

RELIGION IN THE DIGITAL SPACE: The Potential of Social Media for Religious Conflict Mediation

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ABSTRACT

Religious conflict remains a complex issue worldwide, including in Indonesia. The rise of digital spaces, particularly social media, has not only expanded the religious public sphere but also offered new opportunities for conflict resolution. This article examines the potential of social media as a medium for mediating religious conflicts by highlighting interfaith dialogue, peace-oriented narratives, and the role of religious actors in managing tensions. Employing a qualitative approach grounded in a literature review, the study uses John Paul Lederach's Conflict Transformation theory as the primary analytical framework to conceptualize digital space as a relational, structural, and narrative environment in which religious conflict is continuously reproduced and potentially transformed. The findings suggest that while social media algorithms tend to amplify hate speech and deepen echo chambers, these same platforms also enable participatory, wide-reaching initiatives for conflict mediation. Thus, digital spaces can be transformed into inclusive arenas for constructive engagement, symbolic rituals, and collaborative practices that foster positive peace and social justice while at the same time facing structural constraints, such as algorithmic polarization, digital inequality, and performative peacebuilding.

Keywords: Religion in the Digital Space; Social Media; Religious Conflict Mediation

INTRODUCTION

Religious conflicts in the contemporary era are no longer confined to physical but have expanded into digital space. Social media presents a new arena where expressions of religious identity, theological debates, and hate speech interact intensively (Campbell, 2013). In Indonesia, the escalation of religion-based conflicts is often accelerated by digital media. The 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, for example, demonstrated how a short video clip could be reproduced, politicized, and disseminated virally, triggering sharp polarization within society (Lim, 2017). This phenomenon illustrates how social media algorithms function as accelerators of conflict by creating echo chambers that reinforce each group's beliefs.

Social media platforms have evolved beyond mere conduits for religious messaging into sites of symbolic interaction where religious identities are negotiated, authorities are contested, and conflicts are reinterpreted. This phenomenon has given rise to what is characterized as “digital religion” or “religion in the digital space” (Campbell, 2013; Evolvi, 2018). While early studies viewed the internet as a mere extension of offline religious life manifested through online rituals and virtual communities, recent developments suggest that digital spaces operate under a distinct logic. Technological and social structures, such as platform algorithms, the attention economy, and participatory culture, create new religious relational structures that are fluid, open, and frequently conflictual.

Within the digital landscape, religious conflict has assumed new forms. Social media enables symbolic, faith-based disputes to propagate rapidly across geographical boundaries, involving a broader spectrum of actors. These conflicts are not limited to verbal violence, hate speech, or religious misinformation; they also encompass discursive contestations, the delegitimization of traditional authorities, and the deepening polarization of religious identities. Consequently, the digital space does not merely replicate conventional religious dynamics but actively reshapes the nature of religious friction.

To establish the position and contribution of this study, it is essential to critically map previous research regarding digital religion and religious conflict. Campbell (2013) provided a foundational framework by asserting that online and offline religious practices are deeply interconnected, allowing communities to adapt to digital tools without forfeiting theological meaning.

However, this early focus remained largely on adaptation rather than the intricacies of conflict. Religion is produced through a complex interplay of media, materiality, and emotion (Meyer, 2009). This perspective is vital as it highlights that digital religious conflict is not solely ideological but also deeply emotional and performative. In the Indonesian context, Rohmawati et al. (2024) demonstrated how mediatization reshapes Muslim practices, leading to the fragmentation of authority and the pluralization of interpretation. However, the conflicts arising from this fragmentation have yet to be fully analyzed through the lens of mediation or structural transformation.

