

Religion in the Digital Media Age: The Religious Formation of Young People from the Perspective of Christian Personalism

Religia w epoce mediów cyfrowych. Formacja religijna młodzieży w perspektywie personalizmu chrześcijańskiego

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Abstract: This article examines the religious formation of young people in the digital media age from the perspective of Christian personalism and the humanism of Francis de Sales. It starts from the thesis that digital media are not merely tools of religious communication, but also function as a cultural environment that shapes young people's experience of faith, identity, and social relationships. Drawing on contemporary research on digital religion, the mediatisation of religion, and youth religiosity, the author highlights both the potential of digital religiosity and its structural limitations for religious formation. The main contribution of the article lies in applying Christian personalism as both a hermeneutical framework and a critical criterion for evaluating digital religiosity. Referring to the thought of Emmanuel Mounier and Karol Wojtyła, the author argues that religious formation cannot be reduced to affective experience, media expression, or the selective consumption of religious content, but should lead to the integral development of the person as a relational, free, and responsible being. The humanism of Francis de Sales is presented as a pedagogical and spiritual paradigm capable of entering into a creative dialogue with digital culture, emphasising the gradual nature of growth, pedagogical gentleness, and the unity of reason, will, and affectivity. The article shows that Christian personalism, reinforced by the Salesian perspective and the teaching of the contemporary Magisterium of the Church, provides an adequate framework for the theological assessment of young people's religiosity in the world of digital media and indicates directions for responsible and integral religious formation.

Keywords: digital religion; youth; religious formation; Christian personalism; digital media; Francis de Sales; religious pedagogy; mediatisation of religion

Abstrakt: Artykuł podejmuje problem formacji religijnej młodzieży w epoce mediów cyfrowych, analizując go w perspektywie personalizmu chrześcijańskiego oraz humanizmu Franciszka Salezego. Punktem wyjścia jest teza, że media cyfrowe nie stanowią jedynie narzędzia komunikacji religijnej, lecz funkcjonują jako środowisko kulturowe współkształtujące doświadczenie wiary, tożsamość oraz relacje społeczne młodych ludzi. W oparciu o współczesne badania nad digital religion, mediatyzacją religii oraz religijnością młodzieży autor ukazuje ambiwalentny charakter religijności cyfrowej, wskazując zarówno na jej potencjał, jak i na strukturalne ograniczenia formacyjne. Zasadniczym wkładem artykułu jest zastosowanie personalizmu chrześcijańskiego jako hermeneutyki i kryterium krytycznego wobec religijności cyfrowej. Odwołując się do myśli Emmanuela Mouniera i Karola Wojtyły, autor argumentuje, że formacja religijna nie może być redukowana do doświadczenia afektywnego, ekspresji medialnej ani selektywnej konsumpcji treści religijnych, lecz powinna prowadzić do integralnego rozwoju osoby jako bytu relacyjnego, wolnego i odpowiedzialnego. Humanizm Franciszka Salezego zostaje zaprezentowany jako pedagogiczny i duchowy paradygmat zdolny do twórczego dialogu z kulturą cyfrową, akcentujący procesualność wzrostu, łagodność wychowawczą oraz jedność rozumu, woli i afektywności. Artykuł wykazuje, że personalizm chrześcijański, wzmocniony perspektywą salezjańską i nauczaniem współczesnego Magisterium Kościoła, stanowi adekwatne narzędzie teologicznej oceny religijności młodzieży w świecie mediów cyfrowych oraz wskazuje kierunki odpowiedzialnej i integralnej formacji religijnej.



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Słowa kluczowe: religia cyfrowa; młodzież; formacja religijna; personalizizm chrześcijański; media cyfrowe; Franciszek Salezy; pedagogika religijna; mediatyzacja religii

INTRODUCTION

The dynamic development of digital media in recent decades has led to a profound transformation in the ways of communicating, forming identity and experiencing religiosity, especially among young people. Today's youth function in an environment that is no longer just a collection of communication tools, but a comprehensive cultural ecosystem that shapes the perception of reality, social relations, and the language of spiritual experience (Campbell 2010; Hoover 2006). Religion, subject to processes of mediatization, is incorporated into the logic of imagery, algorithmisation, and affectivity characteristic of digital culture, which raises questions about its anthropological, theological, and educational consequences (Hjarvard 2011; Hjarvard 2016).

