

This is an electronic reprint of the original article. This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.

Between Tradition and Innovation

Sztajer, Sławomir; Sjö, Sofia

Published in:
Digital Media, Young Adults and Religion

Published: 01/01/2020

Document Version
Accepted author manuscript

Document License
Publisher rights policy

[Link to publication](#)

Please cite the original version:

Sztajer, S., & Sjö, S. (2020). Between Tradition and Innovation: Social Media in the Religious Lives of Young Adults in Poland. In M. Moberg, & S. Sjö (Eds.), *Digital Media, Young Adults and Religion: An International Perspective* (Routledge Studies in Religion and Digital Culture). Routledge. <https://urn.fi/URN:NBN:fi-fe202201147994>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

9. Between Tradition and Innovation: Social Media in the Religious Lives of Young Adults in Poland

Sławomir Sztajer and Sofia Sjö

Introduction

As highlighted in previous research (Bolton et al. 2013) as well as in all the chapters in this volume, we need to take media into account if we want to arrive at an adequate understanding of today's youth (e.g. Possamai 2009; Bolton et al. 2013) and their religious lives and views (Moberg and Sjö 2015). Although media is an essential part of everyday life for today's young adult generation, approaching them all as belonging to a "media generation" or viewing them as "digital natives" – as has often been the case in previous research on young adults and the present-day media environment – easily misses the complex and diverse variety of ways in which young people approach media, and particularly social media (Margaryan et al. 2011). This is clearly also the case when the focus is on religiosity and media use.

Poland provides a fascinating case for the study of these issues, not least since it remains marked by quite high levels of religiosity and religious practice. Even though the young Polish adults who took part in the Young Adults and Religion in a Global Perspective project (YARG) view themselves as considerably less religious than the family they grew up in (a mean of 4.5 versus a mean of 6.4 on a scale from 0 to 10), they are still located on the more "religious end" when compared to all other thirteen contexts studied in YARG. Only the results from India and Ghana display higher means of self-assessed degree of personal religiosity. While reporting very similar figures of religious belonging (33%) as the respondents in the total YARG sample

(35%), Polish respondents still report comparatively higher frequencies of participation and engagement in religious practice. In the total sample, 16% reported taking part in religious practices at least once a week while in Poland the portion was 29%.

Previous studies have illustrate the centrality of media and social media in the religious lives of Poles, particularly among Catholic Christians, the dominant religious group in Poland. The Catholic Church uses media actively (e.g. Wąsiński and Szyszka 2013) and Catholic Internet forums are by some used as sites for religious dialogue and exploration (Kołodziejska 2014a; 2014b). Online discussion forums have also been shown to challenge traditional religious authorities (Kołodziejska and Neumaier 2017). The Polish YARG respondents are avid Internet users, with almost 93% reporting using the Internet daily. They did not, however, report using the Internet for “religious or spiritual services and issues” to any greater extent at all. Indeed, as many as 65% reported that they “never” use the Internet for this purpose and not a single respondent reported doing so “every day,” which is a unique result among all other contexts studied in YARG.

It is also noteworthy that social media use in Poland is somewhat low in wider international comparison. According to a recent study by the Pew Research Center, only 46% of Poles report generally using social media sites (Pew Research Center 2018a). As is the case in many other countries, age makes a difference. While only 29% of adults aged 37 years or older use social media, 84% of those between the ages 18–36 do report using such sites. Still, in comparison with many of the other contexts studied in YARG, social media use is not quite as common among young people in Poland. Looking at the European contexts studied by both YARG and the Pew Research Center – Poland, Russia, Sweden, and Turkey – Poland has, with 84%, the lowest portion of young adult social media users. In Russia, 92% of those age 18-36 report using social media; in Sweden, the number is 90%; and in Turkey 86%. Turning to the YARG survey, 81% of respondents in the total YARG sample reported getting information

about news or current affairs from social media. In the Polish sample, however, only 58% of respondents reported this being the case. While social media is, of course, used for a range of other purposes among the Polish respondents, a somewhat critical attitude towards social media is perhaps noticeable already in these results. A critical attitude comes across ever more clearly in the interviews.