The decentralization of authority and shift in religious identity have further intensified digital contestation. Firdaus and Sidik (2024) observed that digital public spaces allow non-traditional actors to construct religious legitimacy, making truth claims increasingly competitive and contentious. This is echoed by al-Zaman and Alimi (2021), who explicitly examined Islamic conflict in digital spaces, noting that social media accelerates the escalation of narrative confrontations. Similarly, Lim (2017) highlighted how religious sentiment on social media reinforces polarization. Despite these insights, a common thread in existing studies is the positioning of conflict as a negative byproduct of technology rather than a social process capable of being transformed.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study draws upon John Paul Lederach's (1997) theory of Conflict Transformation, which views conflict as a catalyst for social change. Unlike traditional resolution, transformation focuses on evolving relationships, structures, and discourses that underpin conflict narratives, a medium for cross-identity dialogue, and an arena for forming new relationships that transcend geography. This approach allows us to view digital mediation not merely as the cessation of hate speech (negative peace) but as a path toward positive peace (Galtung, 1969; 1990), i.e., the realization of social justice and inclusive relationships.

Based on the literature mapping and theoretical synthesis, this study identifies that not many studies investigate social media as a potential instrument for mediating religious conflict rather than just a source of it. There is a lack of a holistic approach that connects digital conflict dynamics with the process of conflict transformation in religious context through the utilization of social media. This study offers a significant theoretical contribution to the growing body of scholarship on religion in the digital space by repositioning digital media not merely as a communicative arena but as a transformative relational infrastructure within the framework of Lederach's Conflict Transformation theory.

The novelty of this study lies in its development of an integrated conceptual

framework encompassing conflict, religion, and digital space. By repositioning social media as a potential site of mediation and reading digital religious conflict through the lens of transformation rather than mere polarization, this study offers a new paradigm for understanding religious dynamics in the contemporary era. This study adopts a virtual library research approach. This method was selected because the focus of the study is not on collecting empirical field data, but on conducting conceptual and thematic analyses of scholarly sources relevant to religion, social media, and the mediation of religious conflict.

TRANSFORMING RELIGIOUS CONFLICT IN THE DIGITAL SPACE: RELATIONS, STRUCTURES, NARRATIVES, AND MEDIATION PRACTICES

The Digital Space as a Relational Arena for Religious Conflict Transformation

The transformation of social space facilitated by digital technology has significantly changed how religious conflicts are expressed, negotiated, and mediated. Social media platforms are no longer a mere means of transmitting religious messages. Rather, they have become relational spaces in which identities, emotions, and religious affiliations are continuously being constructed and contested. From the point of view of John Paul Lederach's theory of Conflict Transformation, religious conflicts must be understood not merely as theological conflicts or as failures in communication but as the expression of conflicts in relationships and antagonistic identity narratives (Lederach, 1997). Thus, digital space becomes a critical space for the reproduction and transformation of religious conflicts.

Research on digital religion has indicated that digital religion enhances symbolic interaction. Campbell (2013) and Hjarvard (2016) suggested that online religious activities have given rise to new religious environments that combine traditional authority with media logic. In these environments, religious symbols spread quickly and are often politicized, making them vulnerable to identity-based conflict. Lim (2017) also found that in plural societies, social media use increases religious polarization by facilitating selective exposure and in-group storytelling. But, Lederach's approach suggests a different interpretation of these processes by pointing to the potential of highly polarized interactions to become entry points for transformation if being engaged in ethical ways.

In contrast to the classical approaches to conflict resolution, which focus on short-term results or institutional agreements, conflict transformation focuses

on long-term relational change. In the view of Lederach (2005), peace is not defined by the absence of conflict, but rather by the presence of constructive relations, which are able to manage conflicts in a non-violent way. In the digital space, relations are built and sustained through repeated interactions, visual symbols, and narrative interactions. These micro-level interactions contribute to macro-level perceptions of religious “others”. Thus, digital environments should not only be understood as technical environments but as social environments, which directly impact relational quality.

Within the specific context of religious conflict, digital platforms empower religious actors, interfaith activists, and civil institutions to engage in mediation efforts unconstrained by traditional limitations on space and time. This digital evolution is most visible in global campaigns such as #PrayforPeace and various online interfaith forums, which demonstrated the profound potential of the digital space to facilitate rapid interfaith solidarity. These platforms democratize peacebuilding, enabling grassroots voices to gain the same visibility as high-level institutional leaders.

