

Religion shapes the life of individuals, communities and societies. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the former ways of functioning of people in various spheres, including also the religious domain. Restricting mobility, the recommended social distancing rules have influenced the collective forms of religious activity. It has initiated an extension or complete transfer of religious practices to the media and making use of digital technology.

The main aim of the project is understanding the role and the turn of religious practices towards digital technology in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. The (medium- and long-term) effects of using technology in the religious life will be researched, as well as how religious communities and rituals have been rebuilt for the needs of the digital age.

The significance of digital technologies (also in the religious sphere) was evident even before the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the pandemic, together with restrictions on in-person meetings and contacts have caused religious communities to turn to digital tools on a larger scale in order to continue their work, maintain contact with the faithful, care about their commitment. Therefore, the project will include the scope of analyses, which will show how religious communities have altered from the moment of their “emergency” involvement in digital technologies, as well as in what way practices, structures and rituals of the communities have been changed by adopting digital tools.

The research will take into account 2 main aspects: 1) changes in the nature and structure of religious communities (including: issues connected with authority, membership, rituals, the digital creation of a place); 2) changes in the perception of the role of religion in public life. They will make it possible to indicate forms of membership, the level of commitment, crossing geographic boundaries, interaction with global religious communities, new forms of religious power, the ways of functioning of rituals in the digital space. Moreover, they will allow us to show the role and position of religion and religious communities in public life. The pandemic has emphasized some of the existing tensions in relations between religious communities and social, cultural and political structures of public life. It has shown that religion, religious communities on the Internet should not isolate themselves from the discourse of the general public. Religious communities must be aware of their social capital, especially in the conditions of digitalization.

Three types of religious communities will be included in the research: 1) a large, established, mainstream religious community; 2) a relatively well-established and integrated minority religious community; 3) a relatively less established or integrated minority religious community. Taking into consideration these kinds of communities will make it possible to describe their way of functioning and strengthening the influence of the pandemic as well as digitalization on the shape of religious life, both in majority and minority communities. Moreover, the research which encompasses different kinds of communities will reveal whether higher digitalization could have contributed to equalizing the existing inequalities or deepening them.

Therefore, the aim of the project is to understand the current effects of changes caused by the pandemic in religious life. Due to the fact that religion encompasses a wide range of practices, beliefs, relations, institutions, ideas and resources joined by human experience, various research methods will be used in the project, which will allow us not only to capture the indicated aspects, but will also make it possible to explain the forms and ways of their connection.

The research methods used in the project will be, first of all: desk research, the individual in-depth interviews, surveys, participant observation, digital ethnographic methods. Three case studies will be conducted within the research, which will include: the Catholic Church, the Jewish community as well as the Muslim community.

Religious life has kept its meaning since the COVID-19 pandemic, but it has changed its structure. The research in this project will enable us to capture the influence of the pandemic and digitalization on the functioning of religious communities, which will in turn make it possible to develop relevant attitudes towards it as well as analytic frameworks. The result of the project and the conducted research will not only be the data on the subject of life and religious practices in the digital age, but also knowledge in the field of religious studies of how religion and humanism are shaped anew through interactions. The entire project should contribute to debates on the role of religion in digital society.