In this chapter, we want to explore in more detail how the young adult Poles that participated in YARG relate to social media and particularly the role it plays in their religious lives. Previous studies have illustrated the complex ways in which social media can be used for negotiating religious authority (e.g. Cheong 2013) and in the construction of religious identities (e.g. Leurs et al. 2012). Social media can allow new voices to be heard, but they of course also provide a platform for traditional religious authorities. Regarding identity, as discussed by van Dijck (2013) among others, social media sites afford users a great deal of options for the performance of selves and construction of identities online. Religious identities can thus easily be presented, enacted, concealed, or negotiated online. While social media can provide safe spaces for the exploration of religious topics and aspects of the self (Leurs et al. 2012), they can also be used to stir up and amplify conflict and controversy (Taylor et al. 2014). For some, devolving one's religious identity online is a given, for others hiding it comes just as natural (Bobkowski and Pearce 2011).

In the following, we proceed to present the Polish context in more detail, focusing on both the Polish religious and media landscapes. This is followed by an exploration of the thoughts expressed by Polish respondents regarding the relationship between their Internet and social media use and religious lives. We make a general distinction between those respondents who hold a sceptical attitude towards using social media in religion-related matters, and those who remain more open to such types of usage. We conclude with some summarizing thoughts on our findings and a short discussion of possible avenues for future research.

Religion and media in contemporary Poland

The place of Poland on the religious map of Europe is quite exceptional in that it still remains a highly religious country. Over 90% of Poles identify as believers (CBOS 2015), the overwhelming majority of which declare belonging to the Catholic Church. Notable minority religious churches and faith communities include the Polish Orthodox Church, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession, and the Greek Catholic Church.

Since the Catholic Church has for centuries played a highly central role in shaping and maintaining national identity, strong connections still persist between Catholicism and Polish nationalism (McManus-Czubińska and Miller 2008: 131–132). The Church is not only visible in public life, but also exercises considerable influence on legislation, electoral processes, public education, and the functioning of some public institutions. The position of the Catholic Church in the public sphere has long been the subject of ongoing debate, which also unfolds on social media. Especially widely debated issues include the church's involvement in political affairs, confessional religious education in public schools, the presence of religious symbols in public institutions, the church's property, and the discrepancy between the moral teachings of the church and the life of the clergy, especially in regards to the sexual sphere (Ramet 2017a; Ramet 2017b). Previous research has also highlighted the increasingly central role that media has come to play in bringing religion into the public sphere in Poland (Herbert 2015).

Though still a comparatively religious country, religiosity in Poland has undergone considerable changes during past decades on all conventional indicators: frequency of daily prayer, regular church attendance, and adherence to church doctrine have declined among the Polish population at large. Although the change have not been dramatic, they have nevertheless

become increasingly observable in most aspects of religious life. The changes have been most visible in the religious views and practices of young adults. According to a report published by the Pew Research Center, there is a widening gap between the religiosity of the young adult and older generations in Poland (Pew Research Center 2018b). For example, when it comes to frequency of church attendance, daily prayer, and thinking that religion is “very important” in life, Poland displays the widest gap between generations among all studied countries. However, while young Polish adults have become much less religious than older generations of Poles, they still remain much more religious than their peers in Western European countries.

The Polish media landscape has gone through a great deal of changes since the communist era. After the fall of communism, freedom of the press was re-instituted. As in many parts of Europe, a development towards the pluralization and privatization of media outlets has been underway for some time, coupled with a proliferation of broadband access for increasing numbers of citizens. In 2016, three in four Poles had access to broadband (Chapman 2017) and according to a recent Pew Research Center study (2018a) 75% of the population reported generally using the Internet. As with social media use, age plays a difference in this context as well; 98% of 18–36 year olds reported using the Internet, as compared to 64% among those 37 years or older. Although the media landscape in Poland has diversified considerably, it is still commonly considered to be both heavily politicized and polarized. This is particularly following more recent political debates on the state of the freedom of the press in Poland (Chapman 2017). A notable role is played by religion-oriented media. The Catholic Church not only maintains a strong presence in the Polish media sphere more generally, but also actively contributes to shaping the media landscape by running its own TV and radio stations, magazines/newspapers, and online-media. The Church also actively participates in social media debates where it also articulates its Christian point of view, which tends to draw the attention of young people in particular (Wąsiński and Szyszka 2013). In addition, the Catholic

Church also actively encourages the creation of Catholic Internet communities by both clergy and laypersons. Online religious communities are often built on traditional parish communities, but according to Kołodziejska, who has studied Catholic Internet forums in Poland, these online communities often extend “beyond traditional parish boundaries. Online religious communities reflect the tension between the need to participate in church-based communities and to create new ones” (Kołodziejska 2014b: 55). Online Catholic communities also produce and disseminate various types of self-produced content, which sometimes differs considerably from that transmitted by the institutional Church and that goes beyond the scope of traditional church activity. Generally speaking, social media, for some, provides both an alternative to institutional religion and a tool for strengthening and rebuilding traditional religious identities shaped around the Catholic Church. In both cases, a shift in authority can be observed from the institutional Church to a multitude of agents operating according to a different logic.

