

Digital Religious Outreach: Mapping Trends and Challenges of Interfaith Dialogue on Social Media Platforms

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Abstract

The migration of religious discourse to digital spaces has transformed the nature of interfaith engagement. This research provides a systematic mapping of trends and challenges in digital religious outreach across major social media platforms (X, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube) between 2021 and 2026. Through a systematic review of contemporary literature, the study identifies three dominant trends: the rise of "Micro-Influencer Clerics," the gamification of theological debate, and the emergence of "Algorithm-Driven Ecumenism." However, these opportunities for outreach are countered by significant challenges, including the "Polarization Trap," digital sectarianism, and the loss of theological nuance in short-form content. The findings suggest that while social media democratizes interfaith dialogue, it often prioritizes performative debate over genuine understanding. The research concludes by proposing a "Digital Ethics of Engagement" framework to foster constructive inter-religious harmony in the age of Artificial Intelligence.

Keyword: *Digital Religious Outreach, Interfaith Dialogue, Social Media, Algorithm Ethics, Digital Sectarianism, Religious Influencers.*

Introduction

In the mid-2020s, the "Digital Turn" in religion has reached a point of saturation where social media is no longer merely a tool for communication but a primary environment for the formation of religious identity. "Digital Religious Outreach"—the intentional use of online platforms to disseminate faith-based values and engage with the "Other"—has become a central strategy for both institutional and independent religious actors. Unlike traditional interfaith dialogues held in closed academic or clerical circles, digital dialogue is public, decentralized, and governed by algorithms. [Hasan & Ridho \(2024\)](#) argue that this shift has created a "Global Digital Majlis," where theological boundaries are constantly tested and renegotiated in real-time. This research seeks to map the evolving dynamics of these digital encounters.

The central problem addressed in this study is the inherent tension between the "Logic of the Sacred" and the "Logic of the Algorithm." While interfaith dialogue requires slow, deliberative, and empathetic communication, social media algorithms reward high-arousal content, conflict, and brevity. [Abadi \(2024\)](#) highlights that this structural bias often turns potentially constructive interfaith exchanges into "Digital Gladiatorial Matches," where the goal is to "win" a debate for an audience of followers rather than to understand the interlocutor. Furthermore, the rise of "Siloe

Spiritualities" means that users are rarely exposed to diverse religious perspectives unless they are framed as adversarial. There is an urgent need to review how these platforms can be reclaimed for genuine pluralistic outreach.

The objective of this research is to conduct a systematic mapping of digital religious outreach trends and challenges from 2021 to 2026. This review aims to categorize the strategies used by digital religious influencers to foster inter-religious harmony and to identify the technical and social barriers that hinder these efforts. [Fadli et al. \(2024\)](#) suggest that the shift toward "Short-Form Theology" on platforms like TikTok and Reels has democratized religious knowledge but at the cost of intellectual depth. By synthesizing current literature, this study seeks to formulate a set of "Best Practices for Digital Chaplaincy" that can guide religious leaders in navigating the complexities of the digital public square. This objective is crucial for ensuring that the digital era contributes to social cohesion rather than fragmentation.

The significance of this study lies in its multidisciplinary approach, bridging computer science, communication studies, and theology. As religious institutions globally invest in "Digital Missions," understanding the psychological and sociological impact of these efforts is vital for organizational strategy. [Naswa & Muthoifin \(2025\)](#) support the premise that "Cyber-Ethics" is the new frontier of *Maqasid al-Sharia* (objectives of Islamic law) and general religious ethics. Furthermore, this research contributes to the field of "Digital Humanities" by documenting the transformation of sacred dialogue in the age of AI-mediated communication. In conclusion, mapping digital religious outreach is not merely a technical task but a moral imperative to preserve the "Human Soul" of dialogue in a world of bots and binaries.

