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EDITORIAL

Special Issue: Grassroots and Indigenous Digital Faith-based Activism

Steve Taylor

Human societies are being transformed by digital technology. Global connectivity and digital automation bring new opportunities, while social media algorithms and hateful content are reshaping political engagement and mental health. Amid countless examples of toxic digital discourse, grassroots and indigenous faith-based organizations are using digital technologies to advocate for justice. These activists draw on contextual wisdom and religious resources to name inequities, invite solidarity and call for change. Hence, the digital becomes a space of transforming mission in which faith-based activism expresses ecclesial witness.

Inter-disciplinary academic research of these grassroots and indigenous digital expressions of witness intersects with the scope and focus of *Ecclesial Futures*. This journal exists to investigate God's mission in the world, particularly within local Christian communities and the systems that support them. Researching digital faith-based activism yields insights into theologies generated "on-the-ground," the role of lay leadership in local Christian communities and the relationship between a local church and its 'world' or context. Focusing on digital activism by indigenous communities allows reflection on the place of local churches formed outside of Christendom.

Hence, the seven articles in this issue of *Ecclesial Futures* investigate digital activism as it embraces vulnerability and power imbalances in Christian witness. First, regarding theology generated "on-the-ground" in local contexts, the articles provide case studies from grassroots and indigenous contexts by non-Western Christians, including those from Africa, Hong Kong, Oceania, and tribal India. Second, the activism examined in the case studies is the work of lay people who use digital skills to bear witness on social media platforms. Historically, ecclesiology has centred worship, and contextualization has worked with liturgy. In this issue of *Ecclesial Futures*, we glimpse lay leaders using communicative skills honed in visual and digital environments to engage in public mission. Third, the content the activists create is local theologies, emerging not from traditional parish churches and denominations but activist communities of prophetic praxis. The social media content offers windows into how these Christians understand God's mission in a rapidly changing

world. Fourth, several of the articles engage critically with the colonizing tendencies of modernity, including digital surveillance, climate justice and approaching online algorithms and digital platforms in dialogue with theological language of powers and principalities.

Before I introduce each of the seven articles in more detail, let me chart how this special issue began. My hope is that the narrative provides readers with an example of how special issues develop and research projects can evolve over time.

Background

In the European summer of 2024, I was grateful to be awarded a research fellowship with the Institute for Advanced Studies (IASH), Edinburgh University. For three years between 2021 and 2024, IASH invited research proposals investigating decoloniality.¹ Between 2021 and 2024, I had undertaken research on the future of theological education for the Anglican Province of Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia. Spanning multiple cultures and five nation states, climate justice was a major topic of conversation, particularly for communities in the Diocese of Polynesia. Thus, the IASH Research Fellowship was an opportunity to attend to the calls for climate justice I heard during the research, while thinking further about faith-based digital activism across Oceania.

In my research while at IASH, I utilized a case study approach that began with the praxis of Pacific communities. My aim was to engage with decoloniality not as a theory but as a reality present in the call of indigenous communities for liberation and justice. A faith-based lens was consistent with the priority of the spiritual in indigenous Pacific worldviews and the history of Christian mission between Oceanic (is)lands. Case studies of grassroots faith-based activism would foreground indigenous agency and offer ways to locate decoloniality in the waters of the Global South.

As my IASH research fellowship ended, I pondered how to broaden the work. The use of case studies seemed a helpful way of inviting engagement by researchers from other local contexts. Bringing grassroots and indigenous case studies into conversation with one another is consistent with the call for a “derived etic” (Hwang 2006: 80–1) and a way to theorize decolonial digital activism from culturally specific samples of grassroots and indigenous faith-linked activism.

I was grateful to receive further support from IASH, including space within their 55th anniversary celebrations in April 2025 to host a colloquium, calling for papers that addressed the theme of *Grassroots and indigenous digital faith-based activism*.²

1 <https://www.iash.ed.ac.uk/ipd/about>.

2 <https://www.iash.ed.ac.uk/news/call-papers-grassroots-and-indigenous-digital-faith-based-activism>.

Appropriately for research focused on digital activism, IASH provided digital technologies to enable an international conversation.

Following the colloquium, the presenters discussed next steps and observed congruence between digital activism and online and open-access publishing formats. *Ecclesial Futures* was approached, noting the congruences between digital faith-based activism and the scope of the journal, given how the colloquium papers researched Christian praxis outside of Christendom, elevated the role of lay leadership in digital activism and analysed the relationship between a local church and its 'world' or context. The proposal for a special issue was workshopped by the *Ecclesial Futures* Editorial Board. Nigel Rooms, as Co-editor, administered the peer-review process to ensure double-blind peer review. The result is this issue of seven articles.

Faith-based Activism Articles

Rathiulung Elias KC, in "The Falcon in the Web: Ecclesial Witness in Digital Ecologies of Northeast India" begins with a definition of "indigenous" as a cosmological-philosophical orientation characterized by rootedness to land, embedded relational ontologies and non-fragmentary understandings of human-nonhuman life. The article examines ecological work among the Zeliangrong-Inpui community, in Manipur, India, to conserve the Amur Falcon. Interviews, digital ethnography and analysis of online content provided by the Rainforest Club Tamenglong (RCT) demonstrate a faith-informed and indigenously relational approach to ecological stewardship. RCT use digital media to share stories, indigenous art and local rituals. Digital platforms enable advocacy and a witness that is trans-local across global networks. However, digital contexts are shaped by unequal power. The dynamics of surveillance logics and algorithmic authority make RCT vulnerable to further experiences of marginalization. Rather than withdraw, RCT rework their agency through practices. These involve the use of Christian language, including the theological concept of stewardship, cultivating platforms for knowledge sharing and valuing intergenerational collaboration, as elders share ecological and cultural wisdom with technologically skilled and younger activists. Hence, the article engages themes central to *Ecclesial Futures*, describing the lived theology and lay ecclesial witness of RCT, ecological responsibility, and how indigenous activists choose to participate and represent their culture as they navigate digital contexts. The article makes a distinctive interdisciplinary contribution that brings together digital ethnography, indigenous ecological knowledge, and eco-theological reflection.

We remain in Tribal India for our second article. **Taimaya Ragui**, in "Digital Initiative, Indigenous Heritage: A Catalyst for Digital Theological Discourse and Digital Activism", explores how revisiting and recovering Indigenous heritage can initiate processes of decolonization. Ragui defines decolonization as a methodology to

recover Indigenous knowledge through amplifying the voices of Indigenous communities. The article examines how Indigenous Christian Tangkhul Naga artists enact digital activism: Rewben Mashangva, who incorporates Indigenous folk and blues, and Asa Kazingmei and Easterlight Zimik, who blend traditional attire with modern fashion. The article locates colonization first in history and then in conversations with analysis of online content, particularly YouTube videos of music and live performance, Instagram photos of fashion and digital art. Finally, Ragui brings his examination of colonization and contemporary music and fashion by indigenous artists into conversation with developments in digital theology. He argues that “digital activism” needs to include the use of digital tools to recover Indigenous heritage, enable self-representation and liberate local communities from colonial ideological captivity. Hence, the article engages themes central to *Ecclesial Futures*, describing lived theology, lay ecclesial witness expressed in digital cultures and outlining how indigenous initiatives can free local theologies from colonial ideologies. The findings of the article are persuasive and highly original. Digital platforms can play a significant role as indigenous communities decolonize. Digital activism involves recovery as well as protest.

In our third article, we move from Tribal India to Hong Kong. **Ann Gillian Chu** and **Rachel Siow Robertson**, in “Joys in Online Religious Spaces: A Study of Hong Kong Local and Diasporic Online Christian Communities”, argue that the emotion of joy is a digital activism. In Hong Kong, the digital hashtags #deltaδmovement and #基督教文化運動 (Christian Cultural Movement) evolved as a way for people to share their experiences, including during the COVID-19 pandemic and waves of migration during 2019–2021. Online communities emerged around the two hashtags as places to reflect on the difficulties of not being able to meet in person. Chu and Robertson used digital ethnography to analyse social media posts on Facebook and Instagram and the role of the hashtag #deltaδmovement. They define these online communities as grassroots, given they were often lay-led. Chu and Robertson use a framework of cognitive, emotional and social to examine how the two hashtags allowed people to express religio-social viewpoints on social media.

Their argument is two-fold. First, the grassroots online community that evolved supported the sharing of pain, navigating disagreement and positive expressions of joy through camaraderie and creativity. Hence, participating in online discourse around the hashtags resulted in wider participation, identification in diversity and demands for difference. Second, this participation, which Chu and Robertson describe as “change-inducing,” can be developed in theological terms. The language that emerged enabled experiences of joy in challenging circumstances to be shared, and was made possible through online interactions. Hence, Chu and Robertson define this online participation as a “discursive” activism and theorize the cognitive, emotional

and social elements as a theological experience of joy which creates a space for actions that would not otherwise be permissible.

The fourth article turns to the Pacific Ocean, and the realities of rising waters on the (is)lands of the world's largest body of water. As the Co-editor of this journal and the curator of this special issue, I also have made a contribution, not least because of how this project was initiated and my own passion for it. Thus, if readers will forgive me, I will use the first person when describing my article here. In "The Visual Grammar of Online Faith-linked Climate Activism: Case Studies of Grassroots 'Moana' Theologies in Oceania," I argue for a climate justice conversation located not in Western thinktanks but in Pacific waters. I draw on "visual grammar" analysis to investigate the visual content of three faith-linked groups in Tonga, Solomon Islands and Fiji. The argument is that images from social media, websites and a music video express an online activism that is immersive, communal and prayerful. These "digital" eco-theologies are brought into dialogue with established Oceanic or "moana" eco-theologies, to argue for a Pacific eco-praxis that offers a rich and distinctive contribution to global eco-theologies. The article offers new models for how Christianity might engage with climate change and understand digital activism. First, for wider definitions of digital activism that include prayerful and intergenerational forms of participation. Second, for global eco-theologies, the need to place Pacific activist communities at the centre of global climate conversations. Third, for ecclesial mission, acceptance of new forms of lay leadership and the valuing of charisms of digital storytelling, citizen science and video making, to call for climate justice.

A fifth article takes us to Africa. **Ikenna Paschal Okpaleke** in "Digital Activism and the Making of a Decolonial Public Theology: Revisiting the 2020 #EndSARS Protest as a Theological Provocation" examines the role of digital activism in Nigeria. During 2020, the hashtag #EndSARS was used to coordinate protests against systematic police brutality in Nigeria. Okpaleke defines coloniality as "leftover colonial structures" that replicate colonial exploitation and domination and locates the #EndSARS protest as a decolonial move, utilising digital tools like social media to critique the colonial structures of power and influence in contemporary Nigeria. Okpaleke continues his digital reflection by turning to the online commentary of a Nigerian pastor, who described the #EndSARS protest as originating in digital activism and mirroring the incarnational framework: "The word became flesh." The article then develops the implications of an incarnational hermeneutic and what it means to make the (online) visible. Okpaleke argues that the online activism of the hashtag #EndSARS revealed two moments of theological provocation. First, an incarnational hermeneutic which demands that churches speak prophetically against injustice. Second, the need for "grievability," defined as visible ecclesial action that enfleshes solidarity with those experiencing dehumanization. The article argues for a Christianity that is reclaimed through radical commitment to abundant life and social

transformation in postcolonial Africa. While much discourse locates digital cultures as universal, the originality of the article lies in the framing of digital activism through incarnational and decolonial lenses, as a theology from below and originating in the digital that enfleshes Christ.

A sixth article offers a case study into the role of prayer among Christian climate activists in the Global North. **Tobias Adam**, in “Defiant Hope: Intercessory Prayer as Spiritual Resistance to Hopelessness in the Climate Crisis,” focuses on ecclesial practices, specifically intercessory prayer. The article uses participant observation and interviews to study an evangelical prayer network, *Climate Intercessors*. Digital technologies are tools, an essential backdrop which bring people from different churches and geographical contexts together in activating through prayer for climate justice. Adam places his findings about the nature of intercessory prayer into conversation with several other empirical case studies and argues that intercessory prayer fosters solidarity, helps to process climate anxiety, and cultivates defiant hope. The place of “defiant hope” for these praying activists is brought into dialogue with Jürgen Moltmann’s theology of hope. Adam argues that the *defiant hope* is located in small signs in the present, rather than a promised new world. Intercessory prayer is a way to face the future squarely, without denying human responsibility. The article provides an interdisciplinary, empirically informed theological reflection, offering highly original insights into how contemporary Christian communities engage missionally with the climate crisis. A feature is how Adam challenges a secularized framework of activism, whether online or offline. Another is the role of the digital in bringing activists together.

A final article provides a very different way of theorizing digital faith-based activism. **Jonas Kurlberg** in “Digital Powers and Principalities, Decolonization, and Faith-Based Activism” provides a highly original contribution, not of a single case study but rather of the technological environments that shape faith-based digital activism. Central is Walter Wink’s theological framework of “powers and principalities,” which Kurlberg uses to analyse digital technology and online platforms. What results is a conceptual vocabulary to account for the spiritual dimensions of technological life. A postcolonial digital activism involves analysis of the powers at play in empire building within and through the digital. The argument is built in conversation with Kwok Pui-Lan, who offers the possibility of decolonial ecclesial practices, including resistance, deliberate power redistribution and nurturing transnational communities of sharing and listening. Kurlberg applies this to digital activism, suggesting digital platforms that might be ethically healthy and the importance of being present with alternative stories and voices. These practices are suggested as ways that grassroots and indigenous digital faith-based activists might resist and subvert colonial dynamics embedded in digital technologies. The originality of the

article lies in how the language of powers and principalities works to both identify evil and seek redemption.

Research Trends for Grassroots and Indigenous Faith-based Activism

While the digital is everywhere, faith-based activism is an understudied practice in all theological fields. The seven articles offer rich, robust and theological generative conversations. Given this is a special issue, let me draw together shared themes and indicate possible future trajectories for research.

First, all seven articles in different ways challenge Eurocentric approaches to technology and theology. The range of case studies, including research from Nigeria, Hong Kong, Northeast India and Oceania, broadens the geographical and cultural scope of ecclesial and theological scholarship, and provides valuable knowledge-making in a field of study that is dominated by Western interests. The articles by Elias, Ragui and Taylor document indigenous ecological knowledge and describe unique epistemologies that understand knowledge as communal, interrelated and holistic. Adam and Kurlberg demonstrate ways in which Eurocentric faith and scholarship can open itself to be with and learn from the Global South. Hence, this digital faith-based activism special issue broadens global understandings of digital theology as they document how hashtags and visual images have been used to elevate indigenous agency. However, further case studies reflecting on grassroots faith-based digital activism in Latin America, the Caribbean and other African countries are needed.

Second, the articles demonstrate how activism is formed in and through solidarity. Several examples challenge the notion that the digital is a tool that creates distance and barriers. Elias KC describes the work of RCT as shaped by solidarity that includes care for the environment and the marginalized. Okpaleke eloquently describes the “grievability of all lives” and how digital activism make visible local, decolonial provocations. Adam describes how the practice of intercessory prayer works to create solidarity with the experiences of the climate-impacted in the Global South. Further work is needed to understand whether these movements toward solidarity are enduring and behaviour changing, or temporal.

Third, several of the articles demonstrate the presence of the affective and the place of emotion, both in digital activism and as a theological resource. Elias KC writes of the importance of attending to the affective and relational dimensions of postdigital worlds. Chu and Robertson develop joy as a theological category, with cognitive, emotional and social elements. Okpaleke describes the 2020 #EndSARS protests as a space for the celebration of faith. Further research into the role of emotions in digital activism and how participants respond would be welcome.

Fourth, categories of visibility and invisibility. My article works with a methodology in which online visual representations are interpreted as enfleshments of public eco-theologies. Okpaleke uses an incarnational logic, suggesting that the digital world can en flesh Christ and transform ecclesial witness. Adam argues that intercessory prayer is a way of engaging present realities. In these articles, digital hiddenness is revealing itself. Central to Christian theology are notions of the hidden being revealed and affirmation of Christian witness as an enfleshing the Gospel. Further research is required to understand the role of the digital in relation to categories of visibility and invisibility and theological understandings of Divine revelation made tangible in material bodies.

Fifth, the articles use a range of methods and methodologies. Six of the articles work “from below,” centring case studies. Most of the articles gather online data from websites and social media platforms including Facebook, YouTube and Instagram. Some of the authors use interviews to thicken their data, including Elias KC, Ragui and Adams. However, there is little considered reflection on the theological dimensions of these methods and the role of the interpreter in analysis. Gathering data from digital platforms involves, as Kurlberg reminds us, engaging with powers and principalities. There is a need for further research on the opportunities and limits provided by different methods for studying digital activism as public theology, including how research might account for diverse interpretations of digital activism and the ethical complexities embedded in all contextual research.

Sixth, the articles describe the value of lay leadership in digital activism. The New Testament offers several descriptions of gifts and graces given by God’s Spirit to source and resource the life of the church (including Romans 12.4-8; 1 Corinthians 12.4-11; 1 Corinthians 12.27-30 and Ephesians 4.7-12). Obviously, none mentioned geo-tagging, developing hashtags or curating digital content. Yet these contemporary charisms are essential to the digital activism described in this special issue. Are digital skills merely utilitarian tools? Or might the church need to think about how it forms and commissions digital activism as Christian witness? Further research would aid understanding of how ecclesial bodies might be involved in the purposeful formation of digital gifts and graces.

Finally, I wish to thank a range of people. My thanks to IASH, Edinburgh for supporting this special issue, particularly through resourcing the hosting of an online Colloquium. My thanks to *Ecclesial Futures* Co-editor, Rev Dr Nigel Rooms, the Editorial Board, double blind peer reviewers and colloquium respondents. My thanks to each of the authors as you submitted colloquium abstracts, responded to each other’s papers, experienced peer review and engaged with this editorial. It has been a pleasure to wrestle together with the ecclesial dimensions of grassroots and indigenous digital faith-based activism.

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ARTICLE

The Falcon in the Web: Ecclesial Witness in Digital Ecologies of Northeast India

Rathiulung Elias KC

Abstract

This paper examines the Amur Falcon conservation initiatives of the Rainforest Club Tamenglong (RCT) among the Zeliangrong-Inpui community in Manipur, India, to argue that grassroots ecological practices in digitally mediated contexts may be understood as a form of ecclesial witness beyond formal church structures and in post-digital worlds shaped by unequal power. The paper analyses how digital infrastructures reshape social-ecological relations, knowledge production and authority. Digital technologies have enabled RCT to engage trans-local and global networks of advocacy and knowledge sharing, while simultaneously reconfiguring relational dynamics within the community. Though operating within predominantly secular conservation frameworks, their work is grounded in Christian commitments, and their witness emerges through practices in digitally mediated contexts in the forms of ecological care, advocacy and community engagement. The paper attends to the role of digital technologies in shaping visibility, knowledge and relationality. While digital infrastructures enable new forms of collaboration and cultural expression, they also introduce risks associated with datafication, surveillance and the privileging of modernist epistemologies. These dynamics contribute to shifts in human–nonhuman relations, the translation of embodied ecological knowledge into abstract data, and the reshaping of subjectivities. Grassroots actors negotiate these tensions through plural, co-produced forms of knowledge that bring together scientific, embodied and theological ways of knowing. This paper contributes by (i) re-theorizing ecclesial presence as a digitally mediated relational practice, (ii) foregrounding infrastructural and epistemic injustice in postdigital worlds, and (iii) showing how indigenous onto-epistemologies reconfigure theological categories of creation care.

Keywords: Lived theology, Digital ontology, Indigenous, Digitization, Conservation, Tamenglong, Zeliangrong-Inpui, Indigenous theology

Introduction

This paper examines the Amur Falcon conservation initiatives of the Rainforest Club Tamenglong (RCT) among the Zeliangrong-Inputi community in Manipur, Northeast India, to argue that grassroots ecological practices in digitally mediated contexts may be understood as a form of ecclesial witness. In navigating the opportunities and constraints of digital infrastructures, RCT's work expresses a lived eco-theology grounded in relational responsibility, plural modes of knowledge-making, and commitments to ecological care. Such practices complicate conventional distinctions between "secular" conservation and "religious" activity, suggesting that ecclesial witness may emerge beyond formal church structures through everyday engagements with land, community and technology. The paper approaches ecclesial witness as lived, and emerging from grassroots contexts, attentive to the contextual, community-embedded forms that Asian ecclesial life characteristically takes (Chan 2018). The contribution is precisely that witness is identified in unexpected places and forms; or that indeed, it is enacted in pragmatic response and in plural forms (Jenkins 2013).

My usage of "indigenous" refers to the cosmological-philosophical orientation characterized by rootedness to land, embedded relational ontologies and non-fragmentary understandings of human-nonhuman life (Elias KC 2026). It does not assert a fixed or essentialized identity. Rather, the orientation provides a critical lens through which to examine the inherent assumptions embedded in digital infrastructures, particularly their tendencies toward abstraction, legibility and control. The encounter between these assumptions and indigenous lifeworlds offers a productive site for evaluating how ecological knowledge, authority and subjectivity are being reconfigured in postdigital contexts.

Methodologically, the paper approaches digitality through the framework of what I will call "digital landscapes", attending to the digital-real continuum of postdigital worlds rather than isolating online activity from embodied practice (Savin-Baden and Reader 2022). Analysed through the lens of landscapes rather than fragmented engagements, RCT's activities encompass multiple modes: digital media, embodied rituals, scientific collaboration, traditional storytelling, community festivals and theological reflection. This framework enables attention to plural cosmologies and practices as they are lived together, rather than forcing them into their respective singular modes of expression. Drawing on interviews, digital ethnography and analysis of online content (Facebook, YouTube and Instagram), the paper traces how these modes are held together in practice.

Ethnographic attention to RCT reveals a complex set of tensions. Digital platforms enable translocal solidarity, advocacy, and cultural creativity, affording agency to indigenous actors across global networks. At the same time, they introduce dynamics of datafication, surveillance logics and algorithmic authority that risk

reproducing their experience of marginalization, reshaping ecological relations and reconfiguring knowledge and authority. Rather than treating these as problems to be resolved, the paper attends to how they are negotiated in practice. In doing so, it argues that RCT's practices constitute a form of ecclesial witness beyond formal institutional structures, enacted through relational responsibility, cultural production and digital participation.

Locating the Falcon: the Rainforest Club, Tamenglong

Every late autumn, the Amur Falcons, the raptor birds, would arrive in thousands and roost for a few weeks in the forested regions around Tamenglong, located in the Indo-Myanmar biodiversity hotspot. Recent research findings by ornithologist Suresh Kumar extending beyond Northeast India indicate centuries of annual visitation; a presence reflected in Zeliangrong-Inpui (ZLRI) folklore and songs (on the ZLRI community, see Panmei 2001; Kamei 2004) that remember the birds as “winged guests” (Ghosh 2024). In one of their vernacular languages, the name for the Amur Falcon is *Akhuaipuina*. It is said that the name *Akhuaipuina* comes from the “calling” of the birds, which resembles their traditional chants or shouts, known as *huai-mei* or “hoi-hoi” (Nehemiah Panmei, interview with author, 2021). *Huai-mei* refers to communal vocalization practices that function to foster community participation, solidarity, and shared presence, such as during collective work, festivities, or invocation of blessings. This name *Akhuaipuina* seems to throw insights into how the communities relate to these annual raptor visitors: as ones with voices that call to them, much like their own human neighbours. This points to a relational understanding of the birds that exceeds instrumental or even purely ecological value.

The conservation of the Amur Falcon in Tamenglong offers a generative site for examining how digitality becomes entangled with ecological relations, indigenous authority and community dynamics. Among the ZLRI Naga community, who have historically practised subsistence farming, the seasonal arrival of the Amur Falcon has been regarded in folklore as an ecological and cosmological signifier, associated with agricultural well-being due to the bird's role in controlling pest and termite populations. In recent decades, however, intensified hunting and deforestation in Northeast India severely threatened regional biodiversity. The mass hunting and sale of thousands of Amur Falcons in northeastern states of Nagaland and Manipur drew national and international attention in the mid-2010s, marking a moment when local ecological and hunting practices became more visible within wider conservation and media circuits. It was in this context that the Rainforest Club Tamenglong (RCT), registered in 2014, emerged as a key actor, organizing conservation advocacy with the Amur Falcon at its centre.

Firmly rooted in the local community yet operating within trans-local conservation networks, RCT has collaborated with state and national institutions such as the Manipur Forest Department and the Wildlife Institute of India (WII). Central to this collaboration was the geotagging of Amur Falcons, through which numerous individual birds were digitally tracked and named after local villages and landmarks, such as Chiuluan (named after a village) and Irang (after a river). The resulting flight-path data from this digital tracking, situated the birds within their trans-equatorial migration, revealing their tremendous journeys from the Manchurian Steppe of northeast Asia, across the Arabian Sea to southern Africa. Once only encountered as “winged guests” that visited their remote villages (remote from centres of development and political power), the *Akhuaipuina* have taken on another life – reconstituted as datafied, mobile and globally legible entities that now connected continents and oceans, and linked diverse ecological, scientific and local knowledge systems.

While RCT operates largely within secular conservation networks, it is composed of Christian actors whose advocacy and activism are shaped by scriptural imagination, call for church action and prayer, and inherent eco-theological commitments, and who remain closely engaged with local church communities. In this sense, they may be regarded as expressions of the “liquid church” (Ward 2013) in that they represent Christians driven partially by their scriptural and theological convictions, and moving fluidly in the world, working across local churches, across regions and even across faiths/non-faith actors. This was expressed clearly in a news report. In a *National Geographic* report on conservation efforts in Azuram, Tamenglong district, Paul Salopek writes of Nehemiah Panmei, co-founder of RCT: “I asked Panmei where he got his green ideas. He quoted Psalms 94:5: ‘In His hand are the depths of the Earth, and the mountain peaks belong to Him’” (Salopek 2020). Thus, their work can be understood as a form of ecclesial witness, where faith-informed values shape environmental stewardship. Christian witness in conservation is particularly significant in India where, as Director Mordecai Panmei told me, conservationists are often puzzled by their Christian faith, given the wider and popular reputation of Christians as being anti-environmentalists (Stoll 2015; White 1967). He lists at least two scriptural and theological motivations: the world as “God’s creation” (creation account of Genesis) and the eschatological vision of coexistence (Isaiah 65.25). Additionally, in the context where local Baptist churches have only recently begun to engage with ecological concerns, RCT’s pioneering eco-theological praxis is noteworthy. They do not set out to constitute an ecclesial entity, nor are they animated explicitly by formal theological concepts such as *missio Dei*. Yet, their conviction and pragmatism for care for the environment (and by extension, for the marginalized and impoverished communities) locate them within the “mixed economy of Church life”, in their embodiment of faithful ecclesial presence (Müller 2019: 251). This contextual, community-embedded character of RCT’s witness also resonates with Chan’s (2018) account

of Asian ecclesiologies, which are shaped by relational presence within particular social and ecological landscapes.

In this context, the community's socio-economic designation as a Scheduled Tribe under the Indian Constitution situates them within a complex terrain of recognition, marginalization and governance (Ambagudia 2019). This juridical status shapes how their ecological practices, cultural life, and knowledge systems take shape within state, media, and digital infrastructures. As such, engagements with conservation and digital technologies in such marginalized regions cannot be understood apart from the broader dynamics of politics and uneven power that structure the position of tribal communities within the Indian "mainland" imaginary.

The Falcon Takes Flight: The Promises of Digital Relationality

Trans-local Networks of Solidarity

RCT is comprised of passionate social workers with training in media production, and attuned to broader climate discourse. Digital media and technology naturally align with their skills and experiences. According to Mordecai Panmei, the 2020–21 pandemic marked a turning point for RCT, compelling them to explore digital media. They discovered that, rather than being a limitation, the digital space offered unexpected opportunities during a time when in-person events and print media were out of reach. The news of their Amur Falcon conservation spread online during this period, reaching individuals and communities across the globe, including me in Edinburgh, coincidentally during my PhD on digital ethnography. Digital tools provided unprecedented opportunities for advocacy for their efforts related to the falcons, the blue pitta and the Chinese pangolin. Journalists from around the world could reach them to amplify their work and foster further connections. This also allowed them to participate and present papers at international gatherings such as the ICCA Consortium (Indigenous Peoples' and Community Conserved Areas and Territories 2023) and the United Nations in Geneva. During this pandemic era, RCT drew inspiration from other indigenous conservationists, such as the Pangolin Man in Zimbabwe, and collaborated with scientists and organizations like WII. Indigenous communities rallied digitally around shared "pan-indigenous" identities, exchanging knowledge and experiences across borders in what Roturier and Beau (2022: 165) describe as transnational environmental struggles. These experiences helped locate their place in a broader struggle of grassroots and Indigenous communities in the work of cultural and ecological conservation (Linkola-Aikio et al. 2025). Such solidarity and connectivity are especially significant for RCT and the ZLRI community, who have historically faced marginalization and a lack of visibility. Digitality offered

opportunities to break from the infrastructural constraints and marginalization, creating new spaces for recognition and influence on both local and transnational stages. It enabled them to join forces and speak out against state and infrastructural projects that “massacred” dense forests in the name of progress (Gore et al. 2022).

Interestingly, however, participation in national and global conservation circuits often required the translation, and at times the muting, of explicitly Christian language and theological motivations – a subtle constraint on their ecclesial witness. It is in the local and grassroots engagement that their place in ecclesial witness is most prominent. In other spaces, RCT’s ecological commitments needed to be articulated in terms legible to secular environmental discourse, even as they remained shaped by scriptural imagination and religious conviction. This tension reveals an important dimension of how Christian witness and convictions are professed and enacted in postdigital contexts, which demands some sort of translation and negotiation. Nonetheless, Panmei admitted that their grounding in scripture and religious convictions did not go unnoticed even in these trans-local and national circuits, much to the puzzlement of the reporters and fellow conservationists.

New Networks and Structures of Relation within the Community

Online platforms also introduced new ways of communication and connection within the community. During the pandemic, RCT organized online events for the local community, such as art competitions to promote Amur Falcon awareness. The 2024 community event was a photography competition, titled “Shoot me with your cam.” Such online outreach facilitated creative participation and active learning about local biodiversity, encouraging participants to observe, document and share their experiences with the falcons. It created new forms of interaction across generations, with youth mentoring older participants on technological processes, while elders shared traditional knowledge about the *Akhuaipuina*. Besides these activities, RCT developed approaches that built on traditional cultures. They recognized that the *Akhuaipuina* not only had ecological and scientific significance, but also were featured in traditional folklore, folk songs and customs. As Panmei puts it, to preserve the biodiversity is effectively to preserve their cultural traditions. Building on this, RCT organised folk song competitions, poetry and painting competitions, and even included folk dances. These efforts coalesced into a rich repertoire of activities, eventually becoming the annual Amur Falcon Festival observed every late autumn.

The digital media produced by RCT served educational purposes besides advocacy. These activities introduced new relational dynamics within the indigenous landscape, creating fresh pedagogical possibilities. Unlike conventional structures of knowledge held by schools, churches, or elders, digital technologies allowed younger content creators and activists to generate information about birds and the environment, and about associated traditional cultures. This enabled new relational

structures within the community, redistributing influence, and thereby reshaping cultural production. Through intergenerational learning and collaboration, elders contribute ecological and cultural wisdom, narrating the significance of species, local flora and folklore, while the younger community members mediate these teachings digitally – designing posts, running social media campaigns, or creating educational content for broader audiences (as seen in Gonmei 2024). In this emergent configuration of cultural production, the transmission of knowledge becomes increasingly mediated through digital infrastructures and platform logics. Younger, technologically adept actors assume a mediating role, determining what is rendered visible and shareable according to the demands of legibility, online aesthetics and ease of circulation. What is curated within these parameters ultimately comes to be recognized as ecological and cultural knowledge in digital spaces. In this sense, the knowledge of elders becomes dependent on the technological and curatorial capacities of the younger generation. While intergenerational transmission has always been integral to ZLRI social life, digital mediation introduces an added layer of dependence that reshapes how knowledge is selected, translated and circulated. Again, this is not entirely unprecedented; however, what is new here is the extent to which transmission is now entangled with digital infrastructures, rather than circulating more immediately and traditionally through oral narration, embodied practices and ritual or festival life. Moreover, knowledge is preserved and amplified insofar as it aligns with the priorities of digital regimes and conservation agendas, where ecological value becomes a key criterion for visibility.

