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CHALLENGES OF THE RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP IN THE ERA OF DIGITALIZATION AND INFORMATION-COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY: THE EXAMPLE OF NORTH MACEDONIA AND SERBIA

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Abstract

The rapid development of digital and information-communication technologies resulted in their widespread use in everyday professional and personal life, via various forms of manifestation, such as, social networks, podcasts, and artificial intelligence. The willingness and the capability of religious leaders to accept information and communication innovations, and to adjust them to the existing specific structure of the religious communities, presupposes a strategic re-thinking of the religious practices and the relations with the believers in the online space. New technologies have enabled simpler and faster communication in religious communities, but with the use of digital technologies, religious leaders as spiritual authorities and preachers of faith, enter the virtual space that is subject to public oversight. This research analyzes the challenges that religious leaders face when using digital technologies. The paper presents findings from a qualitative study on the perceptions and experiences of the religious communities' representatives, in regard to the religious leadership practices and communication with believers in a digital context, by using the example of North Macedonia and Serbia. The main findings reveal that digital tools are considered a necessity for maintaining visibility, communication, and relevance in a rapidly changing social environment, but at the same time, cautiousness about the integration of digital technology is being expressed, with a strongly emphasized affirmation of traditional theological boundaries. **Key words:** religious leadership, challenges, digitalization, communication, North Macedonia, Serbia

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to explore how digital technologies change the religious practices inside religious collectives. The central focus of the paper is to examine the perceptions, attitudes, and experience of the representatives of religious communities regarding the use of digital technologies in religious leadership in their religious institutions. Also, the paper aims at examining how the religious communities' representatives evaluate the impact that the digital media and the internet have on religious leadership, and on the fulfillment of their role, tasks and service in the religious community. The content of the paper is organized as follows. First, the most important theories of leadership and theoretical perspectives in the conceptualization of the term are briefly presented. A separate sub-section is dedicated to defining religious leadership and the dimensions that comprise it, the roles and tasks of religious leaders and the challenges and opportunities of religious leadership in the digital transformation era. The following section describes the methodology and research design. The paper continues with an analysis and interpretation of the empirical findings, followed by a discussion of the research results. Finally, concluding remarks are provided.

Digital technology and the internet have penetrated all aspects of social life, as well as secular and religious organizations. Today, teachings, sermons, and other religion-themed content are more regular in the internet space, thus, encouraging interdisciplinary research actualizing key aspects of religious life, such as, religious rituals, believers' space, authority, the faith community, and identity.²

The rapid development of digital technology became reality which must be taken into account when considering the organization of religion, as well as believers' everyday life.^{3, 4} The social conditions that determined and created various forms of authority, including religious authority, have changed significantly as a result of the influence of modern information technology, which has provided communication via mediation of social networks and digital platforms. Today, social media networks provide every individual with an opportunity to gain access and participate in public debates on various social issues, as well as to follow or create content. The rapid increase of the internet and digital platforms use have also resulted in quick and unlimited access to religious teachings and communication with believers, providing individuals with easier and more frequent chances for devotion to their faith. Moreover, the digitalization and possibilities of digital mediation in relations and communication have changed the way religious authorities are being perceived, but have also resulted in the emergence of new digital authorities which have influence in the online space. In the context of online communication, M. Andok⁵ emphasizes the relationship between the religious community and the religious authority and how that relationship affects the reinforcement or the decline of the religious authority. Namely, the author suggests two types of online religious communities. The first type are religious communities which recognize and respect the institutional religious authority in the digital space, and adapt to it. In that case, the digital media aid in maintaining and reinforcing the traditional religious leadership and its institutional authority. The second type of online religious communities

² Heidi A. Campbell and Alessandra Vitullo, "Assessing changes in the study of religious communities in digital religion studies", *Church, Communication & Culture*, 1(1), (2016), 73–89, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23753234.2016.1181301>

³ Marijana, Maksimović "Globalizacija i promene u domenu rada: život i rad preko aplikacija". In: *Svet i Srbija - vreme promena*, Snežana Grk & Dejan Molnar (ur), (Ekonomski fakultet, Centar za izdavačku delatnost, 2017). 199-220.

⁴ Marijana Maksimović and Vesna Z. Chatleska, "The impact of the digital ecosystem on the aspect of entrepreneurial business and human resource management." In: *Socio-Technical Perspectives in Information Systems (STPIS 2025) Proceedings of the 11th International Workshop. CEUR-WS*, 1-13. <https://ceur-ws.org/Vol-4134/paper11.pdf>

⁵ Monika Andok, "The Impact of Online Media on Religious Authority", *Religions*, 15: 1103 (2024): 1-15, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15091103>

gain legitimacy based on personal authenticity and appeal in the online media space, while the religious institution as such is not being considered necessary or particularly important. In such religious communities, digital media and the internet can lead to a decline of the traditional religious authority.

Digital transformation and digital space created with the help of digital technology represents a challenge for traditional norms and practices. The early years of the 21st century marks the beginning of the debate among religious leaders on the transformation of religious culture caused by religion on the internet, particularly due to individual searches of information and online religious engagement.⁶ In that period, clergy and religious leaders raised the question of the need for adjusting and taking over control of the digital space, with a purpose of maintaining authority, which can be potentially endangered by the internet. Religious leaders may perceive the internet as a threat; thus, the examination of religion in the internet sphere is of utmost importance in order to understand how issues such as positions of power, authority, agency, identity, and community are addressed today. It is therefore important for religious leaders and institutions to consider potential implications on religious practices, so they can respond accordingly with a new strategic approach for effective religious leadership.

The experiences gained during the COVID-19 pandemic have shown that the integration of digital technology and the internet represents a necessity for further religious activity in the community, but also in the society as a whole. This new reality has brought another challenge for the religious leaders, raising the question of how digital technology should be adapted, and how the digital platforms should be used, without basic theological aspects and overall system of doctrine being put at risk. J. Rankin⁷ considers that the slow, cautious acceptance of the internet and digital tools for religious teaching and communication with believers is due to religious authorities' theological concern for the biblical and theological justification of virtual constructs and virtual environments, such as the "digital church" construct. Namely, the author raises the question whether the "digital church" is opposing well-established doctrinal teachings, principles, and standpoints, and whether it is being considered as biblical community. He further remarks that the frequent use of the internet for religious practices and spiritual aims can bring into question the

⁶ Heidi Campbell and Ruth Tsuria, "Digital religion: Understanding religious practice in digital media", 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429295683>

⁷ Jason L. Rankin, "Implications of digital church for Christian leaders," *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 11:1 (2024), 1-12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2024.2408868>

traditional definitive elements of the Christian community, emphasizing that certain trends suggest that “the physical spatial elements such as face-to-face engagements of the traditional, local, or historical church are not an essential element in defining the church.”⁸ Given that digital transformation and the use of the internet and social media will have far-reaching and lasting implications, religious leaders should consider the opportunities which digital technology provides and its application in institutional operations, as well as in the management of religious communities and practices of the ministry. They have been called upon to respond to the changing circumstances, through developing institutional strategies for digital integration and new innovative leadership practices for missionary work and implementing online digital communications and interactions with the religious collective, including broader communication with the entire social community.

The Concept of Leadership

Digitalization has provided a wider space and new opportunities for engagement of social leaders, who now play new and important roles in public online space, as providers of information, advisors, and motivators for a common vision. The increased use of the internet has resulted in the emergence of new leadership practices and communication strategies with believers. With the use of social media as a tool for increasing reach and relevance, the leaders shape new ideas and spaces for interpretation and communication with followers in the online community.⁹

Even though the leadership phenomena has been a subject of research among leadership scholars for many decades, it does not have a single unified definition. Many theories exist which explain leadership and define it from different viewpoints, identifying various dimensions which make leadership effective. The following definition suggested by P. Northouse can be considered the most adequate definition, which explains leadership in the simplest, but most precise manner: “Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal.”¹⁰ This definition encompasses the most essential components which are of utmost importance when explaining the concept: 1) leadership is a process, 2) leadership involves

⁸ Ibid., 2.

⁹ Juan Narbona, “Digital leadership, Twitter and Pope Francis,” *Church, Communication and Culture*, 1:1 (2016), 90-109. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23753234.2016.1181307>

¹⁰ Peter G. Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, 8th ed. (SAGE Publications, 2019), 43.

influence, 3) leadership happens within the context of a group, and 4) leadership involves common goals.

