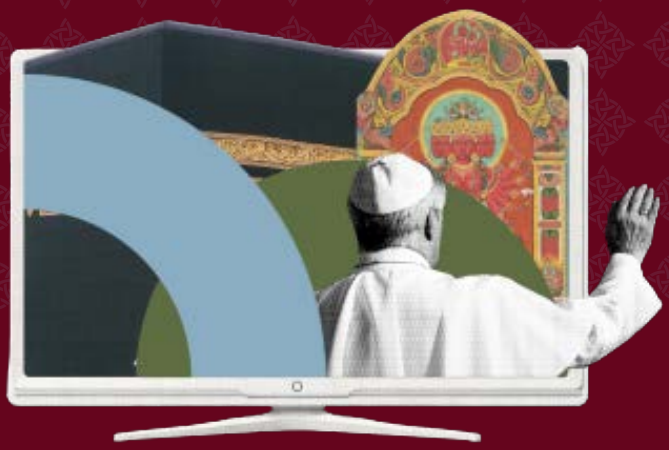


Mapping the Religion and Media Space

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Prepared for The Aspen Institute's Religion and Society Program

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Executive Summary

The religion and media landscape in the United States is at a critical inflection point. Influence is increasingly concentrated among actors best adapted to platform dynamics rather than those best equipped to advance informed, pluralistic public discourse. The structural forces driving this divergence are intensifying rather than receding.

Challenges and Opportunities

- **Influence in the religion and media ecosystem remains concentrated** among evangelical media networks, conservative political religion outlets, high-production-value devotional content, and platform-native influencers who are well-adapted to platform dynamics and skilled at audience capture. In contrast, academic religious scholarship, minority religious voices, and nuanced journalistic coverage remain structurally disadvantaged, due to the fragmented nature of digital media platforms, weak cross-sector networks, and limited investment in distribution strategies.
- **The field lacks connective tissue:** Scholars, journalists, creators, and institutions operate in parallel rather than in networked ecosystems, limiting the impact of otherwise strong work. As a result, innovative ideas often remain siloed—or never reach the audiences that they may best serve at all.
- **Financial constraints** limit religion-focused media, particularly in mainstream journalism. While funding mechanisms exist to address many of the challenges at the intersection of religion and media, our research indicates that many senior scholars and veteran journalists are unaware of them. This suggests a need to develop a centralized hub to disseminate information and connect stakeholders to relevant funding opportunities.
- **A dual bias in religion and media:** The media landscape presents a paradox: much faith-related coverage is negatively skewed—reflecting widespread religious illiteracy and simplistic portrayals—while funding incentives are seen to favor "positive" stories that depict religion as comforting, community-building, or morally uplifting. In-depth reporting on religion's complex entanglements with nationalism, extremism, or systemic injustice is seen as being underfunded. Stakeholders warn that this dual bias both distorts public understanding and undermines the investigative journalism essential for democratic accountability.

- **Disinformation operates at the ecosystem level.** Politically instrumentalized religious narratives are produced and amplified through coordinated networks, requiring responses that go beyond content moderation to include network-building and proactive intervention strategies, such as "pre-bunking."

Philanthropic and institutional opportunities

The report's central finding—that influence in the religion and media ecosystem is shaped less by content quality than by infrastructure, distribution, and network position—points to a clear set of strategic intervention opportunities. Effective investments must move beyond isolated projects to address the structural conditions that determine visibility, sustainability, and impact.

- **Build shared field infrastructure:** Invest in platforms, hubs, and network tools that connect scholars, journalists, and creators, enabling collaboration, resource sharing, and coordinated dissemination across institutions and media formats.
- **Develop sustainable talent pipelines:** Expand fellowships, training programs, and career pathways that equip scholars and journalists to operate effectively in digital-first media environments and sustain public-facing work over the medium to long term.
- **Strengthen the translation layer:** Increase support for initiatives that translate academic research and expert knowledge into accessible, public-facing formats, bridging persistent gaps between expertise and audience engagement.
- **Fund distribution, not just production:** Support audience development, platform-native content strategies, and cross-platform amplification so that high-quality journalism and scholarship can compete within algorithmically driven media systems.
- **Rebuild local religion reporting:** Invest in local and regional journalism to restore coverage of religion at the community level, where the erosion of local media has created acute information gaps and heightened vulnerability to mis/disinformation.
- **Counter disinformation at the network level:** Support efforts to map, monitor, and intervene in disinformation ecosystems through early warning systems, trusted messengers, and cross-sector coordination rather than stand-alone counter-messaging.
- **Support independent and mid-tier creators:** Provide flexible, multi-year funding—including general operating support, fellowships, and capacity-building grants—to sustain independent and contingent scholars, freelancers, and emerging voices who are influential within niche or underserved audiences but lack institutional backing.

Together, these interventions emphasize connective tissue over isolated outputs, sustainability over short-term visibility, and ecosystem health over individual success, aligning philanthropic strategy with the realities of contemporary religion and media. Incremental or project-based

funding will likely not be sufficient to address the structural challenges identified in this report. The most effective interventions will:

- Prioritize long-term, flexible funding models over short-term grants
- Focus on ecosystem infrastructure development rather than isolated outputs
- Support collaborative, cross-sector approaches
- Invest in distribution and audience development as core components of impact

Absent such investments, the religion and media landscape will continue to be shaped by actors who are best adapted to platform dynamics rather than those best equipped to contribute to informed, pluralistic public discourse.

Introduction

The Aspen Institute's Religion and Media Mapping Project seeks to illuminate the intricate and evolving connections between religion communicators, media organizations, and religious influencers.[1] Initiated in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, at a time when trust in institutions and information ecosystems is being renegotiated, this project seeks to chart the new architectures through which religious meaning circulates in public life. It seeks to provide a roadmap for scholars, journalists, and faith leaders interested in engaging broader audiences through public-facing work.

The aim is to cultivate a deeper understanding of how media are evolving as tools for conveying religious, spiritual, and religion-critical ideas and practices in the public sphere. The project also seeks to highlight the key support networks and relationships that make this kind of communication possible. It is intended to be useful to a range of audiences navigating the intersection of religion and media. For public scholars, the report can serve as a resource to help demonstrate the value of public-facing work within academic contexts—for example, providing evidence of the scholarly significance of media engagement. At the same time, the report is designed for a wider set of stakeholders, including journalists, funders, and practitioners, who seek to understand the broader landscape of religion and media as well as the challenges and emerging trends shaping the field.

The project includes a prototype dataset and network visualization that maps more than 7,000 relationships among key actors, organizations, and platforms in the religion and media ecosystem. This tool is designed to highlight patterns of connectivity, gaps in coordination, and opportunities for strategic intervention. In its current form, the dataset offers a proof of concept. However, it could be developed into a dynamic infrastructural resource for funders, researchers, and practitioners—supporting more targeted grantmaking, identifying emerging nodes of influence, and enabling ongoing monitoring of the field as it evolves.

A central finding is that the field is not constrained by a lack of content or talent. Rather, it is shaped by structural conditions—platform dynamics, funding flows, and fragmented networks—that limit the ability of high-quality scholarship, journalism, and public-facing work to achieve visibility and impact. Influence remains concentrated among evangelical media networks, conservative political religion outlets, high-production-value devotional content, and platform-native influencers who are well adapted to platform dynamics and audience capture. In this environment, influence is driven less by the substance of ideas than by the capacity to *distribute* them effectively across platforms, networks, and communities.

1 We define religious influencers as individuals that blend spiritual authority with media savvy, shaping content that is inspirational, educational, and increasingly monetized. Unlike purely commercial influencers, their impact is not only measured in engagement or followers but in perceived moral or spiritual credibility. Their impact extends beyond engagement metrics to personal identity, community norms, and participation in religious rituals.

Any analysis of the religion and media ecosystem must acknowledge that the production, circulation, and authority of knowledge are always shaped by underlying structures of power and capital. Media systems are not neutral conduits; they are embedded in political economies that determine who has access to platforms, whose voices are amplified, and which narratives become legible or legitimate to broader publics. The consolidation of media ownership, the advertising-driven logic of commercial platforms, and the metrics-based incentives of digital communication all privilege particular kinds of religious expression while marginalizing others. As a result, patterns of visibility and invisibility in religious discourse often reflect broader hierarchies—racial, economic, geopolitical—that shape whose expertise is validated and whose stories are told. Attending to these dynamics is essential for understanding how contemporary knowledge about religion is produced, contested, and distributed.

Macro trends shaping the religion–media space

The landscape of religion and media has experienced significant transformations in recent years, driven by shifts in the demographics of U.S. religion, technological advancements, shifts in the domestic and global political environments, media consolidation, and evolving media consumption habits. Important demographic shifts include the move away from more formal and institutionalized forms of religion, especially among younger generational cohorts, white Americans, and women.[2] These changes have been accompanied by dramatic shifts in how media are consumed and produced. These include the rise of streaming services, subscription-based media, short-form video platforms, hybrid forms of media, and the explosive growth of audio and video podcasting formats and audiobooks. Together, these shifts have further fragmented audiences and made it increasingly difficult to engage broad, general-interest publics.

A defining feature of today's religious media landscape is the diversification of revenue and authority beyond traditional institutions. Influential communicators increasingly rely on direct-to-audience support models such as Patreon and Substack, while building recognizable "influencer" or "influencer ministry" brands that integrate content, merchandise, and live events. At the same time, platform-driven monetization—through algorithms, ad revenue, and audience engagement metrics—shapes both visibility and sustainability. The result is a profound structural shift: many of the most impactful religious voices now operate independently of churches, denominations, and legacy organizations, challenging long-standing assumptions about where religious authority resides and how it is funded.

Religious traditions engage with media in distinct ways. Conservative white evangelical Protestants have long dominated the religion media space in the U.S., harnessing emerging technologies not only to spread the gospel but also to cultivate a distinct cultural identity

2 Gregory A. Smith et al., "Religious 'Nones' in America: Who They Are and What They Believe." *Pew Research Center,* January 24, 2024. https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/01/24/religious-nones-in-america-who-they-are-and-what-they-believe/; Ed Kilgore. "Will Young Men Take Over American Christianity?" *Intelligencer*, September 24, 2024. https://nymag.com/intelligencer/article/will-young-men-take-over-american-christianity.html

and mobilize political influence. The resulting media outputs—ranging from radio and televangelism to podcasts and social media—have often been aimed at both reinforcing in-group commitments and shaping wider public debates, targeting audiences who share specific evangelical beliefs while also seeking to influence broader cultural and political conversations. Following the logic of secular lifestyle branding, white evangelical media often integrate faith with parenting, health, cooking, and relationships, broadening cultural reach while reinforcing internal coherence. Organizations such as Focus on the Family pioneered this model, creating self-contained ecosystems that offered "commonsense" biblical truth while sowing distrust of the secular press.[3]

In recent years, conservative voices in legacy media, such as Tucker Carlson and Glenn Beck, have transitioned to podcasting and other digital-first platforms, where they often engage more openly with religious themes and language.[4] This evolution reflects broader shifts in the media landscape, in which audience-driven formats enable greater ideological and spiritual expression. It also invites closer examination of how religious discourse is being rearticulated within politically aligned digital media ecosystems.

Mis/disinformation and political religion

The contemporary religion and media ecosystem cannot be understood without grappling directly with the scale and structure of mis/disinformation and politically instrumentalized religious narratives. While mis- and disinformation is often treated as a diffuse byproduct of the digital environment, in practice it is frequently networked, strategic, and institutionally reinforced, particularly in domains where religion intersects with identity, geopolitics, and domestic political conflict.

A growing body of evidence points to the consolidation of white Christian nationalist media in the United States into a seamless ecosystem where theology, history, and politics are inextricably linked. Operating across podcasts, social media, and legacy outlets, this network relies on heavy repetition and cross-promotion to build a closed loop. The result is a powerful interpretive framework that fundamentally reshapes how audiences view religious identity and creates a deep-seated skepticism toward pluralistic democracy.

Parallel and overlapping dynamics are evident in the proliferation of Islamophobic disinformation networks, which often target Muslim charities, advocacy organizations, and

3 Susan B. Ridgely, "Conservative Christianity and the Creation of Alternative News: An Analysis of Focus on the Family's Multimedia Empire," *Religion and American Culture* 30, no. 1 (2020): 1–25.

4 Gabriel Sherman, "Tucker Carlson's Prayer Talk May Have Led to Fox News Ouster," *Vanity Fair*, April 25, 2023, https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2023/04/tucker-carlson-fox-news-rupert-murdoch; Richard Luscombe, "Tucker Carlson Credits Demons for the Invention of Nuclear Technology," *The Guardian*, November 4, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/nov/04/tucker-carlson-demon-war-room-podcast; "Fasting, Prayer, Meditation, and the Global Persecution of Christians (With Hallow CEO Alex Jones)," transcript of *The Tucker Carlson Show* episode, HappyScribe, November 15, 2024, https://podcasts.happyscribe.com/the-tucker-carlson-show/fasting-prayer-meditation-the-global-persecution-of-christians-with-hallow-ceo-alex-jones; Glenn Beck, "Religious Freedom: The Four-Part Series," *GlennBeck.com*, March 26, 2016. https://www.glennbeck.com/2016/03/26/religious-freedom-the-four-part-series/

public figures. These campaigns frequently originate in activist think tanks with narrow political agendas and then move through a predictable amplification chain: from niche reports to partisan media coverage, to social media circulation, and ultimately into policy discourse or regulatory scrutiny.[5]

In addition, the rise of "conspiracy spirituality"—a hybrid of wellness culture, New Age beliefs, and conspiratorial thinking—has created new pathways for religiously inflected disinformation.[6] These communities are often less institutionally anchored but highly adaptive, spreading across platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram through influencer-driven content that blends personal testimony with broader claims about hidden power, moral corruption, or spiritual warfare. This content can function as a gateway to more explicitly political or extremist narratives, particularly when amplified by algorithmic recommendation systems that reward emotional intensity and engagement.

These dynamics contribute to a broader pattern of digital radicalization, in which religious language and symbols are used to legitimize increasingly exclusionary or adversarial worldviews.[7] Importantly, this process is rarely linear or centrally coordinated; instead, it emerges through overlapping networks of creators, audiences, and platforms, where content is iteratively adapted and reinforced. The result is an ecosystem in which the boundary between "religious expression," "political messaging," and "disinformation" is often blurred, complicating both analysis and intervention.[8]

The key implication is that disinformation in the religion and media space is not simply a content problem—it is an ecosystem problem. Effective responses will require investments that go beyond fact-checking or counter-messaging to include:

- Network mapping and monitoring of disinformation flows across platforms and sectors
- Support for independent, trusted voices capable of reaching audiences within specific religious or cultural communities
- Development of early warning systems to identify emerging narratives before they scale
- Cross-sector collaboration between researchers, journalists, technologists, and practitioners

Without such interventions, disinformation and politically instrumentalized religion will continue to shape public discourse in ways that are difficult to detect, harder to counter, and increasingly consequential for democratic institutions and social cohesion.

5 Gerald FitzGerald, "Mapping Anti-Muslim Discrimination and Information Manipulation, and Its Impact on Humanitarian Aid and Development" (Arlington, VA: Schar School of Policy and Government, George Mason University, 2024), https://webdocs.gmu.edu/wp-content/uploads/Fitzgerald_WhitePaper_March2023_REV.pdf

6 Marc-André Argentino, "The Church of QAnon: Will Conspiracy Theories Form the Basis of a New Religious Movement?" *The Conversation*, May 18, 2020.

7 Philip S. Gorski and Samuel L. Perry, *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

8 Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Harold Roberts, *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Tradition-specific vignettes

Mega-churches, televangelists, and the Catholic Church have each sought—with varying degrees of success—to adapt to the rapidly changing media landscape by embracing digital platforms, livestreaming, and social media engagement.[9] For many established institutions, this has meant translating preexisting authority structures and ritual practices into digital formats: Sunday services become livestream events, sermons are repackaged as short-form video content, and clergy cultivate influencer-like followings. Yet as traditional religious authorities attempt to maintain relevance in a decentralized media environment, new entrants have emerged to fill gaps in audience trust and engagement. Entrepreneurial ventures such as the faith-based social networking platform and mobile app *Pray.com* or the media and events organization *Thinq Media* represent a shift toward individualized, market-driven forms of digital evangelical religiosity. These platforms blend elements of worship, wellness, and self-branding—illustrating how religious communication increasingly adopts the logic of the influencer economy. Their success signals a reconfiguration of religious authority—away from institutional gatekeepers and toward a more participatory, algorithmically mediated economy of faith-based content. Where evangelical networks have long mastered mass media to reinforce identity and mobilize power, Catholic, Black Protestant, Muslim, and diasporic religious communities reveal alternative models—with some more decentralized and others focused on reasserting institutional authority.