The pandemic intensified this dynamic. As youth returned from mainland cities during lockdowns, they re-engaged their homelands through digital documentation and representation. The result is a form of digital relationality in which care for land, species and community is enacted online as much as offline, reconfiguring how territorial belonging is expressed. Visibility itself becomes charged with ecological responsibility, functioning as a mode of ethical action on behalf of their eco-social community.

A contrasting dynamic is visible in accounts of Amur Falcon conservation in Pangti, Nagaland, where external conservation narratives and digital storytelling are framed as central in shifting local practices from hunting to protection (Veríssimo and Kudalkar 2024). While this foregrounds the role of persuasion through media, it also implicitly reproduces a hierarchy in which ecological knowledge is introduced from outside the community by experts who leverage an epistemic authority based on science and modern technology. In the Tamenglong case, however, RCT's work complicates this hierarchical model, as conservation initiatives are actively produced from within the community itself, drawing on indigenous cultural forms and ecological knowledge, supplemented by indigenous actors utilizing digital media practices. Here, ecological responsibility emerges through the community's own

reconfiguration of cultural and ecological meaning within digital infrastructures, alongside being informed by experts and educated conservationists.

Reconfigured Relationality with Nature

It is often framed as preferable to “shoot the falcons with the cam”, as expressed in the photography competition theme of Amur Falcon 2024, rather than with guns for hunting. Yet this paper asks whether the act of capturing the falcon within digital regimes should also be critically examined, in ways not dissimilar to earlier concerns about capture within hunting and market economies. This also has theological implications on how humans interact and engage with nature. A full philosophical treatment of this question lies beyond the scope of this paper, but here I will foreground two interrelated theological concerns related to digital mediation: epistemology and subjectivity.

Datafication and Indigenous Onto-epistemology: Expansion of Knowledge or Epistemicide?

Rendering “nature” into data, intensified through digital mediation, can displace complex, embodied, relational, and lived (“walked in”) knowledge with more abstract and easily circulated forms of knowledge. This shift is often aligned with the logics associated with high modernist rationality in its emphasis on legibility, abstraction and control. In the context of indigenous communities, this translates into a reconfiguration of relations with nonhuman life, alongside the reduction of situated, sensory, and relational knowledge into “data” (Duarte et al. 2019: 173). Where such logics prevail as dominant, as is increasingly evident in the case of Tamenglong, digital landscapes risk functioning as sites where relational and embodied forms of knowledge are subordinated to scientific and “datafied” knowledge.

This tension becomes noticeable in the datafication of the Amur Falcon migration narrative, particularly in the scientific and digital reframing of the *Akhuaipuina* as the Amur Falcons. The introduction of geo-tagged flight paths produced a different narrative of these birds, one that articulated identities and movements extending beyond the community’s cultural signification. In 2020, the flight patterns were circulated widely on social media. Reading these reports from distant Edinburgh, I was stunned. As a ZLRI from Tamenglong, in these digital maps, I was encountering the familiar *Akhuaipuina* through new lenses. They were different from my childhood memories of noisy flocks filling the evening sky in Tamenglong, and seen from the ground as we paused from our evening games. The digital colour-coded flight paths traced across maps of Asia and Africa offered a distinctly different perspective: a view from above. The information gained from geo-tags expanded on the community’s pre-existing traditional knowledge and practices surrounding the familiar

Akhuaipuina in ways that enriched their significance into broader ecological and geopolitical scales. For the community then, they represent and quantify the journey of our guests, the *Akhuaipuina*. These representations articulate a different ontological register in which the falcon is constituted primarily as data-in-motion rather than as relational presence. Their sensorimotor knowledge (Roturier and Beau 2022: 167) is supplemented and repositioned within a plural epistemic field, where embodied, ecological and scientific knowledges are managed and negotiated, albeit in uneven interactions.

Where datafication displaces this relational and epistemic plurality, however, what is at stake is the ontological reduction, and the reframing of what nature is understood to be. In its more extreme form, the dominance of data-driven epistemologies in conservation contexts can marginalize indigenous ways of knowing, raising the risk of epistemicide (Hall and Tandon 2017; Sonkqayi 2024). In privileging objectivity and legibility, the plural subjectivities acknowledged in indigenous life-worlds stand to be discarded.

New Subjectivities and Identities: “Relating like a State”

Aiyadurai’s work on the Mishmis of Arunachal Pradesh notes how complex, lived relations with tigers – previously viewed as protector, prey, or kin – are flattened within state and conservation frameworks that re-classify them as “endangered” or as national symbols (Aiyadurai 2016: 312). A similar reconfiguration can be observed in the shift from *Akhuaipuina* to the Amur Falcon. Once encountered as “winged guests”, embedded within seasonal rhythms and relational cosmologies, the falcons are increasingly reframed as objects of conservation, eco-tourism and scientific classification. The vernacular name *Akhuaipuina*, “the one who calls”, signals rather a form of subjectivity, a being that addresses the human community. By contrast, the sterile taxonomic “Amur Falcon” (*Falco amurensis*) situates the bird within a classificatory and managerial order that abstracts it from these relational contexts; a shift of ontological significance. It signals a reconfiguration in how human-nonhuman relations are structured and understood. As Roturier and Beau (2022: 165) observe in the Sami context, digital and scientific frameworks can recast nonhuman beings as mere passive recipients of human rational intentionality. In such configurations, animals are no longer encountered as relational subjects but as entities to be tracked, managed and interpreted through human-centred systems. These developments may be understood in relation to what Scott describes as “seeing like a state” (Scott 2020), which can be extended here as “relating like a state”. It characteristically privileges legibility, standardization and control, often positioning scientific expertise as the primary arbiter of valid knowledge, while treating indigenous knowledge as subordinate or peripheral (Harding 2011).

At the same time, the empirical situation in Tamenglong resists such a straightforward account. As noted by ornithologist Suresh Kumar in neighbouring Nagaland state, the introduction of geo-tagging and digital mapping actually generated new forms of engagement and enthusiasm among the community, who were deeply affected by the newly acquired knowledge. “In this whole process, people were learning about the geography where these birds were passing through,” he explained. “They started getting emotionally attached to the birds” (RAPTORS 2013). In this sense, digital mediation can be said to extend knowledge, introducing new epistemic and ontological horizons, and connecting local lifeworlds to wider ecological networks. Vernacular understandings of the falcons as relational beings coexist with their digital representation as datafied entities. The falcons continue to “call out” within local cosmologies, even as their movements are mapped, tracked and circulated across global networks. Digital infrastructures thus generate a layered field of relationality in which different ontologies of nature, encompassing relational, scientific and data-driven, intersect, if in an uneven terrain.

As an uneven terrain, digital platforms remain human-centric infrastructures, structuring how nonhuman life is made visible and intelligible. In doing so, they subtly shift the balance of relational authority, privileging legibility and abstraction. The issue then is how digitality *reorders* how human relations with nature are envisioned and recognized. For this paper, this reordering has immense theological significance. If relations with nonhuman creation are increasingly mediated through infrastructures that privilege abstraction and rational subjectivities, then the conditions under which care, responsibility and witness are enacted are themselves transformed. Rather than the relational and sacramental view of nature as “the body of God” (McFague 1993), digital mediation introduces fresh risks of further objectifying nonhuman creation. Indeed, theologian Norman Wirzba identifies significant theological implications in this epistemic shift: the objectification of nature in modernity is closely linked to the rejection of transcendence and the disenchantment of the world. If anything, digital infrastructures exacerbate this tendency towards epistemic abstraction and the exclusive prioritization of human rational subjectivities.

Reconfigured Relations of Marginalisation: Caste Logics & Surveillance Capitalism

The expanded visibility afforded by digital technologies has been crucial for RCT and the wider ZLRI community, as seen above. Yet this visibility introduces further vulnerability. It exposes communities to external scrutiny shaped by unequal social imaginaries, particularly what may be described in the Northeast Indian context as the “mainland gaze,” driven by caste-inflected hierarchies and cultural distance. Within this gaze, tribal communities are alternately romanticized as ecological custodians or

denigrated as culturally backward, especially in relation to food practices as “dirty” or inferior, reflecting casteist notions of contamination, privilege and moral superiority (Kikon 2022).

The viral circulation of photographs showing animals sold in local markets for food in the 2010s further amplified these prejudices, framing Naga tribal communities as cruel or irresponsible. In this framing, the hunting and consumption of Amur Falcons long practised among the communities, became freshly entangled with longstanding casteist and racialized narratives, positioning indigenous practices as evidence of backwardness or moral deficit. Faced with this scrutiny and surveillance, indigenous youth have used digital platforms to assert their own narratives of care, knowledge and identity. In particular, by sharing stories of RCT’s work on Amur Falcon conservation and other ecological projects, they perform a deliberate counter-narrative: demonstrating that indigenous communities are intimately familiar with their lands, and deeply invested in “stewardship” (a theological word often encountered in my interviews) and relational engagement with the nonhuman world. Through such digital practices, the youths assert that their plural ecological engagement is both culturally grounded and globally relevant, claiming a space within global networks of knowledge and advocacy. Such work, which might be superficially waved off as representational work, constitutes a form of moral and relational practice; what this paper understands as an expression of communal witness, enacted beyond formal institutional structures. Importantly, witness, in this case, is expressed in more subtle and implicit manifestations. Although operating within secular spaces, their practices are often undergirded by Christian moral language alongside ongoing relationships with local churches. In this way, ecological action, digital participation and theological imagination intersect in diffuse but meaningful ways.

Here too, we encounter conditions of digital mediation that impose constraints on this witness and representation. Visibility must be carefully managed, especially when images and spectacles are circulated with minimal account for local contexts or cultural meanings. As Mordecai Panmei notes, even a single poorly timed or candid image, such as one capturing a momentary lapse in the handling of an animal, could circulate widely and undermine years of conservation work and the collective reputation of communities. This ambivalence highlights the ethical stakes of digital mediation: visibility can empower, connect and teach, but it can also expose communities to misrepresentation, judgment, or coercive forms of authority. Furthermore, what gains traction and circulation is often what aligns with dominant expectations: visually compelling, legible, aesthetically palatable and easily interpretable knowledge, while those that do not fit this mould possibly risk marginalization. For ecclesial reflection, this underscores the importance of attending to the affective and relational dimensions of postdigital worlds: visibility and platforming alone are insufficient for cultivating ethical, caring, and networked communities. If Christian witness

is to be attuned to justice, it must attend to the infrastructures through which visibility and knowledge are mediated within contemporary realities. The practices of RCT suggest that faithful engagement in such spaces requires discernment: a commitment to relational accountability, to the protection of vulnerable representations, and to the cultivation of forms of presence that resist epistemic reduction to spectacle. Public theology in India calls for attention to subaltern concerns (Patta 2023), and this is especially pertinent in the domain of digital publics strained by infrastructural imbalances and ingrained racial and casteist prejudices.

At a broader level, these dynamics find resonances with concerns about surveillance capitalism and the extractive logics of digital companies, especially towards marginalised communities (Zuboff 2019). Increased connectivity has created new opportunities for participation, but also new asymmetries of power regarding who owns, interprets and benefits from digital knowledge that is scraped from marginalized communities. Online documentation of species, landscapes, and frontier regions can expand awareness, but it also risks extracting and instrumentalizing what is perceived as valuable according to dominant frameworks. Seen in this light, digital landscapes are recognized as moral and theological terrains, which have the capacity to shape how persons/communities relate, how knowledge is formed or muted, and how responsibility is enacted. Stoddart's (2022) call to "dismantle White surveillance" provides a liberative framework for challenging the Whiteness inherent in Western digital norms. However, in the Indian context, racialised minorities further face an intersectional challenge: they must navigate not only dominant digital norms but also the added burden of a casteist gaze. Ethical Christian presence in postdigital contexts then is about critically interrogating inherent logics of domination, and cultivating practices grounded in relationality, care and justice. It involves action and solidarity alongside the "sinned against", who in this case comprises of nature and marginalized communities, and thereby articulating an expansive understanding of ecclesial presence in the world, the body of God (McFague 1993).

Becoming Digital Natives: Authority, Plurality and Ecclesial Witness

RCT's practices suggest that digital engagement reworks, rather than replaces, existing lifeworlds, creating new sites where authority is negotiated and shared. A close analysis of RCT's activities has revealed the innovative ways in which they manage a pluralistic paradigm – an interweaving of epistemological, relational, cultural-religious and methodological plurality. For example, in the annual Amur Falcon Festival, data maps and scientific figures are presented alongside traditional dances and newly composed folk songs about the falcons. On the same platform, government officials, nationally renowned ornithologists, local pastors, folklorists, dance

troupes and village elders converge. Painting and photography exhibitions, documentary screenings, prayers, pamphlets and posters all coexist, reflecting a co-production of knowledge that simultaneously draws from science, tradition, community expressions and lived experience. Digital technology enables this pluralism: the integration of “new orality”, audio-visual media and text allows indigenous creators to narrate, perform and document knowledge in ways that reach both local and transnational audiences. In this sense, indigenous digital activists, or “digital creatives” emerge as new actors of cultural and religious authority, shaping both ecological and cultural narratives (Campbell 2020). This indicates that in practice, ecological and theological authority is distributed across generations, institutions and platforms. In this sense, RCT inhabit roles that extend beyond conservation, and include cultural and, implicitly, theological mediator.

Interestingly, however, authority is constantly being contested even in these digital landscapes. Local communities assert their authority online, often resisting the conservation efforts, especially when they are perceived as high-handed and paternalistic. Digital fora such as Facebook and WhatsApp provide space for sustained deliberation, debate and dissent – whether over the surrender of hunting guns during the falcon season or the allocation of village land for eco-sensitive zones. Such discourse, which would be difficult to organize in person, allows for the negotiation of authority, the airing of dissenting voices, and the maintenance of pluralism in conservation and cultural practices. This resistance should be read as a challenge to romanticized and essentialized notions of indigenous “environmentalism” that paint indigenous communities as perpetual “noble savages”. In reality, and as such dissent against conservation works indicate, traditional lifeworlds have historically accommodated the simultaneous sacralization, honouring, hunting and consumption of *Akhuaipuina*. (See similar observations in other contexts: Nadasdy 2005.) Thus, we see digital infrastructures provide space for dissent, and therefore for seemingly-contradictory cosmologies to be articulated.

At the same time, these locally negotiated forms of authority remain vulnerable to the wider digital infrastructures in which they are embedded. Algorithmic logics shape visibility and credibility, often privileging what is legible, measurable, or aligned with dominant expectations (Campbell 2020). As a result, relational and embodied forms of knowledge risk being marginalised within digital infrastructures. For RCT, this creates an ongoing tension: digital media enables plural expressions of knowledge and care, while simultaneously pressuring them towards abstraction and standardisation.

Conclusion: Ecclesial Witness in Postdigital Contexts

This paper has presented digital ecology as a contested space in which relations are continually reconfigured: between humans and nonhuman life, between local communities and external powers, and between different ways of knowing. Digital infrastructures enable visibility, advocacy and collaboration, while also introducing pressures of datafication, surveillance and epistemic hierarchy. RCT's practices navigate this complex terrain, negotiating these tensions rather than resolving them. The paper has argued that RCT's work constitutes a form of ecclesial witness beyond formal church structures. Though operating largely within secular conservation networks, their practices are implicitly shaped by Christian commitments – expressed through notions of care, responsibility and relational accountability to land, community and nonhuman life. The tension RCT navigates between secular conservation circuits and explicitly Christian conviction is itself theologically instructive. It points toward a mode of ecclesial witness constituted by presence and plurality, rather than through explicit confessional stances or proclamation. That Christian convictions must sometimes be implicit or translated into secular idiom does not diminish their ecclesial character; it rather reflects the contextual, pragmatic form that faithful witness takes at the margins, where, as Jenkins (2013) argues, religious creativity emerges in plural and pragmatic responses to crisis. Seen from another perspective, these practices represent lived expressions of eco-theology. What is often articulated in conceptual terms, such as stewardship and care for creation, appears here as a relational ethic shaped by indigenous cosmologies – a form of lived eco-theology that is in continual onto-epistemological negotiations within postdigital worlds. Indigenous relational lifeworlds reshape Christian concepts, reworking them and resisting the singular or universalized frameworks of environmentalism or, indeed, of theology. Such epistemological openness and cosmologically-attentive approaches provide a pathway for reframing ecclesial presence that is grounded in lived contexts, attentive to both human and nonhuman flourishing, and responsive to marginalized communities.

For ecclesial futures, this carries two implications. First, it suggests that Christian witness in postdigital contexts must attend to the infrastructures that shape visibility, knowledge and authority. Second, it calls for forms of theological reflection that are grounded in lived practice and open to plural ways of knowing. The example of RCT points towards an ecclesial imagination, shaped beyond the centre of institutional ecclesial structures, through grassroots practices of care, attentive to questions of epistemic justice, shared responsibility and digital presence.

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ARTICLE

Digital Initiative, Indigenous Heritage: A Catalyst for Digital Theological Discourse and Digital Activism

Taimaya Ragui

Abstract

This research suggests that engaging in the revisiting and recovering of Indigenous heritage is needed to initiate the decolonization process, representing individual or community efforts to move away from the captivity of colonial ideologies. It will analyse Indigenous Christian initiatives, namely in the field of contemporary music and fashion, aimed at reclaiming cultural heritage using digital technologies and platforms among the Indigenous Tangkhul Nagas, while making it accessible and engaging for the contemporary generations. These creative initiatives exemplify a form of digital activism and are noteworthy because Indigenous heritage, including their way of life, beliefs and intellect, was previously described as demon worship and rejected by colonizers. This exploratory paper argues that creative use of digital technologies and platforms by Indigenous communities has the potential to inform digital theological discourse and contribute to discussion of digital activism, particularly among the Tangkhul Nagas. The proposed work positions digital theology within a decolonial framework, arguing that revisiting and recovering Indigenous heritage constitute liberation from colonial ideologies. Furthermore, rather than a “radical democracy” framework, my contribution to digital activism is reframed as a process that challenges not only current power structures but also their disregard for Indigenous heritage.

Keywords: Digital theology, Digital activism, Decolonization, Indigenous heritage, Tangkhul Nagas, Digital platforms

Introduction

The recovery of Indigenous heritage marks the beginning of decolonisation. This process serves to challenge the continuing influence of colonial ideologies that posit their religion, education and culture as superior to those of Indigenous communities. Such initiatives are significant, as colonizers, particularly American Baptist

missionaries and British administrators and/or ethnographers, disregarded their heritage and imposed, if not coerced, colonial ideologies onto Indigenous Tangkhul Nagas (see Vashum 2007); American Baptist missionaries with British administrators and/ ethnographers under the term “colonial”, as mission work was carried out in collaboration with the British Empire. Given this historical precedence, I look at Indigenous Christian initiatives in contemporary music and fashion, focused on recovering cultural heritage using digital technologies and platforms among the Tangkhuls, while ensuring it is accessible and engaging for contemporary generations. I argue that these creative initiatives have the potential to inform digital theological discourse and contribute to the discussion of digital activism, particularly among and beyond the Tangkhuls.

The term “decolonize” or “decolonization” is used as a methodology to develop a framework to conceptualize existing practices of recovering Indigenous heritage and provide support in initiating community action. This means amplifying the voices of Indigenous communities who are involved in the recovery of Indigenous heritage using digital technologies and platforms, particularly in contemporary music and fashion. It will be limited to the works of a folk-rock musician, Rewben Mashangva, and fashion designers Asa Kazingmei and Easterlight Zimik. I examine digital content, such as YouTube videos, interviews, social media posts, and web-based publications and scholarship on digital theology and digital activism.

Recovering Indigenous Heritage as Decolonization

Tangkhuls began the process of recovering their cultural heritage a few decades after the colonials departed Ukhrul, Manipur, in the 1950s. These early initiatives are a form of decolonisation, where Tangkhuls began to resist the influence of colonial ideologies by reclaiming Indigenous heritage.

Early Recovery Efforts

The British Empire collaborated with Western missionaries to spread Christianity among the Tangkhuls, who reside along the Indo-Myanmar border. William Pettigrew, the first Western missionary to Indigenous communities, greatly contributed to spreading Christianity in Manipur (Pettigrew 1986). Pettigrew spent approximately forty years on the dissemination of the Christian faith through his literary works, preaching, healthcare, and teachings. He also propagated Christianity in ways that undermined Indigenous knowledge, including the prohibition of festivals linked to *Āmeoyan*, the Indigenous religion (Pettigrew 1909).

Colonials engaged in civilizing mission enforcing colonial ideologies (sociocultural values). This means influencing the early Indigenous converts to imitate colonial practices. In their thinking and practices, they carried with them colonial ideologies.

Frederick S. Downs suggests that the “traditional system” of Indigenous communities “could not survive under the centralised British administration and jurisprudence” (Downs 2001: 63). However, two to three decades after Pettigrew left Ukhrul (1960–70s), efforts to recover Indigenous heritage began. While some works clung to Pettigrew’s format, others, such as Luikham (1961), Shimray (1967) and Shaiza (1970), clearly represented Tangkhul heritage. These early texts, composed in the Tangkhul language, initiated the recovery of Indigenous heritage, albeit limited to a select group of individuals. These initiatives emerged from a desire to embrace Christianity while retaining their Indigenous ways of life. There was increasing concern around why the Nagas could not adopt their own cultural practices while still being good Christians, especially since Western Christians take part in singing, dancing and drinking (Horam 1977: 14). Indigenous communities in Northeast India (NEI), including the Tangkhuls, worked to reclaim their heritage. Nalini Natarajan observes that within the Khasi community, both Christians and non-Christians uphold strong commitment to their longstanding values, customs, and traditions (Natarajan 1977: 193).

These recovery initiatives hold great significance because colonizers historically rejected or dismissed Indigenous knowledge. The initiatives resist the continued influence of colonial ideologies. Yet, their denominational ties remain strong as Tangkhul churches embrace an Anglican-Baptist perspective on theology and church structure. Tangkhuls continue to use Western approaches to worship, using hymns, gospel music and choir participation (Pettigrew 1897, 1899). Their approach to reading the Bible also takes a colonial approach, where individual salvation is emphasised. Tangkhuls also adopt their culture, such as clothing, music and education (Nukshirenla and Dhanaraju 2019: 52; Philip 1976: 93).

Tangkhuls may have merely copied Anglican-Baptist Christianity without being rooted in their cultural tradition (Keitzar 1982: 310). Dominant groups have assimilated marginalized communities. But Tangkhuls did not entirely abandon their Indigenous heritage. They preserved certain aspects of their cultural identity while adopting the Christian faith.

Recovery Efforts with Colonial Frameworks

Establishing a school marked the beginning of the civilizing mission. This was followed by the planting of churches among the Tangkhuls (Vashum 2007: 3). Such mission tasks were accompanied by the publication of catechisms, Bible translations, hymns, etc. (see, for example, Pettigrew 1907). This civilizing mission carried colonial ideologies which were embedded with colonial religious and sociocultural values.

Tangkhuls shared knowledge from one generation to the next within their community, in the context of village social structure, inter-village interactions, and occasional exchanges with other communities. Informally, they share knowledge through kinship and family relationships. Formally, it is shared through *Longshim*,

an Indigenous education system, also called *mayarlong* for boys and *ngalalong* for girls (Horam 1977: 67–74). They prioritize communal learning by imparting knowledge that they can use in their everyday lives. But colonials viewed *Longshim* as a “heathen” practice resulting in its eventual discontinuation (Furer-Haimendorf 1939: 58). In fact, early converts to Christianity faced a ban on any Indigenous practice related to *Āmeoyan*.

Hence, early attempts to reclaim Indigenous heritage failed to resonate with the larger society. Their recovery efforts adopted text-based methods, introduced by colonizers and conflicting with oral traditions. While there were printed books, “print culture” remained supplementary when compared to oral traditions (Shimreiwung 2013: 71). For example, early educated Tangkhuls founded the Tangkhul Literature Society in 1938 (Shimray and Maransa, 1993: 2–3). They published many texts, secured state-level recognition for the Tangkhul language, and offered it as a subject in high schools and higher secondary schools in 1985 (Shimray and Maransa 1993: 25). These initiatives mostly remained limited to “school textbooks and Tangkhul language”; they did not evolve into major “literary works and publications” (Shimreiwung 2013: 76). They struggled to convince the wider community to participate in revitalizing Indigenous heritage/history.

Indigenous theology perceives the divine, human and natural worlds as interconnected (Vashum 2003: 68); however, colonial influences introduced a dualistic theology that separates the sacred from the secular. Hence, Tangkhuls tend to categorize anything beyond the sacred (church and related activities) as secular. The church and its associations limit the reach of anything they label as secular, controlling what the community receives from the sacred. This means that early recovery efforts outside the church structures did not produce the expected results. Considering this reality, we must seek answers to several questions: What are other ways to recover Indigenous heritage? Could recovery initiatives align more closely with Tangkhul Naga oral tradition? Can Indigenous Christians lead these initiatives, even if they originate outside church structures and contribute to digital theological discourse and activism within Tangkhul churches?

Ambivalence of Christianity

Tangkhuls experience Christianity in two distinct ways. First, it arrived as a colonial power that dismissed Indigenous religion and knowledge. Pettigrew (1909) saw Indigenous ways of life as something to be replaced rather than retained. Second, the mission school system influenced students to look at their own culture as “backward”. Tangkhul Christianity slowly became more like the people who brought it. They engaged with the same Bible that was translated to undermine Indigenous culture, while still spreading its message. Yet, colonially influenced churches that had earlier ignored their own heritage were also willing to display digital art with

Indigenous heritage at the Tangkhul Baptist Gospel Quasquicentennial (Shaiza 2024). Due to this complexity, one cannot reduce Christianity to merely a colonial tool or an Indigenous possession. It retains both.

The artists who will be discussed in this paper walk a tightrope. They are Christians who critique the ways that Christianity has been used against their community, yet they also uphold Christian identity and church institution. Their work shows that decolonisation does not mean giving up Christianity. Rather, it means reclaiming the capacity to be both Christian and Tangkhul on their own terms.

Indigenous Creative Initiatives in the Contemporary Context

Tangkhuls are engaging in the recovery of Indigenous heritage using digital technologies and platforms in contemporary Indigenous music and fashion. This section examines those creative initiatives which can inform digital theological discourse and contribute to discussions of digital activism, particularly in and from the Tangkhuls.

Indigenous Music

Tangkhuls learned to read and write with an adapted Roman alphabet in the mission school (Pettigrew 1897). They grew proficient in it as they translated the Bible and hymns into the Tangkhul language and made them accessible. The Bible was translated from the King James Version into Tangkhul language, along with a collection of English hymns (Pettigrew 1927). In this task, Pettigrew's student assisted him (Ragui 2022). These students also carried forward the teachings imparted to them after the colonials left. They sought to emulate colonial figures, advancing their ideologies and presenting them to the community as a way forward (Kharingpam 2020: 8). This mindset further reinforced the notion that colonial ideologies are "civilised," while an Indigenous way of life is "uncivilized". In practice, this means they continued to translate and compose new songs using colonial formats. Western songs and musical instruments like the guitar, piano, drums and violin replaced traditional instruments and tunes. However, Tangkhul traditions like *tingteila* (one-stringed lyre), *kashankachon* (attire/wraparound shawl), *phung* (log drum), and *hao laa* (folksong) were neglected.

There are, however, exceptions. Recently, Rewben Mashangva has featured the identity of Indigenous communities through his unique blend of folk and blues. His music blends influences from Western artists like Bob Marley and Bob Dylan with *hao laa*, the folksong (Longkumer 2023). Mashangva grew from not being able to afford a guitar to becoming a national icon. He received the fourth-highest civilian award, the Padma Shri, from the Indian government in November 2021 and the title "guru" (teacher) from the North East Zone Cultural Centre (NEZCC) in 2004 for his folk

music work (UT Desk 2021). His folk music also helped him gain global recognition, with the *New York Times* reporting on his contribution to Bob Dylan's songs (Sengupta 2008).

Mashangva's recovery efforts are a form of decolonisation. It stands out in preserving *hao laa* and reinventing musical instruments like *tingteila* and *phung*, fusing them with other forms of music (Longkumer 2023: 66–7; Sadokpam 2018: 290–91). His music is complemented by his presentation of traditional attire and appearance during performances (Mashangva 2021). Arkotong Longkumer described his performance as follows:

When [Mashangva] performs, he wears the Raivat Kachon, which is a traditional Tangkhul body cloth. Alongside this, he wears various necklaces, sometimes a bird feather, but always with a traditional Naga haircut (kept long at the back and shaved along the sides), and a pair of leather boots. With an acoustic guitar, and harmonica – this is the brand, the persona that identifies [Mashangva]. (Longkumer 2022)

His performance represents Indigenous identity and shows how other Indigenous communities have had shared experiences. For Longkumer, “He is more than a musician; he is a reviver of tradition, an activist, a reformer and the leader of a movement that is reverberating” (2023: 62). Through digital platforms, people can access his work, i.e., hear him sing, play, or speak. Over the course of time, Mashangva has uploaded over two hundred videos to YouTube. These videos include music videos, interviews, live performances and messages for Indigenous communities and beyond.

Mashangva works to reclaim and preserve Indigenous heritage while resisting the dominant voice. As a pacifist activist, he writes songs about peace in response to the militarization of NEI. Examples of such works include songs like “No more killings” and “Winning peace together”. He calls for maintaining peace among different communities in NEI; he also expresses concern about the dominant influence of colonial ideologies. Mashangva claims that colonial schooling has little to do with Indigenous village life. Instead, he finds a stronger connection with herding sheep than with the blue-eyed, golden-haired figure of Jesus they introduced (Longkumer 2023: 67–8).

Tangkhuls adopted colonial cultures, including their music and clothing. Kharinpam asserted that after the early students converted to Christianity, the semi-educated converts embraced their new identity, viewing themselves like the colonial teachers/missionaries and rejecting their own culture (2020: 8). This is a concern. Indigenous communities began to abandon their heritage, burning traditional clothing and ornaments, triggered by the assumption that they are associated with Indigenous religions. The problem lies in connecting the colonial ideologies with

“light”, while branding other cultures as “dark” or in darkness. The term “guru” applied to Mashangva, though unfamiliar to the Tangkhuls, gains new meaning as a “cultural reviver”. It embodies his self-identification as a *guru* who brings light, “Even if it’s a small light” (Longkumer 2023: 15–16, 66).

Indigenous Fashion

This new perception of “light” highlights individuals who engage in revitalizing Indigenous heritage using digital tools and platforms. Kazingmei debuted his clothing design, “Immortal”, at the Lakmé Fashion Week in 2012, marking his emergence as a next-generation designer (Lakmé Fashion Week 2012). He launched his fashion collection, “Changvei”, at Lakmé Fashion Week Winter/Festive 2014, helping him achieve national recognition (Haokui 2014). Kazingmei’s designs highlight Tangkhul culture and connect to younger generations.

Augustine Horchuigam, a model, was inspired to form Featherheads Haokui after this show (Shatsang 2022). This band currently produces creative music that celebrates Indigenous heritage. Spectators found themselves intrigued by the culture on display, as Augustine sported a *hao kuiret* (a traditional hairstyle) and adorned his head with feathers. This experience made him realize he knew little about his culture and motivated him to explore and promote it (Featherheads Haokui n.d.). In 2016, four years after the Lakmé event, he formed a band to preserve and promote Tangkhul culture. In their journey, Mashangva guided them in integrating Western music with *hao laa* (Longkumer 2023: 85).

