

Digital Religion:

An exploration of views and developments around COVID-19



Abbreviated version



About this whitepaper

The digitalization of religion transforms the way we practice, experience, and reshape our faiths. Furthermore, values that were once established by religions now seem to be adopted by neoliberal leaders carrying out the message of solidarity. This, while COVID-19 has driven a wedge between the collective we call Europe. Are we in need of a new collective narrative? And who should provide such a narrative? Who takes the lead within political and religious life?

This whitepaper is based on the outcomes of three virtual round table meetings in which we discussed what consequences digitalization has for churches, individuals and religion as a whole.

We would like to acknowledge the authors of the articles that were written as an inspiration for this whitepaper: Prof. Matthias Smalbrugge, Anthony Buck, Anne Clerx, Astrid Hamberg, Faisal Khalil, and Zoë Tuithof.

We hope you will enjoy reading this whitepaper. Perhaps it can be an inspiration for new conversations with your loved ones, friends or colleagues.

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Digital religion and corona: an exploration

“What strikes is that there is not a prevailing narrative, there are multiple narratives.”

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Matthias Smalbrugge

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we had to work from home - and we had to pray from home. The coronavirus has an impact on us all. It forced us to retreat to the digital realm to remain connected to one another. The digitalization of religion transforms the way we practice, experience, and reshape our faiths. Furthermore, values that were once established by religions now seem to be adopted by neoliberal leaders carrying out the message of solidarity. This, while COVID-19 has driven a wedge between the collective we call Europe. Are we in need of a new collective narrative? And who should provide such a narrative? Who takes the lead within political and religious life?

I Polarities

On the one hand, COVID-19 has caused polarization in and of European societies. On the other, the pandemic illuminated our need for community and urged us to care for the weaker among us. The sentiments of polarization and a sense of community appeared simultaneously during (intelligent) lockdowns within Europe.

Online masses draw a diverse audience

Though we have observed some resistance to the state restrictions, faith communities in general wholeheartedly agreed with the state's adage of saving lives. This pattern can be seen in many European countries, as many religions place high confidence in the ruling of the state. Hence, denominational traditions have adjusted themselves to the new situation during COVID-19 by shifting to the digital realm. This allowed them to gain a new audience interested in their online sermons. Religious and non-religious people were facilitated in their online 'religious shopping,' testing, experiencing, and combining several different liturgies. In Germany, for example, some online Christian services welcomed guests from certain Mosques or Jewish communities. Thus, faith communities adapted themselves successfully to the digitalization of public life. However, while restrictions on religious gatherings were alleviated, clergymen returned to the physical sphere. Hence, churches quickly lost their newly gathered audience and missed out on the opportunity to welcome a broader range of 'participants' in their online communities and services. Churches now lose the chances that were brought to them by the restrictions.

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Islamic communities over-fulfilled governmental regulations

In several European countries, Muslim communities refrained from gathering physically, even when governments would allow them to do so. The Islamic community, a minority in Europe, aimed to gain or maintain a positive public image. They did not seek to get bad press and were eager to show good citizenship. Besides, they did not want to cause harm to other people and thus resisted engaging with real-time spaces to maintain social distancing. Hence, Muslim communities over-fulfilled the expectations and regulations of the government.

Involuntary individualism: the downside of digitalization

Even though online services have seen an exceeded audience, some groups of people were unintentionally excluded from participating. In particular the elder people and children. We may notice the development of an increasing involuntary individualism that puts into question the role of the community in religious meetings. Here, we see the outcomes of social and generational differences that matter.

The elderly, unable to keep up with technological advancements, lacked behind. They could not visit church nor attend digital sermons on Youtube or Facebook. Many of them had little online experience.

Hence, it has been noted that for churches, it is challenging to bring their services and care to all through digital means. Besides the elderly, young children have been forgotten in the process of religious digitalization as well.

