

## Digitalisation and Religious Identity Digitalizacija i religijski identitet

Branko Murić<sup>1</sup>

The development of digital and information technologies, which began in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has progressed at such speed and intensity that digitalisation no longer merely signifies the decoding or conversion of analogue content into digital formats, but has become a constitutive condition of contemporary individual and social life. Although digitalisation is often viewed in public discourse primarily through the lens of social media usage, it is a much broader and more complex process in which social media is just one, albeit relevant, segment. Digitalisation, defined as the process of transfer of many tasks and dimensions of human life onto digital platforms, directly impacts the understanding of humanity. Digital technologies increase efficiency and connectivity, however at the same time they accelerate social and political transformations. New technological development directions, such as Web 5.0 and artificial intelligence, further reshape reality by creating systems that learn, make decisions, and interact with humans in increasingly »human« and emotionally sophisticated ways, thereby opening a range of unresolved ethical and existential questions. This technological shift testifies to a gradual change in focus from a reality understood as constructed from matter and energy to one based on information, which generates serious philosophical-anthropological dilemmas.

Technology is no longer solely a medium onto which we project our own dreams and desires, instead digital technologies have become »extensions of our very selves« (Delio 2013, 159). This development of the infosphere (a term used by Luciano Floridi) or »info-philia« (a term by Ilia Delio) has led to the

<sup>1</sup> Catholic Faculty of Theology, University of Zagreb

formation of a digital culture in which the distinction between »online« and »offline« is increasingly blurred and converges into the concept of »onlife« (cf. Floridi 2014, 59–86), particularly among the generations of »digital natives« and »digital immigrants.« Within such an integrated communication environment, social media play a central role in shaping values, beliefs, and identities, and often represent the primary contact for many individuals with digital communication. Users rely on them both for access to information and entertainment and to satisfy their needs for belonging and affirmation, often expressing trust in corporate missions that promise connection and empowerment, even though they are primarily profit driven. The power of technology is seductive, as it promises and promotes the betterment of life, societal prosperity, and »immortal« presence. Such utopian projections of a »promised land« provoke both philosophical and theological reflections, as they stand in sharp contrast to present-day layered and tension-marked digital reality. It should be pointed out that initial hopes for digital technologies have not been fulfilled, as a persistent »digital divide« has left (cf. Joost 2021, 37-40) many without access to both basic needs and information and communication technologies, further fragmenting society, through platforms that deepen divisions instead of fostering community.

Therefore, the document of the Dicastery for Communication »Towards Full Presence. A Pastoral Reflection on Engagement with Social Media,« published on 28 May 2023, warns of the key pitfalls of social media's commercial logic: users have been turned into both consumers and commodities, their data harvested and sold, while »free« services are actually paid for with attention and personal information through unread »terms of use.« The intensified data trade has created an information paradox; information is central yet increasingly hard to verify because algorithmic filtering and personalisation produce »filter bubbles,« exposing people mainly to content that confirms their existing beliefs. Social media communities are built around »networked individuals«, grouped by similarities, which can prevent real encounters with those who are different. Algorithm-driven spaces may encourage individualism and even extreme, aggressive, or abusive behaviour, exacerbated by pseudonymity and lack of moderating cues present in face-to-face interactions. Awareness of these pitfalls is necessary to unmask the harmful logics shaping digital environments and to seek remedies. The Document further calls for integration of digital and physical experiences in building a fully human life and urges attention to those »left behind«, and wounded along the »digital highways.« Using the perspective of the wounded man from the Good Samari-

tan parable, it argues that viewing the digital world from the perspective of the digitally marginalised is essential for understanding and humanising today's complex digital landscape (Dicastery for Communication 2023, *Towards Full Presence*, 12-18). The impact of digital technologies on all areas of human and social life has caused profound changes in the overall perception and shaping of contemporary reality, so that nowadays we speak of a digital revolution and a digital age, with theological reflection increasingly considered within this context. The creation and use of digital technologies reciprocally affect humanity itself, its understanding of itself and the meaning of its existence, its self-awareness and identity, the way it thinks and values the world around it, its relationships with other individuals and communities, and its religious beliefs and ethical principles. Digitalisation poses challenges to both society and humanity in the complexity of its structures, interconnections of people, shared values, and individual, local, and global interests. Ultimately, digitalisation is both a blessing and a challenge for the Church as a spiritual and social reality in its discourse about God and the presence of God's gift of salvation in the world. This is also highlighted by the declaration on human dignity of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith *Dignitas infinita*, published on 8 April 2024, which speaks of the paradox of digital technologies: while they offer new possibilities for the promotion of human dignity and global solidarity, they increasingly foster exploitation, exclusion, and violence that undermine that dignity (cf. Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith 2024, *Dignitas infinita*, 61).