These recovery initiatives, whether from Mashangva or Kazingmei, stand out in several ways. First, the civilizing mission instilled a perception of Indigenous heritage as inferior. The recovery of heritages not only resists colonial captivity but helps in recovering Indigenous identity. Second, the earlier recovery efforts were limited to Ukhul and Kamjong districts, with hardly any digital presence. Kazingmei’s exhibition at Lakmé Fashion Week, which was televised on national television, showcased Indigenous creations. His fashion designs were competent when compared to those of dominant groups. Third, recovery of Indigenous heritage through creative efforts is commendable. But it raised concerns about foreigners/outside appropriating Tangkhul motifs from *kashan-kachon* for commercial interests (Varah, Pamreishang and Khamrang 2021). Rathiulung Elias KC also expresses concern about “who owns, interprets, and benefits from digital knowledge” pertaining to Indigenous communities. This concern comes from the argument that India’s intellectual property rights fail to adequately protect the heritage of Indigenous communities and calls for review (Varah, Pamreishang and Khamrang 2021: 383). This paper avoids legal questions; however, the issue holds relevance as Tangkhul plant and animal designs embody cultural knowledge and meaning (Shimray 2024: 189).

Easterlight Zimik, an Indigenous fashion designer, addresses these issues. Zimik works as a fashion designer, illustrator and print designer (Jamir 2017). He returned to Ukhrul and now collaborates directly with local weavers. His recent collection, “Dear Spring”, explores textile traditions from NEI and creatively applies them (Thingshung 2024). He then moves to the Tangkhul community and their identity through fashion, music, landscape and creativity (Pheirei 2024). He found that mostly older people wear *kashan* (wraparound) during church services or formal occasions. Zimik aims to change this by redesigning it to attract a younger demographic and promote everyday wear. This is done by engaging them on Instagram and featuring *kashan* in key events (e.g., the “Indigenous Fashion Futures” archive at the India Art Fair (Zimik n.d.; India Art Fair 2025)).

Zimik is also attempting to create a system to help local weavers showcase their work and improve and empower them (Pheirei 2024). Local artisans try to meet the demands of their community but struggle to share their work beyond Tangkhuls. The “Dear Spring” collection followed an earlier collection titled *Shim* (home), with aims to inspire more *kashan* wearers. Zimik launched the collection in Ukhrul, his hometown, rather than Mumbai or Delhi. This choice marked his “real journey as a designer and to open my vision to the world”, while working together with local weavers (Ekhon 2023).

Additionally, Zimik’s conversational digital art integrates Tangkhul culture, social life and landscapes, inviting viewers to ask uncomfortable questions. For instance, in the work titled “What They Want to See”, he examines societal constraints that keep women captive (Zimik n.d.). He wonders if he created this art for personal fantasy, to communicate, or to support feminists whose causes he does not understand. Zimik is a Christian, although he did not create his artwork for the church. Church groups recognized his work; he presented two pieces, “An Ode to Raivat Kachon” and “Khom”, at the Tangkhul Baptist Gospel Quasquicentennial (Shaiza 2024). His art examined the impact of colonial Christianity and the decline of tradition and symbols in Indigenous culture. The first piece showcased intricate motifs on a shawl that embody Tangkhul identity, while the second piece wove textile designs to suggest unity. In both artworks, *haoshim*, the traditional Tangkhul house, served as a shared heritage (Shaiza 2024). The digital artworks showcased the Tangkhul culture by combining traditional and modern features that celebrate the diversity and richness of the Indigenous community.

Towards a Digital Theological Discourse and Digital Activism

We begin with key terms as we consider how these creative initiatives affect digital theological discourse and digital activism. Eric Steinhart used “digital theology” as

a term to examine theological concerns associated with the use of artificial intelligence and virtual reality, with a particular emphasis on the notion of personhood (Steinhart 2012). Some argue that technology may assist in our understanding of God and religious concepts (Kolog, Sutinen and Nygren 2016), while others argue that theology and computational methods can complement one another (Sutinen and Cooper 2021). Considering these different views, Peter Phillips, Kyle Schiefelbein-Guerrero and Jonas Kurlberg define digital theology in four waves: using digital tools for theological teaching, facilitating research via digital culture, participating in theological discourse within digital spaces, and providing a prophetic critique of digitality (Phillips, Schiefelbein-Guerrero and Kurlberg 2019). The aforementioned definition of digital theology informs us of its development, but overlooks whose theology is considered significant and how digital spaces mirror colonial legacies. Communities whose traditions faced suppression by colonizers confront a question that goes beyond the digital practice of theology; they seek to recover what was nearly lost. This paper positions digital theology within a decolonial framework, where I argue that revisiting and recovering Indigenous heritage in digital spaces is an act that liberates us from colonial captivity. Similarly, the term “digital activism” is used to refer to actions that recover Indigenous heritage and resist power structures using digital tools and platforms. This aligns with Carlson and Frazer’s research on Indigenous Australian activism where Indigenous communities engage in digital activism emphasizing cultural survival and self-representation (2016). When the term “digital technologies” is used, it includes hardware like phones, computers, and cameras and digital platforms like YouTube, Instagram, websites and streaming services that facilitate the creation, distribution and discussion of content.

Digital Theological Discourse

This paper engages with the discussion of digital theological discourse and presents the four waves of digital theology outlined by Phillips, Schiefelbein-Guerrero and Kurlberg. They document online religious practices and terminology, differentiating between using the internet to enhance offline faith and religious practices occurring in digital environments, examining the impact of digital culture on theology, and examining the interaction between online and offline faith within broader social and theological contexts (Phillips, Schiefelbein-Guerrero and Kurlberg 2019: 34–5). Recognizing that nearly all contributions originate from Euro-American contexts, Stephen Garner highlights the need for voices from Asia, Africa, Latin America, Oceania and other minority contexts (Garner 2020). This paper expands on the proposed Wave 5 of “a theological reassessment of digitality and a digital reassessment of theology” by situating it within a decolonial framework and in the context of Tangkhuls (Phillips, Schiefelbein-Guerrero and Kurlberg 2019: 37).

Decolonial Critique

Current digital theology frameworks help enter the conversation. But there is a need to recognise that they carry assumptions and perspectives that may not align with Indigenous contexts. Digital frameworks offer strategies and approaches that they adopt. These discussions emerge from a specific backdrop of technological saturation and advancement. However, they may overlook how a digital theology can emerge where colonial history influences both access to technology and religious identity.

The digital space is not neutral for Tangkhuls. It emerges in a context where earlier innovations or technologies – like printing presses, schools, hymnbooks and others – replaced Indigenous ways of life. As indicated earlier, Pettigrew used print in his translation of the Bible and hymns to replace oral tradition. When contemporary Tangkhul artists use YouTube, Instagram, or other digital platforms, they adopt and adapt with these new tools. They take back technology for purposes that colonizers may not have envisioned, particularly recovery of Indigenous heritage. This suggests that Wave 5 should explore how digital culture influences theology and examine whose theological perspectives shape digital culture, along with the historical power dynamics that digital spaces represent.

A Decolonial Wave

Phillips, Schiefelbein-Guerrero and Kurlberg explore digital theology through the lens of digital humanities, examining the interaction between theology and digital culture (2019). This paper, however, uses decolonization as a methodology to recover Indigenous heritage raises questions about the underlying Eurocentrism in digital theology. My discourse highlights the significance of reclaiming Indigenous heritage dismissed by colonizers, by sharing their stories and recreating their creations. The focus is on contemporary *hao laa* (music) and *kashan* (fashion), using digital tools and platforms. This decolonization process prioritizes Indigenous voices, where their history, experiences and stories are portrayed in digital spaces. This decolonial process through digital tools and platforms serves as a form of liberation from colonial ideological captivity. This means seeking liberation from the theological perspective of colonials, where the gospel lacks deep roots in the “cultural life” of Indigenous communities and these communities uncritically imitate the colonials (Keitzar 1982: 310).

This is a form of digital theology that positions the current discourse as a theological response to the colonial erasure of Indigenous knowledge/heritage. *My proposed digital theology touches aspects of Wave 3 and 4, and proposes an alternative Wave 5.* As my work analyses how contemporary Tangkhul musicians and fashion designers make use of digital platforms, it carries aspects of Wave 3. They navigate digital spaces, rewriting cultural narratives and encouraging Tangkhuls to engage in

conversation. As my work examines the colonial and missionary histories imposed on Tangkhuls, it engages in a prophetic reassessment of digitality in theology (Wave 4). In doing so, it calls for an alternative of Wave 5, which advocates for a theological discourse that incorporates neglected voices, particularly those of Indigenous communities. This comes with recognition that Tangkhul churches have moved beyond using digital technology and platforms to improve communal worship by streaming sermons. The above recovery initiatives – music and fashion – invite them to use digital technologies for creation and interpretation. Such creative projects require reassessing their voice and its possible reinterpretation using digital technologies and platforms.

The Tangkhul case clearly shows four features of this decolonial Wave 5. First, the development of digital theology must resist the colonial histories embedded in digital platforms. YouTube serves as a platform owned by global corporations and shaped by Western algorithms, despite its use for Indigenous purposes. In order to decolonize knowledge, Jonas Kurlberg suggests that this must be challenged. Second, given this reality, theological reflection in digital spaces must take into account both the loss of knowledge and the new advancements that emerged under colonialism. The contemporary music and fashion initiatives both create and recover. Third, digital theology from the perspective of Indigenous communities resists the sacred/secular dichotomy established by colonial missionaries. Zimik's art, when presented in church gatherings, challenges the distinctions between worship and the cultural expressions that colonial powers sought to uphold. Fourth, this wave calls for methodological humility: digital theology emerging from Indigenous contexts may differ from traditional academic theology. It could appear through music videos, fashion shows, or Instagram creative efforts/posts, instead of journal articles or conference papers.

Digital Activism

As indicated, digital activism is perceived as a process that challenges existing power structures and colonial power that disregards Indigenous heritage. Neumayer and Svensson categorise digital activism through two key dimensions: the activist's readiness to engage in civil disobedience and their perspective on the "other" (agonistic versus antagonistic) (Neumayer and Svensson 2014: 1). These dimensions identify four activist types: the "salon activist" engages in online discussions, petitions, and symbolic actions while remaining law-abiding yet antagonistic; the "contentious activist" breaks laws through hacking, property damage, or radical protest; the "law-abiding activist" seeks dialogue and change within legal boundaries, favouring institutional engagement; and the "Gandhian activist" employs non-violent civil disobedience to oppose adversaries while upholding pluralism (Neumayer and Svensson 2014: 9–12).

This research presents a different viewpoint by focusing on Indigenous decolonial activism, which does not necessarily conform to the digital activist typology. It suggests a different way to protest than the ones Neumayer and Svensson suggest, such as hacktivism, clicktivism, or networks that lack a defined goal (Neumayer and Svensson 2014: 5). This approach of creative digital engagement uses contemporary Indigenous music and fashion to convey real-life experiences, pointing to a new type of digital activism. This framework, an aspect of the Wave 5, expands by including cultural revitalization and resisting the dominance of colonial ideologies.

It highlights the distinctions and similarities with other digital activism initiatives that Indigenous communities undertake. Mashangva spoke of a parallel with the longstanding tradition of “Aboriginal resistance and political expression” in Australia (Carlson and Frazer, 2016) with the militarisation of Indigenous inhabited areas. This parallel approach emphasizes the recovery of Indigenous heritage as a form of digital activism, refining the discourse on the captivity of colonial ideology. In the initiatives of Kazingmei and Zimik, Indigenous communities are using social media and digital platforms to revitalize their culture and encourage community development socially and economically (Corbett, Singleton and Muir 2009: 71–8). Despite the digital divide in Indigenous communities in Ukhurul, Australia, and elsewhere, many increasingly use digital platforms. Guy Singleton and others see it as “maintain their cultures, communicate, archive knowledge, empower their communities, develop skills and generate income” (Singleton et al., 2019).

This paper demonstrates Indigenous activism as a powerful act of self-reclamation, distinguishing it from Neumayer and Svensson’s framework. My framework presents activism as a means of negotiating identity and driving digital initiatives within Indigenous communities, leveraging social media for mobilization. Recovering Indigenous heritage acts as a form of resistance and affirms cultural identity in a constructive way. This use of digital tools and platforms brings insights in finding new approaches to recover Indigenous heritage. This is a shift from rejection to recovery, offering an understanding of activism that operates outside a dominant paradigm. It is made possible by amplifying the voices of the marginalized, resisting captivity by colonial ideologies. This represents a new approach to digital activism.

Limitations of Digital Platforms

Digital platforms open new possibilities, but we also need to be aware of their limits. First, the digital gap is still a problem in the Ukhurul and Kamjong districts. Many villages face unreliable connectivity to the Internet (see Arora and Sapre 2025). Smartphones, computers and data plans create a financial burden that many families struggle to manage. While Tangkhul artists connect with the larger community through digital content, many community members are excluded, notably those

from lower-income families and older generations. There is a disparity between those with or without internet access.

Second, owning digital platforms differs from using the services of these platforms. For instance, Google owns YouTube, and Meta owns Instagram; these firms are responsible for managing the visibility of content, developing algorithms for making recommendations, and distributing profits. Algorithms often display a bias against Indigenous content. Those who own these platforms can remove videos or suspend their users without any explanation. Communities may discover that user-collected data gets used in ways beyond their control (Spano and Zhang 2025). Artists share traditional knowledge and pass it to corporations that may not prioritise the community's welfare. This could reinforce colonial patterns of extraction, where Indigenous communities' resources – now cultural and digital – get appropriated for the benefit of others.

Third, surveillance poses a significant concern. The military is heavily present in NEI to deal with sociopolitical issues, and it also grants the government the power to keep surveillance on internet activities. The ruling government can monitor artists and flag them, especially when they critique its policies (SFLC.in 2025). While digital platforms appear to encourage free expression, they can also be used to monitor and regulate Indigenous voices. A digital presence does not equate with transmitting culture.

Fourth, digital platforms may serve as a supplement, but they cannot replace the embodied and relational means through which Indigenous knowledge has traditionally been shared (Dutta 2011). For instance, watching a video of *hao laa* does not equate to learning through communal involvement, elder mentorship, and participation in village life. An overreliance on digital tools may undermine cultural practices by replacing intergenerational learning with their own, rather than supplementing it.

Yet, these four limits do not render the efforts to recover digital data ineffectively. It is recommended that we exercise precautions. To put it differently, members of the Tangkhul community should discuss digital activism and theology while bearing in mind the limitations and challenges of the digital platforms.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that recovering Indigenous heritage through digital spaces constitutes a form of decolonization among Tangkhuls. It examined early recovery efforts that stayed within colonial frameworks and found that they failed to reach the larger community. It then explored contemporary initiatives in music and fashion by Mashangva, Kazingmei and Zimik. It argued that their creative work on YouTube, Instagram and other digital platforms is making Indigenous heritage accessible for the contemporary generations. This reality, particularly their creative initiatives,

provides resources to rethink digital theology and digital activism from a decolonial perspective.

Three findings stand out from this research. The first relates to the value of digital platforms for decolonization, whereby Indigenous communities are recovering their cultural heritage. The second suggests that digital theology engages with voices from diverse contexts, including drawing on Indigenous music and fashion designs as sources for theological reflection, extending beyond churches and seminaries. The third concerns digital activism from the perspective of Indigenous communities that focuses on recovery of Indigenous heritage rather than protest.

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ARTICLE

Joys in Online Religious Spaces: A Study of Hong Kong Local and Diasporic Online Christian Communities

Ann Gillian Chu and Rachel Siow Robertson

Abstract

This article examines joy in online activism through a study of Hong Kong Evangelical Protestant Christian communities. Joy has been variously described in Christian theology as an intensely positive emotion, a command to be obeyed, and a spiritual gift arising within a covenantal relationship with God. Drawing on these theological approaches, we began with the question of how “joy can be commanded”, from the works of N. T. Wright, especially in challenging circumstances. We connect this with the issue of online activism and consider whether change-inducing participation is possible through online interactions. In response, we develop a theological framing for joy in terms of a virtuous cycle of identifying cognitive, emotional and social aspects. We examine these as they relate to different elements of activism, such as widening participation, identification in diversity and demands of difference. We examine the interaction between these elements through our study. Through this article, we argue that developing and expressing faith convictions online drives activist participation, and that joy in diversity and through adversity plays a central role in this process.

Keywords: Digital Humanities, Digital Ethnography, Hong Kong Studies

Introduction

As researchers studying online Christian communities, we often get asked whether Christians can really come together on social media. Some worry that this combination results in division – arguing, spreading misinformation and talking past each other in ways which further inequalities. Others express concern that social media involve shallow activities such as trading memes, likes and shares, which are not as appropriate for the cause of loving God and others in community. This article addresses these concerns in connection with literature from two themes: joy and online activism.

There is a wide range of theological definitions of joy. N. T. Wright (2015: 36) classifies joy as “an emotion” – specifically, an intensely positive emotion. There also seems to be a cognitive element of evaluating something positively, usually in relation to God – such as seeing that God is good, or that a relationship or situation is an un-owed gift from God (“rejoice *in the Lord* always”, Phil. 4.4, NRSV, emphasis added; see also Volf, 2015; Roberts 2013; Hough 2015). A third aspect is a social outcome – joy “gathers” people into community, especially outsiders (Jennings 2018). In all these approaches, joy is also characterized as a spiritual fruit, a “gift” coming through relating to God and his promises, and persisting through suffering (Crisp 2015: xiii; Johnson 2020a, 2020b). However, Wright (2015: 36) notes that “joy can also be commanded”. This indicates a tension in fitting descriptions of joy together. How can Christians be commanded to pursue something given as a gift, and therefore outside of their control, especially in difficult circumstances? An initial solution is that activities which reinforce knowledge of God’s faithful relationship with God’s people potentiate joy, even in adverse circumstances (Johnson & Robertson 2022).

Thus, the elements of joy connect in a virtuous cycle: activities that support cognitive and emotional elements of relating to God also support joy, and joy will motivate pursuit of these activities and a deeper relationship with God. For example, when mourning their sin, the Israelite community were commanded to rejoice and prescribed rituals of the Festival of the Booths “so that you may *know* that I [God] ... brought them [Israelites] out of the land of Egypt” (Lev. 23.43, NRSV, emphasis added). The rituals support knowledge of God’s past faithfulness, and hope for future realization of God’s promises (Anderson 1991). The result is “very great rejoicing” for the whole community, which is to include “male and female slaves, as well as the Levites, the strangers, the orphans, and the widows resident in your towns” (Deut. 16.14, NRSV). Joy enables renewed efforts at rebuilding (Neh. 8.17, NRSV). Thus, a community pursuing joy should have greater capacity to come together to respond compassionately to difficult circumstances. Arguably, this is why pursuing joy is highlighted in work related to activism, as a way to protect against burnout (as with the Black Joy Project; Cruz 2023).

The possibility of a virtuous cycle of joy raises the question of how the cognitive, emotional and social aspects could work online. Currently, online platforms leverage addictive, low-commitment and combative patterns (Lovink 2011; Morozov 2011; Nabi and Charlton 2014; Noble 2018; White 2010), resulting in pejorative labels such as “slacktivism” (Morozov 2011) and “clicktivism” (White 2010). In response, Steve Taylor (2025: 247) examines Christian communities which are “actively using online platforms to activate for change”. He draws on Neumayer and Svensson’s (2014) account, connecting activism with widening participation. For Neumayer and Svensson (2014: 132), “activities with the purpose of influencing society at large” extend beyond established powers to marginalized voices. Activism involves demands of difference,

understood as expressing diverse actions, positions, and understandings relative to the established order (2014: 133). Activism also requires identification in diversity, which means building a collective identity through unification as an “us” against a “them”, in which difference is affirmed (2014: 134). This may be in “antagonism” toward an enemy “to be eliminated”, or “agonism” regarding an adversary, “whose idea is criticized but who is nevertheless respected” (2014: 135–6). Types of activism include engaging with online content, working on online campaigns, and engaging in online civil disobedience. Based on observations of prayer in online communities, Taylor adds contemplative activities (2025: 251). We wonder if an analysis of online joy could reveal distinctively Christian approaches to online activism. How do cognitive, emotional and social aspects of joy interact with elements of activism – widening participation, identification in diversity, and demands of difference – in online Christian communities?

To answer this question, we conducted a study of Hong Kong Evangelical Protestant Christian communities (henceforth, Hong Kong Christian communities). Activism has always been important for these communities, with high-profile Christians effecting societal change through positions in trade unions, pressure groups, and the legislative council (Tse and Tan, 2016). The shift to online activism began during social movements of 2013–2014 (Occupy Central and the Umbrella Movement) and 2019 (Anti-Extradition Amendment Bill Protests), as many expressed religion-social viewpoints using the hashtags #deltaδmovement and #基督教文化運動 (Christian Cultural Movement). These hashtags evolved when it was difficult to meet in person, during the COVID-19 pandemic and the British National (Overseas) (BN[O]) visa wave of migration during 2019–2021 (Wong, 2022: 228–33). Natalie Chan (2021) argued that social media platforms are now primary places to pastor, rather than the means of attracting people to physical church. A sizeable number of those who self-identify as Christian in Hong Kong do not regularly join offline congregations. These online communities are grassroots, as evidenced by how #deltaδmovement allowed lay members to gain online followings and establish offline influence as “Key Opinion Leaders” (KOLs) (Chu 2023; Lo 2017; Hong Kong Working Group 2022).

Through a study of online Hong Kong Christian communities, we examined how positive emotions, particularly joy, and perceptions of situations and others in relation to God work to produce social outcomes. We suggest that online patterns of interaction can open a community up to joy as a spiritual fruit, enabling communal identification and participation through an activist orientation.

Methodology

Following researchers of activism, such as Svensson and Neumayer (2014), Christensen (2011) and Taylor (2025), who call for attention to context, we adopt digital

ethnography (Pink et al. 2016) as our approach for investigation. We understand online/offline worlds as influencing one another. Digital media is a direct and sustained means of contact with humans in their daily lives. The use of digital platforms provides a relatively unobtrusive way for us to observe our study participants.

We focus on online activities in Hong Kong and in the diaspora, using (digital) ethnographic field observations. We gather social media posts from 2020 to 2025 on Facebook and Instagram with hashtags #deltaδmovement and #基督教文化運動. These posts are compared and thematically analysed using NVivo, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). We use thematic analysis as a way to interrogate the born-digital data we collected. We take a case study approach, hoping that our study can invoke resonances in other contexts.

We note the “problem of silence” for digital ethnographic methodology (C. Chu, 2023): individuals who leave a church community may lack a digital footprint, because they may feel insecure about expressing themselves. Migration has opened up further divisions and silences, with those who stayed being unlikely to post about political issues (Ying, 2020; Chen, 2021), yet those who have left being perceived as disconnected from what is happening “on the ground” (A. G. Chu and Cheung, 2026). Silence and related phenomena, such as dechurching and community divisions, need to be interpreted as much as online activities (A. G. Chu, 2025).

Results

Cognitive

We first examined the formation of perceptions of others, circumstances, and God online, as positive construals of these are significant contributors to joy. We noted that #deltaδmovement posts contain a large amount of text, even on platforms such as Instagram where images are mandatory. This suggested an orientation towards building knowledge. Texts include Christian hymn lyrics, Bible verses, written prayers, thoughts on biblical verses and how they relate to daily life and societal concerns, and responses from commenters under the posts. Online discussions coalesce around KOLs and their approaches to religious texts. For example, Tin Tsz-fung @ideasfung, a Doctor of Philosophy (Theology) student at Emory University, includes citations and links to longer works in his posts, and uses social media to organize in-person reading groups at Hong Kong churches for his book on theology (2023).

We found that KOLs use their platforms to encourage identification amid difference, as belonging to the same church under God. One example is Tin’s discussion of migration. Tackling debates about who is a *real* Hong Konger or a *traitor*, he argues that the focus should not be on migrating or staying in Hong Kong, but rather, a

migration to heaven, according to “citizenship in heaven” (Tin 2020a) and in response to God’s calling (Tin 2020b). Tin encourages Christian communities to unite in action across societal distinctions such as local/diasporic and real/traitor. There are also efforts to bridge the privileged/marginalized distinction. Steven Ng @the.alternative.c and @galut_hk, a freelance pastor, uses his platform to organize monthly outreach sessions to the homeless and other vulnerable people in Mongkok, an area in Hong Kong. Ng suggests that congregants in traditional churches, as well as unchurched Christians, need a platform to come together to serve their local communities, and he draws attention to the contrasts between the homeless and the privileged who turn them away from church (Ng, 2024). He uses Raymond Fung’s “being sinned against” concept to understand homelessness in terms of structural sin (Ng, 2025, referencing Fung, 2020), contrasting with approaches to sin as a matter of personal responsibility in Hong Kong Evangelical Christianity (Kung, 2014; 2016). Michael Chee-man Tang @lifeseekunderstanding, a Doctor of Philosophy (Theology) graduate from the University of Birmingham, seeks to create space for broader discussions of LGBTQ+ issues, arguing that Christian ethics is about disagreeing with fellow church members while still witnessing Christ together (Tang 2025).

These are efforts towards supporting the cognitive element of joy in the online context –emphasizing understanding God and others more deeply, including reinterpreting pressing social issues in light of God’s future kingdom. However, KOLs tend to be from homogenous demographics – able-bodied, straight, ethnically Chinese, cisgender men and usually theologically educated. Those with privileged identities are already empowered by existing social structures, while the marginalized experience online silencing (A. G. Chu and Robertson 2026). This could inhibit the cognitive aspect of joy, which depends on hearing alternative voices and experiences of God.

Emotional

Negative emotions arise in relation to barriers to cognitive elements of joy, centring around misunderstandings of others and circumstances. However, we also find positive emotions in online interactions, including feelings related to joy (freedom, creativity, and gratitude), alongside contrasting emotions such as anger (Johnson and Robertson 2022).

We noted an emphasis on creative, visually aesthetically pleasing content. Hong Kong Christians employ captivating images, such as influencers posting themselves, landscapes and illustrations and comics of Bible stories. Ng took a storytelling approach to theological reflection on homelessness, pairing artistic photos with long text that described the lives and interactions of people he met. Tang shared videos and audio recordings. Theologian and architect Ben Wong (2022) noted that an industrial building unit in Kowloon City was rented specifically for creating online

Christian content. Some of this content linked to nostalgia, with Hong Kong Christians sharing and praising Christian hymns translated during colonial times (Cheung 2022).

Nonetheless, we also found many heated disputes. An example is Hong Kong's Alliance Bible Seminary Associate Professor of Theology John Chan. His catchy and informal writing frequently elicited heated responses. For example, Andres Tang, Vincent Lau and Freeman Huen co-authored a blog post, subsequently reposted on the *Christian Times*, titled "Anabaptists' Ethic, Theology, and Testimony: a Respectful Response to Dr John Chan, in Relation to the Ten Electoral Representative Seats" (A. S. K. Tang et al. 2015). As the authors are all older and more experienced than Chan, using the title "Dr" is not the usual etiquette in Hong Kong Chinese dynamics and was interpreted as being disrespectful (Theological Debacle 2017). More recently, there was online backlash after an interview with *Christianity Today*, in which Chan was quoted as saying that he would raise the Chinese Mainland flag in the church, leading to Chan claiming that he was misconstrued (Maize 2025). Chan's clarification led to further criticism, with commentators suggesting that it is his problem for always being misunderstood. In general, those postings mention being misunderstood, wronged, or shown a lack of respect, and many dwell on differences between what happened in person, on social media and in official publishing outlets.

Commiseration amongst outsiders was another theme. We found increasing numbers of Hong Kong Christians documenting their migration stories following the BN(O) visa. For example, an anonymous poster opened a Facebook Fan Page, with over 1,400 followers, "Post 80s' UK Theology Journey," and documented his family's move to Cambridge, England. Themes included cultural shock and laments about leaving Hong Kong, with commenters commiserating together. We found similar emotions amongst dechurched Christians in Hong Kong and in the diaspora. Many in the online community are not regular attendees of any offline congregation. Creative spaces based in industrial units emerged, targeting younger people in Hong Kong who have left institutional churches, as well as people who have emigrated but want to continue to connect with people in Hong Kong (Wong 2022). Dechurched Christians generate a sense of camaraderie through expressions of doubt and sharing personal stories. Previous studies of dechurched Christians suggested that despite negative experiences such as shame which are involved in leaving church, dechurched Christians also experience happiness and satisfaction as they begin to experience the absence of church politics, a new freedom to ask questions, and greater ability to apply faith to life, care for others, and engage in spiritual practices such as meditation and prayer (van Tongeren 2024; A. G. Chu 2025).

In the midst of sharing painful stories and navigating disputes on social media, we found expressions of joy through online camaraderie and creativity. The online community can support aspects which lead to sustained, positive emotion.

Social

We also considered joy's social outcome of bringing people into community and providing a sense of collective identity. We found online pastors are (self-)tasked with reaching out to online followers, and churches are seeking people situated overseas to pastor online congregants in different geographic areas (Wong 2022: 228–33). The emphasis on online gatherings is in keeping with a church in which congregants “pastor each other” (Tin 2021). A blurring of online/offline spaces and roles is common, as with Ng’s encouragement to fellowship with the homeless and Tin’s organization of offline reading groups.

We found many posts that are not directly relevant to Christianity, such as craft workshops and restaurant reviews. Hong Kong Christians integrate cultural references on social media, unlike how they may have done in physical church settings. Examples of these references include discussing mental health issues and suggesting going out for (alcoholic) drinks. There is a trend of using social media to organize people around re-imagined church spaces (e.g. bars, restaurants, homes, as in Lin 2023) and activities such as games nights and running clubs (A. G. Chu 2025).

Aside from theological debate, posts include ways to donate or sign up for local, offline events. These include independent ventures that are not backed by large organizations. Another common form of engagement is prayer, with texts of prayers being shared, or “Amen”/“阿們” being commented under posts. For example, on Zhang’s (2026) devotional post reflecting on Matthew 6.25–34 (RCUV), Instagram user @michelleleel replied only with “Amen”. These extend the offline church practices to online contexts, indicating commitment through spiritual practices such as prayer and doing life together as a community.

Social media provided a sense of being seen, and pathways towards online and offline engagement in spiritual practice and discourse. We link this to our earlier reflection on the dechurched Christians, who can find a space to be included on social media even when disconnected from traditional, physical forms of church.

Analysis

Cognitive

Online practices, such as openness to the involvement of laity in theological debate, can work against divisive dynamics, such as coming to a negative construal of events and other people through digital mediation, or aligning with the norms of religious authority and discourse that reinforce existing inequalities (A. G. Chu and Robertson 2026). In a way, online Hong Kong Christian communities benefit from their focus on text, historically shaped by both post-Reformation Protestantism’s emphasis on the Word (*sola scriptura*), and “a long time emphasis within the East Asian context of a

print and text culture”, currently being “translated into the digital” (Chow 2025). Text-heavy social media interactions easily replicate the text-focused offline interactions of pastors and academics, enabling lay people, especially dechurched Christians, to demonstrate their faith convictions. Hong Kong Christian online spaces are sites of democratized and creative theological reasoning rather than just passive consumption of content. There are opportunities for joy through expanding epistemic agency and recognizing faith as experienced from multiple positions, especially those which are outside of official church structures.

Regarding widening participation and identification in diversity, experimentation with textual interpretation and application leads to broader participation in the development of Hong Kong theologies. This online activism generates diverse positions under a shared identification as a Hong Kong Christian through theological frames such as citizenship in heaven and structural sin, which are then directly applied to alleviating the suffering of the marginalized, such as the homeless in Hong Kong society. Regarding the demands of difference, online platforms allow Hong Kong Christians to share frankly and to connect theological reasoning with organizations for social causes. For example, Ng’s posts about privilege link directly to in-person opportunities to gather with people who are homeless. Thus, lay involvement in working out the cognitive aspect of joy in Hong Kong Christian online spaces can be interpreted as lay involvement in activism.

Emotional

We found joy supported and expressed through creative posts such as the use of images, videos, and stories, as well as openness to doubt and alternative positions. These go towards countering denial of differences or fatigue in the face of challenges and divisions.

Regarding widening participation and demands of difference, there are open expressions of doubts about faith and faith leaders, and frank sharing of what might be considered taboo topics in offline church. Although not anonymous, people feel safe to post these views. We also saw KOLs using the interaction offered by social media to expand the conversation to those who are traditionally excluded from church, such as people who are homeless or LGBTQ+. We also noted members of the community developing camaraderie around faith outside of in-person church settings.

