FAITH, FREEDOM, AND MORAL DIALOGUE: THE CHURCH'S ADAPTIVE ROLE IN DIGITAL DEMOCRACIES

Țoca C. V., Pázmány-Jianu S. E.

INTRODUCTION

Every aspect of human existence is being constantly reshaped by technological progress, from altering the way people work, interact, and connect with others. Researchers have noticed through time how conventional labor frameworks and social engagement is being transformed by automation, artificial intelligence, and digital advancements, with implications reaching far beyond economic spheres.[1] In this evolving environment–from families to educational and faith-based organizations– are experiencing the effects of technological progress, requiring new structures of thought and action.[2] In 'The Death of Distance 2.0' by Frances Cairncross, one of the most impactful forces shaping the contemporary society is the decline of geographical barriers to communication, expediating the affordable spread of knowledge, which was once restricted to a select group.[3] The Church is, also, part of this communication revolution: over 85% of churches worldwide are active on social media, while more than half of practicing Christians are currently engaging in worship online, and a third discover their communities for the first time digitally.[4] According to the 'Catholic Pastoral Constitution Gaudium et Spes', the Church's mission–"*to form the family of God's children…and to keep increasing it until the Lord returns*"[5], although unchanged, has been significantly altered in the way it is carried.[6] The Church is thus faced with a new moral discourse and

---

[1] G. Ugboh, "The Church and Techno-Theology: A Paradigm Shift of Theology and Theological Practice to Overcome Technological Disruptions," *Journal of Ethics in Entrepreneurship and Technology* 3, no. 2 (2023): 59–78, pp. 66-67, https://doi.org/10.1108/JEET-02-2023-0004.

[2] *Ibidem.*

[3] F. Cairncross, *The Death of Distance: How the Communications Revolution Will Change Our Lives*, 2nd ed. (The Orion Publishing Group Limited, 1997), 303 p., pp. 1,4, https://www.scribd.com/doc/160895887/The-Death-of-Distance-pdf.

[4] M. Kimanzi, *The Future of Social Media for Churches in 2025 and Beyond*, in Africads Agency (blog), April 28, 2025, https://africadslive.com/the-future-of-social-media-for-churches-in-2025-and-beyond/; S. Anderson, *Social Media for Churches: A Complete Guide in 2025*, in Social Champ (blog), September 23, 2024, https://www.socialchamp.com/blog/social-media-for-churches/.

[5] Pope Paul VI, "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World 'Gaudium et Spes,'" The Holy See, 1965, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

[6] *Ibidem.*

technological engagement paradigm, where humanity's envisionment of its relationship with God as well as how believers connect with others and the world have been revolutionized.[7]

This research explores the interaction between prominent Christian traditions–specifically the Catholic, Orthodox, and Evangelical Protestant (particularly Pentecostal, Charismatic and Baptist streams) branches–and democracy in the digital age, analyzing their adaptation of ecclesial authority, moral discourse, and evangelizing presence. Concentrating on the global spread of this phenomenon and the timeframe from around 2020 to 2025, the article examines on the changes in communication models from conventional pulpit-centered frameworks to online network platforms.

This article aims to address the following research questions: Q1. How is ecclesial authority being redefined in the digital era? Q2. How can the Church share its message and values online, respecting democratic pluralism? Q3. In what ways does digital evangelization contribute to civic dialogue and the formation of moral conscience in democratic societies?

1. Methodology

This research incorporates three analytical fields. Firstly, it utilizes a qualitative case study methodology to delve into how the Catholic, Orthodox, and Evangelical Protestant Christian branches are adapting their ecclesial authority in the digital environment. Secondly, a comparative analysis was essential to comprehensively understand the modus operandi behind every denomination, specifically the platforms they use, the content they create on social media, while also respecting democratic principles. Thirdly, using a diachronic analysis, it ascertains a clear timeframe of the way authority and communication models change over time.

The sources mentioned in this document were meticulously chosen from scholarly databases–ResearchGate, Scribd, SCIRP etc., adjacent to official documents from diverse organizations and institutions–Vatican Press, Harvard Divinity Bulletin, Konrad-Adenauer Stiftung, Pew Research Center etc., and veridic news outlets–Vatican News, CNN, The Independent etc.

2. From Pulpit to Platform: Redefining Ecclesial Authority in the Digital Decade

Religion represents both a moral compass and a community, being a guiding voice in the public affairs of democratic societies. With the advent of technological advancements, civic engagement has inevitably shifted towards

---

[7] A. Le Duc, "The Church's Mission of Dialogue in the Digital Age," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, Asia Pacific Mission Studies, vol. 4, no. 2 (2022): 31–56, pp. 32-33, https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4356082.

the digital space, shaped by sophisticated algorithms, which influence visibility and interactions. The Church's online presence is more than a modernization effort; it is a new model of engaging in the public sphere. As a result of recent developments – particularly during the pandemic – the digital era favors the platform model of communication – media networks, livestreaming, social media engagements – as opposed to the classic, centralized pulpit-based structure.[8]

Recent global statistics reveal that the total world population around 8.2 billion by 2025, with approximately 2.65 billion individuals – roughly 32.3% – identifying themselves as Christian. Additionally, Muslims represent about 25.2% of the world population, followed by Hindus with 13.8%. Within Christianity there is considerable diversity (see Figure 1), which indicates the denominational complexity present in contemporary Christianity.[9]

Table 3. Global Christianity by Tradition, 1900–2050.

