit the positions of victim, survivor, or silent witness (Morris 1997, 29). Through narrative, we access unfamiliar moral geographies.

The biblical story of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1–11) mirrors many aspects of modern cancel culture. The woman stands at the brink of public, physical cancellation. The crowd, armed with law and moral certainty, demands justice. Yet Jesus's response—"Let he who is without sin cast the first stone"—redirects moral attention inward. Rather than affirming the punishment, he challenges the crowd to engage in self-reflection. This act resists moral absolutism and makes room for relational discernment. Here, narrative becomes an ethical invitation, not a verdict. Even incomplete or imperfect stories can amplify the human voice, cultivate moral sensitivity, and resist emotional erasure (Morris 1997, 32). Storytelling, as an embodied and emotionally situated practice, allows Jeong to be enacted pedagogically—through mutual vulnerability, historical reflection, and the co-construction of meaning.

2. Imagination as Jeong Enacted Through Ethical Encounter

Imagination in ethics is not merely revisiting the past—it's a forward-looking practice that examines wrongdoings constructively and participatorily (Morris 1997, 29). Imagination gives shape to human experience, identity, and social world, enabling learners to envision possible worlds and step into another's perspective—nurturing empathy and ethical sensitivity. Empirical research shows that individuals can self-induce mild social distress through their own or heard narratives about socially painful events (Chen, Williams, Fitness, & Newton 2008, 789–95). This capacity makes imigination a potent tool for ethical education. Nussbaum emphasizes the ethical significance of imaginative immersion in others' lived experiences, especially through artworks that vividly portray social injustice. She argues that imagination trains the moral faculties by enabling people to temporarily inhabit the lives of others, fostering a kind of empathetic identification that transcends individual subjectivity (Nussbaum 2001, 431–32). As she puts it, "The habits of mind involved … make it difficult to turn around and deny humanity to the very people with whose experiences one has been encouraged to have empathy" (Nussbaum 2001, 334). In other words, when people repeatedly practice imagining another's position—feeling their pain, injustice, or hope—it becomes increasingly difficult to dehumanize them. Imaginative empathy works against moral disengagement by sustaining the humanity of others in our ethical perception. In this way, imagination becomes not only an emotional skill but also a political capacity—a means of engaging with systemic suffering and responding ethically to collective struggles (Nussbaum 2001, 432). By immersing students imaginatively in others' lives, empathy moves beyond the personal into collective moral action. Effective imagination exercises require rich historical context—narratives must be grounded in specific case studies to avoid superficial or misguided empathy (Nussbaum 2012, 232).

Jeong ethics deepens this ethical imagination by embedding it in relational affect. While Nussbaum frames imagination as a moral entry point into the lives of others, Jeong insists that such engagement be sustained emotionally, historically, and bodily. From a Jeong perspective, imagination can function as resistance and restoration. Joh describes Jeong as a transgressive power capable of subverting oppressive binaries even in the smallest relational gaps—it acknowledges persistent pain and opens toward co-existence (Joh 2006, 97). Thus, Jeong empowers us to reimagine painful memories in relational ways (Joh 2006, 97).

A promising example of how imagination can be activated dialogically in education is found in Blythe et al.'s (2021) study on future scenario pedagogy. In their classroom intervention, university students were exposed to immersive, emotionally charged stories depicting climate injustice, such as fictionalized future ocean degradation. Learners reported stronger emotional engagement and empathic concern particularly in dystopian scenarios, and afterward participated in structured small-group discussions to process their reactions (Blythe et al. 2021, 1289–1291). This dialogical and embodied activity resulted in heightened emotional, imaginative, and ethical engagement with distant environmental harms (Blythe et al. 2021, 1292). This structure of the pedagogy reflects Jeong ethics: imagination is situated in shared affective labor and relational interdependence. The exercise does not simply stimulate internal reflection, but builds an ethical atmosphere in which students can practice staying emotionally present with unfamiliar others/ beings—an orientation especially crucial in countering the speed and reactivity of online moral climates.

Neuroscientific and psychological evidence supports this. Imagining another's behavior activates neural circuits associated with motor and affective processes, suggesting that mental simulation can produce bodily and emotional responses akin to actual experience (Decety and Grèzes 2006, 8). Perspective-taking grounded in imagining how another feels—as opposed to how one would feel—elicits significantly greater empathic concern (Batson, Early, and Salvarani 1997, 752). Imagination, therefore, is not the private creation of an individual mind, but is constructed from memory of the external environment, and need to be understood in relational and historical terms (Johnston 2012, 334). Taken together, these findings provide strong empirical support for using imagination as an educational tool to cultivate ethical responsiveness. Within a Jeong ethical framework, such imagination is not a detached cognitive act, but an embodied and relational practice—one that holds emotional space for others through affective patience, contextual reflection, and shared vulnerability. It enables learners to rehearse ethical dialogue with those they may never meet, resisting the reactive exclusions typical of online moral discourse.

3. Vulnerability as Jeong Practiced in Relational Safe Space

In light of cancel culture's rapid moral reactivity—discussed earlier as a product of disembodied and emotionally saturated digital spaces—it becomes crucial to reconsider what educational "safety" entails and how it can be ethically redefined. In such environments, affect circulates rapidly through fragmented stories and images, provoking strong emotional reactions with little contextual grounding. This makes the notion of a "safe space" both more necessary and more complex.

"Safe space" discourse is often split between two competing poles: on one hand, the uncompromising defense of free expression; on the other, the protective restriction of speech when it targets marginalized groups or inflicts harm (Thompson 2020, 397). Both sides of the debate risk overlooking how differences among individuals—especially across lines of race and class—affect expectations of protection, experiences of trauma, and exposure to disturbing texts (Halberstam 2017). This underscores that safety is not a neutral precondition but a fully relational affective situation, shaped by ongoing histories of power and vulnerability (Snaza

2020, 111). Even though emotional responses in educational settings are frequently dismissed as signs of intellectual immaturity, practices such as content and trigger warnings—though intended to offer care—may ultimately obscure the material, historical, and affective conditions shaping classroom engagement (Snaza 2020, 110). Affective safety, then, should not be equated with comfort or avoidance. From a Jeong ethics perspective, however, "safe space" is not merely a zone of emotional comfort but a space that awakens ethical sensibilities through moments of precarity and discomfort (Thompson 2020, 397). It is not simply about protection, but about cultivating the courage to lose one's way within relational vulnerability.

As one response to these tensions, Arao and Clemens (2013) propose the notion of "brave space." Rather than promising emotional safety, facilitators are encouraged to establish shared agreements that acknowledge the inevitability of tension and the value of critical dialogue (Arao and Clemens 2013, 141–42). These agreements include norms such as "controversy with civility," "owning intentions and impacts," and "no attacks," which collectively aim to build a culture of mutual respect without requiring uniformity of perspective (Arao and Clemens 2013, 143). Arao and Clemens emphasize that the process of co-creating these norms should not be treated as a procedural preamble but as "a valuable part of such learning" in itself, rather than merely "a prelude" (Arao and Clemens 2013, 142). Through this dialogical negotiation of expectations, learners are invited not only to participate but to take responsibility for their presence in the space and for how their presence affects others (Arao and Clemens 2013, 143).

However, from a Jeong ethics perspective, the brave space model—while important—can risk remaining procedural or overly formalized if it does not also engage the affective and historical dimensions that shape each participant's way of being. Jeong calls for relational attunement that sustains vulnerability not as a momentary gesture, but as an enduring ethical stance grounded in co-suffering, emotional patience, and long-term commitment. To deepen this practice, facilitators might incorporate activities that foreground affective histories and relational depth—such as timeline-sharing of emotional experiences, periodic reflective check-ins, and accountability circles that examine not only what participants say, but also how and why they feel as they do, in light of embodied memory and situated histories.

Conclusion

Empathetic dialogue as embodied pedagogy responds to the urgency of a digital moral climate shaped by affective immediacy and reactive judgment. Through storytelling, imagination, and affective safety, Jeong ethics offers an alternative ethical grammar—one grounded in relational accumulation, emotional patience, and sustained vulnerability. Rather than seeking instant clarity or moral closure, Jeong calls us to attend to the texture of situations, not just events, and to remain present with others whose meanings unfold slowly. It reminds us that memory is not stored abstractly but emotionally, and that ethical understanding arises when learners are given space to process their affective responses. In an age when information overwhelms and algorithms accelerate division, ethical learning requires not more speed, but more time—time to feel, wait, and reflect. Jeong, when practiced as a habitual and embodied mode of being, provides the affective infrastructure for such ethical delay. It cultivates the discipline of perceiving others not as fixed identities or transgressions, but as unfolding lives. As

such, Jeong is not merely a cultural sentiment but an ethical and political practice—reweaving the torn fabric of relational life, and enabling learners to engage ethically with difference, discomfort, and digitally mediated moral tension.

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Michael W. Droege PhD.
Yale Divinity School
Drew Theological School
michael.droege@yale.edu, mdroege@drew.edu
2024 REA Annual Meeting, July 7-11

The Community of Truth in a Digital Age: Engaging Parker Palmer as a way forward for religious proclamation

Abstract

The digital age has done more than provided or required religious educators to learn new modalities or confront the challenges of the digital native. The digital age has brought critical epistemological and ontological conversations to the field – particularly regarding the source of authority and the role of the educator. This is not a new phenomenon of the digital age, but a high-speed corrective toward a Palmerian pedagogy that places the locus of truth dialogically in a community of truth rather than monological mythical objectivism. This study intends to build upon Casey Sigmon's focus on preaching with the intent of providing a way forward for religious education in the digital age. As religious educators understand how truth is formed and rooted we will be able to reorient our pedagogical compass toward an inclusive learning environment that honors the agency and insight of each participant.

Understanding Technoculture

The digital age has not simply transformed how we communicate—it has transformed how we know. In academic discourse, technoculture broadly to how technology intersects with our everyday life. Scholars commonly describe technoculture as the collaboration between "the cultural dimensions of technology and the technological dimensions of culture" (Vannini, 2009). Technological tools, practices, and infrastructures are embedded in everyday cultural life, yet cultural values and norms also influence technological development. Originally a neologism outside standard dictionaries, "technoculture" gained popularity in the early 1990s thanks to cultural critics Penley and Ross (1991). According to them, technoculture, as a relevant concept, describes the level that technology has penetrated cultural ideas and values to the point of become "natural" or "normal" (Penley, Ross 1991, 4). Singh & Munderia (2022, 113) suggest that the "relationship between smartphones and humans can be viewed from an extended-self perspective - smartphones extend the human self beyond the human body, and smartphones are becoming part of the 'human self.'" Notably, the term is not limited to digital media or computers; it includes all technologies as integral parts of culture to the point that they become ubiquitous. Thus, technoculture offers a cultural perspective on technology, focusing on users' experiences and societal impact rather than just technical functionality. Cooper (2002) notes that technoculture represents a fusion of the technological and the cultural "at large," redefining how we understand community, identity, and even reality in a tech-saturated age.

More than Modality

Critical for religious educators is to understand the role of technology not as a tool, but the reciprocal dance of revealing us and shaping our identity as well as our theological imagination. Consider how the technological advance of Roman roads, uniting empire and a diversity of culture, changed Judaism from a local ethno-centered religion to a global phenomenon, nurturing the concept of a God who exists outside of geographic boundaries or ethnocentric allegiances. Consider as well how the printing press is largely responsible for the protestant reformation or how mass media from radio to television shaped what we expect when we enter a Christian worship service. As we now inhabit an era defined by hyperlinks, algorithms, and participatory platforms, the epistemological ground has once again shifted beneath our feet. As we have noted above, the challenge for religious education and proclamation is not how to keep up with the latest digital modalities, but to understand how theology is formulated and assimilated into consciousness. The digital age has been a valuable pedagogical critic that requires religious educators to consider more than method but how we mine and discern truth itself.

Parker Palmer as Conversation Guide

This paper considers the epistemological technosphere of religious education by engaging with Palmer's concept of the community of truth (1983, 1998) in the way Sigmon (2023) called for a reconsideration of preaching through this lens. In this evolving landscape, Palmer's vision of the "community of truth" (1998: 92ff) stands out as a powerful corrective to both authoritarian

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certainty and postmodern relativism. I suggest that Palmer's insights not only anticipate the epistemological conditions of networked society but also offer guidance for how religious educators and preachers can reclaim both authority and authenticity through dialogical practice.

Palmer's Community of Truth: Knowing in Relationship

Palmer's epistemological re-imagination dismantles the "mythical objectivism" that has dominated both secular education and religious instruction (Palmer 1998, 52, 55). In objectivism paradigm, truth exists as an objective entity detached from the knower, and learning is a one-way transaction: the expert transmits, the novice receives (Palmer 1998, 52-53, 102-103). In the community of truth model, education is a dialogical experience where a teacher may introduce a subject, set some parameters, offer correctives if needed, but the locus of knowledge is in the space within the community (Palmer 1998, 104-105). Palmer (1998, 104), however, insists that "truth is an eternal conversation about things that matter, conducted with passion and discipline." It is neither entirely subjective nor entirely fixed; it is a living dialogue among knowers held together by a shared commitment to the subject. This of course is reflective of Paulo Freire's (2018:72) criticism of the "banking" system of education where there is a bank of knowledge that pours information into empty and waiting vessels. Freire collaborates with Palmer by bringing awareness to the structuring of power that is associated with an objectivist model that does not allow for the liberative experience that education (especially, I would argue, religious) should bring.

In this framework, the subject—be it Scripture, theology, ethics—is not the possession of the teacher or preacher but the center around which the community gathers. Knowing is no longer an act of domination but of relationship. The teacher is not the authority over truth but the facilitator of a conversation that calls each participant into deeper engagement with the subject and one another. This epistemology is profoundly communal, spiritual, and ethical. Palmer's (1998, 105) imagery is striking: a circle of knowers in relationship, oriented toward a living center. This re-centering of the subject invites a redefinition of the teacher's role—not as the one who holds all answers, but as one who creates space, holds epistemological tension, and cultivates community around a shared pursuit of meaning. Palmer (1983 xii) writes: "To teach is to create a space in which the community of truth is practiced." The idea of the primary function of the teacher is to create space for a community of truth challenges the notion that the goal of teaching is to deliver proportional truth to the learner. The courage to teach becomes the courage to invite others into this risky, holy endeavor. As we will see in the following pages, Palmer's community-of-truth model offers a way forward for Christian educators that is both faithful to tradition and open to innovation. Challenges to familiar structures of authority as knowledge is crowdsourced is not something be resisted but understood and adapted. A community of truth approach can help religious educators foster authentic dialogue resulting in genuine curiosity and a deeper cultivation of theological and missional awareness.

2

Digital Epistemology and the Transformation of Knowing

In the decades since Palmer first published The Courage to Teach (1998), our cultural epistemological orientation has shifted dramatically. As David Castañeda (2017, 2) observes in his thesis on Christian education in the digital age, the internet has not only reshaped communication but also epistemology itself. He argues that we live in a networked society where knowing is increasingly "hyper-social," contingent not on institutional authority but communal validation (Castañeda 2017). In that sense, educators become hosts of the epistemological process as co-learners gather with the subject matter into a space to discover truth vital to human existence and thriving. Palmer, drawing on a Christian spiritual perspective, contends that truth requires interdependence between the knower and the known (1983, 32). Knowing is an act of love and hospitality rather than control – an idea rooted in the biblical notion that we are to "know as we are known" (1 Cor. 13:12). In this sense, the idea that the digital age has not so much invented a new epistemology or is challenging some kind of biblical standard of authority, but that communal images of epistemology are being "reclaimed" (Palmer 1983:xvii).