However, the architecture of these platforms presents a significant structural challenge, as social media algorithms often reinforce discursive segregation by creating “algorithmic enclaves” that prioritize content based on existing user biases (Lim, 2017). Algorithms tend to privilege emotionally charged and polarizing content, thereby undermining dialogical engagements (Vaidhyathan, 2018; Fuchs, 2021). This limitation reinforces the relevance of Lederach’s approach, which does not rely exclusively on rational deliberation but incorporates emotional healing, trust-building, and moral imagination.

As a result of this digital narrowing, peace messages frequently become confined within specific echo chambers, preaching to the converted while failing to reach or persuade diverse and opposing audiences. To overcome these technological barriers, digital mediation strategies cannot stop merely at creating dialogic spaces; they must be combined with intentional, collaborative, and cross-identity narratives (Garred & Abu-Nimer, 2018). Effective peacebuilding in the digital age, therefore, requires a move toward transversal communication, where content is specifically designed to bridge social silos and disrupt the cycles of polarization that algorithms tend to reward. Accordingly, digital space should be conceptualized as a relational arena characterized by conflict, vulnerability, and transformative potential. Lederach’s Conflict Transformation framework provides a holistic analytical lens by integrating relational, structural, and narrative dimensions of conflict. This framework enables a deeper understanding of how religious conflict unfolds in digital contexts and how it might be transformed through

intentional practices.

Interfaith Digital Rituals and the Reconstruction of Social Relationships

One of the most significant findings of this study is that interfaith digital rituals are used as a strategy for promoting religious harmony. Virtual interfaith prayers, which are performed through online platforms such as Zoom and live streaming, have been organized by state institutions, local governments, judicial institutions, and educational institutions. For example, virtual interfaith prayers organized by regional police departments, district governments, and courts in various regions of Indonesia have been reported (Pemalang National Unity and Political Agency, 2021; District Court of Tual, 2024; Sleman Media Center, 2025). This shows that the concept of ritual is not obsolete in the digital age but has simply adjusted to the new technological environment.

According to Lederach's model, rituals are essential for transforming conflicts since they act on the symbolic and emotional levels of human interaction. For Lederach (2005), moral imagination is critical in the transformation of conflicts. Moral imagination refers to the ability to see oneself within a web of relationships that include former enemies. Digital interfaith rituals create symbolic spaces for shared experiences of togetherness among the participants, even when they are not physically together. Such shared experiences are essential for the rehumanization of religious "others", which is the first step to transforming conflict-ridden relationships.

Beyond the analytical and communicative functions of technology, the spiritual dimension of human connection is increasingly finding a home within virtual environments. Rituals play a crucial role in building peace (Schirch, 2015) by providing a structured way for communities to process trauma, celebrate unity, and envision a shared future. In digital spaces, these rituals take the form of solidarity hashtag campaigns, online interfaith prayers, and virtual memorials. Such practices function as "digital rituals" that engage emotional and spiritual dimensions, going beyond rational discussion to touch the core of human identity. This broadens our understanding that digital mediation is not merely about discourse but also about creating collective experiences that strengthen social cohesion through shared action.

These mediation practices have now expanded to include specific digital rituals, such as interfaith prayer sessions via Zoom, which serve as powerful symbols of social cohesion and interfaith solidarity. This phenomenon reflects a significant shift from text-based dialogue, which can often be cold or

confrontational, to collective emotional experiences that reinforce symbolic peace. By moving beyond mere intellectual exchange, these virtual rituals create a shared sacred space that fosters a more profound sense of belonging and mutual empathy among participants, regardless of their physical location. The screen ceases to be a barrier and becomes a communal window through which diverse believers can witness and participate in one another's spiritual expressions.

The effectiveness of these digital gatherings lies in their ability to translate the "liturgy of peace" into a format accessible to a hyper-connected world. While traditional mediation often focuses on resolving specific grievances, these symbolic rituals focus on the restoration of relationships and the humanization of the "other". The visual representation of religious leaders and followers praying together on a single digital screen, for instance, offers a powerful alternative narrative of coexistence and mutual respect. As participants see faces from different backgrounds displayed in a single gallery view, the visual representation of unity provides a counter-image to the narratives of division found elsewhere online. Consequently, digital rituals serve as an emotional anchor, ensuring that the peace achieved in virtual mediation is not just a signed agreement on a screen, but a felt reality in the hearts of the community.