	1900	1970	2000	2020	% p.a.*	mid-2025	2050
Total Christians, % of world	34.5	32.9	32.3	32.1	0.10	32.3	34.1
Affiliated Christians	522,440,000	1,112,204,000	1,886,371,000	2,383,436,000	0.91	2,493,823,000	3,161,041,000
Catholics	265,756,000	656,431,000	1,024,932,000	1,235,323,000	0.60	1,272,775,000	1,480,094,000
Protestants[1]	134,196,000	251,902,000	429,289,000	586,193,000	1.42	628,862,000	864,317,000
Independents	8,859,000	89,480,000	284,420,000	384,757,000	1.25	409,425,000	610,002,000
African	40,000	16,782,000	71,897,000	114,252,000	1.88	125,394,000	199,192,000
Asian	1,906,000	15,370,000	95,856,000	122,619,000	1.06	129,233,000	170,425,000
European	185,000	6,571,000	13,640,000	18,473,000	1.31	19,717,000	30,610,000
Latin American	33,000	8,963,000	27,949,000	42,889,000	1.42	46,014,000	81,293,000
Northern American	6,673,000	41,438,000	74,339,000	85,386,000	0.57	87,838,000	126,669,000
Oceanian	22,000	356,000	740,000	1,138,000	1.53	1,228,000	1,813,000
Orthodox	116,199,000	139,037,000	257,602,000	290,107,000	0.10	291,580,000	317,365,000
Unaffiliated Christians	35,906,000	103,927,000	101,533,000	136,069,000	2.17	151,494,000	151,163,000
Evangelicals[2]	80,912,000	108,841,000	270,707,000	390,532,000	1.47	420,040,000	620,970,000
Pentecostals/Charismatics[3]	981,000	57,631,000	442,643,000	623,844,000	1.25	663,863,000	1,031,503,000
Denominations	2,000	13,100	31,000	44,700	2.27	50,000	64,000
Congregations	400,000	1,330,000	3,000,000	4,180,000	1.03	4,400,000	5,500,000

Note: Categories below do not add up to affiliated Christians because of double affiliation (between traditions).
[1] Including Anglicans. Past tables have listed Anglicans separately.
[2] Churches and individuals who self-identify as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls.
[3] Church members involved in the Pentecostal/Charismatic/Independent Charismatic renewal in the Holy Spirit, also known collectively as "Renewalists."
*Column % p.a. trend. Average annual rate of change, 2020–2025, as % per year.
Source: Gina A. Zurlo and Todd M. Johnson, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden: Brill, accessed August 2024).

Fig. 1. Global Christianity by Tradition. 1900-2050

Source: G. A. Zurlo et al., op. cit.

[8] C. Mihai, "Media, Religion, and the Public Sphere," *Religions* 14, no. 10 (2023): 1253, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14101253; M. Andok, "The Impact of Online Media on Religious Authority," *Religions*, Contemporary Religion, Media and Popular Culture, vol. 15, no. 9 (2024): 1103–1117, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15091103.

[9] G. A. Zurlo et al., "World Christianity 2025: Regional Perspectives," *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 49, no. 1 (2024): 62–74, SageJournals: London, https://doi.org/10.1177/23969393241283291.

Furthermore, José Casanova outlines in his work how religion hasn't been limited by modernity. On the contrary, it pushed it in the public sphere, where faith is no longer an outside authority, but a link between moral identity and civic participation.[10] Religious communities built on common convictions and goals encourage their members to embody those convictions through concrete actions (e.g. volunteering, voting etc.) within their everyday lives.[11] Based on Jeremiah 29:5-11, God instructs His people to prosper in the land they inhabit, promoting the welfare of their city because their existence is neither coincidental but directed by God's will, who is capable of using every situation for His glory.[12] Expanding on the premise of Casanova, Jürgen Habermas views communicative action as the pillar of democracy, where inclusive, rational dialogue fosters truth. The communicative sphere has been broadened by digital media, wherein the Church's pastoral voice became a contributor in global democratic discussions.

In light of this, Heidi Campbell's networked religion theory is extremely useful because authority, community, and practice are transformed reformed through online connections, where authentic relationships are replacing institutional status as the basis of legitimacy. This represents a shift from conventional to charismatic or relational authority.[13] Along the same lines, Stewart Hoover notes that media shapes religion not just transmits it; building a theological environment where believers explore meaning in online communities. In the digital era, ecclesial authority–from popes to parish priests, from Orthodox patriarchs to evangelical pastors–is now addressing a participatory congregation capable of giving feedback, adapting, and criticizing.[14]

---

[10] J. Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (University of Chicago Press, 1994), 340 p., pp. 40-74, https://www.scribd.com/document/560290409/Jose-Casanova-Public-Religions-in-the-Modern-World-University-of-Chicago-Press.

[11] S. Sunil and S. K. Verma, "Moral Identity and Its Links to Ethical Ideology and Civic Engagement," *SAGE Publications*, Journal of Human Values, vol. 24, no. 2 (2018): 1–10, https://doi.org/10.1177/0971685818754547; M. Tatala et al., "Personal Aspects of Religiosity and Civic Engagement: The Mediating Role of Prayer," *Religions*, The Concept of Spirituality and Its Place in Contemporary Societies, vol. 15, no. 2 (2024): 192, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15020192.

[12] NAE staff, *For the Health of the Nation. An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsability* (National Association of Evangelicals, 2018), 56 p., p. 9, https://www.nae.org/for-the-health-of-a-nation/the-basis-for-christian-civic-engagement/.

[13] H. A. Campbell and R. Tsuria, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in Digital Media*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2022), 308 p., pp. 23-103, https://www.scribd.com/document/576021433/Heidi-A-Campbell-Ruth-Tsuria-eds-Digital-Religion-Understanding-Religious-Practice-in-Digital-Media.