Although frequent use of digital media among young adults in Poland is indisputable, much less is known about the ways in which young adults in Poland use such media for religion-related purposes. Even less is known about the role of specifically social media in this context. Research on engagement with religious Internet sites and portals shows that only 15% of Poles use such portals on a regular basis (CBOS 2016). This proportion is marginally higher for young adults (16% for the age bracket 18–24 and 17% for 25–34 year olds). For the majority of those people who use religious Internet portals and webpages, the Internet performs a supplementary function to religious activity offline, such as prayer and worship attendance. However, for 33% of the CBOS study respondents, religion-related Internet activity is not connected to religious activity offline. Moreover, most people who report using the Internet for religious and faith-related purposes visit websites which are not created and managed by large religious institutions or organizations.

The above results are partly reflected in the YARG research findings in Poland. As already noted, intentional use of the Internet and social media for religious purposes is not commonly reported by Polish respondents. Such types of usage is mainly limited to a minority of respondents who could be described as traditionally oriented believers and spiritual seekers. Whereas the former participate in offline religious activities and sometimes join parish communities, the latter avoid such participation and are more interested in different non-Christian religious and spiritual traditions. In the following section, we present our findings based on the interviews conducted in Poland for the YARG project. As already noted, we have distinguished two types of attitudes towards the use of social media for religious purposes. The first type includes those respondents who are reluctant to get involved in religion-related social media activity. The second type of attitude characterizes people who are more willing to use social media for religious purposes. Neither group is homogeneous, however, as respondents of both groups provide many different perspectives.

Views on social media and religion among the Polish YARG respondents

Young Poles have ample access to social media. However, having access to and using social media does not mean that one cannot at the same time hold very critical attitudes towards social media. Many previous studies have explored the varying attitudes towards and reasons for using social media (Tufekci 2008; Ridell 2011; McAndrew and Jeong 2012). Our respondents likewise articulate many reasons for both taking part in social media and for not doing so, both generally as well as in relation to religion specifically.

Why not social media

The young Poles that took part in our study discussed several reasons why they were sceptical towards social media and particularly towards using social media or the Internet more broadly for religion-related purposes. One respondent simply declared that “one can find total rubbish on the Internet” (YPLSS106). Many see the Internet as un-reliable and prefer to get their information from other sources. Even though many respondents recognize how easy social media are to use and what they have to offer, they are still not inclined to use it. As one respondent put it:

Obviously, Facebook is now number one, and simply everything is there: some news from Onet, they publish some news and -- I mean it is easier because you don't have to go to a Kiosk in the morning, buy your paper and read it, but you could go on the Internet and everything is presented to you on a silver platter. [...] I would prefer to buy a newspaper and read something that had been written by a real journalist, rather than someone who could be lying. (YPLSS104)

While this quote provides an illustration of a more widespread general scepticism towards news and information disseminated via social media that is common among our respondents, some also raised questions about the impact of social media on personal communication:

But well -- yes -- what also annoys me a bit among young people is that it is hard to talk to them because they are busy with writing SMS texts or um -- for instance, with sending messages on Facebook. And this is a bit sad when you just see how those contacts drift apart. (YPLSS97)

In the view of this respondent, social media is considered to have a negative impact on human relations. Instead of communication via social media, many respondents in this group therefore prefer personal face-to-face interactions:

I think that this [Facebook] is not a place for discussions. For me, the Internet is a place where people do not necessarily express what they feel. They rather try to arouse some emotions and do not necessarily express their beliefs. I try to stay away from this and not to be active in discussions. [...] I mean that the Internet has such a -- power which makes people think that they can say anything and go unpunished because it is always the case that if someone expresses a strong view and another person -- tries to contradict it, it usually does not end in substantive discussion [...] I think it is not a place for a good discussion. (YPLSS129)

Instead of turning to the Internet, this respondent prefers interacting directly with others: “I think it is a circle of people who have different views but meet face-to-face” (YPLSS129).