Leadership theories have been developed through various approaches by defining the concept of leadership. What follows is a short presentation of the crucial theoretical approaches which bring about different understandings of the phenomena. Trait approach and skills approach differ from the other theoretical approaches due to their focus only on the personality of the leader, without taking into consideration the followers or the situation. Trait Theory emphasizes the importance of the characteristics of the leader's personality, which are considered inherent and unchangeable. Skills Theory is focused on the skills which the leader should possess, pointing out that leadership skills can be learned and developed via experience.¹¹ Both theories complement each other because they are based on the personality attributes and the leader's skills and competencies, but without taking into consideration the relations with the followers. In the digital era, Skills Theory has its own justification in the sense that modern leadership requires skills and knowledge of the digital tools, as well as capabilities for effective communication with the believers via social media.

The study of leadership is being expanded by novel approaches. The Behavioral Approach studies leadership from the standpoint of the leader's acts, and what he or she does in regard to the followers and the given situation. The Situational Approach explains leadership as a form of behavior which can shift or change to support believers, and it is being implemented according to the demands of a given situation. The Path-Goal Theory deals with how leaders motivate followers with the purpose of reaching a set of objectives, with the imperative of implementing a leadership style that will meet the followers' motivational requirements.¹² Transactional Leadership relies on the Transactional Theory of the relations between the leader and the followers. As a leadership style, it focuses on the transaction or exchange of skills, knowledge, resources or efforts between leaders and followers. The leader prioritizes individual interests and uses external motivation as a means of reaching the desired results. Transactional Leadership relies on a reward and punishment system for reaching short term objectives. "The Transactional Leadership is based on negotiating which is restricted in scope because the process functions only in easily identifiable, calculable,

¹¹ Ibid., 101.

¹² Ibid., 199.

tangible, measurable properties.”¹³ In that sense, the Transaction Leadership Theory overlaps with the Classic Social Theory of Exchange; however, Burns points out that the transactional relations are short-term and can be superficial and trivial.¹⁴ In contrast to transactional leadership, which implies simple exchange, Burns has defined transforming leadership as reciprocal relations in which the leaders and the followers encourage each other to act towards common goals, demands, and aspirations. He distinguishes this from the basic exchange typical of transactional leadership, in that transforming leadership as a process in which leaders and followers collaborate in such a way that they are elevated at higher levels of motivation and morals, encouraging meaningful changes and alignment for a higher purpose. This type of description of transforming leadership contains Burns’ main and original ideas, which are: the focus on the followers; the character of the motivation, and the definition of morals. At the same time, he emphasizes that leadership must be aligned with the collective purpose, and that effective leaders must be evaluated according to their capability to influence social changes.

One of the most popular and influential approaches is the Transformational Leadership Theory which is considered a part of the “New Leadership” paradigm,¹⁵ which identifies the importance of the leader’s charisma¹⁶ and affect. The Transformational Leadership concept was developed by Bernard A. Bass, and it is based on the previous model of Transforming Leadership, defined by Burns. Transformational Leadership is partially defined by the context in which the leader and followers communicate. Bass considers that “Transformational leadership is more likely to reflect social values and to emerge in times of distress and change, while transactional leadership is more likely to be observed in a well-ordered society.”¹⁷ Charismatic Transformational leaders are characterized by the following four components:¹⁸ 1) Idealized Influence: The followers admire, respect and trust the leader. They identify with him/her and he/she is their role model. The leader earns the recognition among followers when he/she puts the requirements of his/her followers above his/hers. The leader is consistent in his/her attitude in

¹³ James M. Burns, *Leadership* (Harper & Row, 1978).

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 379.

¹⁵ Peter G. Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, 8th ed. (SAGE Publications, 2019).

¹⁶ Sverre Spoelstra, “Leadership and Religion”, in *The Routledge Companion to Leadership*, ed. J. Storey, J. Hartley, J.L. Denis, P. ’t Hart & D. Ulrich (Routledge, 2017), pp. 319-331.

¹⁷ Bernard M. Bass, Bruce J. Avolio, Dong I. Jung, and Yair Berson, “Predicting unit performance by assessing transformational and transactional leadership”, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 88(2), (2003): 208, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.88.2.207>

¹⁸ *Ibid*., 208.

alignment with the ethics and basic principles and values; 2) Inspirational Motivation: The leader motivates the followers by giving meaning and challenge to the work. He/she stimulates individual and team spirit and demonstrates enthusiasm and optimism. The leader encourages the followers to imagine appealing future situations and communicates an appealing vision of the future; 3) Intellectual Stimulation: The leader encourages his/her followers to be innovative and creative by reexamining the suppositions, reformulating the problems, and approaching the old situations in new ways. The leader stimulates new ideas and creative solutions to the followers' problems. And 4) Individualized consideration: The leaders pay attention to the requirements of every individual, for achievement and growth, by acting as a coach or a mentor. Individual differences in requirements and wishes are recognized. The followers are being developed to higher levels of potential, thus creating new possibilities for learning and self-actualization. Transformational leaders possess high moral values and a developed sense of identity, and they represent role models for their followers. They get transformational power from the recognition and respect received from their followers. They motivate their followers with an inspiring mission, a collective vision, idealized goals and identity. The transformational approach suggests that the leaders should act as social architects, focusing on results for a collective well-being.¹⁹

Finally, in the last three decades, new approaches which explain leadership from a different process-based perspective are emerging, among which some of the more significant can be singled out: authentic leadership, spiritual leadership, servant leadership, adaptive leadership, and followership.

Religious Leadership – Challenges and Opportunities in the Digital Era

Generally, all leadership conceptualizations in the theories thus far could be applied to religious leadership, and could also explain it, taking into consideration various dimensions and aspects. In fact, religious leadership could be considered as the oldest form of leadership in history, and as such, it contains all previously mentioned dimensions of the various theoretical approaches to leadership, regardless of whether they are defined by the concept, the personal capacity of the leader, or the importance of the situation and the relations of the leader to his/her followers.

¹⁹ Peter G. Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, 8th ed. (SAGE Publications, 2019).

Among all theoretical approaches of leadership, the concept of transformational leadership with its four key components, defined by Bass, can be considered as a most adequate approach to studying religious leadership, and a most adequate form of guiding believers in today's digital age. Transformational religious leaders are more focused on the believers and the relations with them in a given social context,²⁰ enable greater commitment from followers, and develop and inspire them to achieve higher goals.

Barentsen defines religious leadership as: "... leadership in religious contexts by people who identify themselves with that particular context. This may refer to church or denominational leaders in various Christian traditions, but also to leaders of other religious communities or of non-profit organizations with an explicitly religious purpose."²¹ The author particularly emphasizes the importance of the religious leaders' role in multicultural and multi-confessional societies, in which, "the religious leaders are key agents (1) to shape the culture of their own religious communities, while adapting and resisting a diversity of outside influences and (2) to construct a relevant socio-religious identity that enables the religious community to play a meaningful role in civic society beyond its own religious commitments."²²

In his study of religious leadership, Barentsen proposes his own typology of religious leadership, and defines the dimensions, roles, and tasks of religious leaders. The nine dimensions of religious leadership suggested by Barentsen highlight the unique functions, roles, and tasks of religious leaders. The author sums up these dimensions in three meta-categories²³: 1) Key dimensions which qualify the leadership as religious; 2) Dimensions which focus on the relations within the religious community; and 3) Dimensions which focus on the relations with those outside of the religious community. The first meta-category that qualifies leadership as religious includes four key dimensions that essentially define religious leadership; they refer to the leadership roles, and are aimed at believers' direct participation in the religious service, rituals, and traditions of the community. These are the four basic dimensions: representing the sacred, celebrating community, modelling spirituality, and stewarding tradition. The second meta-category concerns the maintenance and development of the religious community and encompasses the following three

²⁰ Jack Barentsen, "Practising religious leadership," in *The Routledge Companion to Leadership*, ed. J. Storey, J. Hartley, J.L. Denis, P. 't Hart & D. Ulrich (Routledge, 2017), pp. 260-278.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 260.

²² *Ibid.*, 273.

²³ *Ibid.*, 272.

dimensions: tending the community; leading the organization; and reconciling differences. The third meta-category comprises two dimensions which, according to Barentsen, are the religious leader's functions as a religious group representative engaged in the broader social community and in the believers' participation in public life and the common good. Those two dimensions are: proclaiming publicly and engaging socially. Barentsen defines the roles and the tasks of the religious leaders for each dimension separately.