Digital rituals also have significant implications for inclusivity. Persons who are often not included in public rituals in physical spaces, such as women, persons with disabilities, religious minorities, and those living in remote areas, can more easily participate in virtual spaces. Feminist approaches to peacebuilding highlight the significance of inclusivity in participation in order for sustainable peace to be achieved (Pankhurst, 2003; Shepherd, 2008). Digital rituals make it easier for individuals to participate in rituals, thus facilitating a more inclusive relational transformation.

However, this study also underscores the limitations of digital rituals. Unless they are followed up with sustained efforts and integrated into the daily social fabric, the potential for such rituals to be merely performative rather than transformative exists. Lederach (1997) argues that for symbolic acts of peace to be truly effective, they need to be situated within a wider context of relational and structural change, lest they become superficial. Digital interfaith rituals need to be seen as part of a wider ecosystem of conflict transformation.

The Digitalization of Religious Services and the Transformation of Conflict Structures

Another result is that digital technology can greatly affect the structural aspect of religious conflict. The development of interfaith digital service platforms,

such as the “One Minute Service” application developed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Bangka Belitung Province, shows how digitalization can facilitate equal access to religious services (Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2025). The application delivers administrative and ritual services for all religious groups in a standardized and transparent way.

According to the Conflict Transformation approach, structural inequalities are the main cause of latent conflict. Lederach (1997) based his argument on Galtung’s idea of structural violence, arguing that unequal access to resources and institutions creates conditions for latent conflict. When some religious groups feel they are discriminated against in accessing public services, this creates conflict. Inclusive digital services can be seen as structural interventions to address such inequalities.

Galtung’s theory of positive peace supports the above analysis because it suggests that peace is the presence of social justice, not the absence of violence (Galtung, 1990). The digital religious services contribute to positive peace because they remove bureaucratic barriers and provide equal treatment to all religious communities. While the reduction of hate speech or the removal of inflammatory content may be seen as a form of negative peace, the intentional creation of collaborative and just interfaith narratives represents the actual progress toward positive peace. This deeper form of peace requires not just the silencing of hostility, but the active construction of inclusive structures that address the root causes of digital alienation.

Nevertheless, digitalization also creates new challenges, particularly with regards to the digital divide. According to Van Dijk (2020) and Helsper (2021), the issue of access to technology and digital literacy skills may lead to the reproduction of social inequalities. The elders, disadvantaged social groups, and inhabitants of rural areas may not benefit from digitalization without the establishment of adequate support systems. From the point of view of Lederach, structural transformation must go hand in hand with relational engagement in order to avoid the creation of new forms of exclusion.

Hence, the digitalization of religious services must be seen as a social process rather than a technological innovation. Conflict Transformation entails a need for technology to be rooted in community experiences and ethics. Otherwise, technology will simply become another arena for conflicts instead of a tool for peace.

Digital Preaching, Peace Narratives, and Middle-Range Peacebuilding Actors

According to Garred & Abu-Nimer (2018), religion not only serves as a source of violence but also contains rich spiritual resources for peace. With teachings grounded in love, justice, and solidarity, religion can act as a cognitive framework for mobilizing peace narratives. This view aligns with Appleby (2000), who explains that the sacred ambivalence of religion can exacerbate conflict but also provide moral capital for reconciliation. In studies of religious conflict, religion is often positioned ambivalently—on one hand as a source of disintegration, and on the other as a moral reservoir for peace (Appleby, 2000). This approach echoes Philpott's (2007) argument that religious ambivalence is political: it can contribute to violence when mobilized by certain actors, yet it can also serve as a normative foundation for building reconciliation.

Johan Galtung's (1969, 1990) theory of Peacebuilding deepens this understanding by distinguishing between negative peace—the absence of direct violence, such as the cessation of online hate speech—and positive peace, which refers to the creation of more fundamental social justice. Achieving positive peace requires addressing direct, structural, and cultural forms of violence. In the digital context, this involves confronting online hate speech, digital access inequality, and cultural legitimization that normalizes discrimination through religious narratives or symbols.