Black churches have historically been underrepresented or narrowly portrayed in the media, despite their central role in advancing civil rights, shaping Black identity, and fostering theological innovation. Today, Black churches and leaders continue to adapt to digital media environments to expand outreach, preserve oral traditions, and amplify issues of racial justice, economic inequality, and spiritual well-being. Bishop T.D. Jakes, former pastor of The Potter's House in Dallas, is one of the most recognizable Black Pentecostal leaders in the U.S., using preaching, publishing, and media production to reach a global audience. His daughter and successor, Sarah Jakes Roberts, represents part of a generational shift in how Black Pentecostals engage with media platforms, effectively using social media and podcasting to connect with younger audiences while maintaining her father's legacy.[10] Rev. William J. Barber II has emerged as a moral and political voice through his leadership of the Poor People's Campaign, linking Christian faith to movements for racial and economic justice. Rev. Traci Blackmon, a national leader in the United Church of Christ, combines pastoral ministry with public advocacy, especially around racial equity and health care access, making her a prominent faith-based voice in social justice discourse. Yet coverage still tends to flatten the diversity and grassroots vitality of this tradition, underscoring the need for more nuanced storytelling for broader audiences.

9 Sydney Scheller, Elizabeth Jones, and Nathan Vick, "#MarketingFaith: The Megachurch Pastor as Social Media Influencer," in *Research Perspectives on Social Media Influencers and Their Followers*, ed. Samuel R. Watkins (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2021); Fiona Murphy, "He's a Young Millennial Catholic Priest; of Course He's a Social Media Influencer," *Religion News Service*, February 12, 2025, https://religionnews.com/2025/02/12/hes-a-young-millennial-catholic-priest-of-course-hes-a-social-media-influencer/

10 Dr. Dara Delgado, interview by author via Zoom, January 21, 2025.

The Catholic Church in the United States is undergoing a complex transformation marked by both efforts toward greater inclusivity and the persistent influence of conservative factions. On one hand, new voices—including digital missionaries, younger priests, and lay initiatives—are expanding the Church's diversity and reach, often aligning with Pope Francis and Pope Leo XIV's calls for pastoral openness. At the same time, the Catholic Right exerts significant influence in the U.S., shaping discourse through legacy outlets like EWTN and allied networks that frequently criticize papal leadership and promote a more traditionalist theological and political agenda. This dual dynamic underscores that Catholic media in the U.S. is not simply moving toward inclusivity but is a contested arena where competing visions of Catholic identity are negotiated and amplified.

Simultaneously, the Catholic Church is embracing the concept of the "social media influencer." In July 2025, Pope Leo XIV addressed over 1,000 Catholic digital missionaries and influencers from around the world during a special Jubilee event at St. Peter's Basilica.[11] Bishop Robert Barron of the Diocese of Winona-Rochester is an influential media figure, founding Word on Fire Catholic Ministries to evangelize through various media formats. Priests such as Father David Michael Moses and Father Mike Schmitz command substantial followings on Instagram and other social media platforms. Father James Martin, S.J., is a Jesuit priest and influential media figure whose writing, public speaking, and social media presence bridge Catholic teaching with contemporary conversations on faith, culture, and LGBTQ+ inclusion.[12] Other initiatives, such as *Black Catholic Messenger*, highlight stories and voices often marginalized within mainstream Catholic discourse, reflecting the Church's demographic diversity.

Latino/a communities have become a key focus for religious media, especially evangelical outlets that seek to expand their reach through Spanish-language programming, targeted social media, and partnerships with Latino/a faith leaders. These efforts are particularly visible on platforms like Facebook and YouTube, where engagement among Latino/a communities is high.[13] However, this targeted attention often overshadows more nuanced realities. For example, while most Latinos who leave Catholicism historically move into Protestant (often evangelical) churches, religious disaffiliation is an increasingly important destination, particularly among younger and U.S.-born cohorts.[14] Media focus on religious realignment among Latino/a communities can further obscure the presence of what some analysts call

11 Sebastián Sansón Ferrari, "The Church Prepares Its First Jubilee for Catholic Influencers," *Vatican News,* July 15, 2025, https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2025-07/vatican-jubilee-catholic-influencers-hymn.html

12 Fr. James Martin, S.J., "Six (Historic) Days in Rome for LGBTQ Catholics," *Outreach*, September 9, 2025, https://outreach.faith/2025/09/james-martin-s-j-six-historic-days-in-rome-for-lgbtq-catholics/.

13 Jens Manuel Krogstad, Joshua Alvarado, and Besheer Mohamed, "Among U.S. Latinos, Catholicism Continues to Decline but Is Still the Largest Faith," Pew Research Center, April 13, 2023, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/04/13/among-u-s-latinos-catholicism-continues-to-decline-but-is-still-the-largest-faith/; Sarah Naseer, Christopher St. Aubin, and Michael Lipka, "Hispanic Americans' News Habits and Sources," Pew Research Center, March 19, 2024, https://www.pewresearch.org/race-and-ethnicity/2024/03/19/hispanic-americans-news-habits-and-sources/; Meaghan Winter, "Latinos Will Determine the Future of American Evangelicalism," *The Atlantic*, July 26, 2021, https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2021/07/latinos-will-determine-future-american-evangelicalism/619551/; Leah Payne, *God Gave Rock and Roll to You: A History of Contemporary Christian Music* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2024), 132.

14 Pew Research Center, "Major New Survey Explores the Shifting Religious Identity of Latinos in the United States," May 7, 2014, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2014/05/07/major-new-survey-explores-the-shifting-religious-identity-of-latinos-in-the-united-states/

the "overlooked religious middle"—Latino/as whose beliefs and affiliations do not map onto categories such as the "Christian right" or "liberal religion."[15]

Across U.S. media, Indigenous spirituality has long been reduced to vague symbols of mysticism or generic "natural" wisdom divorced from their cultural and geographic roots. Across film, television, and digital platforms, Indigenous practices are frequently appropriated to lend spiritual depth or exotic flair to non-Indigenous narratives. One striking example is the popularization of sage burning in "spiritual" scenes—a practice with deep ceremonial meaning in certain Indigenous traditions that has been commodified and spread without regard for its origins.[16] The demand for white sage, which grows naturally only in Southern California and Northern Mexico, has led to overharvesting and ecological strain, compounding the cultural harm. Such portrayals not only distort the spiritual realities of Indigenous communities but also erase the diversity of Indigenous traditions that continue to shape spiritual life across the United States. FX's Reservation Dogs, created by Sterlin Harjo and Taika Waititi, is frequently praised for the way it integrates Indigenous spiritual sensibilities into everyday life—not as exotic or background "spiritual moments," but as part of the characters' lived reality. The show doesn't shy away from ancestral and spirit-world themes while still rooting them in contemporary reservation life.

Other religious traditions have developed distinct media ecosystems that extend well beyond proselytization to include cultural production, political commentary, and community formation. Mapping these ecosystems highlights the institutional and organizational infrastructure through which religious publics produce and circulate meaning. In the United States, Jewish media constitutes a particularly robust and heterogeneous ecosystem spanning funders, news agencies (e.g., Jewish Telegraphic Agency), digital magazines (e.g., *The Forward, Jewish Currents, Moment,* and *Tablet*), and journals oriented toward more scholarly or theological audiences (e.g., *Sapir, Masorti,* and *Sources*), as well as professional associations (e.g., the American Jewish Press Association) and media organizations such as 70 Faces Media and Reboot Studios. Together, these actors reflect the diversity of Jewish religious, cultural, and political life in the United States, encompassing devotional, cultural, and secular-analytical modes of expression. Since October 7, 2023, amid the ongoing Israel–Hamas war and its broader regional reverberations, many U.S. Jewish communities have reported heightened experiences of vulnerability alongside intensified expressions of solidarity and cultural affirmation. Within media discourse, these developments have corresponded to increased attention to questions of Jewish belonging, safety, and antisemitism, as well as visible debates over solidarity with Palestinians and competing claims regarding justice and human dignity. Figures such as Arielle Angel, editor-in-chief of *Jewish Currents*, and Molly Crabapple, a writer and artist whose work frequently engages questions of politics, identity, and Jewish life, illustrate overlapping strands of Jewish cultural and media production that foreground critical perspectives on these debates.

15 Robert P. Jones, "Understanding America's Overlooked Religious Middle," *Religion News Service*, April 30, 2024, https://religionnews.com/2024/04/30/understanding-americas-overlooked-religious-middle/

16 Joely Proudfoot, email message to author, May 14, 2025.

Muslim media voices are emerging in new and dynamic ways, particularly among younger generations on social media. Prominent Muslim leaders, including Omar Suleiman, maintain a significant social media presence; Suleiman is particularly noted for his contributions to interfaith engagement, social justice, and public oratory. Imam Talib Abdur-Rashid of Harlem's Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood regularly connects Islam to Black freedom struggles and is frequently sought after for commentary on issues of race, justice, and interfaith relations. Public commentators such as Mehdi Hasan, through his work with Zeteo, and cultural figures including Zohran Mamdani, Hasan Minhaj, and Hasan Piker have broadened Muslim representation across political, comedic, and digital spaces. Influencers and other public figures—such as Blair Imani, Dr. Rania Awwad, Alana Hadid, Jenan Matari, and Indya Moore—further contribute to a diverse and expanding ecosystem of Muslim expression online. Platforms like @Muslim on Instagram and media outlets such as *Muslim Matters* further institutionalize this presence. While representation of Muslims in film and television has improved in some areas, problematic portrayals—especially those rooted in Orientalist tropes and securitized narratives—persist in mainstream media. Recent research suggests that these representations can generate support for exclusionary and anti-democratic policies.[17] Meanwhile, social media has emerged as both a corrective and a counterpublic sphere. Some evidence suggests that witnessing events in Gaza through digital media has prompted new interest in Islam and conversion, illustrating how online platforms can both challenge traditional media authority and transform moral and political understanding.[18] Social media, especially Instagram and TikTok, has become a key space for Muslim digital engagement. Palestinian journalists and creators such as Motaz Azaiza, Bisan Owda, Hind Khoudary, Lama Jamous, and Plestia Alaqad have reached global audiences with on-the-ground reporting from Gaza, reshaping international perceptions and highlighting gaps in mainstream coverage.[19] Their prominence underscores the current centrality of Palestinian voices in the contemporary Muslim media landscape.

African diasporic spiritual traditions—such as Ifá, Santería, Candomblé, and Kongo-derived practices—are increasingly visible through public scholarship, social media, and podcasts.[20] Visual and multimedia content, from ritual music to art and divination demonstrations, makes these practices more accessible and performative in digital spaces. This online presence highlights how historically marginalized religious traditions are leveraging media to assert authority, connect diasporic communities, and shape their own narratives. Other notable figures working at the intersection of religion and media include Sikh educator, writer, and activist Simran Jeet Singh, whose work focuses on issues of religion, race, and social justice. Rainn Wilson, best known for his role as Dwight Schrute in The Office, has also made significant contributions to make the teachings of the Bahá'í faith more accessible to a broader audience.

17 Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, "Stereotypes on Screen: The Effects of Muslim Portrayals in Entertainment Media," accessed September 10, 2025, https://ispu.org/public-policy/stereotypes-on-screen/

18 Dr. Maytha Alhassen, email message to author, September 26, 2025; Nahid Widaatalla, "After Seeing the Struggle of Palestinians in Gaza, TikTok Users Are Learning about Islam," *The Conversation*, December 18, 2023, https://theconversation.com/after-seeing-the-struggle-of-palestinians-in-gaza-tiktok-users-are-learning-about-islam-218503

19 Dr. Maytha Alhassen, email message to author, September 26, 2025.

20 Megan Goodwin and Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst, "You Don't Know African Diasporic Religions," *Keeping It 101?* podcast episode 402, September 21, 2021, https://keepingit101.com/e402

Intersecting forces reshaping the religion and media landscape: Algorithms, economic precarity, and the rise of AI

Social media has significantly transformed traditional religion media by reshaping both content distribution methods and the types of material that gain prominence. Discourses on religion and spirituality are increasingly shaped by individuals rather than institutions. Podcasters, YouTubers, and TikTok creators representing a broader diversity of religious traditions are shaping new expressions of "lived religion."[21] However, stakeholders in the religion and media space express grave concern about the opaque algorithmic drivers of this content, which often steer users toward more extreme or sensationalized forms of religious content, distorting public perceptions of faith and spirituality. "Success" now often depends more on emotional appeal and viral potential than on theological depth, and the most popular content often lacks theological rigor and grounding.

The collapse of local media has profoundly reshaped the religion and media landscape by dismantling the infrastructures that once enabled and sustained community-centered coverage of faith institutions, leaders, and events. As local newspapers and radio stations shutter or consolidate under national conglomerates, nuanced reporting on religious diversity, local congregational life, and the civic roles of faith communities has sharply declined. This erosion not only limits public understanding of religion's role in specific geographic and cultural contexts but also diminishes the visibility of historically marginalized traditions.

In the absence of robust local news ecosystems, coverage of religion has increasingly shifted toward a patchwork of nonprofit newsrooms, independent outlets, and freelance religious beat reporters. These actors play a critical and often under-recognized role in maintaining baseline coverage, but they frequently operate with limited resources, precarious funding, and uneven geographic reach. As a result, religion coverage is becoming more episodic, personality-driven, or nationally framed, rather than grounded in sustained local reporting. The decline of local media has not simply reduced coverage; it has restructured how religion is reported, shifting responsibility onto under-resourced nonprofit and freelance ecosystems.

The loss of local media ecosystems further contributes to a fragmented information environment in which misinformation and stereotypes proliferate more easily. Philanthropic efforts such as Report for America, Press Forward, and the American Journalism Project have begun to address these gaps, but the losses remain significant. Strategic investment in these models, particularly in sustained local beats and institutional capacity, will be essential to rebuilding a more accurate, representative, and resilient information environment around religion.

The fragmentation of media audiences—driven by the proliferation of media outlets and audiences' increasingly selective consumption—has made it increasingly difficult for content creators to engage broad, general-interest audiences or shape a shared reality. This challenge is particularly acute in the

21 For scholarship on the "lived religion" paradigm, see N. T. Ammerman, "Finding Religion in Everyday Life," *Sociology of Religion* 75, no. 2 (June 1, 2014); Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

religion and media space, where audiences are naturally segmented by religious tradition. While quality religion reporting continues across podcasts, websites, and video, it struggles to reach sustainable audiences in a landscape marked by social media algorithms that tend to suppress external content rather than drive traffic. These difficulties are even further compounded by partisan sorting, in which audiences actively seek content that affirms their existing beliefs, and even rigorously objective reporting is often misread as signaling partisan allegiance. Adding to this complexity is the broader cultural devaluation of expertise, which fuels misinformed debates and undermines both religious pluralism and democratic institutions.[22]

Economic precarity in the media sector has pushed legacy religious outlets to experiment with new revenue models and distribution strategies. Following the 2008 financial crisis, as corporate advertising budgets contracted and disposable income declined, organizations such as *Religion News Service* and *Christianity Today* transitioned from subscription-based models to ones sustained largely by philanthropy.[23] In the years that followed, platforms like Facebook, Twitter (now X), and Instagram appeared to offer a lifeline—expanding reach, amplifying individual stories, and fueling engagement around religiously inflected cultural trends like the "Trad Wife" aesthetic and the LDS-centered #MomTok. Yet as algorithmic volatility made audience visibility increasingly erratic, these outlets shifted focus to prioritizing brand identity, developing platform-specific content strategies, and producing shareable material aligned with users' values.[24] Confronted with the tension between chasing clicks and maintaining credibility, many have since embraced platform-independent formats—such as newsletters, podcasts, and community-based media—to reach younger audiences while preserving editorial integrity.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is transforming not so much the substance of religious messages as the channels through which they are produced and communicated. Generative tools now allow sermons, prayers, commentary, and even religious imagery to be created and disseminated rapidly, lowering barriers to entry and broadening access. This shift alters *who* can produce religious content, how quickly it circulates, and what kinds of material gain visibility. At the same time, the reliance on AI carries implications for the *content itself*. While AI rarely introduces wholly new religious messages, it often repackages them in ways that lack theological depth or ethical nuance and may perpetuate biases embedded in training data. In this sense, AI reshapes religious communication indirectly—by changing the authority, tone, and credibility of messages, and by raising new questions about authenticity and spiritual authority.