The dynamic changes inside religious communities impose new challenges on the religious leaders, particularly in highly advanced western societies, in which the perception and the evaluation of effective religious leadership is changing increasingly. The reduced trust in and loyalty to traditional religious leaders leads to the emergence of new kinds of authority and leadership, based on the believers' needs, which favor an individualized approach and a spirituality that is not necessarily connected to a specific religious institution.²⁴ Therefore, religious leaders increasingly practice an individualized spiritual leadership, and motivate believers to participate in the religious community through individual spiritual experiences and a search for the meaning of each individual's spiritual life, which may weaken the importance of the institutional and organizational action of the religious leader.

Digital technology's presence in everyday life alters the believers' practice and behavior as well. Now, they create online social relations and attachments via sharing common goals, values, and beliefs, which are not necessarily connected to a physical space, but rather to a wider, virtual one. The easy accessibility of religious information on the internet could endanger the religious authority and undermine the structure and the relevance of the religious system. It is notable that the religious practices on the internet have grown quickly in various religious traditions, as the Holy Scriptures, religious materials, and other various textual, audio, and visual religious content have become available online.²⁵ In the modern digital age of fast and easy access to online religious resources, traditional religious institutions are faced with the challenge of how to maintain their institutional authority and relevance and how to adapt to the changing religious environment, while religious leaders are looking for a new ways of how to be responsive to the

²⁴ Annemarie Foppen and Joke W van Saane, "Assessing Religious Leadership: A Scoping Review of Leadership Effectiveness Criteria and Current Trends in the Academic Literature", *Pastoral Psychology*, 73 (2024): 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-023-01113-8>

²⁵ Pauline H. Cheong, "Authority", in *Digital religion: Understanding religious practice in new media worlds*, ed. H. A. Campbell (Routledge, 2013), pp. 72-87.

believers' needs in the digital space. When describing the challenges of the religious leadership in post-modern society, Barentsen²⁶ emphasizes the new roles and tasks of religious leaders. He states that, from a hierarchical and institutional standpoint, the leadership is transitioning to spiritual guidance for believers and guidance through an authentic personal example. A top-down leadership style with hierarchical control is replaced by collaboration and transparency. Instead of building a religious identity based on tradition and community dedication to maintaining institutional loyalty, religious leaders should focus more on building religious identity shaped by social networks and developing religious communities based on the principles of the learning organization, simultaneously focusing on personalized spiritual development and the personal contribution of the believers to civic society. Bearing in mind, with the influence of digital technology and the rising role of the network society in shaping religious leadership and the religious life of the community, these challenges could be considered as the most important for religious leaders.

Research of digital religion in the past couple of decades has indicated that religious groups and traditional religious leaders react in several different ways to internet use in religious life, seeing it as a threat, as unavoidable for limited use, or as an opportunity to provide further reinforcement of leadership and development of religious community.²⁷ Analyzing how religious representatives perceive the use of internet for religious purposes, Cheong²⁸ states that initially the internet has been viewed as a threat, endangering traditional religious authority, due to the possibility of new media technologies disrupting relations with believers, but also with the traditional institutional functioning of the religious organization. In the following years, when the increasing penetration of the internet in the everyday and the religious life is notable, the religious leaders began viewing the internet as an opportunity and digital technology as a tool, in order to maintain and strengthen their influence and power. Finally, there are viewpoints which are highly optimistic regarding internet use and digital media. However, whether the virtual space can completely replace the physical space and communion, which are the basis of the religious system's doctrine, remains a question.

²⁶ Jack Barentsen, "Practising religious leadership", in *The Routledge Companion to Leadership*, ed. J. Storey, J. Hartley, J.L. Denis, P. 't Hart & D. Ulrich (Routledge, 2017), pp. 260-278.

²⁷ Heidi A. Campbell, "*Digital creatives and the rethinking of religious authority.*" (Routledge, 2021).

²⁸ Pauline H. Cheong, "Authority", in *Digital religion: Understanding religious practice in new media worlds*, ed. H. A. Campbell (Routledge, 2013), pp. 72-87.

Moreover, the influence of technological innovations is becoming increasingly evident in the deinstitutionalization, diversification, and digitalization processes.²⁹ Deinstitutionalization has created a new situation in which the personified leadership is becoming more important due to the undermined institutional structures. The followers respect the leader because of his/her transparent and authentic activity, while power and authority are gained through spiritual and personal inspiration. Also, the internet space and online communication have enabled an emergence of new charismatic leaders, who function outside of the religious institutional structures, and they try to pose themselves as a role model to their followers.³⁰ Digitalization has created limitless choice of opportunities in the network society, and thus new possibilities for the believers, which now instead of being only committed to the local religious community, can also belong to an online religious group. This poses yet another challenge for the religious leaders who are now conscious that they must continuously maintain the dedication and loyalty of their believers, additionally with presence in the online space. The internet is changing the way authority is being perceived, because technology provides the creation of new positions of power and levels traditional hierarchical structures. This new reality can be a challenge for religious leaders, particularly regarding the place and the role of institutional authority, because, in the case of the internet, the structure of the interactions is mostly network-organized, not hierarchical.³¹

Social media and the digital space have caused more fluid and more complicated authority distribution, but at the same time have opened new possibilities for practicing religious leadership. Namely, the religious leaders can connect with more followers in the online space, and gain legitimacy by adapting innovative approaches for practicing religious activities. The internet also provides the individual with a larger choice, which in the digital space means that the users choose the kind of network authority or leadership they will accept, according to their personal views and beliefs. M. Andok states that in the classics of sociology of religion, the concept of authority is hierarchically adjusted to the concepts of social order and rationality, meaning that the choice of

²⁹ Jack Barentsen, "Practising religious leadership", in *The Routledge Companion to Leadership*, ed. J. Storey, J. Hartley, J.L. Denis, P. 't Hart & D. Ulrich (Routledge, 2017), 260-278.

³⁰ Ian A. Nell, "Religious leadership and the Fourth Industrial Revolution: Towards a competency framework", in *Engaging the Fourth Industrial Revolution – Perspectives from theology, philosophy and education*, ed. J.A. van den Berg (Sun Media Bloemfontein, 2020), 187-207.

³¹ Heidi A. Campbell, "*Digital creatives and the rethinking of religious authority*", (Routledge, 2021). And Monika Andok, "The Impact of Online Media on Religious Authority", *Religions*, 15: 1103 (2024): 1-15, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15091103>

authority is determined by rationality and social order.³² In that sense, with a massive use of the internet and online communication, technology becomes an important factor which shapes the concept of authority and determines the positions of power and leadership in the digital space. The technological changes have provided leaders with access to new digital tools, so they can strengthen and expand their influence on various generational groups, especially among the younger generation.³³

Research studies have indicated increased interest among religious leaders and believers in accepting the internet for religious service and religious practices. Internet use for religious purposes is also evident in the period before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. In a 2014 study, Barna Group examined the use of the internet by pastors and their views about it, as compared to 15 years prior, at the beginning of the century. In 2014, almost nine out of ten pastors considered that it is theologically acceptable for the Church to provide religious help or religious experiences to people on the internet (87%). This is an increase when compared to only about three quarters of the pastors for which the same was acceptable in the year 2000 (78%). Similarly, in 2014, almost nine out of ten pastors stated that the people in their area would consider it acceptable for their church to provide religious help or religious experiences via the internet (86%), as compared to only seven out of ten (70%) who stated the same in the year 2000. The conclusion is that in a period of 15 years, between 2000 and 2014, religious leaders have considerably increased internet usage and have generally accepted it as a tool for religious service in the 21st century.³⁴ Research findings of the CONTOC studies from 2020 and 2022, which examined the digital presence and communication practices of the Protestant churches in Germany and Switzerland during the COVID-19 pandemic, suggest that COVID-19 facilitated the digitalization of the Church; however, most of the analog forms of communication were again in use with the ending of the pandemic. The second CONTOC study, from 2022, showed that only 13% of the respondents regularly provided digital church service, while the rest of them were using digital formats

³² Ibid, 1.

³³ Juan Narbona, "Digital leadership, Twitter and Pope Francis," *Church, Communication and Culture*, 1:1 (2016), 90-109. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23753234.2016.1181307>

³⁴ Barna Group, "Cyber Church: Pastors and the Internet," (2015), <https://www.barna.com/research/cyber-church-pastors-and-the-internet/>

sporadically.³⁵ The Pew Research Center study from 2023³⁶ indicated that online religious services are appealing to many Americans, but physical presence remains more popular. Around one quarter of the adult population in the USA (27%) regularly watch religious services on the internet or on TV; 21% are using applications or web pages in order to receive assistance in reading the Holy Scripture; 20% state that they watch religion related videos on the internet, such as the ones that can be found on You Tube and TikTok platforms. 33% of Americans say that they generally attend services in person at least once a month, while 27% say they generally watch services online or on TV at least monthly. Overall, 11% of U.S. adults say that they follow or keep track of their own religious leaders online or on social media. Schlag and his colleagues³⁷ have examined the impact of digital innovations on religious leadership in Switzerland. The main research findings have shown that religious people consider the digital practice important for engaging the Church in modern society, however, they view it as supplementary, not as a substitution of analog church activity. The study findings suggest that the possibilities provided by digital innovations could be found in the areas of multi-professional collaboration, strategic resource allocation and the development of empowering educational formats, in such a way that the balanced relations between digital and traditional church practice would be secured.