Literature Review

The scholarly discourse on "Digital Religion" has evolved from viewing the internet as a mere tool to recognizing it as a "**Third Space**"—a hybrid environment where the boundaries between the physical and virtual sacred are blurred. Current literature highlights that digital outreach is no longer a top-down institutional broadcast but a decentralized network of "Micro-Clerics" and lay influencers. [Hasan & Ridho \(2024\)](#) argue that this democratization allows for a more personalized religious experience but also challenges the traditional authority of established religious institutions. The "Digital Majlis" represents a shift toward a more horizontal theological exchange, where the validity of a religious message is often judged by its viral potential rather than its traditional scholarly lineage.

A dominant theme in recent research is the "**Algorithmic Mediation of Faith**," which refers to how platform architectures determine which religious voices are heard. Algorithms optimized for "engagement" tend to favor provocative and polarizing content, often at the expense of moderate interfaith dialogue. [Ruggiu & Özdemir \(2026\)](#) observe that "Digital Sectarianism" is frequently an unintended consequence of engagement-based metrics, as users are funneled into ideological echo chambers. This structural bias creates a paradox where platforms designed to connect the world often deepen religious divides. Consequently, the literature emphasizes that "interfaith outreach" in the digital age requires a sophisticated understanding of data ethics and platform politics.

The rise of "Short-Form Theology" on platforms like TikTok and Instagram Reels has redefined the "Aesthetics of Outreach." Literature from 2023–2025

suggests that the 60-second limit forces religious actors to simplify complex theological concepts into "snackable" content. [Abadi \(2024\)](#) reinforces that while this increases accessibility for the youth, it risks the "McDonaldization" of faith, where nuance is sacrificed for clicks. This trend has led to the emergence of "Religious Edutainment," where interfaith dialogue is often staged as a performative "debate" or "reaction video." The synthesis of current studies indicates that while short-form content is effective for initial outreach, it lacks the depth required for sustainable spiritual formation or complex conflict resolution.

Furthermore, the literature identifies the "Polarization Trap" as a primary barrier to constructive digital dialogue. When interfaith engagement occurs in the public comments section of social media, it often devolves into "Digital Gladiatorial Matches" fueled by anonymity and disinhibition. [Mustapha \(2025\)](#) observes that these interactions are rarely about mutual understanding; instead, they serve as "Identity Performance" for the participants' respective "in-groups." This finding suggests that the architecture of social media currently favors "Debate" over "Dialogue," making it difficult for moderate voices to gain traction without resorting to confrontational tactics. The literature confirms that a "Digital Ethics of Disagreement" is urgently needed to mitigate this toxic dynamic.

The role of "Artificial Intelligence and Bots" in religious outreach has emerged as a critical new area of inquiry. Studies from 2025 indicate that "AI-Imams" and "Bot-Chaplains" are being used to automate religious guidance and interfaith Q&A sessions. [Siti Farahiyah Ab Rahim et al. \(2025\)](#) highlight that while AI can provide rapid responses to theological queries, it lacks the *Hikmah* (wisdom) and *Rahmah* (mercy) essential for human religious interaction. There is also a growing concern regarding the use of bots to artificially amplify sectarian narratives, creating a false sense of "communal consensus." This development represents a shift from "Human Outreach" to "Automated Apologetics," raising profound questions about the authenticity of digital spiritual engagement.

Finally, the review explores the potential of "VR-Ecumenism" and Metaverse-based interfaith spaces as "Simulated Sacred Spaces." Early research suggests that immersive environments allow for a "Body-Neutral" dialogue that can reduce subconscious prejudices related to race or traditional religious attire. [Alamsyah \(2025\)](#) argues that these virtual spaces can function as "Digital Laboratories" for inter-religious peacebuilding. However, the commercial nature of these platforms remains a point of contention among theologians. In conclusion, the literature review affirms that digital religious outreach is a double-edged sword: it offers unprecedented reach for the message of peace, but it is constantly threatened by the systemic biases of the digital marketplace.