This problem is particularly evident in the area of religious education for young people. Research on digital religion indicates that young users not only consume religious content in digital media, but also actively reinterpret, curate, and performatively act it out in the online space (*Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice* 2013; *Digital Media, Young Adults and Religion* 2020). The religiosity of young people often takes on a fragmentary, hybrid, and highly emotional character, leading to a shift in emphasis from doctrine and community to subjective and aesthetic experience (Horsfield 2015; Gale 2024). In this context, religious formation faces a tension between the need for authentic experience and the risk of reducing faith to a media product or identity performance (Nam 2023).

Research on the relationship between religion and digital media emerged as a separate field of study at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries. The classic works of Stewart M. Hoover pointed to the need to analyse religion not only as content present in the media, but as a phenomenon co-created by media logic (Hoover 2006). This approach was further developed into the concept of the mediatization of religion, proposed by Stig Hjarvard, according to which the media are not a neutral channel of communication, but an active factor transforming religious authority, symbolism, and practices (Hjarvard 2011; Hjarvard 2016).

Heidi A. Campbell's work was groundbreaking for research on digital religion, proposing a methodological framework for analysing religious practices in the new media environment. Campbell demonstrated that digital religiosity is not a simple transfer of traditional forms of piety to the internet, but a new configuration of relationships between community, authority, and medium (Campbell 2010; *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice* 2013). In her later works, the author drew attention to the phenomenon of "digital creatives" who reinterpret religious authorities and narratives in the logic of networked participatory culture (Campbell 2021).

This approach has been further developed in interdisciplinary anthologies such as The Oxford Handbook of Digital Religion, which document the diversity of online religious practices and research methods used in the analysis of digital religion (*The Oxford Handbook of Digital Religion* 2024). At the same time, research by Cheong and co-authors has highlighted the importance of social media as a space for negotiating religious and identity meanings, especially among young adults (*Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture* 2012).

In recent years, researchers have focused particular attention on the religiosity of young people in the digital environment. The volume *Digital Media, Young Adults and Religion*, edited by Moberg and Sjö, provides a broad, comparative picture of the religious practices of young users in different cultural contexts, highlighting both the formative potential of media and the processes of fragmentation of religious experience (*Digital Media, Young Adults and Religion* 2020). These analyses are complemented by empirical studies on the impact of social media on young people's faith, pointing to the ambivalent nature of the digital mediatization of religion (Gale 2024).

At the same time, theological reflection on digital media and religious formation is developing. The concept of digital theology, proposed by Peter M. Phillips, among others, postulates the need to integrate digital humanities tools with classical theological reflection (Phillips, Schiefelbein-Guerrero Jonas Kurlberg 2019). Research in the field of religious pedagogy, on the other hand, emphasises the need for a critical approach to digital affectivity and experientiality, pointing to the risk of reducing the educational process to emotional stimuli (Heimbrock 2022).

Against this background, a research gap is clearly emerging. Although the literature on the subject extensively analyses digital religion and the religiosity of young people, attempts to systematically root these analyses in personalist Christian anthropology are relatively rare. Classical personalism, represented by Emmanuel Mounier and Karol Wojtyła, offers a coherent concept of the person as a relational, free, and responsible being, which can serve as a criterion for evaluating the processes of digital mediatisation of religion (Mounier 1989; Wojtyła 1979).

Polish personalist reflection has developed concepts that systematically address the issues of the human person, freedom, and education understood as the process of integral formation of the subject. These approaches provide tools for critical analysis of contemporary cultural changes, in particular those that influence the construction of identity and the understanding of the autonomy of the subject. Of particular importance here is the personalist interpretation of freedom inspired by the thought of Emmanuel Mounier and the consistent distinction between person and personality, which makes it possible to describe the tensions that arise in the processes of cultural and media socialisation of the individual. This perspective remains relevant, especially in relation to digital mechanisms of identity formation, which favour the identification of subjectivity with its variable forms of expression (Słomski 1998; Słomski 2008).