Research Methodology

The *main research goal* is to explore the challenges and implications of digital technology on practicing religious leadership in religious communities in Macedonia and Serbia. The *research objectives* are focused on examining the attitudes and beliefs of representatives of religious communities regarding practices of digital adaptation of religious leadership in the new virtual reality, and analyzing the perception of the representatives of religious groups regarding the challenges facing religious leaders in the new digital age, and the opportunities for digital transformation of religious rituals, teachings, and communication with believers.

³⁵ Thomas Schlag, Gabriela, Frey G. and Katharina Yadav, "Religious Leadership and Digital Innovation: An Explorative Interview Study with Church Actors in the Swiss Context," *Religions* 16: 491 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16040491>

³⁶ Pew Research Center, "Online Religious Services Appeal to Many Americans, but Going in Person Remains More Popular", (2023), <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/06/02/online-religious-services-appeal-to-many-americans-but-going-in-person-remains-more-popular/>

³⁷ Thomas Schlag, Gabriela, Frey G. and Katharina Yadav, "Religious Leadership and Digital Innovation: An Explorative Interview Study with Church Actors in the Swiss Context," *Religions* 16: 491 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16040491>

Based on the main research goal and research objectives, the paper addresses the following research questions:

1. *What is the general perception of the representatives of religious groups regarding the use of digital technology in religious leadership and communication with believers?*
2. *How does digital technology impact religious leaders in conducting religious services and other religious rituals?*
3. *In what way does digitalization, the internet, and social media alter the way by which religious leaders communicate and connect with their religious communities or congregations?*
4. *With what kind of theological and doctrinal dilemmas are religious leaders faced when maintaining the authenticity and integrity of religious traditions in the digital space?*
5. *What are the expectations of the representatives of religious communities regarding the future of digital technology use and its impact on religious leadership?*

The *qualitative strategy and the exploratory research approach* have been applied in the study. For collection of empirical data the *semi-structured interview method* has been employed, which provides many possibilities for a rich and detailed narrative from the interviewee, with thorough analysis for gaining new insights on the topic. This type of interview allows flexibility in the interviewing process and provides a chance to accentuate the manner by which the interviewee formulates and understands the issues and the events; actually, the interviewees have an opportunity to say what they think is important for explaining and understanding the events, experiences, or forms of behavior.³⁸

In order to gain deeper insights and answers about previously determined research questions, a *research instrument - interview guide*, has been created. It is comprised of two parts. The first section contains four question which refer to the general information about the respondent: gender, age, educational level and position or function held in the religious community. The second section contains list of eleven interview questions focusing on: motivation and experiences of the respondents in the processes of the implementation of digital changes and the use of digital media; perception about the changes in regard to leadership efficiency and communication with believers; and views on theological or doctrinal issues related to adaption to digital technology.

³⁸ Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 4th ed., (Oxford University Press, 2012).

The research was conducted on a *purposive sample*, comprised of total of 17 respondents. In this sample, participants who possessed characteristics and experiences relevant to the research goals were selected. The selection of the respondents was made based on their role, position, and active participation in the religious communities, as well as their potential to provide relevant informative and analytical data. Representatives of various religious communities were included in the research, out of which a portion of them were religious leaders, while another were official representatives or active members, with relevant responsibilities in their communities. Geographically, the research was conducted in Macedonia and Serbia, two neighboring Balkan countries, with similar historical, cultural, and sociological context, which provided a comparative approach.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with religious leaders and/or representatives of religious communities from various confessions, including Orthodox, Protestant, Jewish, and Islamic. The interviews were conducted in written form, seven in Macedonia and ten in Serbia, between July 15 and August 15, 2025. The prepared interview guide was delivered to the representatives of the religious communities via e-mail as a word document, which they would send back to the research team as a completed document. After receiving the completed interviews, a formal and logical control of the material was carried out, in order to check the completeness, consistency, and clarity of the answers. What followed was a phase of thematic analysis, in which the empirical material was systematically codified, categorized, and interpreted in accordance with the defined analytical themes and research questions. In order to protect the respondents' privacy and identity, all statements were completely anonymized. The interviews were marked with codes according to the country and the order of the conduction, as follows: "Respondent 1 from Macedonia" (R1M) to Respondent 7 from Macedonia" (R7M), as well as "Respondent 1 from Serbia" (R1S) to "Respondent 10 from Serbia" (R10S). This type of marking provided easy data tracking, without disrupting the principles of ethics and confidentiality of the research.

Research Results from Macedonia and Serbia

The research employed thematic analysis for analysis and interpretation of the results.³⁹ The analysis followed an inductive and semantic approach, focusing on the meanings which participants attributed to their experiences with digital technology. Themes emerged through

³⁹ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using thematic analysis in psychology", *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), (2006): 77–101, <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>

systematic coding, grouping, and interpretation across all interviews (cross-interview analysis). Each of the identified themes and sub-themes were analyzed, and the findings presented in accordance with the research questions (RQ). Extracts from the respondents' statements, in the form of anonymized quotes, were included for illustration of the elements of the theme and the confirmation of the main point (R1M – R7M, and R1S – R10S).

RQ 1: What is the general perception of the representatives of the religious groups regarding the use of digital technology in religious leadership and communication with believers?

Theme 1: Digital Technology as an Inevitable Reality of Modern Religious leadership

Sub- theme 1.1: Technology as a Necessity, Not a Choice

Most of the respondents perceive digital technology as inevitable reality in the modern society. Digital technology is not perceived as a trend or temporary solution, but as a necessary tool for maintaining of the religious mission and contact with believers. The use of digital technology is considered exceptionally important (R1M) and, “an essential part of the service” (R1M), even mandatory for the work (R2M). One of the respondents stated: “digital technology today does not represent a luxury, but necessity, if we want to keep up with the times” (R6M). Some of the respondents point out that it offers great possibilities (R2M, R7M) and advantages, when used as an instrument for “promoting religious leadership” (R3M) as well as “increased leader efficiency” (R1M). Digital technology is perceived as a tool for reinforcing relations with the religious community as well, (R3M) because it provides more efficient communication with believers (R3M, R5M, R4M), and with the younger generations in particular (R3M). R4M considers that the digital possibilities have “certain missionary potential.” Besides that, almost all of the respondents associate the digital platform usage with the need for larger visibility and outreach.

The respondents state that the increased use of digital technology came as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis (R2M, R3M, R6M), but point out, that the use of digital platforms began a lot earlier than the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (R1M, R4M, R5M, R6M, R7M). Some of the respondents point out the technical possibilities of digital technology in facilitating the management and organization processes, such as easier access to information; easier processing and collection of data; synchronization of the activities among the personnel of

religious organization (R5M); the financial management of the religious community, more rational time management, ease of use, as well as encouraging creative ideas (R2M).

The research results from Serbia detect an intensive and effective usage of digital technology. The respondents consider digital technology a “tool for bringing the Word of God and the sacred tradition closer to the believers, as well as to students of theology” (R3S). One of the respondents considers that digital technology today represents an important link in the organization of the church (R6S). Information collected in such a manner is being transformed into useful data (R9S, R10S). One of the respondents pointed out that digital technology facilitates communication with active believers. Also, digital technology assists him in providing accurate and regular information, due to his management of a large parish (R1S). Thus, one of the goals for digital technology use is reducing the time for establishing contact with believers. Also, it aids in faster and easier ways to collaborate, thus becoming a helpful tool for informing the religious community about current events (R8S, R5S). One of the advantages of digital technology is that it provides better visualization of religious content (R3S, R1S). Moreover, it makes liturgical work more visible, because religious content is more accessible to believers, thus providing a wide range of use (R2S, R4S, R7S, R10S). It must be acknowledged that digital technology began to be widely used as a reaction to the COVID-19 crisis, therefore entering everyday use as a more efficient means of communication.