[14] R. Horwitz, "Religion in the Digital Age," *ResearchGate*, Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, vol. 46, no. 2 (2007): 281–285, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5906.2007.00357_1.x.

In the following section of this chapter, the research turns its focus on the leadership adaptation of each of the three denominational branches, succeeding with a comparative analysis of their unique approaches and directions.

The Digital Diplomacy Structure developed by the Catholic Church

The Catholic ecclesiastical authority has a threefold structure–Scripture, Tradition and the Magisterium – commonly known as the 'three-legged stool' of faith. Scripture represents the Word of God revealed to us; Tradition represents the oral teachings passed down from Christ to the apostles and their bishop successors–better known as the apostolic succession; and the Magisterium, exerted by the pope and bishops under Christ's authority, which protect and interpret both. In this context, the institutional framework lays a clear distinction between the clergy and laity.[15]

Despite this, the hierarchical structure is being reenvisioned by the new dawning age of digital technology and diplomacy. In accordance with Pope Benedict XVI speech from 2009, new media must go beyond merely connecting people, it should be a proponent for a culture founded on 'respect, dialogue, and friendship'. On a similar note, Pope Francis asserted that the digital realm has merged with our daily lives, changing the ways in which humanity connects, communicates, and learns. Hence, digital platforms have become venues for encounter, moral discourse, and evangelization, to which the Church has to adapt.[16]

A prominent illustration is the Vatican's involvement on digital platforms. In January 2019, Pope Francis had announced the launch of 'Click to Pray'–the official multilingual app and platform of the Pope's 'Worldwide Prayer Network' and its youth division, the 'Eucharistic Youth Movement'. The platform quickly garnered global appeal: in only three days, over 167,000 users have downloaded the app, resulting in more than a million prayer interactions from between January 20-22.[17] Additionally, the Pope broadened his social media reach by posting on Instagram–attracting 5.8 million

---

[15] G. R. Allison, *How a Roman Catholic View of Church Authority Compares to a Protestant View*, in 9Marks (blog), 2016, https://www.9marks.org/article/how-a-roman-catholic-view-of-church-authority-compares-to-a-protestant-view/.

[16] P. Ruffini, *Towards Full Presence. A Pastoral Reflection on Engagement with Social Media*, The Holy See Press Office, May 29, 2023, https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2023/05/29/230529g.html.

[17] Vatican News staff, *Pope Launches His Click to Pray App Profile*, Vatican News (Vatican), January 20, 2019, https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2019-01/pope-launches-click-to-pray-app.html.

followers by 2020–and on Twitter–where he received an average of 36,750 likes per tweet and 7,998 retweets.[18]

The shift in the Church's stance towards digital platforms is due to its universal mission (*catholicitas*) to reach as many people as possible. The 'Pontifical Council for Social Communications' states that "*the Church herself is a communio, a communion of persons and eucharistic communities*"[19], with ecclesiastical authority reflecting pastoral care, authenticity, and open communication, resulting in a better model of "*the propagation and consolidation of the kingdom of God.*"[20] José Casanova's public religion theory–supporting this change of course–highlights that religion maintains its importance in democratic societies when it addresses public matters and participates in moral discourse instead of remaining in the private domain.[21] Heidi Campbell's idea of networked religion, captures how institutional legitimacy now co-exists with legitimacy based on networks–where genuine relationships becoming vital for digital media.[22]

Orthodox Churches–from Slower Adaptation to Rising Authenticity

The Eastern Orthodox Church comprises of fourteen autocephalous (self-governing) and six autonomous churches, with each administrating its internal affairs independently within specific geographical boundaries. Ecclesiastical authority is shared among equals, and although, the Patriarch of Constantinople serves as primus inter pares–first among equals–there is no such thing as centralized papal role as the Catholic structure, hence his primacy is one of prestige rather than jurisdictional power. Historically, Orthodoxy originated from Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and the Middle East, expanding into North America only in the eighteenth century through missionaries.[23] Structurally, Orthodoxy embodies a tripartite community–clergy, monastics, and laity–though distinct, they complement each other. The clergy–bishops, priests, and deacons–are considered as spiritual leaders responsible for maintaining the doctrine and conducting the ceremonies; whereas, the monastics–monks and nuns–lead a life of prayer and spiritual

---

[18] C. Wooden, *Resource Not Risk: Pope Reflects on Using Social Media for Good*, in The Catholic Sun (blog), January 24, 2019, https://thecatholicsun.com/resource-not-risk-pope-reflects-on-using-social-media-for-good/.

[19] J. P. Foley, *The Church and Internet*, The Holy See, February 22, 2002, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_200 20228_church-internet_en.html.

[20] *Ibidem.*

[21] J. Casanova, *op. cit*.

[22] H. A. Campbell, "Religion and the Internet," *Scholar Commons*, Communication Research Trends, vol. 25, no. 1 (2006): 1–44, https://doi.org/10.1111/J.1083-6101.2007.00362.X.