The groups that would regularly attend church were forced to remain absent in online services. Churches have had difficulty keeping their community together and seem to scatter. Many churchgoers have turned to masses broadcasted on national television. Research shows that protestants have quite easily adapted to the non-physical online service while Roman-Catholics experience a profound lack of physicality, especially concerning the Eucharist.

The return to hierarchical structures

The role of the preacher is up for discussion. They will have to rethink their services and their position within these services and other church activities. The churches' move towards the digital realm has made way for many preachers to manifest themselves absent audience. Thus, the digitalization of religion has caused an exaggerated focus on clergymen. This has been called the 'clericalization' of the churches. Preachers tend to emphasize their greatness, and online services amplify their centrality

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by physically and visibly removing the community. The service became a one-person show. The difference between the 'men of God' and the community was aggrandized. COVID-19 has erased the church community from the presence, especially women and laypeople who usually take up important yet invisible roles within the church. The focus again returns to hierarchical structures, facilitating a renewed orthodoxification. The strong male leader reclaimed the stage.

Strong leaders have profiled themselves in the Muslim community as well. Smart and young orthodox Imams have proved themselves popular leaders within the digital realm. They have anticipated the chances offered to them by the (intelligent) lockdown.

Religious and political one-man shows

The image of a strong male leader in religion parallels that of the strong male leader in politics. For example, the Dutch government has drawn authority towards itself during the COVID-19 crisis. Prime Minister Rutte, as well as so many other prime ministers or presidents, may even be deemed a national preacher. Their role on television resembles that of a pastor. Their press conferences bear a religious atmosphere, reminding us to keep social distance (suffering) before we can continue 'normal' life (paradise). Both in church and society, a strong male archetypical leader stands up.

Religion and politics thus move towards each other in terms of leadership and structure of authority. While the Dutch government claimed all power, churches strictly complied with their regulations. This has allowed for preachers to draw influence towards themselves as well.

II Narratives

What keeps us together? A lack of convergence between the religious, national, and European narrative is detected. COVID-19 narratives have been shifting and changing. Yet, religious communities have not been present in national and international debates on morality and values.

“Though we have seen the need for physical community among religious practitioners, faith communities adopt state rulings loyally”

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The European narrative is lacking

In Portugal, Spain, and Italy, the importance of European solidarity on an economic and financial level during the pandemic was stressed. The Netherlands is deemed to be among the most greedy European countries, unwilling to aid those countries suffering most from COVID-19. What once bound our countries in solidarity seems long gone. The European narrative may have suffered severe damage during the COVID-19 crisis. Furthermore, we have not heard religious leaders speak out about the lack of a greater European narrative during the pandemic.

Religious values employed in our common narrative

Religions have been remarkably absent in the debate on the national and European narrative. Religious groups have been quiet during such conversations. Religions may not have a seat at the table in moral discussions anymore. However, it has been observed that religious values such as empathy, solidarity, and caring for the marginalized in society are very present in the common narrative.

While religions failed to provide a common narrative of solidarity, neoliberalist political leaders did frame their narratives as such. Hence, values long ascribed to faith communities found their way to neoliberal thought and practice.

Denominational religions remained speechless in the public debate even while the values they hold so dear are employed and accepted *en masse*. They have not claimed such values as their own and remain invisible. Faith communities lack the competence to handle the intertwinement of morality and politics because they still view these domains as separated. The secular debate, parallel to religious debate, now revolves around values and meaning-making. Questions of ethics are publicly raised and answered absent churches.

The Orthodox narrative drawing in (young) members

Churches with an orthodox character/signature, as opposed to mainline churches, strengthened their inner circle. Their attraction is shaped by a clear narrative about the future and proper decisions that will lead one towards it. Orthodox churches speak the language of their followers, especially that of the younger generation. This is a vital generation for the continued existence of faith communities. They seize the opportunity the pandemic has provided them with. Orthodox churches have been well organized and hold a great sense of urgency to persuade others of their beliefs. Besides, they can operate quickly due to their local roots. Mainline churches, on the other hand, might implode due to their absence in public - what would be left of their use?