For identification in diversity, creative modes of engaging, such as storytelling and sharing nostalgic music, contribute to a sense of belonging and emotional resonance. Yet, in the many heated disputes, we saw persistent conflict and resentment which may undermine joy. Another complexity related to emotional resonance comes from Hong Kong’s post-colonial situation in relation to the present Chinese rule and previous British colonization. Church historian Renie Chow Choy acknowledges how

that colonial reality and its legacies shape our own understanding of self, others, and the world. Nostalgia for British colonialism should not be taken as simply Hong Kongers wanting to be white or selling out their ethnic Chinese heritage. Instead, nostalgia for British colonialism is often a pushback against the present situation. These suggest complex, perhaps uneasy, emotions toward past British colonialism and present Chinese rule (Choy 2021: 45).

The emotional benefits of participation may be uneven as offline pressures and structures remain. This links to our suggestion that silence needs to be interpreted. Social media may not be a safe space for all to meet and vent. Tangential conversations and a retreat to online-only activities might be signs of reluctance to share and act on religio-political views. Given the homogeneity of KOL demographics, there is also a need to address the silence of those who do not align with privileged identities. We hope to gather further empirical data on this topic through qualitative interviews, as more intimate and anonymous settings provide more of a sense of safety and security.

Social

The gathering function of joy is at work as religious practices get reinterpreted for the online context, allowing increased civic participation. We interpret this shared action as digital activism. Regarding widening participation, we noticed significant influence accrued through the text-based contributions of KOLs with privileged identities, suggesting some patterns of interaction are largely continuous with the offline context. Yet, we saw followers participating through commenting, praying, donating, coordinating and attending both online and offline events. Part of widening participation is respecting the medium of online platforms. Christian communities in Hong Kong have moved beyond an approach to social media as a church bulletin or a storage space for sermon recordings. Instead, they are engaging in ways that users expect will create genuine communities (A. G. Chu 2024). In Anglophone academic contexts, it is often considered the responsibility of authors to make themselves understood, which might not be the case in other contexts, such as for Sinophone readers and writers (Qi and Liu 2007; Salager-Meyer 2011). Christian communities engaging in theological debates online will have to be mindful of these responsibilities. For example, as we previously mentioned, Chan is often misunderstood. Chan is trained in Hong Kong and Germany, while many of his readers, including us, may have been trained in Hong Kong and other Anglophone countries. As such, expectations about who is responsible for making texts clear can be a point of contention, given cultural differences. Interactions on social media are not just for the one asking questions, but also those who are observing the interactions (A. G. Chu, 2024). Such an approach to social media centers the collective identity and purpose of the

community, such that the user recognizes that they are not just speaking for themselves or even to their conversation partner alone, but instead, engaging a wider community.

Regarding identification in diversity, #deltaδmovement is used to express collective identity, demonstrating interest in creating identity in the public space of the internet. There are connections being made between Christians across boundaries such as staying/migrating and privileged/marginalized. Experiences of migration and diasporic identity were negotiated through theology without privileging leaving or staying. This goes towards sustaining community despite physical dispersion. Yet, we suggest that patterns of silence reveal that not all groups experience collective identification to the same degree. We noticed there are many other discussions in other diasporic communities, such as in the Chinese Mainland, Malaysia and more (Cheong, 2019; Choy 2021; C. Chu 2025; Phan 2025; Tan 2020; Vala and Huang 2017), and these would be worthy of comparison in future work.

Regarding the demands of difference, this context is not one in which we would expect ideas such as radical democracy, civil disobedience, and activism to be discussed openly. Indeed, many Christian communities in Hong Kong and the Chinese Mainland work together with local governments to create spaces for evangelism and welfare. This can be further observed in online spaces, where limiting pro-democracy discourses in online contexts, so as not to aggravate the government, facilitates other online/offline evangelical and welfare work to continue. This observation is further supported in other contexts. For example, Rathiulung Elias (2026), for this special issue, also refers to the context of northeast India, where “digital mediation that imposes constraints on this witness and representation. Visibility must be carefully managed, ... visibility can empower, connect, and teach, but it can also expose communities to misrepresentation, judgement, or coercive forms of authority.” This demonstrates the need to tread carefully for faith communities. While outsiders may consider them to be selling out the Christian faith, we argue they are creating space for social activism. Similarly, we observe that on social media, Christians express and organize themselves in ways which allow for civic participation to continue. Given the theological, decolonial underpinnings of identification formation in this context, online religious practices such as discussions of applications of religious texts to social issues, sharing prayers, responding “Amen/阿們”, and online tithing, all align with Taylor’s (2025: 251) identification of the importance of contemplative activism in online religious communities.

Theological Reflections: Our Proposal

According to our theological account of joy, obedience to the command to “rejoice!” means living as if the Kingdom of God is already here. Part of this task is to enter

into a virtuous cycle of cultivating deeper knowledge of God's past and future faithfulness, generating sustained positive emotions in relation to God and others, and welcoming other people into communal identity and participation. Returning to the account of activism provided by Neumayer and Svensson (2014), we propose the following additions of dimensions and categories of online activism.

For the Hong Kong Christian community, widening participation, difference, and identification are developed and expressed in theological terms. In examples such as Tin's appeals to citizenship in heaven to encourage identification across geographical and political boundaries, and Ng's application of the idea of structural sin in relation to the homeless, the us/them distinction is drawn along the lines of spiritual, eschatological realities. The unified "us" relies on a vision of God's coming kingdom of peace, and the "other" being rejected is framed in terms of oppressive structures rather than the personal, moral qualities of certain individuals or groups. The spiritual dimension adds nuance to the enemy/adversary options for characterizing the "other", suggested by Neumayer and Svensson. Online platforms provide a liminal space for creating and sustaining a collective identity, even though the space is fragile.

In relation to Neumayer and Svensson's four categories, we add discursive online activism. This refers to the production of meaning online. We saw this happening through community members, especially the laity, bearing witness to, and interpreting, their own lived realities and faith commitments. The online context is amenable to methods of storytelling through various modalities of audio, video, and images – sharing memories, testimonies and songs. Honesty and truth-telling are important Christian values which can be enabled by these kinds of activities in online spaces. Moreover, in Hong Kong Christian communities, we found that the kind of theology developing online is praxis – online theorizing about the homeless, LGBTQ+ and other marginalized communities came with offline movements towards inclusion and support. We therefore interpret involvement in online theological discourse as activism, as people find their voices and become participants through online comments and offline reactions, and, in turn, shape others' perceptions and actions.

This paper has drawn attention to affective dimensions of online activism. In our study, an otherwise dispersed and diverse community created opportunities to feel together online, mourning difficult circumstances and turning to shared joy. This combination could be a vital part of working together in the gap between present challenges and the coming Kingdom of God. We propose that cultivating communal joy online is a form of online activism, as an act of resistance to narratives of unending division and oppression.

Concluding Thoughts

We have traced how online activities result from and feed into positive emotions, perceptions of situations and others in relation to God, and the gathering of people across typical borders. Through these patterns of interaction, joy, as a spiritual fruit, may be found as community identity develops in relation to God amid challenging circumstances and divisions. Hong Kong Christian communities create opportunities for receiving this gift of joy by rekindling their faith with an activist reorientation, although outside of a bricks-and-mortar church context. This suggests that joy and activism take place within and in response to online and offline constraints, as indicated by silence, and ongoing negotiations of online debate norms and the dominance of privileged KOLs. We argue that there is a need to broaden what counts as activism, as Hong Kong Christians, perhaps anonymously or physically situated outside of Hong Kong, post, comment, organize, pray and donate online – creating a space for actions that would not otherwise be permissible.

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ARTICLE

The Visual Grammar of Online Faith-linked Climate Activism

Case studies of grassroots “moana” theologies in Oceania

Steve Taylor

Abstract

Climate change is dramatically impacting communities. Grassroots and indigenous faith-linked organizations in the Pacific are responding by using digital technologies to share stories and to advocate for justice. Most digital research occurs in the USA and Europe. However, the study of grassroots and indigenous digital activism yields important ecclesial insights about the nature of eco-theologies generated in the Global South. This paper presents research on online grassroots digital activism by three faith-linked groupings in Tonga, the Solomon Islands and Fiji. Theologically, case studies of grassroots digital activism provide vivid illustrations of how public theologies might engage missionally with the multifaceted challenges facing contemporary society. Methodologically, the use of visual images in faith-linked digital activism is interpreted by applying concepts of “visual grammar” to digital images. The results indicate that the visual images of digital activist organizations in the Pacific centre an ocean or “moana” eco-praxis that is immersive, communal and prayerful. Theoretically, the research challenges existing Eurocentric theorizations of digital activism and centres local and indigenous meaning-making as primary sources in decolonial knowledge-making. Ecclesiologically, the praxis of these digital activist organizations demonstrates how digital technologies contribute to new forms of Christian organizing and the role of gender and lay leadership in the mission of God in a climate emergency.

Keywords: Climate justice, Creation, Digital activism, Ecotheology, Public theology, Social media, Visual grammar

Introduction

From space, the Pacific glitters in ocean blue. Across an expanse of 162 million square kilometres, the world’s largest body of water covers some 30% of the earth’s surface. The waters of Oceania are critical for climate regulation and biodiversity,

providing half the world's oxygen and supporting a rich complexity of marine life. Around one-quarter of the world's languages are present in the Pacific, making the region one of the most linguistically complex areas of the world (Lynch 1998: 25) and a significant resource for global eco-theologies.

The islands, species and peoples of this liquid continent are vulnerable to changes in climate. A recent World Meteorological Organization report (2024) detailed sea surface temperatures that have risen three times faster in the Pacific than the global average since 1980. The impacts from "restless seas" (Kekea 2023) present unprecedented challenges for all species, human and non-human.

Pacific countries call for Pacific solutions to global challenges. Tupou et al. (2023) observed the invisibility of Pacific peoples' lived experiences and the need for research that makes visible the distinct, place-based ways that local communities respond to climate distress. Pacific solutions include spiritualities that are holistic and communal, "grounded in the experiences, stories, faith and wisdom" of communities (Pacific Conference of Churches 2024: 6). Pacific solutions are theological, developing theomoana, God the Ocean, as a metaphor that opens new ways of seeing and understanding (Halapua 2008: 90–5). Hence, Pacific spirituality and theology offer unique insights as the mission of God is discerned in climate justice.

This paper examines the unique contribution of Pacific eco-praxis and how across the liquid continent, Pacific communities are utilising faith-linked digital initiatives to activate for change. This article applies visual grammar analysis (Kress and van Leeuwen 2021) to examine the online visual images of three faith-based eco-justice initiatives in Tonga, the Solomon Islands and Fiji, in dialogue with ocean or "moana" theologies. This paper documents a digital eco-praxis that is immersive, communal and prayerful and outlines the implications for digital activism, global eco-theologies and ecclesial mission.

Theorizing Liquid Places, Digital Activism and Public Theologies

Researching digital faith-linked climate activism in the Pacific draws on literature in various domains, including theories of liquid places, typologies of digital activism, and the development of public eco-theologies. I will describe key themes in each domain and the implications for researching digital faith-linked eco-praxis in Oceania.

Theorizing Liquid Places

The role of oceans in Christian theology is gaining increased attention. Pope Leo XIV (2025) recently announced an Apostleship of the Sea. It was a move not only to promote the pastoral care of "people of the sea" but also to express concerns about how climate change impacts humanity. In *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis (2015: 25) wrote

that many of “the poor live in areas particularly affected by phenomena related to warming, and their means of subsistence are largely dependent on natural reserves and ecosystemic services such as ... fishing.” Pope Francis saw oceans and seas not only as physical realities but as making visible a relational ontology, in which “our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us” (Francis 2015: 1).

Climate change disturbs the common home shared by all species, human and non-human. Indigenous communities speak with distress about how climate change is impacting their land and incomes, and destroying ancestral connections. Willox et al. (2012: 546) detailed how climate change is a global phenomenon that requires context-specific responses that value place-linked understandings. “People are not only *from* a particular place, but they are also *of* the place; that is, their identities, well-being, livelihoods, histories, and emotion-spiritual connections are emergent from the lands on which they live.” For Oceanic people, waters are an extension of “self, avoiding the creation of a colonial ideology founded in binary oppositions” (Ingersoll 2016:145). The result is an expansive identity that weaves connections, past, present and future.

The call to theorize a liquid Pacific continent in ways that learn with and from indigenous wisdom and lived experience invites the study of online grassroots digital activism by faith-linked organizations in Oceania. Local communities, as they activate for sustainability in Tonga, promote the work of Christian leaders as citizen climate scientists in the Solomon Islands and nurture digital creators in Fiji, are expressing contextual Pacific solutions. The study of these faith-linked activist networks can elevate indigenous ways of enacting mission and offer ecclesial insights into how lay leaders use communicative skills honed in visual and digital environments to activate for justice.x

Typologies of Digital Activism

The role of digital technologies in Christian ministry and mission is also gaining attention. Pope Leo XIV recently called the church to be wise in navigating digital cultures. He applied the call of Jesus to “go and mend the nets” not only to ministry toward “people of the sea” but also in online mission. Digital missionaries and influencers are to weave “networks of relationships ... where we can mend what has been broken ... networks that liberate and save” (Leo XIV, 2025). Kurlberg, Vo and Afshari (n.d. para. 40) call for the church to consider the use of digital technology “to remain a faithful witness in a digital age.”

While there are plenty of examples of online toxic discourse, it is clear that faith-linked organizations are actively exploring the use of online platforms to activate for change. Technologies like streaming, Virtual Reality, apps, artificial intelligence, gaming, activism and social media provide mission opportunities and raise critical

questions regarding mission in digital cultures (Taylor 2026). Campbell and Boone (2025: 61–2) document the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and argue that technology is now an essential component in ecclesial life. At the same time, they also observe that digital divides remain, including between generations within congregations, among smaller and rural congregations and across cultures and contexts. The reality is that most digital research occurs in the USA and Europe (Neumayer and Rossi 2016), making the study of grassroots and indigenous activism a priority.

Digital activism has been theorized by Neumayer and Svensson (2014) as occurring in four domains. First, a **salon activism** where online platforms like Facebook are used to make visible demands for change. Neumayer and Svensson (2014: 139–40) detail how salon activism generates support for and recognition of other types of activism. **Contentious activism** involves engaging in digital civil disobedience, for example, hacking websites or sending threats through digital media. **Law-abiding activism** is expressed in digital campaigns and petitions that fall within legal boundaries, while **Gandhian activism** is willing to enact civil disobedience to effect change.

This fourfold typology of digital activism suggested by Neumayer and Svensson (2014) is helpful. First, because it describes a range of ways to participate in digital activism. Second, because the researchers call for further fine-grained case studies to nuance the typology, which is consistent with the work of this paper. Third, Neumayer and Rossi observe that most research into digital activism occurs in Europe and North America and the need for research into diverse cultural contexts. In the words of Titifanue et al (2017: 146), there is a need for research into “online activism in the Pacific region”. Fourth, research into Pacific activism provides a constructive response to the current dominance of Eurocentric epistemologies and typologies. Beginning with indigenous and grassroots case studies provides a foundation for developing globally sensitive and indigenous- shaped typologies of digital activism and eco-theologies of praxis.

The Development of Public Eco-theologies

Sebastian Kim describes a range of ways in which theology and Christian churches are responding to climate change as public eco-theologies (2011: 62–76). He outlines four strands of eco-theology that have emerged. **Social ecology** understands public theology as a socio-political struggle for the liberation of creation. **Creation theology** sees public theology as restoring the interconnectedness of all things. **Eco-feminism** advocates for a feminist spirituality that overcomes dualisms. **Eco-spirituality** understands public theology as integrating with the work of the Spirit in creation. For Kim, these four strands are distinct. However, they are closely related, and several strands can be present in the work of an individual. Kim argued that public eco-theologies are a contextual response to climate change that invite new ways of understanding relationships between God, humanity and nature.

These possibilities are amplified when eco-theologies from the global church, including non-Western contexts, are considered. A significant eco-theological resource from the Pacific is the concept of the Pacific household of God. Samoan theologian Ama'amalele Tofaeono described the household of God as "a contextual eco-theology" (2000: 19), a creation-linked philosophy that could reconstitute Christian doctrines of creation and redemption. The household is a translation of *aiga*, a Samoan word for a community in relationship. *Aiga* speaks not only of the social unit in a village embodied in communal ties with generations but also of a bio-geographical place that celebrates the sharing of resources. "Every part of the *aiga* is sustained and generated by an interdependent web of sustaining richness of a specific locality, and every member is entitled to share in its blessings" (Tofaeono, 2000: 32).

Building on the household of God, Winston Halapua (2008) developed *theom-oana*, God the Ocean, as a theological metaphor that draws on insights from the moana, or ocean. Halapua drew on the narratives in Genesis 1 and 2 to describe the ways in which oceans are the source of interconnected life, in which "there is the potential to see ourselves" (2008: 38–9). For Halapua (2008: 41), the call of the moana is to "unprecedented adventures in faith as we move towards the unseen future."

A feature of moana theologies is the reframing of who is my neighbour. The *Tuākoi 'Lei Declaration* was released by the Pacific Conference of Churches in 2024. The phrase *tuākoi 'lei* is translated from the Tuvaluan phrase for "Good Neighbour" or "Loving Neighbour." It draws on research by Maina Talia (2022), who argued that in an increasingly inter-connected world, the call to be a "loving Neighbour" assumes a common humanity. The result is a common humanity, distinctively framed in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37).

Observing the rise of eco-theologies among church communities in the Solomon Islands, Bobbette (2023: 100) described how indigenous Christians in the Pacific were contextualising Christianity. Ecotheology in the Pacific becomes a decolonial form of Christianity that draws on Pacific histories of environmental knowledge. Hence, this paper undertakes research that begins with grassroots digital activism in the Pacific. Such an approach elevates local theologies of mission as gifts and resources in a climate emergency. It also provides ways for digital activism to think beyond and against existing Eurocentric imaginations.

Methodologies for Researching Indigenous Digital Activism

Studying indigenous digital activism involves research methods including developing case studies, visual grammar analysis, "we-search," scavenge ethnography and researcher reflexivity.

My research uses case study methods. Theologian Elaine Graham (2013: xvii) argued that case studies of grassroots activism offer “vivid illustrations” of how to respond to the multi-faceted challenges facing contemporary society. While protest and media technologies increasingly combine social network analysis with quantitative digital data analysis contexts (Tufekci 2017), fine-grained case studies that draw on mixed methods can illuminate the particular and amplify lived experience and local wisdom. In developing case studies, I used purposive sampling to bring diverse contexts and different online platforms into conversation.

Second, social media and digital technologies often utilise visual images to increase engagement and deliver vital information. Kress and van Leeuwen (2021: 4) argue that visual images, like writing, have a grammar, defined as the “social-semiotic resource of a particular group, the group’s explicit and implicit knowledge about this resource, and its use in the practices of that group.” I have drawn on Kress and van Leeuwen and applied tools of colour, perspective, framing and composition to interpret the visual grammar of the online activities of Christian organizations (Taylor 2025).

Third, my research approach drew on scavenge ethnography (Niang 2024), a research approach anchored in black and indigenous studies. Scavenge ethnography recognizes the scarcity of resources in marginal groups. It responds to scarcity, including time, by working with existing work. In this study, I “scavenged” by utilizing existing online resources, including online articles and interviews with activists.

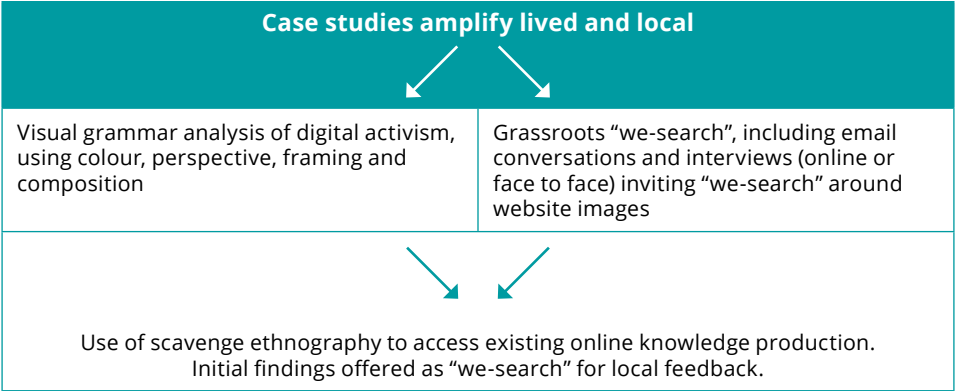


Figure 1 Mixed methods for researching digital activism (drawn from Taylor (forthcoming))

Finally, in approaching this research, my self-location as a researcher is important. I position myself as an outsider. While I have been shaped by cross-cultural experience, including being raised in Papua New Guinea, living along the banks of the Aramia River, Western Province, as an adult, I was educated in Western cultural

contexts in Aotearoa New Zealand. Several years ago, I was invited to undertake a review of theological education for the Anglican Diocese of Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia. During the research, members of the Diocese of Polynesia consistently called for the church to prioritize climate resilience. When that project finished, I continued to ponder how what I heard from participants in the research could influence where, what and how I researched.

In reflecting on my positionality as a researcher, Pacific theologian Sef Carroll (2022: 414) provided a helpful frame with her argument that ecotheologies require internal work to recover Pacific indigenous epistemologies and external work in advocacy and climate justice. My hope is that my external work not only amplifies indigenous eco-theologies but also deconstructs Eurocentric approaches to ecotheologies and digital activism.

Visualising Grassroots Moana Digital Activisms

Three case studies of online grassroots digital activism by three Pacific faith-linked organisations were chosen. No Pelesitiki – Kingdom of Tonga (NPC-T) uses Facebook to activate for sustainability in Tonga. The Anglican Church of Melanesia Environment Observatory hosts an Environmental Observatory Programme (EOP) website to promote the work of Christian leaders as citizen climate scientists in the Solomon Islands. “Pasefika Rising” is a music video created by musicians in Fiji that portrays Pacific solutions as an immersion in the waters of Oceania.

The case studies share a similar context, that of a liquid “blue” continent. They come from three nations and use three different social media platforms. They share ecclesial connections but in different configurations: a diocesan initiative (EOP), an ecclesially-linked organization (NPC-T) and an artist collective.

No Pelesitiki Campaign – Kingdom of Tonga and Social Media Activism

No Pelesitiki – Kingdom of Tonga (NPC-T) describes itself on Facebook as “a campaign to reduce and eliminate single-use plastic products from Tonga and promote local.” It is **digital** through the Facebook page, which offers visual images of offline action, along with memes focused on alternative approaches to sustainability. It is **faith-linked** through connections with the Anglican Diocese of Polynesia and St Paul’s Anglican Church youth group (for example 24 November 2023). It is **activist** as it invites local people to take action for their local community by “picking up rubbish at the ... foreshore this Saturday morning” (4 April 2023).

Analysis of Header Image

The cover photo from the NPC-T Facebook site provides a starting point for visual grammar analysis. Tools of colour, perspective, framing and composition can be used to analyse an image which has been chosen by these activists as representative of their organization.



Figure 2 Cover image from No Pelesitiki Campaign – Kingdom of Tonga Facebook

The **colours** in this header image are natural. There is no evidence of manipulation of colour or background to de-contextualize. The visual grammar being presented involves ordinary people in a specific local context, the Kingdom of Tonga, acting in their local community to pick up rubbish. The **perspective** of the header image involves the group of people looking directly at the camera, and thus the viewer. There are plenty of smiles, suggesting a warm welcome. The viewer is at the same eye level as the participants, generating a mutuality of gaze. The photograph is action-oriented, with everyone using the shared hand gesture. In the background of the **framing** is the sea. This indirectly references the focus of climate change in the Pacific, in rising levels and increased severity of weather events. However, the participants have their backs to the sea, perhaps suggesting a willingness to act, rather than stand helpless in the face of “restless seas” (Kekea, 2023). Turning to **composition**, the people are in a tightly packed group, with a range of ages, including younger people and adults. The group’s differently coloured clothing suggests an individuality among the different participants.

Overall, the visual digital activism of NPC-T portrays a friendly, smiling community of ordinary people. They are smiling, perhaps inviting the viewer to join in shared action. The visual grammar is of an activism that is **communal and participatory**.

Scrolling “Visual Grammar”

When people engage online, a common approach is to scroll, viewing a series of Facebook posts over time. Hence, visual grammar analysis includes looking for patterns among multiple visual images from individual posts over time periods. The table below gathers data from six months of posts on the No Pelesitiki Campaign – Kingdom of Tonga, as a way of establishing visual patterns.

Table 1 Patterns and themes across NP-KT Facebook posts

	6 months July-December 2023		6 months January-June 2024	
	Number	Themes	Number	Themes
Videos	3	Local recycling activity and community innovation.	7	Local recycling activity and community innovation.
Events	17	Local communities picking up rubbish. Workshops where NPC-T partners with other groups.	6	Local communities picking up rubbish. Workshops where NPC-T partners with other groups.
Infographics	0		4	Infographics encouraging recycling and encouragement to apply these in Tonga.
News	3	News including the sudden death of Eleni Levin-Tevi, a co-founder of NPC-T	4	News about recycling, including a crushed glass bottle machine that could transform local building processes.
Total	24		21	

Every post was focused in some way on the “future-making possibilities” around recycling. The phrase “future-making possibilities” is from Niang (2024: 61), who uses it to describe theory as a liberating practice. Applied to NPC-T, they are drawing on digital eco-praxis to activate for liberative practices of recycling to address local needs.

Another theme was partnership in knowledge-sharing. Many of the posts described partners, including the local Anglican Parish (27 October), wider Anglican bodies (for example, 24 November), government organizations (for example 29 September) and other groups (for example 1 November). Posts expressed gratitude to partners including the Ministry of Tourism for a workshop which was “imparting knowledge and inspiring young budding plastic recyclers” (30 December). Partnerships with and among communities are central to their activism.

Their knowledge sharing about “future-making possibilities” was grounded in theology. Posts described the picking up of rubbish as a way of “Caring for God’s Creation Season” (29 September). Another post described the need to teach “our children the responsibility of being good stewards of our environment and Godly responsibility to keeping our nation clean” (27 October). This post was linked to a further post showing an adult standing beside a young adult in a hoodie, several teenagers and a child (28 October). Their activism understood “godly responsibility” as involving generations together learning to be good stewards.

As the viewer scrolls, the visual grammar of the social media posts aggregates. Themes important to these activists include theologies of God caring for creation, learning across generations and affirming partnerships. Their climate activism, offline in picking up rubbish and online in advocating for recycling, visually expresses a holistic and communal spirituality, with partners and across generations.

Green Apostles and Citizen Science Activism

The Anglican Diocese of Melanesia has embraced novel approaches to climate change, including attaching weather monitoring stations to local churches and training “Green Apostles” as citizen scientists (Ashworth 2021; Axford 2019). In a nation of over a thousand islands yet few weather stations, using local churches and widening daily prayer practices to include recording of weather data offers innovative eco-praxis that centres local responses to climate distress. The project is **digital** through a website, which describes the project and lists monitoring sites (Environmental Observatory Project, N.d). It is **faith-linked** to the Anglican Diocese of Melanesia (Bobbette 2019; 2023). It is **activist** as a “community-linked initiative empowering local people, schools, rural-linked institutions and religious orders through participatory training to acquire simple knowledge, skills and methods of collecting and managing local climate data information” (Fataka 2024–25).

Analysis of Header Image

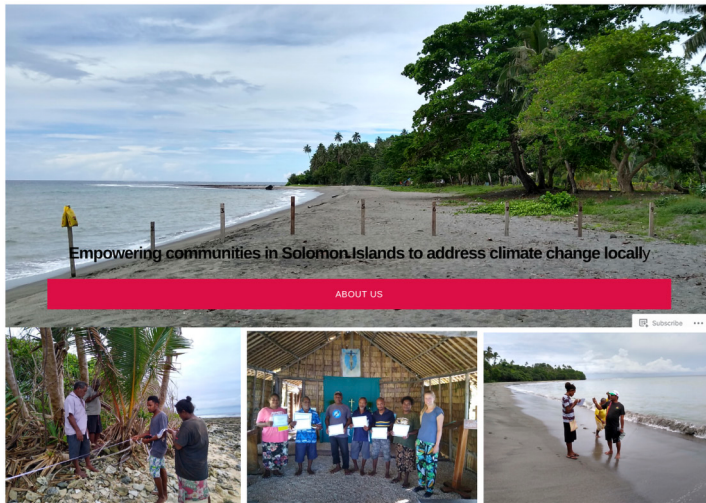


Figure 3 Images from the front page of the Environmental Observatory Project website

Four images on the website's front page provide a starting point for visual grammar analysis. The **colours** are mostly natural and include a palette of ocean blue, yellow sand and green trees. Stretched between the ocean and the green trees is a line of poles. These are emphasised by the "about us" header and the words "empowering communities in Solomon Islands to address climate change locally." A line of poles will not hold back the "restless seas" described by indigenous peoples (Melanesian Mission, n.d.). Rather, the text of the website is placing hope in empowered local communities. The dominance of ocean blue in three of the four images invites reflection on the title "Green Apostles". While "green has become the central theme of church engagements with ecological issues", the challenges of our blue planet require Christianity "to display its blue hues alongside ... other colours that speak of diverse ecological realities" (Maggang, 2022: 323, 324).³

These locally empowered communities are visually portrayed in three smaller images. All the images are at eye level, placing the viewer with a medium-range **perspective** on people gathered. Two of the images portray people at work. One of the images includes a person holding pen and paper, and others holding a tape

3 My thanks to the reviewers for inviting me to think more carefully about the colours of green and blue and their implications for decolonizing contemporary eco-theologies.

measure and providing data. It only takes two people to do these tasks, yet more people are present. This suggests a communal approach to the data gathering. Almost all of the people are barefoot, which perhaps suggests a connection to place, in ways consistent with the call for context-specific responses which value place-linked understandings (Wilcox et al. 2012: 546)

The middle image is from inside a building. It is presumably a church, given that behind the people is an altar cross and above them a crucifix. The people are holding certificates to represent their training (likely as “Green Apostles”) to undertake the data gathering depicted in the other two images.

Together, these three visual images make visible the “empowered communities” at work. The church is central to the “about us” of the EOP. The church is visually portrayed as a place of side-by-side participant learning. Following the learning, the church sends people outdoors to undertake the data gathering portrayed in the other images. Outdoors, at the intersection of blue sea and green land, participants engage in collaborative action of measuring, recording and supporting.

Scrolling the “Visual Grammar” of the Gallery

The website also has a gallery of visual images (<https://acomobservatory.wordpress.com/gallery/>). The images can be analysed for patterns, which in this case include groups of people working collectively on citizen science (see Appendix: Visual Grammar Analysis of the EOP Gallery). All but one of the 29 images is taken outdoors. The most common backdrop (52%; n=15) is of a combination of blue sea, green vegetation and sand or rocks. Four of the visual images point to the impact of climate change, with houses lying in water or partially uprooted trees toppling toward roads. People appear in many (76%; n=22) of the visual images. The groups of people consist of a mix of male and female and a range of ages, including school children and adults, of predominantly Melanesian descent. Almost invariably, the people are in groups (66%; n=19), working together in shared activity of data gathering. Their collaborative work is portrayed through images of rain gauges attached to buildings, poles being dug into sand, people recording on paper or holding tape measures.

The overall pattern of citizen science is consistent with the theme of the header image. The church is being visually portrayed as gathering groups of people to learn about work outdoors in shared tasks of data gathering. Hence, visual grammar analysis of the EOP confirms the claims by Bobbette (2023: 100) that the environmental observatories are a “series of possibilities for re-imagining the production of climate knowledge”. The teaching of science in a church and the weaving of faith and prayer offer different ways of conceiving faith, science, indigenous knowledge and digital activism.