An important point of reference for this study is also the humanism of Francis de Sales, which emphasises the integrity of the person, pedagogical gentleness, and the importance of internal formation. His vision of spiritual life, focused on everyday life and relationships, can be an inspiration for contemporary reflection on the religious education of young people in the digital world (Francis de Sales 2002; Francis de Sales 2010). Contemporary documents of the Magisterium of the Church, especially the exhortation *Christus vivit*, confirm the relevance of this approach, emphasising the need for the integral formation of young people in the context of digital culture (Francis 2019).

The aim of this article is to analyse the religious formation of young people in the age of digital media from the perspective of Christian personalism, taking into account the humanism of Francis de Sales. The main research question is: to what extent can the personalistic concept of the person be an adequate hermeneutical tool for assessing the processes of digital mediatisation of religion among young people? Specific questions concern:

(1) the impact of digital media on the structure of young people's religious experience, (2) tensions between affectivity and personal freedom in digital religiosity, (3) the possibility of applying personalistic criteria in religious pedagogy.

The article is based on the method of source hermeneutics, including the analysis of theological, philosophical, and pedagogical texts, as well as on theological comparativism, comparing contemporary research on digital religion with classical personalistic anthropology. An analysis of theological discourse will also be used, focusing on the language of the person, relationships and freedom in the context of digital media. The adopted perspective allows for a critical yet constructive approach to the problem, without reducing theology to media sociology or pedagogy to communication technology.

1. DIGITAL MEDIA AS A RELIGIOUS ENVIRONMENT: ANTHROPOLOGICAL AND THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR YOUTH FORMATION

One of the key findings of contemporary research on religion in the digital age is the shift away from an instrumental understanding of media towards viewing them as a cultural environment in which religious experience is constituted. Digital media no longer serve merely as channels for the transmission of religious content, but co-create the perceptual, symbolic, and relational frameworks within which young people interpret reality, construct identity, and experience faith (Hoover 2006; Campbell 2010). This approach has important consequences for theological and pedagogical reflection, as it shifts the focus from the question of the effectiveness of religious communication to the question of the anthropological effects of immersion in digital culture.

Heidi A. Campbell, developing the concept of digital religion, emphasises that online religious practices are not a simple continuation of traditional forms of piety, but arise as a result of negotiations between the norms of religious communities and the logic of digital media, such as personalisation of communication, participation, and algorithmic selection of content (*Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice* 2013). In the case of young people, this process is particularly intense, as digital media are the primary environment for socialisation and identity expression. Religion in the digital space is thus incorporated into the dynamics of self-presentation, aestheticization, and performativity, leading to a transformation of its forms and meanings (Horsfield 2015).

Stig Hjarvard's analyses indicate that in the context of the mediatisation of religion, there is a shift of authority from religious institutions to the media as the main producers of cultural meaning (Hjarvard 2011). In the context of young people, this means that religious experience is increasingly shaped by the logic of digital platforms, which prefer concise, emotional, and visual communication. Theological authority is giving way to media authority, based on reach, visual appeal, and the ability to generate engagement (Hjarvard 2016). From a theological perspective, this raises questions about the durability and depth of religious formation based on such mechanisms.

Empirical research on youth religiosity in the digital environment confirms the ambivalent nature of these processes. On the one hand, digital media provide access to a variety of religious content, online communities, and forms of spiritual support; on the other hand, however, they encourage the fragmentation of religious experience and its subordination to the logic of instant gratification (*Digital Media, Young Adults and Religion* 2020). Young users often create their own religious "micro-narratives," selectively combining elements of tradition with culturally popular content, which leads to a weakening of doctrinal and community cohesion (*Digital Media, Young Adults and Religion* 2020).