This sub-theme reflects the dominant framework via which the respondents comprehend \ technology not as a personal preference, but as a structural necessity of the modern context. The language that they use in their statements, for example, “necessity,” “inevitable part,” or “important ally,” suggests the acceptance of technology as a part of religious practice, not as an external constraint. This indicates a process of “normalization of the digital” in religious practice, where above all, adaptation is perceived as a responsibility of leading the community.

Sub-theme 1.2: Positive, but Controlled Perception

Even though the general perception is positive, the participants express caution and awareness of the need for control and moderation, in which digital technology is perceived as a tool, not as a goal in itself. Digital technology is being accepted instrumentally, not ideologically. It is being evaluated according to its usefulness, but autonomous value is not being ascribed to it. R1M points out that the “religious service does not depend on digital technology, however, digital technology increases the visibility and the outreach of the messages.” Unfortunately, exactly that

“accessibility” negatively affects the depth and quality of the essential communication” (R7M). Similarly, another respondent expressed his concerns about the use of digital technology, stating that, “Even though digital technology plays a huge role in the spreading of the spiritual content, it cannot replace the personal, Eucharistic, and liturgical communion, which is the essence of the Orthodox pastoral life and religious experience” (R3M).

The research in Serbia indicates that all of the respondents have stated that digital technology has become an integral part of religious life. However, what is being expected is a combination of digital tools with traditional methods, which makes the basis of a religious life and coexistence of the people living in a community (R3S). The traditional methods are fine, but they are not sufficient because they are outdated (R1S). In that sense, digital platforms are a tool (R2S). With modernization, and communication via technical-informational technologies, the access to information is being facilitated (R10S), communication is much easier (R5S), the usage of podcasts is notably intensified, and also, the education provided via applications and knowledge transferred via platforms has become accessible (R4S). Digital technology plays a supporting but important role in the religious leaders’ missions (R1S, R2S, R3S, R4S, R6S, R8S). Digital technology is already bringing changes, and it is increasingly required in people-related work (R7S). The religious leaders who accepted innovations brought by digital technologies, have an opportunity to be present in the virtual world. Of course, moderation and truthfulness is what is being expected. One answer which was very different from the rest of the answers stated, “the Serbian Orthodox Church was always a leader in innovations and always welcomed modern means of communication and catechization” (R1S).

The respondents’ statements indicate a clear stance which suggests a tendency for protection of the religion and maintenance of religious authority, as well as prevention of technological determinism in the religious service and spiritual life.

RQ 2: How does digital technology impact religious leaders in conducting religious services and other religious rituals?

Theme 2: Digitalization as a Means of Continuity, but Not as a Substitute for the Sacred

Sub-theme 2.1: Ensuring Continuity of the Religious Practice

This sub-theme is pointing out the key role of digital technology in maintaining the religious continuity, particularly during crisis periods such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The

importance of digital technology is explicitly expressed in the statement, “it is particularly important in the modern world for maintaining continuity in the exchange of spiritual values” (R3M). Religious leaders use digital tools as an adaptive strategy, demonstrating flexibility in redefining the form, simultaneously preserving the essence of worship. This implies that the technology has provided a functional adaptation and innovation in the practices, without theological disruption or interruption of the traditional religious life. Speaking about the need for maintaining communication with the believers in the period of ban on physical gathering, one of the respondents clearly indicated, “The digital platforms acted as a crucial tool in that adaptation” (R4M).

In Serbia, the digital technology has brought to question whether the religious experience can remain authentic without the physical space and the community. The role of the ministers is very important here, because they are the ones who must not allow the goal of communion to be violated (R1S). So, digital platforms are very important sources of information, of accurate religious quotes, and of prayers which inspire thinking and commitment to the faith. Observation of the authenticity and the integrity of religious traditions comes primarily through the holy liturgy, which testifies to the presence of Christ himself (R10S), and also through the accurate interpretation of the gospels through preaching, although the sermons could be transferred via electronic means (R8S). Digital technologies can be good support for conveying tradition and continuity of religious rituals (R3S, R4S, R5S, R7S, R10S), but the church’s mission as well (R2S). Thus, believers who are listening to a wise story about spiritual experiences can correct their own behavior (R6S). However, there are certain limitations due to the inability of digital spaces to completely replace live contact and common experience (R3S, R9S). There is a danger of losing the deep experience of the liturgy and the liturgical life, because religious experiences are not explainable by words only (R6S, R9S).

Sub-theme 2.2: Clear Boundaries of the Sacred Ritual’s Digitalization

Most of the respondents set clear boundaries between what can and cannot be put in a digital format. The digital practices should not be considered as a replacement for a complete and congregational participation in a temple (R2M, R3M, R4M, R7M) because they limit the depth of the spiritual experience. Certain rituals, such as, confession, communion, anointing, monastic silence, personal spiritual guidance, private prayer service, etc., which are intimate, personal and deeply private for believers (R1M, R3M, R4M, R5M), assume acquired trust and personal physical

contact. They represent forms of “spiritual wealth” (R5M) which cannot be performed via digital interaction (R1M, R3M, R4M, R5M). This suggests a deeply ingrained understanding of the sacred as a bodily, relational, and spatial experience. One of the respondents explains that the Eucharist demands personal and liturgical presence, stating: “Eucharistic life (the communion) is an essential part of the Orthodox faith, which cannot be substituted or conveyed online. The Eucharist is the living presence in the body and blood of Christ, and requires physical presence in the temple, spiritual communion with the minister and the other believers, as well as the sacredness of the space and the time, which cannot be duplicated via digital means” (R3M). R5M explains that “There are practices which cannot be conveyed in digital form, such as the sacraments,” concluding that, “The Church represents a gathering of believers, not of avatars or people in front of a camera” (R5M). This sub-theme is pointing out the centrality of physical presence as a theological and spiritual principle, which digital technology cannot replicate, because the dimension of togetherness manifested by unity and the physical, immediate participation is fundamentally irreplaceable. An illustration of this stance can be detected in the following statement: “The religious service in the temple is to be experienced, not to be conveyed” (R4M).

In Serbia, certain religious leaders think that there are practices which are impossible to convey digitally, such as the sacrament of baptism, the sacrament of marriage, the sacrament of consecration, and the sacred communion (R4S, R5S, R6S, R7S, R8S, R9S). Furthermore, it is not recommended to transfer the Holy Sacrament of Confession, particularly personal life testimonies, into a digital format (R10S). Three of the respondents consider that the liturgy should not employ digital format (R1S, R2S, R3S). The reason for this is the loss of the personal relations, that is, physical relations between two individuals, as well as our relation with God himself, which is reflected and manifested through that other person (R3S). “Our faith is a belief in God, and it is reflected through the other people in the community, that is, the communion of people connected by God’s love, and grace, which provides them with freedom. Everything that disrupts those relations and harmony of the community, leads to egoism, individualism and self-sufficiency, which is considered dangerous and destructive” (R1S). This suggests that the ontological experience is irreplaceable. Also, an atypical answer appears in the interviews, which advised not to transfer Church behavior to the digital platforms (R6S).

RQ 3: In what way do the digitalization, the internet, and the social media alter the way the religious leaders communicate and connect with their religious communities or congregations?

Theme 3: Transformation of Religious Communication and Community Expansion

Sub-theme 3.1: Redefining the Community by an Increased Accessibility and Continuous Connectivity

Digital communication redefines the temporal and spatial dynamics of religious leadership. Religious leaders are no longer limited to occasional in-person encounters, because digital media provides constant pastoral contact and intensified believers' involvement. What prevails is the belief that online services are considered an adequate alternative for spiritual presence and prayer participation of the believers which removes reasons for non-attendance for those not able to be physically present (R1M, R2M, R3M, R4M, R5M, R7M). This was illustrated by R1M, who considers that digital communication is bringing down physical barriers, and "solves the problem with transportation." It was also illustrated by R3M, for whom the importance of digital technology is particularly indicated in, "... the common participation in church life, even when physical contact is being limited." For R7M "The pace, the massiveness and the quantity of communication is being multiplied." Many respondents' statements point out the role of digital platforms in the transformation of communication practices, expanding communication from episodic interaction to continuous pastoral care beyond physical gatherings. Moreover, digital platforms enable religious communities to overcome geographical boundaries, promoting a more inclusive and flexible understanding of affiliation. Physical proximity is not the sole participation criteria any longer, thus resulting in an expanded definition of the religious community in which the diaspora has equal opportunity to participate in religious life (R2M, R3M, R5M). The following quote concisely presents the opinion: "Not only in our country, but even beyond, the digital platforms helped us reach the diaspora, old and new, as well as to maintain contact with those who, unfortunately, have left our country and communities, due to migration abroad" (R5M).