Another respondent deems communication online to be humiliating and childish:

I don't really like to write such things on the Internet because for me it is making yourself ridiculous and like -- I don't know -- writing stupid comments about it -- it is pathetic to me because arguing on the Internet is nothing. If that person met me normally and talked to me, then yes. But this, to me, it is childish. (YPLSS104)

Being sceptical about the potential of social media for in-depth communication does not, however, necessarily entail a dismissive view of social media as such. As one respondent put

it: “I cannot imagine life without Facebook, however -- when I talk to someone or there are some discussions, I prefer a direct contact than the Internet” (YPLSS077).

Some respondents also reported having experienced hate speech and intolerance online. Because of this, they do not reveal their religious beliefs on social media:

I just have a lot of friends on Facebook who publish a lot of text messages, pictures and memes condemning faiths, anticlerical and so on. At one time, I tried to enter into discussion with those people but later it turned out that no matter how tolerant I was trying to be toward them saying that I understand their view, I felt hurt because these things were against my views and those people did not understand this. They usually said that -- Catholics can say and do something and so on -- but I cannot. So, a discussion with such people has no effect. I would even say that it is -- that the result is opposite to the intended one. (YPLSS129)

The experience that it is difficult to have meaningful discussions about religion online has been identified in much previous research (e.g. Lövheim 2004; Lövheim 2008), and this is also reflected in the accounts of our Polish respondents. Some respondents also expressed concern about privacy online. Since the mainly view religion as a private matter, they are not comfortable with disclosing religious beliefs or views on social media:

I try to remain relatively anonymous on social media. I think it is a very healthy attitude nowadays. Not only in the context of socio-political situation in the country, but generally -- privacy is very important on the Internet, and religious issues are also a private matter. So it is better to – let’s be honest -- hide yourself rather than display

everything. Although if someone enjoys it, go ahead. As for me, I prefer to maintain a certain dose of privacy. (YPLSS149)

Those sceptical to using social media and the Internet in religion-related matters are thus of the opinion that social media affect inter-personal connections negatively and that the Internet does not provide a good platform for discussions about issues such as religion. While these respondents might still use social media, they do so for other purposes. For some of these respondents, religion is clearly viewed as a private matter. While it is a part of their identity, it is not a part they feel much of a need to share with others, and especially not via social media, which they feel can distort what they stand for and lead to unproductive debates.

Why social media

Even though we find many social media sceptics among our Polish respondents, there are also plenty of respondents who express a positive attitude toward social media and its religious potentials. For example, there are some who, in contrast to the views expressed by the respondents quoted above, enjoy discussing religion online:

P: There are sometimes such -- so interesting discussions that it is unthinkable. And perhaps it's good that these discussions take place on the Internet; if they took place in reality --

I: What motivates you to take part in this? It's interesting for me.

P: On the forum? Just one simple thing. Exactly. At some point, in 2008, I entered this forum. It was the time when I was in a high school. I was just intellectually curious about all those interesting things. I got some answers and then -- well, you know,

there is always someone who not only gives answers but also begins to attack. Well, and it turned into asking questions and the necessity of defence. And it turned out that I can reach agreement {LG} on some issues even with Catholics. As for me -- I managed to do one thing: one of the respondents convert from Catholicism into Orthodoxy. (YPLSS324)

As seen in this quote, while those who enjoy discussing religion online sometimes identify the same problems with social media as discussion environments as the more sceptical respondents do, they are nevertheless more prone to highlight beneficial aspects. They might, as the respondent quoted above, enjoy the challenge of having to defend themselves and their views, but they sometimes also point out that actual agreement can be achieved online. One respondent, who describes herself as “a child of the Internet, of the meme era,” said that Facebook has a considerable influence on her religious life, while not necessarily being a good place for discussions:

Sometimes I take part in discussions on Facebook. I try to defend the Catholic Church in the comments and in some discussions that, as I realize later on, are meaningless, because nobody has -- reached any compromise. We only spill a bucket of spite and this is basically it. But yes, the Internet. I begin my day with it. I turn on my computer and read the news, then some funny memes, Facebook, all Facebook likes. But -- it is important for me to become aware of various things -- the pictures that we now tend to call memes help me understand many things. And they have an impact on me. So yes, it is an important influence. (YPLSS148)

This respondent specifically highlights the importance of Internet memes for her. Internet memes, that is to say images and text that are circulated online (Rogers 2019), have attracted the interest of many scholars. Memes have been argued to provide a good source for exploring attitudes towards religion (Aguilar et al. 2017), but they have also been shown to play a role in, for example, the construction of collective identities (Gal et al. 2016). For some of the people interviewed in Poland, posts published on Facebook, be it quotations or memes, are used as objects of reflection and contemplation. They are also by some respondents argued to trigger what they refer to as spiritual or religious experiences. One respondent specifically describes how words and sentences read on Facebook have affected her:

I remember that I was very -- just very spiritual -- it touched the right chord. Such a single word. And it often happens to me. Or I read some dictums -- Once I found such dictums on paper, now I sometimes find them on the Internet. Civilization, after all.
(YPLSS068)

Memes found online are by some of our respondents also considered motivating:

I: Have you ever seen Catholic memes? These are memes which people publish on Facebook and read every day. There are both funny and thought-provoking memes.