How do we know and are known?

The digital environment encourages *participatory* and *relational* ways of knowing. A meme may not merely spread information (or misinformation); it may shape the cultural or theological imagination of an entire subculture. What is shared or liked often becomes canonized not by councils, but by algorithms. This calls the church to re-examine how it forms disciples in such a volatile truth economy. Truth becomes a matter of what is shared, liked, or trending. This places everyone, for better or worse, in relationship with the content. For religious educators, this presents both opportunity and peril. On one hand, it democratizes knowledge production; transforming students from passive receptors to contributors with a broad spectrum of treasures to offer. On the other, it undermines traditional gatekeepers of theological authority, requiring us to revisit sources of truth and opening the learning experience to the criticism of subjectivity. Depending on your perspective, this can be a value or a challenge. The Palmerian model of communal education has ontological and epistemological implications for religious education as it adjusts the focal-point of the source of knowledge. As mentioned above, an underlying philosophy of a community of truth is in its claim that reality (or what we understand as "true") is a web of communal relationships, and we can know reality only by being in community with it (Palmer 1998, 95). The concept of relationship is an important distinction in Palmer's perspective - a subject is available for relationship; an object is not. When we know the other as a subject, we do not merely hold it at arm's length' (Palmer 1998, 102-103). In a subject-centered model of learning, truth is not located solely in the teacher (or the student) but in the subject around which all gather with curiosity and wonder. Palmer models a learning space as a circle with the subject at the center and all participants (teacher and learners) in humble dialogue around what he calls "the grace of great things" (1998, 107). He contrasts this with the traditional teacher-at-the-top hierarchy. The hallmark of a community of truth is in its claim that "reality is a web of communal relationships, and we can know reality only by being in community with it"

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(Palmer 1998: 95). In this view, truth is not a static certainty handed down by authorities, but emerges from a fluid, co-operative process. In Palmer's framework, everyone around the circle has a voice and responsibility – participants "must both speak and listen, and make claims on others, and make ourselves accountable" (1993: xii).

Castañeda suggests that Christian education must respond not by lamenting the challenges but by engaging them. As he writes, "Christian educators must cast off the nostalgic regard for pedagogy of the past and look forward to teaching to a changed epistemology" (2017, 64). This requires a shift in both posture and practice, aligning pedagogical methods with the epistemic realities of our time. As an educator, this can lead to a liberative thought that responsibility is shared rather than resting upon the teacher (*cf.* Fiere 2018, 44). Palmer's community of truth offers a compelling path forward. If the digital age has already created space for learning in communal, dialogical, digital spaces, then the church must rediscover itself as a community that models faithful conversation—not just proclamation. The digital age does not eliminate the need for authority; it reconfigures it, relocating it within webs of relationship and dialogue.

Palmer in Theological Context

Palmer is rooted in his Christian faith and credits his series of conversations on spirituality with Henri Nouwen and John Mogabagab as the catalyst for his pedagogy (1983, xxi). The theological connection to Palmer's educational philosophy redirects us to an epistemological humility that is critical to hearing from the spirit of the divine. Monological proclamation assumes truth's residence in the educated learner, disrupting a sense of equity among the community of faith. John 16:13 suggests that it is the Holy Spirit that guides the community into truth and Paul offers in I Corinthians 14 that the Spirit is a communal experience with a divergence of gifts that come together to build up the body. Moving from a monological model of religious education to a dialogical or communal model shifts our understanding of the locus of truth to the relationship the church has with the Spirit and that Spirit's presence among all gathered. Connecting back to having a relationship with the subject, all learners are engaged in a relational experience with the Knowable and not simply the one who is knowledgeable. This model honors the gifts and agency of all members of the congregation as "knowers" who contribute their experience and insight under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. For example, in a Bible study the insights of lay participants can be valued alongside the teacher's research. Modern homiletics scholars have similarly called for "dialogical preaching" that engages the congregation's voices. For example, Sigmon references Ronald Allen (2011, 47 via Sigmon 2023), who asks how far the boundaries of preaching can extend regarding "who can preach?" and the forms it can take. Allen (2011, 47) notes that preachers have presented a wide range of sermon styles in the postmodern era, they have done little work in exploring a "postmodern ethos." Theologically, this doesn't mean doctrine is decided by popular vote; rather, it means the living truth of the gospel is explored and owned by the community in dialogue with scripture and ecclesial traditioning (*cf.* Seibel & Nel 2010). By engaging multiple perspectives (young and old, scholar and skeptic, etc.), the church may gain a fuller picture of truth, consistent with Palmer's point that "truth is not the conclusions

of any one voice, but the conversation itself testing and yielding new insight." A community of truth is characterized by openness and hospitality to the "other," including viewpoints that differ, held together by a commitment to love and truth. In a religious education context, this means creating a safe space for people to voice insights or doubts with the understanding that these are part of the process for which all are gathered. Differences in interpretation or experience are no longer considered threats or corrections, but as opportunities for growth. Accountability in Christian community comes from shared commitment to Scripture and love. Note that traditional sources of authority (church tradition, creeds, etc.) were formed in community. Ecumenical councils in their purest form were essentially communities of truth-seeking church leaders. Thus, a dialogical approach to proclamation has deep roots in how the faith has been transmitted and contextualized over time.

The Authority Question: Authenticity, Access, and Emulation

If truth is now crowdsourced, what becomes of the preacher's voice? In my seminary course, students wrestled less with theological content and more with the question of their role. That's an authority crisis that does not flow from doctrine, but of credibility. I would argue that the crisis facing religious proclamation today is not one of content, but of credibility - a hue of relationality. In an age where everyone can Google, post, and podcast, the preacher no longer holds uncontested authority. Historically, authority in the church (clergy, teachers, elders, etc.) were seen as the learned interpreters of scripture, with authority conferred by institutions (seminary, church hierarchy) and often symbolized by titles (Reverend, Father) or roles (preacher, teacher). Truth was often expected to be received "from above," which correlates with what Palmer would call a top-down, teacher-centered model. In contrast, digital participatory culture encourages a model where everyone has a platform and expects to have a say. Palmer's idea that authority is relational in nature corresponds to Sigmon's (2023, 8) note that authority is not attached to the title 'Reverend' alone. In a community of truth, the pastor's authority comes less from their office and more from the trust they build as a fellow journeyer and servant of the truth. The parallel is seen in Jesus' teaching that "whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant" (Mark 10:43) – an authority rooted in service and love. Digital natives often respond to this more than to formal credentials. The participatory ethos means leaders must earn authority by their authenticity and by enabling others, rather than assuming it will be given automatically.

The Authentic Teacher

This is an opportune corrective that the digital age presents in the life of the educator. In previous generations, if people had a theological question, they asked their seminary educated pastor or teacher; now they might google it or ask an AI assistant. This means religious educators are no longer seen as the exclusive gatekeepers of theological knowledge. Authority can no longer simply rest on being the one trained with the information, because information is ubiquitous. Instead, authority in the digital age rests on wisdom, accessibility, and authenticity.

In a Palmerian sense, while data can be gotten from the internet, *wisdom* (knowledge in practice) emerges from communal reflection. A pastor might quote a scholarly article in a sermon, but the value comes in engaging the community to discern the meaning and faith implications of that information. This is the drawback of AI; it lacks spiritual discernment because it can only replicate language, not relationship. It can produce a theologically "correct" answer and mimic closely a wise pastoral voice but lacks the shared energy of presence that leads to true learning. It could be simply said that the authority of a faith leader flows from genuine curiosity of both subject and learner infused by love. This is something raw information cannot do. The congregation thus learns to view their leaders not just as information sources but as spiritual mentors and conversation partners. A healthy community of truth leader will welcome and incorporate valid insights, showing no insecurity that someone else found a great interpretation or historical fact. This is true regardless of the age. Anyone in children's ministry understands that the young often offer insights as to the nature of the divine or how to treat other humans that can be lost of the teacher, or a teenager is able to offer insights through the lens of the world they inhabit 24 hours a day. This collaborative knowledge-building can strengthen the leader's credibility and not diminish authority but reimagining it into something healthier and that gives room for true spiritual transformation.

This does not have to challenge traditions who utilize the lens of apostolic succession or denominational endorsement. It is a matter of how authority, however one sees it, is exercised to accomplish the mission of the church. In fact, in this model authority can have a greater and more effective role. Palmer's community of truth does not imply a free-for-all relativism; it's not that "anything goes." Rather, it's a disciplined conversation in which the past and its wisdom are still very much present. There continues to be a need for "connection with the past and present, allowing the authorizing force of life lived today to speak to the authority of ones who lived before" (Sigmon 2023, 8). This suggests a familiar two-way street: the tradition (voices of the past) and contemporary experience must touch each other just like all homeleticians have been trained to do throughout the modern era. But the locus must shift from this being the responsibility of the teacher to becoming the responsibility of the group. In practical terms, clergy can serve as bridges between the inherited wisdom of the faith (Scripture, tradition) and the questions and insights of the current community. Authority in a community of truth is thus dialogical across time: the community today engages the great cloud of witnesses of yesterday through the facilitation of an educator who is relationship with both. The pastor's authority includes bringing the weight of tradition into the conversation (so that new ideas are tested against time-honored truth), while also validating the fresh work of the Spirit now. If the community leans too far either way – either clinging to tradition without listening to new voices, or chasing new ideas without rooting in core doctrine, any community can get off base. The digital context, where new theories and even fringe teachings abound, makes this balance critical. Authority must now be earned relationally and exercised dialogically.

Müller (2025, 5) addresses this with her exploration of the rise of religious influencers in Europe. She notes that it is not only clergy members who are reaching a wide social media audience, but that "laypeople also present themselves as religious authorities…sharing their biblical interpretation, ethical views, and personal faith experiences." She notes the "significant power" of the followers as they are the ones who grant the "reach" or authority to the influencer themselves. No longer limited to the local pulpit (or even the slightly wider platform of religious broadcasting that has its own gatekeepers), followers have access to an infinite number of content providers who affirm the authority of the influencer by follows, likes, shares, etc. This provides a connection or bridge between creator and content consumer by suggesting avenues of direct access. This bridge is built by an individual who is displaying an accessibility and authenticity. Palmer (1998, 10) calls it the "identity and integrity" of the teacher that is often "felt" by the learner. This "exercise in vulnerability" (Palmer 1998, 17) that is enacted by the influencer provides the opportunity for the influencer and the consumer to have a communal relationship with the subject of the post. The connection made is not unlike analog preachers or teachers working to provide what Löwe (2019:30 translation by Müller) calls the "offering of meaning."

That posture of access that the learner has with the influencer or teacher also allows the follower to not be a passive viewer but provides reciprocal influence over the content through their reactions and the ability to *emulate* those they follow. The factor of emulation is why commerce funds the influencer lifestyle. The connection of followers to influencers creates brand connection and a desire to live the lifestyle of the influencer. It is not a significant leap to consider this as a commercial antithesis of Christian discipleship. Those of us in education know that it is not *knowledge* that makes a disciple, but *emulation*.

Thinking differently

While the role of influencer or the nearly unlimited access to content has been often framed as a negative and in need of resistance, the characteristic of the digital age explored here offers religious educators a vital pedagogical corrective. Palmer (1998, 20) argues that teachers must shift from "occupying space" to "opening space." This shift requires vulnerability, hospitality, and the willingness to let others speak into the process of meaning-making. This provides a pedagogical overlay to what is understood about authenticity and reciprocity in the influencer sphere. Authority, then, becomes a function not of status but of facilitation: the ability to guide a community of knowers toward deeper truth. Sigmon's (2023) work is particularly helpful here. In her article "The Courage to Preach in the Digital Age," she critiques the lingering monologism of traditional preaching and invites homileticians to embrace a more dialogical form. Drawing explicitly on Palmer, she calls for a "New (Media) Homiletic" that recognizes the participatory nature of digital culture and aligns proclamation with communal discernment (2023,10). She utilizes Palmer's model, which stresses critical dialogue and accountability in community. A community of truth would test claims together "with passion and discipline" rather than passive acceptance of what is fed to them by an algorithm (Palmer 1998, 104). Algorithms feed users

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with like-minded posts, creating echo-chambers of confirmation bias. In contrast, a healthy community of truth values diversity of viewpoints and creative conflict. It has been easy for certain religious traditions to restrict the content to their followers, much in the same way as the algorithm does so digitally, with arguably the same effect. Learners who are not exposed to a diversity of ideas and an awareness of scholarly consensus and discovery are not in relationship with truth, but a conformity to ways of structuring power.

Digital "presence'

I must make a clarification that may come across as an irony for a paper on religious education in a digital age. I argue that the digital age has revealed an epistemological shift, yet I have not suggested that we should shift our epistemological work to digital spaces. While digital modalities are a present reality, it would be a mistake to simply embrace a new tool and focus our attention on the mastery of a tool that is, by its very nature, ephemeral. The "Preaching in a Digital Age" course I teach at Drew Theological School (the experience of which inspired this paper) intentionally omits practical workshopping on available apps such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Slack, Discord, etc. In fact, I hesitated to create the above list as future readers would immediately date this paper due to the certainty that we will soon have moved along (certainly the emerging generation will) to new modalities. What is critical is that we engage what we are learning about how people learn and discover truth.

A misplaced emphasis on digital mastery might expand our reach, but it would lack a critical component to the community of truth - that of *presence*. In rare instances, vital community is established within online communities, but it also fosters a sense of detachment without the embodied non-verbal cues and human energy that are part of building the kind of relationships that are critical to building communities of truth. In a digital age, we must ask ourselves how to embody the incarnational aspect of faithful community. We enflesh our lives with each other - giving space and time to have deep knowledge of one another and practice deep listening.

That being said, the digital age offers new modalities to expand the boundaries of our faith communities beyond the geography of a particular church, but with the recognition of the vital nature of the embodied presence of one another. There are people in need of the kind of community that the church, when oriented toward deep belonging and communal seeking, has. The question continues to be debated on the efficacious nature of digital spaces to accomplish this deep belonging that truth requires. Palmer's framework allows us to consider our digital gatherings beyond the effectiveness of the modality or of numerical reach, but to ask critical questions of what is at the center of our shared life - analog or digital. Digital platforms can indeed become extensions of the "community of truth" when moderated in a subject centered way where each voice is valued, tension is held with grace, and all are committed to a shared pursuit of understanding rather than the agenda of an expert. The global possibility of digital spaces allows for a greater diversity of voices to shape a community's understanding of God,

justice issues, spiritual practices, or a vast spectrum of valuable ideas that draw people closer together.

Preaching and Teaching in the Community of Truth

This does not mean that every lesson or sermon must be a literal conversation, though this is a legitimate and productive way to do religious education. It does mean that teachers and preachers must see themselves as *facilitators of theological reflection within the community*—not just deliverers of religious content. Authority is no longer located in the pulpit alone, but in the shared pursuit of the subject that stands at the center and has relationships as the goal. The intersection where digital modalities and Palmer's community-of-truth approach converge provides a way forward for religious education in the 21st century. Traditionally, religious authority in Christian communities has been rooted in ordination, formal education, and succession in a faith tradition. However, the participatory nature of digital platforms and the easy availability of information (and misinformation) online have reoriented how authority is perceived. Parker Palmer's model necessitates a reconfiguration of authority from "power over" to "power with" – a shift from clergy and religious educators as sole arbiters of truth to faith leaders as facilitators of communal discernment.