“Pasefika Rising” and Music Video Activism

“Pasefika Rising” is an original music video that sings of Pacific solutions rising from the waters of Oceania (Bhagwan et al. 2024a). Two of the key contributors are the family of Rev James Bhagwan, the General Secretary of the Pacific Conference of Churches.⁴

The lyrics move between lamenting a neo-colonial Pacific in which countries lack self-determination and expressing a call to pray for oceans of peace and justice. When interviewed about the song, lyricist Antonia Bhagwan described how “words matter” and the need for “telling and showing something” from human experience (JayEsBee2 2025). This resonates with the 2024 *Tuākoī ‘Lei Declaration* that affirmed the vitality of sharing climate experience stories.

The song’s title, “Pasefika Rising”, is a clever play on words, evoking a sense of something new emerging from ocean water. What is instructive is how the video portrays rising seas not as a threat but as an opportunity for “currents” of solidarity, liberty and equality to emerge.

Sequencing the “Visual Grammar” of “Pasefika Rising”

The visuals in the video offer four different seascapes. In one seascape, the viewer is looking down on calm and slowly moving water (DoW). In a second seascape, the viewer is looking across at crashing waves (CW). A third seascape involves a camera moving underwater across a seabed (USB). In a fourth seascape, the camera is immersed and about to break into a blue sky (Im).



Figure 4 Screen capture by researcher of the four moana sequences on the “Pasefika Rising” music video

4 The lyrics are credited to Antonia Bhagwan and music to Francisco Bhagwan, along with Ben Masi-rewa and Ju Ben.

The sequences give visual voice, both physically and theologically, to the Pacific as a liquid continent. In relation to place, all four seascapes share water as a unifying motif and the lived experience of Oceanic peoples.

However, the colour palette of the seascapes is visually diverse. As is evident in Table 2, the colours of the moana include light blues (Im), white-capped waves (CW), tranquil green (USB) and swirling emeralds (USB).

Table 2 Moana, or ocean, sequences in the video of “Pasefika rising”

Seascape	DoW	USB	CW	DoW	Im	USB	CW	DoW	USB	CW	DoW	Im	
Time (seconds)	22	15	20	18	37	12	16	32	14	15	46	45	

Analysis of colours speaks to the diversity of liquid environments. It resonates with the carefully curated chapter titles of *Decolonisation and the Pacific* (Banivanua-Mar 2016), which uses words like currents, wellsprings, churn and saltwater to verbalize the diversity inherent in an oceanic geography.⁵

The different visual images of the moana seascapes invite the viewer to reflect on how they experience the Pacific. Visually, one can experience Pacific waters looking down on them from a distance (DoW and CW). Or one can feel like they are pushed and pulled by underwater currents (USB). Finally, one can sense they are rising toward the surface, about to break through into a blue-skied reality (Im). These contrasts challenge those who make policy and create eco-theologies from a distance. At the same time, they affirm the need for Pacific solutions. In the music video, the immersion seascape sequences (Im) are accompanied by a chorus of sung voices. Many voices, immersed in the moana, harmonize together about a rising to freedom and equality. This shared hope is amplified by the sense in the visual of a rising toward the surface.

Indigenous eco-praxis as missional activism

My analysis of these three case studies demonstrates a digital eco-praxis that centres an ocean or “moana” theology that is immersive rather than distanced and activisms that are communal, prayerful and mutual. The results can be discussed in relation to

5 Referencing the following chapter headings in full: “Currents: the well springs of decolonisation”, “Churn : restlessness and world government between the wars” and “Saltwater: the separation of people and territory”.

the nature of eco-theologies generated in the Global South, how digital technologies contribute to new forms of Christian ecclesial organizing, the role of gender and lay leadership in the mission of God in a climate emergency and the interplay between offline and online activism. I will also discuss how the patterns present in my visual grammar analysis resonate with the ocean or “moana” theologies emerging from the Pacific.

First, the results centre decolonial digital eco-praxis. The immersive standpoints, holistic spirituality, and collective approaches to activism of these Pacific eco-theologies are consistent with Bobbette’s claim that Oceania is “already undergoing this process of fitting, transforming, moulding, and arranging old stories with those of today” (2019: 567). At the same time, the theories of immersion, collective partnerships and holistic spirituality in these Pacific digital eco-theologies challenge the four-fold typology of Neumayer and Svensson.

Second, digital technologies contribute to new forms of Christian organizing. Each case study has ecclesial connections, including with local congregations (NPC-T and EOP), dioceses (NPC-T and EOP), ecumenical bodies (PR) or mission groups (NPC-T and EOP). In each case, the activist groups work through partnerships and function as networks of prophetic praxis rather than express themselves in traditional ecclesial structures. As such, they provide insights into how the church, whether in local expressions or as ecclesial systems, might organise to enact a mission of climate justice. The organizations do not activate alone. Rather, they value partnerships, which becomes an outworking of Winston Halapua’s description of “moana” theology, particularly in understanding the ocean as a sharing in interconnected life (2008).

Third, the case studies point to the role of lay leadership in the mission of God in a climate emergency. While these activist organisations are ecclesially connected, their eco-praxis is being embodied by lay people in both function and role. In relation to function, there is no evidence of clerical vestments or liturgical practices of preaching or worship leading. Rather, particularly in the EOP case study, the church is certifying “Green Apostles” who embrace new forms of daily prayer through data gathering. In role, the skills and tasks of digital activists include social media storytelling (NPC-T), data gathering (EOP) and music and video making (PR). These activist organizations make visible different kinds of leadership that will be required for the Christian church to embody the *missio dei* by activating for climate justice in digital cultures.

Fourth, women play a significant role in each of the three case studies. The co-founder of NPC-T was Eleni Levin-Tevi. Women are present in 19 of the 22 gallery photos in EOP. Women play equal roles alongside men in recording data and being trained as Green Apostles. The lyrics of “Pasefika Rising” were penned by Antonia Bhagwan “telling and showing something” from human experience (JayEsBee2

2025). Hence, these activisms provide ways, as it says in Acts 2:17-18, for daughters to prophesy and receive the Holy Spirit. The case studies speak to the shape of gender in developing moana eco-theologies.

Fifth, there is a woven interplay between offline and online in each of the three case studies. The online storytelling of NPC-T is informed by the offline picking up of rubbish. The climate data being recorded by the Green Apostles is intended to be placed in a digital repository. The PR song and video are made offline to be shared online. Even the making of the song becomes online content (Bhagwan et al., 2024b). It is impossible to separate the offline worlds from the online digital activism. This makes sense of the *Tuākoī 'Lei Declaration* (Pacific Conference of Churches, 2024), translated from the Tuvaluan phrase for “Good Neighbour” or “Loving Neighbour”. The three case studies embody a “loving Neighbour” praxis. They locate Pacific people not as victims of climate change but as active, weaving together the online in digital activism and the offline in picking up rubbish, expanding scientific knowledge through data gathering and creating music and video of Pacific “currents” of solidarity, liberty and equality.

Concluding remarks

These case studies demonstrate how digital eco-praxis in the Pacific is a significant resource for constructing global eco-theologies, enacting ecclesial practice and theorizing digital activism.

Visual grammar analysis provides ways to read the online activism of three Oceanic digital faith-linked groups as immersive, communal and prayerful and discern areas of convergence with established Oceanic eco-theologies and ecclesiologies. A Pacific eco-praxis that is immersive, communal and holistic offers rich insights for global eco-theologies.

The case studies provide insights into how the church as both local expressions and as ecclesial systems can organise to enact a mission of climate justice through embracing partnerships. The findings make visible new forms of lay leadership. Digital storytelling, citizen science and video making can enable the Christian church to embody the *missio dei* and activate for climate justice in digital cultures. Digital eco-praxis is a significant source in decolonial knowledge-making, placing Pacific activist communities at the “vanguard of global climate processes” (Bobbette 2019: 566).

The findings in relation to theorising digital activism invite further research into how grassroots and indigenous eco-praxis can inform digital activism typologies, including Neumayer and Svennson’s fourfold typology. These case studies demonstrate a visual grammar of online faith-linked climate activism amid Pasefika’s rising seas.

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Appendix: Visual Grammar Analysis of the EOP Gallery

Visual analysis occurred by identifying keywords to describe each of the twenty-nine visual images at <https://acomobservatory.wordpress.com/gallery/>. The keywords were then aggregated into themes like outdoors, people, science and nature.

Image 1 Building Gauge – equipment for data gathering		Image 2 Building Gauge– equipment for data gathering Sea Sand Forest	
Image 3 Poles in row (equipment for data gathering) Sea Sand Forest	Image 4 Pole (equipment for data gathering) People (4; 3 men) Sea Sand	Image 5 Pole (equipment for data gathering) 1 person (male) barefoot Sand Sea in distance	
Image 6 Poles in row (equipment for data gathering) Sea Sand People (1)	Image 7 People (1 male, 1 female, 1 unclear) Action of data gathering (pen, paper, digital device) Sea Sand	Image 8 People (1 male, 1 female) Action of data gathering (pen, paper, digital device) Sea Sand	

Image 9 People (1 male, 2 female) Action of data gathering (pen, paper, digital device) Sea Sand Forest	Image 10 People (2 female, 2 male) Action of data gathering (pen, paper, digital device) Sand Forest	Image 11 People (1 female, 1 male) Action of data gathering (pen, paper, digital device) Sand Forest
Image 12 People (1 female, 4 male) Action of data gathering (pen, paper, digital device, rain gauge on pole) Forest	Image 13 People (1 female, 3 male) Action of data gathering (tape measure) Rocks on beach Sea Forest	Image 14 People (row facing camera) holding certificates 2 female, 5 male Concrete steps
Image 15 People (row facing camera) holding certificates 3 female, 4 male Inside church (crucifixion image and cross), colour green material backdrop and on altar	Image 16 People (1 female, 3 male) Action of data gathering (pen, paper, tape measure) Sand and rocks Forest Sea	Image 17 Close-up of previous People (1 female, 3 male) Action of data gathering (pen, paper, tape measure) Sand and rocks Forest Sea
Image 18 Building with 2 men seated inside Gauge – equipment for data gathering	Image 19 People (1 female, 32male) Action of data gathering (pen, paper) Sand Forest	Image 20 People (4 male) Standing around a cake
Image 21 People in 2 rows 11 + 6; 2 female so 15 male Outside – signs in background	Image 22 Houses Water inundating	Image 23 Houses Water inundating
Image 24 Forest Road Trees uprooted lying over road Sea	Image 25 Forest Road Sea	Image 26 15 children in uniform (6 female, 4 male, rest unclear) Teacher pointing. 4 exercise books
Image 27 School children gathered around rain gauge on pole 7 (6 female, 1 unclear)	Image 28 School children gathered around rain gauge on pole 11 (4 female, 3 male, 4 unclear)	Image 29 Crowd of school children gathered around holes in sand Sand Sea

ARTICLE

Digital Activism and the Making of a Decolonial Public Theology: Revisiting the 2020 # EndSARS Protest as a Theological Provocation

Ikenna Paschal Okpaleke

Abstract

This article explores the 2020 #EndSARS protest in Nigeria as a theological provocation that calls for a decolonial public theology. The protest, which demanded the disbandment of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad due to systematic police brutality, exemplified the transformation of digital activism into embodied resistance. Employing an incarnational hermeneutic, in which words took on meaning through action, I argue in this article that the protest challenged both the colonial rationalities underpinning state violence and the complicity of Nigerian Christianity in structures of domination. Drawing on the decolonial framework and liberation theology of Jean-Marc Ela, I demonstrate how the protesters compelled churches to rediscover their prophetic voice and engage in resistive performances. The analysis reveals two forms of theological provocation: the demand for churches to speak prophetically against injustice, and the call for concrete ecclesial action in solidarity with those experiencing dehumanization. By conceptualizing the digital activism of the protest as an incarnational and decolonial moment, this study proposes a theology from below that critiques the colonial matrix of power, affirms the grievability of all lives, and reclaims Christianity's radical commitment to abundant life and social transformation in postcolonial Africa.

Keywords: #EndSARS protest, Decolonial theology, Digital activism, Jean-Marc Ela, Incarnation, Grievability, Africa, Church, Nigeria

Introducing the #EndSARS as a Campaign for Social Justice

Studies at the intersection of theology and socio-political movements have traditionally followed a top-down methodology, imposing pre-established theological frameworks onto the analysis of real-world events. A shift from such a prescriptive,

predetermined theology gives way to a contextual framework that considers the peculiarity of any given event, in what is known as “theology from below”. Such an approach incorporates a hermeneutics that moves from context to theology, and from theology back to context. The #EndSARS protest is an example of a contextual matter for theology, an instance where a civil resistance borne out of digital activism would eventually attract religious/theological support. Thus, writing from within African Christianity, and shaped by the decolonial turn in theological method, I read the #EndSARS protest not as an object of detached analysis but as a provocation that demands theological accountability. More still, I approach this study as a theologian who is convinced that incarnation is not merely a doctrinal category but an epistemological and political one, and that truth, including theological truth, is always enfleshed in particular bodies, histories and struggles.

Indeed, the emergence of the protest had a semblance of an incarnational process. As Christ was enfleshed, the digital world was also made *flesh* on the streets. The verbal agitations online became real actions offline. While the theological implication of this process is yet to be sufficiently addressed, I consider its pattern of emergence as a starting point for a theological exploration of the #EndSARS protest with a methodology that proceeds from context. Given the focus on local agitations and a “theology from below”, some of the sources of this study are taken from social media reactions, newspaper reports, and opinions on the protest. Beyond this empirical information, the incarnational orientation of this article will be grounded in theological explorations of a decolonial response to violence within a postcolonial society like Nigeria. My analysis equally responds to the fact that rather than leading from the front, churches were compelled to join the protest by the young people, which invariably raises questions about Christianity’s role as a colonizing force (Conradie and Sakupapa 2018). In scrambling to align themselves with a movement whose legitimacy they had not initially recognized, churches in Nigeria managed to sidestep any serious self-examination of their own historical complicity in colonial violence. As a caveat, I shall use the term “church” in an ecumenical sense since the quest for social justice is a mission that concerns all Christians.

To provide some background, I am a Nigerian theologian who has experienced police brutality. Although I was abroad during the #EndSARS protest, I collaborated with like-minded friends to provide support to the protesters since their demands resonated with our collective desire for justice and civility in policing. Historically, the #EndSARS protest is part of Nigeria’s long history of civil disobedience, stretching back to the colonial era. Nigerians have repeatedly resisted oppressive rule, from the Ekumeku movement (1898–1910) and the Abeokuta Women’s Tax Revolt (1914), to the Aba Women’s War (1929) and the Iva Valley Miners’ Strike (1949). This tradition of resistance continued after independence (1960), as citizens pushed back against decades of government oppression, most notably during the military regimes that

lasted until 1999. The #EndSARS protest is the latest expression of this resistance. Led by young Nigerians, who constitute about 70 per cent of the 250 million population, it demanded the disbandment of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a notorious unit of the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) known for brutality and abuse (Ovaga et al. 2025). These demands were due to multiple incidences of police brutality, in the forms of torture, extortion, molestation and even extrajudicial execution, largely carried out by the SARS unit. Amnesty International (2016) reported 58 cases of torture in its 2016 report, and at least 82 cases between 2016 and 2020. The Amnesty International Report 2020 indicates that “most victims are young men between the ages of 18 and 35, poor and from vulnerable groups, and are tortured either to extract information and ‘confessions’ or as punishment for their alleged offences”. Despite the efforts of human rights organizations to seek an end to such impunity and justice for victims, it is sad to note that none of the culpable officers was prosecuted or penalized. Thus, when the protest finally broke out on 8 October 2020, it brought together Nigerian youths across the 250 ethnic groups and multiple religious affiliations in a collective public disapproval of the continued experience of police brutality.

Clearly, the #EndSARS protest was never a random agitation. It was rather an organized and well-intentioned event that demonstrated a proper understanding of the enormity and complexity of the issues at hand and how to fix them (Okpaleke 2024: 28). In fact, on 11 October 2020, the protesters published five demands that included the release of arrested protesters, justice and compensation for victims of police brutality, an independent oversight body for misconduct investigations, psychological evaluation and retraining of disbanded SARS officers, and a pay increase for police (Sulaimon 2020). In agitating for social justice, the protesters lived out an incarnational moment by putting their words into action. From just being a random list of names in the hands of the police, they formed a “body” (*corpus*) for the sake of both themselves and many others. Without even being fully conscious of the implications of their actions, they challenged not only the state’s colonial use of violence but equally critiqued the silence of Christian communities in Nigeria.

The Logic of Incarnation and Colonial Rationality in the #EndSARS

An incarnational hermeneutic was deployed by the Pentecostal pastor Sam Adeyemi to explain the nature of the #EndSARS protest. Addressing the protesters through his X (formerly Twitter) platform (@sam_adeyemi) on 17 October 2020, Adeyemi stated, “Dear young citizen, it is understandable that you are hearing many voices, like the biblical David, but you’ve been called to be unconventional. Be comfortable with that. Your movement did not start on the streets; it started on your phones.

Your ability to move from being an invisible force to being a visible one is a miracle. 'The word became flesh'." Adeyemi equally recognized the ongoing character of the incarnational framework of the protest, with the skill of being able to move back and forth between word and action. His reference to the incarnation offers us an opportunity for a theological engagement in the Nigerian public sphere characterized by colonial traits that impede human flourishing.

A theologically responsible incarnational approach must deviate from a dualistic and disembodied Christology that has been roundly critiqued by feminist liberation theologians. Elisabeth Johnson (1992: 51) demonstrated how, for example, an androcentric Christology puts the salvation of women and children at risk. Such a Christology, Lisa Isherwood (2004: 142) argued, presents a dualistic *bleached Christ*, "the one who is white and can never be black" and who approves the exploitation and marginalization of others. For Isherwood, "it was this constructed Christ who justified the march into slavery, the abuse and dehumanizing treatment within it and the reluctance to abolish it." A responsible incarnational approach rejects any incomplete Christology or soteriology. It demonstrates, as Mercy Oduyoye (1986: 96) put it, that the Christ-event makes an ethical demand of theology. Belief in the incarnation radicalizes Christian action. Thus, in developing the Christology of "Jesus the Savior", Oduyoye (107) insisted that "the good news to Africa is that people and communities have to be willing to die to all that dehumanizes on both personal and corporate levels." In other words, an incarnational approach provokes a "spirituality of action" that requires the church to move "from words to deeds, from ecclesial claims to ecclesial witnessing" (Ilo 2011: 29). Concretely, this *spirituality of action* "involves performance, praxis, testimony, witnessing, martyrdom, and sacramentalizing what we profess" (Ibid.). While the phenomenal growth of Christianity in Nigeria offers hope for the future of the church (Adogame 2010), the survival and test of Christianity would depend on its ability to be truly incarnational, to witness both internally and externally in words and deeds, and to be truly the salt and light of the world (Mt. 5.13-16).

The #EndSARS protest became a learning moment for an incarnational ecclesiology in which the dualism between what the church *is* (esse) and what it *does* (agere) is given up. Indeed, God's embrace of humanity in the person of Christ carries a profound ecclesiological implication. What this means is the awareness that the church "is truly linked with [hu]mankind and its history by the deepest of bonds" (*Gaudium et Spes* §1). As such, "the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men [and women] of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, ... are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ" (Ibid.). It is exactly this understanding of the non-contradictory nature of being a Christian and a campaigner for social justice that leads to a *spirituality of the streets* that is well-articulated by the #EndSARS protest. Of course, not all the #EndSARS

protesters were believers or belonged to the same denomination, although the majority of them were either Christians or Muslims who understood their faith as perfectly aligned with their agitation on the streets. And so, it was not surprising that the street became at once a space for the celebration of faith, as well as for the demonstration of the religious dimension of the #EndSARS protest (Jannamike 2020). Indeed, the protest integrated ecumenical and interreligious encounter within the socio-political sphere, which would need to be explored further.¹

Interesting also is how the digital activism of #EndSARS produced at once a decolonial turn that calls for a theological reimagination. Protest as a decolonial tool emerges as an embodied resistance to the colonial (postcolonial) hermeneutic of dissent. Colonial hermeneutics instrumentalizes violence or force in place of dialogue. It thrives on a sustained atmosphere of domination and fear, and results in the dehumanization of the other (Dutta and Atallah 2023: 2). In postcolonial Nigeria, coloniality emerges then not simply as “invisible structures that sustains colonial relations of exploitation and domination long after the end of direct colonialism” as posited by Teddy Sakupapa (2018: 407) but equally the “leftover colonial structures” that replicate colonial exploitation and domination. It is a case of a change of guards in the same prison yard. In fact, the colonial product of dehumanization is evident in police brutality that is justified by the state even in its extremist expressions. Invariably, state-sponsored brutality becomes a claim to ownership of the life of any individual, and to the power to dispense with it without being questioned.

Implied here is the complete erasure of the lives and bodies of the non-powerful in the society, producing, as it were, the category of those whose lives are regarded, according to Judith Butler, as “ungrievable” since they are considered as “not quite lives, not quite valuable, recognizable or, indeed, mournable” (Butler 2009: 42–3). According to Butler, “one way of posing the question of who ‘we’ are” when faced with the colonial violence of the state “is by asking whose lives are considered valuable, whose lives are mourned, and whose lives are considered ungrievable” (Ibid. 31). In the colonial calculation, therefore, “an ungrievable life is one that cannot be mourned because it has never lived, that is, it has never counted as a life at all. Indeed, we find ourselves in a world where “the shared condition of precariousness leads not to reciprocal recognition, but to a specific exploitation of targeted populations, of

1 The 19 October 2020 prayer walk that was led by one of the prominent Pentecostal pastors in Nigeria, Dr Paul Enenche of Dunamis International Gospel Center, belongs to this category. It was in itself a deliberate form of protest that came from the religious component. The rally began with a service at the Christian Ecumenical Center Abuja followed the pattern of similar protests by various religious leaders in the past. According to Pastor Enenche, the rally is just a spiritual response to the situation that the country was facing with the goal of trusting God in the search for solution to avoid any disastrous escalation.

lives that are not quite lives, cast as ‘destructible’ and ‘ungrievable’” (Ibid.). When we take all these into account, then a decolonial praxis would entail, in the first instance, “nurturing ways of being, knowing, and relating that do not stem from a tiered structure of humanity” (Dutta and Atallah 3), in which some lives are considered less valuable. The #EndSARS confronts the Nigerian Christian and political leadership with this challenge.

#EndSARS “Provocation” as a Decolonial Theological Project

Beyond the incarnational logic, there is the additional question of whether the protest *provokes* a decolonial theological response. In the first place, the concept of ‘provocation’ resonates in theological and decolonial discourses. Originally credited to the French Catholic scholar Louis Massignon, we also find the idea in the oppositional intellectualism of Edward Said, who has been described as “the *agent provocateur* in postcolonial literary theory and practice” (Eid and Ghazal 2008: 111). Said’s work *Orientalism*, first published in 1978, upturned the predominant narrative of empire and conquest, thus constituting a prominent postcolonial text in the West. The idea of provocation was an ethical necessity for Said as for many postcolonial and decolonial scholars. Said proposed a redistribution of geopolitical awareness into texts that present the aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological interpretations of the world. Equally, he challenged the uneven exercise of “various kinds of power” (Said 1979: 13): political, intellectual, cultural and moral. As such, *Orientalism* inaugurated the postcolonial provocation against orthodoxy and conventionality through a critical analysis of the normativized epistemology of the West. In calling for the widening of the horizons of interest and knowledge, Said, on the one hand, disrupted what he called “imaginative geography” that limited the critical participative agents in the “social world” (Said 1985: 90), and on the other hand, dismissed the claim to “disinterested universality” of European anthropology (Ibid., 94). Similarly, the decolonial insistence on an epistemological pluriverse and the ‘delinking’ (a concept popularized by scholars like Aníbal Quijano, Walter Mignolo, Samir Amin) from the Colonial Matrix of Power (CMP) also provoked a shift in the distribution of power, knowledge, being and imagination (Mignolo 2007: 459).²

2 Walter Mignolo argues that de-linking begins with the acceptance that “nobody has access to an ultimate truth” hence any claim to abstract universals equates to “the same fundamentalist and imperial logic.” In that sense, decoloniality “means working toward a vision of human life that is not dependent upon or structured by the forced imposition of one ideal of society over those that differ, which is what modernity/coloniality does, and, hence where decolonization of mind should begin.”

Besides the postcolonial and decolonial literature, provocation, as already hinted, emerges as a theological concept that is grounded in the Scripture, particularly in the unleashing of divine graciousness as a counternarrative to human rebelliousness (cf. Isa. 65.1-3; Rom. 11.30-36). Within the context of interfaith encounter, provocation is construed as evoking the “sense of stimulation into an appropriate response” (Ipgrave 2015: 493). Provocation thus happens in a situation where the action of a religious other, whether positive or negative, triggers a better understanding of one’s own community. Overall, it refers to an action that “elicits from one’s own community that which is a distinctive expression of its identity and values, which might not have been brought forth at all, or not in the same way, but for the catalytic role of the *provocateur*” (Ibid.: 493). In the case of #EndSARS protests, both Christians and Muslims discovered the relational aspects of their religious identities, and so were able to work together in spite of historical differences and conflicts. Ultimately, Incarnation remains the ultimate provocation in theology because of its reordering of cosmic history (Williams 2018).

Meanwhile, nowhere is the link between incarnation and decolonial theology more present than in the works of the famous Cameroonian theologian, Jean-Marc Ela. For Ela, the incarnation of Christianity in Africa implies an alignment with the African reality. It is an invitation to be different in a way that critiques both the presuppositions of “Africanness” as well as Christianity. Little wonder he raises questions on the participation of lay people in the church, the reconceptualization of Levitical priesthood, the social and critical power of the Eucharist, the over centralization of the church, as well as the critical role of the theologian. And to make the connection, Ela locates the identity of the theologian precisely in the space between incarnation and decolonial performance. For him, the theologian is “a sign-person, a person who has become a word, a person who so faithfully incorporates his meaning that to deny the latter would require abolishing the former” (Ela 1992: 41). For the theologian, theology means speaking of God from the point of view of the poor and the God who liberates. In the context of the #EndSARS, we realize different types of *sign-theologians*, represented not just by the professional theologian but by the pastor who speaks on X (Twitter) for the oppressed, the priest who celebrates the Eucharist with the protesters as a sign of resistance, as well as the activists who exercise their faith in the God who liberates, right there on the protest ground. Being a “sign-theologian” therefore presupposes a “doing God” that emerges from the critical demands and audacity of the African theologian, while at the same time justifying a different way of doing theology. Ela (2003: 81) understood that such a theology poses a challenge to colonial powers and attracts a mortal response.

Ela embodied this mortal response and responsibility throughout his biography, and from that vantage point of “death” he challenged the Christian church to *die* for the liberation of the marginalized. An African theology that emerges from this

challenge goes beyond the cliché of inculturation to a “delatinization” of the African church, not simply from the West (as Ela had originally conceptualized it) but also from the local forces of domination that seek to control her voice. Put simply, the church needs to be liberated to liberate others in the society. Meanwhile, Ela located the essence of liberation in God (cf. the Exodus and Mary’s canticle) and is convinced that the full meaning of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ in Africa depends on the church’s option for the gospel of liberation. The church, he maintains, must become a daily sacrament of justice and liberation. Yet he noted that churches of Africa are in a “neo-colonial” situation that constitutes an obstacle to their own consistency. He therefore called for their liberation from structures presented as unique and irreformable, and which, on analysis, prove to be not only iniquitous and unreformable, but also contingent, contextual, oppressive and sclerotic. What he proposed is that these churches be lifted from trusteeship, to enable them “to make their voices heard in specific matters affecting faith, discipline and the organization of local communities” (Ela 1980: 36).

Necessarily, an ecclesial “de-linking” or mortality, as the Christian church *dies* for the liberation of the marginalized, leads to a rediscovery of ecclesial creativity that responds to the problems posed by the “shock” of the gospel in the African environment. To sufficiently address the historical suffering of African people, it is thus important to “rethink the essentials of the Christian message” (Ibid.: 431). This requires us to “overcome the dogmatic fences that enclose the church in Africa within the boundaries of a structure constituted once and for all” (Ela and Luneau 1981: 236), which invariably contribute to perpetuating the colonial rationality both within the church and the society. Christianity in Africa remains an unfinished project and a provocative decolonial, theological approach is critical in realizing this task. The vision is the emergence of a church that is sufficiently liberated to *speak* and to *act* prophetically, on behalf of the oppressed.

On the Two Forms of Theological Provocation

Returning to the #EndSARS protest as a particular context for the exercise of incarnational and decolonial theology, there are two signs of theological provocation that emerged from the actions and determination of the protesters. Both signs point to a decolonial turn in the theological resistance to violence and domination: The first level is a provocation to speak, either through communique, official statements or confessions that contain theological positions on the protest. The second level is a provocation to action through religious ‘resistive performances’ such as public celebration of the Eucharist, prayer walk, ecumenical prayers or actions within the protest ground. I shall elaborate further on these.

When the Church is 'Forced' to Speak

Provocation leads to the rediscovery of the prophetic voice of the church in the public space. The #EndSARS protesters provoked Christian leaders and churches to add their voices in support of the protest, and broadly, for social justice. It was a legitimate demand not only because the young protesters constitute the “life-blood of most religious bodies” in Nigeria (Alabi 2020), but also because it belongs to the prophetic mission of the church to speak against all forms of injustice. The Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria were among the first to declare complete support for the protest. In an official statement, the President of the Conference, Archbishop Augustine Akubueze, acknowledged that the “#EndSARS goes beyond the SARS, and it is morally justified. We support the youths who have taken this step, and we caution that they are allowed without any intimidation to exercise their right to peaceful demonstration and should not be provoked or incited to violence” (Samasumo 2020). Another vocal cleric, Pastor Paul Enenche of Dunamis International Gospel Center, would in a broadcast titled “The Way of Peace” state: “There is no peace where there is massive injustice, unfairness and lack of equity. There can be no peace in the face of oppression, suppression and subjugation of one people by another”. Other influential Pentecostal church leaders like Pastor Enoch Adeboye of Redeemed Christian Church of God, Pastor Paul Adefarasin of House on the Rock, and Bishop David Oyedepo of Living Faith Church would later add their voices in the quest for justice (Ezeobi 2020).

Indeed, the protest awakened the consciousness of the prophetic character of the church to always speak – to speak to, to speak for, and to speak against – and against all realities that stand in the space between the people and the realization of the will of God for them, namely abundant life for all. This prophetic speech serves as a theological hermeneutical tool to critique and deconstruct colonial paradigms that produce regimes of violence and dehumanization. Keith Clements (1995: 217), in his work *Learning to Speak*, outlined three manners in which the church is prophetically called to speak in the public. The first is the *indicative manner* of prophetic speech that articulates “the principles by which people should live and by which societies should order themselves.” This implies a prioritization of “the classical virtues of goodness, truth and beauty” (Ibid.). Upholding these values (as present in Phil. 4.8; Col. 3.12; Gal. 5.22-23; 2 Pet. 1.5) is critical for social transformation. The second is the *imperative manner* of prophetic speech in which the church utters a very concrete way of approaching issues of public concern, indicating specific moral choice(s) to be made.³ Imperative speech must be programmatic and practical, offering, as it

3 Biblical examples would include the instructions in Isaiah 1.16-17 and Psalm 82.3-4 on actions for social justice. Church examples that fall within this category of prophetic speech include the South

were, a clearly thought-out and theologically founded framework of action for the common good. The third is *the interrogative manner* of prophetic speech that uses questions to propose an “alternative imagination”. Interrogation as prophetic speech is a sophisticated and provocative manner of speaking. It challenges “a perceived oddity or incompleteness of the world as one experiences it, [and] as against what one imagines it could or ought to be” (Ibid.: 225). We find sufficient examples in the Scriptures (Ps. 82.2; Jer. 2.14; 22.15; Lk. 15.4, 8) that evoke a decolonial resistance to violence while insisting on equal dignity and justice for all. In responding to the #EndSARS protest, Christian leaders mostly deployed the indicative and imperative manners of prophetic speech, insisting on the moral choices that the Nigerian government must make to address the problem of police brutality. The interrogative prophetic speech can also be deduced from the first two since moral choices open the space for an alternative imagination of a Nigeria where young people feel safe in the hands of people who are meant to protect them in the first place.