P: Well, I also have such pages of various kinds -- there are sometimes cool citations -- which are motivating; words of wise people. (YPLSS117)

Another respondent reflected on the potential of Internet memes to inspire reflection and thoughts on topics that the person might not otherwise have considered:

For example, there are various -- memes on Facebook contrasting Pope Francis with Benedict, and I am more inclined towards the latter -- and they show some mistakes that Francis makes -- for example regarding his liturgical clothing and so on, so this is -- kind of -- ironic and funny. Usually during Lent or Easter there are memes that are supposed to make us aware that Christ suffered and rose again, and they really make me reflect on life. These may be simple pictures, but -- they get me thinking. And I often start wondering on things I would never think of. (YPLSS148)

Catholic memes are by the same respondents also credited with a spiritual or religious dimension. As this respondent said, they can sometimes change the ways in which she thinks about the world:

On Facebook, I follow several fan-pages with -- memes -- but also quotes from Doctors of the Church, bishops, cardinals, or even Ratzinger (before he became Pope). I also follow Dominicans and Franciscans on Instagram -- it is a daily dose of spiritual images with a significant influence. I browse through things thoughtlessly and suddenly I stop by a passage that completely refocuses my attention. So -- well -- we cannot get rid of the Internet, but we can use it in nice ways. (YPLSS148)

Although religious and spiritual experiences that some of our participants argue that memes induce are not considered to be very deep, for some, they can nonetheless still play an important role:

I think so -- well -- I am also a fan of Orthodox icons and I have an icon image on my computer desktop, so it is always around. When I check Facebook and I see some

fan-page with a captioned image, or a passage from the Bible, then I really see it every day. So it gives me some religious or spiritual experiences, even if they are not very deep. (YPLSS148)

Catholic Internet memes thus seem to fill a religious and spiritual function for some of our Polish respondents. They serve to inspire reflection, causes one to stop and think, and induce experiences that, while often not considered very profound or thought provoking, still adds a “spiritual” or “religious” element to mundane life.

Social media is also reported to be used for more practical religious purposes, such as communicating and disseminating religious content:

We have our own blog which is used for publishing articles connected with faith, knowledge of God, or --- oh, for example in the context of Eucharist, some understanding of God’s word, personal testimonies, descriptions of events that took place, retreats -- someone describes what happened. (YPLSS101)

The Internet and social media are also by some experienced as a useful source for some forms of information:

Yes, for instance, there is a webpage on Facebook [entitled] “Face Bóg”; there are just materials and other things connected to religious issues and practice on this page; and there are also articles on how to find a vocation or -- when I had a look on the wall -- I came across an article “Five ways to like and accept yourself”. So, this is a sort of very practical and shows that religion affects -- I mean religion does not only focus

on the Church and God's worship but through religion we can just find answers, try to accept ourselves and sort everything out according to religion. (YPLSS122)

Social media is thus used by some of our respondents to learn more about one's own faith. Social media are also increasingly being used by youth communities within the Catholic Church. A Facebook community, for example, is built up over the offline community. It can be seen as a virtual enlargement and enhancement of the latter. Although such communities are part of the institutional Catholic Church and follow the teachings and rules of the Church, they bring a new quality to religious life because they considerably transform traditional ways of communicating. For instance, the structure of social media encourages a specific language which is rarely encountered in offline church communities.