[23] J. Turner, "Orthodox Christianity in the Digital Age," *Praeger*, Religion online: How digital technology is changing the way we worship and pray, vol. 2 (January 2019): 111–125, pp. 112-113, https://www.academia.edu/36698690/Orthodox_Christianity_in_the_Digital_Age.

discipline based on poverty, chastity, and obedience, yet unlike the Roman Catholic framework, they are not part of fixed religious order. The laity, on the other hand, represent the believers, who actively engage in worship and parish life, having no part in the leadership structure.[24]

According to the Church's ecclesiology–founded on New Testament texts, early canons, and the teachings of the Church Fathers–the Body of Christ is completely manifested through each local Eucharistic assembly led by its bishop. The protector of apostolic belief and center of sacramental existence–namely the bishop–represents the apostolic continuity through the unbroken passage of faith rather than institutional hierarchy. Consequently, Orthodox authority–being primarily conciliar and sacramental–concentrates on unity in both doctrine and physical worship instead of centralized control.[25]

With the rise of digital platforms–which alter how believers experience faith– Orthodox churches have slowly begun to embrace new forms of communication, by focusing on authenticity and community relations over rapid institutional restructuring. Some scholars have notes that even though lay members utilize technology similarly to their non-Orthodox counterparts, institutional approval is more often cautious and ambivalent. The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified this polemic in the midst of religious leaders, wherein they have to rethink how to balance expressing faith online authentically and its sacramental nature. Chad Houk's argument rests on theoretical principles formulated by Kaft and Cook, where he highlights how technologies–having lost their neutral stance–play an active role in molding religious experiences.[26] Meanwhile, Birgit Meyer claims that since faith heavily relies on mediation, new media must be deemed as an extension of religious expression instead of a disruption.[27] Jeffers Engelhardt makes a clear distinction between unmarked media–conventional conduits like icons, the Eucharist, and incense–and marked media made up of livestreams, digital liturgies, and apps, which turn the sacred into digital format.[28] This

---

[24] C. Scroope, *Christianity: Eastern Orthodox – Social Structure and Institutions*, in Cultural Atlas (blog), January 1, 2022, https://culturalatlas.sbs.com.au/religions/christianity-eastern-orthodox/resources/christianity-eastern-orthodox-social-structure-and-institutions.

[25] J. Meyendorff, ed., *Eastern Orthodoxy – Church Structure, Canon Law, Sacraments*, Britannica, November 2, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Eastern-Orthodoxy/The-structure-of-the-church.

[26] C. Houk, "Toward an Understanding of the Role of Digital Technology in Orthodox Life and Practice," *Journal of the International Society for Orthodox Church Music*, Journal of the International Society for Orthodox Church Music, vol. 6, no. 1 (2025): 167–176, pp. 167-171, https://doi.org/10.57050/jisocm.113100.

[27] B. Meyer, "Religion as Mediation," *ResearchGate*, Entangled Religions, vol. 11, no. 3 (2020): 1–31, https://doi.org/10.46586/er.11.2020.8444.

[28] C. Houk, *op. cit.*

adjustment is best illustrated by the Orthodox Christian Network (OCN), a ministry in the U.S. that disseminates its messages in more than 190 countries through podcasts, livestreams, and online radio. Fundamental democratic values, such as transparency, conversation, and accessibility; are adopted in the everyday institutional engagements–found in the 'Social Media Guidelines for Clergy and Lay Leaders of the Diocese of New York and New Jersey' and 'Utilizing Facebook for Your Parish Ministries' of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America.[29] The shift of ecclesiastical authority reflects Bauman's argument of liquid modernity, where institutions must be both flexible and engaging, rather than rigid and hierarchical–their voices being heard globally.[30]

Evangelical Protestant Churches as Digital Pioneers

Protestantism denotes the reform movements started by Martin Luther in 1517, after criticizing the indulgences of the Roman Catholic Church, becoming official at the Diet of Worms (1521) when Luther declined to recant. The Reformation's widespread influence was possible due to the invention of the press, which produced and disseminated quickly numerous Bibles, catechisms and pamphlets around the German territories, Swiss cities, England and Scotland.[31] The fundamental doctrines of classic Protestantism are the 'Five Solas': 'Sola Scriptura (Scripture as the supreme authority)', 'Sola Fide (justification by faith)', 'Sola Gratia (salvation through grace, not works)', 'Solus Christus (Christ alone is mediator)', and 'Soli Deo Gloria (all for God's glory)'.[32] Several streams have been arisen from the sixteenth century–each with its own theological and institutional norms–such as, Lutherans, Reformed (Calvinists and Presbyterians), Anglican, Anabaptists (Mennonites, Quakers, and Brethrens), and the Free-Church movements after the seventeenth century (Baptists, Methodists, Adventists, Pentecostals, and Charismatics). Evangelicalism emerged in the eighteenth century through the revitalized movements within Protestantism–led by prominent figures like

---

[29] *Utilizing Facebook for Your Parish Ministries – Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America*, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, accessed November 7, 2025, https://www.goarch.org/-/utilizing-facebook-for-your-parish-ministries; Archbishop of New York Michael and The Council of Presbyters of the Diocese of New York and New Jersey, *Social Media Guidelines for Clergy and Lay Leaders of the Diocese of New York and New Jersey* (The Diocese of New York and New Jersey, 2020), 12, https://www.nynjoca.org/files/Social-Media-Guidelines-final-2020-06-19.pdf.

[30] Z. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 1st ed. (Polity Press, 2000), 232 p., pp. 14-50, https://giuseppecapograssi.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/bauman-liquid-modernity.pdf.

[31] Britannica Editors, *Reformation. Christianity*, in Britannica, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/event/Reformation.

[32] G. J. Williams, "The Five Solas of the Reformation: Then and Now," *Unio Cum Christo* 3, no. 1 (2017): 13-34, https://doi.org/10.35285/ucc3.1.2017.art1.