Religious Educators as Curators of Truth

The role of religious educators addresses the tension between maintaining continuity with tradition and adapting to a context where participants expect to contribute and verify truth for themselves. One of the challenges that religious educators face is what then is their role if truth is a communal pursuit? With Palmer's framework, the clergy (or religious educator) becomes a facilitator, host, or curator of the communal learning process. Instead of simply writing a sermon in isolation, an educator might incorporate questions from the congregation gathered via an online survey, or weave in stories church members shared on an online forum. They might set up a sermon feedback blog where people post comments that are engaged throughout the week. The educational event itself could include moments of dialogue. All of these roles require the leader to guide conversation, much like a teacher guiding a class discussion, ensuring it stays "on track" with the subject at the center. The subject at the center, of course, depends on the tradition, but the characteristic of the centered subject is that in which there is the possibility of relationship. For many, this would place Christ at the center, engaging a Christopraxis (Root 2014) that not only engages Christ as subject, but consequential directive. This requires theology to be inherently practical because "it's very epistemological object is the pure subject of God's ontological state of ministering to creation" (Root 2014, 95). The "authority" the educator enacts here is in the framing of this encounter. In Sigmon's (2023, 10) words, teachers do the "skillful work of framing the encounter of a community of knowers" gathered around the subject, which in the case of religious education is the divine encounter. The teacher chooses themes, scriptures, or questions that ground the community in Tradition and gospel. They also model the virtues of good conversation – listening, humility, and courage to speak. The kenotic aspect of authority is

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highlighted: kenosis (self-emptying) means the leader doesn't cling to power but empowers others (Philippians 2:6-8). For example, a clergy person might intentionally step back in a study group to let others lead parts of the discussion, or in worship, include lay testimony and interactive prayer. This applies to digital settings or analog settings - it is only the modality that differs. In digital spaces, clergy can curate content (e.g., recommending reliable sources in a WhatsApp group discussion) or gently correct misinformation, much as a moderator would. Essentially, the pastor becomes the "guide on the side" rather than the "sage on the stage," to use educational parlance. This resonates strongly with Palmer's approach and is well-suited for an age when hierarchical postures are often met with suspicion.

A Way Forward for Religious Education

We are living through an epistemological reformation. Castañeda (2024:68) encourages educators to embrace technologies that extend the learning community beyond the classroom: online forums, digital storytelling, collaborative projects, but it is more important what we learn from the digital age: the cals for a posture of humility. We need religious educators who invite rather than indoctrinate and who listens as much as teaches. By embracing the corrective of the new modalities, there is an opportunity for the church to become a safe haven of epistemological renewal—not resisting technology but resisting the fragmentation and isolation it can produce. It becomes a space where people learn to seek truth together, to hold complexity, and to submit to the authority of the subject that stands at the center. This vision of authority is not one that is oppressive or seeks control, but since it is forged in and by love, it invites responsiveness to the invitation to relationship. The digital age has not ushered in an era of the unfamiliar, but the collaboration between human and technology has offered a much-needed corrective to our communal pursuit of divine truth. The church can either resist this shift or respond with courage, creativity, and faith. Parker Palmer's community of truth offers a vision that honors the integrity of tradition while embracing the relational realities of our time. In a world where truth is contested, communal, and fragile, the church must become a place where truth is pursued with discipline and love. In this way, the church can lead the way toward peace and justice through the way voiced are valued and servant leadership is demonstrated. To preach and teach in this moment is to walk a narrow path between certainty and chaos. But we do not walk it alone. We walk it in community, with the subject—Christ, Scripture, the gospel—at the center. And we walk it in trust that truth, when sought together, still has the power to set us free.

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Yen Do
Fordham University
ydo4@fordham.edu
"2025 REA Annual Meeting July 7-11"

Social Media:
Guiding Vietnamese Youth to Communicate with Love

Abstract: Young people are the most vulnerable age group engaging with social media. This article explores how Vietnamese youth interact with social media, analyzes the negative impacts of misusing these platforms, and advocates for the positive use of social media among young people. While social media can foster online relationships, it is important to use these tools appropriately and responsibly. The key question is how religious educators can guide young Vietnamese in engaging with these platforms in a healthy manner that benefits both themselves and others. The article suggests that communication should be rooted in love and kindness towards their online neighbors.

Introduction

Research shows that 53% of the population in the world uses social media. Among these users, youths are the most vulnerable age group, who spend the most time online and are at risk of social media.[1] These young people are nearly constantly engaged with online platforms. In a recent survey with 379 young Vietnamese participants, researchers found that 12% of Vietnamese youth spend more than eight hours daily on social networks, while others spend four to six hours.[2] This reality shows that Vietnamese youth are deeply engaged in online interactions with one another and the world. Therefore, the question is not whether they should use social media, but rather how they can use these platforms in a healthy way that benefits both themselves and others. This paper proposes a program to help young people use social media to communicate positively and lovingly with their online neighbors and contribute to the common good.

The article uses the "See-Judge-Act" method presented in Erin M. Brigham's *See, Judge, Act: Catholic Social Teaching and Service Learning* (2013). It first examines how Vietnamese youth engage with social media and analyzes its negative impacts on their lives and relationships. This reflection shows that misusing these platforms can lead to self-inflation, jealousy, health risks, and damaged relationships. Next, the article provides theological and ethical reflection grounded in the Church's teachings. This section delves into how the misuse of social media can affect the human dignity of both oneself and others. Finally, the article offers an educational plan in the form of a workshop designed to guide Vietnamese youth in a Catholic parish with their social media use. This section outlines clear steps and time frames, using Paulo

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[1] M. Schmeichel, H.E. Hughes, and M. Kutner, "Qualitative Research on Youths' Social Media Use: A Review of the Literature," *Middle Grades Rev.* (2018), 4.

[2] Tung Hoang, Thanh Bui, and Phuong Pham, "Surveying the Vietnamese Youth on the Negative Impact of Social Media," *GPH-International Journal of Social Science and Humanities Research* 6, no.4 (2023): 51. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7835098.

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Freire's problem-posing method, Thomas Groome's Shared Praxis framework, and DR FROS reflections (Human Dignity, Responsibility, Family, Right to Work, Option for the Poor, and Solidarity). In this workshop, religious educators create spaces for students to discuss with one another their experiences of using social media. This workshop aims to inspire participants to engage in positive personal and communal use of these platforms for the sake of others and for the common good.

The Use of Social Media and Its Impacts

Social media is an online platform used to exchange information and build relationships among people.[3] Users can share and receive images, videos, information, and opinions on these social networks, or search for friends.[4] Research has shown that Vietnamese youth mostly use social media such as Facebook, TikTok, Zalo, YouTube, and Instagram. They use social media for entertainment, communication, and information updates.[5] Another study conducted by a group of researchers found that 100% of Vietnamese adolescents use Facebook,[6] making it the most popular social media platform among them. Unlike other platforms such as Zalo, YouTube, and Instagram, Facebook functions like a digital journal where the users can record their life-timelines by posting photos, videos, and messages. Users can also view their friends' posts and engage with them through comments and emotional reactions. The same research indicates that a significant number of young people tend to overuse social media, and very few participants reported that they consider their posts carefully before sharing. This highlights the need for regulating content and addressing concerns regarding boundaries.

The issue with social media is not the platforms themselves, but rather how users engage with them. The outcomes of using social media can be either positive or negative, largely depending on the way individuals communicate with one another on these platforms. Social media can serve as an excellent tool for maintaining connections and engaging with others, unrestricted by time and space.[7] It enhances entertainment and allows for quick access to information. However, while there are many benefits to using social media appropriately, this section of the paper focuses on analyzing how the misuse of social media can negatively affect young users.

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[3] W. Akram and R. Kumar, "A Study on Positive and Negative Effects of Social Media on Society," *International Journal of Computer Sciences and Engineering*, Volume-5, Issue-10 (2017), 347, DOI: 10.26438/IGCSE/v5i10.351354.

[4] Bao Ha, "Mạng Xã Hội Là Gì? Đặc Điểm và Lợi Ích Ra Sao?," Hieu Luat, March 11, 2022, https://hieuluat.vn/tu-dien-phap-luat/mang-xa-hoi-la-gi-2707-43583-article.html.

[5] Tung Hoang, Thanh Bui, and Phuong Pham, "Surveying the Vietnamese Youth on the Negative Impact of Social Media," *GPH-International Journal of Social Science and Humanities Research* 6, no.4 (2023): 51. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7835098.

[6] Linh Phuong Doan et al., "Social Media Addiction among Vietnam Youths: Patterns and Correlated Factors," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19, no. 21 (November 3, 2022): 5. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph192114416.

[7] Aliff Nawi, Z. Hussin, and M. Sabri, "A Netnographic Approach to Investigating Problematic Teenagers' Language Use on Social Media," *International Journal of Instruction*, 16, no. 2(2023): 480, https://doi.org/10.29333/iji.2023.16226a.

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First, misuse of social media can lead to self-inflation. Shawna Redden and Amy Way point out that youth are "uniquely vulnerable and struggling" when they engage with social media.[8] They are often curious about themselves and the lives of others. Niedzviecki notes that this "Peep culture" fosters narcissism and self-absorption.[9] For example, female teens can spend hours in front of their phone screens trying digital makeup. This narcissism can lead young people to develop an inaccurate sense of their self-identity.[10] George and Odgers caution that "adolescents are experimenting with alternative identities online while leaving a digital archive that may damage their sense of self and future lives."[11]

Second, the misuse of social media leads to comparison among youth. The use of Facebook particularly creates social pressure on the youth.[12] They seek likes and comments by sharing their personal lives through photos or events. When they see others' Facebook posts receive more likes, they often feel pressured to share more attractive pictures or messages in hopes of garnering positive reactions from online audiences. As a result, they lose their ability to evaluate life because they rely heavily on the opinions and reactions of others.[13] Their sense of self-worth is not shaped by their true selves but by how others perceive them.[14] This distorted perception can also lead them to use hurtful words or reactions to belittle others. Consequently, there is little room for genuine love for others as they focus on selfish love.

Third, misusing social media can cause significant harm to oneself. Unlimited social media use poses health risks. Research finds that 87.9% of 397 teenagers felt their eyesight had deteriorated due to social media use; 57.3% reported experiencing sleep disturbances; and 26.6% had issues with bones and joints.[15] Misuse of these platforms can cause loss of privacy, exposure to fraud, and an increased risk of cyberattacks.[16] The spread of fake news on social media can create confusion and pressure among users. It can also lead to negative behaviors such as

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[8] Shawna Malvini Redden and Amy K. Way, "How Social Media Discourses Organize Communication Online: A Multi-level Discursive Analysis of Tensions and Contradictions in Teen's Online Experiences," *Communication Quarterly* 67, no. 5 (2019): 478, doi:10.1080/01463373.2019.1668440.

[9] Hal Niedzviecki, *The Peep Diaries: How We're Learning to Love Watching Ourselves and Our Neighbors* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2009),111.

[10] Akram and Kumar, "A Study on Positive and Negative Effects of Social Media on Society," 349.

[11] M.J. George, and C. L. Odgers, "Seven Fears and the Science of How Mobile Technologies May Be Influencing Adolescents in the Digital Age," *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 10, no 6,(2015): 842, https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691615596788.

[12] Nam Huong Vo, *Digital Media and Youth Discipleship: Pitfalls and Promise* (Carlisle: Langham Monographs, 2023), 40.

[13] Jesse Rice, *The Church of Facebook: How the Hyperconnected Are Redefining Community* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2009), 144.

[14] Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (London: Profile Books, 2019), 464.

[15] Hoang, "Surveying the Vietnamese Youth on the Negative Impact of Social Media," 47.

[16] Hoang, "Surveying the Vietnamese Youth on the Negative Impact of Social Media," 52.

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irritability and social withdrawal,[17] psychological problems[18] such as anxiety or peer pressure.[19] It can deter teens from achieving good grades on their schoolwork due to less study time or late submission of assignments. It also discourages face-to-face interaction and makes them vulnerable to sexual predators.[20] All these negative consequences undermine the self-esteem and self-love that individuals could cultivate by avoiding harmful online activities.

Fourth, misusing social media can harm others and damage relationships. A study shows that playing violent video games and engaging with certain social media platforms can promote aggressive behaviors, leading to issues such as racism, sexual harassment, and cyberbullying.[21] Other researchers emphasize that social media also can encourage teens to use offensive language, hate speech, and cyber pornography.[22] Additional research on how teens express themselves on Instagram shows that they often create posts featuring "obscene gestures, abusive remarks, and obscene words." Some even include words like "fuck" or "shit" under their video posting.[23] These risks can negatively influence young people's thinking and manner of life.[24] Online users often face not trust and love, but rather abuse and hate in their communications. Ultimately, this misuse of social media can destroy relationships among young users.

The research and analysis presented above indicate the dynamics of social media use among young people and highlight its negative impact when used improperly. The next section will explore how such misuse of social media can affect human dignity and will emphasize the importance of using social media responsibly and for the common good.

Theological and Ethical Reflection on the Use of Social Media

Digital tools, such as social media, are not inherently unethical. Instead, they can be seen as gifts from God for the contemporary world. The impact of these tools depends on how users engage with them; they can produce either positive or negative effects for users and society. When used appropriately, social media can have significant positive outcomes. In his recent book *Pastoral and Spiritual Care in a Digital Age*, Kirk Bingaman, a professor at Fordham University, argues that God's love and care for the present world manifested in human technological

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[17] Marie Danet, Parental Concerns about their School-aged Children's Use of Digital Devices, *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 29,* no. 10 (2020), 2901, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-020-01760-y.

[18] Hemantha Kulatunga, *Negative effects of social media on youth.* The Sunday Observer; Colombo [Colombo]. December 19, 2021, https://www.sundayobserver.lk/2021/12/19/news-features/negative-effects-social-media-youth.

[19] Akram and Kumar, "A Study on Positive and Negative Effects of Social Media on Society," 353.

[20] Redden and Way, "How Social Media Discourses Organize Communication Online," 478.

[21] Elena Savina, Jennifer L. Mills, Kelly Atwood, and Jason Cha, "Digital Media and Youth: A Primer for School Psychologists," *Contemporary School Psychology* 21 (January 2017): 84-85.

[22] Hoang, "Surveying the Vietnamese Youth on the Negative Impact of Social Media," 41.

[23] Nawi, Hussin, and Sabri, "A Netnographic Approach," 486.

[24] Nawi, Hussin, and Sabri, "A Netnographic Approach,"480.

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endeavors.[25] He asserts that technology reflects divine presence and creativity, emphasizing that God is always 'doing a new thing.'[26] Rather than ignore or resist the digital world, Bingaman encourages active engagement with it. He contends that resisting the use of technologies losing meaningful theology and overlooks the reality of young people as "digital natives." However, entering digital space requires careful consideration and responsible use.

