

# Co-imagining participatory design in religious and spiritual contexts

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## ABSTRACT

People with religious and/or spiritual interests have long been digitally connected and have engaged in joint prayer, worship, or meditation. However, the COVID pandemic has accelerated this trend as more religious and/or spiritual activities were technologically mediated. Many of these formats had to be implemented quickly, often with little participation from stakeholders. In this workshop, we aim to bring together scholars and practitioners from different backgrounds, such as religious studies, theology, HCI, and participatory design, to start a conversation about what collaborative technological design and research with religious and/or spiritual communities could look like in the future and what needs to be done to get to such futures. The outcomes of this workshop will be the formation of a transdisciplinary research and design community, the establishment of guiding principles and best practices that can inform research and design methodologies, and the dissemination of this knowledge in collaborative post-workshop publications.

## KEYWORDS

Collaboration, theology, HCI, digital religion, participation, trans-disciplinary

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Participatory technology development assumes that direct collaboration between those who develop technology and those who use it leads to technical solutions that meet the needs of the users. Participatory Design (PD) of the Scandinavian school explicitly advocates for the participation of marginalized populations and user groups in the technology development processes [6]. Being rooted in the “Cooperative System Design” of the 1970s, and finding expression in the UTOPIA project from the early 1980s, PD

approaches originally aimed at democratizing the workplace by involving employees in technology development [24]. However, given the range of sociotechnical developments in areas such as artificial intelligence, machine learning, autonomous and automated driving, digital transformation, and the Internet of Things, and the associated changes in infrastructures, power relations, and precarization, PD is tasked to re-imagine itself [2, 3].

This reimagining of PD mirrors a necessity for religious and/or spiritual individuals and communities to reimagine the very idea of participation in religious or spiritual life. While the birth and growth of the internet has long raised questions about what religiosity and spirituality online means (e.g., [16]) and how online spaces could be designed to support communities and practices (e.g., [12]), the COVID pandemic has accelerated the movement to online spaces, intensified the amount of time spent online for religious or spiritual purposes, and normalized the use of online spaces and other interactive technologies for religious or spiritual practices and pursuits [18], often through co-opting existing technologies (e.g., Zoom) and without significant input from the stakeholders. This acceleration, intensification, and normalization has amplified existing questions about the meaning of a religious “community” when one is able to participate with individuals scattered around the globe, about “authority” and one’s relation to religious or spiritual leaders as individuals are more able to access those leaders in comparatively direct ways, about the intermixing of different religious and spiritual traditions, and about the very meaning and effect of religious rituals now being livestreamed on platforms such as YouTube (e.g., the Avalokiteshvara Empowerment offered by the Dalai Lama [11], Protestant worship services across Germany [25]).

While livestreaming religious and spiritual rituals on the internet facilitates easy access, it can also have other, drastic effects, such as changing forms of collaboration, participation, or power structures: Who is in the focus of the camera’s view? Who can participate in what way? (e.g., [21, 25]). Such questions mirror those of participatory design asking “who is allowed to decide on novel technology developments and their specific design?” So far, HCI has only rarely documented and engaged with questions of participation when designing technologies for the religious and spiritual context, with some exceptions (e.g., [7, 10, 23]).

Apart from the importance of explicitly addressing the religious and spiritual context in PD, it is also important to recognize the influence of religious values in creating social practices and shaping culture [8]. Religious and spiritual values influence the way communities perceive the world and make decisions - also in relation to interactive technologies - and PD offers designers, researchers,

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and communities a way to ensure that technologies are reflecting those values and meeting the needs of those communities.

Yet another way of approaching the context of religion and spirituality in research and design is to engage with other disciplines that are related to the topic but have been traditionally left out of discussions in HCI and PD. Scholars contributing to the body of work on digital religion have long been engaged in descriptive analysis of how communities adapted and adopted digital spaces for religious and/or spiritual purposes. The evolution of this research is often described in terms of "waves" that are connected to respective perspectives, questions, and methodologies. For example, while online spaces were once studied as being separate and different from offline spaces, this perspective changed towards a more integrated one within the later waves of research in digital religion [9]. In recent years, scholars have suggested to move beyond current perspectives and methodologies in digital religion to research settings that make use of prototyping and testing novel technologies to better understand the effects these technologies could have [14]. This call seems like an invitation to the HCI community to offer itself more as a dialogue partner and to explore a possible common future.

