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Book Review
Viera Pirker / Paula Paschke (eds.), Religion auf Instagram

Analysen und Perspektiven

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The contributions in this edited volume primarily address Christian content on Instagram. In the introduction, the editors describe Instagram as an emerging research field in various disciplines, including practical theology, religious education, religious studies and communication studies, which has required a variety of methodological and theoretical approaches. The editors' goal is to combine hermeneutical and anthropological reflections with recent empirical research, especially that of early career researchers. Methods range from digital ethnography, qualitative content analysis and network analysis to interviews or "social media tours". The book demonstrates, they propose, that transformations of communication and consumption patterns or conceptions of the world through social media also affect religious communication on Instagram. This niche but lively field alters our understandings of (religious) community, identity and authority. As the choice of platform shapes communicative and aesthetic practices as well as content, the editors also delineate the platform's evolution, in particular its increasing economization and algorithmization. Such themes are taken up in the various contributions, which are assigned to one of four sections: (1) Platform, which provides overarching observations; (2) Content, largely based on case studies; (3) Users, which centers user practices; and (4) Practice, containing reflections by content creators.

Section One, on the platform itself, starts with a discussion by Roman-Catholic theologian Viera Pirker about the theme of religion on the community account @instagram. Pirker underlines that trends such as the growing

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relevancy of individual experience also effect religion. As a result, a culturalist view on religious traditions from a "tourist gaze" gives way to questions surrounding social awareness based on users' subjective perspectives. This is accompanied by the popularization of formats such as "stories" which center individuals and a growing focus on Islam and Hinduism.

Anna Neumaier, scholar of religious studies, concisely discusses digital ethnography as a method in religious studies, noting critical developments, such as the emergence of multi-sited ethnography in the 1990s, that also inform the navigation of digital spaces. Reflecting on the implementation of key tenets of ethnography in Instagram research, she discusses methodological, legal and ethical challenges and questions ideological assumptions about the internet being "less real".

Other contributions, including that by Catholic theologians Rebekka Burke, Laura Mößle and Lena Tacke, discuss concepts such as embodied self-presentation, narrativity, performativity and authenticity. Strategies used to convey spontaneity and accessibility across the private-public binary are described as tools of "doing singularity", a means of constructing one's own (commodified) story on Instagram. Philosopher and anthropologist Anna Puzio points to the interdisciplinarity of Instagram research that engages the technical, natural and social sciences as she considers Instagram's relevance for the formation of non-anthropocentric definitions of the human through renegotiation of the human and non-human. Her article is something of a plea for a contemporary anthropology in general, much like Wolfgang Beck and Leopold Kohlbrenner's anthropological reflections (in Section Two) on the role of visuality for the Catholic Church and the development of sacramental theology.

Catholic theologian Florian Mayrhofer opens Section Two, on content, with his contribution on digital storytelling, although his insightful reflections on digitalization, technologies and digitality would also fit in Section One. Arguing that historically the digital-analogue distinction was not as sharp as often assumed, he calls for a broader understanding of storytelling within "digital *circumstances*" (p. 129, my emphasis). With features such as intertextuality, multimodality, interactivity, emotionality, nonlinearity and topicality, digital storytelling today oscillates between authentic self-representation and self-promotion and can present both neoliberal logics and counter-narratives by marginalized communities, all shaped by algorithmic outcomes and platform affordances. These "circumstances" raise questions of reconcilability with pastoral and educational contexts.

Sabrina Müller, who is a Protestant theologian, similarly points out historical continuities. Describing how religious influencers, who may be considered experts, provide meaning through visual communication and the authentic interplay of their personal outlook and relevant themes, she draws parallels with the clergy's role in disseminating the gospel as authentically as possible. She argues that influencers might be answering current calls for more relatable forms of religious delivery.

Deploying a netnographic approach, sociologist of religion Gero Menzel's contribution on the role of married couples in religious communication by the International Christian Fellowship (ICF) in Germany demonstrates the entanglement of online and offline spheres by analyzing the online coverage of a marriage seminar. Based on Heidi Campbell's framework of "religious-social shaping of technology", he reflects on how the ICF's media ideology impacts its Instagram use. In his theoretically dense article, based on the religious-sociological concept of charisma, he analyzes how influencers offer solutions to "modern hyperculture" by promoting their own expertise and Bible-led lifestyles within the context of post-feminism.

Although limited in scope because of the small number of examples, Christine Wenona Hoffmann's study of the pastoral-theological context convincingly argues that digital pastoral care has the potential to transform pastoral care as a whole: rather than being a simple adoption of traditional practices, this form of pastoral care is accompanied by profound changes in key issues such as confidentiality, formal structure and content. One-on-one interactions or peer groups give way to fluidity on Instagram with regard to time, space and target groups, enabling anonymous reception and "interpassivity" while also activating community resources. Here, emphasis is placed on the vulnerability and authenticity of clergy, who embody new roles in parasocial relationships.

