

Agency, Religion, and Digitalization

Interdisciplinary Research and Systematic Reflections. *By Ilona Nord and Kerstin Radde-Antweiler*

As digitalization processes become increasingly prevalent in people's daily lives, there is a growing urgency within the field of religion to clarify the role that these processes—and artificial intelligence (AI) in particular—play in shaping people's scope for action and their agency. The actions of humans and machines, or the datafied processes associated with them, can no longer be meaningfully understood as separate entities (cf. Hepp&Görland 2024). This article provides an introduction to the current state of interdisciplinary research on this question. Religious practice is understood as not solely attributable to human entities, yet as being bound to them in a specific way. The findings are significant for further religious and in a broader sense also cultural studies because they aim to contribute to basic research on the concept of agency, which has thus far received little conceptual attention.

To address this research project, an interdisciplinary and international research network funded by the German Research Foundation (Conceptualizing Agency, Religion and Digitalization (CARD)) was established. This network facilitates an intensive exchange on the state of the art among the participating disciplines of science of religion, theology, philosophy, sociology, communication and media studies, computer science, and human-computer interaction.

Outside the field of religion, research has long been conducted on processes of transformation, particularly as they relate to artificial intelligence (cf. e.g., Ess 2014). In the context of religion(s), a field of discussion on Digital Religions and Digital Theologies has emerged over the past thirty years, though it has received little attention in public debates beyond this sphere. Here, the initial thesis is that religions, as part of cultures and as ethically practicing and reflective communities, possess specific resources for reflecting on agency and possibilities for action. Traditionally, they reflect on the motivations, objectives, risks,

Prof. Dr. Ilona Nord holds the Chair of Religious Education and the Didactics of Religious Instruction at the Institute for Protestant Theology and serves as Director of the Center for Education Against Antisemitism in the Faculty of Human Sciences at Julius-Maximilian-University of Würzburg.

and opportunities of specific religious practices in relation to individuals, groups, and also in cooperation and relationship with non-human entities that concern transcendent perspectives on action, including the action of God. Non-human entities are thus not unknown factors for religious practices; rather, they have established specific frameworks for engagement and reflection for such entities, which are first identified and named in this article. The scholarly contributions of this article are therefore initially focused on an interdisciplinary and internationally oriented literature review and analysis.

Initial research findings within the conceptual triangle defining the relationship between agency, religion, and digitalization reveal that distinct horizons of reflection exist for each of these three areas; however, these horizons generally show little interdependence with one another. At times, it becomes apparent that at least two of these horizons are, at least initially, related to one another. The concept of agency is certainly found in theology and in relation to religious practice, but it is rarely connected to processes of digitalization or to artificial intelligence. The concept of digitalization is, in turn, reflected upon in relation to the concept of agency, yet the discussion of religions or theology is largely absent here. Finally, regarding the concept of religion and its reflection within theology, it is only in exceptional cases that it is related to digitalization or artificial intelligence in terms of action. Thus, all three concepts are discussed largely independently of one another in the disciplines dedicated to the study of religion. Based on this finding, it becomes clear that a conceptual development toward understanding the concept of agency in digitalization processes or in worlds where artificial intelligence is part of everyday life is needed in the humanities and social sciences, as well as in the sciences that view themselves as more technologically oriented.

In this context, the cultural aspects of religious practices are considered particularly sensitive when it comes to their transformation. In particular, the Abrahamic religions discussed here are rarely perceived by the public as being associated with technological innovation. Religions seem to be phenomena steeped in tradition that should not relinquish their rich diversity of forms to contemporary transformation processes without careful reflection. This naturally raises many questions: Is it sensible and appropriate, for example, for pastoral care to incorporate technological communication tools into its practice? With these concrete considerations in mind, it becomes clear that developing an understanding of action in the context of digitalization first requires an expansion and deepening of the

*Prof. Dr. Kerstin
Radde-Antweiler is a
professor of Religious
Studies, Religious
Literatures, and Media
at the Institute for
Religious Studies and
Education, as well as
Deputy Director of
the Center for Media,
Communication, and
Information Research
(ZdMKI) at the
University of Bremen.*

*Together, they
co-direct the
international
DFG network
"Conceptualizing
Agency, Religion, and
Digitization" (CARD)
(2026–2028).*

concepts of lived religion to encompass the material, technical, and digitalized world. In this process, an important horizon of reflection will also be that of embodiment (cf. Radde-Antweiler 2022).

It is already apparent that the collection of interdisciplinary findings and case studies on religion-related resources also holds promise for conceptualizing human and non-human agency. Such studies address, for example, the question of non-human structural features of communicative agency, as seen in the field of chatbots. These studies will be conducted in a second phase of the project. They are not yet the focus of this article. However, it is already clear here that, when describing religious practice, a reference to human agency falls short because, as explained in Latour's ANT theory, the agency of, for example, a ritual can be understood as a religious practice that is not limited to individual human actors. It already extends the concept of the actor "—or actant—to non-human, non-individual entities" (Latour 1996, 369).

Finally, a key insight that emerges from the literature review underpinning this article is that research on agency, religion, and digitalization seeks, on the one hand, to better understand technological change in the realm of religion-related communication; on the other hand, it also yields a wealth of new insights into religions and their understandings of religious agency. The research processes outlined here are therefore not solely aimed at developing a conception of agency in the age of digitalization and AI; rather, they also seek to re-enter the discussion regarding the self-understanding of religious culture and its practices through an examination of agency, digitalization, and AI.

References

- Ess, Charles M. 2014. "Selfhood, Moral Agency, and the Good Life in Mediatized Worlds? Perspectives from Medium Theory and Philosophy." In *Mediatization of Communication*, edited by Knut Lundby, 617–640. Berlin/Boston. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110272215.617>.
- Hepp, Andreas, and Stephan O. Görland. 2024. "Agency in a Datafied Society: An Introduction." *Convergence* 30, no.3: 945–955. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565241254692>.
- Latour, Bruno. 1996. "On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications Plus More Than a Few Complications." *Soziale Welt* 47, no. 4: 369–381.
- Nord, Ilona, and Leon Schleier. 2025. "A Lack of Agency: Artificial Intelligence Has So Far Shown Little Potential for Church Innovation—An Exploratory

Interview Study with Protestant and Catholic Leaders in Germany.” Religions 16, no.7. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16070885>.

Radde-Antweiler, Kerstin. 2022. “Embodiment.” In *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in Digital Media*, 2nd ed., edited by Heidi A. Campbell and Ruth Tsuria, 103–122. London.

Full Article

(German):

Ilona Nord/Kerstin

Radde-Antweiler:

*Agency, Religion
und Digitalisierung.*

Interdisziplinäre

*Recherchen und
systematisierende*

Reflexionen. In:

Communicatio Socialis

59 (3), S. 466–476.

DOI: 10.5771/0010-

3497-2026-3-466