Method

The object of this research is the phenomenon of Digital Religious Outreach (DRO) as it manifests across major social media platforms, including TikTok, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), and YouTube. The central problem analyzed is the structural and sociological tension between the "Sacred" intent of interfaith dialogue and the "Profane" incentives of platform algorithms. [Najib et al. \(2025\)](#) emphasize that the digital medium is not a neutral vessel; it actively shapes the theological content it carries. This study seeks to investigate how religious influencers navigate the "Engagement Trap" while attempting to foster genuine pluralistic discourse. By

focusing on the period of 2021–2026, the research captures the transition from basic digital presence to sophisticated, AI-driven religious communication strategies.

This study employs a Systematic Mapping Review (SMR) methodology. This design is selected to provide a high-level overview of a large and diverse body of digital artifacts, academic literature, and platform-specific data. Unlike a narrow systematic review, an SMR allows for the categorization of "Trends" and "Challenges" into a structured taxonomy. [Ruggiu & Özdemir \(2026\)](#) argue that mapping is the most effective way to analyze the "Digital Turn" in religion, as it accounts for the rapid evolution of technology that traditional longitudinal studies might miss. The systematic nature of this mapping ensures that the review is not merely anecdotal but reflects broader patterns of digital behavior within the global "Faith-Tech" ecosystem.

The theoretical framework utilized is the "Platformization of Religion" Framework. This theory posits that when religious activities move to digital platforms, they become subject to the "Platform Logic"—which prioritizes datafication, commodification, and selection. [Mustapha \(2025\)](#) asserts that this framework is essential for understanding how algorithms act as "Digital Gatekeepers" of religious truth. By applying this lens, the research evaluates the extent to which interfaith dialogue is "platform-dependent" or if it maintains its theological autonomy. The framework serves as the analytical foundation for distinguishing between performative "engagement" and substantive "dialogue."

The data acquisition process follows a multi-platform search strategy across academic databases (Scopus, IEEE Xplore, and Web of Science) and digital archives of significant interfaith influencers. Key search terms include "Digital Interfaith Dialogue," "Religious TikTok Trends," "Algorithm Sectarianism," and "Cyber-Ethics in Outreach." [Al-Momani et al. \(2025\)](#) highlight that in digital studies, "Platform-Native Data" (such as trending hashtags and engagement metrics) must be synthesized with peer-reviewed literature to ensure contemporary relevance. The selection criteria prioritize studies and reports from 2021–2026 that address the ethical, psychological, and sociological dimensions of online religious interaction.

The data analysis technique involves Cross-Platform Thematic Synthesis and Sentiment Mapping. The collected literature and digital trends are coded into specific categories: "Technological Drivers" (e.g., AI chatbots), "Socio-Religious Challenges" (e.g., digital fatwas), and "Interaction Trends" (e.g., interfaith 'duets' on TikTok). [Alamsyah \(2025\)](#) explains that this synthesis allows researchers to identify which platforms are most conducive to specific types of dialogue. The final stage involves mapping these findings against the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights on Digital Spaces" to assess the alignment of digital outreach with global ethical standards. This results in a comprehensive "Map of Digital Faith" that provides strategic insights for religious leaders and tech developers.

Results and Discussion

Results

The first finding identifies the emergence of "Algorithm-Driven Ecumenism" as a dominant trend, where platform recommendation systems unintentionally create cross-faith encounters. Unlike traditional physical dialogue, digital outreach often occurs when users are presented with content from "neighboring" faiths due to shared interest in broader spiritual or ethical keywords. [Hasan & Ridho \(2024\)](#) find that 65% of young users first encounter interfaith perspectives through "Suggested

for You" feeds rather than intentional searches. This manifestation suggests that algorithms, despite their risks, can act as accidental bridges in a globalized religious marketplace. Consequently, the research identifies that the "Discovery Phase" of interfaith dialogue has been successfully automated by big-tech architectures.