Josh Gale, analysing the impact of social media on young people's faith, notes that intensive exposure to digital content encourages the perception of religion primarily in terms of emotional experience rather than as a formative process requiring time and reflection (Gale 2024). This phenomenon is confirmed by the research of Vo Huong Nam, who points to the risk of reducing Christian discipleship to motivational messages and aesthetic representations of faith, devoid of roots in community practice (Nam 2023).

From a theological point of view, the key issue is therefore the question of the image of the person implied by digital culture. Personalistic Christian anthropology, developed by Emmanuel Mounier and Karol Wojtyła, emphasises the person as a relational, free, and responsible being whose development takes place through engagement in relationships and community, rather than through constant self-presentation (Mounier 1989; Wojtyła 1979). Meanwhile, the logic of digital media favours the construction of a fragmentary and performative identity based on changing narratives and audience reactions.

Polish personalist reflection has developed a distinction between person and personality, which allows us to grasp the tension between the ontological dignity of the subject and the variable forms of its cultural expression. Personality, as a structure shaped by social, psychological, and cultural factors, can be deformed under the influence of dominant symbolic patterns, while the person retains their unchanging dignity and call to freedom and responsibility. In the context of digital media, this distinction takes on particular importance, as network communication processes encourage the identification of one's own value with one's media image and the reactions of the audience. Such dynamics lead to a reduction in freedom to make aesthetic or emotional choices, subordinated to the logic of visibility and acceptance, rather than to authentic self-determination (Słomski 1998).

Theological reflection on digital media and religious education therefore points to the need for a critical approach to affectivity and visibility as dominant categories of religious experience. Hans-Günter Heimbrock emphasises that although experience and emotions play an important role in the process of learning religion, they cannot replace reflection and hermeneutic deepening of the content of faith (Heimbrock 2022). Otherwise, religious formation becomes superficial and loses its ability to shape a mature Christian identity.

In this context, the humanism of Francis de Sales appears to be an important point of reference. His vision of spiritual life, focused on the integrity of the person, gentleness, and the daily practice of faith, counterbalances the hasty and fragmentary nature of digital religiosity (Francis de Sales 2002). Francis de Sales emphasised the importance of patient internal formation and harmony between experience and reason, which can inspire contemporary religious pedagogy in the world of digital media.

In summary, an analysis of the literature on the subject allows us to conclude that digital media are not only a challenge but also a space that requires in-depth theological and personalistic reflection. Without clear anthropological criteria, there is a risk that the religious formation of young people will be subordinated to the logic of the media, rather than leading to the integral development of the person. Christian personalism and the humanism of Francis de Sales offer an interpretative framework that enables a critical and constructive approach to the religiosity of young people in the digital age, which is the starting point for further analysis in the following sections of this article.

2. FRANCIS DE SALES'S HUMANISM AS A PARADIGM FOR THE RELIGIOUS FORMATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE AGE OF DIGITAL MEDIA

Reflection on the religious formation of young people in the context of digital culture requires not only analytical tools drawn from media studies, but also a grounding in the spiritual and pedagogical tradition of the Church. In this context, the humanism of Francis de Sales is a particularly relevant point of reference, as it combines a profound Christian anthropology with sensitivity to everyday life, relationality, and the gradual nature of spiritual growth (Francis de Sales 2002). His thought, although shaped in the realities of early modern Europe, contains insights that remain relevant to the challenges of contemporary digital culture.

The central element of the Salesian vision of man is the belief in the integral unity of the person, encompassing reason, will, emotions, and physicality. Francis de Sales opposed all forms of elitist spirituality or spirituality detached from the realities of everyday life, emphasising that the call to holiness is realised in specific existential conditions, through gradual and patient work on oneself (Francis de Sales 2002). From the perspective of youth formation in the digital age, this intuition takes on particular significance, as media culture encourages the fragmentation of experience and the acceleration of formation processes at the expense of their deepening (Hoover 2006; Campbell 2010).