In sum, the religion and media landscape is being reshaped by intersecting forces of demographic change, technological innovation, and systemic precarity. These dynamics create both challenges and opportunities for those seeking to engage broad audiences with religious

22 Thomas M. Nichols, *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

23 RNS, which once had around 150 subscriber papers including major outlets like *The New York Times* and *The Los Angeles Times*, now has a handful of subscribers and is mostly funded by philanthropic donors, especially Lilly Endowment. Paul O'Donnell, Editor-in-Chief, *Religion News Service*, interview by author, January 24, 2025; Dr. Daniel Silliman, Christianity Today, interview by author, April 24, 2025.

24 Dr. Daniel Silliman, interview by author, April 24, 2025.

and spiritual ideas. By mapping networks of influence and surfacing emerging trends, the Aspen Institute's Religion and Media Mapping Project seeks to equip scholars, journalists, funders, and practitioners with tools to better navigate this complex environment and to sustain a diverse, pluralistic media ecosystem.

Methodology

Defining religion and media

For this project, we define "religion" broadly as encompassing beliefs, practices, and identities related to the sacred, the transcendent, or a higher power. This includes organized religious traditions, institutional faith communities, and doctrinal systems, as well as more fluid forms of spirituality, personal faith, and worldviews engaging with ultimate meaning, morality, and existence. Our definition includes both formally affiliated religious groups and those identifying as spiritual but not religious (SBNR), acknowledging the diverse ways people experience and express their religious or spiritual identity through ritual, ethics, storytelling, and community belonging.

"Media" refers to platforms that actively produce content related to religion, culture, or society, including mainstream, independent, and niche outlets. We distinguish between explicitly religious media and those that engage with religious themes without a direct faith orientation. Our tagging system classifies content as religiously affiliated or as secular, interfaith, multifaith, observational-analytical (i.e., critical), or SBNR, based on engagement style. We recognize that classifications such as "Christian-Protestant" may oversimplify the diversity of views within traditions, especially given the rise of post-denominational identities among younger generations.

Scope and selection criteria

This study focuses on U.S.-based media with national reach, excluding regional radio networks but incorporating all major podcast offerings and social media platforms. We analyze content produced since March 2020, a timeframe selected not as a critical juncture but as a practical starting point, reflecting accelerated trends in religion and media during the COVID-19 pandemic. We acknowledge that this approach inherently biases results toward more recent and younger content producers.

By focusing on the United States, this report does not fully capture the global scope of contemporary religious media ecosystems—a necessary limitation of its design. However, it recognizes that religious media is deeply transnational, with audiences often engaging sources that extend well beyond national boundaries. For example, during the Israel–Gaza conflict, many Muslim communities in the U.S. turned to international media and transnational

religious networks for news and interpretation, underscoring the importance of cross-border information flows in shaping domestic discourse.

To identify major media producers in television, radio, and publishing, we conducted desk research on online and print mastheads, examined award programs and bestseller lists, and balanced critically acclaimed and commercially successful content. Our dataset prioritizes high-impact figures and entities, including social media influencers with over 10,000 followers and funders contributing at least $10,000 to religion and media-related initiatives. While these thresholds ensure analytical focus, they may overrepresent established voices at the expense of emerging ones.

Much of the content examined in this report centers on Christian traditions, reflecting both the prominence of Christian voices in the current religion and media landscape and the practical constraints of scope. We recognize that this focus does not capture the full breadth of religious and spiritual expression across traditions. As such, this should be understood as a limitation of the present work. Future research can and should expand this inquiry to better include a wider range of religious and spiritual communities, practices, and media expressions.

It is also important to note that the examples included in this report are drawn from a broader and more diverse field of cases. The examples that we present throughout this report are used selectively to illustrate observed patterns and highlight emerging trends rather than to represent the field in its entirety. Given the scope of this project, our intention is not to provide an exhaustive catalog of organizations, individuals, or media products, but rather to identify dynamics that appear across a range of contexts. As such, the report should be read as offering a snapshot of salient themes and illustrative cases, not as a comprehensive mapping or definitive account of the religion and media landscape.

Data collection and analysis

We employed a mixed-methods approach, combining desk research, interviews, and network analysis. Between July 2024 and May 2025, we conducted 24 interviews and 42 surveys, selecting participants through an initial pass of the network analysis and a snowballing approach. Some individuals declined to participate, and some did not respond to interview or survey requests, potentially skewing the representation. Titles used throughout this report reflect interviewees' positions at the time of interview. Given the complexity of religious identity and media engagement, our iterative research process allowed for cross-platform analysis of key figures. We examined:

- **Book publishing:** Identifying relevant authors via bestseller lists, awards, and commercial data, focusing on their most recent releases as of January 2025.
- **Podcasting:** Identifying prominent and award-winning religion and media-related shows, cross-referencing hosts with other media forms to assess influence across platforms.

- **Music:** Identifying key recording artists using Spotify and Amazon metrics, supplemented by searches on Discogs.com and AllMusic.com. Artists were labeled based on their most recent release as of January 2025.
- **Social media:** Analyzing verified accounts with over 10,000 followers on platforms such as YouTube, X, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. While newer platforms (e.g., Bluesky, Threads, Rumble) were noted, our focus remained on established ones where identity and influence were clear. Reddit and Parler were excluded due to their anonymity and decentralized nature.
- **Funding:** Using the Foundation Directory Online to track funders contributing more than $10,000 to religion and media initiatives since 2020. While this threshold ensures practical focus, it may introduce bias by overrepresenting larger funders.

Throughout our research, recurring individuals and entities emerged across multiple platforms, prompting additional analysis of crossover influence.

Traditional media

1.0 Traditional media: Film

The fundamental frameworks of religious and spiritual narratives often overlap thematically in storytelling themes of overcoming the monster, rags to riches, the quest, voyage and return, rebirth, comedy, and tragedy.[25] For example, *Oppenheimer*'s portrayal of the atomic bomb's first successful test, followed by the titular character's quote from the Bhagavad Gita, "Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds," invokes a deeply religious and philosophical reflection on power, destruction, and human responsibility. Another prominent mainstream cinematic offering from 2023, *Killers of the Flower Moon*, explores themes of moral righteousness, the abuse of power, and the collision between Indigenous spirituality and the exploitative forces of capitalism and colonialism.

In more intentionally faith-oriented filmmaking, creators are exploring how religiously inflected narratives can resonate with diverse audiences. Directors such as Jon Erwin and D.J. Caruso have gained recognition for values-oriented content that appeals to both religious and secular viewers through uplifting, family-friendly stories. Media companies, including Amazon, MGM Studios, and Netflix, are increasingly collaborating with creators like Erwin and Caruso, as well as Roma Downey and Mark Burnett's LightWorkers Media, to tap into the commercial potential of faith-inflected storytelling.[26] Erwin's Wonder Project, for instance, is producing high production-value faith-inspired projects, such as *House of David*, while Caruso's Netflix collaboration *Mary* seeks to make its titular character broadly relatable.[27] By contrast, Hulu's *Secret Lives of Mormon Wives* adopts a more sensationalist approach, which has sparked criticism from many within LDS communities who see it as misaligned with lived religious commitments.[28]

In documentary filmmaking, recent works such as Joshua Seftel's *Stranger at the Gate* and Nichola Ma's *Leap of Faith* explore themes of transformation, redemption, and the power of human connection across religious and cultural divides. PBS programming, such as the recent documentary series, *American Muslims* and *The Jewish Journey: America*, explores the early

25 Christopher Booker, *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories* (London: Continuum, 2006).

26 John Jurgensen, "From 'The Chosen' to 'Sound of Freedom,' Religious Projects Are Sweeping Hollywood," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 3, 2024, https://www.wsj.com/style/house-of-david-jon-erwin-wonder-project-angel-studios-d31ac703; Mike Fleming Jr. and Anita Busch, "MGM Buys 55% Of Roma Downey And Mark Burnett's Empire; Relaunches United Artists," *Deadline*, September 22, 2014, https://deadline.com/2014/09/mgm-buys-55-of-roma-downey-and-mark-burnetts-united-artists-838595/

27 Jurgensen, "From 'The Chosen' to 'Sound of Freedom'"; Claire Giangravé, "New Netflix Film Wants to Make Mary Accessible to All," *Religion News Service*, December 6, 2024, https://religionnews.com/2024/12/06/new-netflix-film-wants-to-make-mary-accessible-to-all/

28 Amanda Freebairn, "Perspective: Hulu Makes Sure the Bitter Consequences of 'Sexual Liberation' for Families Are No Secret," *Deseret News*, May 19, 2025, https://www.deseret.com/opinion/2025/05/19/sexual-revolution-fallout-hulu-secret-lives-mormon-wives/

history of Muslims and Jews in America. These efforts reflect a broader trend to present religious themes and histories in ways that are both authentic and engaging to a wide spectrum of viewers. The Sundance Institute's Indigenous Program supports Indigenous and Native storytellers, focusing on culture, heritage, and the indigenizing of creative practices.[29] While the program is not explicitly organized around a faith tradition, many participating filmmakers naturally incorporate spiritual motifs and practices rooted in their cultures. As a result, the lab functions primarily as a cultural initiative in which spirituality and creative expression frequently intersect.

1.1 Traditional media: Television

Over the past two decades, rapid technological advancements and shifting consumer preferences have transformed the television industry. The rise of streaming services has accelerated the decline of traditional television, driving widespread "cord-cutting" and reshaping viewing habits. Between 2012 and 2024, the number of U.S. households subscribing to cable, broadcast, or satellite TV dropped from over 100 million to 51.8 million, with the median age of a network primetime viewer rising to 64.6 years in 2023.[30] The audience for cable news is even older, with MSNBC's median age at 70, Fox News's at 69, and CNN's at 67.[31] Younger audiences, particularly Gen Z and Millennials, overwhelmingly prefer streaming platforms over traditional TV, with Gen Z spending nearly three times more time on streaming platforms than cable.[32]

Dedicated evangelical TV networks and production companies—such as the Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN), the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN), God TV, and Daystar—remain influential in the shrinking and aging television market. The Eternal Word Television Network (EWTN) continues to serve as the primary provider of religious and devotional programming for Catholic audiences. However, these networks have struggled to engage with younger audiences, who increasingly access religious, spiritual, and religion-critical content through streaming services, podcasts, or social media, if at all.[33] Tyler Perry, by contrast, has built an expansive storytelling ecosystem—including films, TV series, and digital content—that leverages recurring characters and themes, cultivating a devoted audience and a distinctive brand. Perry's model shows how television can foreground underrepresented cultural voices while using interconnected storytelling to sustain audience engagement.

29 Sundance Institute, "Announcing the Fellows for the 2025 Sundance Institute Directors, Screenwriters, and Native Labs," April 28, 2025, https://www.sundance.org/blogs/announcing-the-fellows-for-the-2025-sundance-institute-directors-screenwriters-and-native-labs/

30 Rick Porter, "TV Viewers Are Aging. These Shows Bring in the Oldest Audiences," *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 29, 2024, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/tv-viewers-oldest-audiences-1235910778/

31 Isabella Simonetti and Joe Flint, "TV Networks Embrace Their Aging Audience With a New Mantra: Age Doesn't Matter," *The Wall Street Journal,* May 22, 2024, https://www.wsj.com/business/media/tv-networks-embrace-their-aging-audience-with-a-new-mantra-age-doesnt-matter-63badbd1

32 Frankie Karrer, "The Streaming Generation Gap Is Smaller Than You Think," MNTN Research, September 26, 2023, https://research.mountain.com/insights/the-streaming-generation-gap-is-smaller-than-you-think/

33 Michel M. Haigh and Pamela Jo Brubaker, "Social Media and Televangelists: Examining Facebook and Twitter Content," *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture* 7, no. 1 (April 16, 2018), 29-49.

At the same time, the decline of local journalism and reductions in religion coverage by mainstream outlets—as evidenced by the 2019 closure of PBS' *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly* and CBS' *Religion and Culture* programming—have constricted television news coverage and analysis of religion's role in public life. When religion is addressed on network and cable TV outlets, it is most often interpreted through a political lens, particularly in relation to the overlap between conservative white evangelical Christianity and American political life. MSNBC frequently features scholars such as Anthea Butler, David French, Sarah Posner, and Peter Wehner, while Kristin Kobes Du Mez and Wehner appear on PBS's *Amanpour & Co.*, addressing similar themes. On Fox News, religion correspondents and commentators such as Lauren Green and Jonathan Morris similarly situate religion within broader cultural and political developments.

Representation of historically marginalized communities in scripted television has grown in visibility. FX's *Reservation Dogs* follows Native American youth navigating life on a reservation, offering rare insight into Indigenous experiences and community dynamics rarely seen on mainstream television. The success of shows like Netflix's *Mo* and Hulu's *Ramy* highlights the growing impact of authentic Muslim representations in popular culture. Unlike mainstream portrayals that often lean on stereotypes, these narratives offer nuanced, lived experiences that resonate with viewers. Mo and Ramy demonstrate how inclusive storytelling about the complexities of hybrid identities can engage broader audiences. Contemporary Jewish representation has also expanded, including series such as Netflix's *Nobody Wants This*, which centers on a cross-cultural relationship involving a Jewish rabbi, and Hulu's *We Were the Lucky Ones*, which depicts a Jewish family's survival and diaspora experience across World War II and its aftermath. Other contemporary examples, such as *Never Have I Ever*, illustrate how Hindu identity is increasingly incorporated into mainstream storytelling through narratives of adolescence, family, and diaspora. Across these cases, storytelling about Jewish, Muslim, Indigenous, and Hindu characters increasingly engages the complexity of hybrid identities in ways that reach broader audiences. At the same time, representation remains uneven. For example, while more nuanced portrayals have emerged, Muslim characters continue to face persistent stereotyping in mainstream media, including Orientalist framing, associations with extremism or terrorism, and "good Muslim/bad Muslim" binaries.[34]

34 Maytha Alhassen, *Haqq and Hollywood: Illuminating 100 Years of Muslim Tropes and How to Transform Them* (Pop Culture Collaborative, 2018), https://popcollab.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/HaqqAndHollywood_Report.pdf; Al-Baab Khan et al., *Erased or Extremists: The Stereotypical View of Muslims in Popular Episodic Series* (USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, 2022), https://assets.uscannenberg.org/docs/aii-study-muslim-erased-or-extremists-20220901.pdf; Al-Baab Khan et al., *Missing and Maligned: The Reality of Muslims in Popular Global Movies* (USC Annenberg, Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, 2021), 5, https://assets.uscannenberg.org/docs/aii-muslim-rep-global-film-2021-06-09.pdf

1.2 Traditional media: Radio

Religious radio broadcasting has deep roots in the United States, with early pioneers such as Catholic Bishop Fulton Sheen—whose popular radio preaching and later television program *Life Is Worth Living* dominated the 1940s and 1950s—demonstrating the power of radio to reach mass audiences. Today, religious radio remains a prominent part of the American broadcast landscape, with evangelical talk radio networks maintaining particularly strong followings, reaching nearly all Americans and accounting for roughly a quarter of U.S. stations.[35] Nationally syndicated examples include *American Family Radio, Salem Radio Network*, and *Moody Radio*. While nearly half of Americans consume some form of religious audio programming, listening patterns skew toward music and sermons, with more overtly political or talk-based content attracting smaller, more niche audiences.[36] The nonprofit Educational Media Foundation (EMF), through its K-Love and Air1 brands, operates the second fastest-growing radio chain in the U.S., broadcasting on more than 1,000 signals across all 50 states and reaching an estimated 18 million listeners weekly. Satellite radio provider SiriusXM also carries a range of religious programming, including the *Family Talk Channel*, the *Catholic Channel*, and *Joel Osteen Radio.*

Public radio has developed a complementary presence in religious coverage, particularly through NPR and its local affiliates. National Public Radio (NPR) maintains a robust religion desk and has an editorial partnership with Religion News Service that is funded by the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations and the Lilly Endowment.[37] NPR correspondents, such as national political reporter Sarah McCammon and national correspondent Leila Fadel, often cover stories that touch on themes related to religion and spirituality. Local NPR affiliates also produce podcasts with national reach, such as KALW's *The Spiritual Edge*, North Carolina Public Radio's *Me and my Muslim Friends*, and WGBH's *All Rev'd Up*. Produced at WAMU in Washington, D.C. and distributed nationally to as many as 100 public radio stations, "Interfaith Voices" featured in-depth discussions on religion, spirituality, and ethics, often highlighting underrepresented voices and perspectives. In 2024, the program rebranded as "Inspired." However, despite its reach on nearly 100 stations, "Inspired" faced financial challenges and ceased production later in 2024.[38]

Podcasts produced by national public radio networks and independent organizations have further expanded the range of religious and spiritual content. Local affiliates of NPR provide relevant podcasting programming that is available to national audiences. With support from

35 Samuel Bestvater, Athena Chapekis, Skyler Seets, Sono Shah, and Aaron Smith, "1 in 4 U.S. Radio Stations Are Religious, Reaching Nearly All Americans," *Pew Research Center,* March 26, 2026, https://www.pewresearch.org/data-labs/2026/03/26/religious-radio-across-america/

36 Ibid.

37 The Arthur Vining Davis Foundations, "Partners," AVDF, accessed September 10, 2025, http://www.avdf.org/partners/

38 WVTF, "Inspired," accessed September 9, 2025, https://www.wvtf.org/show/inspired

private philanthropy, national radio network PRX produces several podcasts that center on issues related to faith and spirituality. Examples include *How God Works*, *On Being*, *Wisdom and Practice*, and several podcasts that fall under the umbrella of The Big Questions Project, supported by the John Templeton Foundation. These initiatives exemplify the growing diversity of formats and perspectives within the faith and spirituality media landscape.