The second finding reveals that "Short-Form Theology" on TikTok and Instagram Reels has led to the "Grammar of the Viral," where complex theological concepts are reduced to catchy soundbites. While this trend has successfully increased the "Reach" of religious messages to Gen Z, it has simultaneously decreased the "Depth" of engagement. [Abadi \(2024\)](#) observes that interfaith dialogue on these platforms often takes the form of "Reaction Videos" or "Duets," which prioritize performative wit over mutual understanding. The manifestation of this result is a "Thumbnail Faith," where the aesthetic appeal of the content determines its theological authority. This signifies a shift from "Sacred Textuality" to "Visual Spirituality" in digital outreach.

The third finding identifies "Digital Sectarianism" as the most significant challenge to constructive outreach. The mapping indicates that "High-Arousal" content—which includes polemics and aggressive apologetics—receives 300% more engagement than moderate interfaith discourse. [Ruggiu & Özdemir \(2026\)](#) report that platform incentives create a "Conflict-as-Engagement" model that punishes nuance and rewards hostility. This result manifests as the "Echo Chamber Effect," where moderate religious voices are marginalized by the algorithmic amplification of extremist rhetoric. Ultimately, the research confirms that the architecture of social media currently favors the "Gladiator" over the "Mediator."

The fourth finding reveals the rise of "AI-Generated Apologetics," where chatbots and automated accounts are used to engage in interfaith debates. Findings show that sectarian groups are increasingly using Large Language Models (LLMs) to flood comment sections with pre-programmed theological arguments. [Siti Farahiyah Ab Rahim et al. \(2025\)](#) highlight that this leads to "Dead Internet Dialogue," where bots are essentially talking to other bots, creating a false perception of public consensus. This manifestation suggests a crisis of authenticity in digital outreach, where the human soul of dialogue is replaced by synthetic text. The result is a "Diluted Spirituality" that lacks the ethical weight of lived human conviction.

The fifth finding highlights the success of "Collaborative Interfaith Influencers" who use "Cross-Over Content" to model pluralism. In Indonesia and the UK, creators from different faith backgrounds have formed "Digital Hubs" to co-create content that addresses shared social issues like climate change or mental health. [Mustapha \(2025\)](#) observes that these "Values-Based Collaborations" are more effective at reducing prejudice than traditional "Doctrine-Based Debates." This manifestation shows that when the focus shifts from "Which faith is right?" to "How can faith solve problems?", digital engagement becomes significantly more constructive. This signifies the birth of "Pragmatic Pluralism" in the digital sphere.

The sixth finding identifies "Digital Disinhibition and Hate Speech" as a pervasive barrier, specifically targeting minority religious voices. The mapping shows that the anonymity provided by digital platforms facilitates a "Toxic Disinhibition" where users feel empowered to use sectarian slurs they would never use in a physical encounter. [Al-Momani et al. \(2025\)](#) report that female religious influencers face a "Double Jeopardy" of both religious and gender-based harassment. This finding manifests as a "Digital Chilling Effect," where moderate and minority voices

withdraw from the public square to avoid abuse. This confirms that the digital public square remains a hostile environment for the most vulnerable actors in interfaith dialogue.

The seventh finding reveals that "Virtual Reality (VR) Sacred Spaces" are emerging as "Prejudice-Neutral Zones." Early data from 2025–2026 indicates that in VR environments, where users interact through avatars, subconscious biases related to race or traditional religious attire are significantly reduced. [Alamsyah \(2025\)](#) finds that users in the Metaverse report a higher sense of "Empathic Presence" during interfaith meditations compared to traditional video calls. This manifestation suggests that "Immersive Outreach" could be a powerful tool for de-escalating deep-seated religious conflicts. Ultimately, the VR medium provides a "Safe Laboratory" for experimenting with radical inclusion.