Francis de Sales's humanism is based on the affirmation of personal freedom, understood not as freedom of choice, but as the capacity to direct one's life consciously and responsibly towards the good. In his *Treatise on the Love of God*, Francis de Sales consistently presents freedom as the space in which grace and human response cooperate, thereby protecting spirituality from the extremes of both determinism and subjectivism (Francis de Sales 2010). In the context of digital media, which promote instant gratification and algorithmically shaped choices, the Salesian concept of freedom can serve as a critical criterion against reducing the person to a user or consumer of content (Hjarvard 2016).

An important aspect of Salesian pedagogy is also the role of affectivity in spiritual life. Francis de Sales does not deny the importance of feelings and emotional experiences, but subordinates them to the process of discernment and formation of reason and will. Affectivity is to be integrated, not absolutised, which is in stark contrast to the dominant trends in digital

culture, where emotions become the main criterion for the value of content and relationships (*Digital Media, Young Adults and Religion* 2020; Gale 2024). In this sense, Salesian humanism offers an alternative to the emotionalisation of religion in social media, pointing to the need for harmony between experience and reflection.

From a pedagogical point of view, the Salesian principle of gentleness (*douceur*) is particularly important, which is expressed in the manner of spiritual and educational accompaniment. Francis de Sales emphasised the importance of dialogue, patience and gradualness in the formation process, which is reflected in contemporary concepts of accompanying young people, developed, among others, in the Salesian tradition (*Spiritual Accompaniment* 2019). In the digital context, this principle can be interpreted as a call for responsible and prudent use of the media, without a moralising tone, but with respect for the young person's path of development.

Francis de Sales's humanism also remains deeply consistent with Christian personalism. Its emphasis on the dignity of the person, the person's relational nature, and the vocation to freedom and love corresponds to the personalist approach of Emmanuel Mounier and Karol Wojtyła (Mounier 1989; Wojtyła 1979). In the personalist reflection developed in Poland, attention has been drawn to the particular risk of identity deformation under the conditions of digital culture, in which the expressive and performative layer of identity gains dominance over its ontological dimension. In a media communication environment, there is a real danger that a personality constructed through images will begin to overshadow the dignity of the person as a being of inviolable value and an inner call to freedom. Such a shift in emphasis leads to a reduction of subjectivity to representative and reactive functions, which has far-reaching consequences for the processes of religious formation and education towards responsibility (Słomski 2008). Salesian humanism, through its anthropological realism, makes it possible to preserve this distinction in educational practice.

The contemporary Magisterium of the Church confirms the relevance of Salesian intuitions in relation to young people living in the digital world. The exhortation *Christus vivit* emphasises the need for the integral formation of young people, taking into account both their immersion in digital culture and the need for a deeper relationship with God and the community

(Francis 2019). Francis points to the risk of superficial communication and “digital loneliness,” which is consistent with the Salesian emphasis on relationality and the presence of the educator.

In summary, Francis de Sales’s humanism offers a coherent and theologically profound paradigm for the religious formation of young people in the age of digital media. His integral anthropology, affirmation of freedom and pedagogical gentleness, and critical approach to affectivity can provide an effective counterbalance to the reductionist tendencies of digital culture. Incorporating this perspective into reflections on religion and digital media not only allows for a better understanding of the challenges of contemporary formation, but also points to ways of developing it creatively and responsibly.

3. CHRISTIAN PERSONALISM AS A HERMENEUTIC OF THE RELIGIOUS FORMATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE

The analysis of youth religiosity in the age of digital media requires not only a sociological or media-studies description, but above all a hermeneutic capable of grasping the meaning of religious formation as a process of shaping the person. Christian personalism offers a coherent interpretative framework in this regard, as it focuses on the person as a relational, free, and responsible subject rather than merely on the behaviour or experiences of the individual (Mounier 1989; Wojtyła 1979). The application of personalism as a hermeneutic of formation thus allows us to move beyond reductionist approaches to digital religiosity, which reduce it to shifting media practices or emotional reactions.