George Whitefield and John Wesley from the Britain and North America.[33] David Bebbington came up with the four defining qualities of evangelical faith: 'conversionism (new birth)', 'activism (evangelization through missionaries)', 'biblicism (high regard for Scripture's authority)', and 'crucicentrism (Christs' atoning work)'. While maintaining the quadrilateral qualities, Pentecostals and Charismatics incorporate their own pneumatology (Spirit baptism, charisms).[34]

Evangelical Protestants (Baptists, Pentecostals, Charismatics) have rapidly adapted to the digital age, by embracing new practices, from creating Bible apps and platforms for their ministries to incorporating livestreams, podcasts and short videos in their mission to spread the Gospel. This rapid transition from pulpit to platform is possible because faith and leadership is regarded as personal and their mission is proactive, where digital platforms and tools become a setting for outreach.[35] A new phenomenon taking place in evangelical Protestantism–particularly in the megachurch settings (average attendance of more than 2,000 persons in its weekly worship services)–is the rise of 'pastor-influencers'. These megachurches make use of secular social media techniques–personal branding, curating their identity for various platforms, livestreamed discussions, glimpses from behind-the-scenes, anecdotes, interactive Q&A sessions etc.–to engage with their online communities.[36] Notable examples are Steven Furtick (Elevation Church), Bill Johnson (Bethel Church), Craig Groeschel (Life.Church), and T.D. Jakes (The Potter's House).

This transition is consistent with Hoover's research on mediatizing religion through different media formats, together with Campbell's idea of religious authority becoming relational networks as opposed to formal structures. A 2025 joint research by Barna Group and 'National Religious Broadcasters' (NRB) discovered that 64% of Gen Zs and 58% of Millennials

---

[33] Britannica Editors, "Great Awakening. American Religious Movement," in *Britannica*, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/event/Great-Awakening.

[34] A. Atherstone and D. C. Jones, *The Routledge Research Companion to the History of Evangelicalism*, Routledge Studies in Evangelicalism (Routledge, 2019), 312 p., pp. 1-20, https://api.pageplace.de/preview/DT0400.9781317041535_A37589166/preview-9781317041535_A37589166.pdf.

[35] Grey Matter Research and Infinity Concepts, *Media Matters: Evangelicals and the Media* (Grey Matter Research, Infinity Concepts, 2022), 26 p., https://www.infinityconcepts.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Media-Matters-FINAL-Compressed.pdf.

[36] S. Scheller et al., "#MarketingFaith: The Megachurch Pastor as Social Media Influencer," in *Research Perspectives on Social Media Influencers and Their Followers*, by Brandi Watkins (Lexington Books, 2021), 248 p., pp. 51-71 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/386104044_MarketingFaith_The_Megachurch_Pastor_as_Social_Media_Influencer.

in the U.S. engage with Christian social media accounts.[37] Concurrently, another survey shows that more than 60% of American adults consume Christian content–from social media to YouTube, podcasts and radio.[38] Moreover, some of these churches have created their own digital platforms like Life.Church's 'YouVersion' Bible app–used for daily devotionals, having reached one billion downloads in 2025, with 12% more installs than 2024.[39] Additionally, Christian artists frequently feature on Billboard charts–Forrest Frank, CeCe Winans, Maverick City, Brandon Lake etc.–demonstrating the democratization of faith expression.[40]

Throughout the second chapter, it has been made clear how the church's authority within three significant Christian traditions has evolved in the digital era. The Catholic Church–based on hierarchical authority and sacramental mediation–has seen a shift towards a relational and connected presence on digital media. The Orthodox tradition–founded on liturgical continuity, conciliar governance, and cautious media integration–now has to find a balance between the democratization of digital platforms and its sacramental identity. The Evangelical Protestant branch–with its focus on personal growth, Scripture-driven activism, and relational participation–has become a digital pioneer out of the three traditions, by rapidly adapting to the times and swiftly redefining its leadership through connectivity, authenticity, and worldwide media presence.

Despite their doctrinal and theological differences, all three branches display the democratic language that has emerged in the digital public sphere: networked communities, participation, and availability. At present, ecclesial communication is not confined to the one-way model of clergy speaking from the pulpit to the congregation; instead, believers participate in interactive networks, actively engaging in faith discussions on online platforms.

3. Evangelization as Civic Dialogue in the Democratic Public Sphere

This section examines how evangelization–once regarded as a unilateral declaration of the Gospel–has transformed in the digital age to a networked public sphere, where faith transmission is considered as civic participation.

---

[37] NRB staff, *Christian Media Reaches Digitally Engaged, Spiritually Committed Younger Demographic*, in NRB (blog), May 1, 2025, https://nrb.org/christian-media-reaches-digitally-engaged-spiritually-committed-younger-demographic/.

[38] *Idem*, *Most Americans Engage with Christian Media, NRB and Barna Report*, in NRB (blog), April 24, 2025, https://nrb.org/most-americans-engage-with-christian-media-nrb-and-barna-report/.

[39] *YouVersion, Creator of the World's Most Popular Bible App, Reaches One Billion Installs*, YouVersion, October 28, 2025, https://www.youversion.com/news/bible-app-reaches-one-billion-installs.

[40] M. Cusson, *Top Christian Artists*, Billboard, 2024, https://www.billboard.com/charts/year-end/top-christian-artists/.

As a result, the Church strengthens democratic diversity and moral understanding by re-humanizing digital engagement.