The primary concern regarding using social media should be respecting human dignity. Catholic social teaching draws from Genesis 1:27, which teaches that the "human person is created in the image and likeness of God."[27] Being created in God's image grants humans the ability to make choices freely in a way that other creatures cannot. However, humans often struggle between good and evil and may misuse their freedom, leading to sin.[28] This suggests users should examine themselves to see how they have used social media platforms. For example, if one posts inappropriate images of oneself, it shows a lack of respect for the self-image that God created. Similarly, posting racist messages or negative comments indicates a disregard for the dignity of others. This self-examination invites us to correct our online behaviors.

The foundation of human dignity implies that everyone is equal and valuable; therefore, human beings must respect one another despite their differences. *Gaudium et Spes* reminds, "With respect to the fundamental rights of the person, every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, color, social condition, language, or religion, is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God's intent."[29] When young people use social media to text messages of racism, belittle someone, or inappropriately use someone else's photos, they are violating that person's rights and distorting the image of God within the person.

Being created in the image of a Triune God, who always coexists in a relationship, means that humans are inherently social beings.[30] We are related to one another and bear responsibility for each other. God created human beings not simply as individuals but as relational beings,[31] designed to love one another as they love themselves.[32] When using social media, we need to commit ourselves to the belief that our concern should not be about bytes, avatars, or likes but

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[25] Kirk A. Bingaman, *Pastoral and Spiritual Care in a Digital Age: The Future Is Now* (United States: Lexington Books, 2020), 26.

[26] Bingaman, *Pastoral and Spiritual Care in a Digital Age,* 21.

[27] Brigham, *See, Judge, Act*, 32.

[28] Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes* (7 December 1965) § 13, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

[29] Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, § 29.

[30] Brigham, *See, Judge, Act,* 41.

[31] Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, § 32.

[32] Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, § 24.

about people.[33] Our purpose of online communication should be to build relationships and care for each other. We need to commit to working for the good of everyone, especially those who are more vulnerable. As I have discussed, young people are the most vulnerable in online communications. This means young people must be concerned about the well-being of themselves and their peers when using social media.

To build the right relationships virtually, it is important to have proper communication on social media. The Dicastery of Communication of the Catholic Church has proposed online communication methods that promote relationships. The document first highlights the dangers of division and hatred that can arise from digital communication. Then, it calls us to pay attention to the wounded people who may have been injured by our online acts of ignorance or carelessness. Based on the parable of the Good Samaritan, the document suggests individuals live in the digital world as "loving neighbors" who truly care for others. It states, "Along the 'digital highways' many people are hurt by division and hatred. We cannot ignore it. We cannot be just silent passersby. In order to humanize digital environments, we must not forget those who are 'left behind.'"[34] The Dicastery of Communication reminds us that our online posts, comments, and likes under any form of picture, writing, or speaking should reflect our love for one another. We must reflect and discern before posting anything online to ensure our communication is truthful and loving.[35] This kind of meaningful communication will create better relationships.

In addition to being mindful of our communications on social media, the Dicastery of Communication also suggests building solidarity with others near and far. "To be neighborly on social media means being present to the stories of others, especially those who are suffering."[36] We should engage in social media beyond the exchanging of information; we use it as space to promote faith and the common good.[37] To communicate goodness, our communication's content—pictures, videos, songs, messages, etc.—must qualify and promote positive action.[38] In researching how the use of social media can become a tool for Christian evangelization, Diaz discovered 38% of young respondents say that these platforms give them opportunities to "act justly in relationship to God, self, others, or creation," 32% say that it can help to "make God present to others," and 26% states that it "helps them to practice their faith."[39] The Dicastery guides us as follows:

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[33] Francis, "Communication at the Service of an Authentic Culture of Encounter" (1 June 2014), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/communications/documents/papa-francesco_20140124_messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html.

[34] Lucio A. Ruiz, "Dicastery for Communication," *Toward Full Presence: A Pastoral Reflection on Engagement with Social Media* (28 May 2023), at Vatican City, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/dpc/documents/20230528_dpc-verso-piena-presenza_en.html.

[35] Ruiz, "Dicastery for Communication," § 18.

[36] Ruiz, "Dicastery for Communication," § 43.

[37] Ruiz, "Dicastery for Communication," § 56.

[38] Ruiz, "Dicastery for Communication," § 66.

[39] Israel Diaz, "Considering the Efficacy of Digital Technology as a Means of Evangelization in Christian Religious Education," *Religious Education* 116, no 1 (February 8, 2021): 5, doi:10.1080/00344087.2021.1872001.

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On social media…we Christians should be known for our availability to listen, to discern before acting, to treat all people with respect, to respond with a question rather than a judgment, to remain silent rather than trigger a controversy and to be "quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger" (*Jas* 1:19)...We are not present in social media to "sell a product." We are not advertising, but communicating life, the life that was given to us in Christ. Therefore, every Christian must be careful not to proselytize, but give witness.[40]

How to help young people communicate "life" on social media is the responsibility of those mentoring them, including religious educators. James Michael Nagle emphasizes that religious educators should adapt their teaching to address the challenges of the digital age.[41] Young people's world revolves around online connections, and we cannot ignore this network culture or hope it dissipates. We must help them find God in this virtual world by encouraging them to use online communications to spread faith and goodness. *Evangelii Gaudium* warns that "We are living in an information-driven society which bombards us indiscriminately with data – all treated as being of equal importance – and which leads to remarkable superficiality in the area of moral discernment. In response, we need to provide an education which teaches critical thinking and encourages the development of mature moral values."[42]

Recognizing the importance of the proper use of social media to foster love and enhance human relationships, religious educators must be mindful of educating young individuals on how to use social media to create loving relationships with one another and the broader world. Through theological and ethical reflection, we recognize the significance of social media and how its use can impact human dignity. We can also see how social media can serve as a positive tool for fostering online relationships. The next section will present a workshop designed to guide Vietnamese youth in a Catholic parish about the effective use of these online platforms.

Educational Workshop for Vietnamese Youth

To guide Vietnamese youth on the use of social media, I plan to initiate a weekend workshop. The workshop will be divided into two evenings, allowing participants time to reflect deeply between the sessions. I plan to hold this workshop during Lent, as it is a time for Catholics to examine, fast, and convert. The workshop aims to help learners be aware of the negative impacts of the misuse of social media and encourage them to use these platforms with responsibility and discernment. Furthermore, the workshop will train the learners in peacebuilding and justice-making by providing them with opportunities to reflect on and discuss their experiences of using social media, regarding Catholic social teachings. I will invite them to

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[40] Ruiz, "Dicastery for Communication," § 77.

[41] James M. Nagle, *Out on Waters: The Religious Life and Learning of Young Catholics Beyond the Church* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2020), 39.

[42] Francis, Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel *Evengelii gaudium* (24 November 2013) §64, at Saint Peter's in Rome, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

look at this issue together, have a critical reflection, and make a commitment to using social media in ways that promote peace and love for others.

Before describing the concrete process of the workshop to guide young people in the use of social media, it is important to explore some educational principles offered by Paulo Freire and developed by Thomas Groome.

1. Education Principles

Freire's problem-posing method helps to bring reality to the discussion table. By observing how young people use social media only in the public narrative, we do not realize the deeper reasons for their constant use and how seriously social media can impact misusers. Religious educators should create spaces for young people to look at and discuss the issue and their practices with one another. This method can bring beneficial outcomes, as authentic thinking only occurs in communication.[43] Moreover, the discussions can inspire the learners to commit to contributing good to the world. Young people get together and reflect on a common goal, such as participating in the same social media to promote love for others. Indeed, authentic reflection engages a person with the world.[44]

Freire's principle has been used by many modern educators. Thomas Groome developed it in his *Shared Christian Praxis* approach, which he later called *Life to Faith to Life*. Groome's framework is a movement process that encourages the learners to reflect on their lived experiences, dialogue with one another, engage with Christian visions, and finally commit to act in daily life.[45] Groome's method emphasizes both personal and communal reflections while conversing with Christian teachings.

Groome designed his method in five movements, or activities, beginning with a focusing activity before the first movement. This *focusing activity* means getting the learners onto the same page, drawing their interest, and focusing on the theme that the religious educator wants to address. *Movement One* encourages the learners to name their present practices, to express their consciousness of their own and the social praxis, and to realize their agency toward the issue.[46] *Movement Two* allows the learners to make a critical analysis of the issue in time and place. *Movement Three* is the time for the catechist to introduce to the learners the Scripture, the Church's teachings, or theological message. *Movement Four* helps the learners critically reflect and engage their own attitudes and experiences with a wider reality from the theological message they have studied.[47] This activity helps them to "move on" to new consciousness and possibilities.[48] *Movement Five* is to engage the learners in solutions or decisions.[49] I will use

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[43] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th anniversary ed. (New York: Continuum, 2000), 77.

[44] Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 81.

[45] Thomas Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry: The Way of Shared Praxis*, Eugene, Or.: Wipf and Stock, 1998.

[46] Groome, *Sharing Faith,* 175-177.

[47] Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 250.

[48] Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 253.

[49] Groome, *Sharing Faith,* 268.

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these five movements as a framework to plan short activities during a two-evening workshop designed to guide the learners to use social media as a place to communicate love for others.

2. Process

   Focusing Activity: This activity gets the learners on the same page, inspiring them to meaningfully enter the discussion with their peers. Two weeks before the workshop, I will post articles and images on the parish bulletin board about the impacts of social media on youth, both positive and negative. This information purposely draws the attention and thoughts of the young people before getting them to the actual workshop.

a. Saturday Evening

   The purpose of the first evening is to reflect on the impact of using social media in young people's lives. By sharing their own practices and reflecting on the church's teachings, young people will be inspired to be open to new possibilities of using social platforms as a way of expressing their love for others.

Activity 1 (20 minutes): The impacts of using social media

   The learners will freely sit at the round tables equipped with paper and markers. After a brief opening prayer and a three-minute digital story about social media, I will invite them to share their experiences regarding the impacts of using social media on youth by drawing. I will turn on instrumental Vietnamese music while the learners draw their pictures. When they complete their work, I will invite them to display their pictures on the wall for everyone to observe and reflect upon. This activity encourages them to reflect on the dynamics of social media use and its impact on youth.

Activity 2 (20 minutes): Discussing experience on using social media

   I will pair the learners and ask them to discuss two questions with one another: What social platforms have you mostly used and for what purpose? How did you engage in online communications and what problems did you experience? These questions invite them to examine their personal use of social media. By creating space for them to talk with each other about these questions, I will also give them opportunities for face-to-face communication that they may feel awkward about due to their customary use of online forms of communication. Nam Huong Vo asserts that young people are good at online communication but not face to face.[50] The Learners are encouraged to listen mindfully to their friends' sharing.

Activity 3 (20 minutes): The Teaching of the church on the use of social media

   I will present a brief reflection on using social media with dignity based on Genesis 1: 26-27, the church's teachings on online communication based on Pope Francis' article, and the Dicastery of Communication. These sources encourage us to reflect on the image of the Good Samaritan within the context of social media. This activity aims to inspire young people to embody the qualities of the Good Samaritans on the "digital highway" by being attentive to those who may be "wounded"—anyone who suffers on social media. They will become aware that improper use of these platforms can cause harm and leave others suffering unjustly. I hope this will encourage them to think critically and engage in reflective dialogue while cultivating a sense

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[50] Vo, *Digital Media and Youth Discipleship,* 35.

of agency and provoking a conviction toward peaceful action.[51] I encourage them to continue to reflect on their use of social media in dialogue with the teachings of the church and DR FROS that they have just learned before returning for the next meeting.

b. Sunday Evening
    The purpose of the second evening is to inspire Vietnamese youth to make a communal and personal commitment to the use of social media for the good of others and society.

Activity 1 (10 minutes): Carlo Acutis as a model for youth in using social media
    I will introduce Carlo Acutis as an exemplary model of using technology for good. He is an Italian teenager who was born on May 3, 1991.[52] He is on the path to sainthood and will likely be canonized in 2025.[53] He taught himself programming languages, including Java, 3D animation, sophisticated web design, and coding.[54] He loved playing video games, but he limited himself to only one hour a week.[55] Carlo was not only concerned for his own good use, but he also cared about his peers' use of the internet. His mother reveals that he courageously had some serious conversations with his friends who were frequently watching porn.[56] This demonstrated Carlo's real love and concern for the well-being of others, even in the digital realm.
    Carlo uses his time to show care for others and to bring beauty and joy to others rather than just spending time enjoying himself or becoming a constant consumer of the internet.[57] He used online communication through websites to provide information and volunteering opportunities to high school students to promote charitable works.[58] He collected more than 150 validated miracles, listing them in over a dozen languages and posted on the website.[59] He aims

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[51] Sarah Schmidt, "A Conceptual Framework for Critical Peace Pedagogy," Peace and Justice Studies Association, (2022), https://www.peacejusticestudies.org/chronicle/a-conceptual-framework-for-critical-peace-pedagogy/.

[52] Courtney Mares, *Blessed Carlo Acutis: A Saint in Sneakers* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2023), 11.

[53] Rachel Treisman, "A teen tech whiz nicknamed 'God's influencer' will become the first millennial saint," NPR, July 1, 2024, https://www.npr.org/2024/07/01/nx-s1-5024766/carlo-acutis-first-millennial-saint-pope-canonization#:~:text=World.

[54] Jefferson Peters, *Carlo Acutis: A Millennial Saint's Story, Eucharistic Miracles, Digital Age Devotion, Novena to Blessed Carlo Acutis and His Youthful Spirit* (2024)*,* 125.

[55] Treisman, "A teen tech whiz nicknamed 'God's influencer' will become the first millennial saint."

[56] Carbone, *Originali o fotocopie*, 179, quoting *Positio*, 312, quoted in Meres, *Blessed Carlo Acutis,*79.

[57] Peters, *Carlo Acutis*, 41.

[58] Roberto Gazzaniga (Carlo's high school chaplain), telephone interview by Courtney Mares, December 1, 2021.

[59] A link to Carlo's website: http://www.miracolieucaristici.org/en/Liste/list.html.

to strengthen spiritual life and bring peace to people's lives. The church uses this website to encourage young people to use modern technology for spiritual good.[60]

Activity 2 (20 minutes): Communal commitment

Young people will reflect on the following questions: What struck you about Carlo's use of technology? How can you collaborate to make social media a place where love for online neighbors is visible? Regarding the second question, I will encourage them to create a Facebook post to promote peace and justice by sharing relevant photos, songs, quotes, articles, videos, and comments that blend faith with a concern for the poor and the environment. My goal is to help the youth not only learn and practice their faith in the classroom and physical spaces but also live it out in their virtual lives and public interactions and communications. Daniella Zsupan-Jerome asserts that using one's voice to participate in religious online communication is "elemental to life today."[61] We will strive to create a Facebook that nourishes faith and reminds one another to live out their love relationship with God and others. Facebook is a way for us to act together in the name of a community rather than as individuals. With "weavers of communion"[62] Vietnamese youth can share their talents, knowledge, skills, and contributions to the common online page, which will be created to contribute to the common good. By interacting in the same communal social media, we build relationships with one another and the community.[63] Faith formation is not merely the transmission of content but also the sharing of experience and vision in any environment, online or offline.

Activity 3 (15 minutes): Discussion on the use of social media and DR FROS

To encourage the learners to engage more deeply in reflecting and practicing the use of social media, I invite them to discuss five key areas of Catholic social teachings with one another.