When the Church is Compelled to Act

The protest initiated a religious turn to action. Toyin Samuel Ajose locates an instance of this religious turn to action at the introduction of the Prayer Walk across major cities. Popularized by Pentecostals, a prayer walk involves long walks by Christian groups, marked by prayers and songs, often used as a form of public display of faith or a means to register displeasure against any societal ill. For Ajose (2024: 553), “The prayer walk offered a new framework for protesters who felt the need to seek divine intervention during the protest. Just like the #EndSARS protesters, different groups and influential Christian leaders and musicians started organizing and mobilising people to use the agency of prayer as an alternative to advocate for social change. The hashtag #prayerwalk trended on social media to create awareness about the prayer walk across the country.” Another location of the religious turn to action is the Holy Eucharist that was celebrated in solidarity with the protesters at Lekki Tollgate, the epicentre of the protest, on 18 October 2020. Led by Msgr Paschal Nwaezeapu of the Catholic Church of Divine Mercy Lekki and other priests, this action aligned with historical instances where the Eucharist was used as a form of resistance to oppressive regimes, particularly in Latin America (Cavanaugh 1998). Prayer services were also organized by Christians of other denominational backgrounds, Catholics, Protestants and Pentecostals alike. Even the Muslim faithful did their Jumat prayer on the protest ground on 16 October while being shielded by other non-Muslim protesters (Ezeobi 2020). These actions were unprecedented in the history of Nigeria.

African ecumenical Kairos Document (1985) that challenged the apartheid regime and Pope Francis’ *Laudato Si’* (2015) that called for global action on ecology.

By mobilizing with churches to respond with concrete actions, the protesters made the demand of a theology that serves the public in concrete acts of defiance to structures of violence, of a Gospel that seeks the flourishing of life, and of a Christian community that is in tune with “the deepest concerns of men and women about the meaning of their lives, and their ultimate destiny” (Ilo 2011: 7). The theological provocation further highlights that the excuse of a church-state dichotomy is not a justifiable rationale for the de-politicization of theology. The gospel is not neutral, nor is theology apolitical. In fact, Ela, whose work is intently decolonial, would go beyond academic discourse disconnected from reality to take a practical stand in view of a theological response to coloniality. For Ela (2003: 87), “the problem of African theology is no longer one of discourse, but rather one of concrete commitment, where men and women take on tasks through which the Church decides to reach out to men mired in history.” Consequently, Ela denounced “state theologies that make pacts with regimes that strip and massacre people” (Ibid.). Theology ought to become, therefore, a discourse of dissidence, resistance and insubordination, opening the way to concrete commitments with liberation as the horizon. Theology in Africa, Ela insists, should be situated in “the dynamic of the witness of men and women who risk their lives to defend human rights in the name of the Gospel” (Ibid.).

Digital activism steps into this dynamic of witnessing through an incarnational logic that brings visibility to the silent, and often suppressed, cries and sufferings of the oppressed and marginalized. Theologically, this implies a Christology of liberation that recognizes how the invisible and visible human sufferings are embodied in Christ, the Word. This Word, who dwells within and with humanity, becomes at once the prophetic words that challenge all colonial structures of oppression and bondage. And so, when there is a Christological participation where digital activism takes on the task of inviting Christians to a prophetic witnessing against evil, as in the case of the #EndSARS protest.

Ignoring such a compelling invitation to identify with the struggles of the protesters would amount to a contradiction of what the church stands for (both in terms of its identity and mission) as well as a rejection of the paradoxicality of the cross of Christ as the space of exchange of life and death for the salvation of all. A decolonial theology is not a convenient exercise since it must incorporate resistive performances that must challenge any “death-dealing” power structure. In that way, it critiques a version of Christian praxis that neutralizes the radicality of the cross for a feel-good spirituality under a colonial space.

Conclusion

The #EndSARS protest of 2020 represented a critical moment in Nigeria’s socio-political landscape and offered a significant theological provocation that demanded

sustained reflection on the nature of public theology in postcolonial contexts. This movement, which began as digital activism and materialized into embodied resistance on the streets, demonstrates the profound theological implications of grassroots organizing for social justice. The protesters, predominantly young Nigerians who had experienced or witnessed the brutality of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad, did not merely seek policy reform; they engaged in an incarnational act that challenged the very foundations of colonial rationality still operative in contemporary Nigeria.

The incarnational dimension of the protest reveals a theology that emerges from the concrete realities of suffering and resistance rather than from predetermined doctrinal frameworks. Of course, there are similar paradigms in other contexts (like in Latin America) that reveal a kairotic prophetic moment for the church, and theology as such. This methodology, theology from below, prioritizes contextual engagement and lived experience as primary sources for theological reflection. In their bodies, the protesters lived a spirituality of action that transcended the dualism between faith and social engagement, the false distinction between the digital *as not real* and the physical *as real*, thus demonstrating that the quest for justice is inseparable from authentic Christian witness (Oduyoye 1986: 96). Their willingness to risk their lives and livelihoods for the sake of dignity and human flourishing exemplifies the radical demands of discipleship that the church has often domesticated or ignored. And this is despite the violent manner through which the Nigerian state brought the protest to an end, leaving deep-seated scars and distrust among its citizens (Okpaleke 2024: 31).

The fact that young people had to compel churches to join their cause reveals a troubling disconnect between ecclesial rhetoric and ecclesial practice. Churches that should have been leading the charge for justice were instead caught up in a posture of silence or cautious equivocation, thereby normalizing the state's systematic dehumanization of vulnerable populations, a perpetuation of the colonial tool of violence. This silence reflects what Ela critiqued as the neo-colonial situation of African churches and their captivity to structures that appear irreformable but are, in fact, contingent, oppressive and antithetical to the gospel of liberation. Moreso, the decolonial theological framework employed in this article illuminates how state-sponsored brutality functions as a continuation of colonial logics that divide humanity into "grievable and ungrievable lives" (Butler 2009: 38), and which must be rejected. This rejection constitutes a fundamental decolonial move, made concrete in the rejection of epistemic, ontological, and political hierarchies that justify violence against the marginalized.

Meanwhile, the two forms of theological provocation identified in this article, namely, the demand for prophetic speech and the call for resistive action, point toward a reimagined ecclesiology for the Nigerian context and, by extension, for

postcolonial Christianity more broadly. Each of these modes of speech serves to deconstruct the normalized violence of the colonial matrix of power and to articulate a vision of society grounded in the principles of justice, dignity, and human flourishing founded on Sacred Scripture. Beyond speech, however, the protest revealed the necessity of ecclesial action. The celebration of the Eucharist at protest sites, the ecumenical and interreligious solidarity displayed by protesters, and the eventual participation of church leaders in the movement all represent concrete enactments of a theology that denounces the false dichotomy between the sacred and the secular, reminiscent of Said's critique of "imaginative geography" as well as the feminist rejection of disembodied Christology (Johnson 1992; Isherwood 2004). These actions demonstrate that Christianity, when authentically practised, cannot remain neutral in the face of injustice. The gospel is inherently political insofar as it concerns the ordering of human community and the conditions necessary for abundant life.

The #EndSARS protest thus functions as an ongoing provocation for African (Nigerian) church and theology. It challenges theologians and church communities to recognize that Christianity in Africa remains an unfinished project requiring continuous critical engagement with the realities of suffering, violence and resistance. Ultimately, it reminds us that the incarnation, which represents God's embodiment in human history through Jesus Christ, establishes a pattern for Christian existence that cannot be reduced to spiritual abstractions. If the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, then the church's words must likewise become flesh through concrete acts of solidarity, resistance and advocacy for the marginalized. The young protesters of Nigeria, many of whom were members of Christian communities, lived out this incarnational logic in a radical way. Their courage, creativity and commitment to justice constitute a prophetic witness that deserves theological recognition and sustained reflection. As Nigerian Christianity continues to grapple with its identity and mission in a postcolonial context, the #EndSARS protest stands as both a judgment and an invitation. It remains till date a call to authentic discipleship that embraces the radical, life-giving, and often dangerous demands of the gospel.

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ARTICLE

Defiant Hope

Intercessory Prayer as Spiritual Resistance to Hopelessness in the Climate Crisis

Tobias Adam

Abstract

This paper examines the role of intercessory prayer in how Christian climate activists from the Global North engage with the existential challenges of the climate crisis. Based on a qualitative case study of the evangelical prayer network Climate Intercessors, the research draws on participant observation and interviews to explore how prayer functions as a spiritual response to despair and uncertainty. The findings show that intercessory prayer fosters solidarity, helps to process climate anxiety and cultivates defiant hope. This stance resists hopelessness while acknowledging human limitations. The research also shows how digital technologies are a tool that connects people from different churches and geographical contexts, united by their awareness of the climate crisis. The study contextualizes these findings within lived theology, three empirical case studies by Nita, Hall and Schüler, and engages with Jürgen Moltmann's theology of hope.

Keywords: Intercessory prayer, Climate change, Digital spirituality, Digital activism

Introduction

"We are here, we are loud, because you are stealing our future" was one of the most prominent slogans of the Swiss Fridays for Future, also known as Climatestrike (Roth et al. 2019). It illustrates how the discourse on the climate crisis in Western Europe often focuses on future developments, such as rising global temperatures and their consequences for life on this planet. But for billions of humans and other creatures, it is already a reality to live and suffer the consequences of global heating. As time passes, the risks to life on this planet increase with the severity of global warming. (IPCC 2023; Edwards 2022)

In the Western European context, where many societies alienate themselves from the existing realities of global warming, combined with the inaction of many

governments and companies, the question arises as to how we can deal personally with this ongoing destruction of our world (Thunberg 2022). This question is particularly relevant for people who are actively involved as activists and consciously engage with the climate crisis and its consequences. Moreover, it is particularly relevant for younger people who still have a significant portion of their lives ahead of them. It is therefore not surprising that many of these people are losing hope that the climate crisis will be mitigated. Furthermore, they are developing psychological problems and anxiety, also known as “climate anxiety” (Hickman et al. 2021).

From a Christian perspective, prayer could be a crucial tool as it is especially connected to overwhelming and hopeless situations, as well as to human and divine action within such interactions. One could look towards intercessory prayer in the Old Testament as an example, where God incorporated human action done in faith, even to the extent of changing his will and withholding judgment in response to the intercession of the righteous. Furthermore, as Gerhard Ebeling argues, prayer lies at the core of the Christian faith, as it is the only way in which humans can realize God is by entering into a trusting relationship. From a practical theological perspective, based on this starting point, the question arises: What role does intercessory prayer play for Christian climate activists in dealing with an increasingly severe climate crisis?

This article explores the role of intercessory prayer as a spiritual practice among Christians who are environmentally conscious and active. It uses a qualitative case study of Christians from the United Kingdom, the US, Canada and South Africa who incorporated climate-related topics in free intercessory prayer outside church services. In this case study, digital technologies are mainly used as a tool to bring people from different churches and geographical contexts together, united by their awareness of the climate crisis.

Methodologically, this research is embedded within a framework of lived theology (Müller 2023). It also remains committed to the principle of openness of an exploratory case study, not defining the central concepts in advance through a guiding thesis, but rather through listening to the voices of interviewees. Finally, the results of the study are compared with other empirical work in the field and the theology of hope of Jürgen Moltmann. The analysis of Moltmann is offered in light of his position as the central German-speaking theologian on hope, thereby providing a solid theological foundation for these findings.

At the same time, this study has limitations. As a single case study, it focuses on one specific form of evangelical-charismatic intercessory prayer and does not explore other expressions of Christian spirituality or denominational traditions. Moreover, the research covers only a short time frame, leaving open questions about how these practices might evolve over longer periods.

The case chosen for this study does not fit perfectly into the classical understanding of online activism, characterized by participation in campaigns and civil disobedience (Neumayer and Svensson 2016). Not all Climate Intercessors participants work in this way, but they are all somehow active within the field of climate justice, whether by engaging in dialogue, running programmes in their local parishes, or serving as observers at the United Nations Climate Conferences (COP).

The Case: The Climate Intercessors Network

Climate Intercessors is an evangelical online prayer network that describes itself as “a global network of people whose prayers are as real and urgent as the climate crisis” (Climate Intercessors 2024). It is supported by evangelical organizations and networks from the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom, including the Environmental Network of the Lausanne Movement, the World Evangelical Alliance, Tearfund (UK) and the US-based Young Evangelicals for Climate Action. The impetus for the network’s founding was a prayer campaign ahead of the UN Climate Change Conference in Glasgow in November 2021. It became clear that Christians who care about climate protection have a need to pray together and exchange ideas with like-minded people. This idea was continued after the climate conference in the form of a network.¹

The roots of the network go back further to the involvement of evangelical Christians in the UN climate conferences, which was significantly influenced by Lynn,² a former Baptist missionary and now a member of the Climate Intercessor leadership team, who was also interviewed for this article. The 2015 UN Climate Conference in Paris, which adopted the Paris Climate Agreement, was particularly influential. For the first time, there was a prayer and observation mission by evangelical Christians, supported by the environmental organization A Rocha and the Lausanne Movement. Prayer meetings were held, and dialogues were sought with the participants of the climate conference (Lynn, Pos. 22; David, Pos. 16 – see the Appendix for details of these participants). This led to the development of the Christian Climate Observers Program, which to this day is closely linked to Climate Intercessors in terms of personnel and ideas and, as an accredited ecumenical observer mission, also has access to the negotiating grounds of the UN climate conferences.

In an article on the founding of Climate Intercessors in *The Christian Century*, the network’s understanding of prayer is described as very open. Prayer is seen as being beneficial as an inner resource for the person praying, or in the more traditional

1 A table listing all the interviewees can be found in the appendix of this paper.

2 All participants’ names are anonymized.

understanding of intervention: Moving God to intervene supernaturally in the climate crisis or in climate negotiations. The aim is not to restrict God in this regard (Huska 2021). As one of the network's co-founders, Lynn notes that he never experienced the powerful and intimate intercessory prayer in the Christian climate movement that he had known from his work as a missionary (Lynn, Pos. 79).

Climate Intercessors has an evangelical-charismatic background linked to missionary work. This is evident from the organisation itself and the biographical backgrounds of the members of the leadership team. Nevertheless, the leadership team strives to work in an ecumenical manner, appealing to people from other confessional backgrounds. Such an ecumenical approach is evidenced by a question posed to potential supporters: "Are you willing to bring the best of your faith tradition to being a 'climate intercessor'?" (Climate Intercessors 2024).

Climate Intercessors meet once a month online via Zoom in four different sessions throughout the day, allowing individuals from different time zones to participate. In the period of data collection, each meeting, including the leadership team, had between 8 and 15 participants, with most participants being evangelical/charismatic and originating from the United Kingdom with an Anglican background.

Methodology and Methods

The study is a qualitative case study using the qualitative content analysis method. The case study approach made it possible to address the research question by focusing on the Climate Intercessors prayer network, which serves as a representative example of the phenomenon of praying in the climate crisis. Qualitative content analysis then guided the interpretation of the data.

Furthermore, the study is situated within the realm of lived theology, grounding the research in practical theology, offering not only a description of the practice and self-understanding of the Climate Intercessors but also a lived theology. Lived theology is understood as individually constructed, personally verified, rhythmized, and integrated into the everyday life of the individual human being. Therefore, lived theology is based in the lifeworlds of people and becomes theology through its "reflected expression" and the fact that it finds "public resonance" (Müller 2023: 226, translated).

The initial data were collected through participant observation of six online prayer meetings in February and April 2024. In these meetings, I myself prayed every time in the breakout sessions and also several times in the plenary session, which I noted in the observation log. The study followed the methods of Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr (2014: 52), who place an emphasis on managing the tension between closeness and simultaneous analytical distance to the observed situation by distancing in the fieldnotes between observation, context, self-reflection, and initial theoretical

insights. Also taken into account was the colonial heritage of the method, given that participant observation was often used by Western researchers in colonial settings to extract knowledge from communities or to portray the people studied in an objectifying and exoticizing manner. Reflecting on these roots, self-reflection of the researchers became a notable feature, bringing awareness of possible power dynamics and biases existing within the fieldwork (Kelle 2018).

The reflection of my social and contextual location is central not only to the method of participant observation, but also to the entire research process because it and its relation to the location of my participants shape the entire process (Dube Shomanah 2003). For example, the emphasis in my master's thesis on how predictions of the future are incorporated into prayer is clearly linked to my social location as a Swiss male. This is due to the climate crisis still being perceived in the Swiss context as a future threat rather than an immediate danger. Ironically, several floods that were clearly connected to global warming struck Switzerland in the midst of completing this research in the summer of 2024 (Bundesamt für Umwelt 2024; Titz 2024). My background as a Reformed theologian also shapes my choice of theological works with which to discuss the findings of this study. In terms of personal exposure to climate issues, the Climate Intercessors and I have a similar background, as most of them come from the well-protected Global North. However, they have repeatedly exposed themselves to the existential threat of the climate crisis through prayer and their work as activists and missionaries.

In addition to participant observation, a total of 14 semi-structured interviews were conducted between early March and late April 2024 using interview guides based on the research question. Interviewees were recruited via announcements at prayer meetings. Each participant then gave their informed consent to participate in the research. This type of qualitative interview combines the openness of data collection, which is characteristic of qualitative research, with a certain degree of content control by the interviewer. The interviewee's narrative, however, remains decisive for the direction of the conversation, because questions are not asked linearly. This combination of openness and control was crucial for addressing the research question, given its clear thematic focus (Meuser 2018). Due to the initial time limitations of the study, only eight of the interviews were analysed. These were selected based on initial case summaries focusing on the interviewees' understanding of intercessory prayer and the future in the context of the climate crisis. The aim was to include as many different opinions, ecclesiastical and social backgrounds, as possible while also achieving a balance of gender.

A third data source comprised the two prayer meeting scripts for February and March 2024 (i.e., the manuals for prayer meeting leaders). All data types were analysed using qualitative content analysis, a method developed by Udo Kuckartz and Stefan Rädiker. In this method, passages in the data are labelled with different

codes. First, codes are applied deductively, based on the research question. Then, in a second round of analysis, new codes are created inductively from the data itself (Kuckartz and Rädiker 2022).

Findings

To understand the role of intercessory prayer for Climate Intercessors in dealing with the reality and future of the climate crisis, the perception of the present and future of the climate crisis, as well as the understanding of intercessory prayer found in the data, must first be presented.

The Present under Climate Crisis

First, it is useful to understand how the Climate Intercessors perceive the current climate crisis. The data from the qualitative research does not present the climate crisis in terms of abstract metrics such as CO₂ levels or climate targets, but rather through concrete examples, primarily in prayers and interviews. Three thematic clusters emerged from the analysis of how the present situation is described: (1) observable environmental changes, (2) human suffering and (3) perceived isolation and responsibility.

Participants first describe ecological disruptions, such as sinking islands, desertification, extreme weather, vanishing ecosystems, and species extinction, which signal a world in disarray. The most dominant theme, however, is human suffering, particularly in the Global South. A striking example was a prayer request on 24 April based on a *New York Times* report about Afghan families being forced to sell a daughter or a kidney due to drought-induced debt (Addario and Kim 2024). This story deeply moved participants, leading to prayers for empathy towards people in the Global South and expressions of moral dissonance regarding how such suffering coexists with protests in the Global North against socially designed carbon pricing. The Afghan case resurfaced in interviews, underscoring its emotional impact.

Beyond acute suffering, participants note growing climate visibility through agricultural challenges. Farmers, though a minority, experience droughts and fires firsthand, as discussed in breakout sessions about droughts on the Iberian Peninsula and Canadian wildfires. These events make climate impacts tangible even in the Global North, though often indirectly (cf. Cara, Pos. 50).

In contrast, participants perceive populations in the Global North as relatively isolated from severe climate consequences. They observe minor inconveniences, such as smaller food package sizes or empty pools in holiday resorts, contrasting these with the catastrophic realities experienced elsewhere. Some participants reflected explicitly on this isolation, attributing it to geography, privilege and technology like flood defences and air conditioning. These factors are seen to both shield

populations in the Global North and create new vulnerabilities. This isolation also extends to the capacity to overlook the crisis, as one participant lamented: “it seems funny that people don’t want to see the truth to just live simply and enjoy life” (Observation Log 9.4.24, 10:00 a.m., 10:38 a.m.). Material wealth and technological progress are cited as causes alongside cultural factors. One interviewee links detachment to enlightenment rationalism and the weakening of creation-centred spirituality, which shapes dominant worldviews in the Global North (Rahel, Pos. 198).

Responsibility for the crisis is also discussed and perceived as disproportionately lying with the Global North. At times, this responsibility is acknowledged on a personal level. A recurring theme is conveying distant suffering in an emotional way through vivid narratives and images, such as stories about the drought in Afghanistan. The participants emphasise empathy despite experiential gaps. Some draw on personal experiences, such as surviving floods, to connect with others’ hardships (Alice, Pos. 119). This effort to render abstract climate impacts tangible recurs across prayers and interviews, framing intercession as spiritual and relational engagement.

The Future of the Climate Crisis

Notably, the Climate Intercessors’ visions of the future of the climate are neither utopian nor dystopian. Instead, they are shaped by a complex interplay of factors. Despite all respondents agreeing that it might not be achieved, the Paris Agreement’s 1.5°C global warming target emerged as the decisive benchmark, with severe consequences if missed. Drawing on his environmental science background, Gerald, an interviewee, warns of exponential risks and unprecedented storms. He stresses that “with climate change all those understandings go out the window, because the risk is exponential” (Gerald, Pos. 48). Beyond infrastructure, the interviewees anticipate escalating biodiversity loss, droughts and human suffering, all of which are already visible phenomena today. Coral reefs exemplify this trajectory; warming seas are causing die-offs, and a 2°C rise would likely destroy most reefs globally. Recovery would take millions of years, if it were even possible (Andrew, Pos. 67, 86).

Future outlooks are predominantly pessimistic. Thea doubts rapid behavioural change, predicting continued fossil fuel emissions and elite privilege: “Rich people are gonna [sic] keep doing what makes them happy” (Thea, Pos. 42). Her only hope lies in divine intervention, though she questions whether God will act. Lynn foresees “eco-fascism” in the Global North, bringing xenophobia, fortified borders, and violence (Lynn, Pos. 60), while Rahel even fears human extinction (Rahel, Pos. 54, 94).

Positive visions are rare and often intertwined with despair. Some describe hope as oscillating (Rahel, Alice), while others root it in prayer or divine agency (Andrew, Lynn, Gerald). Lynn invokes Martin Luther King Jr.’s “long arc of justice”, praying God would bend it toward justice (Lynn, Pos. 21). David introduces a theological distinction: ultimate hope, grounded in Christ’s return and cosmic renewal, versus present hope,

tied to incremental signs of change – reflecting the “already but not yet” nature of God’s kingdom (David, Pos. 41). Prayer scripts rarely address future visions, focusing instead on immediate crises. Across interviews, emotions range from sadness and fear to anger and shame, but above all, helplessness. Andrew captures this vividly: “I felt so small, so insignificant . . . this problem is so big” (Andrew, Pos. 68). Participants struggle to reconcile global suffering with local resistance to climate measures, often admitting they “do not really know how to pray”. Rahel oscillates between exhaustion and seeking hope in God, yet not always finding it (Rahel, Pos. 50, 70).

Amidst despair, an attitude that could be described as *defiant hope* emerges when dealing with this tension. At its core lies the acknowledgement of human limitations, while resisting despair. This hope is manifested through small actions, ideas and good news that one would not have expected, such as picking up litter, local projects and shifts in awareness, which are often seen in the midst of crisis (David, Pos. 42). According to the interviewees, the corresponding inner action is empathy, which is practiced through prayer and by extending compassion to people and creation alike, thereby fostering a deeper connection and sense of responsibility (Thea, Pos. 34; Gerald, Pos. 36).

Intercessory Prayer and its Effects

Analysis of the interviews shows that, despite having different priorities for what to pray, all interviewees share a similar understanding of intercessory prayer. This unity is even more remarkable given the interviewees’ different backgrounds. Intercessory prayer is understood as a practice whereby concerns are presented to God in prayer. This is not merely a listing of concerns, but a sharing and entrusting of them in the hope of God’s power. This hope is not viewed as an attempt to shirk responsibility, but rather as an active plea for divine intervention. This understanding is evident in an excerpt from the prayer script for the suffering of children in Gaza during the war: “Let’s pray in such a way now that children . . . are placed up on the lap of Jesus who is more than capable of addressing . . . injustices associated with all violence.” (Script 12 Mar. 2024, Pos. 43).

Some interviewees describe intercessory prayer as a means of responding to excessive demands and challenges. It involves acknowledging one’s own failures in relation to the climate crisis and hoping for God’s grace, while not rejecting human responsibility. It is also an act of solidarity with those already affected by the consequences of the climate crisis (Thea, Pos. 46; Alice, Pos 50; Andrew, Pos. 86). For the interviewees, intercessory prayer is not just an individual act, but a process based on a relationship with God. This relationship is reflected in the central importance of trusting God in response to prayer requests. It is also an educational process, through which those praying learn about their relationship with God and the climate

crisis. Up-to-date information on climate issues is crucial for intercessory prayer and forms an integral part of Climate Intercessors' meetings.

While all interviewees share a fundamental understanding of intercessory prayer, their interpretations and practices vary, particularly regarding the relationship between prayer and action. This dynamic is most pronounced in Gerald's account. For him, intercessory prayer serves as a starting point for deep engagement with issues and for processing personal wounds within a group setting. Prayer became a paradigm for his activism and professional work in an environmental agency. He recounts experiences of seemingly hopeless situations, such as illegal waste disposal protected by authorities and the privatization of a major ecosystem where unexpected resolutions occurred. Gerald interprets these outcomes as instances where his activism functioned as prayer: Surrendering ego and personal agendas allowed space for God's will to prevail. For him, prayer is a transformative process that encompasses both verbal prayer and activist engagement, often involving painful relinquishment of control amid systemic entanglement in climate harm (Gerald, Pos. 31f, 36, 40).

Other participants articulate different connections between prayer and action. Thea emphasizes spiritual warfare, viewing prayer as a means to confront evil in a spiritual realm, with the heart's disposition being decisive (Thea, Pos. 70). Rahel associates prayer with manual labour and environmental work, framing such acts as worship (Rahel, Pos. 150). Alice and Cara highlight prayer as a form of solidarity: Informing disaster-affected individuals that they are being prayed for fosters encouragement and resilience (Cara, Pos. 35, Alice Pos. 39). Similarly, Lynn integrates intercessory prayer into missionary work, maintaining empathetic concern for communities already suffering climate impacts (Lynn, Pos. 18, 29).

For David and Andrew, prayer complements action by expressing the urgency and intensity of climate-related work, reinforcing commitment without replacing practical engagement. Across their perspectives, prayer emerges as both a spiritual and embodied practice, ranging from inner transformation to external activism, while consistently affirming that prayer does not substitute for action but deepens its meaning and motivation (David, Pos. 16; Andrew, Pos. 35, 56).

The question of the expected effectiveness of prayer remains, as nurturing a relationship with God is only one aspect of intercessory prayer. It is equally important for the Climate Intercessors to believe that God has the power to influence the climate crisis. This is particularly evident in the sections of the data where the effects of prayer are discussed, as respondents believe that prayers are answered. Some reported having experienced this themselves, such as the healing of an illness or the adoption of the Paris Agreement, which was seen as a miracle (Alice, Pos. 48; Andrew, Pos. 56f). Alternatively, they trust in the Bible's testimony and expect change through prayer.

The interviews reveal a consensus that this hope for change brought about by prayer is always in tension with the possibility that prayer will not be answered. All those who comment on this agree that one can never be certain of a connection between prayer and a change in a particular matter. The connection will always remain a mystery and a matter of human assumption. Alice and Andrew illustrate this quite well. They talk about how they prayed, and then a change happened, but they observed that they cannot say with absolute certainty that the change was directly caused by their prayers. For both of them, it remains a mystery. Alice clarifies this by explaining that it is God, not prayer itself, who brings about change, and that God is sovereign (Andrew, Pos. 57; Alice, Pos. 44).

Intercessory Prayer as Defiant Hope

Having seen how the Climate Intercessors perceive the present and future of the climate crisis, as well as how they understand intercessory prayer and its effects, it is appropriate to analyse the role of intercessory prayer in dealing with the climate crisis. In qualitative content analysis, this is achieved by looking at the overlap of certain codes in the data.

It comes as no surprise that most of the overlaps are between codes of prayer and codes of the present. These overlaps include prayer for current and urgent topics, which are brought in prayer before God as the core practice of the network. The clearest example of this is the prayer for the drought in Afghanistan mentioned in the section on the present under the climate crisis, where the feelings of participants were well illustrated by the following quote: “we don’t know how to pray but, we do” (Observation Log 9.4.24 9:00 p.m.). It also comes as no surprise that prayer codes rarely overlap with those describing the visions of the future in the climate crisis, as they are not praying for prospects but actual challenges. In one of the few overlaps with categories pretraining for the future, the discussion revolves around whether prayer should continue given bleak prospects and how the relationship with God and prayer helps in dealing with an uncertain future (David, Pos. 50).

This does not, however, mean that the data lacks a future dimension of prayer. There is a subcode called “Hope for Change” that overlaps the most with the prayer codes of all future codes. This code was defined in an inductive manner and included all passages starting from a specific problem, hoping for a change in the future, and actively asking for it in prayers. This seems to be the basic attitude with which participants address the future of the climate crisis in their prayers. This is not surprising, as it aligns with the group’s understanding of intercessory prayer. They pray with the hope in God that something will change through prayer.

Considering the area, this hope enacted in this becomes more significant. Because this area is the perceived and envisioned present and future of the climate crisis, which lasts until the extinction of humanity, and is related to personal oscillation

between hope and despair. Here, praying with hope for change offers a defiant way to lean toward positive change in the catastrophic situation of the climate crisis. The term *defiant hope* used above is suitable for the role prayer plays in dealing with the climate crisis. This is to say that *defiant hope* is the attitude with which the uncertain future of the climate crisis is faced, while intercessory prayer is the central place for the Climate Intercessors, where *defiant hope* for change in trust in God is lived and embodied.

Discussion

Before engaging with Jürgen Moltmann's theology of hope, the case study results are situated within three empirical case studies by Nita, Hall and Schüler on prayer in the climate crisis and evangelical movements. The most significant comparative work is Maria Nita's ethnographic research on environmentally engaged Christians in the United Kingdom, some of whom are linked to the Climate Intercessors (Nita 2016). Nita conceptualizes prayer as ritual along a "lament-celebration axis", where activists move from grieving ecological destruction to envisioning an ecologically conscious future. Her focus lies on the affective engagement with the climate crisis and its integration into Christian identity through memory culture. Prayer and protest make the crisis more accessible and emotional. This dynamic is reflected in my case study, which shows that prayer fosters cognitive and emotional engagement with the impacts of climate change. Both studies also identify raising awareness as a central intention of prayer.

However, a key difference concerns hope. Nita does not consider hope to be an integral part of prayer. While her "lament-celebration axis" shares transformative qualities with *defiant hope*, the latter term in intercessory prayer resists despair by acknowledging reality rather than merely shifting personal attitudes. Furthermore, Nita primarily views prayer as communication among Christians rather than with God, emphasizing human action over divine action. This contrasts sharply with my participants, for whom hope is underpinned by trust in God and expectation of divine action alongside human responsibility.

Amy Cox Hall's research on New Monasticism offers an additional perspective. She described prayer as a means of contemplating and enacting socio-ecological justice: "Prayer provided the mechanism to bridge the ideal into political acts" (Cox Hall 2018: 693). This idea aligns with the emphasis in my research on God-centered trust. However, it differs in that intercessory prayer petitions for change rather than deliberates on it, which may reflect different prayer practices.

In his ethnography of the 24/7 Prayer Movement, Sebastian Schüler introduces the concept of holistic spirituality, in which prayer permeates all activities and merges activism and devotion (Schüler 2013). A wide range of activities, including dancing in

a club during a mission, are considered forms of prayer, exemplifying a “culture of prayer”. In Evangelical contexts, the dichotomy between prayer and action is often rejected, and transformation is viewed as God’s work intensified through prayer. While my case study shares this integration, it rejects the notion that increased prayer compels divine action, affirming God’s sovereignty.