Regarding the communication practices and the use of digital tools, the interviews vividly depict the cautious choice of digital platform. The respondents consider that the religious leaders chose which platform to use, depending on the shared content and message. Facebook and YouTube are the most used platforms. The social network Facebook is most adequate due to the possibility for two-way interactive communication, "... allowing the believers to react, ask questions, and to include family members or friends, in the shared content" (R4M). Some of the respondents have stated that they use Facebook for live streaming Sunday church services (R1M, R2M); as a platform for "online services, advertising of events and spreading various information

through short videos” (R2M); or for preaching, religious teachings and practices (R6M). However, almost all of the respondents state that they mostly use the digital platform YouTube for sharing video content, such as sermons, broadcasts, spiritual sermons and teachings, interviews, and educational videos (R1M, R2M, R4M, R5M, R6M); for posting lectures, conferential presentations and educational content” (R3M); for “long-term content archiving, so the believers can view it when and where it is more suitable to them” (R3M, R4M). Other digital platforms are used to a smaller extent. Some religious organizations use Zoom for meetings with partner organizations, as well as for online lectures and seminars (R2M, R3M). During the COVID-19 pandemic, Zoom was used for prayer meetings (R1M). It is considered a communication platform which provides effective time management and effective use of other resources (R5M). Some use Viber mostly for group communication within their local church and “interaction between pastors” (R2M). Instagram and TikTok are mostly used for promotion (R2M, R5M).

In Serbia, the conviction and recommendation from religious leaders that the liturgy be served digitally only during a war or pandemic, is deeply ingrained (R1S - R10S). A key reason being that digital media has limited influence, whereas, “The minister can always find a way to reach and get to the believer, as well as, to meet the needs of the sick, the old and the dying, such as, to talk, to confess, to read a prayer, to give communion and to offer support” (R1S). However, the digitalization largely aids in spreading of the missionary influence (R3S, R5S, R6S, R7S, R9S, R10S). Furthermore, the digital way of reproduction of the religious content can influence the motivation of those believers who do not go to church (R3S). Online services are an alternative to real church presence, to those who for various reasons are not able to be physically present (R1S - R10S). Moreover, it can be a means of connecting believers of a certain religion on a worldwide scale (R4S). Besides, it is confirmed that it provides useful information to the believers of the same confession in the diaspora, but also to people of different confessions, who can thereby be informed of the Orthodox religious content (R2S). All of the respondents share the same opinion, that the most used digital tools by the senior believers are YouTube, Viber, even SMS messages, and then Facebook (R1S - R10S). Instagram and TikTok are used occasionally, while Zoom is used very rarely, only for religious education (R3S). Google classrooms are mostly used by religious teachers when teaching younger students about religion (R1S).

Sub-theme 3.2: Generationally Adapted Communication

The interviews reveal that there are thoughtfully designed communication strategies, using selective digital platform applications, and styling messages according to the needs of believers from various age groups. This is illustrated by R4M: “We use mostly a few digital tools for establishing and maintaining contact with the believers from various generations, thus, carefully adjusting to each age group’s habits and requirements.” Even though the older generations find it more difficult to adjust to the new social media, it is noticeable that they show interest for accepting the new digital means and their use, thus, pointing out to the need to secure technical support for easier adaptation (R3M). When it comes to various generational groups, it can be concluded that Facebook is the most frequently used platform by all age groups, thus making the platform “multifunctional”(R3M). However, two respondents stated that the digital platforms are used only by the younger generation (R6M) and they show increased engagement (R7M), whereas the older generation “prefers direct communication“ (R6M) or uses the digital platforms rarely, and in a “basic form”(R7M). It is noticeable that older people prefer Facebook (R2M, R4M) and this platform is considered an efficient way for gathering information, watching religious events videos and sharing spiritual messages, quotes, and teachings (R4M). Regarding the younger generation, the use of digital platforms has considerably aided in attracting their interest in religious content (R1M, R2M, R3M, R4M, R5M, R6M, R7M). A positive change in younger people’s engagement is being detected, due to their increased openness and activity in the digital space (R3M, R5M, R7M) and they are more accustomed to following digital, visual, and audio-visual communication. One of the respondents particularly stressed the increased engagement via institutional inclusion of young individuals responsible for the administration of social networks: “The shift in the engagement occurred when we encouraged the young people to take responsibility for the social media, the promotion, etc. Technology is something that they use every day, and they are familiar with the language that they use to address the broader society” (R5M). The interviews reveal that, besides using Facebook, young people prefer and are more active on digital platforms such as YouTube and Instagram (R1M, R2M, R4M).

Findings from Serbia suggested that the use of digital technology is a way of communicating with the public, “That kind of communication places visible practical results in the common endeavors” (R1S). According to one of the respondents, it represents a way for to promote religious leaders’ and believers’ achievements (R2S). However, communication between religious leaders and believers depends on generational affiliation, i.e. whether they are younger

or older believers. The youngsters mostly use digital tools, while the older individuals prefer direct communication (R6S, R7S). Also, it is evident that the youngsters prefer content which is short in duration, and can be shared via social networks, such as YouTube and TikTok (R3S). Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube are most often used by young believers. (R8S, R10S). According to the majority of the respondents, Facebook, Viber, and YouTube are platforms used by all generations (R3S, R4S, R5S, R6S, R7S, R8S, R9S).

Adapting communication requirements of various generational groups by a selective use of digital platforms reflects the new evolutionary role of religious leaders. Besides their activity as spiritual leaders, in the new digital dynamics, they are becoming communication mediators of digitally varied groups of believers, as well.

RQ 4: With what kind of theological and doctrinal dilemmas are religious leaders faced when maintaining authenticity and integrity of religious traditions in the digital space?

Theme 4: Preserving Theological Authenticity in the Digital Space

Sub-theme 4.1: Physical Presence as a Core Theological Value

Digitalization raises fundamental questions about the role of embodiment and the importance of physical presence as being essential for an authentic religious experience. In all the interviews, physical presence and communion are being consistently confirmed and reaffirmed as key dimensions of spiritual life. This is illustrated by one respondent's statement: "... the physical gathering, the common celebration with songs and psalms, and teaching one on one, cannot be substituted, because God primarily works through people who have personally experienced the transforming power of the encounter with the resurrected Jesus through the work of the Holy Spirit" (R2M). Similarly R3M explains: "The faith and the religious service in Orthodoxy suggest presence in the temple as a sacred place, where communion is being experienced, as well as a liturgical body," whereby "the sacral dimension of the space" is being emphasized as essential. These statements confirm the belief that digitalization must not disrupt the basic theological and doctrinal elements of the faith, nor should lead to the complete virtualization of faith and religious practices. On the other hand, one statement indicated that in the Evangelical-Protestant churches, digitalization does not threaten the authenticity of the teachings and the relations to the physical space at all (R2M). One person explains that certain doctrinal questions have emerged only when

the meanings of “communion” and “togetherness” had to be defined, in the context of social media, and the way of interpreting their “existence” in the digital world (R5M).

Two of the respondents consider that there are no theological or doctrinal dilemmas (R1M, R4M), but that the dilemmas are mostly of a practical nature (R1M). This suggests that the digitalization is being perceived only as an additional practical tool for connecting, communication, and education of believers. For one of the respondents, digitalization does not cause theological dilemmas. The respondent states that: “The technology itself is neutral, until it is put/used in a given context,” which could raise the level of theological debates (R5M). Regarding the doctrinal questions, the same respondent explains that they can only arise from the content of texts/posts in which claims and beliefs are being listed without any responsibility and without any biblical proofs (R5M). For R7M the doctrinal dilemmas arise as a result of the “sensationalist content, religiously motivated conspiracy theories, and shallow and exceptionally harmful teachings,” whereas R6M connects them to the reliability of the source of information.

In Serbia, digital technology has raised questions as to whether the religious experience can remain authentic without the physical space and the community. There is a danger of losing the depth of the experience, because not everything can be explained with words only (R6S). According to one of the respondents, digital technology is/can represent a good support for passing on the tradition (R3S), while another one claims that it is helping in passing on the mission of the Church (R2S). There is no question that, in that case, the role of the minister is very important, protecting the goal of unity from disruption (R1S). That is, it is important for the minister to ensure that religious quotes are accurate, and to provide prayers that encourage a thoughtful dedication of faith. By listening to educational stories about spiritual experiences, believers can correct their behavior (R6S). However, according to one of the respondents, maintaining the authenticity and the integrity of religious traditions is only possible with the sacred mystery of the liturgy, which testifies to the presence of Christ himself (R10S), and also with the accurate interpretation of the gospels through sermons which are adequate to the teachings of the Church, therefore avoiding a “halo effect” of content (R8S).