Changes to federal funding for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, combined with ongoing economic pressures on commercial and nonprofit stations, have raised concerns about the sustainability and diversity of local-affiliate programming. These shifts may influence which programs reach national audiences, with podcasts and other emerging digital formats particularly vulnerable. As religious radio and faith-centered podcasts continue to evolve, these financial and structural challenges may constrain the variety of perspectives and voices available to listeners across the United States.

1.3 Traditional media: Print

In recent years, print publications have increasingly migrated to digital formats, reflecting broader trends in the media landscape. Evangelical magazines and periodicals, whether in print or online, continue to play an important role in shaping discourse within American Christianity. *Christianity Today* remains the most influential mainstream evangelical publication, while *World Magazine* offers news analysis from a biblical worldview. *The Gospel Coalition* serves reformed evangelicals with in-depth theological commentary, and *Charisma Magazine* caters to Pentecostal and charismatic audiences. Sojourners blends faith-based perspectives with social justice advocacy, and the Catholic-leaning *First Things* attracts an intellectual evangelical readership interested in Christianity's role in public life. Collectively, these publications shape evangelical identity, bridging denominational divides while also reflecting the broader ideological splits within evangelicalism, particularly on politics, race, and gender.

Evangelical media today functions less as a unified communicative sphere and more as a contested field of overlapping media regimes, in which outlets differentiate themselves through competing claims to theological authority, political legitimacy, and epistemic credibility. The Trump era has intensified these divisions by forcing outlets to articulate—explicitly or implicitly—their stance on the relationship between Christian identity and national power. In December 2019, *Christianity Today* took a clear anti-Trump stance when then editor-in-chief, Mark Galli, published the editorial "Trump Should Be Removed from Office," provoking backlash and a temporary decline in subscriptions.[39] *World Magazine* was initially skeptical of Trump but its opinion columns often reflect more supportive voices.[40] *The Gospel*

39 Mark Galli, "Trump Should Be Removed from Office," *Christianity Today,* December 19, 2019, https://www.christianitytoday.com/2019/12/trump-should-be-removed-from-office/; Dr. Daniel Silliman, interview by author, Zoom, April 24, 2025.

40 Marvin Olaskey, "Unfit for Power," *World News Group*, October 11, 2016, https://wng.org/articles/unfit-for-power-1617305343; Andrew T. Walker, "Same Song, Second Verse." *World News Group*, November 8, 2024. https://wng.org/opinions/same-song-second-verse-1731066356; Albert R. Mohler Jr., "It's Donald Trump's World Now." *World News Group*, January 22, 2025. https://wng.org/opinions/its-donald-trumps-world-now-1737460421

Coalition has largely avoided directly addressing Trumpism, leaving it "pinched in the middle" between more conservative and progressive audiences. Meanwhile, outlets like *Charisma Magazine* have gained prominence within white charismatic evangelical circles, notably promoting figures such as Messianic Rabbi Jonathan Cahn, who views President Trump as divinely appointed.[41] These tensions reflect broader epistemic and theological divisions within evangelicalism over the pursuit of cultural and political influence, the handling of church abuse, the meaning of gender and gender roles, and how to confront racism.[42]

Mainline Protestant media, though less widely circulated than evangelical outlets, have continued to influence public discourse through denominational news services and independent publications. *Christian Century,* for example, offers theological reflection and commentary, cultivating a readership among clergy, scholars, and lay leaders across the ecumenical spectrum. Denominational outlets—including *Episcopal News Service, Presbyterian Outlook,* and *United Methodist News*—report on institutional developments, global partnerships, and intra-denominational debates. While these outlets maintain high editorial standards and a commitment to theological depth, they face mounting financial pressures, declining subscription bases, and the broader challenges confronting legacy print media. As a result, many have expanded into digital platforms, podcasts, and newsletters to sustain engagement, even as their influence is increasingly concentrated among smaller but highly committed audiences.

In the face of financial pressures, the "religion beat" of more mainstream secular media outlets has often been an early victim of corporate downsizing, restructuring, or shifting priorities. Although *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* continue to maintain a religion beat, nearly all other major metropolitan, local, and regional newspapers no longer employ dedicated religion reporters, with many struggling to sustain even the most basic local reporting.[43] As a result, most Americans lack consistent exposure to reporting that humanizes neighbors of different faiths. Outside of national outlets, few newspapers convey the country's rich diversity of religious beliefs and practices—a central aspect of American life. Instead, audiences are increasingly confined to media silos that reinforce their existing viewpoints, prioritizing confirmation over opportunities to learn about—and engage with—the "other."

The contraction of traditional religion beats has generated divergent reactions within media and religious ecosystems. Some observers view the decline as an opportunity to integrate religious and spiritual dimensions more fully into adjacent beats such as politics, culture, and lifestyle, potentially enabling more holistic and wide-ranging coverage.[44] In this view, the loosening of a

41 Asaf Elia-Shalev, "Why Trump Is Being Compared to the Obscure Biblical King Jehu on the Christian Right." *Jewish Telegraphic Agency,* November 4, 2024. https://www.jta.org/2024/11/03/united-states/why-trump-is-being-compared-to-the-obscure-biblical-king-jehu-on-the-christian-right

42 See for example Kate Shellnutt, "Bethlehem Baptist Leaders Clash Over 'Coddling' and 'Cancel Culture,'" *Christianity Today*, August 20, 2021, https://www.christianitytoday.com/2021/08/bethlehem-bcs-minneapolis-resign-meyer-empathy-rigney/

43 *The Dallas Morning News* has since hired Adrian Ashford to cover "faith and religion in North Texas," a position supported through a partnership with Report for America. "Adrian Ashford | Dallas Morning News," *The Dallas Morning News*, accessed February 20, 2025, https://www.dallasnews.com/author/adrian-ashford/

44 Krista Tippett, interview by author, Zoom, February 4, 2025.

standalone "religion beat" allows for more fluid forms of commentary and analysis, as reflected in the work of many public-facing commentators who operate outside formal religion reporting but nonetheless center faith as a key analytic lens.[45] This may open opportunities for more innovative collaborations between funders, media outlets, academic institutions, and religious organizations to ensure continued coverage of important religious topics—or topics with important religious dimensions. Others, however, interpret the same shift more pessimistically, arguing that the erosion of dedicated religion coverage risks diluting expertise and institutional knowledge. From this perspective, the integration of religion into broader beats can lead to superficial treatment, reduced contextual depth, and greater susceptibility to misunderstanding, stereotyping, or misrepresentation of religious communities.

While the downsizing of religion beats creates some challenges in maintaining quality journalism about religion, new online spaces have evolved for more nuanced scholarly contributions to public discourse on faith and spirituality through op-eds, podcasts, and other media.[46] For example, the "Ethics and Religion" section of *The Conversation* has provided opportunities for both early- and senior-career scholars to build their public profiles and connect with broader audiences by pegging their areas of expertise to current events. *Associated Press* and *Religion News Service* (RNS) syndicate contributions to *The Conversation* as part of an ongoing collaboration in the Global Religion Journalism Initiative, which was launched in April 2019 with the support of Lilly Endowment.[47] Other examples of online media that attract more nuanced scholarly contributions include *Arc: Religion, Politics*, *Et Cetera*, *The Immanent Frame*, *Killing the Buddha*, and *The Revealer*.

Jewish newspapers are also facing mounting financial and demographic pressures. Many have reduced or eliminated print editions and pivoted to digital-first models, local outlets have adopted nonprofit or donation-based funding structures.[48] At the same time, new niche publications like *Shtetl: Haredi Free Press* have emerged to serve specific communities, while digital archival projects continue to preserve Jewish press history for broader access.[49]

Across these various ecosystems, religious media—both legacy and digital—continues to play a vital role in shaping faith, identity, and public discourse in the United States. While financial

45 Prominent examples include David Brooks, Elizabeth Bruenig, and David French of *The New York Times* and Peter Beinart of *The Daily Beast*.

46 Josh Good, interview by author, Zoom, July 19, 2024.

47 The Associated Press, "Religion News Service, AP and The Conversation Launch Global Religion Journalism Initiative," accessed February 5, 2025, https://www.ap.org/media-center/press-releases/2019/religion-news-service-ap-and-the-conversation-launch-global-religion-journalism-initiative/

48 Marcy Oster, "New York Jewish Week Putting Print Edition on Hiatus after 150-Year Run," *The Times of Israel,* July 8, 2020, https://www.timesofisrael.com/new-york-jewish-week-putting-print-edition-on-hiatus-after-150-year-run/; "At a Time When Many Jewish Newspapers Are Struggling, Detroit's to Seek Sustainability by Going Nonprofit," Jewish Telegraphic Agency, September 18, 2020, https://www.jta.org/quick-reads/at-a-time-when-many-jewish-newspapers-are-struggling-detroits-to-seek-sustainability-by-going-nonprofit; Aaron Howard, "Pandemic Further Questions the Future of Jewish Newspapers," *JHV Online*, July 23, 2020, https://jhvonline.com/pandemic-further-questions-the-future-of-jewish-newspapers-p27887-164.htm

49 Jon Kalish, "A New Website Reports on the Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Community," Religion, NPR, September 6, 2023, https://www.npr.org/2023/09/06/1196642902/a-new-website-reports-on-the-ultra-orthodox-jewish-community; Sharon Altshul, "Global Conference Celebrates Historical Jewish Press Project," *JNS.org*, May 15, 2025, https://www.jns.org/global-conference-celebrates-historical-jewish-press-project/

pressures and ideological divisions pose challenges, digital innovations and collaborative initiatives offer pathways for more nuanced, inclusive, and impactful coverage of religion.

1.4 Traditional media: Books

The launch of the Kindle in 2007 reshaped the book publishing industry, transforming how books are produced, distributed, and consumed. While e-books initially saw a rapid rise in popularity, the market has since stabilized, with digital reading now complementing, rather than replacing, print books.[50] Devotional books (especially Bibles) continue to outperform the broader market, with U.S. Bible sales up over 20 percent in 2024, and religion volumes overall rising about 18.5 percent through October 2024—outpacing a flat general market.[51] Reflecting this growth, Penguin Random House announced in October 2024 the creation of a standalone Christian Publishing Group to expand readership, strengthen audience connections, and broaden its range of religious content.[52] Yet institutional and denominational publishers face ongoing challenges, including rising production costs, shifting consumer habits, and competition from digital platforms.[53]

The growth of audiobooks and self-publishing platforms now offers authors new ways to reach readers. Yet, research suggests that Gen Z is reading more books compared to previous generations, particularly in physical formats.[54] Social media communities like TikTok's #BookTok have played a role in centering physical books in online conversations, while over 59 percent of Gen Z reports a preference for graphic or illustrated versions of stories over text-only formats.[55] The industry is also diversifying, with efforts to bring Black religious perspectives and other historically underrepresented voices into the trade publishing world.[56]

50 Michelle Faverio Perrin and Andrew Perrin, "Three-in-Ten Americans Now Read e-Books," Pew Research Center, January 6, 2022, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/01/06/three-in-ten-americans-now-read-e-books/

51 Cathy Lynn Grossman, "Sales Soar on Bibles and Beyond," *PublishersWeekly.Com*, January 22, 2025, https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/religion/article/96894-sales-soar-on-bibles-and-beyond.html

52 Penguin Random House, "Penguin Random House Announces Strategic Expansion Into Christian Publishing," October 30, 2024, https://global.penguinrandomhouse.com/announcements/penguin-random-house-announces-strategic-expansion-into-christian-publishing/

53 Anna Piela, "The Slow Fade of Denominational Publishing," *Religion News Service*, August 1, 2024, https://religionnews.com/2024/08/01/the-slow-fade-of-denominational-publishing/.

54 Nielsen, "On The Same Page, No Matter the Age: Reading Is a Top Spare-Time Activity for All Generations," accessed February 8, 2025, https://www.nielsen.com/insights/2015/on-the-same-page-no-matter-the-age-reading-is-a-top-spare-time-activity/

55 Kathi Inman Berens and Rachel Noorda, "Gen Z and Millennials Have an Unlikely Love Affair with Their Local Libraries," *The Conversation*, January 12, 2024, http://theconversation.com/gen-z-and-millennials-have-an-unlikely-love-affair-with-their-local-libraries-220632; Kathi Inman Berens and Rachel Noorda, "Gen Zers and Millennials Are Still Big Fans of Books – Even If They Don't Call Themselves 'Readers,'" *The Conversation*, April 30, 2024, https://theconversation.com/gen-zers-and-millennials-are-still-big-fans-of-books-even-if-they-dont-call-themselves-readers-228569

56 Malaika Adero, formerly of Simon and Schuster reported that her attempt to buy a manuscript written by Susan Taylor, the editor in chief of Essence, was rebuffed because Taylor's book was "too focused on religion." Marcela Valdes, "Inside the Push to Diversify the Book Business," *The New York Times*, June 22, 2022, sec. Magazine, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/22/magazine/inside-the-push-to-diversify-the-book-business.html

The market for religious and spiritual books is diverse, with publishers catering to distinct audiences and needs (See Table 1). These include trade, academic, denominational, and other faith-based publishers. Each has its own dynamics, targeting varying audiences. Trade publishers have increasingly focused on high-profile authors and bestselling titles. As a result, niche religious topics are often underserved.