The Great Commission of the Church to spread the Gospel–"Now wherever you go, make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit" (e.g., Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:15, TPT)–has transcended geographical, cultural, and linguistic barriers. Thus, the rise of digital technologies, just as the invention of the press, support this mission, by creating a worldwide, interconnected, and participatory space.[41] Moreover, evangelism can be considered, theologically, as a collection of diverse actions that introduces individuals into God's kingdom for the first time by the public declaration of God's goodness made known in Jesus Christ. As noted earlier, digital evangelization–purposeful exercise of the Internet, mobile and social media channels to spread the message and address personal needs–becomes a form of civic dialogue. [42] In this regard, the congregation is no longer just a local structure but it includes the wider digital space, with younger generations that engage with it daily, as well as those who are confined at home or isolated can be reached. Because believers are now actively involved in digital activities–livestreamed services, interactive devotionals, online small groups–they become participants in the Church's life and propagation of its mission. This change signifies the evolution of the public sphere within digital circumstances. Based on Renate Fischer's findings on platformization and authorization, which collectively mold the contemporary media public sphere: digital platforms circumvent traditional gatekeepers and allow users to create content. The transformation in digital spaces, shifts thereby the believer's stance from mere bystanders in a program to involved participants. Therefore, a new religious culture is emerging, marked by civic virtues–transparency, openness, and moral presence–in place of the conventional unidirectional communication shared from the pulpit.[43]

In democratic societies, civic engagement is defined by the American Psychological Association as "individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern".[44] On this account, digital evangelization and civic virtues intertwine, since Christians participate in digital networks to share their faith, help communities, and engage with diverse audiences. The moral and social mission of the Church is to love,

---

[41] B. G. Nsereka and T. Nwanze, "Evangelism in the Era of New Media," *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science* 05, no. 08 (2021): 643–648, https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2021.5834.

[42] *What Is Digital Evangelism?*, The Methodist Church, 2020, 6 p., pp. 2-4, https://media.methodist.org.uk/media/documents/what-is-digital-evangelism_.pdf.

[43] R. Fischer and O. Jarren, "The Platformization of the Public Sphere and Its Challenge to Democracy," *SageJournals*, Philosophy & Social Criticism, vol. 50, no. 1 (2023): 200–215, https://doi.org/10.1177/01914537231203535.

[44] S. Sunil and S. K. Verma, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

pursue unity, and promote peace (e.g., Romans 12:9-18), but also to influence both governments and citizens to ensure justice (e.g., Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-17).[45] Although, these digital platforms foster a greater outreach, there are certain drawbacks that have been noticed online–impersonal content, algorithmic prejudice, misinformation, disinformation, false teachings, and fragmented audiences. Therefore, there is a need for ethical principles and digital discernment for both clergy and laity–being mindful, accountable, and relational in their interactions on online platforms. Accordingly, the Church assumes the role of a moral compass, offering a re-humanizing presence within a chaotic digital landscape characterized by individualism and disunity.[46]

Throughout the three religious traditions, the paradigm shift is represented by a new wave of spiritual leaders who use doctrine in their dialogue. Within the Catholic Church, as previously mentioned in Chapter II, Pope Francis symbolized the pastoral movement closer to sincerity and proximity–with his Twitter (now X) and Instagram posts. Correspondingly, Father Mike Schmitz and influencer Lila Rose from the U.S., make Scripture more approachable for daily implementation through their podcasts (e.g., The Bible in a Year podcast, The Lila Rose Show).[47] Furthermore, the work of Orthodox Christian Network (OCN), Father Andrew Stephen Damick (U.S.), and Father George Frangos (Australia) highlight the way liturgical depth and theological contemplation can maintain their sacramental nature on digital platforms.[48] In the meantime, Evangelical Protestant churches act as digital pioneers, such as Craig Groeschel and Steven Furtick's congregations with worldwide audiences following them on various platforms (e.g., YouTube, TikTok, Instagram).[49] Conclusively, digital evangelization is about sanctifying screens rather than dominating them; it's about molding consciences, not about building a loyal following.

---

[45] NAE staff, *For the Health of the Nation. An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsability* (National Association of Evangelicals, 2018), 56 p., pp. 8-10, https://www.nae.org/for-the-health-of-a-nation/the-basis-for-christian-civic-engagement/.

[46] C.Fuchs, "The Digital Commons and the Digital Public Sphere: How to Advance Digital Democracy Today," *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* 16, no. 1 (2021): 9-26, https://doi.org/10.16997/wpcc.917.

[47] L. H. Griffin, *Social Media Influencers and the Rise of a Platform Catholicism*, in Political Theology Network (blog), October 24, 2025, https://politicaltheology.com/social-media-influencers-and-the-rise-of-a-platform-catholicism/.

[48] *Top 40 Orthodox Influencers in 2025*, FeedSpot for Influencers, September 8, 2025, https://influencers.feedspot.com/orthodox_instagram_influencers/.

[49] *Top 100 Christian Influencers in 2025*, FeedSpot for Influencers, December 24, 2020, https://influencers.feedspot.com/christian_lifestyle_instagram_influencers/.

CONCLUSION

This article has traced the evolution of ecclesiastical authority from pulpit to platform across Catholic, Orthodox, and Evangelical Protestant traditions. Therefore, the shift goes beyond technological aspects, it also involves theological, institutional, and civic. The Catholic Church's hierarchical frameworks are gradually accompanied by networked digital presence; while, the Orthodox Church is confronted by incorporating digital technologies within their liturgies and sacraments. Evangelical Protestantism–rooted in personal conversion, activism, and Scripture–has swiftly adapted their ministry to social media developments. Moreover, evangelization presently utilizes various tools like social media platforms, podcasts, apps, livestreaming; besides their classic Sunday service activities. As a result, the congregation functions as co-agents and digital citizens in the democratic public sphere. The Church thus becomes a dialogue partner, rather than just a distant entity; acting as a moral compass, supporting civic virtues in a society. Hence, in the digital environment, discernment has to be cultivated– moral knowledge, theological contemplation, community building. In this manner, the Church maintains its mission, but it also supports the welfare of the community. The Gospel is no longer just unilaterally preached; it is networked and democratically lived–as the progress continues.