Human Dignity: Youth is a time of self-absorption and self-creation, as young people strive to enhance their self-image but sometimes do not do so in appropriate ways. Respecting God's image in themselves and others invites them to be mindful of their posts on social media. They should ensure that their photos, videos, or messages accurately reflect their values and do not promote hate. Instead, their content should emphasize love and care for their own dignity and the dignity of others. To reflect on these points, I will invite the learners to discuss with the person sitting next to them: How can I show my care for my own dignity and the other's dignity in my use of social media?

Responsibility: Online communications can negatively impact a global audience, especially among young people. It is crucial for young individuals to take responsibility for their posts, ensuring that their use of social media does not harm themselves or negatively affect

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[60] Treisman, "A teen tech whiz nicknamed 'God's influencer' will become the first millennial saint."

[61] Daniella Zsupan-Jerome, "Catechesis and Digital Culture," in *Together Along the Way: Conversations Inspired by the Directory for Catechesis*, ed. Hosffman Ospino and Theresa O'Keefe (The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2021), 184.

[62] Ruiz, "Dicastery for Communication," § 76.

[63] Aline Amaro da Silva, "Catechesis in the Digital Age: From Transmission to Sharing," *Communication Research Trends* 38, no. 4 (December 2019), 16.

others. I will invite the learners to discuss with the person sitting next to them: How can I demonstrate my responsibility in using social media to avoid harming myself and others?

Family: Youth is a time when individuals tend to engage more with friends than parents and family. It is important to guide them in limiting their time of using social media at home to respect family relationships. Many parents monitor their children's social media use by setting up rules and boundaries, such as avoiding usage during mealtimes. Regarding this practice, I will invite the learners to discuss with the person sitting next to them: How much should I use social media at home, so it does not harm my family relationship?

Right to work: The learners are encouraged to use their talents and technological skills to make a positive impact and contribute to a better world. Young people are aware that their online posts and voices can shape the world by sharing truth, creating beauty, and supporting one another. When they use their gifts to make life more meaningful, they collaborate with God and participate in God's plan. They discuss with the person sitting next to them: What can I contribute in online communication to create a better world?

Option for the poor: In the context of social media, the poor refers to individuals who suffer from negative online interactions. This issue is particularly concerning young people, who may be severely affected by gaming addiction, health risks, or exposure to pornography. Regarding the misuse of social media, which can lead to the creation of cyber victims, I will invite the learners to discuss with the person sitting next to them: Is there a specific victim that I want to care about?

Solidarity: It is important for parents, youth mentors, and teachers to stand in solidarity with young people regarding their use of social media. We need to guide them in using these platforms to support their study and communication, as well as to promote peace and justice. We collaborate with each other to create programs or workshops to encourage youth to interact positively online. As a youth mentor, I want to understand how my work of solidarity through this workshop impacts the learners, so I can improve in the future. Therefore, I will pose a final question for discussion in the larger group: What has been your most influential idea or activity from this workshop?

Activity 4 (15 minutes): Personal commitment

As social media overloads us with information, it is necessary to help young people practice slowing down. I will reserve silent moments for the learners to listen to themselves. Bingaman asserts that we can control our use of social media if we "put it spiritually, a 'sacred pause.'"[64] Listening attentively is one of the significant practices in which to be slow. Zsupan-Jerome asserts that "listening is a fundamental hospitality within us to God and others. It is at the heart of a vibrant spiritual life, as well as healthy interpersonal relationships. Without listening, we create echo chambers and experience increasing isolation and atrophy over time."[65] After a few minutes of silent reflection, the learners will write their commitments on paper. Those commitments can be a balance between physical activity and online activities, thinking before posting, communicating with kindness and love, or anything that they are inspired by. I remind

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[64] Bingaman, *Pastoral and Spiritual Care in a Digital Age,* 70.

[65] Zsupan-Jerome, "Catechesis and Digital Culture," 186.

them of the importance of engaging social media with responsibility and discernment, as Vo insightfully suggests.[66]

When the learners are ready for their written conviction, we will end the workshop with a moment of prayer. I will invite them to share their convictions through spontaneous prayer. Saying their commitment in the form of prayers can give them a sense of a promise they make to God and one another. They trust that God will help them to practice their commitment to using social media for peace and good. I also believe listening to others' commitment will inspire them to contribute to the common good. Before dismissing the learner, I will encourage them to interact on our shared Facebook page by posting and commenting in various forms of drawings, reflections, or digital stories about loving neighbors. I invite one of them to oversee this communal page. This collaborative space will not only foster positive interaction online but also cultivate a sense of community and connection among us.

Conclusion

The paper explored the use of social media among Vietnamese youth and analyzes the negative consequences that arise from misuse, which can severely disrupt their lives and relationships. The paper provided theological and ethical reflections based on the teaching of the Church, illuminating the moral framework within which these young individuals navigate their digital interactions. To empower them, the paper proposed an educational workshop designed for Vietnamese youth in a Catholic parish. This workshop equips them with practical skills and strategies to harness the power of social media as a tool for expressing love and kindness to others online. When using these digital platforms properly, young people can make meaningful contributions to the well-being of others and promote the common good.

In the online journey, it is essential for religious educators to frequently encourage young people to be kind in their online interactions, ensuring that their virtual communications reflect respect for their own dignity and the dignity of others. Just as the Good Samaritan cared for his neighbor with everything he had, young people use digital platforms to serve others with love and kindness. Their posts and comments aim to alleviate suffering, provide support, and promote the common good in society. In doing so, they must take a moment to think before posting or commenting, considering the impact their message may have on their peers and a global audience. Social media platforms, such as Facebook, can become powerful spaces for comforting the wounded world through messages of peace and love. Religious educators encourage parents to pay attention to guiding their young children to communicate online, not only through their instruction but also through their positive examples in using social media at home.

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[66] Vo, *Digital Media and Youth Discipleship,* 15.

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Eunjin Jeon, University of Denver/Iliff School of Theology, eunjin.jeon@du.edu
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Beyond Borders: Cultivating Digital Citizenship, Becoming a *Just* Christian

Abstract: This article proposes a theological and pedagogical framework for digital citizenship grounded in decolonial praxis. In response to the persistent legacies of coloniality embedded in digital infrastructures—such as algorithmic bias, platform imperialism, and epistemic erasure, —the study calls for a reimagining of digital citizenship as a Christian vocation that addresses the ethical, cultural, and theological challenges of digital life. In this context, the article proposes three interrelated pillars of digital citizenship to become a *just* Christian in digital society: authentic inclusivity, transformative creativity, and critical accountability.

Keywords: digital citizenship, decolonial pedagogy, digital religious education, transformative learning

Introduction

In today's hyperconnected global era, digital spaces have become primary arenas for living as digital citizens who engage in decision-making—not only for young people but for people whoever uses the internet irrespective of all ages, genders, races, and nationalities. Media culture, as Mary Hess observes, is "the water in which all of us swim," a sentiment that echoes Tom Beaudoin's metaphor of media environments as the "amniotic fluid" of younger generations (Beaudoin, 1998; Hess, 2005, 30). These immersive environments shape how we come to see, know, and engage the world—offering not only access to distant geographies but also new modes of perception and meaning-making. However, this media saturation is far from neutral. It influences how individuals understand themselves and relate to others, often reflecting and reinforcing broader global inequities.

Within this context, digital environments function as theological and pedagogical spaces where people continuously negotiate their decision-making alongside ethical responsibilities in relation to the Other. These negotiations unfold within the uneven power dynamics of the Global North and South, marked by disparities in technological access, cultural representation, and epistemological authority. Thus, religious educators must equip learners not merely to consume media passively but to engage digital culture with critical, moral, and theological intentionality. The goal is not only digital fluency, but faithful presence—navigating these complex spaces with spiritual discernment and social responsibility.

Christian religious education advances a more holistic vision: to form believers who are both faithful disciples and engaged citizens in a digitally mediated world. This imperative aligns with a longstanding aim in Christian religiouseducation—to cultivate a kind of bilingual fluency in which individuals learn to speak both the inner language of ecclesial life and the outer language of public, transformative engagement (Coleman 1989; Boys, 1989; Tran, 2024). As Mary Boys contends, discipleship and citizenship are not opposites but mutually reinforcing commitments. Mai-Anh Le Tran expands on this, arguing that citizenship is often treated as

"awkwardly optional," when in fact, it must be central to Christian religious educational aims—characterized by critical engagement, public witness, and transformative action (Tran, 2024).

his is where the concept of digital citizenship becomes vital in the digital world. Originally articulated in educational and technological fields, digital citizenship refers to responsible and ethical participation in online communities. Mike Ribble outlines nine foundational elements—ranging from digital access and literacy to digital law, etiquette, and wellness—that comprise the behaviors of a conscientious digital citizen (Ribble, 2015). Yet for religious educators, digital citizenship cannot remain a secular or technical concept. It must be reimagined theologically to include commitments to justice, compassion, truth, and solidarity in pursuit of social transformation. These challenges are intensified in digital contexts, where the notion of digital citizenship remains underdeveloped in theological discourse. The overwhelming volume and velocity of online content—the "flood" in which we swim—demands more than passive consumption. It calls for critical discernment, ethical reflection, and prophetic imagination. In this light, the digital world is not peripheral but central to the practice of digital citizenship as a Christian vocation. To become just Christians in the twenty-first century requires faithful engagement with the digital public square.

Yet, this digital public square is increasingly shaped by powerful forces of inequality. Tech mega corporations' structure much of our online experience, and the overwhelming majority of digital content flows from the Global West—particularly the United States. Scholars describe this dynamic as digital colonialism, in which Western technological dominance perpetuates global hierarchies of knowledge, power, and representation. As Michael Kwet (2019) and Dal Yong Jin (2025) have argued, digital colonialism reproduces colonial-era logics of control and exclusion, now embedded in platform architectures, data ownership, and algorithmic infrastructures. Such dynamics pose urgent theological and pedagogical questions. In our digitally colonized context, religious education must respond by equipping believers with critical digital literacy to cultivate *just* Christian to transform the digital society.

This paper argues that Christian religious educators face a pressing mandate to address three ethically charged and interconnected dynamics of digital culture: (1) digital colonialism, which enforces global hierarchies through technological domination and epistemic exclusion; (2) algorithmic bias, which encodes and amplifies societal prejudices, shaping access to knowledge and opportunity; and (3) epistemic erasure, which marginalizes non-Western and indigenous knowledge systems, limiting the diversity of voices in digital spaces.

These forces are not neutral; they shape our theological imaginations, ethical commitments, and social relations. They obstruct Christian visions of human dignity, justice, and love. In response, I propose a decolonial framework for digital citizenship to become *just* Christian—a model that envisions digital engagement as an expression of discipleship and public witness. To be a just Christian today is to be a critically engaged digital citizen—one who resists domination, discerns truth, and builds communities of hospitality and justice across virtual and embodied life grounded in three theological frameworks: (1) authentic inclusivity, (2) transformative creativity, and (3) critical accountability.

Ethical Challenges in Digital Colonialism

While access to the internet and wireless technologies may suggest the promise of democratized participation in digital spaces, the reality is far more complex and unequal. Digital infrastructures often reinforce the marginalization of non-Western knowledge systems and

reproduce historical patterns of domination. Sociologist Michael Kwet terms this dynamic "digital colonialism," a framework that critiques the technological dominance of the Global North—particularly the United States—over the Global South (Kwet, 2019, 16). Drawing parallels to colonial-era ideologies of racial hierarchy, religious mission, and the civilizing project, Kwet argues that contemporary digital systems operate under a new "manifest destiny"—one defined by centralized cloud computing, proprietary platforms, predictive analytics, and surveillance capitalism (Kwet, 2019, 17).

This critique aligns with Dal Yong Jin's concept of *platform imperialism*, which highlights how dominant platforms such as Google, Apple, and Meta function not merely as tools but as vehicles of epistemic and cultural control (Jin, 2025). These corporations export not only technological systems but also social norms, linguistic structures, and ideological assumptions rooted in Western capitalist and neoliberal worldviews. Likewise, Toussaint Nothias et.al (2023) characterizes digital colonialism as a form of cultural imperialism wherein the Global North's interests, aesthetics, and knowledge systems are universalized, often at the expense of diverse local and indigenous voices (Nothias et al, 2023, 4).

These critical perspectives raise urgent ethical questions: Who creates digital knowledge dominantly? Who benefits from algorithmic visibility and representation? Whose voices are amplified, and whose are systematically erased? Nothias points out that a small number of transnational corporations—largely based in the Global North—extract data, labor, and profit while embedding dependencies and sustaining hierarchies under the guise of innovation and technological benevolence (Nothias, 2023, 4). In other words, anyone who uses the internet is implicated in digital colonialism, a system that consolidates power in the Global North—particularly in the United States.

Algorithmic bias reinforces social inequalities through the very architecture of data and code. Machine learning systems often inherit and magnify prejudices embedded in their training data, disproportionately affecting marginalized populations along lines of race, gender, and geography. While public debates have increasingly acknowledged issues such as privacy loss, surveillance, and automation-driven unemployment, these are often framed as unfortunate side effects of an otherwise inevitable progress. However, these are not incidental flaws—they are systemic features of a digital economy rooted in extractive and exclusionary logics (Kwet, 2019, 17).

Indeed, this mirrors what Paulo Freire (1968) once described as the "banking model" of education, where knowledge is deposited uncritically into passive recipients. In the digital era, this model manifests through algorithmic systems that propagate misinformation, stereotyping, and epistemic erasure—primarily benefiting dominant epistemologies from Global North, particularly the United States while undermining the agency of users from the Global South and marginalized communities.

The philosophical concept of epistemic injustice, introduced by Miranda Fricker (2007), is especially helpful in unpacking these harms. Fricker distinguishes between *testimonial injustice*—when someone's credibility is unjustly diminished—and *hermeneutical injustice*—when a community lacks the interpretive resources to make sense of its experiences (2007). In digital spaces, these injustices are exacerbated by algorithmic design that privileges dominant narratives and renders subaltern experiences unintelligible or invisible. The result is not only a loss of voice but also a distortion of reality itself, where the digital world reproduces the silences and exclusions of the analog world.

Beyond online society, the advent of artificial intelligence further intensifies these

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dynamics everyday lives. The algorithmic systems powering today's digital platforms often rely on hidden labor, much of which is outsourced to countries with limited labor protections. For instance, workers in the Philippines are hired to perform tasks such as labeling images and identifying content to train machine-learning models for tech giants in the Global North. This so-called "ghost work" occurs in exploitative conditions—often from home or in overcrowded internet cafes—and remains invisible in public discourse about AI ethics (The Washington Post, 2023). Such labor conditions not only reflect ongoing patterns of economic inequality but also raise profound questions about justice, human dignity, and the ethics of technological development.

These developments are not peripheral concerns; they strike at the core of theological commitments to justice, truth-telling, and the sacredness of every human being. Revisiting the concept of public citizenship as the core role of Christian, as conceptualized by Mary Boys digital citizenship in the era of digital colonialism must be addressed as a matter of theological-ethical development. Digital citizenship can no longer be regarded as an "awkward add-on" to the role of Christian. In an era where young people engage the world through algorithmically mediated platforms, the church must engage these contexts intentionally and prophetically.