Table 1: The Distinct Market Dynamics for Observational-Analytical and Devotional Books

MARKET TYPE	EXAMPLES	AUDIENCE	FOCUS AND CONTENT	SALES AND DISTRIBUTION	MARKETING CHANNELS
Trade Publishers	HarperOne, Penguin Random House, Hachette	General readers, both religious and secular	Crossover books (memoir, history, self-help, politics with religious themes)	Bookstores, online retailers, libraries	Mainstream media, social media, bestseller lists
Academic Publishers	Oxford University Press, Baylor University Press	Scholars, students, researchers	Peer-reviewed, analytical works, theological studies	University courses, libraries, scholarly conferences	Academic journals, university networks, conferences
Denominational Publishers	Concordia Publishing, Crossway, Loyola Press	Members of specific religious traditions	Theology, catechisms, Bible study guides, devotionals	Church bookstores, conferences, direct sales to congregations	Church networks, denominational events, religious publications
Faith-Based Publishers	Zondervan, Thomas Nelson, Charisma House, Hay House	Evangelicals, spiritual seekers, faith-based self-help readers	Devotional, inspirational, self-improvement, biblical guides	Christian bookstores, online retailers, church events	Church networks, podcasts, Christian media
Independent and Self-Publishing	Wipf and Stock, Amazon KDP, Hybrid publishers	Niche religious communities, independent scholars	Personal spirituality, theological debates, niche religious movements	Online platforms, direct-to-reader sales	Author websites, niche social media groups, word of mouth

Academic publishers continue to produce rigorous scholarship but face pressures from subscription models, open-access demands, and shrinking library budgets. Denominational and faith-based publishers are shifting to digital formats and multimedia platforms to engage audiences, while independent and self-publishing thrive through online distribution, amplifying diverse and experimental religious voices. Together, these trends reflect a rapidly evolving landscape where traditional gatekeepers coexist with new, agile platforms.

Literary agents remain crucial intermediaries in the religion publishing landscape, connecting authors to major publishers, particularly the "big five." Securing representation can be as challenging as obtaining a book contract, as agents are selective about whom they represent. Authors and agents often spend months developing proposals before pitching to editors, though some agents proactively approach writers whose essays or other work gain visibility.[57] Certain agencies specialize in values-driven content—Jones Literary and WTA Media focus on conservative evangelical authors—while others, like Fedd Agency, combine traditional publishing services with brand strategy, event booking, and agent-managed publishing. More broadly focused agencies, such as DeFiore and Company and Folio Literary Management, serve authors across diverse religious and spiritual traditions. Established authors sometimes maintain separate agents for secular and devotional markets, reflecting the distinct audiences and commercial dynamics of these sectors.[58]

Religious book publishing is evolving rapidly, shaped by technological shifts, generational reading habits, and a growing demand for diverse voices. Traditional publishers, independent platforms, and literary agents now coexist in a more fluid ecosystem, where high-profile bestsellers sit alongside niche, experimental, and underrepresented perspectives. This dynamic environment is redefining how devotional, scholarly, and trade works reach readers, creating new pathways for engagement and influence.

57 Dr. Simran Jeet Singh, interview by author, phone, November 19, 2024; Wajahat Ali, interview by author, phone, November 20, 2024; Sarah Posner, interview by author, phone, October 9, 2024.

58 Lisa Sharon Harper, interview by author, Zoom, January 8, 2025.

Digital media

Digital media spaces are in flux, reshaped by changing platform policies on one side and evolving user behavior on the other. During the COVID-19 pandemic, moderation efforts on YouTube and Facebook led some content creators to migrate controversial religious content to platforms with looser oversight, such as Rumble, Gab, and Parler. In late 2024, X (formerly Twitter) experienced significant user migration to Bluesky and Threads following complaints about harassment, misinformation, and inadequate content moderation.[59] In January 2025, Meta announced major revisions to its content moderation policies across Facebook, Instagram, and Threads, relaxing certain hate speech restrictions to accommodate political and religious discourse.[60]

While digital platforms allow religious communities to connect, share teachings, and engage audiences more broadly, scholars and journalists have raised concerns about how algorithms influence religious content online. Recommendation systems often amplify more extreme, sensational, or polarizing material, shaping perceptions of faith and spirituality and potentially affecting individual beliefs and practices.[61] Commercialization adds another layer of complexity. When religious influencers monetize content, they actively curate personal brands for financial gain, raising questions about the authenticity of their messages.[62] Platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Patreon have enabled these new revenue streams, allowing some creators to reach global audiences while blurring the line between spiritual guidance and content marketing. Understanding these dynamics is critical for assessing how religion is represented, consumed, and practiced in digital spaces today.

59 Raphael Boyd, "From X to Bluesky: Why Are People Fleeing Elon Musk's 'Digital Town Square'?" *The Guardian* (London), December 11, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/media/2024/dec/11/from-x-to-bluesky-why-are-people-abandoning-twitter-digital-town-square

60 Jillian C. York, Paige Collings, and David Greene, "Meta's New Content Policy Will Harm Vulnerable Users. If It Really Valued Free Speech, It Would Make These Changes," Electronic Frontier Foundation, January 9, 2025, https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2025/01/metas-new-content-policy-will-harm-vulnerable-users-if-it-really-valued-free

61 Dr. Christopher White, interview by author, Zoom, December 13, 2024; Paul O'Donnell, interview by author, January 24, 2025. For supporting research, see Anna Floerke Scheid, "Social Media Algorithms, Christian Extremism, and Catholic Ethics for Faith-Based Advocacy to Build a Culture of Encounter," *R Discovery*, June 14, 2024, https://discovery.researcher.life/article/social-media-algorithms-christian-extremism-and-catholic-ethics-for-faith-based-advocacy-to-build-a-culture-of-encounter/eeefb42c3da63922b3f19f8cae318369

62 Dr. Heidi Campbell, email message to author, August 18, 2025.

2.0 Digital media: Generational, demographic, and gender factors

Social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and X have reshaped how religious and religion-critical content is produced, shared, and consumed across generations. Facebook remains a key platform for reaching Boomer and Gen X audiences, while Instagram and TikTok dominate among Millennials and Gen Z.[63] The visual and short-form nature of these platforms lends itself to inspirational messages and memes—often delivered by influencers who blend personal narrative, lifestyle branding, and faith-based expression. YouTube continues to attract diverse audiences across age groups, offering everything from devotional instruction to critical commentary. Advances in AI-driven video and editing tools have further lowered barriers to content creation, enabling creators with limited resources to produce professional-quality media. This democratization has amplified new and niche voices but also intensified competition and raised concerns about misinformation, manipulation, and authenticity.

The COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns increasingly moved producers and consumers into digital spaces, with many content producers moving more rapidly to consolidate their audiences in digital media spaces. Legacy televangelists continue to maintain significant followings, particularly on platforms like Facebook, reflecting the persistence of older generational consumption patterns. These generational dynamics in consumption patterns reflect broader societal trends, including a move away from inherited religious identities and growing disaffiliation across specific demographics. Meanwhile, younger users engage with content in more interactive, personalized ways, often forming niche communities outside traditional institutional structures via podcasts and short-form video platforms.[64]

Digital platforms reshape religious expression—not through institutional doctrine but through visually driven, influencer-based performances that translate theology into lifestyle. For example, the "Trad Wife" phenomenon—a social media trend that idealizes traditional gender roles, where women embrace domesticity and submission to male authority—has become a potent nexus of religion, media, and cultural identity in digital spaces.[65] Rooted in conservative Christian values but resonating across broader religious and secular spaces, this aesthetic and ideological stance reinforces patriarchal models of masculinity by romanticizing traditional ideals of femininity. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube amplify these messages through curated imagery and personal testimony, reinforcing certain models of masculinity and femininity while translating religious narratives into culturally resonant visual content.

At the same time, the rise of narrowcasting and micro-audience targeting has diversified religious voices online. Underrepresented faith leaders and niche communities can now reach

63 Michelle Faverio Sidoti and Olivia Perrin, "Teens, Social Media and Technology 2024," Pew Research Center, December 12, 2024, https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2024/12/12/teens-social-media-and-technology-2024/

64 Krista Tippett, interview by author, Zoom, February 4, 2025.

65 Jessica Grose, "Tradwife Content Isn't Really for Women. It's for Men Who Want Submissive Wives," *The New York Times*, May 15, 2024, sec. Opinion, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/15/opinion/tradwife-tiktok.html

audiences previously inaccessible through traditional media. Moving forward, media coverage and research will need to recognize and engage with these emerging forms of religious expression, which blend spiritual seeking with social justice concerns, ecological awareness, and personal storytelling in ways that often defy conventional categorization. Yet algorithmic amplification frequently prioritizes sensational or emotionally charged content, creating a double-edged landscape in which greater visibility comes with the risk of distorting public perceptions of faith and spirituality.[66] These dynamics highlight both the opportunities and risks of a digital religious landscape shaped by attention-driven platforms.

Together, these generational, demographic, and gendered dynamics illustrate how digital media is redefining religious expression. Platforms influence not only what content is produced and consumed but also how theology, identity, and cultural values are communicated, experienced, and contested across generations.

2.1 Digital media: Podcasting

Podcasting has become a key platform for more long-form expression and storytelling that reflects the diversity of religious, spiritual, and religion-critical expression in the United States.[67] However, in recent years, the podcasting space has become crowded and commodified, making it difficult for new entrants to capture and retain listeners' attention.[68] While some scholars and veteran podcasters have described the podcasting ecosystem as in need of stabilization[69], it is maturing into a network-dominated ecosystem, albeit one where independent creators struggle to achieve sustainability without institutional or philanthropic support.

Podcasters highlight several key and interrelated challenges they face, including high production costs, securing funding and sustainability, market saturation, audience engagement, technical barriers, and the challenges in balancing quality and pressures to produce content in a timely manner. These challenges underscore the complexity of succeeding in the podcasting industry, requiring a combination of creative, technical, and business skills to navigate effectively. Despite these challenges, podcasting allows for the development of niche audiences and more localized and community-focused content. Podcasting can also serve as a platform for pedagogy and community building, even if individual podcasts do not reach mass audiences.[70] A good example of this is the *Keeping it 101* podcast, which is aimed at educators, undergraduate religious studies scholars, and

66 Heidi Campbell, *Digital Creatives and the Rethinking of Religious Authority* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020).

67 Sarah Posner, interview by author, phone, October 9, 2024.

68 Dr. Heather Bigley, interview by author, phone, February 6, 2025; Dr. Simran Jeet Singh, interview by author, phone, November 19, 2024.

69 Dr. Simran Jeet Singh, interview by author, phone, November 19, 2024; Krista Tippett, interview by author, Zoom, February 4, 2025.

70 Krista Tippett, interview by author, Zoom, February 4, 2025.

general listeners interested in religion.

The decoupling of podcasting from radio presents both opportunities and challenges for content creators in religious, spiritual, and religion-critical programming. It offers more freedom and direct audience engagement, but also requires navigating a more crowded and rapidly changing media environment. While radio shows often relied on institutional support, podcasters need to be more entrepreneurial in securing funding. This shift has opened new possibilities, such as potential support from donors interested in religious, spiritual, and religion-critical content, but it has also made the landscape more competitive.[71]

Over the past decade, podcasting has evolved into a formalized genre with established norms for presentation, organization, and branding. This routinization has created audience expectations that favor polished performers whose charisma fits established formats, while sidelining voices and styles that depart from those conventions, however compelling. As a result, the platform simultaneously opens space for new religious content and constrains the visibility of diversity, privileging those who can conform to the genre's professionalized standards over those who offer alternative or experimental approaches. Even with high-quality content, it is difficult for a show to survive without successful fundraising efforts.[72] This is especially the case for quality investigative or documentary-style podcasts, which can cost $250,000 or more to produce due to the labor costs involved in conducting in-depth research and maintaining high production standards.[73]

The podcasting ecosystem is, in some sense, an insular one, with listeners often introduced to new shows through the ones they already follow.[74] Podcast networks play a significant role by offering support, visibility, and cross-promotion and monetization opportunities. Podcast networks may focus on different aspects of religion, spirituality, and religion-critical content, such as faith-based education, cultural commentary, or journalistic coverage. A prominent example is PRX's slate of "Religion and Spirituality" podcasts, which includes podcasts such as *How God Works*, *All Rev'd Up*, and *Chutzpod!* Bradley Onishi's *Axis Mundi Media* network features research-based religion-critical podcasts that engage broader audiences through creative storytelling, in-depth research, and interviews.[75] Co-hosted by Onishi, a scholar of religion and former evangelical, and Dan Miller, the *Straight White American Jesus* engages in news analysis of the political entanglements of conservative Christianity.

Religious podcasting is diverse and fragmented due to different stages of podcast development (passion projects vs. professional shows), varied funding models (grant-funded, listener-supported, etc.), and different religious contexts (Christian, Jewish, Muslim, secular,

71 Krista Tippett, interview by author, Zoom, February 4, 2025.

72 Krista Tippett, interview by author, Zoom, February 4, 2025.

73 SPJ DC, "So You Want to Have a Podcast - Tips from Sarah Ventre," YouTube video, 57:19, January 10, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ndBuLWujLP8.

74 Josh Good, interview by author, Zoom, July 19, 2024; Dr. Simran Jeet Singh, interview by author, phone, November 19, 2024.

75 "Axis Mundi Media on Apple Podcasts," Apple Podcasts, accessed February 19, 2025, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/channel/axis-mundi-media/id6464326988

etc.).[76] These structural differences contribute to the dispersed nature of religious podcasting, making it challenging to develop broader audiences.

2.2 Digital media: Long-form text-based platforms

As mainstream outlets have reduced their dedicated religion coverage, long-form text-based digital platforms, such as Substack, Medium, Ghost, and Beehiiv, provide opportunities for producers of devotional and more critical content. Established scholars, journalists, or public commentators may use these platforms as an income-generating source, while others use them to practice writing and explore ideas in a more flexible format, free of editorial control.[77] Some see this ecosystem as a promising new space for engagement.[78] Others express specific reservations about Substack's lax moderation policies and its venture capitalist-funded financial model.[79]

Patheos continues to play a role in providing a space for religious discourse and commentary across a wide variety of religious traditions, forms of spirituality, and religion-critical perspectives. In the aftermath of 9/11, Patheos provided a significant opportunity space where Muslim writers could comment on political developments and challenge preconceptions and prevailing narratives about Islam.[80] Specific blogs on Patheos provide venues for scholarly discourse on religion and spirituality and related sociopolitical issues.[81] However, our network analysis indicates that, with some exceptions, the content creators who inhabit the Patheos ecosystem tend not to appear prominently elsewhere in our network, indicating its greater value as an incubator for budding authors from across religious traditions.

2.3 Digital media: Long-form video-based platforms

YouTube has emerged as a key platform for both devotional and critical content, presenting diverse perspectives and formats that appeal across generations. Religious leaders, scholars, journalists, and audiences use the platform to share teachings, personal experiences, and in-depth discussions on religion and spirituality. Our analysis of influencers in the religion and media space on YouTube indicates the predominance of worship music collectives, such as

76 Casper ter Kuile, interview by author, phone, March 4, 2025.

77 Dr. Simran Jeet Singh, interview by author, phone, November 19, 2024; Sarah Posner, interview by author, phone, October 9, 2024; Wajahat Ali, interview by author, phone, November 20, 2024.

78 Dr. Robert P. Jones, interview by author, Zoom, January 13, 2025.

79 Sarah Posner, interview by author, phone, October 9, 2024; Peter Kafka, "You Probably Can't Make More than $1 Million a Year on Substack. But Matthew Yglesias Does," *Business Insider,* accessed February 6, 2025, https://www.businessinsider.com/matt-yglesias-substack-million-dollars-interview-2024-10; Alex Hern, "Substack Faces User Revolt over Anti-Censorship Stance on Neo-Nazis," *The Guardian,* January 3, 2024, sec. Media, https://www.theguardian.com/media/2024/jan/03/substack-user-revolt-anti-censorship-stance-neo-nazis

80 Wajahat Ali, interview by author, phone, November 20, 2024.

81 An important and influential example is the Anxious Bench blog, which covers evangelical scholarship and contemporary religious life in America.

Elevation Worship and Bethel Music Group, with well over 10 million subscribers. Legacy media evangelicals have a relatively smaller presence on YouTube, with Joel Osteen being the only one ranked among our sample of the platform's top 10 channels or influencers, with 3.83 million subscribers as of October 2026.

YouTube channels provide opportunities for faith communities and content producers to teach broader audiences about religion through more devotional or more pedagogical content. For example, the *Bible Project*, a channel that creates free resources to help viewers experience the Bible, has 5.5 million subscribers as of October 2026. *Religion for Breakfast*, a channel that explores various aspects of religion from a scholarly and educational perspective, has 1.28 million subscribers as of October 2026.