Emmanuel Mounier defined the person as a spiritual being who fulfils himself through commitment, relationship, and responsibility towards others (Mounier 1989). In the perspective of religious formation, this means that the educational process cannot be limited to the transmission of content or the stimulation of experiences, but must lead to the integration of freedom, reason, and affectivity towards the good. In the context of digital media, which encourage superficial consumption of content and fragmentation of attention, Mounier’s personalism becomes a critical tool against models of formation based solely on the attractiveness of the message (*Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice* 2013; *Digital Media, Young Adults and Religion* 2020).

Karol Wojtyła, developing personalism in a phenomenological key, emphasised the importance of action as a place of revelation of the person. In *The Acting Person*, the person appears as a subject of self-determination who, through action, not only expresses himself but also shapes himself (Wojtyła 1979). From the perspective of the religious formation of young people, this means moving away from passive models of religious content reception in favour of forms of education that engage young people as responsible participants in the life of the faith community. Meanwhile, the digital environment often encourages a consumerist attitude, in which religion becomes one of many available identity “resources” (Hjarvard 2016).

In the personalist reflection developed in Poland, a distinction has been made between the person and the personality, which proves particularly useful in analysing the formation processes taking place in digital culture. Personality, understood as a dynamic set of psychological and social traits, remains highly susceptible to the influence of dominant cultural, media, and communication patterns. The person, on the other hand, retains their ontological dignity and inner freedom, regardless of the changing forms of expression and representation. In the context of the mediatisation of religion, this distinction allows for a critical assessment of the tendency to equate religious identity with media image or the intensity of emotional experiences, which, although important, cannot constitute a sufficient criterion for the maturity of faith or the integral formation of a person (Słomski 2008).

Freedom remains a particularly important category in the personalist hermeneutic of formation, understood not as abstract autonomy or unlimited choice, but as the dynamic capacity of the person for self-determination in relation to truth, goodness, and other people. This approach emphasises the relational nature of freedom, which excludes both determinism, reducing the subject to the result of external factors, and a subjectivist understanding of autonomy detached from responsibility and the normative dimension of the good. Freedom understood in this way is a key criterion for evaluating formative processes, especially in the context of digital culture, where freedom is often reduced to the selective choice of content and styles of expression. In the case of young people functioning in an environment of algorithmically controlled digital media, personal freedom is exposed to subtle forms of restriction resulting from mechanisms of content personalisation and the attention economy (Campbell 2021). Christian personalism thus makes it possible to unmask the apparent freedom

of choice offered by digital media and to direct religious formation towards authentic self-determination.

Personalist hermeneutics also assumes an integral approach to affectivity. Unlike approaches that either absolutise emotions or marginalise them in the formation process, personalism views feelings as an important but subordinate element of personal development. Research on youth religiosity in digital media shows that emotionality often becomes the main criterion for the authenticity of religious experience (Gale 2024; Nam 2023). Christian personalism, on the other hand, allows affectivity to be included in the formation process, not reducing religion to an experience, but presenting it as a path of relational maturation of the person.

The application of personalism as a hermeneutic of religious formation of young people also leads to a critical reinterpretation of the concept of community. In the digital environment, relationships often take on a networked and episodic character, which influences the way religious community is experienced (Hoover 2006; Horsfield 2015). Christian personalism, emphasising *communio* as a space for personal encounter, allows us to distinguish between a formative community and a group of users gathered around religious content.

In this sense, personalism is not just one of many possible anthropological trends, but a hermeneutic capable of integrating empirical data with theological reflection. It enables a critical yet constructive reading of youth religiosity in the digital age, without falling into either apologetics for technology or its unequivocal condemnation. The personalist hermeneutics of religious formation indicates that the essential criterion for evaluating digital practices is not their attractiveness or reach, but their ability to support the integral development of the person in relation to God, others, and oneself.