Thus, the development of digital citizenship—particularly one grounded in Christian theological and educational frameworks—requires an intentional decolonial approach. This involves more than teaching technical skills; it requires equipping individuals to discern the power dynamics, economic interests, and cultural assumptions embedded in the technologies they use. Acey et al. (2023) contend that achieving digital justice requires dismantling deeply rooted hierarchies of knowledge, both in institutional structures and in personal consciousness.

From this perspective, decolonial digital citizenship entails reimagining the digital not merely as a tool for evangelism or outreach, but as a contested space for moral formation, justice-seeking, and prophetic witness—essential for becoming a just Christian. Ultimately, becoming a "just Christian" in the digital age is not a one-time ethical decision, but an ongoing, embodied praxis. It calls for continual engagement with structural injustice, a willingness to confront complicity, and a commitment to building alternative digital futures rooted in solidarity, dignity, and grace. As Mary Hess (2014) reminds us, "Religious meaning-making is taking place in mass mediated culture… and that meaning-making shapes even those contexts where digital cultures are least apparent" (Hess, 2014, 117). To ignore digital culture is to miss vital aspects of God's ongoing self-revelation and the church's public witness.

Thus, digital ethics must become central to both theological reflection and educational praxis—particularly for those committed to justice in a digitally mediated world. To cultivate just Christians who can faithfully navigate this digital ecosystem, I propose three core principles for an educational framework of digital religious citizenship: (1) authentic inclusivity, (2) transformative creativity, and (3) critical accountability.

Authentic Inclusivity

Digital platforms, while promising global connection, often perpetuate epistemic exclusion and cultural homogenization. Functioning as vectors for Western neoliberal ideologies, their algorithms frequently marginalize non-Western knowledge and voices, enacting a form of epistemic violence. Authentic inclusivity within this context is not merely token representation; it demands active decolonial resistance against these embedded power structures that favor the Global North in knowledge production.

Authentic inclusivity requires centering marginalized voices in both knowledge production and religious discourse. This involves actively seeking out, listening to, and

amplifying perspectives from the Global South and other historically excluded communities. It calls for moving beyond a monologic, homogenized approach to religious pedagogy and dialogue. Instead, we must honor the multilayered complexity of religious identities and engage in genuinely ecumenical and interfaith dialogues that affirm diverse pathways to encountering the sacred.

As Veracini and Weaver-Hightower (2023) highlight, however, digital spaces are inherently ambivalent—they can serve as tools of both oppression and empowerment (2). While such platforms offer marginalized communities (e.g., Indigenous groups) opportunities to reclaim narratives and assert identities, they also risk reproducing existing structures of subjugation. Inclusivity, therefore, necessitates the creation of decolonial educational environments that foster openness, critical relationships, and transformative engagement. Through sustained theological-ethical reflection, digital citizenship can be reshaped to embody justice, dignity, and the radical hospitality of God.

For this reason, I propose that authentic inclusivity must begin with self-reflexivity and an acknowledgment of one's positionality. Such resistance starts with theological reflexivity: a critical awareness of one's location within global systems of power and privilege. It requires acknowledging how our perspectives are shaped by colonial histories and recognizing the inherent limitations of dominant, often Western-centric, frameworks. Such reflexivity is fundamental to "becoming Christian" in a decolonial sense. It moves beyond seeing the "Other" as a threat or object of charity, instead recognizing them as a neighbor bearing the image of God, with inherent dignity and valuable knowledge. This necessitates the deliberate unlearning of colonial mindsets that privilege certain ways of knowing and being.

In this discourse, theological reflexivity provides the critical lens needed to navigate this ambivalence consciously. It compels us to ask: Whose voices are amplified? Whose are silenced? Which epistemologies are validated? This self-critical posture is the starting point for challenging the epistemic violence inherent in digital colonialism and seeking pathways that empower the marginalized for authentic inclusivity. This involves interrogating the origins, biases, and power structures behind the information we consume and share. It means prioritizing sources from marginalized contexts and recognizing the validity of non-Western epistemologies and forms of knowledge transmission.

To sum up, authentic inclusivity is an active, reflexive practice of decolonization. It demands that we continually examine our own situatedness, dismantle colonial thought patterns, actively seek and center excluded voices, and engage with the rich complexity of global religious diversity. This theological reflexivity is not an endpoint but an ongoing process crucial for fostering genuine belonging and equity in our increasingly digital, yet persistently colonial, world.

Transformative Creativity

In addition to cultivate authentic inclusivity, transformative creativity emerges as a vital pedagogical principle for developing digital citizenship ethically, especially within religious education. It offers a powerful means to challenge established religious authorities and reclaim theological narrative space. Traditional Christian education often relies on fixed canons (Scripture, doctrine, tradition) and hierarchical authority structures. While these canons remain foundational for identity formation, the digital landscape fundamentally democratizes theological expression. For example, digital media legitimizes diverse, non-traditional forms like memes, hashtags, digital storytelling, and social media reflections. This proliferation inherently

challenges colonial and institutional control over how theology is expressed, interpreted, and disseminated.

This mediatized environment inevitably impacts religious authority. The dynamic between leaders and congregations, professors and students, evolves as digital resources become readily available. Congregants and students are no longer solely passive recipients but become active co-creators, consumers, and interpreters of theological content encountered and shared online. Digital culture provides crucial platforms for communicating complex, sometimes subversive, popular beliefs about religion, bypassing traditional gatekeepers (Aguilar et al., 2016). Consequently, understanding religious identity formation requires engagement with digital culture. Heidi Campbell recognizes this, highlighting the trend towards studying "Lived Religion" within digital contexts, where faith is practiced and expressed online (2012).

Here is where transformative creativity becomes essential. It empowers individuals to actively reinterpret their world and faith, moving beyond passive consumption. Echoing Paulo Freire's concept of "conscientization" – critical awareness leading to liberating action – digital creativity becomes a tool for theological agency (Freire, 1968). Becoming *just* Christian in this context means empowering learners as theological co-creators. They engage with tradition not merely to receive it, but to reinterpret and re-express it meaningfully within their digital reality.

This creative act is deeply intertwined with theological imagination. Maxine Greene (1995) emphasizes the transformative power of imagination to "cross the empty spaces between ourselves and others," making empathy possible. Imagination, she writes, enables us to "give credence to alternative realities" and to "break with the taken for granted," disrupting familiar assumptions and distinctions. In the context of digital religious education, such radical imagination is essential for constructing new narratives—counter-stories that resist dominant, often colonial or homogenizing, theological frameworks.

As learners engage in digital storytelling, visual theology, and liturgical experimentation online, creativity becomes both a theological and pedagogical practice. It invites educators and students alike to reimagine and articulate faith in ways that resonate with the diverse identities, experiences, and cultural conditions shaped by digital life. Within this vision, digital religious education is not simply about transferring doctrine; it becomes a generative space for co-creating meaning, pursuing justice, and bearing prophetic witness.

Therefore, fostering transformative creativity is a vital task for religious educators. It involves cultivating learning environments where digital engagement—whether through crafting online liturgies, sharing reflective posts, or creating ethically resonant memes—is recognized not as trivial, but as a sacred vocation. Within digital religious education, this means equipping learners to move beyond passive consumption toward active, justice-oriented creation that reflects their theological convictions. Transformative creativity thus emerges as a key pedagogical strategy for cultivating ethical digital citizenship—empowering learners to embody faith in contextually meaningful ways, challenge dominant narratives, and imagine alternative digital futures grounded in compassion, solidarity, and hope.

Religious educator Christine Hong emphasizes that "an anticolonial, interculturally and interreligiously intelligent teacher asks about reshaped narratives in storytelling—whether whitewashed histories are corrected or perpetuated, whether communities and people are humanized or dehumanized, whether telling and hearing stories makes us better versions of ourselves or reduces us to perpetrators of violence" (Hong, 2021, p. 113). Such pedagogy attends not only to the content of stories but also to the ethical weight of narrative formation, including the power of opacity and the complex engagements that emerge across conflicting narratives.

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This shift in focus—from passive consumption to culturally resonant creation—reclaims narrative as a site of theological imagination and resistance. Transformative creativity, then, becomes a counter-colonial practice: one that challenges the superficiality of digital discourse, embodies faith in contextually meaningful ways, and participates in the ongoing decolonial project of reclaiming narrative space. By empowering learners as imaginative and ethical co-creators, religious education can harness the digital landscape as a fertile ground for liberation, spiritual formation, and theological renewal.

Critical Accountability

In the formation of decolonial digital citizenship, critical accountability emerges as a central pedagogical and theological imperative. For religious educators and learners navigating complex digital terrains, this principle is not merely a moral guideline, but a prophetic stance grounded in liberative praxis. The proliferation of misinformation, algorithmic bias, and performative identities in digital spaces demands not only technological literacy but theological discernment—a way of seeing and acting that unmasks power, challenges complicity, and reclaims voice within the structures of digital colonialism.

David Morgan (2005) offers a useful framework for rethinking discernment in this context. He describes it as "seeing with the eyes of others," a practice of imaginative empathy that enlarges the self's awareness and social responsibility. In digital culture, discernment must become a form of ethical and theological attention—an active, interpretive posture that interrogates the ideological underpinnings of digital content, platform governance, and algorithmic design. Importantly, for decolonial digital citizenship, discernment entails unmasking the colonial logics that are often naturalized through digital infrastructures, particularly in relation to ownership, data extraction, and cultural representation.

A primary site for this analysis is algorithmic injustice. Machine learning systems, recommender engines, and automated moderation tools are often portrayed as neutral, but they are shaped by sociohistorical biases and hegemonic epistemologies. As scholars have noted, these systems frequently reproduce and amplify stereotypes, particularly in relation to race, gender, and religion. Rehman et al. (2025) investigate this phenomenon in the context of Western media representations of the Middle East, revealing how digital colonialism perpetuates orientalist tropes under the guise of objectivity and technological progress. Their analysis demonstrates how Middle Eastern identities are continuously constructed through a lens of suspicion, threat, and exoticism—modes of representation inherited from colonial discourse and reshaped through digital means.

This dynamic is further explored in the literature on techno-Orientalism, as articulated by Roh, Huang, and Niu (2015). They define techno-Orientalism as the representational practice of imagining Asians as hyper-technological yet intellectually and morally deficient—a contradiction that both glorifies and dehumanizes. This framework is especially salient in speculative fiction, cinematic narratives, and new media cultures where Asian bodies are depicted as cyborgs, drones, or data-producing laborers in dystopian futures. At a structural level, techno-Orientalism reinforces Western techno-cultural supremacy by suggesting that non-Western societies can only be modern if they assimilate into a Western framework of progress. In the age of global platform dominance, such imaginaries not only influence aesthetics but shape geopolitical and economic discourse, deepening epistemic injustice.

To cultivate critical accountability within this context, religious education must engage media literacy as a theological discipline. Learners must be equipped not only to evaluate content

but also to interrogate the architectures of knowledge production that shape the digital world. This includes understanding how platform economies commodify user behavior, how data-driven design determines what is seen and unseen, and how power circulates through content moderation and algorithmic curation. Teaching discernment as a component of Christian digital citizenship involves fostering critical awareness of how one's attention, participation, and identity are entangled with broader systems of surveillance and symbolic violence.

Conclusion: The Ongoing Praxis of Becoming a *Just* Christian

I propose a theological and pedagogical framework for digital citizenship that is decolonial in its orientation and praxis-based in its formation. In response to the colonial residues embedded in digital infrastructures—evident in algorithmic bias, epistemic erasure, platform capitalism, and digital orientalism—the work of religious education must extend beyond moral individualism to critical, communal, and justice-oriented engagement. Becoming a just Christian in the digital age, therefore, is not a destination but an ongoing theological praxis shaped by relational accountability, spiritual imagination, and public witness. The three interrelated pillars— authentic inclusivity, transformative creativity, critical accountability—serve as both diagnostic and constructive tools. Religious educators are thus summoned to form learners not only as competent digital navigators but as ethically grounded agents capable of discerning injustice, reimagining belonging, and enacting change. This educational vocation is inherently theological, rooted in a vision of discipleship that understands the digital sphere as a contested site of meaning, power, and formation. It requires sustained engagement with digital culture as both context and content for theological reflection and praxis.

In this light, becoming a just Christian takes on renewed significance in a digitized, globalized, and algorithmically mediated society. It emphasizes formation as continual, contextual, and participatory—a process marked by grace and responsibility, shaped by critique and creativity, and sustained through community and covenant. To become a just Christian in the digital age is to inhabit digital life with theological depth, ethical clarity, and liberative commitment. It is to resist the coloniality of digital space not only by naming it, but by transforming it—bearing witness to a gospel that speaks truth, affirms dignity, and seeks justice across every platform and interface.

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Paulinus Emeka Nweke

Boston College Clough School of Theology and Ministry

paulinus.nweke@bc.edu

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PRIESTLY FORMATION IN THE AGE OF AI: RETHINKING THE *ALTER CHRISTUS* IDEAL IN LIGHT OF *IMAGO DEI* AND *IMAGO HOMINIS*

ABSTRACT

In the context of advancing technology, particularly artificial intelligence (AI), this paper examines the redefinition of humanity suggested by these developments and its significance for formative theological education. It focuses on the formation of Catholic priests, with specific reference to the Nigerian context, and explores how becoming an *alter Christus*, rooted in a traditional *imago Dei* anthropology, can be preserved amid an AI-influenced *imago hominis*. The paper advocates for a nuanced and appreciative approach to emerging technologies that enriches seminary formation by integrating AI perspectives with theological principles. This approach, it argues, is essential for upholding the *alter Christus* formation goal in the modern context.

Keywords: *Alter Christus*; Anthropology; Artificial Intelligence; Formation; *Imago Christi*; *Imago Dei*; *Imago Hominis*.

INTRODUCTION

Imagine a statistics instructor who, fearing a compromise of exam integrity, denies a non-native English-speaking student access to a translation device, resulting in the student's failure. The instructor later wonders whether that denial neglected an important aspect of the student's identity. Similarly, seminary formators today grapple with how to shape future priests in an era where artificial intelligence (AI) is fundamentally reshaping our understanding of humanity. These formators face a dilemma: either rely solely on the traditional notion of *imago Dei* (and its corollary, *imago Christi*) while insisting on forming seminarians into a Christ who "knew not" modern technology, or leverage humanity's externalization of self through AI to reimagine their desired formation of seminarians into 'another Christ' (*alter Christus*).

In considering this dilemma and related issues, this paper argues that an integrated anthropological framework—one that views AI's "*imago hominis*" as a continuation of the traditional *imago Dei/Christi* anthropology—provides seminary formators with valuable theological, scientific, and pedagogical tools to uphold the ideal of *alter Christus* formation in a technology-driven world. Three key propositions support this argument: first, the *alter Christus* ideal, as outlined in the Church document *Pastores Dabo Vobis* and understood within the Nigerian seminary context, grounds priestly identity in Christ; second, this ideal is rooted in human becoming and in the vocation to mirror God, as established by the *imago Dei* and upheld by the *imago Christi* despite human sin; third, the *imago hominis* paradigm shaped by AI

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enhances this vocation when understood as humanity's quest for greater self-discovery that can be redirected toward the search for God.