At the same time, YouTube has become central to contemporary podcasting strategies, with many religion and media podcasts now adopting a "video-first" or "video-parallel" approach. Creators increasingly record full episodes for YouTube, often prioritizing visual formats, thumbnails, and clip-based distribution that can circulate independently across the platform. This shift expands audience reach beyond traditional audio listeners, allows for algorithmic discovery through YouTube's recommendation system, and creates additional entry points through short-form excerpts, making YouTube a primary—not secondary—distribution channel for podcast content.

While YouTube offers a powerful tool for religious outreach and education, it also presents challenges in terms of content moderation and the potential spread of misinformation. Its algorithmic-driven nature can lead users down paths of increasingly sensational content that may contribute to the further demonization of religion.[82] This trend is particularly noticeable among older or less tech-savvy users who may be more susceptible to the platform's recommendation system.

2.4 Digital media: Short-form text-based platforms

Our analysis of X, formerly Twitter, indicates the predominance of legacy televangelists (e.g., Joel Osteen, Joyce Meyer, T.D. Jakes, Franklin Graham, and Rick Warren). Recording artists of various genres, such as CCM, Gospel/R&B, and Hip-Hop, whose music draws heavily on Christian themes, also enjoy significant followings on X (e.g., Kirk Franklin, Jordin Sparks, and Lecrae). Other prominent influencers on X include those with various forms of crossover appeal, such as film producer Tyler Perry, athlete Tim Tebow, and a variety of influencers whose social media personas fuse politics and religious identity (e.g., Mike Huckabee and Jenna Ellis). Others who have garnered substantial followings on X and remain on the platform include journalists, faith leaders, and advocates, such as Muslim commentators Mehdi Hasan, Wajahat Ali, and Shadi Hamid; Protestant minister Bishop William J. Barber II; Jesuit priest Fr.

82 Paul O'Donnell, interview by author, January 24, 2025.

James Martin; and Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg.

In recent years, X has seen a substantial migration of users to platforms such as Bluesky and Threads. Those departing X typically cite a lack of moderation and a rise in harassment, misinformation, and hate speech, and/or a rejection of the political commitments of its owner, Elon Musk.[83] Another popular alternative to X is Meta's Threads, which activists and influencers are finding more intuitive and user-friendly. Reflecting these shifts, organizations such as the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) are encouraging scholars to explore alternatives to X that may offer better opportunities for productive engagement.[84] However, this type of partisan sorting also contributes to the fragmentation of media, audience siloing, and echo chamber effects.

2.5 Digital media: Short-form video-based and image-based platforms

A notable trend in new media is the rise of visually driven content on platforms like Instagram and TikTok that departs from the traditional, face-to-camera sermon style. Instead, creators overlay voiceovers of scripture, worship music, or sermon clips onto footage of themselves performing ordinary tasks such as cooking, cleaning, or exercising. This format embeds religious messages within the rhythms of daily life, blurring the line between sacred and mundane and making spiritual content feel more integrated into everyday practice. The shift also signals a broader reorientation in religious communication—from authoritative proclamation toward ambient influence—where encouragement, correction, and teaching are absorbed less through direct exhortation and more through the subtle pairing of ritualized sound with relatable visuals.

In a media environment where "lived religion" stories are often either ignored or under-reported, TikTok has spurred massive engagement and remains dominant for religious influencers. TikTok's reach today is the product of two interacting forces: (1) internal changes to its recommendation algorithm and (2) external regulatory pressure (especially in the U.S. and EU). Together, they've reshaped who sees content, how far it travels, and how predictable "virality" is. TikTok's algorithm has shifted from broad, mass virality to "micro-virality," using rapid feedback loops to cluster users into highly personalized niche communities where content spreads deeply but struggles to cross audience boundaries.

Hashtags like #Islam and #ChristianTikTok command billions of views, bringing religious content to new audiences and breaking down stereotypes. Less visible religious figures have embraced the platform to connect with younger audiences and showcase a more relatable side

83 Marie Boran, "How Top X Rivals Fared Since Elon Musk Sparked Twitter Exodus," *Newsweek*, November 12, 2024, https://www.newsweek.com/how-top-twitter-rivals-fared-since-elon-musk-exodus-1984404

84 Dr. Robert P. Jones, interview by author, Zoom, January 13, 2025.

of their faith.[85] For example, the "#MomTok" community—including a large contingent of LDS mothers—has gained viral attention for its polished aesthetic and family-centered content.

The rise of communities like #NunTok and #WitchTok has created new spaces for Gen Z to engage with both traditional and nontraditional religious content. These platforms allow users to explore faith, spirituality, and ritual in formats that often blend education with entertainment. By highlighting diverse practices—from convent life to contemporary witchcraft—these communities enable young people to experiment with religious identity, form connections around shared interests, and challenge conventional boundaries between sacred and secular expression. This trend illustrates how social media is reshaping the ways a new generation encounters and interprets spiritual life.

Legacy televangelists are notably absent in our sample of TikTok influencers. Noteworthy evangelical Christian influencers on TikTok include actress and author Candace Cameron Bure (4.2 million followers) and television personality and author Madison Prewett Troutt (2.2 million followers). Christian worship music collectives and artists, such as Maverick City Music, Elevation Worship, Tori Kelly, Jordin Sparks, and Skillet, also command substantial followings on TikTok. TikTok's short-form format presents challenges for academics, with minimal uptake among scholars of religion.[86] One notable exception to this is Dan McClellan, who has gained almost 1 million followers by creating short-form content that clarifies complex biblical and religious topics.

Meta's Instagram platform hosts a more traditional mix of content creators. This mix includes film producer Tyler Perry (7.6 million followers), legacy media televangelists Joel Osteen and Joyce Meyer (5.7 and 4.8 million followers respectively), and mega-church pastor Steven Furtick (3.9 million followers). Other notable figures with high followings include actor, author, and spiritual thinker Rainn Wilson, best known for his role as Dwight Schrute in *The Office* (3.8 million followers). Wilson, who identifies as Bahá'í, often explores themes of unity, purpose, and the search for meaning. Omar Suleiman, a prominent Muslim scholar and public speaker, has 3.1 million followers on Instagram. Suleiman's content often explores themes at the intersection of faith and social justice.

As with other social media platforms, the opaque algorithms of these short-form visual platforms can lead to problematic content exposure, and managing negative interactions remains a challenge. Despite these issues, TikTok and Instagram's massive reach and popularity, especially among younger generational cohorts, make them increasingly important platforms for religious, spiritual, and religion-critical content and engagement in the digital age.

85 "NunTok: How Religion Is Booming on TikTok and Instagram," BBC News, December 2, 2021, https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-59513177

86 Dr. John Paul Christy, interview by author, Zoom, November 15, 2024.

2.6 Digital media: Hybrid platforms

Facebook, a "hybrid" platform with a diverse range of content formats, is dominated by legacy white Christian televangelists, CCM recording artists, and mega-church pastors. This aligns with research that shows it becoming a "default" platform for older generations (i.e., Boomers and Gen X), community groups, and local organizing.[87] Legacy televangelists, such as Joel Osteen (27 million followers), Joyce Meyer (11 million followers), and Franklin Graham (10 million followers), command three of the top four spots in our sample in terms of Facebook followings. R&B artist and American Idol winner, Jordin Sparks (8.9 million followers), CCM band Casting Crowns (6 million followers), rapper TobyMac (5.2 million followers), and Christian rock band Skillet (4.7 million followers) also feature prominently on Facebook. In sum, evangelical Christian influencers dominate Facebook, with all the top 20 influencers in our sample fitting this profile. However, Facebook is losing relevance as a cultural trendsetter among younger users, who prefer short-form video platforms.

Substack has expanded beyond its original newsletter model by introducing "Substack Live," moving the platform toward a hybrid format that blends written publishing with real-time video and audience interaction. This shift positions Substack less as a static publishing tool and more as a multi-modal media ecosystem that integrates newsletters, livestreaming, and community engagement within a single infrastructure.

2.7 Digital media: AI, religion, and media

Artificial intelligence is rapidly reshaping the production, circulation, and authority of religious media, opening new possibilities while raising complex ethical and epistemic challenges. AI tools can expand access to religious knowledge, support interfaith understanding, and help journalists and scholars track discourse across platforms. Many faith communities—especially large congregations and megachurches—are already using AI for sermon preparation, media production, community engagement, donor management, and personalized spiritual support. These developments suggest that AI can strengthen religious communication and broaden participation when applied responsibly.

Yet the same technologies risk deepening bias and misinformation. Because AI systems often reproduce the assumptions embedded in their training data, they can reinforce stereotypes or further marginalize minoritized faith communities.[88] The spread of AI-generated misinformation—including fabricated images or speeches attributed to religious leaders—poses additional dangers. For instance, AI imagery has circulated depicting Donald Trump alongside biblical figures, even recasting him as Jesus, while other deepfakes have generated

87 Michelle Faverio Sidoti and Olivia Perrin, "Teens, Social Media and Technology 2024," Pew Research Center, December 12, 2024, https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2024/12/12/teens-social-media-and-technology-2024/; Michel M. Haigh and Pamela Jo Brubaker, "Social Media and Televangelists: Examining Facebook and Twitter Content," *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture* 7, no. 1 (April 16, 2018): 29–49.

88 "AI-Generated Papal Sermons Raise Concerns about Misinformation Proliferation," DISA: Disinformation Social Media Alliance (blog), June 6, 2025, https://disa.org/ai-generated-papal-sermons-raise-concerns-about-misinformation-proliferation/

fictitious speeches by Malcolm X, such as one about Palestine that drew tens of thousands of views on TikTok.[89] These examples highlight how AI can blur the line between devotion, propaganda, and performance, complicating the public understanding of religion.

AI also introduces new forms of synthetic religious authority. Chatbots, voice clones, and AI-generated personas can simulate the style and authority of recognized religious figures or traditions, creating the appearance of legitimacy without institutional accountability. This has significant implications for how audiences interpret religious guidance, particularly in decentralized or digitally mediated environments.

In response, a growing number of initiatives are examining the ethical and theological implications of artificial intelligence. Organizations such as AI and Faith, AI Faith and Civil Society Commission, and the Global Network for Digital Theology aim to guide religious leaders and institutions in navigating these shifts. Meanwhile, platforms like Gloo, Pastors.ai, and Faith Assistant are training ministers and faith-based organizations to use AI for outreach and administration. These efforts reflect both enthusiasm for innovation and unease about authenticity, authority, and the role of human discernment in spiritual life.

In May 2026, Pope Leo XIV's encyclical *Magnifica Humanitas* framed AI as a defining moral and political challenge of the contemporary era, arguing that it must be subordinated to human dignity rather than allowed to concentrate power or displace human agency. Drawing on Catholic social teaching, the encyclical called for strong public oversight of AI development, and situated the technology within broader concerns about inequality, dehumanization, and the ethical limits of technical power.

Addressing these tensions will require collaboration among technologists, journalists, educators, and faith leaders to ensure that AI enhances rather than erodes religious literacy and representation in the digital age. For funders, the growing role of AI in religious media presents both a risk landscape and an opportunity space. Strategic investment will be needed to support ethical standards, media literacy, and institutional capacity, while also leveraging AI's potential to expand access, foster inclusion, and strengthen the quality of public-facing religious content.

89 Rodney Kennedy, "I Imagine Jesus Saying to Trump: 'Not Everyone Posting a Sketch of Me with Them Will Enter the Kingdom of Heaven,'" opinion, *Baptist News Global*, October 23, 2023, https://baptistnews.com/article/i-imagine-jesus-saying-to-trump-not-everyone-posting-a-sketch-of-me-with-them-will-enter-the-kingdom-of-heaven/; Youness Bousenna, "How AI Turned Charlie Kirk into Christ's '13th Apostle,'" *Le Monde*, October 5, 2025, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/religions/article/2025/10/05/how-ai-turned-charlie-kirk-into-christ-s-13th-apostle_6746117_63.html

Religion, music, and media

The Contemporary Christian Music (CCM) market has undergone significant changes in recent years, driven by both demographic shifts and technological advancements in music production and distribution. Two of the "big three" labels, Universal Music Group and Sony Music Group, have been central players in the market through imprints such as Capitol CMG and Provident Label Group. However, the rise of digital tools for home recording, such as Avid's ProTools and Adobe Audition, has made music production accessible to independent artists, allowing recording artists to produce high-quality tracks for mass audiences at low cost and without the traditional studio infrastructure or gatekeeping roles played by Artists and Repertoire (AandR) departments at major labels. Coupled with platforms like Spotify, iTunes, and YouTube, these innovations have democratized the distribution of music, allowing emerging and established artists to bypass traditional industry structures and connect directly with listeners.[90]

Demographic shifts, along with more diverse musical tastes and production advancements, have transformed the predominantly white, male, and worship-focused landscape of CCM. Historically, radio networks like K-Love and The Fish played a crucial gatekeeping role in driving sales, but the emergence of Spotify has reshaped both the market and the types of music gaining prominence.[91] These changes are evident in the shift of Christian artists on Spotify that now better reflect the increasingly diverse demographics of the United States and often blur the lines between sacred and secular music.[92]

With the relative decline of the CCM market, worship music collectives such as Maverick City Music and Elevation Music are enjoying significant growth. This growth was accelerated by COVID-19, which provided an opportunity for these collectives to leverage their existing online platforms and sophisticated production capacities to produce anthems that resonated deeply with worshippers during this challenging time.[93] As a result, worship collectives that bridge racial and cultural boundaries have emerged as major forces in the worship music scene, drawing tens of thousands of fans to stadium tours.[94] However, a tension persists between these integrated, contemporary worship styles and traditional ones, such as Black gospel music. Some younger Black Pentecostals are embracing multicultural worship, while others are advocating for a return to more familiar, choir-led styles, reflecting a broader

90 Deborah Evans Price, "Skillet Leaves Atlantic After Two Decades: 'It's Time for Us to Be Pushed Out of the Nest,'" *Billboard* (blog), August 6, 2024, https://www.billboard.com/music/rock/skillet-leaves-atlantic-new-song-unpopular-1235747219/

91 Leah Payne, *God Gave Rock and Roll to You: A History of Contemporary Christian Music* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2024), 183.

92 Payne, *God Gave Rock and Roll to You*.

93 Dr. Leah Payne, interview by author, Zoom, December 12, 2024; For an example, see Elevation Worship, "The Blessing with Kari Jobe and Cody Carnes | Live From Elevation Ballantyne | Elevation Worship," YouTube video, 12:10, March 6, 2020, https://www.youtube. com/watch?v=Zp6aygmvzM4

94 Dr. Leah Payne, interview by author, Zoom, December 12, 2024.

generational divide in the Christian music community.[95] Gospel remains the core idiom, but artists are also increasingly integrating elements of hip-hop, R&B, trap, and neo-soul, creating hybrid forms that appeal to younger demographics and expand the genre's cultural reach.[96]

95 Dr. Dara Delgado, interview by author, Zoom, January 21, 2025.

96 Tashi McQueen, "A Look at the Legacy of Gospel: From Hymns to Hip-Hop," *AFRO: The Black Media Authority,* 2025, https://afro.com/gospel-music-black-culture/; Tyler Huckabee, "Meet the Next Generation of Christian Hip-Hop," *RELEVANT*, 2022, https://relevantmagazine.com/magazine/the-rise-of-christian-hip-hop/

Award programs

Award programs play an important role in spotlighting significant contributions in the religion and media space across various mediaforms. They are administered by a wide variety of stakeholders in the space, including professional associations, academic associations, book publishers, and individual publications. Several prestigious award programs recognize excellence in religion and media in the U.S., highlighting the role of faith-related storytelling in journalism, film, television, and digital media. The Wilbur Awards, hosted by the Religion Communicators Council, honor outstanding coverage of content on religion and spirituality, while the Religion News Association (RNA) Awards celebrate top-tier religion journalism across various platforms. The Gabriel Awards, organized by the Catholic Media Association, recognize uplifting and faith-driven storytelling in film, radio, and television. The Goldziher Prize honors journalists and digital creators whose work highlights and deepens stories of solidarity, dialogue, and shared humanity between Jews and Muslims.