Sub-theme 4.2: Maintaining of the Institutional and Religious Authority

Open access to the digital space has provided multiple understandings and various interpretations of the faith and spiritual experiences. Such pluralism is freely expressed by unregulated opinions, beliefs, and claims, on one hand representing a possibility, but on the other

hand, raising questions of possible deviation and incorrect doctrinal interpretation. The risk of relativizing the theological is being detected in the interviewed people's statements, as well as a placement of disinformation and potential diminishing of the religious authority. The sub-theme reflects the tension between the freedom of expression and the need for theological responsibility.

Some of the respondents are convinced that digitalization cannot disrupt the traditional religious positions and roles, because the traditional leadership structure is considered "biblical, unchangeable, and permanent," where the pastor functions as one of the equals (R2M); the spiritual authority remains closely connected to the sacraments, the ministry service, and the personal relations (R3M). One of the respondents explains that digital media cannot affect the leader's position, however, it can positively affect the relations between the religious leaders and society, but under the condition that "the religious leaders do not go beyond their framework of jurisdiction, that is, they do not take someone's side, or interest," as well as, "if it is preached by legitimate representatives of the religious community, and it is not abused for somebody's interest and purpose" (R6M).

However, some of the respondents consider that digital platforms affect the traditional leadership structures in the religious organizations, posing challenges for spiritual authority versus digital visibility. Social media provides some of the religious leaders who are more digitally engaged with larger access and visibility, to become popular leaders and to gain leadership authority, particularly among young believers, but also in the wider community (R4M). Simultaneously, what is being pointed out are the concerns of "creation of a new kind of 'digital authority' which is not so much based on traditional hierarchical position or spiritual maturity, but on the presence and the influence in the digital space" (R4M). Moreover, R4M considers the emergence of the new digital authorities, as a potential "risk of the individualization of the faith," which the respondent explains as focusing the believer's attention towards an individual, instead of towards the religious community as a whole, and the liturgical life. Another respondent has an interesting explanation about the negative effects, stating that, "... there are 'attempts' for 'influencership,' for polemics, for political preferences, and 'cultural wars'" (R7M), inside the spiritual leadership structures. That same person holds an even more extreme position regarding digital religious authorities, claiming that many young people "find their leaders" in the digital space, while, "the physical community serves them only to satisfy their need for belonging to a group" (R7M).

The research results in Serbia, reveal that there is an influence of digital platforms on leadership structures in the religious organizations and communities in the sense of media exposure, leadership promotion, as well as gaining popularity and religious influence (R1S - R10S). However, most often the spiritual authorities are not those who necessarily promote themselves but those who have the largest following. That of course does not affect the church hierarchy. One of the respondents has stated that digital platforms can support traditional leadership, but they cannot affect the internal hierarchy (R3S). The rest of the respondents consider that digital platforms cannot affect leadership structure but can serve to promote and inform (R1S, R2S, R4S, R5S, R6S, R7S, R8S, R9S, R10S). The number of posts, the quantity of the followers, and the popularity cannot affect the profound and traditionally established church leadership (R8S). When modern technology is being used reasonably, carefully, and accurately it can only enhance the personal relations and the relations inside the community itself. Thus, the authority cannot be endangered in any way (R1S). The hierarchy in the Serbian Orthodox Church is canonically established; thus, the selection of the religious leaders must be accordingly adequate. They must be religiously educated leaders, eloquent, and capable of communication with the church administration and the believers.

This sub-theme highlights the clear distinction between the authentic spiritual authority and the online popularity. Respondents express concerns that visibility may be mistaken for legitimacy, emphasizing the need for ethical and reflective engagement with digital media.

RQ 5: What are the expectations of the representatives of religious communities regarding the future of digital technology use and its impact on religious leadership?

Theme 5: A Balanced Integration of Traditional and Digital Religious Leadership

This theme considers the position of the representatives of religious communities on the future of religious leadership in conditions of rapid development of digital technology and the current processes of the digital transformation. Respondents view digital technology as an irreversible aspect of contemporary religious leadership, yet one that should remain supportive, rather than dominant. The future is framed as a process of integration, where the core religious values remain intact. All of the respondents agree that the imperative of religious leadership to maintain the traditional forms of spiritual communication with believers is irreplaceable, while digital technology can assist the mission of the religious leaders (R1M, R2M, R3M, R4M, R5M,

R6M, R7M). Digitalization remains a permanent, but secondary component. For R3M and R4M, the future of the religious leadership is not a matter of choice between the digital and the traditional, but a balanced integration of both (R3M, R4M). The future of religious leadership is being viewed as a “harmonious coexistence,” considering the digital as a contribution, not a substitution (R3M). R4M explains that the religious leaders should “use the digital potential wisely,” adopting new digital solutions and innovative practices. At the same time, the significance of the technical competencies and the digital literacy of the leader, is being pointed out (R4M).

Statements of interviewed respondents in Serbia indicated that the use of the digital technologies have become inevitable in the fulfillment of the church’s mission, and the work with believers (R1S, R2S, R3S, R4S, R5S, R6S, R8CS). Regarding the promotion segment, it made work of religious communities visible, and made communication easier, more direct, and faster (P7C, P9C, P10C). What represents a potential danger is that believers could be manipulated via digital platforms, could be led to isolation, and could be in contradiction with family values, or even something more negative, such as failing to be in accord with the human imperatives of the religion and society (R1S, R2S).

Challenges are being located in the capability of religious leaders to act strategically by creating a vision for the future of their leadership, and the future of the religious community in a digital context, while simultaneously maintaining the essence and the authenticity of spiritual guidance.

Discussion

This study has examined the perceptions, attitudes, and experiences of the representatives of the religious communities in Macedonia and Serbia, in regard to the usage of digital technology in religious leadership and practices. The compared empirical findings from the interviews conducted in Macedonia and Serbia have shown that there are no substantial differences between the two countries. The respondents share similar, or almost identical beliefs regarding the implementation and the practical use of the digital tools in everyday religious life, and in the organization of the religious collective.

According to the research findings, *the general perception of the representatives of religious communities regarding digital technology in religious leadership*, is that it is unavoidable and is a structural component of the contemporary religious leadership, rather than an optional innovative practice for religious guidance and communication. In the two national contexts, in

Macedonia, as well as Serbia, digital tools are being considered as necessities for maintaining visibility, communication, and relevance in a rapidly changing social environment. This kind of perception reflects the broader process of acceptance of digital technology as part of religious institutions, while the adaptation is being considered the leadership's responsibility, not as an externally imposed constraint. At the same time, regardless of the positive orientation towards digital technology, it is notable that the process is continuously accompanied by emphasis of the control of the digital, moderation in its usage, and strictly instrumental use. The representatives of the religious communities articulate clear division between technology as means and spirituality as a goal, thus rejecting technological determinism. Digital tools are being valued as a means for reaching and supporting communication with believers, but also as a tool for better organizational efficiency. Cautious acceptance of the possibilities provided by digital technology is in line with previous research, which suggests that religious entities usually integrate digital media pragmatically, while simultaneously confirming traditional theological boundaries.

Regarding the beginnings of the digital technology implementation in religious practice, it is clear that it has been used years prior, while the COVID-19 pandemic has functioned as a facilitator, not as an initial point of digital engagement by religious leaders and organizations. This shows that the pandemic has facilitated and consolidated the existing trajectories of digital adaptation, by implementation of new innovative forms of leadership and communication; however, it failed to impose a fundamental transformation of the traditional authentic religious leadership models.

Concerning the *influence of digital technology on the religious service and rituals*, the research has shown clear consensus among the respondents that the digitalization serves as continuation, but not as a substitute of faith's already set and deeply established offline religious practices. However, when discussing the impact of digitalization on religious life and leadership practices directed towards believers, strict boundaries are being drawn between what can and cannot be transferred to a digital format. This is particularly evident when it comes to digital mediation of the secret and sacred rituals. This reflects the deeply rooted theological understanding of the sacred as rational, corporal, and spatial. The digital formats, although perceived as practical for connecting and communication, are not capable of completely transferring the experiential, common, and sacramental dimensions, which are central to religious life. These types of views reflect different standpoints to those who consider that the physical location is not necessary, and

that the digital and internet environment could be considered as areas for religious community, which suggests a shift from the focus on the physical space to a focus on relations established as part of the religious collective.⁴⁰ Overall, the research findings confirm that the digitalization does not endanger the theological core of religious practice, and clearly defines the boundaries of the digital, reinforcing the traditional theological principles in a digital context.