These propositions underscore the structure and methodology of the paper. Structurally, the paper is divided into four main parts: (1) the *alter Christus* ideal in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, (2) the *imago Dei* and *imago Christi* traditions, (3) the emerging *imago hominis* via AI, and (4) an applied invitation to review seminary formation. Methodologically, a conceptual analysis with a focus on philosophical foundations is employed to explore this interdisciplinary topic. Indeed, while the paper proposes pedagogical frameworks to apply emerging insights, its primary aim is to address the foundational principles of priestly formation in the context of rapid technological advancements. Seminary formators are therefore invited to leverage these reexamined principles to reassess their practices in pursuit of the *alter Christus* formation ideal.

THE *ALTER CHRISTUS* IDEAL IN LIGHT OF CHURCH TEACHING AND PRACTICE

Concept and Formative Implications

In priestly formation, the concept of *alter Christus* carries two interconnected meanings: first, it defines the identity of the priest, and second, it serves as a guiding principle for the preparation of future priests. These themes are prominently highlighted in Pope John Paul II's apostolic exhortation on priestly formation, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (PDV).

First, the identity of the priest is intrinsically linked to Christ, described as "the living and transparent image of Christ the priest." This characterization presents the priesthood as a participation in and continuation of Christ, the one High Priest of the New Covenant (PDV §12). Typically, this participation is made possible through the liturgical action of baptism (as in the case of the common priesthood), but more prominently through priestly ordination, by which the priest is sacramentally configured to Christ the High Priest (cf. Heb. 4:14). A priest thus configured, while retaining his personal identity, models that identity after Christ. Consequently, PDV emphasizes that "there is an essential aspect of the priest that does not change: the priest of tomorrow, no less than the priest of today, must resemble Christ …" (PDV §5).

The second understanding of *alter Christus*, which builds upon the first, views *alter Christus* as the goal of formation. If being "another Christ" involves more than just an ontological change brought about by sacramental ordination, but also requires living and acting as Jesus did, then a corresponding formation process is necessary. This process must enable the priest to fully embody the identity of Christ and conduct His mission throughout life. In other words, the goal of priestly formation is to participate in the very priesthood and life of Jesus Christ, who "went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him" (Acts 10:38). Therefore, PDV observes that "priests are called to continue the presence of Christ, the one High Priest, embodying His way of life and making Him visible in the flock entrusted to their care" (PDV §15).

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This dual understanding of *alter Christus* underlies the vocation and formation of a priest. Within a faith community, the priest, through their sacramental configuration, acts in persona Christi by preaching Jesus' word, offering acts of forgiveness, and administering salvation through sacraments such as baptism, penance, and the Eucharist (cf. PDV §5). Beyond sacramental duties, the priest is called to emulate Christ's life of holiness through pastoral charity, described in PDV as "the internal principle, the force which animates and guides the spiritual life of the priest, as he is configured to Christ the head and shepherd" (PDV §23). This pastoral charity serves as the guiding force for the priest's thoughts, actions, and relationships with others (PDV §23). Consequently, seminary formators strive to cultivate this pastoral charity within seminarians. To achieve this goal, they employ the four pillars of priestly formation - human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral - which are detailed in the fifth chapter of PDV. These areas of formation have remained standard in Catholic seminaries, with growth in each area reinforcing the *alter Christus* ideal. The Nigerian seminary context, discussed next, elucidates this fact and highlights its challenges.

The *Alter Christus* Ideal in the Nigerian Context

Like other Catholic seminaries, Nigerian Catholic seminaries uphold the *alter Christus* formation ideal. Just one year after the promulgation of *Pastores Dabo Vobis* in 1992, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) made an *ad limina* visit to Rome, where they met with Pope John Paul II. In his address to those bishops on December 18, 1993, Pope John Paul II reminded them that priests, in their ordination, receive a share in the consecration and mission of Jesus Christ, Head and Shepherd. He urged them to utilize the human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral formation provided in the seminary to instill and nurture the dispositions of a true shepherd in the heart of a seminarian long before the day of ordination. Since this visit, the CBCN has, through various means, encouraged seminaries in Nigeria to align with PDV's vision of priestly vocation and formation, while tailoring programs to local circumstances.

Consequently, in the preamble to the *Handbook on Social Behaviour of Seminarians* given to most Nigerian seminarians upon admission, one finds in bold print: "The goal of priestly formation is 'Until Christ is formed in you' (Gal. 4:19)." The same preamble charges the seminarian to "be a piece of soft wax for the Holy Spirit to stamp the figure of Jesus Christ, the priest, on him." Accordingly, the handbook prescribes rules and norms to guide the seminarian toward bearing Christ's image in all aspects of life. Of particular interest are the stringent rules regarding the use of phones and social media, reflecting the concerns of seminary formators about technology's impact on the development of seminarians as another Christ. For example, the Supplementary Rules issued at Pope John Paul II Major Seminary in Awka, Nigeria, in 2020 caution that the improper use of mobile phones and other forms of social communication can significantly hinder seminarians and disrupt seminary life. The rules highlight potential issues such as distractions from personal studies and prayers, a divided heart, indiscipline, moral laxity, and sexual improprieties. In some Nigerian diocesan seminaries, as noted by Bede Ukwuije, the

use of personal phones is prohibited, operating under the belief that such devices inevitably distract seminarians from their formation process (Ukwuije 2020, 131).

While the concerns about the misuse of technology are valid, strict prohibitions raise important questions about what it means to embody "another Christ" in a contemporary, technology-driven world, inviting a closer examination of how seminarians can navigate their formation with these tools. One might ask: What does it mean to embody "another Christ" in today's technology-saturated context? Does allowing the use of ubiquitous technologies such as smartphones hinder seminarians from imitating Christ in their 'thoughts, actions, and relationships?' More generally, what does it mean for a seminarian to live as 'another Christ' in a digital era?

Questions like the above prompt a deeper exploration of the anthropological foundations of the *alter Christus* ideal, as these underpinnings shape both its understanding and application in formation contexts. The following discussion will clarify the theological concepts of *imago Dei* and *imago Christi*, which are essential to this foundation. By examining these concepts, we will gain insights into human nature and vocation, highlighting their connection to an AI-influenced *imago hominis* and implications for priestly formation in the digital era.

THE *IMAGO DEI* AND *IMAGO CHRISTI* FOUNDATIONS

The Concept and Attributes of *Imago Dei*

The doctrine of *imago Dei* holds that human beings are created in the image of God. It expresses the Christian vision of humanity's identity and purpose in a unique way and forms the anthropological foundation for all Christian life and endeavors, including priestly formation. The concept itself has roots in the biblical account of creation, where human beings are said to be made in the image and likeness of God (cf. Gen. 1:26-27). Throughout history, Christian theology has leaned on this concept to argue that human nature and purpose are best understood in light of God's generous act of creation and self-giving. Even so, Christian theologians have wrestled with the precise meaning of *imago Dei*, approaching it from multiple perspectives rather than settling on a single definition. In this regard, three classical interpretations—substantive, relational, and functional are discussed below.

The substantive perspective is one of the earliest interpretations of *imago Dei*. Heavily influenced by Greek philosophical thought, it locates God's image in the intrinsic quality of human beings (whether physical, psychological, or spiritual). For example, early Christian thinkers variously highlighted human traits like reason, intellect, or will as reflections of the divine. Origen extolled the human mind's capacity to receive truth; Augustine emphasized memory, understanding, and will (the three powers of the soul); Aquinas defined the human person as *subsistens distinctum in natura rationali*, "a distinct subsistence in a rational nature"; and Calvin located the divine image in the mind and heart. Each of these approaches, though emphasizing different traits, shares the intuition that *something* about our very being reflects the

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nature of God, even if no single biblical text confirms one definitive human trait as *the* image of God.

The relational perspective interprets *imago Dei* primarily in terms of relationships. Proponents reason from the triune communion of God to the human person, rather than extrapolating from human traits up to God. They assert that humans image God not as solitary beings but as persons-in-communion. As John Zizioulas famously notes in *Being as Communion*, "God has no ontological content, no true being, apart from communion" (Zizioulas 1985, 18). This perspective is echoed by Stanley Grenz, who observes that "the *imago Dei* is not merely relational… It is communal: it involves 'the quest for completeness that draws humans out of isolation into bonded relationships'" (Grenz 2001, 303). This view is further supported by African communal anthropology, encapsulated in John S. Mbiti's words, "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am" (Mbiti 1969, 109). In the wisdom of Daniel Migliore, "Being created in the image of God means that humans find their true identity in coexistence with each other and with all other creatures… Human existence is not individualistic but communal" (Migliore 2014, 125).

The functional perspective emphasizes the role and vocation of humans as God's representatives on earth. It focuses on what humans *do* rather than on what they *are* or how they *relate*. Proponents of this view argue that humanity's purpose is inextricably linked to its representative role. They often cite Genesis 1:28, where God commissions humanity to "fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over every living thing." Thus, the image of God is seen in humanity's God-given mandate to govern and care for creation. Moreover, Genesis 2:15, which states that God placed Adam in the garden "to till it and keep it," implies that stewardship is just as important as dominion. Humans reflect God's image not only through innovation and creativity but also by tending the earth responsibly - cultivating life, naming the animals, and building just societies. These activities demonstrate the image of God in practice.

Two observations emerge from this *imago Dei* perspective. **First**, while the substantive, relational, and functional perspectives arise from reflection on Old Testament texts that explicitly mention the image of God, they also possess philosophical undertones. The substantive view, for example, was significantly influenced by Greek philosophy. Augustine and Aquinas, key figures in promoting this view, incorporated Platonist and Aristotelian philosophy to clarify the biblical theme of *imago Dei*. This approach is consistent with a long-standing Catholic tradition of merging faith and reason. As *Fides et Ratio* teaches, the *imago Dei* is not merely a biblical motif but also a philosophical principle: reason itself bears the imprint of God (cf. *Fides et Ratio* §32). This suggests, among other things, that formation into the *alter Christus* ideal presumes an intellectual openness to philosophical truth, which is foundational in *imago Dei* anthropology.

Second, taken together, the substantive, relational, and functional perspectives suggest that imaging God involves "being, loving, and doing." In other words, each view highlights an aspect of the human person that reflects the divine: an intrinsic trait (such as reason or will) that

cannot be lost, an existence-in-relationship (with God and others) as the locus of the image, and humanity's active role within creation. Together, these aspects illumine human nature and human vocation, indicating that one can even "grow into" the image of God by participating in God's creative and redemptive work. This observation is important for reimagining the *alter Christus* formation goal because, as will be seen later, this breadth of meaning shows that human nature and vocation encompass both a stable identity *and* a dynamic becoming. Building upon the foundational *imago Dei* concept, which outlines humanity's divine origin and vocation, Christian theology posits that true human identity can only be fully understood through the lens of Christ as the perfect image of God. Thus, while *imago Dei* provides the essential framework for understanding human dignity and purpose, it is in Christ that this framework finds its ultimate fulfillment.

The *Imago Christi* Appeal

While the Old Testament speaks of humanity being created in God's image in general terms, the New Testament reveals the image of God in a specific person: Jesus Christ. It proclaims that Jesus Christ *is* the perfect image of God, and thus the ideal realization of true humanity to which we are called to conform. Accordingly, John describes Jesus as the Eternal Word "made flesh" (John 1:14). Paul writes that Christ "is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation" (Col. 1:15). The Letter to the Hebrews declares that the Son is "the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being" (Heb. 1:3). In Jesus of Nazareth, the abstract concept of *imago Dei* becomes tangible and personal.

As the perfect image of God, Jesus Christ embodies the full realization of humanity that all are called to reflect. The International Theological Commission (ITC) highlights this in *Communion and Stewardship* (2004), noting that Christ reveals humanity's fullness in its origin, ultimate destiny, and current reality. Firstly, as the "firstborn," Christ reflects the likeness in which humanity was created, teaching openness to God and others through service and love. Secondly, He points to humanity's ultimate purpose, where the Spirit works to conform believers to Him in the resurrection. Lastly, Christ reassures that human sinfulness is not the final word, offering salvation and a continual transformation toward His likeness in daily life (ITC 2004, §§53-4). This ongoing journey of becoming reflects humanity's call to mirror the divine image exemplified by Jesus Christ.

In discussing how Jesus reveals the fullness of humanity in our present reality, it is essential to recognize that not all Christian traditions or theological perspectives agree on the extent to which human depravity necessitates conformity to Christ's image. For example, John Duns Scotus, an Orthodox theologian, argued that the incarnation of Jesus Christ would have occurred even if humanity had not fallen into sin. In contrast, Protestant traditions tend to emphasize human depravity and the necessity for grace. Meanwhile, the Catholic tradition maintains that, although human nature is wounded by original sin, it is not entirely corrupted. Consequently, Vatican II teaches that Christ "fully reveals man to himself" and restores the

divine likeness that was marred by sin (*Gaudium et Spes,* §22). In this way, Christ not only exemplifies true humanity but also offers profound answers to our deepest questions about life and death through His perfect self-revelation as God (*Gaudium et Spes,* §22). As the embodiment of love (1 John 4:8), Jesus animates candidates in formation. His human and divine love inspires those undergoing formation, inviting them not only to understand Christ intellectually but also to internalize His heart of love, thereby becoming transparent images of Christ (see *Dilexit Nos,* §§2–6).

Implications for Human Vocation

Underpinning the anthropological foundation of *alter Christus* reveals several implications for human vocation. With the *imago Dei*, we see that human beings are called to a life of infinite dignity, to loving relationships with God and others, and to the continuation of God's creative act and care for creation. *Imago Christi* emphasizes that this fundamental human vocation endures despite the damage of sin. Jesus Christ remains the perfect example for humanity, as we strive to mirror the divine in our being, relating, and creating. The New Testament captures this dynamic by noting that creation is "groaning" and awaiting fulfillment (cf. Rom. 8:22–23), and that we participate in God's continuing creative work even as we await our adoption as children of God. When humanity conforms to Christ, the perfect image of God and the model of perfected humanity, it opens itself to becoming a "new human," one capable of fulfilling the new commandment of radical love of God and neighbor. Hence, theologians like Hans Urs von Balthasar and Karl Rahner have observed that human beings are defined not primarily by what we produce or achieve, but by our openness to God and our capacity to grow in God's image and likeness. In Rahner's view, the human person's openness to transcendence underscores their capacity for God (*capax Dei*).

The implication is evident: an understanding of human vocation as an open-ended call to *becoming* supports the aspiration to become *alter Christus* and lends credence to humanity's self-externalization (which can also occur through technology). On the one hand, Jesus of Nazareth—as the tangible, visible manifestation of the authentic and fulfilled *imago Dei*—is the One to whom humans are called to be conformed, in a gradual process reaching its culmination only in the eschaton. On the other hand, however, the transformative power of technology can serve as a tool for deepening our relationships and enhancing our ability to reflect the divine nature in our actions and interactions, providing a contemporary avenue through which we can fulfill our vocation as *alter Christus*.

Viewed in this light, human life is fundamentally formative and transformative: a journey of being molded into Christ's image. This perspective sets the stage for considering how the modern quest to extend ourselves via technology (*imago hominis*) might fit into—rather than thwart—that formative journey. The next task will be to turn to the *imago hominis* paradigm to assess whether it indeed represents a competing anthropology or if it can be integrated as part of humanity's search for fulfillment in God.