Pope Francis has frequently warned that confusing genuine communication with mere virtual contact leads to loneliness, manipulation, addiction, isolation, and a loss of contact with reality, hindering authentic relationships. Digital media facilitate phenomena such as fake news, slander, cyberbullying, pornography, sexual exploitation, and gambling, while encouraging voyeurism and erosion of respect for others' privacy (cf. Francis 2019, *Christus vivit*, 88; Francis 2020, *Fratelli tutti*, 42). Digitalisation, with all its manifestations, represents an unavoidable challenge that theology cannot ignore if it wishes to maintain its prophetic role in the Church and society. Its task is not only to reconstruct the digital space with theological instruments but also to offer new insights, starting from the light of divine revelation in synthesis with human reason and experience, to study the contributions and dangers of the impact of digital transformation on religious truths, the life and practice of individuals and religious communities, and the Church. Ultimately, the task of theology is to explore creative possibilities of digital and informational discourse, which

would better connect the message of Christian faith and contemporary culture, always keeping in mind the evangelical reserve as a critical and creative deviation in relation to the possibilities of ever-new inculturation and interculturalisation (as a more recent example of such a positive approach in the Croatian-speaking area cf. Vranješ 2025, 92-106).

One of the key challenges of digitalisation, particularly for pastoral care and catechesis, is access to information on religious content. Individuals have access to a great deal of religious/theological content and resources that are often difficult to verify and do not always rely on the tradition or authority of a religious community. This can lead to a certain disorientation among believers (individuals or entire communities) in terms of the understanding of doctrinal content, primarily among those who are not sufficiently theologically (and informatically) literate. Exposure to various religious content can ultimately lead to a crisis of identity (of both the individual and the community). Digitalisation also affects religious practice. Many believers »participate« in Eucharistic celebrations via media or engage in other forms of religious practice on digital platforms (e.g., spiritual exercises etc.), thereby reducing personal contact with individuals in their faith community and with the entire community.

Digitally mediated communication on the internet has become predominantly visual, and it can be discussed in relation to the iconic or pictorial turn. The best paradigmatic example can be found in the 2019 statement of Instagram's co-founder Kevin Systrom: »People have always been visual – our brains are wired for images. Writing was a hack, a detour. Pictorial languages are how we all started to communicate – we are coming full circle. We are reverting to what is most natural. Instagram has always been a communication platform, not an image sharing tool. Instagram challenges the notion that beauty comes in a traditional, artsy form... it's not about beauty, it's about the story you tell. Instagram's inherent feedback systems help users continuously improve their communication skills« (quoted by Meeker 2019, 86). Over the past twenty years, image use and production have increased in step with smartphone cameras and mobile internet; this is now joined by rapidly expanding forms of image circulation. These visual worlds are mostly virtual, existing within digital infrastructures and appearing only on screens, yet they directly shape people's sense of reality and their lived experience. This must be considered when reflecting on contemporary understandings of existence and the potential development of faith (cf. Pirker 2021, 156). Theology has been slow to recognise these complex and transformed image practices (cf. Pirker 2021, 157; Vranješ 2025, 102-107).

All these, as well as numerous other challenges and positive stimuli, have been thematically summarised under the title »Digitalisation and Religious Identity« of the 47th International Symposium of Professors of Philosophy and Theology, organised by the Catholic Faculty of Theology of the University of Zagreb. The symposium took place from 23 to 24 April 2025 in Trakošćan and was conducted in collaboration and co-organisation with the Catholic Faculty of Theology of the University of Graz, the Faculty of Theology of the University of Ljubljana, the Catholic Faculty of Theology of the University of Sarajevo, and the Catholic Faculty of Theology in Đakovo, Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek. Some of the contributions in this issue of *Bogoslovska smotra* are the result of work from the symposium and are dedicated precisely to the aforementioned theme.