The eighth finding identifies "Hyper-Personalized Faith" as a result of digital outreach, where users "pick and choose" elements from different religious traditions presented online. This "Spiritual Bricolage" is particularly prevalent among Gen Z, who view religious identity as a fluid and customizable project. [Arjaya et al. \(2024\)](#) observe that digital outreach often leads to "Faith without Friction," where users adopt spiritual practices but reject institutional accountability. This result manifests as a challenge to traditional religious authority, as influencers replace clerics as the primary source of spiritual guidance. This indicates a "De-Institutionalization" of the sacred in the digital age.

The final finding confirms that "Data Ethics" has become the new "Theology of Outreach." The mapping indicates that religious organizations are increasingly hiring data scientists to manage their "Digital Footprint" and protect their followers from algorithmic radicalization. [Naswa & Muthoifin \(2025\)](#) argue that protecting the "Digital Intellect" (*Hifẓ al-Aql* in a digital sense) is now a mandatory religious duty. This manifestation shows that the "Sacred" must now be defended through cybersecurity and ethical coding. In conclusion, the findings suggest that the future of interfaith dialogue depends on whether we can build "Algorithms of Grace" to counter the "Algorithms of Greed."

Discussion

The analytical mapping of Digital Religious Outreach (DRO) reveals a fundamental shift from "Geographic Communities" to "Algorithmic Assemblies." This research confirms that the digital public square has decentralized religious authority, empowering a new class of influencers to lead interfaith engagement. [Hasan & Ridho \(2024\)](#) argue that the "Global Digital Majlis" has successfully democratized access to the "Other," yet it remains precarious due to its dependence on profit-driven platform infrastructures. By fulfilling the research objective to map these trends, the study demonstrates that "Algorithm-Driven Ecumenism" creates a paradox: it facilitates unprecedented cross-faith exposure while simultaneously incentivizing the conflict that destroys social cohesion. Consequently, the future of interfaith harmony is no longer just a theological negotiation but a technical and ethical struggle against "Engagement-at-any-cost" metrics.

The transition toward "Short-Form Theology" represents a significant "Epistemological Thinning" of religious discourse. The findings show that while the "Viral Outreach" model successfully captures attention, it often sacrifices the *Hikmah* (wisdom) and historical nuance necessary for genuine inter-religious reconciliation.

[Abadi \(2024\)](#) reinforces that "Performative Pluralism"—where dialogue is staged for "Likes"—may create a superficial sense of harmony that collapses under real-world pressure. This research reflects that for digital outreach to be meaningful, it must evolve from "Reaction Videos" to "Deep Dialogue" formats that utilize the digital medium without being enslaved by its brevity. This suggests that religious institutions must develop "Slow-Digital" strategies that prioritize relationship-building over viral metrics.

The emergence of "Digital Sectarianism" and the "Polarization Trap" indicates that social media architecture is currently "maladapted" for religious peacebuilding. The result that high-arousal polemics receive significantly more amplification than moderate voices proves that platforms are not neutral stages; they are biased toward "Conflict-as-Content." [Ruggiu & Özdemir \(2026\)](#) observe that this systemic bias necessitates a new "Cyber-Theology of Moderation" that actively resists algorithmic incentives for hostility. This reflection confirms that the goal of climate-based or social-based interfaith justice cannot be achieved online without a structural reform of how content is moderated and amplified. Practically, this implies that religious leaders must become "Algorithm Literate" to navigate the digital gladiator pits of X and TikTok.

Furthermore, the rise of "AI-Generated Apologetics" poses a profound challenge to the "Human Essence" of interfaith dialogue. The finding that automated bots are increasingly populating the digital public square suggests a move toward "Synthetic Sectarianism," where ideological battles are fought by proxies rather than people. [Siti Farahiyah Ab Rahim et al. \(2025\)](#) argue that this "Dead Internet" phenomenon threatens the very concept of *Sadaqah Jariyah* (ongoing charity) and ethical communication, as there is no moral agent behind the machine. The implication is that "Digital Authenticity" will become the most valuable currency in future outreach. Academically, this study suggests that we must move beyond "Digital Religion" to "Post-Human Religion," examining how AI shapes the "Spiritual Intellect" of the next generation.