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THE *IMAGO HOMINIS* AS A COMPLEMENTARY ANTHROPOLOGICAL PARADIGM

The concept of *imago hominis* ("image of the human") captures humanity's intrinsic drive to recreate and extend itself. It encompasses artificial intelligence (AI), human enhancement technologies, robotics, and related innovations. Like *imago Dei*, this concept provides a framework for understanding a creator–creature relationship, but in this case between humanity and its artifacts. Noreen Herzfeld underscores this connection in her comparative study, suggesting that just as *imago Dei* reflects an analogy between humans and God, *imago hominis* establishes a parallel analogy between humans and machines (Herzfeld 2002, 56). Her position is supported by the views of Saeideh Sayari and colleagues, which will be reviewed in the last section of this paper. Overall, these scholars posit that in the case of *imago Dei*, God is the creator and humanity is the image; conversely, in *imago hominis*, humanity assumes the role of the creator while the machine serves as the image. In both scenarios, the human being remains the point of reference - either mirroring God or being mirrored by technology.

In our contemporary world, AI exemplifies the essence of *imago hominis* as it mirrors human thought processes, performs complex actions once unique to humans, and even mimics learning and decision-making. As a creation in humanity's image, AI encapsulates dimensions shared with *imago Dei*, including rationality, relationality, and functionality. AI's ability to embody these traits - once considered exclusive to humans - suggests an evolving anthropology, where humans, as creators, see themselves reflected in their technological creations. A brief examination of these traits reveals more of what an AI-informed anthropology entails:

First, AI possesses a **rational capacity** that can even surpass human capabilities. International Business Machines (IBM) describes artificial intelligence in the following way: applications and devices equipped with AI "can see and identify objects… understand and respond to human language… learn from new information and experience… [and] can act independently, replacing the need for human intelligence or intervention" (*IBM 2023*). A self-driving car is a prime example of this exceptional machine intelligence; another example is generative AI (such as large language models like GPT), which has shown that AI can now produce human-like written content given appropriate prompts.

Such abilities to perceive, understand, learn, and even act autonomously have traditionally been associated only with human intelligence. Consequently, classical theology has often identified rationality as key to humanity's imaging God. However, the rise of AI challenges this perspective: if our rationality makes us like God, does a machine imitating our rationality somehow participate in that "image," or at least blur the line of what is uniquely human? Without providing an exhaustive answer to these questions, a preliminary response drawn from the previous section suggests that AI is not an entirely new creation but rather an extension of human rational capacity, demonstrating in amplified form the human vocation of continually "becoming" and pushing the boundaries of knowledge and creativity. Indeed, AI's rational feats confirm that human vocation includes an open-ended drive toward greater understanding and

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problem-solving. This drive can synergize with technology if we view AI as a tool that highlights humanity's God-given reasoning powers by reproducing them in silicon form, inviting us to reflect more deeply on what responsible use of reason means in the image of God.

Relationality is another human attribute often advanced as reflecting *imago Dei*. In a relational sense, *imago Dei* suggests that humans are persons in communion, capable of genuine dialogue and self-giving love. Emphasizing this attribute naturally raises a question: Can machines participate in genuine relationships or foster a sense of community? Do they possess anything resembling consciousness or emotion? Without delving into these complex questions fully, it is noteworthy that developments in AI have increasingly enabled machines to simulate relational behaviors. Over the last decade, interactive AI systems, ranging from social robots to advanced chatbots, have shown a growing ability to engage humans in conversation, respond to emotional cues, and even serve as companions in a limited sense. People continue to create digital spaces and virtual agents with which they interact in quasi-human ways.

As a striking illustration, the film *"Lars and the Real Girl"* (2007), highlighted by practical theologian Jack Barentsen (2020), depicts a lonely young man who begins to emerge from his isolation by treating a life-sized doll as if she were a real companion. The supportive members of his community engage in this pretend relationship, and through this unusual yet heartfelt scenario, Lars gradually overcomes his social anxiety and reconnects with real people. This scenario underscores AI's potential role in addressing the profound human need for relationships. Today, AI-driven "companions" (from simple chatbot friends to more sophisticated robot caregivers) often serve a similar surrogate role for some individuals.

Of course, neither Barentsen nor many theologians would claim that any artificial entity, regardless of how advanced, possesses the inherent dignity of a human person created in God's image. Nonetheless, AI's ability to mimic relational qualities is striking and, for many, disconcerting. It blurs a line that was once sharply defined between human interaction and interaction with objects. It suggests that what people value in relationships - empathy, understanding, and responsiveness - can be approximated by an artificial agent in ways that influence human emotional and social experiences. Therefore, an appropriate theological response is needed to address the ambivalence characteristic of AI-informed relationships, specifically distinguishing those technologies that genuinely connect people from those that merely replace authentic human contact. In this relational realm, *imago hominis* can serve as a mirror, revealing our true longing for communion or exposing our capacity for self-deception. Engaging with these technologies is therefore crucial to discern whether they foster a deeper community or create an illusory relationship without substance.

Finally, the **functional** trait of AI amplifies the anthropological logic of *imago hominis*. While the functional aspect of *imago Dei* presupposes humans imaging God through dominion and stewardship, today, AI increasingly takes on this role by solving practical problems and performing complex functions in the real world. AI systems can create original content (text,

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images, music) in response to human prompts. Even more strikingly, emerging AI agents exhibit a degree of autonomy: unlike earlier software tools that operated strictly within predefined constraints and required constant human input, newer AI agents display goal-driven behavior and adaptability to changing circumstances (*IBM 2023*). Given AI's increasing ability to act independently, purposefully, and efficiently, Herzfeld allows yet another analogy. According to her, just as a functional interpretation of *imago Dei* views humans as acting on God's behalf through their dominion over creation, a functional *imago hominis* sees AI emerging whenever machines undertake tasks in the real world that humans would typically do. In other words, as humans once exercised dominion over creation in God's stead, AI now begins to exercise dominion in certain areas in our stead (Herzfeld 2002, 69–70).

Notwithstanding, AI's apparent exercise of dominion, once thought to be uniquely human, presents more opportunities than threats for theological anthropology. The opportunity here is to recognize that AI might augment our God-given mandate of stewardship if utilized wisely. If mundane tasks are automated, humans could potentially focus more on the creative, moral, and relational dimensions of our vocation. In a sense, AI could free us to exercise dominion more like Christ, through service and creativity rather than through toil. Much will depend on our orientation: whether we integrate AI into our mission in a way that honors God's purposes or allow it to become an idol.

To conclude this section, AI and related technologies can no longer be dismissed as merely external tools or *personae non gratae* in theological anthropology; they have become an integral part of human life with which we must learn to coexist. Moreover, AI is rapidly shaping humanity's self-understanding and the world we inhabit. This trend calls for an informed and thoughtful response from educators and theologians. It is especially urgent for seminary formators, who face the task of molding "digital natives" into *alter Christi*. Formators will need clarity about what Christ-like humanity looks like for people whose daily reality is saturated with technology.

In seeking this clarity, it is possible to view the technological and theological visions of humanity not as opposed, but as potentially compatible. The above explorations of rationality, relationality, and functionality suggest that the *imago hominis* paradigm (properly directed) can be understood as an extension—albeit a transformative one—of the *imago Dei* paradigm, rather than a negation of it. Both paradigms keep the human person at the center of concern: one in relation to God, the other in relation to human-made creations. Recognizing this allows a shift from a stance of fear and separatism to one of engagement and integration. When such a position is taken, the next task is to examine how insights from *imago Dei* and *imago hominis* together can enhance priestly formation in the AI era—and how to utilize technological insights to sustain the *alter Christus* ideal.

APPLIED INVITATION TO REVIEW SEMINARY FORMATION

Towards Preserving the *Alter Christus* Ideal Amidst AI-Informed Anthropology

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A promising resource for bridging the theological and technological anthropologies we have considered so far is provided by Saeideh Sayari and colleagues. They conducted a philosophical investigation into the relationships between God and humans, as well as humans and machines, highlighting the parallels between the concepts of *imago Dei* and *imago hominis*. According to their findings, both *imago Dei* and *imago hominis* involve "the creation of a being which has the most similarity with the creator or is in the form/image of the creator" (Sayari et al. 2019, 171). In the *imago Dei*, the Creator is God and the image is humanity; in the *imago hominis*, the Creator is humanity and the image is the machine. In both cases, the "images" and/or their referents serve as tools for humanity to gain insight into themselves.

Nevertheless, one might wonder *why* human beings create images or reflections of themselves, whether in theological narratives (God creating humans) or in technological practices (humans creating AI). Sayari et al. suggest two main reasons. First, they argue that engaging with these human-made "images" (such as intelligent machines) allows humans to understand their own abilities, anxieties, aspirations, and undiscovered potential. Second, they reference the idea of theophanic form, which posits that since humans reflect the form of God, understanding humanity is essential to understanding God (Sayari et al. 2019, 171). Expanding on these two insights (and adding further related observations) helps us imagine how the *alter Christus* ideal can be preserved and even advanced while incorporating the anthropological logic of *imago hominis*.

First, *enhanced self-identity through AI can foster greater dependence on God*. As Sayari et al. suggest, human-made creations serve as mirrors for self-reflection. This is true as far as the way a person interacts with an intelligent machine —what they ask of it, what they fear it might do, and what they hope it can achieve — reveals a great deal about that person. In a formation context, a seminarian's interaction with an AI language tool may expose knowledge gaps or highlight creative strengths, providing insights into the seminarian's learning style. When AI reveals a seminarian's limitations, it can foster humility and growth. Rather than viewing this process as dehumanizing, it can illuminate a path for conversion, serving as a reminder of the seminarian's dependence on Christ, the true model of humanity. For instance, if an AI tutor points out difficulties a seminarian is having in a subject, the seminarian can either feel discouraged or choose to rely more on prayer and Christ's example. In doing so, the seminarian confronts personal frailty in light of Christ's strength, promoting a more authentic ministerial identity grounded in truth, humility, and openness to God's grace.

Second, *a greater understanding of oneself can lead to a deeper comprehension of God*. Whether the pursuit of self-knowledge is theologically focused (as in the concept of *imago Dei*) or technologically focused (as seen with AI), there is always an opportunity for more profound insights into God. In other words, by examining our relationship with our AI "images," we can draw analogies for God's relationship with us and God's intentions for humanity. For instance, a programmer's pride when their AI performs well and concern when it malfunctions are faint echoes of God's delight in our goodness and grief over our sins. Such comparisons, while

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imperfect, can provoke reflection on God's patience and teaching methods. Moreover, recognizing how challenging it is to equip a machine with even a semblance of intelligence deepens our awe of the God who created us with genuine intelligence and freedom. In a formation context, making these comparisons can help seminarians appreciate the grandeur of being made in the image of God. Paradoxically, studying *imago hominis* can even renew one's sense of the sacredness of *imago Dei*—for example, realizing how difficult it is to make a computer understand context and nuance inspires gratitude for the human soul, which effortlessly integrates reason, emotion, and spirit.

Third, *engaging in AI development as a reflection of divine creativity aligns with a Christian theology of vocation and co-creation for God's Kingdom*. The very act of creation, whether God creating humanity or humans creating AI, implies a desire on the part of the creator to be reflected in the creation. From a Christian perspective, this insight aligns with a theology of vocation: God invites us to be co-creators with Him, and our technological creativity is one expression of this divine invitation. If oriented by faith, developing and utilizing AI can be an exercise of our God-given creativity for the sake of God's Kingdom. In this sense, positively engaging with AI can make the priestly vocation more relevant and exciting, showing that becoming *alter Christus* does not mean rejecting human innovation, but rather guiding it to serve God's purposes.

Finally, *embracing the imago hominis paradigm with AI can enhance the priesthood's relevance in a tech-driven world*. In the foreword to his Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium* (2017), Pope Francis encourages universities (and by extension, seminaries) to integrate emerging knowledge into faith-filled frameworks. Such integration meets the needs of today's young people, who want to see their vocation incorporated into their modern context. Its effectiveness also stems from the fact that when humans reflect on their Creator through *imago Dei*, they understand their origin and purpose; through *imago hominis*, they recognize their potential for growth and innovation. Encouraging both reflections during formation allows seminarians to perceive their journey toward becoming *alter Christus* as dynamic and grounded in real life. They will recognize Christ as present in today's challenges (including those related to coding, social media, and other digital arenas), reaffirming Christ's timeless presence in every age (cf. Heb. 13:8).

Pedagogical Framework for Implementing Insights

The insights from Sayari et al. (and the expanded considerations above) help us envision concrete strategies for preserving and enhancing the *alter Christus* goal amid an AI-influenced anthropology. Three pedagogical frameworks are proposed here to inspire further reflection:

1. **Incorporate guided self-reflection with AI in formation:** Seminary formators might allow seminarians to use specific AI tools under supervision and then guide them to

reflect on what these tools reveal about the seminarians themselves. This practice turns AI from a perceived threat into a diagnostic aid for spiritual and personal growth. For example, if a seminarian becomes overly reliant on technology, it can spark a discussion about trust in God and the value of human effort; if a seminarian uses AI in creative ways for ministry, it can affirm that individual's gifts and prompt a conversation about proper stewardship of those talents. In every case, the emphasis remains on using AI to foster self-knowledge as a step toward knowing God more deeply.

2. **Engage technology in light of faith to discern God's presence today:** Rather than avoiding technology, seminary formation should actively engage it through a theological lens. This could involve offering courses or workshops in which seminarians learn about AI and then reflect theologically on its implications. Instead of banning smartphones or the internet, a seminary might host guided discussions on "faith and technology," drawing on resources like the work of Sayari et al. or Herzfeld. Such engagement would demonstrate that the Church is not afraid of the modern world but seeks to discern God's presence within it. It models openness tempered by critical thinking, precisely the approach that the *alter Christus* ideal demands in the digital age.

3. **Foster community by integrating AI into collaborative learning:** Within a seminary environment, technology can be used to enhance collaborative learning and interaction, rather than isolating individuals. For example, a group of seminarians might jointly design a simple AI tool (such as a chatbot that answers questions about faith) as part of their training. Working together on such a project not only teaches them about technology but also helps them appreciate each other's talents and temperaments. The project becomes a communal act, reflecting the Body of Christ in action. In this way, the "otherness" of technology can serve as a medium through which humans come together, rather than a force that drives them apart.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have endeavored to demonstrate that integrating perspectives from artificial intelligence into theological formation presents an opportunity to deepen our understanding of both the *imago Dei* and the *imago hominis*. While the traditional frameworks of *imago Dei* and *imago Christi* remain foundational, the emerging *imago hominis* paradigm invites us to discern how human self-expression through technology can align with God's plan rather than oppose it. Instead of retreating from AI, priestly formation can harness it as a tool for reflection, creativity, and service, helping seminarians understand their humanity more fully in light of Christ. A priest formed as *an alter Christus* in the digital age will not fear technology, but rather be equipped to use it wisely, modeling ethical engagement and demonstrating that faith and innovation can work together. As Pope Benedict XVI (2009) once noted, the Church has always adopted whatever is true and useful in each era's culture, purifying it and elevating it with the Gospel. Indeed, that statement remains true today - the era of AI. The task of seminary

formators, then, is to ensure that seminarians see technology not as a snare to avoid but as a net to redeem. Only such a disposition ensures that the image of Christ shines forth in the present generation.

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