When it comes to the *changes in communication and connection with the community*, the study indicates that digitalization, the internet, and social media have particularly influenced the processes of communication and connection with believers. The possibilities provided by digital tools have initiated implementation of innovative communication practices of religious leadership, with a purpose of spreading the faith, and expanding the religious community to new believers and followers. The new forms of communication enable the faith to reach a wider circle of believers, but at the same time to attract new ones, especially considering various generational groups, as confirmed by previous research.⁴¹ The results indicate that digitalization has notably enhanced religious communication. The transfer of communication and religious connection to the online space has inevitably resulted in reconfiguring and redefining of the term “religious community.” The findings reveal a transition from episodic, physically connected interactions to continuous mediated pastoral presence. Digital platforms provide religious leaders with a constant contact with believers, enable them to react to their needs more efficiently, and provide participation opportunities for believers who are not able to be physically present. This expanding of accessibility contributes to redefining boundaries of the religious community, particularly by integrating the diaspora believers into the religious life of the local communities. The findings suggest that an affiliation with a certain religious collective is not any longer determined by physical proximity alone, but to relational and communicational engagement. In the digital and internet world, a new understanding of the religious community as such is being created, while the religion and faith gain new dimension, expressed by interaction, connection, and fluidity between the digital and the physical religious spaces. Simultaneously, the empirical findings suggest that selective communication strategies are being used, specifically for various social media and digital platforms. A clear awareness of the possibilities of the various platforms and the appropriate

⁴⁰ Jason L. Rankin, “Implications of digital church for Christian leaders”, *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 11:1 (2024), 1-12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2024.2408868>

⁴¹ Juan Narbona, “Digital leadership, Twitter and Pope Francis”, *Church, Communication and Culture*, 1:1 (2016), 90-109. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23753234.2016.1181307>

content adjustment is being noted in the interviews. This realization points to the need for digital education, related to appropriate and efficient use of the possibilities provided by digital media.⁴² In addition, the findings reveal that style of communication is vividly differentiated by generational groups. The younger believers are engaged more via visually oriented, short and interactive platforms, while the older generations prefer familiar and less complicated digital tools or direct communication. This generational sensitivity positions the religious leaders not only as spiritual leaders, but they now take on another role, as mediators between various digital groups.

In regard to the *theological and the doctrinal dilemmas in the digital space*, it is evident that digitalization raises important theological and doctrinal concerns related to the integrity of religious traditions and practice in the online space, particularly regarding authenticity and personification. Namely, physical presence as a basic theological value is again pointed out as a central issue which should be taken into account when practicing the religious life, and the relations with the believers in the digital sphere. In the interviews, the religious experience is constantly interpreted as personified and common, thus, digital mediation is being perceived as inherently limited in its capacity to transfer spiritual depth. While some respondents are informing of none or minimal theological dilemmas, interpreting digitalization as neutral tool, most of them express their concern about the quality, the trustworthiness, and the doctrinal accuracy of the online religious content. The open and non-regulated nature of digital spaces could potentially undermine doctrinal coherency, because it allows plural and free interpretations, sensationalism, and spreading of teachings which are often not based in the doctrinal system.

Besides that, digitalization raises a new, exceptionally important question regarding religious authority. The adoption of digital tools and the internet has its implications in the way religious leadership and authority is being perceived and accepted in the online space. The beliefs that digital technology cannot endanger the positions and the roles of the religious leaders are being expressed, nor can digital technology influence the firmly based structure and organization of religious institutions. The online and the offline religious practices can function in synergy and can complement each other, while the complementarity is understood as “acts of interrelation of

⁴² Thomas Schlag, Gabriela, Frey G. and Katharina Yadav, “Religious Leadership and Digital Innovation: An Explorative Interview Study with Church Actors in the Swiss Context”, *Religions* 16: 491 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16040491>

socio-technical developments that co-constitute and augment authority.”⁴³ On the other hand, due to the increased presence and rise of online religious groups and organizations, religious institutions recognize the importance of the internet in spreading religious content, information, and the mission.⁴⁴ Some of the respondents are calling for caution, due to the rising visibility of certain persons in the digital context, which could create new forms of personal influence based on popularity, not on theological legitimacy, or institutional role. These standpoints are in line with the indications of Campbell,⁴⁵ who points out the emergence of a new type of religious leadership in the digital space, such as web administrators and theological bloggers, who undertake positions and roles in already established religious systems of knowledge and influence. The findings reveal that there is a concern regarding the emergence of a form of a ‘digital authority,’ which can compete with, or can devalue the traditional spiritual leadership structures. This tension is pointing out the challenge of maintaining the institutional and theological integrity of the traditional and legitimate religious leadership in the digital space, as opposed to the engagement of persons who tend to gain popularity in the online space, which enables their algorithmic visibility and individual self-presentation.

The interviewed representatives of the religious communities overall have positive *expectations regarding the future of the digital technology in religious leadership*. They view the future as a balanced integration of new digital technologies with the already established definite practices of religious leadership, which remain unchanged, but are now enriched with new forms of activity. The future is envisioned as a hybrid model, in which digital tools are complementing, but not substituting for the personified worship service, the personal pastoral care, and the common religious life. Regarding the *challenges*, the research findings point out the increased importance of the acquisition of digital competencies among religious leaders and other religious entities.⁴⁶ Also, the study indicates the acknowledgment of the importance of digitalization as an incentive for considering the strategic role of digital media and modernizing religious life. Namely, the need

⁴³ Pauline H. Cheong, “Authority”, in *Digital religion: Understanding religious practice in new media worlds*, ed. H. A. Campbell (Routledge, 2013), 78.

⁴⁴ Heidi A. Campbell and Alessandra Vitullo, “Assessing changes in the study of religious communities in digital religion studies”, *Church, Communication & Culture*, 1(1), (2016), 73–89, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23753234.2016.1181301>

⁴⁵ Heidi A. Campbell, “*Digital creatives and the rethinking of religious authority*”, (Routledge, 2021).

⁴⁶ Thomas Schlag, Gabriela, Frey G. and Katharina Yadav, “Religious Leadership and Digital Innovation: An Explorative Interview Study with Church Actors in the Swiss Context”, *Religions* 16: 491 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16040491>

for strategic thinking and implementation of new innovative approaches in the management of religious institutions and communities is being stressed. The previous research has suggested that the adaption of new technology is in positive correlation with the leaders' capability for expanding influence and reinforcing relations with believers.⁴⁷ Furthermore, the findings reveal that the ethical responsibility of religious leaders in the processes of digital integration are being considered as very important in the context of digital changes. Finally, the religious leadership's capacity to maintain its authenticity, while functioning in the digital space, is one of the most important future challenges because digital space is in fact open and free, but difficult to manage and control. The capability for innovations, without compromising basic religious values, emerges as a defining task for leadership in the digital era.

Conclusion

The study indicates that digital technology becomes an integral, although carefully limited element of the modern religious leadership in Macedonia and Serbia. Digitalization and digital platforms do not have a significant impact on the traditional leadership structures in the religious communities and their spiritual authority. However, they positively influence the spreading of faith, the communication with believers, media exposure via digital means, and the way believers perceive the role and availability of their spiritual leaders. It can be concluded that the representatives of religious communities understand digitalization as a supportive instrument, not as a transformative element of the theological core of religious life. There is a pragmatic and reflective approach towards digital engagement, characterized by openness to innovations, vivid theological boundaries, and care for the maintenance of institutional authority and doctrinal integrity.

The study contributes to the growing field of research on digital religion, by illustrating the way representatives of religious communities comprehend the dynamics and the balance between tradition and innovation, visibility and authenticity, and accessibility and depth. Theoretically, the findings confirm the relevance of personification, community, and authority as central concepts in comprehension of religion in digital contexts. From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the need for new strategic approaches, development of digital literacy, and ethical awareness in the training of religious leadership in the digital space.

⁴⁷ Juan Narbona, "Digital leadership, Twitter and Pope Francis", *Church, Communication and Culture*, 1:1 (2016), 90-109. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23753234.2016.1181307>

Future research could investigate the believers' perspectives, the intergenerational dynamics, and the denominational differences, as well as the longitudinal changes and the dynamic that digital technologies alter religious practices. As digital environments continue to develop, the challenge for religious leaders remains the same, and that is, how to join the digital world without losing the spiritual substance of the faith and religious life.

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