Kirsten Wünsche, Antonia Hafner and Tessa von Richthofen's well-structured study, which adopts a media and communication studies lens, is particularly welcome as it is the only contribution to deal explicitly with Muslim perspectives. The authors consider here how Muslims in Germany respond to racism by creating counter-publics. Identifying three main frames – visibility, activation and education – it underlines the importance of social media for the self-representation, participation, and activist purposes of marginalized groups. Although Instagram's reputation is as a visual platform, in these instances it also carries text-heavy content. Activism is also a theme in Catholic theologian Paula Paschke's contribution (in Section Three), in

which she considers the impact of the 2022 #outinchurch campaign, positioned alongside other movements such as #blacklivesmatter and #metoo, on the Catholic Church in Germany.

Christoph Novak, Astrid Mattes, Miriam Haselbacher and Katharina Limacher's study, which opens Section Three, on the user, also discusses religious diversity. Drawing on interviews and social media tours through individual users' feeds that are part of the Vienna-based participatory project YouBeOn (Young Believers Online), it investigates the relationship between Vienna's "superdiverse" urban space, the heterogeneous digital space and the construction of religious identity, offering another view of online-offline entanglements. Findings have identified the culturalization, profanation and ethnicization of religious interpretations and practices against the backdrop of popular forms of youth culture – themes considered more relevant than religious affiliations – as well as highly individualized experiences. On this basis, the authors propose that social media tours can be a productive research method.

Commissioned by the Protestant Church in Germany (EKD) and based on a survey disseminated through Christian influencers' Instagram stories, social scientist Daniel Hörsch examines followers' characteristics, practices, needs, motivations and relationships to church, as well as influencers' missionary potential. He conceptualizes digital communities as innovative, loose and anti-hierarchical social formations that enable individual and simultaneous participation in several contexts. They are, he proposes, a form of lived religion that amplifies the "priesthood of all believers". Followers, mainly female and Gen Z, are interested in "authentic" religiosity, spirituality, (intellectual) stimuli and encouragement.

Section Four contains active Christian-content creators' own reflections on their objectives, self-conceptions, practices and the implications of their practice for church structures and theological debates. In exposing strategies and deliberations that shape the production of religious content, their contributions certainly raise new research questions.

This volume's engagement with a wide range of methodological and theoretical approaches and case studies divided in terms of platform, content and users will be helpful for those acquainting themselves with religion on social media. It is a valuable contribution to a growing field that highlights the need for further research. Despite its focus on Instagram, occasional glances at other platforms, for example in Catholic theologian Brodthage's comparison of representations of religion on YouTube and Instagram, un-

derline ever-evolving platform specifics and their varying impact. Several common concepts, among them community, identity, authority, authenticity, individualization, the private-public binary or changing meanings of expertise embodied in the "influencer", connect the chapters. Recurring themes such as queerness, gender roles, racism or empowerment indicate the entanglements of religion on social media with socio-political currents and the role of Instagram in the formation of new (religious) practices and discourses. Reflections on historical continuities, for example by Mayrhofer and by Beck and Kohlbrenner, complement the volume. The numerous and interconnected contributions, some potentially interesting for researchers in fields such as gender or migration studies, demonstrate a complex and quickly evolving field.

Nevertheless, some contributions lack explicitly Instagram-specific findings and/or have a weak empirical foundation. In Burke, Mößle and Tacke's article, several examples of visual practices, embodiment and authenticity are not specific to Instagram and could appear in pre-social media contexts too, while a discussion of continuities and their implications is lacking. Isolated and anecdotal analysis of a small dataset, as for example in Brodthage's use of the documentary method, with only limited engagement with the broader context despite repeated references to the relevance of platform logics, offers restricted analytical insight. Protestant theologian Wormstädt's observations on the changing meaning of confessions would benefit from a more systematic analysis too. Some contributions can thus be described as rather exploratory. A comprehensive perspective on platform affordances and their interplay, for example an explicit focus on audio-visuality as a key structural feature rather than a mere add-on, could provide well-founded insight into what these mean for specifically religious messages. Furthermore, some arguments might be challenged by insights from alternative religious traditions. For instance, Muslim content creators who refrain from exposing their faces might nuance arguments about embodiment, the relation of private and public, and visual practices. Expertise in other religious traditions could also have prevented easily avoided mistakes, such as mislabeling the Muslim *ʿĪd al-Fiṭr* (p. 45). The volume mostly covers German-speaking contexts, and some contributions engage overwhelmingly with German literature. Considering more international perspectives would have enriched it, as would have a broader empirical foundation and a more diverse religious basis, thus doing justice to the universal title "Religion on Instagram". The volume would have also benefited from more careful linguistic and stylistic editing.