4. CHRISTIAN PERSONALISM AS A CRITICAL CRITERION FOR DIGITAL RELIGIOSITY

Contemporary digital religiosity, especially among young people, requires not only empirical description but also normative theological evaluation. Christian personalism, understood as an anthropology rooted in the ontological dignity of the person, offers an adequate critical criterion for religious phenomena shaped by the logic of digital media. This criterion does not consist in

the a priori rejection of new forms of religiosity, but in discerning them in light of the question of whether, and to what extent, they promote the integral development of the person as a relational, free, and responsible subject (Mounier 1989; Wojtyła 1979).

One of the fundamental problems of digital religiosity is the shift in emphasis from formation to expression. Research on digital religion indicates that the digital media environment favours models of religiosity based on visibility, autobiographical narrative, and the aestheticisation of spiritual experience (Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice 2013; Campbell 2021). In this context, religion becomes an element of performative identity, subject to the rules of self-presentation and the economy of attention. From the perspective of Christian personalism, this raises the question of whether religious expression in digital media leads to a deepening of a person's relationship with God and the community, or whether it remains at the level of symbolic self-affirmation.

Mounier's personalism emphasises that a person fulfils themselves not through expression alone, but through commitment, which is binding and lasting in nature (Mounier 1989). Digital religiosity, often based on episodic acts of engagement – such as reactions, comments or short-term spiritual campaigns – can lead to a dispersion of religious experience and a weakening of its existential dimension. Personalistic criticism does not deny the value of such practices, but points to their limited ability to shape the long-term attitudes necessary in the process of youth formation (*Digital Media, Young Adults and Religion* 2020).

Another problem that emerges in the analysis of digital religiosity is the redefinition of freedom. Digital media promote an image of freedom as the unlimited choice of content and lifestyles, which is also reflected in the religious sphere (Hjarvard 2016). The personalistic concept of freedom, developed by both Mounier and Wojtyła, opposes this view, presenting freedom as the ability to self-determination oriented towards truth and goodness (Wojtyła 1979; Słomski 1998). From this point of view, digital religiosity, which reduces freedom to the selective consumption of religious content, can lead to an illusion of autonomy, devoid of any real ethical and spiritual dimension.

The algorithmic nature of digital media further complicates the issue of personal freedom. Content personalisation mechanisms, while increasing the sense of tailoring the message to individual preferences, simultaneously limit the horizon of experience and

reflection, reinforcing existing beliefs and emotions (Campbell 2021). In this context, Christian personalism allows us to unmask the structural limitations of freedom, which often remain invisible to users but are of significant importance for the religious formation of young people.

The affectivity of digital religiosity also requires particular critical reflection. Empirical research indicates that young people often equate the authenticity of religious experience with its emotional intensity (Gale 2024; Nam 2023). Christian personalism does not deny the importance of feelings, but incorporates them into a broader structure of personal development, in which reason, will and community relations play an integrating role (Słomski 2008). From this perspective, digital religiosity, based mainly on emotional and visual stimuli, can lead to spiritual instability and difficulty in transitioning from experience to a lasting attitude of faith.

The critical application of personalism also applies to the concept of community. Digital religiosity often creates online communities based on weak ties and shared interests rather than real participation in religious life (Hoover 2006; Horsfield 2015). Christian personalism, emphasising *communio* as a space for personal encounter and mutual responsibility, allows us to distinguish between a formative community and temporary configurations of users. This criterion is particularly important in working with young people, for whom the experience of community is an important factor in the development of religious identity.

In this sense, Christian personalism plays a critical but constructive role. It does not reduce digital religiosity to pathology, nor does it postulate a return to pre-media forms of piety. On the contrary, it enables discernment of those elements of digital culture that can be creatively incorporated into the formation process and those that need to be corrected or limited. The humanism of Francis de Sales, with its emphasis on the integrity of the person, pedagogical gentleness, and the processual nature of spiritual growth, reinforces this perspective by offering practical criteria for accompanying young people in the world of digital media (Francis de Sales 2002; Francis 2019).

Ultimately, Christian personalism allows us to formulate a fundamental criterion for evaluating digital religiosity: it is neither the modernity of forms nor the intensity of experiences, but the ability to lead a person towards a mature relationship with God, rooted in freedom, responsibility, and community. Understood in this way, the critical criterion is an

essential element of theological reflection on the religious formation of young people in the age of digital media and prepares the ground for the synthetic conclusions of the article.