However, social media can also be a source of information about new worldviews and practices. For example, for one young vegan respondent, social media and the Internet has provided information about veganism as a worldview and way of life:

It was four years ago when I started {I: Okay} -- at that time I was alone -- I had only a family which {LG} did not understand me. There were support groups on the Internet, for example Facebook, and vegans (()) Thereby I met many people in such Internet groups. [...] Then, after a year, my sister became vegan as well, when she started (()) time, so she supported me. In this way, for instance, I met my boyfriend; it was mainly thanks to that he was a vegan -- we met in this way. In this way, I met some of my friends because we had common views. [...] I have not been aware of what I eat and do, so my family has never not told me about that. I did not get it from my family, but I found it on the Internet. [...] It was the easiest way. Yes, on the Internet. I found various shorts, started to read articles [presenting] what it is about. I

started to look at pictures, read books. So, for instance, I read a book about it, I watched a documentary film. So I started to look for information; I wanted to get to know how it really is in order not to live in error, but to be more aware of what I do. (YPLSS121)

Our discussion above has focused on social media and the Internet. However, traditional media (e.g. print, radio, television) are of course also used for various types of religious purposes by many of our Polish respondents. While social media is clearly gaining in importance for religion-related uses, there is little to suggest that it has started to directly replace other types of media. Undoubtedly, social media are a source of innovation transforming the ways in which religiously engaged young adults communicate within and outside religious communities as well as the ways in which they experience religious content. The example of memes shows that religious content can perform very different functions, from entertainment to deep religious reflection to trigger religious or spiritual experiences.

Conclusion

The data collected in Poland within the YARG project reveals different patterns of religion-related use of social media among respondents. First, we have identified a large group of respondents who are reluctant to use the Internet and social media for religion-related purposes. Indeed, most Polish respondents do not regard the Internet or social media as a suitable platform for the transmission of religious content or other forms of religious engagement. They report multiple reasons for this. Some respondents view faith as a private matter and therefore as something that should not be talked about openly in public environments such as social media. Others perceive online communication as impersonal, i.e. devoid of face-to-face contact, and

therefore as having a negative impact on human relations. Still others view the Internet as an unreliable source of information, replete with fake news and irrelevant information. Hate speech or very negative encounters on discussion forums concerning religion also discourage some from using social media.

Respondents who are eager to use social media for religion-related purposes make up a minority in the Polish data. While these respondents see much religious potential in social media, they often also express similar types of reservations as do the more sceptical respondents. At the same time, they also tend to view social media as indispensable communication tools without which one cannot function normally in the modern world. Respondents belonging to this minority tend to be active members of offline religious communities, and also to use social media to communicate with other members of those communities. Here we can therefore see a strong connection between online and offline religious engagement that has also been identified in much previous research on digital religion (e.g. Campbell and Lövheim 2011).

In the Polish context, the influence of media on religious life extends far beyond the religious activities organized around the institutional Catholic Church. Social media provide some Polish respondents with the opportunity to pursue their own spiritual/religious search and discuss their spiritual and religious experiences. Religious and spiritual content distributed via social media, such as Facebook, can inspire contemplation and are argued by some to trigger spiritual/religious experiences. Some of our respondents explicitly highlighted the role of Internet memes. Although the experience triggered by such memes is not always regarded as very deep, it is still talked about as revealing new ways of understanding reality and helping to add a spiritual/religious dimension to everyday life. Discussion forums also play some role in the religious lives of our Polish respondents. These are described as places where one can either engage in defence or criticism of religion, share one's experiences, or exchange information.

The answer to the question what role social media play in the religious lives of Polish respondents is not simple. Not only do they articulate a wide range of attitudes towards the relationship between religion and social media. Some very different types of religiosity or ways of being religious are also articulated among those who consider social media a useful tool for the communication of religious thought. Social media also clearly provides an environment in which institutional religion can be either extended and complemented, or questioned and replaced by more private and individual religious pursuits. The Internet and social media can provide both a platform for the transmission of religious meanings sanctioned by tradition and traditional religious authority, and a tool for the creation and distribution of innovative religious meanings not expressly supported by the Church. It is important to note, though, that a large part of all mediated religious innovations are created both within and through online communities supported or maintained by the Church.

Further research on religion and social media among young adults in Poland would have much to gain from focusing more directly on the groups of people who actively use social media for various types of religious and spiritual purposes. It is especially interesting to see how social media have started to affect the religious life of youth communities within the Catholic Church and other religious institutions. Although the research findings reported in this chapter only allow us to highlight certain aspects of this increasingly widespread phenomenon, we hope that it will provide an impetus for further research in this area.

Another theme worthy of further consideration would be the changes and transformations that the meanings and functions of religious symbols, images, and other representations undergo as they become transmitted via social media. The phenomenon of memes based on religious content explored in this chapter provides one example of this. Although there are situations when memes can trigger contemplation or spiritual experiences,

as some Polish respondents quoted in this chapter suggested, in most cases Internet memes are regarded as merely funny images embedded in particular entertainment contexts.