From the perspective of online activism, the Climate Intercessors do not fit into the classical understanding of activism, such as the typology of Neumeyer and Svensson (2016). They describe four types of activism alongside the dimensions of viewing opponents as either enemies or adversaries, and willingness to participate in civil disobedience. Along the axis of how to view people who oppose strong climate action, participants in the Climate Intercessors do not see them as enemies, but as adversaries who are isolated from the climate crisis and its consequences due to their wealth, geographical location, and cultural separation from the rest of humanity (Gerald, Pos. 40; observation log 9.4.24, 10:00, 10:38; Rahel, Pos. 198). On the dimension of openness to civil disobedience, some participants may engage in it within other groups, rather than the Climate Intercessors, because this group primarily petitions God to act, rather than a government or company. They understand their prayer as aligning their will and actions with God’s, and trusting in God’s will rather than opposing it through civil disobedience, whatever form it might take when directed at God. But as shown in the section on intercessory prayer and its effects, for the Climate Intercessors prayer is always either part of activism or the starting point. Therefore, prayer would need to be a separate dimension in a typology of Christian online activism, as indicated by Steven Taylor (2025: 253).

While not fitting perfectly into the typology of Neumeyer and Svensson, this case study emphasises that online and offline activism are connected, as Neumeyer and Svensson suggest. Climate Intercessors pray online and are supported by the offline activism of themselves and others, as it is the case with the COPs. This online activism influences their offline behaviour, deepening their defiance and solidarity, and resulting in small actions such as speaking about the climate crisis or picking up trash.

Overall, these comparisons confirm and enrich the case study’s findings: Prayer shapes religious identity and communal attitudes toward the climate crisis. In this study, intercessory prayer cultivates hope and reinforces the belief that prayer itself “does something”, influencing both individuals and their communities.

Alongside the discussion of other empirical work, it is also important to reflect on the theological dimension of hope cultivated in prayer. In his book *Theology of Hope*, Jürgen Moltmann develops a theology of hope inspired by the work of Ernst Bloch and contemporary research that constructs in the Old Testament a line of *Verheissungsreligion*, i.e., the promise lies at the core of the religion: “God promises a new

world of comprehensive life, of justice and truth, and with this promise he constantly calls this world into question; not because it is nothing to the hopeful, but because it is not yet what it is promised to be.” (Moltmann 1969: 149, translated.)

This promise opens the history for the individuals because it gives the future a direction and is no longer just an open space with possible development. For Moltmann, this promise is the salvation history, which is continuously deepened and opened by God in that God reveals himself as the God of All, vanishing all separations. As such, the defeat of death is something eschatological which humans don't have yet, but is promised and of which, in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, humans have a foretaste.

Contrasting this with the findings of the case study reveals differences in basic attitudes toward the future between the two positions. While Moltmann emphasizes God's promise, *defiant hope* acknowledges the dramatic present and makes forecasts. Small signs of hope emerge through local projects and positive news. Moltmann, however, also acknowledges injustices and suffering. The promise of God drives humans to contradict these injustices and sufferings. Both approaches are rooted in trust in God, describing small present changes as signs of hope. Moltmann's principle that a future under God's promise can contrast with the present is consistent with the concept of defiant hope.

Conclusion

This case study shows the role of prayer in how Christian activists in environmentally protected areas are dealing with the uncertainty and existential danger of the climate crisis. It is a practice of hope, simultaneously defiantly working for change. This makes sense when we acknowledge that the present and future in the context of the climate crisis are paths of great unpredictability involving much suffering and destruction. In this context, intercessory prayer can serve as a means of facing this future squarely, without denying human responsibility. Rather, prayer is a search for and a plea to find new ways to fulfil this responsibility. This type of prayer stems from a relationship with God and trust in him. Intercession is not simply presenting a wish list for God to fulfil; rather, it is the persistence of concerns within the relationship with God. With this understanding comes the knowledge that prayers do not necessarily lead directly to the requested changes, but rather, the belief that prayers play a role in the changes brought about by God's actions. They believe that God is continually at work in this world, even when things do not improve. This hoped-for change is referred to in this study as *defiant hope*. Further, praying in environmentally protected contexts means consciously engaging with the dramatic effects of the climate crisis. Learning more about these effects and praying specifically for those

already affected is a way to enact solidarity and empathy. In short, praying in this way does not mean falling into despair, but believing that even through unimaginable suffering, things can change for the better and daring to work for it by petitioning God and others.

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Appendix

Name	Gender	Country	Church background (self-declared)	Other Background
Rahel	F	UK	Anglican, Low Church	Retired
Thea	F	USA	Nondenominational-evangelical	English teacher
Cara	F	UK	Anglican, High Church/Anglo-Catholic	Retired physician
Alice	F	South Africa	Conservative church with a charismatic evangelical character	Farmer
Andrew	M	USA	Comes from a conservative Reformed church, was an agnostic for a long time	Works for a charismatic missionary organisation
Gerald	M	Canada	Various denominations, from evangelical and mainline to liberal; currently Presbyterian, but critical of his congregation's conservative stance on LGBT issues.	Retired environmental scientist
Lynn	M	USA/Canada	Evangelical, Baptist	Former missionary in Asia, now author and activist
David	M	Canada	Evangelical with charismatic influences	Pastor, urban planner

ARTICLE

Digital Powers and Principalities, Decolonization and Faith-Based Activism

Jonas Kurlberg

Abstract

This article investigates the technological environments of faith-based digital activism, looking beyond immediate practices to the structures that shape them. Adopting the theological framework of “powers and principalities”, I argue that digital spaces are value-laden environments shaped by forces that are often intangible yet deeply felt. By putting Walter Wink’s concept of an “integral worldview” in conversation with indigenous theologies, the article develops a conceptual vocabulary to account for the spiritual dimensions of technological life. Suggesting that digital technologies invite quasi-enchanted readings, I consider how these “powers” manifest within the design and systems of digital platforms to represent new forms of empire-building and epistemic colonization. In response, I draw upon Kwok Pui-Lan’s call, “postcolonial imagination”, as a framework to develop practices that resist and subvert these colonial dynamics. Ultimately, I argue that faith-based activism must critically address the structural realities of its digital engagement. I conclude by proposing four practices – cultivating technopolitical awareness, challenging knowledge hegemonies, fostering transnational listening and strategic re-engagement – that can “bend” digital Powers toward liberative ends.

Keywords: Digital activism, Digital colonialism, Faith-based activism, Indigenous theology, Digital theology, Advocacy, Powers and principalities

Introduction

For centuries, media technologies have been central in efforts to mobilize people for worthy causes. Multiple examples can be drawn from modern church history. The abolitionists’ extensive use of pamphlets with “facts”, religious polemics and illustrations stands out as one such example; most famously, drawings of the *Brooks* slave ship, which powerfully visualized the cruelty of the slave trade, mobilizing support for the abolitionist cause in Britain and beyond. To give a further example, in their

endeavour to illustrate the relevance of Christian theology for pressing public and social issues in China during the New Culture movement in the 1920s, Chinese Protestant intellectuals at Yenching University made use of the printing of books and periodicals (Chow 2021: 323). A powerful instance of the use of radio in faith-based advocacy work is the broadcasting by El Salvadorian Archbishop Oscar Romero. Through his weekly reporting on the archdiocesan radio station YSAX, he exposed the atrocities committed by the military junta in the late 1970s. As the voice of the voiceless, Romero's broadcasting captivated over half of the Salvadoran population, leading to his assassination on 24 March 1980.

Today, whether e-petitions, social media campaigns, "botivism", the use of messaging platforms, or more disruptive forms of "hacktivism", digital tools are instrumental, if not indispensable, for activists. They support existing organizations and social movements, whilst fuelling new ones. Digital platforms offer greater visibility and a means of mobilizing protests, creating awareness and effecting cultural change. By providing channels of communication for public engagement beyond the control of traditional media gatekeepers and with the promise of instantaneously reaching large populations, digital communication technology affords effective means of activism. The #EndSARS protest against police brutality in Nigeria is a particularly striking example of the power of grassroots faith-based digital activism, discussed by Ikenna Paschal Okpaleke in this special issue as an example of a "lived-out incarnational moment".

However, whilst the internet is burgeoning with socio-political activism in every shape and form, the early optimism regarding the democratizing propensity of the internet has long faded. We are now conscious of the imperialistic ambitions of the tech giants, the extended capability of surveillance, the manipulation of algorithmic systems, disinformation, colonizing epistemologies and the extension of state power. Ominous clouds are growing as domineering forces are gathering momentum.

A basic premise of this article is that in order to reflect on digital activism we need to start by understanding digital technology – or any technology for that matter – as multilayered. At a basic level of digital technology are material artefacts comprised of hardware and software. They are tools that humans use for various ends, not least to communicate. But as tools they are products of certain values, they embody assumptions about the good life, they are designed with certain goals in mind, and they come with affordances which make some actions more plausible than others. As they are negotiated by users in everyday life, they give rise to new social practices and norms. Technology is therefore culture. Technology is also processes and systems, such as algorithms, data extraction systems and management systems, which shape the actions of those who are drawn into their proximity, creating new power dynamics. Digital technology thereby creates environments in which and through which humans negotiate their lives. "The digital" acts in this article as a

shorthand for these layers of digital technology and the environment they give rise to.

An argument that I will pursue is that as these tools, cultures, systems and environments are engaged, negotiated and interacted with, they give rise to forces beyond the intentions of designers, developers and users. These forces are hidden and intangible yet powerfully felt and not quite within anyone's control. A final layer must therefore be added to our understanding of technology, one that might be spoken of as the spiritual dimension. For a vocabulary that adequately conveys this aspect, I turn to American protestant theologian, activist and pacifist Walter Wink as a key interlocutor, employing his concept of "powers and principalities" to speak of the intangible forces operating in digital environments. I argue that this concept – rooted in the New Testament – can provide faith-based activists with a means of "unmasking the Powers" that seek to dominate the digital.

As such, the article makes a contribution by taking a step back from the immediacy of faith-based digital activism to reflect more broadly on the context in which such activities transpire. To avoid perpetuating forces of domination in digital spaces, activists cannot utilize digital technology as mere tools of effective dissemination and mobilisation but must also engage the Powers by developing practices that in themselves are transformative, liberative and decolonizing. Taking heed of Hong Kong-born feminist theologian Kwok Pui-Lan's call, the article will employ a "postcolonial imagination" as a frame to challenge the Powers of empire and colonality within the digital. A postcolonial lens impels faith-based activists to reflect on how they "have colluded with, lent support to, or resisted and subverted empire" (Kwok 2005: 14).

I conclude by proposing four practices – cultivating technopolitical awareness, challenging knowledge hegemonies, fostering transnational listening, and strategic re-engagement – to "bend" digital Powers toward liberative ends.

Given the focus of this special issue of *Ecclesial Futures* on grassroot and indigenous faith-based digital activism, it is appropriate to say a few words regarding my positionality. I enter this discussion as a white Western Protestant theologian with a keen interest in, but admittedly limited lived experience of, indigenous ways of life and theologies or grassroots activism for that matter. I suspect that where my own disposition is most keenly felt in the argument is in its lingering secular tilt. Most of my research to date has been within digital theology, and it is from this vantage point that I engage with this topic and suggest a conceptual vocabulary to better account for the spiritual dimension of digital life.

Developing a Conceptual Language for Faith-based Digital Activism

“Powers and Principalities” and Indigenous Cosmologies

In Wink’s conception, “powers and principalities” refer to spiritual forces behind our “physical, psychic, and social existence”. These Powers are always “incarnate” or manifested in institutions, structures and systems (Wink 1984: 4). They are the intangible “corporate personalities”, the spiritualities, the “more” that undergird social institutions, corporations and communities. And, Wink asserts, “it is the ‘more’ that holds the clue to their profundity” (Wink 1998: 19–21).

For the purposes of this article, it is interesting to note that Wink suggests that such an “integral worldview” is congruent with non-Western worldviews such as those of Buddhism and Native American religion (Wink 1998: 19–21). We could expand the examples listed by Wink to include recent indigenous theologians. For example, through his exploration of the everyday theologies of Sámi peoples in Arctic Europe, Tore Johnsen suggests that a Sami cosmology inspires a less colonial form of Christianity as it assumes non-hierarchical co-dependent relations with an animated creation where elements within nature assume their own dignity and agency (Johnsen 2022). Writing from an American Indian perspective, George Tinker speaks of the *wakonda* as “the Sacred Energy or Mystery or Power” that animates the world. In American Indian worldviews, he argues, impersonal *wakonda* is manifested in personalized spirits which participate in the celestial-human collaboration to maintain the world (Tinker 2008: chapter 4). Similar references to an enchanted world can be found in African theologies. In rejection of the Enlightenment’s spirit/matter dualism and its disenchantment, Kwame Bediako advances a “primal imagination”. He suggests that one contribution that African theology can make today is its endorsement of a unified view of the world – a worldview found in traditional African religion, affirmed by Scriptures and the patristics – that “may help us restore the ancient unity of theology and spirituality” (Bediako 2013: 95). Bediako suggests that the vitality of African Christianity lies in its rootedness in nature and keen awareness of the forces within it: “In this setting of ubiquitous forces and mysterious powers, the Christian who has understood that Jesus Christ is a living reality, can be at home, assured in the faith that Jesus alone is Lord, Protector, Provider and Enabler” (Bediako 2013: 9).

Technology and Enchantment

Wink does not explicitly engage with technology and, with some exceptions, neither does technology feature as an object of theologising in indigenous theologies.¹ Nevertheless, the use of “powers and principalities” can arguably provide a language to speak of the spiritual dimension of life in materialistic technological societies. This might seem counterintuitive; modern technology is often seen as quintessential of Western materialism. As tools, technologies are indeed material objects. However, tools are never merely *tools*. Tools embody human dreams and aspirations, they are value-laden, they play a part in the matrix of human culture-making, they are processes and systems operating in the background of our lives, they give rise to new environments that humans occupy and navigate. It is this sense of technology as processes and systems that resonates most strongly with Wink’s ideas, for he holds that structures and systems embody “powers and principalities”.

There is then a case to be made for a spirituality of technology that chimes with Wink’s “integral worldview”.² Challenging the technology-as-disenchanting narrative, Sam Han suggests that technology shares the same “cosmo-ontology” as religions in that it concerns ultimate questions of meaning and purpose (Han 2016). Powerful quasi-religious myths of human progress in posthumanist movements that spur entrepreneurs and innovators towards the infinite and eternal can serve as an example here. For futurologist Ray Kurzweil, singularity – the point at which humans evolve into superhumans – is “about as close to God that I can imagine” (Kurzweil 2018 (2005): 375). On a more mundane level, whether steam engines, electricity or the latest AI application, humans have frequently attributed “magical powers” to new technologies. Digital technology in particular seems to invite conceptions of technology-as-enchanted. Take the theological categories, or “god-language”, that lend words to our experiences of the digital: the internet is said to be omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent (Reichel 2026). The recent trend towards greater personification of technology through the advancement of artificial intelligence is suggestive. Devin Proctor even speaks of a “cybernetic animism” in which bots, as non-human entities, generate an “animating presence” (Proctor 2019: 238). As subjects from another dimension, such technological agents become partners to humans, or in some cases foes. Whether predictions of superintelligence, whereby robots gain consciousness, will ever materialize is highly contested. However, the felt intimacy

1 There are some publications within digital theology that use concepts from indigenous cultures to shed light on digital practices. Stephen Garner and Terry Pouono, for example, have used the Samoan concept of the *vā* to reflect on online communities and interactions (Garner and Pouono 2021). Another example is Katleho Mokoena’s use of “ubuntu” for a South African contribution to a theological ethics of AI (Mokoena 2024).

2 For a fuller exposition see Kurlberg 2021.

with current chatbots has been widely reported. Many users already turn to these bots for solace, advice, companionship and pastoral support. AI applications might not ontologically be subjects, but they can appear as such to us. This has a powerful impact on our social imagination and actions. I argue then that a conception of technology as enchanted is an expansion of Wink's "integral worldview" which challenges entrenched heaven and earth dualisms in favour of a cosmology in which God's presence is understood to be permeating the universe and the creation.

Traces of such a quasi-enchanted reading of technology can be found in indigenous traditions, not least in the use of rituals where material technological objects are sacralized. Writing from a Ghanaian perspective, digital theologian Agana-Nsiire Agana, however, argues that the turn to traditional religion and spirituality seen in much African theology is unfortunate. This "past-oriented paradigm that reduces Africanness to tradition" does not adequately address the lived religion of ordinary Africans today, which to a large degree is digitally mediated (Agana 2022: 93). Agana suggests that if culture is a source of theology, then theologians need to pay greater attention to the culture of today, and less to that of the past; for contemporary West Africans, their cultural context is not that of past ancestral traditions but is digital. Whilst Agana's concerns are valid, perhaps we do not need to choose between Bediako's turn to African traditional enchanted worldviews and Agana's insistence on digital culture as the site of African theologising today. The theological enterprise of many African theologians could be brought into conversations regarding the construction of an African digital theology that Agana advocates.

I suggest that there are points of connection between Wink's conception, indigenous theologies and an enchanted view of technology, which enable fruitful investigation of the context of digital faith-based activism. Admittedly, real differences do persist and these must be acknowledged. For despite Wink's insistence on the compatibility of his "integral worldview" with non-Western cosmologies, his work remains Western-centred (as does mine). He intends to develop a language beyond Western materialism, but it is unclear whether for Wink the powers and principalities – "the more" of institutions and systems – go beyond psychological and emotive intuitions. In contrast, within indigenous cosmologies the world *is* enchanted; that is, inhabited by spirits and forces. Whilst God's presence in and through creation is not in question, for Wink Powers are largely phenomenologically felt as opposed to ontological beings. These differences are not inconsequential since they may lead to different spiritual practices and means of addressing the forces within the digital (Asamoah-Gyadu 2007: 228). Nevertheless, whilst acknowledging such differences, I suggest that, regardless of whether understood as phenomenological or ontological, Wink provides a constructive and conceptual language for engagement in digital environments. Whilst working from a premise of Christian faith and theology,

I suspect that if at least taken as experiential, this outlook may even be recognizable for those of no faith or other faiths.

Digital Powers and Decolonization

Wink reminds us that Powers are everywhere, that they can be “good” or “fallen”, and that they must be “redeemed” (Wink 1992: 10). When corporations, institutions and communities serve the people, their Powers are benign. But when they cease to do so, when they serve their own ends at the expense of people, they become demonic (Wink 1992: 5). Unmasking the Powers is therefore a task of discernment. What Powers are then operant in the digital, its systems and environments? There are naturally multiple. Some are good, others fallen, but today we would be forgiven for doubting that the resilience of forces of good can stem the onslaught of the malevolent forces at play in the battle over the internet.

It is here, when considering the neo-colonial forces of the internet, that Kwok Pui-Lan’s “postcolonial imagination” becomes a useful resource. Pui-Lan defines postcolonial imagination as “a desire, a determination, and a process of disengagement from the whole colonial syndrome, which takes many forms and guises” (Kwok 2005: 2–3). This entails participating in communities which engage practices and discourses resistant to empire (Kwok 2005: 10). For the purposes of this article, the postcolonial lens trains our gaze in two significant ways. Firstly, it homes in on the Powers at play in empire-building within and through the digital, which I will briefly outline in the following section. Secondly, it forces a conversation about praxis. A postcolonial imagination invites a move towards decolonisation by practices of resistance, by deliberate power redistribution, and by creating transnational communities of sharing and listening. In this way, Kwok helps us ground Wink’s theoretical work. This will be the focus of the final section of the article.

Colonial Dynamics within the Digital

Empire building comes in different guises through different actors, yet we have been trained into a methodological nationalism which imagines empire building as centred around the nation state and can therefore fail to notice its occurrence outside these boundaries.³ Even the origins of the British Empire can be traced to crude pirating and the advancement of private enterprises; it was only at a later stage that the

3 The term “methodological nationalism” was coined by Ulrich Beck. Beck argues that our socio-political analysis and research are all too often based on a methodological nationalism which fails to understand the cosmopolitan or cross-national social, political, religious and economic dynamics of the world today (Beck 2007).

Crown took over the helm. In a similar vein, empire building continues today not only through state actors, but also through the ambitions of entrepreneurs and private enterprises. Digital empire building, whilst certainly deeply geopolitical, is perhaps less geographically territorial than previous manifestations. It manifests itself in the info wars and the battles to control the information that floods users' social media walls. It is seen in ubiquitous digital surveillance, whether state-sponsored or under the auspices of corporations. It is expressed in the expansive application of persuasive technology, which, through design mechanisms, seeks to manipulate users into acting or thinking in certain ways (Fogg 2003). It advances its own forms of cultural and epistemological colonialism. This is evident in the linguistic dominance of English on the internet, which serves the purposes of the tech giants who stand to profit from homogeneity. This digital colonialism is also seen in the bias towards American culture in Generative AI responses, which are based on statistical inferences made from the model's training data (Palta and Rudinger 2023). Underlying all of this is the struggle over data. Empires have always been built on the extraction of valuable goods and materials from conquered lands. Today, data extraction is the source of wealth of digital forms of imperialism. As such, Ulises Mejias and Nick Couldry speak of "data colonialism", by which the tech giants extract data from users. The power dynamics of this form of colonialism follow those of former colonial enterprises. It ultimately benefits a small elite and leaves the powerless exploited (Mejias and Couldry 2024).

Algorithms in the Service of Empire

An instructive example of the workings of digital colonialism is that of the operations of algorithms. On a basic technological level, algorithms are sequences that follow a set of rules to complete computational tasks. Whilst not strictly algorithms, in popular use the term is associated with the "recommender systems" that determine what content, such as ads and social media posts, users are exposed to. It is according to this popular understanding that algorithms will be discussed here.

Some years ago, Shoshana Zuboff made a significant contribution with her *Surveillance Capitalism*, problematizing the tech giants' business model based on monetizing personal data (Zuboff 2019). Personal data is collected to create user profiling. Individuals that match certain profiles can then be microtargeted with relevant marketing content. The effectiveness of data-driven marketing lies in the possibility of targeted messaging that with eerie precision manipulates individuals at an emotive, dare we say spiritual level. Algorithms are a central design feature of this operation. A positive spin on the use of algorithms would point to their usefulness in exposing individuals to content and products that might be of interest or use to them. A more sinister reading would point to the fact that companies and political actors seek to manipulate users for financial or political gain.

This business model is dependent on users spending as much time as possible on platforms whilst conferring a maximum amount of data. Therefore, the algorithms are set up to keep users engaged. What engages users is normally content that draws an emotive reaction. Some of the outcomes of such uses of “recommender systems” are innocent: reels of cute jumping cats that make people laugh, content about the sports team people love or recipes of mouthwatering dishes from around the world. Whilst this content promotion is fairly harmless, it still has an impact on users’ behaviour and how they engage online. To give an example from religious engagement, Peter Phillips has suggested that therapeutic content which speaks of God’s favour in the individual’s life elicits stronger emotive reactions on social media. It is therefore this content is algorithmically promoted rather than propositional posts highlighting God’s character, nature or will (Phillips 2020). In this way, in order to be seen, heard and affirmed users need to submit to the rules of the algorithmic authorities.

More worryingly, content that expresses strong sentiments is algorithmically promoted at the expense of viewpoints that are nuanced and measured. Whilst it is difficult to quantify the impact of this, there is extensive research that suggests that such design features impact the ideas and sentiments expressed in the digital public square, and consequently, the socio-political sentiments of users. It has also contributed to the polarized socio-political climate that we find ourselves in. According to Wink’s conceptualization, algorithms are in this sense demonic, embodying the spirit of greed of “empire” over the wellbeing of people and society.

A decolonial lens will further problematize how algorithms contribute to a colonization of knowledge. Algorithms are part of the regimes of knowledge that govern the content people are exposed to. For whilst everyone can share content online, not everyone will be read, heard, or seen. Firstly, platforms will promote content that has been paid for; those with financial resources can therefore ensure that their content appears high up in Google’s search rankings. Secondly, algorithms accelerate content that is already popular, leading to biases and obscuring marginal voices. Thirdly, algorithms personalize content, catering to users’ tastes and interests. In the process, they reinforce echo chambers that sustain the ignorance of users, by concealing ideas they would not normally encounter. Fourthly, human voices are drowned in the ocean of bots who manipulate algorithms and masquerade as human actors seeking to sway public opinion.

Whilst the consequences of these design features might be unintended, they manifest a colonizing spirit within the digital. Using the language of “powers and principalities” in this context provides words to express the experience of being up against something bigger and more fundamental than the immediate applications of technological artefacts. It captures the powerful forces at play in the digital world that we cannot quite grasp or control but that tangibly work upon us. This sense is only amplified by the fact that the operationality of these systems is becoming too

complex for even their designers to fully understand. The reality that algorithms remain opaque to us, that their impact upon us is tangible but not quite measurable, and that there is a lack of transparency about how they work, make them appear mysterious to us. Algorithms are part of the systems and structures of the digital and are therefore not the Powers in Wink's understanding of the term. Rather, they embody the "more" of the Powers. Powers and principalities accordingly speak of that which is not entirely under human control. It is also here that the framework goes beyond the claims concerning digital power dynamics in the existing literature and the socio-political framings discussed above.

Developing Decolonizing Practices for Digital Faith-Based Activism

Wink's insistence that the Powers are not inherently evil but also good, enables us to hold in tension the seemingly disparate dynamics of democratization and colonialization that are manifest in the digital at the same time. They are both part of the reality of our digital engagement, and therefore rather than withdrawal, they call for engagement. This invites us to adopt a decolonial posture, mindset and practice in the environments and contexts of our engagement. What gives us hope is Wink's insistence that fallen Powers can be transformed and that there is the possibility of "bending" them back to their divine purposes (Wink 1998: 35). In the context of algorithmic influence, this requires creative intentionality. Foregrounding Kwok's call for a postcolonial imagination in the face of imperialism, I will finish by proposing a few suggestions of what such "bending" might concretely entail.

Engaging the Powers through Technopolitics

The first practice relates to how digital technologies can be used in digital activism – for technopolitical purposes – and its implications. Despite the positive potential of digital activism, scholars investigating this phenomenon have observed several potential weaknesses. Digital social movements tend to be unstable because, whilst there is huge potential to mobilise large groups of people in a short period of time, digital activists "organize around emotion" rather than shared values (George and Leidner 2019: 15). The lack of clear leadership structures, shared values and goals can lead to internal fragmentation and conflict.

Activists working towards justice are, furthermore, not the only actors struggling for prominence on online platforms. Authoritarian political actors also exploit the possibilities afforded by digital media. Far-right movements mobilize political bots giving a false impression of the popularity of their ideas and normalizing them. For powerful groups, market actors and governments, digital technology creates unprecedented possibilities of surveillance and therefore control. However, for

Zeynep Tufekci, the greatest obstacle to activist movements is disinformation rather than Orwellian types of totalitarian surveillance society. Through social media, those “defending the status quo only [have] to create enough confusion to paralyze people into inaction” (Tufekci 2017: xxix). In other words, by flooding social media with disinformation, malevolent political actors are not primarily establishing alternative truths but creating an environment of distrust and apathy.

This is all the more reason for grassroots movements to improve their level of digital literacy. For example, by understanding how algorithms work and co-ordinating the sharing of the same post simultaneously so that they can algorithmically boost their content. Or by encouraging “metavoicing” by understanding what content is likely to gain traction and sharing and commenting on such posts. Such digital activism has been dismissed as “slacktivism” for the low level of commitment it requires. However, in their survey of digital activism, Jordana George and Dorothy Leidner argue that there are empirical grounds for asserting that simple “clicktivism”, the liking, sharing and commenting on activists’ posts on social media, can effect change in attitudes and encourage individuals to take political action (George and Leidner 2019). Furthermore, in contexts of authoritarian surveillance, even a like or retweet comes with considerable risk for the individual.

This does, however, raise important questions about ethics and about the thin line between sharing information and manipulation. As already discussed above, it is the content that is emotively loaded that is likely to gain traction. Further, should activist movements engage in “botivism”, employing non-human agents to further their messages? Or should they be involved in “hacktivism”? Some forms of “hacktivism” seek to disrupt, expose and even destroy, but there are however more benevolent forms. Indigitous, the digital mission offspring of Cru International, has for example organized hackathons for the purposes of creating tools for missions. During a hackathon in 2019, they created a chatbot that disrupts human trafficking by enticing potential buyers of sexual services into conversations about their behaviour.⁴

Challenging the Hegemony of Knowledge

A second practice involves challenging the hegemony of knowledge advanced through the internet. A central aspect of the work of activism involves increasing knowledge and changing attitudes towards certain issues. The internet is without comparison the greatest global bank of knowledge in history. As such, by being present online, indigenous and grass-roots movements are making visible alternative ways of doing,

4 <https://indigitous.org/article/hackathon-creates-chatbot-to-disrupt-human-trafficking/>, accessed 23 December 2025.

seeing and thinking. Their presence and visibility are in themselves decolonizing. Here we can point to several examples in the articles of this special issue of *Ecclesial Futures*. Steve Taylor's case study evidences how Oceanic digital grassroots activism sheds light on indigenous eco-theologies. Tai Ragui's research illustrates how digital media technology can become a means of preserving indigenous heritage that would otherwise have been lost. This work becomes all the more important with the development of Large Language Models (LLMs) that are quickly replacing the search engine as the first port of call when users scavenge the internet for information. AI chatbots can only provide users with ideas and responses based on their training data. Yet a real challenge in this regard is that AI-generated responses are based on predictive inferences. That means that there is a built-in bias towards the most prevalent viewpoints and ideas within the data set of LLMs. Without specific prompting, minority groups' outlooks and data are likely to be omitted from AI-generated outputs. One could argue that having more indigenous and other minority group data available at least raises the likelihood that their knowledge will gain visibility.

It is also important to acknowledge that whilst digital media does permit the spread of knowledge and ideas, when such knowledge or practices are digitally mediated they are always renegotiated into something different. I am struck by an example shared by Steve Taylor of a beautiful video of traditional Pasefika mat weaving.⁵ The video adopts the widespread use of short videos and reels on platforms to visualize this tradition. But whilst it becomes a means of displaying Pasefika culture, the format of the video – the cutting of clips, the superimposed text overlays and the chirpy music – is that of popular “explainer videos” prevalent online. Thus, the video showcases indigenous practices and traditions, making these available to a larger audience, but it has been presented in a new form, adjusted to the grammar of digital culture and therefore transformed into a new cultural artefact.

Developing a Postcolonial Listening

Transnational engagement and mutuality are central to how Kwok envisions postcolonial projects. Here digital technology offers the possibility of a third practice consisting of providing spaces where such encounters and listening can transpire. We can here mention the growing trend of producing podcasts that invite a conversational mode of communication. Some of the more successful podcasts have set up adjunct communities in which individuals are encouraged to continue to exchange ideas and engage in further conversation. A further example is how video-conferencing technologies allow for the gathering of people from communities across

5 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yEcn-vxo9vk>, accessed 4 January 2026.

the world. Majority world scholars who might in the past have been excluded from academic conferences due to prohibitive costs or visa restrictions can now participate. Such technologies have, for example, been central to the annual conferences of the Global Network for Digital Theology, allowing theologians around the world to meaningfully exchange ideas. This has been essential to the identity and vitality of the network.⁶

Re-engagement as Challenging the Hegemony of Digital Empires

A final and fourth practice concerns engagement that directly challenges digital colonialism. I have suggested that the presence of grassroots movements in digital spaces can be decolonizing. Even so, that much of such presence transpires on dominant platforms is not without its drawbacks. We have already discussed the problematic business model of many of the leading tech firms. We see a continuous practice of takeovers of startups furthering hegemony and undermining democratic pluralism. The sheer power of the tech giants means that the industry can resist calls for regulation and accountability by state actors (see (Van Dijck, Poell and de Waal 2018: Chapter 7). The current AI race is a case in point, where many governments are nervous to regulate out of fear of losing out on important financial growth. To use digital tools and platforms does mean participating in this economy.