ABSTRACT

The article analyzes the evolution of Christian ecclesiastical authority within the digital age, revolving around Catholic, Orthodox, and Evangelical Protestant traditions and their engagement in democratic societies. Following the transition from pulpit to platform, the article focuses of how the Church now connects with believers in a relational, networked manner using media tools like apps, livestreams, podcasts, and social media dialogues. Three major changes are examined throughout the article: (1) how leadership and authority are redefined–centering more on connection and authenticity and less on position; (2) the expansion of evangelization tools with digital platforms acting as mission territories; (3) the Church's renewed social function–providing moral counsel, promoting dialogue and participation within the digital public sphere. Drawing upon theories of Campbell's networked religion–that puts an emphasis on shifting authorities in digital spaces–and Hoover's mediatization of religion, it reveals why Evangelical Protestant churches evolved into digital pioneers, while Catholic and Orthodox branches uniquely approach this transition. This article thus examines both opportunities and risks of digital platform's integration in ecclesiastical activities–from growing public engagement, global accessibility, and democratized dialogue, to algorithmic bias, impersonal content, misinformation, and fragmented audiences.

REFERENCES

1. Allison, Gregg R. "How a Roman Catholic View of Church Authority Compares to a Protestant View." *9Marks*, 2016. https://www.9marks.org/ article/how-a-roman-catholic-view-of-church-authority-compares-to-a-protestant-view/.

2. Anderson, Sarah. "Social Media for Churches: A Complete Guide in 2025." Marketing. *Social Champ*, September 23, 2024. https://www.socialchamp.com/blog/social-media-for-churches/.

3. Andok, Mónika. "The Impact of Online Media on Religious Authority." *Religions*, Contemporary Religion, Media and Popular Culture, vol. 15, no. 9 (2024): 1103–17. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15091103.

4. Archbishop of New York Michael and The Council of Presbyters of the Diocese of New York and New Jersey. *Social Media Guidelines for Clergy and Lay Leaders of the Diocese of New York and New Jersey*. The Diocese of New York and New Jersey, 2020. https://www.nynjoca.org/files/ Social-Media-Guidelines-final-2020-06-19.pdf.

5. Atherstone, Andrew, and David Ceri Jones. *The Routledge Research Companion to the History of Evangelicalism*. Routledge Studies in Evangelicalism. Routledge, 2019. https://api.pageplace.de/preview/ DT0400.9781317041535_A37589166/preview-9781317041535_A37589166.pdf.

6. Bauman, Zygmunt. *Liquid Modernity*. 1st ed. Polity Press, 2000. https://giuseppecapograssi.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/bauman-liquid-modernity.pdf.

7. Britannica Editors. "Great Awakening. American Religious Movement." In *Britannica*. 2025. https://www.britannica.com/event/Great-Awakening.

8. Britannica Editors. "Reformation. Christianity." In *Britannica*. 2025. https://www.britannica.com/event/Reformation.

9. Cairncross, Frances. *The Death of Distance: How the Communications Revolution Will Change Our Lives*. 2nd ed. The Orion Publishing Group Limited, 1997. https://www.scribd.com/doc/ 160895887/The-Death-of-Distance-pdf.

10. Campbell, Heidi A. "Religion and the Internet." *Scholar Commons*, Communication Research Trends, vol. 25, no. 1 (2006): 1–44. https://doi.org/10.1111/J.1083-6101.2007.00362.X.

11. Campbell, Heidi A., and Ruth Tsuria. *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in Digital Media*. 2nd ed. Routledge, 2022. https://www.scribd.com/document/576021433/Heidi-A-Campbell-Ruth-Tsuria-eds-Digital-Religion-Understanding-Religious-Practice-in-Digital-Media.

12. Casanova, José. *Public Religions in the Modern World*. University of Chicago Press, 1994. https://www.scribd.com/document/560290409/Jose-Casanova-Public-Religions-in-the-Modern-World-University-of-Chicago-Press.

13. Cusson, Michael. "Top Christian Artists." *Billboard*, 2024. https://www.billboard.com/charts/year-end/top-christian-artists/.

14. FeedSpot for Influencers. "Top 40 Orthodox Influencers in 2025." September 8, 2025. https://influencers.feedspot.com/orthodox_instagram_influencers/.

15. FeedSpot for Influencers. "Top 100 Christian Influencers in 2025." December 24, 2020. https://influencers.feedspot.com/christian_lifestyle_instagram_influencers/.

16. Fischer, Renate, and Otfried Jarren. "The Platformization of the Public Sphere and Its Challenge to Democracy." *SageJournals*, Philosophy & Social Criticism, vol. 50, no. 1 (2023): 200–215. https://doi.org/10.1177/01914537231203535.

17. Foley, John P. "The Church and Internet." The Holy See, February 22, 2002.
https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_20020228_church-internet_en.html.

18. Fuchs, Christian. "The Digital Commons and the Digital Public Sphere: How to Advance Digital Democracy Today." *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* 16, no. 1 (2021). https://doi.org/10.16997/wpcc.917.

19. Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America. "Utilizing Facebook for Your Parish Ministries – Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America." 2023. https://www.goarch.org/-/utilizing-facebook-for-your-parish-ministries.

20. Grey Matter Research and Infinity Concepts. *Media Matters: Evangelicals and the Media*. Grey Matter Research, Infinity Concepts, 2022. https://www.infinityconcepts.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Media-Matters-FINAL-Compressed.pdf.

21. Griffin, Lauren Horn. "Social Media Influencers and the Rise of a Platform Catholicism." *Political Theology Network*, October 24, 2025. https://politicaltheology.com/social-media-influencers-and-the-rise-of-a-platform-catholicism/.

22. Horwitz, Robert. "Religion in the Digital Age." *ResearchGate*, Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, vol. 46, no. 2 (2007): 281–85. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5906.2007.00357_1.x.