However, the pursuit of positive peace faces significant structural resistance within the architecture of modern social media. The primary challenge lies in the fact that algorithm-driven polarization often occurs far more rapidly than the organic, labor-intensive process of building cross-communal trust. Influencers or religious figures who courageously promote tolerance frequently find themselves becoming targets of coordinated online attacks, which underscores the urgent need for robust risk management strategies in digital mediation efforts. Without a safety net for these moderate voices, the digital sphere risks becoming a hostile environment where the loudest, most divisive voices drown out the moderate majority.

To counter these systemic risks, practitioners are increasingly turning to narrative-based interventions that prioritize human connection over abstract debate. Counter-narrative initiatives, such as creating creative content on Instagram that highlights stories of interfaith friendship, serve as a practical tool to dismantle polarization from the bottom up. This strategic use of social media mirrors John Paul Lederach's storytelling framework, which posits that sharing personal experiences is vital for cultivating deep human empathy across traditional divides (Lederach, 1997). By humanizing the “other”

through visual narratives, these initiatives transform abstract tolerance into relatable, lived realities that resonate more powerfully with digital audiences. Consequently, storytelling becomes a transformative bridge, turning passive scrolling into an opportunity for genuine emotional and social integration.

In line with this, Hasenclever and Rittberger (2000) view religion as a cognitive framework that shapes how actors interpret conflict. Social media vividly illustrates this dynamic, as exclusive religious narratives can spread rapidly, especially when validated by authoritative figures such as clerics, pastors, or emerging religious influencers who now function as new epistemic authorities. Meanwhile, digital influencers build moral authority through personal connection, charisma, and constant online presence, effectively bypassing traditional hierarchies. This form of authority differs significantly from traditional institutional authority, creating new dynamics of collaboration and competition that can either strengthen or destabilize communal harmony. Research indicates that collaborations between religious scholars and digital influencers have proven effective in disseminating messages of moderation and tolerance, particularly among younger audiences (Faridah & Amir, 2025). Initiatives such as “*Surabaya Mengaji*” utilize Instagram and other platforms to deliver visually engaging and dialogical religious content (Ansyori, 2022).

In the context of conflict mediation, bridging these two worlds through collaboration between traditional religious authorities and digital influencers becomes crucial for a holistic peace strategy. Theologically grounded peace messages from established religious figures gain a modern edge and reach significantly wider audiences when delivered through the creativity and digital fluency of influencers. This partnership allows for a hybrid authority that combines deep doctrinal substance with high-engagement communication. By working together, these actors can translate complex concepts of moderation into digestible content that speaks directly to the aspirations and concerns of a globalized digital public.

Nonetheless, this convergence of traditional and digital power is not without its inherent dangers. Risks such as the oversimplification of complex theological issues, the intrusion of commercial bias, and the rise of performative mediation, where the appearance of peace is prioritized over actual resolution, must be carefully managed. The foundational importance of mediator neutrality, a quality that digital actors may not always possess due to their reliance on engagement and personal branding, needs to be emphasized as a core ethical standard (Lederach, 1997). Therefore, a successful digital mediation framework must establish clear guidelines to ensure that influencers remain accountable to the principles of impartiality and depth while navigating the

fast-paced currents of the internet.

Within Lederach model, these actors function as middle-range leaders, who play a vital role in peacebuilding processes as they possess social legitimacy and relational flexibility, which help them link institutional elites and grassroots communities (Lederach, 1997). Through their digital preaching, they contribute to the transformation of conflict stories by subverting dominant conflict narratives and advancing alternative stories of coexistence. The importance of narrative is further highlighted in the narrative peacebuilding theory. Bar-Tal (2013) stated that conflicts are maintained through collective narratives that support exclusion and hostility. To change these narratives, new counter-narratives need to be developed that promote the humanity of adversaries and challenge identities. Digital preaching is an important tool for counter-narratives since it has the potential for wide dissemination and engagement.

However, digital preaching also has structural limitations. Social media platforms are biased towards sensational and affective content, which may be detrimental to moderate and reflective communication (Lim, 2017; Fuchs, 2021). Peace-loving religious actors may be at risk of marginalization and online violence. Lederach (2005) highlighted the significance of relational resilience and ethical integrity for peacebuilders in hostile contexts.