Broader media awards, such as the Peabody Awards and the Pulitzer Prize, have honored exceptional religion-related reporting and storytelling, as have the Gracie Awards, which spotlight women-centered narratives, including those in religious media.[97] Additionally, regional Emmy Awards often feature a category for local market news segments on religion and spirituality. Prominent award programs in the religion and music space include the Dove Awards, hosted by the Gospel Music Association, which recognize excellence in Christian and gospel music across various genres. Similarly, the Stellar Awards focus specifically on achievements in gospel music, particularly within the Black church tradition. The Grammy Awards also include categories for Best Gospel Album, Best Contemporary Christian Music Album, and Best Roots Gospel Album, recognizing religious musical contributions on a broader scale.

Overall, interviewees suggest that awards can provide valuable recognition for quality work in journalism and academia, particularly in the realm of religion reporting and public scholarship. However, they also note that the financial support associated with these awards is often limited, and other forms of support, such as fellowships and training programs, can be equally or more valuable for career development.

97 In 2019, Peter Smith of *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* and then-President of the Religion News Association, received a Pulitzer Prize for his coverage of the massacre at Pittsburgh's Tree of Life synagogue. "Big News on Godbeat: President of Religion News Association Wins Pulitzer for Tree of Life Coverage," *GetReligion*, April 18, 2019, https://www.getreligion.org/getreligion/2019/4/18/big-news-on-the-godbeat-president-of-religion-news-association-awarded-pulitzer-prize-for-tree-of-life-coverage

Networks, collaborations, and philanthropic interventions

The enduring crisis of religious literacy and the lack of diversity and representation of religion in media continue to pose challenges to efforts to present more multidimensional representations of lived religion and spirituality across all media forms. This includes traditional media forms, with a 2022 global study finding that less than 20 percent of journalists understand the beliefs and practices of religions beyond those in which they were raised and that 63 percent of faith-related media has a negative bias.[98] Several initiatives have been launched to address these issues, which can be grouped into two main categories: Cross-sector collaborations on faith and media and initiatives to shape the representation of religion in media. Selected examples of each are presented in Sections 3.0 and 3.1.

3.0 Cross-sector collaborations on faith and media

The following is a selection of initiatives that bring together leaders from media, faith communities, and civil society to foster better representations of religion and spirituality:

- **The Coalition for Faith and Media.** The Faith and Media Initiative convened this network of thought leaders from business, faith, media, and civil society that aims to improve portrayals of faith in media. It is supported by the Radiant Foundation and the Fetzer Institute.
- **Faith Angle Forum.** Now housed at the Aspen Institute, Faith Angle Forum brings together notable reporters and scholars to discuss critical issues surrounding religion in the U.S. It strives to strengthen reporting and commentary on faith and its impact on American politics and public life with support from a variety of funders, including the Templeton Religion Trust, the M.J. Murdock Charitable Trust, and the John Templeton Foundation
- **The Diversity and Representation in Media Cohort.** The Aspen Institute's Religion and Society Program convened this working group of experts and leaders in the entertainment industry in 2022 to focus on issues related to religious diversity and representation in media.

98 HarrisX / Faith and Media Initiative, *The Global Faith and Media Study* (2022), https://index.faithandmedia.com/data

3.1 Storytelling and narrative-change interventions

The following organizations work directly on storytelling and cultural change to improve religious literacy in journalism, entertainment, and mass media:

- **Lilly's National Storytelling Initiative** is a program launched by Lilly Endowment to support charitable organizations in identifying, producing, and sharing compelling stories that illustrate the vibrancy and hope of Christian faith and life through various media formats.
- **Deeper Dive** seeks to promote religious pluralism and expand understanding of religion by equipping individual storytellers and companies with the tools to tell more complex and less stereotype-driven narratives.
- **Resetting the Table** provides training and consultation to equip storytellers to translate across socio-cultural and ideological divisions and close perception gaps. It works to improve the quality of authentic, nuanced depictions of disparate voices, streams, and identities in American life, as well as to model productive interaction and engagement across them.
- **The Muslim Narrative Change Cohort.** The Pillars Fund convened this cohort to learn and discuss the latest research in the narrative change and cultural strategy fields and cultivate collaborative relationships through team-building exercises and experiences. It is supported by the Pop Culture Collaborative and the Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art.
- **The MPAC Hollywood Bureau** engages decision makers and creatives to improve the quality of authentic, nuanced, and inclusive depictions of Islam and American Muslims.

3.2 Fellowships to support improved public discourse on religion

Several initiatives have been established to promote more nuanced, public-facing scholarship by supporting fellows positioned to bridge the gap between academia and journalism. These programs seek to elevate public discourse by connecting scholars with media professionals, expanding engagement beyond the academy, and fostering collaboration among social scientists and other experts on religion. Notable examples include:

- **The RNS/IA Religion Journalism Fellowship.** Religion News Service (RNS) and Interfaith America (IA) offer this fellowship to develop future religion journalists. The fellowship includes mentorship, workshops, and editorial meetings.
- **The Public Religion Research Institute's PRRI Public Fellows.** The PRRI Public Fellows program is designed to support interdisciplinary scholars engaged in public scholarship

at the intersection of religion, culture, and politics. Established in 2017, the program has expanded through PRRI's Religion and Renewing Democracy Initiative, with support from the Mellon Foundation and the Henry Luce Foundation.

- **Sacred Writes** provides support, resources, and networks for scholars of religion committed to translating the significance of their research to a broader audience. Its origin story points to the key role of an inaugural 2016 ACLS/Luce Religion, Journalism, and International Affairs program grant. It is currently supported by the Henry Luce Foundation and the Carpenter Foundation.
- The **Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting** has provided grants to support several projects that address the intersection of religion and a number of focus areas, such as global health, human rights, and climate and environment.
- **Intersections** is a digital platform that curates scholarly research at the convergence of religion and international affairs. Its mission is to act as a resource for researchers, policymakers, media professionals, and the wider public by highlighting scholarship on the changing role of religion in the world. The platform is a free resource, developed by the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) with support from the Henry Luce Foundation.
- **The Crossroads Project** aims to create opportunities for scholarly collaboration, provide support for graduate students and early-career faculty in the field, and produce resources for public engagement of the history, theology, politics, and cultures of Black religions.
- **Auburn Seminary's** fellowship programs have cultivated a network of diverse religious leaders who bring theological depth and moral imagination into the public square, strengthening the visibility of progressive faith perspectives and their ability to counter harmful narratives in the media ecosystem.

Two significant programs have reached the end of their grant cycle since 2020:

- **The Luce/ACLS Program in Religion, Journalism and International Affairs** supported collaborative projects between scholars and journalists. The final competition for the fellowships was held in 2020.
- **The SSRC's Religion, Spirituality, and Democratic Renewal Program.** The SSRC offered this program to encourage scholarly and public discussion about religion and democracy. The program was supported by the Fetzer Institute. The final competition for the fellowships was held in 2023.

Bringing together diverse voices through interdisciplinary partnerships between academic institutions, religious organizations, and media outlets fosters compelling narratives and deeper coverage. Expanding media training for scholars and religious leaders enhances their ability to translate complex religious ideas into accessible narratives, bridging the gap between academia and public engagement. An important aspect here is recruiting and developing the next generation of religion journalists—magazines such as *Christianity Today* and *Sojourners* have established grant-funded initiatives that could be replicated across a wider range of outlets.

Barriers to public-facing work

We conducted a small-scale survey of 42 key stakeholders in the U.S. during April and May 2025. The following sections reflect a synthesis of the perspectives of these survey respondents on the current funding landscape in the religion and media space. Stakeholders across journalism, academia, and the unaffiliated scholar-practitioner space identify a common set of knowledge gaps tied to sustainability, data access, talent development, and infrastructural support in the religion and media space. While relevant funding mechanisms often exist to directly address these challenges, many respondents—including senior scholars and veteran journalists—are unaware of them. This may suggest a need for a centralized hub to disseminate information and connect stakeholders to relevant funding opportunities.

4.0 Structural barriers to public-facing work

Universities and the limits of institutional support

Incentivizing public scholarship helps universities fulfill their mission and expand the public impact of religious studies. Yet scholars describe a persistent misalignment between institutional rhetoric—such as emphasizing public good and community engagement—and reward structures that continue to privilege peer-reviewed publications over public-facing work.[99] As a result, faculty often lack the motivation and/or capacity to pursue media collaborations or community partnerships. Scholars call for revisions to tenure criteria, targeted grant funding, and dedicated institutional support—such as time buyouts and access to media expertise—to ensure that public engagement is not penalized in academic careers.

Recent trends in public education and funding have increasingly politicized and marginalized the Humanities, creating significant obstacles for scholars aiming to engage in public-facing work. Cuts to funding, shifting curricular priorities, and political scrutiny have made it more difficult for researchers to pursue projects that connect academic expertise with broader audiences. As a result, scholars face heightened challenges in producing accessible, impactful work outside the academy, limiting opportunities for informed public discourse and the translation of critical insights into civic and cultural conversations.

The American Academy of Religion (AAR) is actively working to align institutional practices with the values of public engagement, ensuring that scholars are supported and recognized

99 The American Academy of Religion created a task force in 2024 to address this specific issue. See The Task Force for Valuing and Evaluating Public Scholarship in Religion, "American Academy of Religion Guidelines for Supporting and Evaluating Public Scholarship in Religion," 2025, https://aarweb.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/AAR-Guidelines-for-Supporting-and-Evaluating-Public-Scholarship-in-Religion-Final.pdf

for their contributions to public discourse and community involvement. In 2025, the AAR approved guidelines for supporting and evaluating public scholarship in religion, recommending that institutions revise policies to recognize and reward quality public scholarship, develop clear evaluation standards, and support such work with training, grants, and fellowships. These recommendations aim to create standards that recognize, assess, and reward public-facing scholarship as scholarship within the critical study of religion.[100]

Independent scholarship and exclusion from institutional pipelines

Independent researchers face even greater structural challenges. Funding and resource access in the religion and media space are often designed with institutional affiliation in mind, leaving independent scholars without access to key tools, grants, or distribution channels. This is especially concerning given that many of today's most innovative religion communicators—particularly in podcasting, social media, and public storytelling—operate outside academia. Independent scholars advocate for fellowships open to unaffiliated individuals, new collaborative platforms, and a broader redefinition of public scholarship as a generative mode of knowledge creation, not just as a mode of translating academic work.

Academics and unaffiliated scholars emphasize that the current environment—often marked by precarity and fragmentation—stifles both creative risk-taking and rigorous public scholarship. They highlight a critical gap: while a new generation is skilled in media production and intellectually robust, they lack the institutional scaffolding, research access, and networks of collaboration to thrive. There is a strong call for more centralized networking platforms, targeted support for freelancers and small outlets, and broad data collection—especially on minoritized religious communities—to inform both media and funding strategies. This points to a need to build a more resilient religion-media ecosystem that will require investment not only in projects, but in people, platforms, and data that connect and sustain them.

Bridging the gap between scholars and media professionals

All stakeholders converge on a critical infrastructure gap: the lack of systems to connect scholars with media professionals and production resources. Without this connective tissue, innovative ideas often remain siloed—or never reach the audiences that they may best serve. Not all scholars need the same interventions—some need training in accessible communication; others need collaborators who can take their already public-facing content and elevate it further. High-quality digital content requires resources, time, production, and technical skills that many scholars lack. Scholars who are proficient in media production often need support in scaling their work or partnering with teams that can amplify it. In the view of some of our survey respondents, the solution is to build more robust connections between knowledge creators and media professionals through networks, training labs, fellowships, and configurable team-based production support that cater to these varied needs. Although

100 The Task Force for Valuing and Evaluating Public Scholarship in Religion, "American Academy of Religion Guidelines for Supporting and Evaluating Public Scholarship in Religion," approved January 26, 2025, https://aarweb.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/AAR-Guidelines-for-Supporting-and-Evaluating-Public-Scholarship-in-Religion-Final.pdf

some such programming already exists, awareness of it remains low. Closing that gap will require more robust network-building and incentives for collaboration between religious studies and media studies departments."

Several key tensions complicate collaboration between scholars and journalists.[101] These include fundamental differences in professional cultures: scholars are trained to engage deeply with complexity and nuance, while journalists are skilled at distilling information into clear, accessible narratives within tight deadlines. Scholars may expect to review and approve stories before publication—a practice that conflicts with journalistic ethics and can pose a barrier to producing robust reporting. As a result, scholars worry about being misquoted or having their ideas oversimplified. Communication styles further challenge collaboration: scholars may struggle to condense complex arguments into concise and clear responses for media audiences. Practical concerns also play a role, as some scholars fear reputational or personal risks associated with media exposure, including harassment or threats, while journalists may be frustrated by scholars' lack of responsiveness to tight deadlines. Finally, institutional barriers persist, including limited understanding of each field's professional constraints, minimal structured training in media engagement for academics, and a lack of institutional support for sustained interdisciplinary collaboration. Programs such as the PRRI Public Fellows and the Luce/ACLS Program in Religion, Journalism and International Affairs have attempted to address these specific issues.[102] However, there is an ongoing need to create programming or training opportunities to foster more effective collaboration by helping religion journalists and scholars better understand each other's practices and publishing expectations.

Journalism, silos, and the undervaluing of religion coverage

In journalism, religion is frequently siloed, treated as a secondary concern, or folded into political coverage—typically surfacing only during moments of crisis or major religious holidays. This marginalization distorts public understanding and weakens journalism's ability to capture religion's role in shaping politics, identity, and civic life. To address this, reporters and editors argue that religion should be integrated across beats—not just confined to standalone "religion pages." Doing so requires structural investments: funding for full-time religion reporters, long-term fellowships, and newsroom training to build expertise and counteract the ongoing marginalization of religion coverage.[103] Journalists stress the need for stable career pathways and digital storytelling strategies that engage next-generation audiences, while also calling for more structured collaboration with peers and access to expert networks and trend data. Without such support, even experienced reporters find it difficult to surface underreported religious stories or innovate amid shrinking newsroom resources.

101 With thanks to John Paul Christy, formerly of the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), for many of the insights presented in this section. John Paul Christy, personal interview by author, Zoom, November 15, 2024.

102 "Luce/ACLS Program in Religion, Journalism and International Affairs," ACLS, n.d., accessed September 9, 2025, https://www.acls.org/programs/luce-acls-program-in-religion-journalism-international-affairs/

103 Juliana Knot, "Religion Sections Disappearing from Newspapers as Print Sales Decline," Calvin University Chimes (blog), May 18, 2018, https://calvinchimes.org/2018/05/18/religion-sections-disappearing-from-newspapers-as-print-sales-decline/

Cross-sector disconnects and outdated funding models

Stakeholders across academia, journalism, and independent research environments consistently expressed that current funding models do not reflect the ways religion content is being created and consumed today. While audiences increasingly engage religion through podcasts, YouTube channels, Instagram explainers, or documentary-style visual storytelling, many funding opportunities are still tied to traditional university research projects, newsroom budgets, or large institutional initiatives. For instance, an independent podcaster exploring religion and politics may struggle to secure grants that are designed for academic centers, while a journalist experimenting with multimedia storytelling may find few resources outside of legacy newsroom structures. Stakeholders emphasize the need for more flexible funding that supports experimental formats, interdisciplinary collaborations, and projects that bridge academic, journalistic, and independent work. They argue that if religion is to be reintegrated into public understanding—not as a niche topic, but as a force shaping culture, politics, and identity—then media producers need structural backing to pursue this work with rigor, creativity, and depth.

In sum, structural challenges in the religion and media space are not merely logistical—they are deeply tied to what kinds of knowledge are valued, whose voices are resourced, and how the field defines legitimacy and impact. Addressing these challenges requires a mix of institutional reform, infrastructure investment, and cross-sector imagination.

4.1 Financial misalignments: Why current models undermine sustainability

Structural financial challenges across journalism, academia, independent scholarship, and civil society reflect a misalignment between funding models and the realities of contemporary religion media work. Stakeholders across sectors describe a precarious landscape shaped by short-term, project-based grants that often fall short in fostering long-term impact, professional development, or more meaningful collaboration.