CONCLUSION

The analysis has shown that the religiosity of young people in the digital media age cannot be adequately described or assessed solely in sociological or media-studies terms. Although research on digital religion provides valuable diagnostic tools, it is only by rooting reflection in theological anthropology that we can grasp the essence of religious formation as a process of shaping the person rather than merely managing practices or experiences (*Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice* 2013; Hoover 2006). The article has shown that Christian personalism constitutes a coherent and normatively justified hermeneutic, capable of a critical and at the same time constructive reading of the digital religiosity of young people.

The starting point for the discussion was the thesis that digital media today function as a formative environment that shapes the structure of young people's religious experience. The mediatization of religion leads to a shift in emphasis from permanent community and doctrinal forms to practices based on visibility, affectivity, and performative expression (Hjarvard 2011; Hjarvard 2016). This analysis revealed the ambivalent nature of digital religiosity: on the one hand, it creates new opportunities for contact with religious content and communities, while on the other hand, it promotes the fragmentation of faith and weakens formative processes, especially among young people (*Digital Media, Young Adults and Religion* 2020; Gale 2024).

The application of Christian personalism as a research hermeneutic enabled a transition from description to normative evaluation. The personalism of Emmanuel Mounier and Karol Wojtyła presents the person as a relational, free and responsible being whose development takes place through engagement rather than through the consumption of experiences (Mounier 1989; Wojtyła 1979). In this light, digital religiosity, reduced to emotional expression or aesthetic self-presentation, reveals its structural limitations as a tool of formation. The personalistic criterion thus allows us to distinguish between practices that promote the integral development of the person and those that lead to distraction and superficiality.

A particularly important element of the analysis was to demonstrate the importance of distinguishing between person and personality in the interpretation of phenomena of digital religiosity. The personalist perspective makes it possible to grasp the risk involved in identifying religious identity with a media image or with the intensity of emotional experiences characteristic of digital culture. In communication environments shaped by algorithms and mechanisms of visibility, this distinction acquires particular importance because it allows us to distinguish between the ontological dignity of the person and the variable, performative forms through which that dignity is expressed. Maintaining this distinction proves crucial for the theological and anthropological coherence of the religious formation of young people, protecting it from being reduced to emotional experience or media self-presentation (Słomski 1998; Słomski 2008).

The humanism of Francis de Sales also proved to be an integral element of the proposed hermeneutics. His vision of spiritual life, based on the affirmation of freedom, pedagogical gentleness, and the processual nature of growth, is a valuable counterbalance to accelerated and affective digital religiosity (Francis de Sales 2002; Francis de Sales 2010). The Salesian understanding of formation as accompanying a person in their daily life allows us to avoid both a technocratic approach to the media and a nostalgic rejection of digital culture. In this sense, Francis de Sales's humanism reinforces the personalistic criterion for evaluating digital religiosity, while offering practical pedagogical guidelines.

The conclusions of the article are in line with the teaching of the contemporary Magisterium of the Church, which emphasises the need for the integral formation of young people in the digital world. The exhortation *Christus vivit* points out that digital media cannot replace real relationships and the process of maturing in faith, but require critical discernment and responsible use (Francis 2019). This convergence confirms the thesis that Christian personalism is not merely a theoretical proposition, but a living tradition capable of dialogue with current cultural challenges.

In summary, Christian personalism, reinforced by the humanism of Francis de Sales, appears to be an adequate critical criterion for the digital religiosity of young people. This criterion does not consist in the negation of new forms of religiosity, but in their discernment from the perspective of the integral development of the person. The article has shown that

without such grounding, religious formation is vulnerable to subordination to the logic of the media, which leads to the reduction of faith to an affective experience or an element of identity politics. By contrast, the application of a personalist hermeneutic makes it possible to preserve the theological identity of religious formation and opens up space for further research into creative and responsible forms of accompanying young people in the age of digital media.

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