Critical media studies can further shed light on these issues, particularly in terms of the political economy of digital media. Couldry and Mejias (2019) pointed out that the politics of data extraction and the economies of attention can dominate the discourse on the internet, and this can be very difficult to reconcile with deliberative or peace-oriented communication. Therefore, effective digital preaching requires not only effective communication strategies but also critical media literacy.

Digital Mediation, Access to Justice, and the Inclusion of Marginalized Groups

The final set of findings focuses on the role played by digital mediation in the facilitation of access to justice and the transformation of religious conflicts into relational justice. Online mediation programs that have been put in place by religious courts in regions such as Namlea and Nanga Bulik have helped women and the economically disadvantaged take part in the mediation process without having to physically move from one place to another (Religious Court of Namlea, 2021; Religious Court of Nanga Bulik, 2022). By going beyond the level of intellectual exchange, the process has helped create a shared sacred space that evokes a deeper feeling of belonging and empathy among

participants regardless of their physical location.

In Lederach model, justice and conflict transformation go hand in hand because unresolved injustice leads to further relational harm. In addition to providing conflict resolution, digital mediation can also change the relationship between legal systems and communities. Studies on Online Dispute Resolution (ODR) show that it can be used to improve the fairness and participation of conflict resolution processes, particularly if it is socially sensitive (Menkel-Meadow, 2015; Katsh & Rabinovich-Einy, 2017). Evolvi (2018) expanded this discourse through the concept of hypermediated religious space, contextualized as existing at the interstice of alternative and mainstream, private and public, imaginary and real venues.

The theory of grassroots peace building also supports this perspective as it asserts that for sustainable peace to exist, it must stem from the experiences of the people (Mac Ginty, 2014). With the help of digital mediation, this is possible, as it ensures that peacebuilding is grounded in the realities of the people, rather than being limited to the negotiations of the elite. Moreover, the digital environment also helps in the increased participation of people who may have been excluded in the past, such as women and the youth, who may have been unable to overcome the cultural challenges that may have been present in the physical mediation process. With the help of the digital environment, these people are able to deliver their perspectives, thus ensuring that the process of peacebuilding is more inclusive and representative of the entire community. This is already being achieved through the practical application of the digital mediation process, which helps in bridging the gap between the people in rural areas and the justice system.

Nonetheless, ethical and security issues remain important. Without data protection and confidentiality standards, digital mediation may lead to the erosion of trust. Lederach's model emphasizes that technological innovation must be accompanied by ethical reflection and relational accountability. Overall, digital mediation is an example of how technology can link justice and peace. Digital mediation can improve access, overcome structural inequalities, and promote the transformation of religious conflicts through relationship building.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that religious conflict in the digital era should be addressed and resolved beyond reactive regulation and communication approaches. By applying and developing the theory of Conflict Transformation proposed

by John Paul Lederach to the digital religious space, this study shows that digital environment is deeply rooted in the relational, structural, and narrative dimensions of contemporary religious life. The digital environment, therefore, is not only a place of risk but also a deep opportunity for transformative peacebuilding.

The results also reinforce that the sustainability of religious harmony in the digital space will depend on design, leadership, and participation. The transformation of conflict in the digital space requires patience and imagination because, while technology may speed up polarization, healing relationships is a slow and fragile process. However, precisely because of this, there is a unique potential in the digital space to cultivate moral imagination on a scale previously unimaginable. Digital preaching can be an effective peacebuilding practice with transformative potential, as long as it is rooted in genuine relationships and is long-term-oriented in its vision. As far as conflict transformation is concerned, the effectiveness of digital preaching should be judged not in terms of metrics of viral spread, but in terms of its potential to build long-lasting inter-religious relationships.

This study indeed has limitation. There is an urge for future researchers to include more comparative contexts beyond Indonesia, the longitudinal effects of digital rituals on inter-religious trust, and the potential impact of new technologies such as artificial intelligence and virtual reality on conflict transformation. By continuing to advance peace theory through digital religion research, scholars and practitioners can contribute to the creation of a more just, inclusive, and peaceful digital public life.

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