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III Theological perspective

As religious scholars and theologians, we have quite a unique set of resources at our disposal that we may employ to interpret current narratives and their transformations. Our contribution to the public realm should entail a sense of moral seriousness. The question can be raised whether we can still present ourselves as objective analyzers? Isn't it true that we cannot allow ourselves to remain absent in the debate while the grand narratives of our time are collapsing?

EARS' seat at the public table

EARS may show how theological competence can help shape certain narratives. Moreover, this has to be done in a language that is understood by the majority. Our presence in the debate could contribute to the preservation and transformation of certain European narratives. If we need new narratives, let us work on them. Importantly, this should be done in a secular way. It does not matter whether one is religious or not, as long as the common values are shared among people to create a narrative that unites us. EARS aims to participate in the public debate and to show that religion, as one of the creators of current norms and values, is still of importance for European society.

European society may need scholarly experience with difficult questions that now come to the fore. We need to make the public value of religious studies and theology evident.

IV Conclusions

Religious communities, both Christian and Muslim, have adhered tightly to the national governments' instructions. Churches and mosques would only be opened if the government allowed it. Some protests arose here and there but that noise remained relatively limited. As a result, however, religious communities were in no way affiliated with the debate on the democratic content of the measures. Think of the elimination of parliament almost everywhere. Critical reflection was missing. Everyone, including religious communities, followed the directions of the prime minister or president, their national "pastor." Hence, religious communities quickly turned to online "meetings". On the one hand, this excluded a vital part of faith communities: the elderly and children. They were cut off from contact with their fellow believers. On the other hand, the rapid transition to online masses promoted the possibility of "religious shopping." Anyone interested could join the service, increasing the reach of faith communities.