Finally, in order not to speak only of the challenges of digital culture for theology and the Church, it is inspiring to see the message that Pope Leo XIV addressed to Catholic digital missionaries and influencers on 29 July 2025, when he called for a Christian mission in the digital age focused on the message of peace from the Risen Christ. There are three stimuli or calls that Pope Leo conveys to Christian influencers. The first call is to be »missionary disciples« online, carrying Christ's peace and hope even to the most distant and despairing »ends of the earth.« The second call is to recognise, within present-day technology-shaped culture (including artificial intelligence), the »suffering flesh of Christ« in every person encountered online, and to ensure that technological progress never undermines human dignity. Christians are urged to foster a culture of Christian humanism: not merely produce content but also create true encounters of hearts, listening, understanding, and accompany those who suffer, beginning from an honest awareness of their own spiritual poverty and need for the Gospel. The third invitation is to »go and mend the nets«: to weave networks of authentic relationships, love, and generous sharing rather than seeking followers or influence. Such networks should heal loneliness, give voice to the weakest instead of enclosing people in »bubbles,« and help rediscover the beauty of face-to-face encounters and truth. In this way, Pope Leo XIV concludes, every act of shared goodness becomes part of a vast »network of God,« overcoming division, polarisation, individualism, fake news, and frivolity by centring on Christ and the light of Truth (cf. Leo XIV 2025, 3).

## References

- Delio, Ilija. 2013. *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being. God, Evolution, and the Power of Love*. Maryknoll – New York: Orbis Books.
- Dicastery for Communication. 2023. *Towards Full Presence. A Pastoral Reflection on Engagement with Social Media* (28 May 2023). In: [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/dpc/documents/20230528\\_dpc-verso-piena-presenza\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/dpc/documents/20230528_dpc-verso-piena-presenza_en.html) (Accessed 7 January 2026).
- Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith. 2024. *Dignitas infinita*. Declaration on Human Dignity (8 April 2024). In: [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_ddd\\_doc\\_20240402\\_dignitas-infinita\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_ddd_doc_20240402_dignitas-infinita_en.html) (Accessed 20 December 2025).
- Floridi, Luciano. 2014. *The Fourth Revolution: How the Infosphere Is Reshaping Human Reality*. Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press.
- Francis. 2019. *Christus vivit*. The Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation to Young People and to the Entire People of God (25 March 2019). In: [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20190325\\_christus-vivit.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20190325_christus-vivit.html) (Accessed 27 December 2025).
- Francis. 2020. *Fratelli tutti*. Encyclical Letter on Fraternity and Social Friendship (3 October 2020). In: [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20201003\\_encyclica-fratelli-tutti.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_encyclica-fratelli-tutti.html) (Accessed 27 December 2025).
- Hoeps, Reinhard. 2020. Einleitung. In: Reinhard Hoeps (ed.), *Handbuch der Bildtheologie 4. Kunst und Religion*, 7-17. Paderborn: Brill and Ferdinand Schöningh.
- Joost, Gesche. 2021. No App, No Access. Wie der Zugang zum Internet über gesellschaftliche Teilhabe entscheidet. In: Wolfgang Beck, Ilona Nord, Joachim Valentin (edd.), *Theologie und Digitalität. Ein Kompendium*, 32-49. Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder.
- Leo XIV. 2025. *Address of his Holiness Pope Leo XIV to Catholic Digital Missionaries and Influencers* (29 July 2025). In: <https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/speeches/2025/july/documents/20250729-missionari-digitali.html> (Accessed 27 December 2025).
- Meeker, Mary. 2019. Internet Trends Report 2019. In: <https://www.bondcap.com/report/it19/#view/260> (Accessed 27 December 2025).
- Pirker, Viera. 2021. Zur Macht der Bilder. Theologische Anthropologie im Kontext digitaler Bildkulturen. In: Wolfgang Beck, Ilona Nord, Joachim Valentin (ed.), *Theologie und Digitalität. Ein Kompendium*, 155-179. Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder.
- Vranješ, Nikola. 2025. *Onkraj izazova. Pastoral u znanstveno-tehnološkom ozračju*. Zagreb: Katolički bogoslovni fakultet Sveučilišta u Zagrebu i Kršćanska sadašnjost.

Language editor: Sunčica Vukelić, prof.