23. Houk, Chad. "Toward an Understanding of the Role of Digital Technology in Orthodox Life and Practice." *Journal of the International*

Society for Orthodox Church Music, Journal of the International Society for Orthodox Church Music, vol. 6, no. 1 (2025): 167–76. https://doi.org/10.57050/jisocm.113100.

24. Kimanzi, Michael. "The Future of Social Media for Churches in 2025 and Beyond." *Africads Agency*, April 28, 2025. https://africadslive.com/the-future-of-social-media-for-churches-in-2025-and-beyond/.

25. Le Duc, Anthony. "The Church's Mission of Dialogue in the Digital Age." *SSRN Electronic Journal*, Asia Pacific Mission Studies, vol. 4, no. 2 (2022): 31–56. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4356082.

26. Meyer, Birgit. "Religion as Mediation." *ResearchGate*, Entangled Religions, vol. 11, no. 3 (2020): 1–31. https://doi.org/10.46586/er.11.2020.8444.

27. Mihai, Coman. "Media, Religion, and the Public Sphere." *Religions* 14, no. 10 (2023): 1253. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14101253.

28. NAE staff. *For the Health of the Nation. An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsability*. National Association of Evangelicals, 2018. https://www.nae.org/for-the-health-of-a-nation/the-basis-for-christian-civic-engagement/.

29. NRB staff. "Christian Media Reaches Digitally Engaged, Spiritually Committed Younger Demographic." *NRB*, May 1, 2025. https://nrb.org/christian-media-reaches-digitally-engaged-spiritually-committed-younger-demographic/.

30. NRB staff. "Most Americans Engage with Christian Media, NRB and Barna Report." *NRB*, April 24, 2025. https://nrb.org/most-americans-engage-with-christian-media-nrb-and-barna-report/.

31. Nsereka, Barigbon Gbara, and Tessy Nwanze. "Evangelism in the Era of New Media." *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science* 05, no. 08 (2021): 643–48. https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2021.5834.

32. Pope Paul VI. "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World 'Gaudium et Spes.'" The Holy See, 1965. https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

33. Ruffini, Paolo. "Towards Full Presence. A Pastoral Reflection on Engagement with Social Media." The Holy See Press Office, May 29, 2023. https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2023/05/29/230529g.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

34. Scheller, Sydney, Elizabeth B. Jones, and Nathan A. Vick. "#MarketingFaith: The Megachurch Pastor as Social Media Influencer." In *Research Perspectives on Social Media Influencers and Their Followers*, by

Brandi Watkins. Lexington Books, 2021. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/386104044_MarketingFaith_The_Megachurch_Pastor_as_Social_Media_Influencer.

35. Scroope, Chara. "Christianity: Eastern Orthodox – Social Structure and Institutions." *Cultural Atlas*, January 1, 2022. https://culturalatlas.sbs.com.au/religions/christianity-eastern-orthodox/resources/christianity-eastern-orthodox-social-structure-and-institutions.

36. Sunil, Soorya, and Sunil K. Verma. "Moral Identity and Its Links to Ethical Ideology and Civic Engagement." *SAGE Publications*, Journal of Human Values, vol. 24, no. 2 (2018): 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1177/0971685818754547.

37. Tatala, Małgorzata, Ryszard Klamut, and Celina Timoszyk-Tomczak. "Personal Aspects of Religiosity and Civic Engagement: The Mediating Role of Prayer." *Religions*, The Concept of Spirituality and Its Place in Contemporary Societies, vol. 15, no. 2 (2024): 192. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15020192.

38. Turner, Jack. "Orthodox Christianity in the Digital Age." *Praeger*, Religion online: How digital technology is changing the way we worship and pray, vol. 2 (January 2019): 111–25.

39. Ugboh, Godspower. "The Church and Techno-Theology: A Paradigm Shift of Theology and Theological Practice to Overcome Technological Disruptions." *Journal of Ethics in Entrepreneurship and Technology* 3, no. 2 (2023): 59–78. https://doi.org/10.1108/JEET-02-2023-0004.

40. Vatican News staff. "Pope Launches His Click to Pray App Profile." *Vatican News* (Vatican), January 20, 2019. https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2019-01/pope-launches-click-to-pray-app.html.

41. "What Is Digital Evangelism?" The Methodist Church, 2020. https://media.methodist.org.uk/media/documents/what-is-digital-evangelism_.pdf.

42. Williams, Garry J. "The Five Solas of the Reformation: Then and Now." *Unio Cum Christo* 3, no. 1 (2017): 13. https://doi.org/10.35285/ucc3.1.2017.art1.

43. Wooden, Cindy. "Resource Not Risk: Pope Reflects on Using Social Media for Good." *The Catholic Sun*, January 24, 2019. https://thecatholicsun.com/resource-not-risk-pope-reflects-on-using-social-media-for-good/.

44. "YouVersion, Creator of the World's Most Popular Bible App, Reaches One Billion Installs." *YouVersion*, October 28, 2025. https://www.youversion.com/news/bible-app-reaches-one-billion-installs.

45. Zurlo, Gina A., Todd M. Johnson, and Peter F. Crossing. "World Christianity 2025: Regional Perspectives." *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 49, no. 1 (2024): 62–74. Sage UK: London, England. https://doi.org/10.1177/23969393241283291.

Information about the authors:
Țoca Constantin Vasile,
Associate Professor,
PhD at the Department of International Relations and European Studies
University of Oradea
Strada Universității 1, 410087 Oradea, Bihor County, Romania

Pázmány-Jianu Sarah-Elissa,
MA Student in Regional Development and Institutional Communication
University of Oradea
Strada Universității 1, 410087 Oradea, Bihor County, Romania