Thus, whilst the platforms of Meta offer unprecedented opportunities in terms of reach, from a postcolonial perspective the trade-offs are apparent. As Kwok suggests, a postcolonial imagination requires a “process of disengagement” from the processes of colonization. One way of doing so is not necessarily total disengagement but a re-engagement by considering alternative platforms, such as those that depend on a different business model and ethos, and perhaps even where the algorithmic influences are minimized. Ecosia, for example, functions as an alternative search engine but, unlike Google, it does not sell user data. It still makes money from ads, but all profit goes towards planting trees and other projects to combat climate change. Ecosia claims to have contributed to the planting of 250 million trees, and its financial reports are published online for added transparency.⁷ There are also a number of alternative messaging platforms. Signal has become the favoured platform amongst activists as it places a premium on privacy and is not-for-profit. It instead operates on donations and grants. Critics will, however, argue that its end-to-end encryption enables illegal activity. Another messaging platform, Discord, has become popular amongst avid gamers, which is reflected in its quirky aesthetics. Whilst it is free to use, the platform is a profit-making company building revenue by

6 For transparency, this is a network that I chair.

7 <https://www.ecosia.org>, accessed 17 June 2026.

offering subscriptions to certain perks and benefits. Much of the critique against the tech giants, however, relates to the design of their social media platforms, which most prominently use algorithms to target users and where some of the more abusive behaviours can be found. Since Elon Musk's purchase of the social media platform X and his public alignment with right-wing populism and far-right politics, many users have left the platform.⁸ Some have shifted to Bluesky, which has positioned itself as being a more decentralized microblogging platform where users have greater control over the content that they view. The company has promised not to sell personal data. Yet the downside is that whilst its popularity is growing, it has to date just 40 million users, which limits its possible reach in comparison to the market-leading social media platforms.

Such re-engagement is consistent with Wink's "third way" of *engaging* the Powers in nonviolent ways. This can be especially effective as companies are subject to the market and are sensitive to consumer preferences. Despite the dominance of the tech giants, they are susceptible to reputational damage and consumer pressure. In its relatively short timespan, the internet era has seen a number of platforms emerge as powerful players only to subsequently falter as users have found other platforms. Could this kind of engagement therefore be viewed as a means of bending the digital Powers back into their proper place?

Conclusion

All of the practical suggestions that I have discussed could admittedly apply to digital activism in general. Lots of groups and movements are mobilising through digital media technology, seeking to bring peace, different forms of justice, equality and so forth. Faith-based digital activist groups use the same digital tools and often in similar ways. What, then, differentiates faith-based digital activism from other forms of digital activism? The answer is, in part, that its source of motivation is rooted in the grammar of faith.

I have argued that the language of "powers and principalities" provides activists with a conceptual language to speak of the realities of their struggles. When St Paul wrote that "our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places (Eph. 6.12 (NRSV))", he was not resigning to defeatism. Rather, he was highlighting the fact that there are greater domineering forces at play than is immediately apparent. In relation to faith-based digital activism, the language of Powers draws attention to the forces behind

8 Despite this, the total number of registered users on X has continued to grow in recent years.

contemporary digital empire-building. By ignorantly participating in the economies of their platforms, they risk, as Kwok warns, perpetuating the forces that they seek to overcome. Employing a postcolonial imagination in their digital activism invites activists to call “digital powers and principalities” to serve their proper ends, that is to serve humanity and creation.

Finally, in the popular imagination, religion is largely seen as otherworldly and as having little relevance for the real everyday struggles of people. However, engaging an enchanted cosmology renders such a dualism obsolete. In the integral world-view that Wink and others advance, material problems matter because they are also spiritual. This bestows our material actions with eternal significance. Further, this biblical imagery holds in tension the fallen Powers and God’s ultimate rule over them. With this assurance, activists can retain hope even in the face of adversity, for their efforts are ultimately not in vain.

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BOOK REVIEW

**Mario Rico C. Jacoba and Agnes M. Brazal.
2025. *Cyberchurch Neighborhood of Others
(Kapwa): An Ecclesiological Model for a
Digital Age***

Bangkok, Thailand
eISBN 978-974-487-172-5

Reviewed by Raymund P. Banaticla

This review evaluates *Cyberchurch Neighborhood of Others (Kapwa)*, which presents a comprehensive ecclesiological model rooted in Global South realities and Filipino theology. Rico Costa Jacoba and Agnes M. Brazal argue that cyberspace is a genuine relational environment for authentic Christian communion rather than a mere technical tool.

The authors integrate the Parable of the Good Samaritan with the Filipino concepts of *kapwa* (shared inner self) and *pakikipagkapwa* (engaging the other) to define digital neighborliness as a practice of compassion and responsibility toward the vulnerable. By reimagining Avery Dulles' classic models of the Church, they demonstrate how ecclesial life "subsists" in digital "sacramental nodes" of mission and solidarity. Emphasizing the experiences of migrants and the marginalized, this work reframes digital ministry as a postcolonial practice of accompaniment, offering a vital framework for contemporary missiology and religious education.

Rico Casta Jacoba develops in this book the ecclesiological model he first proposed in his doctoral dissertation at De La Salle University, where he described the church as "Cyberchurch neighborhood of others". His academic work focuses on faith, pedagogy and digital culture in Filipino Catholic life, with particular attention to migrants and digital natives whose everyday religious practices already move across digital platforms. His co-author, Agnes M. Brazal, is a prominent Filipino theologian known for her contributions to liberation and postcolonial ethics, migration theology and cyber theology, and she has helped shape Asian theological discussion on social communication and digital media.

Writing together, Jacoba and Brazal bring a Global South, postcolonial lens to their subject. Their starting point is the conviction that theology must take seriously

the experience of those who are marginalized, and they apply this conviction to the digital sphere where inequalities and exclusions also operate. The book appears at a moment of rapid digital transformation, heightened by the COVID19 pandemic, when many churches moved quickly into online and hybrid forms of worship and community. Much of the existing literature on digital religion and online church arises from North Atlantic contexts and often concentrates on specific questions such as liturgy, leadership, or online authority. In contrast, Jacoba and Brazal set out to offer a comprehensive ecclesiological model that is rooted in Filipino experience and attentive to wider Global South realities.

Their central claim is that Cyberchurch neighborhood of others (*kapwa*) should be regarded as a full model of church for the digital age, not simply as a temporary emergency measure or a digital extension of the parish. For them, cyberspace is not a neutral tool but a real relational environment in which authentic neighborly relations and Christian communion can develop, even among believers who are widely scattered geographically. The book speaks to theologians, missionaries, religious educators and church leaders who recognize that the main question has shifted from “how do we stream?” to “what kind of Church is taking shape online, and who is included or excluded in that process?”

The authors develop their case in three major movements. First, they describe the range of online church and Christian community expressions that have emerged over recent decades. They focus in particular on contexts where people feel distant from institutional Church life, on the experience of migrants and diaspora communities who rely on digital platforms for sustaining faith and relationships, and on the pandemic, when even very traditional congregations had to adopt online and hybrid forms. In these situations they identify a spectrum stretching from “religion online”, which centres on information and broadcaststyle content, to “online religion”, which involves interaction, participation and community building. They then locate Cyberchurch within this spectrum, arguing that many digital communities already function as real church even if existing ecclesiology has been slow to recognize them.

Second, they construct the theological core of their model. Luke 10.25-37 (the Parable of the Good Samaritan) is read alongside Emmanuel Levinas’ ethics of the face of the Other and Filipino concepts such as *kapwa*, a shared inner self, and *paki-kipagkapwa*, engaging another as an extension of one’s own self. In this framework, *kapwa* describes a shared interiority that connects “one of us” and “not one of us”, without erasing difference. “Neighbor” is thus defined less by physical closeness and more by the responsibility to respond to the vulnerable other encountered along life’s pathways, including digital roads. Liberationist concern for those at the margins deepens this reading. The Good Samaritan becomes a paradigm for digital ethics in cyberspace as a new Jericho Road, people carry wounds of exclusion, exploitation and loneliness, and may be overlooked or harmed through online indifference or

hostility. In this context, *pakikipagkapwa* names a deliberate practice of neighborly compassion choosing to notice, pause and care for others encountered on screens and platforms.

Third, Jacoba and Brazal test and integrate their proposal using Avery Dulles' classic models of the Church Institution, Communion, Sacrament, Herald, Servant, Community of Disciples and his theological criteria such as Scripture, tradition, identity and mission, Christian virtues, contemporary experience, fruitfulness and relations with those outside the Church. They argue that Christ's Church "subsists" in Cyberchurch as a "sacramental node" of communion and mission, even though that life is mediated digitally. Each of Dulles' models is reimagined for digital settings: institutional aspects appear in moderated platforms, online governance and community guidelines; communion takes the form of networked relationships that cross geographical boundaries; sacramentality is expressed through mediated experiences of presence, prayer and sacramental practice; herald and servant roles show up in digital preaching, teaching, advocacy and solidarity; and the community of disciples is seen in groups that learn, serve and discern together using digital tools. Throughout, the authors stress that digital environments are marked by racism, sexism, classism and other forms of exclusion, and that any faithful Cyberchurch must confront these realities rather than ignore them.

The book's argument is coherent and well organized. The image of the neighborhood of others (*kapwa*) provides a strong throughline that holds together the descriptive, theological, and ecclesiological parts of the work. By moving from mapping practice, to constructing a theological synthesis, to evaluating the model through Dulles' categories, the authors offer a structure that connects lived experience with doctrinal reflection in a clear way. This makes the book accessible to readers with pastoral and practical interests while still engaging those concerned with systematic theology.

The theological and theoretical framework is one of the book's most notable strengths. By drawing on Dulles' models, the authors locate their argument within a recognized ecclesiological tradition and show how that tradition can respond to digital change. At the same time, their use of *kapwa* and *pakikipagkapwa* pushes beyond many Western accounts of digital religion. These Filipino concepts challenge individualistic assumptions by presenting the self as fundamentally relational and responsible, an approach that fits the realities of shared online life better than notions of isolated users. By integrating liberation and postcolonial perspectives, they keep questions of power and exclusion central, and thus contribute to broader efforts to decolonize both theology and media studies.

In terms of approach, the book offers a contextual, literaturebased theological construction rather than a report of new empirical fieldwork. The authors work with existing descriptions of online church, case examples and pastoral experience,

weaving these with scriptural and theological sources to build a normative model meant to guide both reflection and practice. Their movement between digital experience, Scripture, tradition and Filipino culture accords with established methods in contextual and practical theology and supports their stated aim of equipping churches and scholars with a usable theological framework.

Their engagement with sources is broad and careful. They converse with foundational work on digital religion and digital liturgy, with liberation and postcolonial thought and with Filipino psychology, while also drawing on Jacoba's earlier dissertation research and Brazil's contributions to the theme of *pakikipagkapwa* and resistance.

Several features stand out as particular strengths. The book offers a clear and substantial model of Cyberchurch that moves past technical "howto" guidance and addresses deeper questions of identity, presence and mission. It foregrounds Filipino and Global South perspectives, thereby widening the scope of digital ecclesiology, which has often been dominated by North Atlantic voices. It consistently keeps migrants and other marginalized groups at the center of discussion, resisting idealized views of digital spaces as automatically equal. It insists that cyberspace can be a genuine context for God's action and ecclesial life, and not merely a secondary or inferior setting.

At the same time, the book has some limitations. Because it does not present original empirical research on particular Cyberchurch communities, its model remains at a theological and conceptual level and invites further testing and refinement in local studies. Readers who are less familiar with philosophy or contextual theology may find parts of the argument demanding. Although the authors identify crucial issues such as the digital divide, economic constraints and the exclusion of people with disabilities, they do not offer detailed policy or pastoral strategies for addressing these; that work will need to be done by others who adopt and adapt the model in specific contexts.

The contribution of the book to theology, missionaries and religious education is substantial. It is one of the clearest attempts so far to understand Cyberchurch as a full ecclesiological model rather than a temporary fix or optional add-on. It complements existing literature on digital religion and worship while adding a distinctive Filipino and Global South voice. For missiological reflection, the book reframes digital mission as accompaniment and *pakikipagkapwa* presence rather than content dissemination or numerical growth, emphasizing solidarity with those who are online, mobile, displaced, or distant from traditional structures. In religious education, it encourages viewing digital platforms as neighborhoods of learning and faith, and it calls educators to design practices that are participatory, networked, and context-sensitive, especially for young people and diaspora communities.

As a doctoral student working on ecclesiology, formation and religious education in the Philippine context, I find myself both affirmed and challenged by this work. It supports the conviction that digital environments are real and significant spaces for church life and pushes me to examine more closely how online practices shape identity, authority and community in the settings I research. The focus on *kapwa* and *pakikipagkapwa* encourages me to center Filipino categories in my own analytical framework rather than relying primarily on Western concepts. It also inspires me to think about advocacy and accessibility in digital ministry, especially for those who are most at risk of being left out.

Overall, *Cyberchurch Neighborhood of Others (Kapwa)* is a timely and important contribution to current thinking about church in digital contexts. It extends key discussions in digital religion and digital liturgy, brings a muchneeded Filipino and Global South perspective to digital ecclesiology, and offers a theological model that can guide future research and practice.

About the Reviewer

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BOOK REVIEW

**Mario Fischer and Thomas-Andreas Pöder
(eds). 2025. *Die Kirche Jesu Christi / The
Church of Jesus Christ: The Contribution of
the Reformation towards Ecumenical Dialogue
on Church Unity***

Leuenberger Texte/Leuenberg Documents 1. 6th revised edition
Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt
eISBN (PDF) 978-3-374-07944-5

Reviewed by Patrick Todjeras

The sixth revised edition of this landmark document of the Leuenberg Church Fellowship – now the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE) – arrives at a moment when questions of ecclesial identity, visible unity and the missional credibility of Protestant churches have lost none of their urgency. Originally adopted at the Fourth General Assembly in Vienna-Lainz on 9 May 1994, *The Church of Jesus Christ* represents the first shared self-reflection of the Reformation churches in Europe on the nature, marks and mission of the church. Republished here in a bilingual critical edition under the editorship of Mario Fischer and Thomas-Andreas Pöder, the volume makes this ecumenical study document accessible to a new generation of scholars and practitioners. This review focuses on the full text of the study document as reproduced in the appendix to the German edition, where the English version (*The Church of Jesus Christ: The Contribution of the Reformation towards Ecumenical Dialogue on Church Unity*) is published in its entirety.

The document is structured around three interlocking movements. Chapter I establishes a theological ontology of the church, grounding ecclesial existence in the justifying action of the triune God (§1.1). The church is confessed as *creatura Verbi* – constituted not from below by sociological aggregation but from above by the living witness of the gospel as the instrument of the Holy Spirit (§1.2). This Reformation axiom shapes the document's entire approach: the unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity of the church are not aspirational programmes but given attributes of divine origin (§2.3). The document's treatment of the *notae ecclesiae*

(§2.4) is theologically precise and ecumenically significant. It distinguishes, with Lutheran and Reformed confessional sources, between the classic marks of word and sacrament and the further marks discussed by Luther in *Von den Konzilien und Kirchen* (1539), including discipline, suffering and the obedience of the second table. Crucially, the text insists that “word and sacrament are the primary, i.e. the original and elementary marks of the true church” (§2.4.3), while simultaneously integrating “witness and service” (*Zeugnis und Dienst*) as constitutive of both ecclesial structure and individual Christian life (§2.5). This nuanced articulation avoids two recurrent pathologies: an activist ecclesiology that dissolves proclamation into social service, and a liturgical quietism that severs the gathered community from its commission in the world.

From the perspective of missional church theory, Chapter II is the document's most provocative contribution. Here the Leuenberg theologians confront the plural, post-Christendom context of European societies with remarkable directness. The church is called to be simultaneously confessing, pastoral, helping, and prophetically critical – and, above all, *missionary* (§2.5). The text argues that the church's openness towards the world “is not rooted in its social context, but in the gospel itself” (§2.6), a formulation that anticipates later discussions in the missional church literature about the distinction between mission as ecclesial programme and mission as *missio Dei* participation. The four dimensions of Christian commission – *leiturgia*, *martyria*, *diakonia* and *koinonia* (§3.2) – are not presented as discrete functions but as unified expressions of election and calling. The document's attention to the Volk-skirche problematic (§3.2) and to the witness potential of minority church situations is pastorally realistic without lapsing into ecclesiological romanticism.

Chapter III engages the ecumenical implications of the Reformation understanding of church unity. The document's foundational claim – that agreement in the understanding of the gospel as the message of justification is both *necessary and sufficient* for church communion in word and sacrament (§1.1, §1.3) – constitutes what it calls a “model of unity” (§4) that the CPCE commends to the wider *oikumene*. The document employs the concept of “unity in reconciled diversity” to describe the fellowship achieved through the Leuenberg Agreement, a concept that has entered the broader ecumenical vocabulary. The treatment of the compatibility of bilateral dialogues (§3.2) is particularly instructive for churches navigating multiple ecumenical commitments simultaneously.

Several critical observations deserve attention. First, the document's ecclesiological method, while theologically rigorous, operates largely within the parameters of classical confessionalism. The interplay between pneumatology and ecclesiology, though present (§1.2–1.3), is less developed than one might expect given the pneumatological renaissance in ecumenical theology since the Canberra Assembly (1991), which the document itself references. Second, the section on dialogue with other

religions (§3.2) reflects the cautious consensus of its 1994 context; subsequent CPCE studies, including *Church and Israel* (2001), have developed these trajectories further, as the editors acknowledge in a footnote. Third, the document's sociological diagnosis of plural societies, while perceptive for its time, predates the post-secular turn and the emergence of digital culture as a theological locus – challenges that contemporary readers will need to supplement from elsewhere.

These limitations notwithstanding, *The Church of Jesus Christ* remains an ecclesiological achievement of considerable stature. Its integration of justification theology, ecclesiology, and missiology in a single coherent framework anticipates much of what the missional church conversation has struggled to articulate. The document's insistence that "the activity of the church must point away from itself" (§2.2) – that ecclesial practice gains credibility precisely when it witnesses to the justifying action of the triune God rather than to its own institutional competence – reads as prophetic against the backdrop of contemporary institutional church decline. The call for churches to remain "recognizable" (§2.6) in plural societies through gathering around word and sacrament while remaining genuinely open to the world offers a coherent alternative to both sectarian withdrawal and cultural accommodation.

The bilingual format of this sixth edition, making the document simultaneously accessible to German-language and international scholarly communities, is an editorial decision that reflects well the CPCE's own commitment to the "fullest possible cooperation in witness and service" (Leuenberg Agreement §29). Readers of *Ecclesial Futures* with interests in Protestant ecclesiology, ecumenical theology and the theology of mission will find this document an indispensable interlocutor.

About the Reviewer

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BOOK REVIEW

Joshua Cockayne and Gideon Salter. 2025. *Why We Gather: Psychology, Theology, and Liturgical Practice*

Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press
ISBN 9781481322911

Reviewed by Kristine Stache

What do we mean when we say individuals share an experience of worship? Does it matter if we worship together in one space or not? What happens when we attend to something with someone? Why is this important “for a life of faith” (3)?

These are but a few of the questions Joshua Cockayne and Gideon Salter explore in their book, *Why We Gather: Psychology, Theology, and Liturgical Practice*. As a theologian and psychologist respectively, these authors spent “half a decade of collaboration, discussion, and friendship,” focusing on the gathering of people in Christian worship (1). For them, “The significance of a project like this, we hope, is not confined only to *what* we have argued, but also to *how* we have argued it ... we have sought to show the ways in which the disciplines might complement and inform one another” (139).

From the beginning of the book, the authors make the claim that “ritual behavior plays a formative role in the development of human thinking and feeling” (34). Rituals and practices matter in the formation and identity of communities of faith. More specifically, they position “the place of liturgy as an important part of this development” (35). Liturgies are more the words we speak together. In the shared language and movements “humans can establish some of the world as shared with others, what some have termed ‘shared situations’” (35).

Six chapters, bookended with an introduction and conclusion, make *Why We Gather* a fairly quick read, without compromising its thoughtful inquiry. The ultimate goal for Cockayne and Salter is that readers will understand liturgy as something more than just what people do together, but that liturgical practices “allow participants to *share attention* with other people and thereby create rich and varied experiences of jointness with others” (9). *Jointness* and *joint attention* are two important terms for this work, with research on these characteristics informing the case

the authors make in this book. The latter, *joint attention*, is defined as the “ability to attend to some feature of the world with another person, with the awareness that this attention is shared” (6). It is in this sharing attention with one another that creates a sense of *jointness* (9). Something, they argue, happens in the shared attending that transcends a mere shared experience. It is in the difference between an individual’s participation in a group experience and a shared experience with shared attention where a participant’s understanding shifts to understanding “that their actions form part of a wider ‘We’” (39). This, the authors claim, deepens a community’s sense of identity.

Chapter 1 grounds their work on liturgy anthropologically. Rejecting more traditional models of experience, they lay out an argument for how “rituals shape human beings because they are social creatures, whose minds and bodies are shaped through engagement with others” (36). This sets the reader up for chapter 2, which looks at how this experience is not just about engagement with one another but also with God. How does our shared experience in worship differ from other kinds of shared experiences? Liturgy, they argue, “allows participants to mutually attend to God in concrete, bodily ways” (42).

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 speak to practices and rituals that weave in and through liturgy-prayer, giving thanks and remembering. While each of these practices is distinctive, all contribute to shared attending within the worship experience in their unique ways. Communal prayer draws those gathered deeper into their “communal life of God” (61). The practice of gratitude, in song and prayer, creates space to share emotions within the community. And finally, the acts of remembrance, as in the Eucharist, connect this sense of jointness beyond the current community into the past. The authors refer to this as the theory of *actualization*, allowing individuals to “experience events of the past in a way that unites the community throughout history” (12).

Chapter 6 focuses on the limits of their argument concerning jointness. Who is included and who is not when it comes to a shared experience? Do participants need to experience a shared event in the same way for it to unite them with each other and with God? They conclude that “all members of the community have a role to play in shaping the sense of jointness, even if they cannot contribute in the same way” (132).

So, who might benefit from reading this book? Three groups come to mind immediately:

- Those who love to think and reflect about theology through a multitude of disciplines. Science and religion, for example, are not in opposition to one another, but each offers insight into further understanding the great mystery of God and God’s good creation. This book offers content and method for such conversations.

- Those who are curious as to what God is up to in and through the gathering of all the generations of God's people in time and place and across time and place, and how we are formed in and through the gathering, particularly liturgically. Practitioners, worship leaders and scholars alike can find something to ponder. This kind of discussion is about what we as people gathered do, how we do it, and where God is in the midst of it all.
- Those who are curious about communal formation, beyond merely participation of a community's members. Leaders designing ministry experiences intergenerationally may benefit in particular. We, as beings created for relationality by a God that exists in relationship with Godself and creation, continue to be formed in Christ. How ministry leaders design experiences contributes to a shared understanding of our life together in Christ.

The gift of this book lies in its ability to put new language (at least for this reviewer) into conversation with familiar language, and to think further about how the roles of ritual and practices, worship in particular, contribute to communal formation. The final words of the conclusion speak to the ultimate purpose of such conversation:

While communal prayer might lead to social cohesion, and group gratitude to social inclusion, pursuing the life of worship solely for its social benefits is missing a crucial part of the theological impetus for worship, and even attempts to naturalize liturgy must engage with its theological rationale; liturgy provides a means of joining attention with one who is worthy of worship, praise, and adoration. "For from him and through in and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen" Romans 11:36. (141)

About the Reviewer

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BOOK REVIEW

Clare Watkins and James Butler. 2026. *Christian Faith and Christian Learning. A Theological Action Research Account*

New York: Abingdon
ISBN: 978-1-032-57558-2 (hbk)

Reviewed by Felix Eiffler

Clare Watkins and James Butler present with this book a theological-action-research-oriented project they conducted on eight sites of Christian formation and learning within British Methodism.

The book consists of three parts. Part 1 (“The problem with Christian learning and a theological action research response”) offers a theoretical introduction “to help the reader orientate themselves to the research described in the main body of the book” (13) and encompasses three chapters.

The first chapter reflects on the discourse on Christian learning and discipleship and the authors “have had a sense that what is most often being described in these works ... doesn’t quite ‘fit’ with what we were hearing and seeing ›on the ground” (15). Watkins/Butler observe that the topic of discipleship and lay vocation “has too readily and uncritically reached education and learning as *the* practical response” (26) and “this ecclesial revisioning is viewed is too often that of the professional or clergy educator” (26). The problem lies within an interpretation of the Christian tradition primarily (and sometimes exclusively) through the lens of adult education and in doing so, neglecting a profound theological approach to questions of spiritual formation (prayer, holiness, etc.). Similarly, the description of the church as a learning community falls short of genuine theological descriptions of church as the body of Christ, etc.

The second chapter asks about the *propria* of Christian learning and formation: “What are the theological realities – realities of Trinitarian presence and agency – at play within the practices and understanding of Christian learning?” (39) For this attempt they turn first to contemporary research on Jesus’ own way of teaching according to the Gospel texts as well as to patristic and medieval writers like Augustine and Aquinas. Central to their quest is Matt. 23.8 (“Call no-one teacher”). The authors are surprised how central this idiom was for pre-modern thinkers and

how little it is regarded in contemporary concepts of Christian pedagogy. In line with Augustine and Aquinas, for Watkins/Butler the basic assumption about Christian pedagogy, understood as “faith learning” (40), is the “identification of Christian learning and truth with growth in holiness” (49). Central topics to a growth in holiness are to grow in the three graces of faith, hope and love through which God should be worshipped. By this, the goal of faith learning is to know (the truth of) God and through him anything else. In other words: Such learning is “orientated towards the sharing of divine life and participation in God” (51). Key to faith learning is to reflect on divine and human agency in it and to discover the importance of God’s activity (as the *one* teacher of Matt. 23.8) that enables learning in the first place. The term “faith learning” is “an attempt to describe those often unseen, unmanaged, and under-celebrated moments of learning towards holiness that we were recognising in the experiences we heard about” (52).

The idea and theory of theological action research (Clare Watkins calls it “ethnography of faith”⁹) is introduced in chapter 3 and its potential for faith learning. Theological action research can be summarised as “an account which seeks to hear multiple theological voices together, recognizing the inherent interrelatedness of the themes of belief, action, agency, and God’s work” (59). Watkins/Butler describe the tendency of practical theological accounts to be “either overly pragmatic accounts of how to improve practice with little reference to formal and normative voices of theology, or they become overly pristine accounts of practice which fail to take account of lived practice’s sinful, flawed, and pilgrim state” (62). To engage with this challenge the authors unfold the central characteristics of theological action research, which are “a commitment to theology in four voices; the centrality of the conversational method; a theology of disclosure; a participatory and collaborative approach; and focusing on the renewal of practice and formal theology” (60). The chapter also sketches the processes and practices that shaped the research of the study in working with eight sites over the course of four years and outlines a typical theological action research circle.

Part 2 of the book (chapters 4–11) is entitled “Faith learning, agency, and eschatology. A theological action research journey with sites of practice” and offers a comprehensive account of the actual research that was undertaken. Each chapter focuses on a specific research site and as “the chapters progress, there is a certain ‘snowballing’ of key themes” (77) and by this the concept of “faith learning” emerges and is developed with growing clarity. The authors warn against considering part 2 only as the “data chapters”, because this would foster a disintegration of theological

9 See Watkins, Clare, *Disclosing Church: An ecclesiology learned from conversations in practice*, London/ New York 2020, 28–9.

theory and faith practice, which the idea and methodology of theological action research aim to overcome. According to Clare Watkins'¹⁰ understanding of theological action research it is an "assumption of integration; the theology embedded in what people say about their beliefs and practices and what they do can be attended to as proper elements of the complex conversation between them and the formal and normative theological accounts" (63).

The themes and aspects of the research and reflection of the eight Methodist's sites of co-research (two Methodist congregations, two theological colleges, a Learning Network, a training centre for rural churches and Christians, a Learning Circuit and a Leaders and Preachers course), where faith is lived and learned encompass topics like "faith is for practice", "deep conversation", "learning taking place through doing", "being present and being wordless", "spirituality as practical care and love of all", "agency and service in faith learning", "(mis)match of lay and ordained learning", "learning as cooperation with the Holy Spirit", "lay and clergy pedagogical dynamics", "the expectation of divine agency in faith learning", "resourcing learning", "growing in confidence", "people as *the* resource for faith learning", "contextual interconnectedness as learning", "practical pneumatology", "spirituality of faith learning and discernment", "the quotidian as the fabric of faith learning", "momentary learning" etc.

The third part of the book ("Re-figuring church for God's teaching. A call for a radical reimagining of Christian teaching and learning") summarizes the key findings and learnings from the research and starts to unfold the pedagogical and ecclesiological consequences of the insights gained by the co-research with the eight sites of English Methodism.

The key insights can be summarized as this: faith learning takes place in quotidian situations of attention, love, interruptions (positive and negative) and deep conversations about those experiences in the light of one's own faith and the Christian tradition. Those quotidian places and practices of learning are intertwined, because "it is the foundational practices of Christian love and attention that enable the conversations of faith learning; and it is to these practices that faith learning itself leads" (233). The fruits of "faith learning" are a growing in holiness (which is growing towards a life marked by faith, hope and love), the gift of discernment, confidence, a sense of flourishing, purpose and vocation as well as humility, interconnectedness and awareness for others.

This whole dynamic of "faith learning" is enabled, accompanied and driven by the Spirit and the pneumatic agency. Thus, an "inquiry into Christian learning is, necessarily, an inquiring after the Holy Spirit at work in the whole complex lives of real

¹⁰ See Watkins 2020.

people" (130). According to Watkins/Butler this is at odds with many ecclesial courses that are often based on teaching methods and aims of adult learning. Instead, the authors plead for a new epistemology of faith learning which circles around three perspectives "faith as a kind of knowing; faith knowing as practical-and-contemplative; and possibilities for a revelation-based theology for faith knowing" (239). The term "faith knowing" is described as follows: "Faith knowing is, mysteriously and through grace and the gift of the Spirit, a sharing in God's life – a life which is shaped by a kind of knowing which finds its beginning and end (*telos*) in love, to which our faith and hope draw us" (245).

The book's postscript offers methodological learnings, and in appendices 1 and 2 practical outlines for conducting theological action research are offered.

The broadness of thematic aspects, connections and implications shows the thorough and encompassing endeavour of this book. Even the arrangement of the study reflects this, as it is an ecumenical approach by design, when a Catholic and Anglican researcher work within the field of Methodism.

A critical note is linked with the following quote: "Rather, they are people with a history of seeking to live faithfully, of desiring to follow God, and following their own vocation. There is always a wealth of wisdom 'in the room'" (256). This shows the idealistic assumption of the study, that expects to find many mature and reflected Christians in the congregations, who can talk deeply about their life and faith and are able to interpret their experiences in the light of the Christian tradition. This might be the case for English Methodism, but this is not likely to be the same in other main-line churches in Europe. The question is what does the following claim mean for different ecclesial contexts and realities, where such places might be rare or hard to find: "If this kind of learning is to be supported, then what is needed is close attention to the places where it is most commonly identified – that is the "deep conversations" that bubble up in daily life, and the way into these is through love and care" (207).

About the Reviewer

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Ecclesial Futures publishes original research and theological reflection on the development and transformation of local Christian communities and the systems that support them as they join in the mission of God in the world.

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We are an international and ecumenical journal with an interdisciplinary understanding of our approach to theological research and reflection; the core disciplines being theology, missiology, and ecclesiology. Other social science and theological disciplines may be helpful in supporting the holistic nature of any research, e.g., anthropology and ethnography, sociology, statistical research, biblical studies, leadership studies, and adult learning.

The journal fills an important reflective space between the academy and on-the-ground practice within the field of mission studies, ecclesiology, and the so-called “missional church.” This opportunity for engagement has emerged in the last twenty or so years from a turn to the local (and the local church) and, in the Western world at least, from the demise of Christendom and a rapidly changing world – which also affects the church globally.

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