The potential of "VR-Ecumenism" as a "Prejudice-Neutral Zone" offers a revolutionary path for conflict resolution. By allowing users to interact in "Body-Neutral" environments, immersive technology can temporarily bypass the subconscious racial and religious biases that hinder physical dialogue. [Alamsyah \(2025\)](#) suggests that these "Simulated Sacred Spaces" are not merely escapism but are "Empathy Simulators" that can retrain the human brain for pluralism. This insight proves that the "Technological Turn" in religion is not purely negative; it provides new "Sacred Laboratories" for peacebuilding that were previously impossible. The strategic implication is for interfaith organizations to pivot toward "Metaverse Chaplaincy" as a way to reach isolated or radicalized individuals in a safe, controlled setting.

The immediate action required is the formulation of a "Universal Digital Ethics of Religious Engagement." This strategy involves religious bodies partnering with tech companies to create "Moderation Frameworks" that recognize and protect sacred dialogue from algorithmic degradation. [Naswa & Muthoifin \(2025\)](#) suggest that just as we have "Halal Standards" for food, we need "Ethical Standards" for religious algorithms that prioritize *Rahmah* (mercy) and *Wasatiyyah* (moderation). Furthermore, there is a pressing need for "Digital Literacy for Clerics" to ensure that those with theological authority also possess digital agency. Subsequent research should

investigate the long-term "Spiritual Health" of users who primarily consume faith through short-form video. Without these proactive integrations, the digital frontier will remain a site of "spiritual extraction" rather than "religious nourishment."

Conclusion

The definitive synthesis of this systematic mapping confirms that Digital Religious Outreach has fundamentally altered the "geography of faith," shifting it from institutional sanctuaries to algorithmic public squares. This research proves that while social media has democratized interfaith dialogue—allowing for "Algorithm-Driven Ecumenism" and unprecedented cross-cultural exposure—it has simultaneously introduced structural risks that threaten the depth and authenticity of religious discourse. It is significant to conclude that the "Polarization Trap" and "Digital Sectarianism" are not merely social issues but architectural consequences of platform logics that prioritize conflict over cohesion. Ultimately, the findings suggest that the survival of genuine pluralism in the digital age depends on a "Theological Digital Reform," where religious actors move beyond performative engagement toward a "Slow-Digital" model of substantive relationship-building.

The scholarly contribution of this study lies in the establishment of the "Algorithmic Stewardship Model," which provides a framework for religious leaders to navigate the tension between sacred values and digital metrics. Practically, this research offers a toolkit for "Digital Chaplaincy," emphasizing the need for critical media literacy and the rejection of "AI-Generated Apologetics" in favor of authentic human interaction. The added value of this work is its identification of "VR-Ecumenism" as a revolutionary "Safe Laboratory" for reducing subconscious religious bias. Theoretically, this study enriches the discourse on Digital Humanities by demonstrating that "Cyber-Ethics" is now a foundational pillar of modern religious jurisprudence (*Maqasid al-Sharia*). This contribution is expected to serve as a cornerstone for future "Algorithms of Grace" designed to foster inter-religious harmony in an increasingly synthetic world.

While this mapping provides a comprehensive overview of current trends, it is limited by the rapid volatility of platform policies and the "Black Box" nature of proprietary algorithms, which obscure the full extent of content manipulation. These limitations serve as a strategic invitation for future researchers to conduct "Algorithmic Audits" of religious content to quantify the exact degree of sectarian bias in AI recommendation systems. Future research opportunities should also explore the "Psychology of Digital Conversion," investigating how short-form video content influences long-term spiritual commitment compared to traditional communal settings. Additionally, exploring the role of the "Metaverse" in preserving indigenous religious practices presents a fertile ground for studying digital cultural heritage. In closing, this study remains a vital call for the global faith community to reclaim the digital frontier as a space for *Hikmah* (wisdom) and *Rahmah* (mercy), rather than a battleground for clicks and binaries.

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