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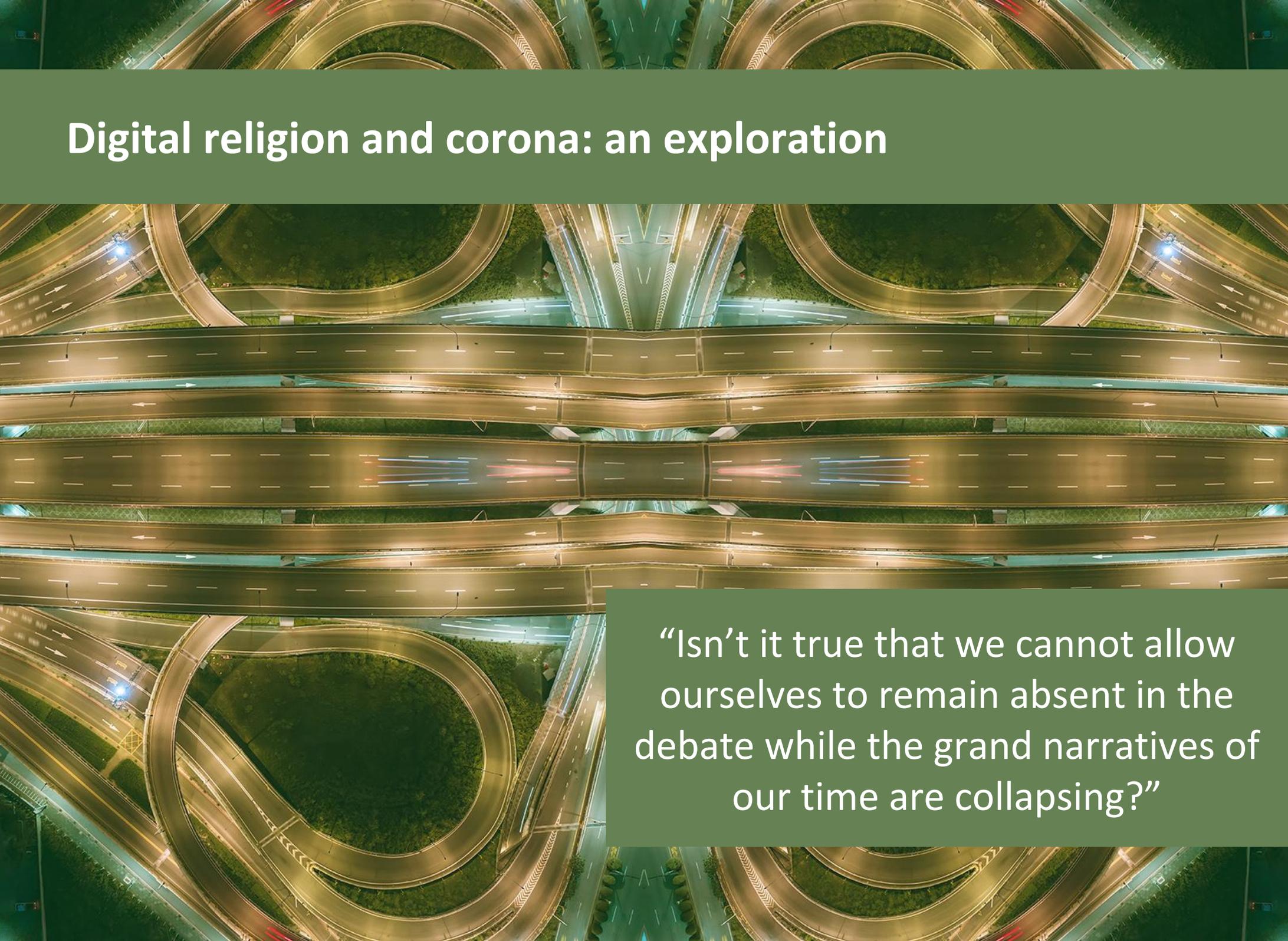
However, the transition to online presence was most effectively accomplished by Orthodox communities. Orthodox churches (such as conservative reformed churches, but also evangelical, Baptist and Pentecostal churches) speak the language of their followers. They were already very familiar with an online presence and took advantage of this trait.

The increased interest in online celebrations, paradoxically, also points to the fragmentation of the mainstream faith communities. On the whole, the corona crisis illuminated a long-standing trend: the "orthodoxification" of faith communities. Faith communities have contributed directly and effectively to direct aid to people in difficult economic circumstances. Religious communities have also contributed to certain narratives, such as that of an apocalypse, of guilt and penance. This increased the need for a reconciler, a redeemer. Someone who brings everyone back together. Oftentimes, the redeemer became the national figure of the prime minister or president. However, a narrative with such a reconciler remained omitted.

Furthermore, faith communities have not commented on the (lack of a) European narrative. Several faith communities could not, or did not want to burn their fingers on this matter.

Overall, religions feared participating in the political debate, while at the same time they desired to have a seat at the table on which the big moral decisions are made. Thus, communities of faith cannot yet deal with the deep intertwinement of politics and morality and deem these domains to be separate. However, faith communities think they can communicate moral cues to society, while they themselves are part of it.

Finally, participants of the three round tables believe that EARS should express its views on the importance of a European narrative, especially when this is in great danger, due to the contradictions between West and East on the one hand, and North and South on the other. The academy, both the university community and the theological discipline, cannot keep aloof.

An aerial, top-down view of a complex multi-level highway interchange at night. The roads are illuminated by streetlights, and the movement of cars has created long, horizontal light trails in shades of blue, red, and white. The interchange features several overpasses and ramps that curve and loop, creating a symmetrical, almost architectural pattern. The surrounding area is dark, with some greenery visible between the road levels.

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“Isn’t it true that we cannot allow ourselves to remain absent in the debate while the grand narratives of our time are collapsing?”