In the current landscape, media and religion function as vulnerable and contested markets, with outcomes heavily influenced by who wields power and which forms of expression gain prominence. Their precariousness underscores the strategic necessity of creative and generative collaboration, enabling actors to navigate competition, adapt to rapid change, and sustain influence. These pressures are amplified at the margins of the so-called mainstream, where limited access to resources and visibility intensifies the stakes, making innovation and coalition-building not just advantageous but essential for survival and meaningful impact.

Building sustainable infrastructure

A consistent theme is the urgent need for general operating support and flexible, multi-year funding that sustains the basic infrastructure of religion and media work. Journalists report being forced to prioritize fundraising over reporting, while scholars lack seed funding for cross-disciplinary centers or staff positions that would support public scholarship. Stakeholders emphasize that investment in institutional durability—such as full-time roles, collaborative partnerships, and core operations—will enable religion reporting and scholarship to flourish beyond episodic or high-visibility projects.

Flexibility, trust, and the cost of the "gig economy"

Independent scholars and media practitioners working at the intersection of religion and public life often operate without institutional support, oscillating between producing content to attract funders and navigating time-intensive grant application processes. This limits capacity for sustained and substantive work.

Many practitioners describe current funding structures as overly bureaucratic, limited in focus, and unsuited to the reality of contemporary media work. Journalists and independent scholars alike stress the importance of *unrestricted, trust-based support* that allows them to prioritize quality and creativity over constant fundraising and gig work. Rigid deliverables, lack of renewal pathways, and low dollar amounts undermine effectiveness. Scholars note that the growing pressure to demonstrate "impact" in narrowly defined ways often privileges mainstream narratives and discourages more experimental or critical projects. Freelancers and early-career creators point out that the *cost of simply preparing an application*—in time, labor, and emotional energy—can be prohibitively high without institutional support, potentially excluding many of the most promising or community-engaged voices.

Funders could mitigate these challenges by adopting more proactive and relational models of engagement. Rather than relying solely on open calls, grant officers—or designated recruiters—could identify and interview potential grantees to assess alignment of goals, values, and field impact. Shifting funding structures from project-based to person-based models would also promote greater sustainability. Investing directly in storytellers, journalists, and scholars—rather than in discrete outputs—would strengthen creative infrastructure and foster continuity across initiatives. Expanding existing "deep work" models to include living stipends, integrated research and travel support, and streamlined reporting would further stabilize this segment of the field.

Finally, funders could enhance collaboration and reduce administrative burden by developing in-house marketing and production capacities. Shared resources of this kind would enable grantees to focus on content and strategy while ensuring that dissemination and audience engagement remain central to the religion and media ecosystem.

Alternative funding models for deep work

Stakeholders across the spectrum emphasize the need for more *fellowships, residencies, and multi-year grants* that support in-depth work and longer creative cycles. Ideal models include more generous stipends (particularly for independent creators), built-in research and travel support, and more streamlined reporting. Practitioners envision fellowships that span academic semesters, allow for course releases, or provide time away from daily deadlines to pursue podcasts, books, or documentaries. Many also request access to shared infrastructure—cohort-based training, IRB support, legal review, or communications mentorship—that would lower the barriers to success for people outside traditional institutions. Scholars and journalists alike stress that these fellowships should support *idea incubation*, not just execution, allowing them to think creatively and respond to emerging cultural shifts rather than chasing predefined narratives.

Equity, independence, and community-rooted work

Independent researchers and unaffiliated scholar-journalists face heightened barriers, as eligibility for most large-scale funding requires an institutional affiliation. These practitioners argue for models that recognize *community-based knowledge*, lived experience, and collaborative research as valid forms of expertise. They call for funders to allow co-investigators to include community members, and for grant structures that support ethical, reciprocal relationships—particularly when working with minoritized religious communities. Long-term investment in this kind of grounded, slow-building work is rare but essential. Furthermore, funders are urged to understand that many freelancers are seasoned professionals producing some of the most widely consumed content in religion media today, and they require patronage models that reflect the value and sustainability of their labor.

Supporting religion journalism in a changing media ecosystem

Journalists across the board articulate a crisis in the sustainability of religion coverage. Rates for freelance work remain low—often failing to cover even the basic costs of travel, lodging, or research. Funding incentives skew toward "safe," affirmative, or inspirational religion stories, while critical or investigative reporting on topics like Christian nationalism, religion and authoritarianism, or underreported faith communities receives less support. Stakeholders call for experiments in reporting collaborations, such as a *reporting fund with a rolling deadline,* like those used in environmental journalism, which would allow freelancers to secure supplemental funding for in-depth or more risky stories.[104]

Rethinking impact

Finally, many contributors recommend deeper collaboration between funders and media creators to define what *impact* means in this space. Stakeholders suggest co-creating evaluative frameworks that reflect the diversity of approaches in religion and media—be it

104 The Pulitzer Center's Reporting Grants and Fellowships have supported religion journalism in this manner. See Pulitzer Center, "Reporting Grants and Fellowships," n.d., https://pulitzercenter.org/opportunities/reporting-grants-fellowships

civic engagement, narrative change, audience trust, or community dialogue. Funders are encouraged to think like long-term partners rather than project sponsors: to fund the more mundane aspects of production (marketing, data analytics, tech infrastructure), to reduce proposal red tape, and to recognize the relational and ethical dimensions of this work as core—not peripheral—to its value.

In sum, the financial challenges in the religion and media field are less about a lack of talent or ideas and more about structural misalignment. Stakeholders need *funding models that match the complexity, pace, and ethical responsibility* of the work they are doing. That means investing in people, not just projects; prioritizing sustainability over visibility; and building flexible systems of support that enable both rigor and risk.

Entering and reforming the religion and media ecosystem

Across the religion and media landscape, stakeholders identify a set of persistent *knowledge gaps*—issues related to knowledge production, access, interpretation, and public understanding—that inhibit the field's ability to inform, engage, and influence the broader public. These challenges are not simply about what gets covered, but how religion is understood, contextualized, and communicated across platforms, audiences, and institutional boundaries.

Expanding religious literacy and challenging assumptions

A foundational concern shared by academics, journalists, and hybrid professionals is that prevailing public and media narratives often reduce religion to a narrow set of beliefs, typically those of dominant Christian traditions. The inability of many media outlets to move beyond a simplistic or Protestant-centric frame limits the public's understanding of religion's true influence in political life, consumer behavior, identity formation, and international affairs. Many stakeholders argue that funders and media producers alike must recognize that *religion is not just belief—it is behavior, practice, culture, community, and power.*

Stakeholders call for deep investment in *religious literacy*—particularly literacy that is interdisciplinary, historically informed, and skilled in digital media. This need is especially pressing given the rise of platforms like TikTok and YouTube, where charismatic influencers with limited knowledge or narrow political agendas fill knowledge gaps with content that often lacks rigor, is misleading, or fuels polarization. In this fragmented and algorithm-driven ecosystem, scholars emphasize the need for better *infrastructure to surface quality religion reporting*—including algorithmic visibility, local journalism support, and tools that make nuanced religion content economically viable. However, profit motives make algorithmic changes unlikely without more intense external pressure on, or meaningful regulation of, social media platforms.

In the era of AI, there is a pressing need for a new level of media literacy that addresses the challenges posed by increasingly realistic deepfake videos and images. As these technologies proliferate, audiences must navigate a media landscape where the line between authentic and fabricated content is often blurred. This raises critical questions about how truth and credibility are evaluated, particularly within religious communities, where trust, moral authority, and doctrinal interpretation play central roles. Developing skills to critically assess digital content will be essential for both leaders and followers to engage responsibly and thoughtfully with faith and media in an AI-driven world.

Epistemic bias in media funding and coverage

The media landscape remains heavily skewed toward negative coverage of religion, shaped by persistent religious illiteracy, limited diversity of representation, and a lack of multi-dimensional portrayals of lived faith and spirituality. A 2022 global study, for instance, found that fewer than 20 percent of journalists understand religions beyond those in which they were raised, and that 63 percent of faith-related coverage carries a negative bias.[105] At the same time, stakeholders caution that structural funding preferences pull in the opposite direction, privileging "positive" stories that depict religion as comforting, community-building, or morally uplifting, while sidelining coverage of its entanglements with nationalism, extremism, and systemic injustice. This dual dynamic, they argue, both distorts public understanding of religion and undermines the critical journalism essential for democratic accountability—underscoring the need for stronger support of investigative reporting on issues such as Christian nationalism, religious disinformation, and the political mobilization of faith-based actors.

Journalists who are part of the communities they cover also point to the challenge of maintaining objectivity while reporting "from within." They stress that good religion journalism should not be confused with advocacy or affirmation. Reporting on one's own faith tradition requires both sensitivity and independence—and must be supported by funding sources not limited to the religious communities being covered. In other words, the ability to follow the story wherever it leads is essential to the integrity of the field and needs to be protected through diverse and non-sectarian sources of support.

Interdisciplinary complexity and methodological diversity

The religion and media field spans anthropology, journalism, history, political science, and theology—each with distinct methodologies, constraints, and standards of evidence. Scholars stress that funders and institutions must respect these diverse methodological approaches. For example, an anthropologist conducting ethnographic research among religious communities cannot be evaluated—or funded—in the same way as a data scientist running large-scale quantitative studies. Both approaches are valid and necessary for a complete picture of how religion functions in contemporary society. Without this awareness, well-meaning funding programs can end up excluding valuable perspectives or expecting metrics that are mismatched with the research approach. One project respondent opined that qualitative, narrative-driven studies, which can produce long-term insights and influence discourse, receive comparatively limited support, whereas quantitative, large-scale projects attract substantial funding despite often replicating existing findings and demonstrating limited practical effect.

105 HarrisX / Faith and Media Initiative, *The Global Faith and Media Study* (2022) https://index.faithandmedia.com/data

Epistemic infrastructure: Training, platforms, and institutional reform

Many stakeholders point to a lack of training—not just in journalistic technique or media production, but in the *knowledge frameworks needed to cover religion well.* Reporters need support to understand religion's intersection with politics, education, climate, migration, and popular culture. This includes training that helps young reporters "connect the dots" between faith and other key sectors, enabling deeper and more context-rich storytelling. At the same time, some veteran observers are skeptical of training efforts unaccompanied by viable employment pathways or economic models. They argue that while funding and support systems and workshops may produce well-prepared individuals, these individuals will flounder without a functioning knowledge economy that values religion journalism. In this sense, knowledge production in the religion and media space is tied not only to education and literacy but to macrostructural changes across the media industry.

On the academic side, the dominant model of public scholarship remains tethered to the tenured faculty framework, which treats the dissemination of "free knowledge" as a form of institutional service rather than as labor with market and social value. While this reinforces the academy's authority as the primary site of legitimate knowledge production, it devalues independent scholars, journalists, creators, and practitioners. The expectation that tenured academics can offer knowledge without compensation—subsidized by their salaried positions—renders invisible the structural precarity of others doing comparable public work outside university walls. This imbalance distorts the broader knowledge ecosystem, privileging institutional voices while undermining the sustainability and credibility of independent scholars.

Conclusion

This report demonstrates that the contemporary religion and media landscape in the United States is not suffering from a lack of ideas, expertise, or creative energy. Rather, it is shaped—and constrained—by a set of structural conditions that determine whose voices achieve visibility, sustainability, and influence. Across traditional and digital media, influence accrues less to those producing the most rigorous scholarship or nuanced reporting than to those best positioned within platform-driven distribution systems, monetization regimes, and tightly networked ecosystems. As a result, high-quality religion journalism, public scholarship, and pluralistic religious voices often remain fragmented, under-resourced, and difficult to sustain.

The mapping conducted for this project reveals a field characterized by asymmetric power and uneven infrastructure. Evangelical and conservative Christian media ecosystems—long adept at leveraging mass media and now highly optimized for digital platforms—continue to dominate attention and audience capture. Meanwhile, other religious traditions, critical scholars, independent journalists, and community-rooted creators operate in more decentralized and precarious networks, frequently lacking the institutional support, funding continuity, and distribution capacity needed to scale their work. This imbalance is not primarily ideological; it is infrastructural.

The report further shows that mis/disinformation and politically instrumentalized religion are ecosystem problems, not content problems. Disinformation thrives where networks are dense, reinforcement is repetitive, and audiences are insulated from competing frames. Algorithmic amplification, economic precarity in journalism, and the collapse of local media have intensified these dynamics, making it harder for corrective or contextualizing voices to intervene effectively. In this environment, even rigorous, ethically grounded reporting struggles to compete with content optimized for virality, emotional resonance, or partisan alignment.

At the same time, the analysis identifies areas of meaningful opportunity. Digital platforms have lowered barriers to entry for historically marginalized traditions, independent scholars, and hybrid scholar-practitioners. Podcasts, newsletters, long-form video, and social media have enabled new forms of "lived religion" storytelling and public pedagogy. However, without coordinated investment in networks, training, and long-term institutional capacity, these gains remain fragile and uneven. Innovation without infrastructure has produced visibility without sustainability.

A central conclusion of this report is that strengthening the religion and media ecosystem will require a shift in how impact is understood and supported. Funding models that prioritize short-term projects, isolated outputs, or narrow notions of reach are poorly aligned with the realities of contemporary media production. What is needed instead is investment in

connective tissue: shared infrastructure, cross-sector collaborations, distribution strategies, talent pipelines, and data systems that enable high-quality work to travel across platforms and communities. Supporting people and networks—rather than individual products—is essential to building a resilient and pluralistic field.

Finally, the Religion and Media Mapping Project demonstrates the value of network-based analysis for understanding this space. By visualizing relationships among creators, institutions, funders, and platforms, the project surfaces patterns of concentration, fragmentation, and opportunity that are otherwise difficult to detect. While the current dataset is a proof of concept, it points toward the potential of a shared, evolving resource that can inform strategic grantmaking, identify emerging nodes of influence, and track shifts in the ecosystem over time.

In sum, the future of religion and media will not be determined solely by technological change or audience preference, but by choices about infrastructure, investment, and collaboration. A more informed, diverse, and democratically healthy public discourse about religion is possible—but only if scholars, journalists, funders, and practitioners move beyond siloed interventions and commit to building the systems that allow credible, pluralistic religious knowledge to circulate at scale.

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List of interviewees

Titles reflect interviewees' positions at the time of interview

Wajahat Ali
Author, *Daily Beast* columnist, and public speaker.

Peter Beinart
Professor, Graduate School of Journalism, CUNY

Heather Bigley
Senior Radio Producer, Brigham Young University Broadcasting

Mario Cader-Frech
Member of the Dean's Council and Fellow, Harvard Divinity School

Heidi Campbell
Professor of Communication, Texas A&M University

John Paul Christy
Program Director, American Council of Learned Societies

Dara Delgado
Bishop James Mills Thoburn Chair of Religious Studies, Allegheny College.

Josh Good
Director, The Aspen Institute Religion and Society Program.

Megan Goodwin
Author and scholar of American religion, specializing in gender, sexuality, and religious minorities.

Lisa Sharon Harper
Founder, Freedom Road.
Speaker, author, and activist.

Rev. Amanda Henderson
Director, The Institute of Religion, Politics, and Culture, Iliff School of Theology

Robert P. Jones
Author and founder of the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI)

Paul O'Donnell
Editor-in-Chief, *Religion News Service*

Mark Oppenheimer
Professor of Practice and Executive Editor, Arc: Religion, Politics, Et Cetera.

Leah Payne
Associate Professor of American Religious History, Portland Seminary

Sarah Posner
Author, journalist, and expert on Christian nationalism

Mark Reading-Smith
Executive Director
ReThink Media

Daniel Silliman
Senior News Editor, Christianity Today

Simran Jeet Singh
Assistant Professor of Interreligious Histories, Union Theological Seminary

Matthew Taylor
Senior Protestant Scholar, Institute for Islamic, Christian, and Jewish Studies.

Casper ter Kuile
Author and co-founder of Sacred Design Lab and Nearness.

Krista Tippett
Creator and Host
On Being

Emilie Townes
Professor of Religion and Black Studies, Boston University.

Christopher White
Professor and Chair of Religion, Vassar College.



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