The HCI and PD communities can also benefit from more directly engaging as a dialogue partner with theology. While the integration of technology into religious and spiritual life and practices certainly raises *technological* questions, it also raises significant *theological* questions that most HCI and PD researchers are poorly equipped to address or may even fail to recognize at all [14]. What is more, HCI and PD researchers and designers may fundamentally lack the proper vocabularies to even understand these communities and practices, something that can be overcome through the "translational" efforts of theologians. Finally, theologians can offer insight into the history of religious and spiritual communities, allowing HCI and PD researchers to better understand the communities with whom they will be working.

Overall, realizing a joint workshop with a multidisciplinary team and taking into focus religion and spirituality in PD projects is valuable at several levels. First, while some headway has been made in the HCI community in bringing religion and spirituality into conversation with HCI [5, 16, 17, 20], this workshop seeks to extend this work more explicitly into PD; to build bridges to existing researchers in religious studies and theology; and to create a space where scholars, religious leaders, and practitioners are able to share knowledge and collaboratively address the unique contexts, technological needs, and resulting questions of religious and/or spiritual communities. Second, engaging with religious or spiritual communities comes with unique challenges, such as specific power structures (e.g., individual beliefs, communities, leaders, confessions, etc.) or traditional modes of interaction (e.g., pre-defined structures of rituals such as worship services versus desired individualization, co-determination, and participation of believers [25]), that would greatly benefit from the transdisciplinary insights. Third, understanding religious values (e.g., the idea of the sacred, one's relationship with the divine, etc.) and their influence on technology-related decisions (e.g., technology use and non-use, the choice of specific technologies, the integration of technology into practices, etc.) is vitally important for PD to consider in work with religious

or spiritual communities [13] and might lead to increased consideration of the values of participants more generally in PD projects.

## 2 INTENDED OUTCOMES

Based on the considerations and needs outlined above, the workshop has three major intended outcomes.

### 2.1 Community building

At present, HCI researchers and designers, religious studies scholars, theologians, practitioners, and other interested parties are fragmented into diverse bodies that only rarely intersect. As such, one central goal of this workshop is to bring these actors together in a single space to elicit rich discussions about the goals and practices of HCI design and research (and more specifically PD) while building long-term, sustainable, and transdisciplinary relationships.

### 2.2 Principles and best practices

Given the unique dynamics of religious and spiritual communities and the intimate nature of religious and spiritual beliefs and practices, there is a crucial need for design and research practices in HCI (and more specifically in PD) that can navigate these complexities. However, at present, guidance on these design and research practices are lacking or, if they exist in other disciplines such as religious studies or theology, have not been fully recognized or incorporated in HCI and PD. As such, one intended outcome of this workshop is the collaborative establishment of guiding principles and best practices in cooperative technological design that can inform PD and other HCI research and design methodologies when engaging with religious and/or spiritual individuals and communities.

### 2.3 Publication and dissemination

Another intended outcome being sought in this workshop is the publication of a collaborative position paper on PD work with religious and/or spiritual communities, with the ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction (TOCHI), the ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW), or the Participatory Design Conference (PDC) among the HCI-focused journals or conferences that could be targeted. Given the transdisciplinary nature of the workshop, other additional publication opportunities will be sought in religious studies and theology journals and conferences and/or other popular religion- or spirituality-focused publications (e.g., Parabola [22]). Finally, broader dissemination of the guiding principles, best practices, and future actions will be sought through a to-be established website dedicated to the intersection of religion, spirituality, and HCI.

## 3 CALL FOR PARTICIPATION

For this workshop, we call on potential participants to submit short (1-2 page) "speculations" on the future of participatory design (PD) with religious or spiritual communities. Harkening back to the roots of PD [24], we invite potential participants to submit "UTOPIAN" (or at least hopeful) speculations on what cooperative technological design and research with religious or spiritual communities could (or should) look like in the near future (2030). These speculations may take the form of (including, but not limited to): imaginary paper abstracts, position papers, diary entries, field

notes, works of art, manifestos, and technologies and tools. We invite the participants to be creative in their contribution while maintaining a central focus on the key question of what PD with religious or spiritual communities could (or should) look like in the near future (2030). Among the considerations that may emerge in this speculative work about the future are:

- how HCI researchers and/or designers should engage in the religious/spiritual practices of the target community (e.g., attending worship, engaging in meditation, etc.),
- how the religious/spiritual community's needs and wants can be centered and what HCI researchers and/or designers can do to create sustainable technologies and long-term relationships with these communities,
- how the values of a spiritual/religious community can directly inform the research and design process, and what religious/spiritual values or practices may be more broadly incorporated in PD and other HCI work (e.g., decision-making among the Society of Friends [1], etc.),
- how actively practicing HCI researchers and/or designers should negotiate their status as members of a spiritual/religious community *and* as researchers and/or designers,
- how the tools and technologies that are used by and/or developed with a religious/spiritual community can best meet the needs of that community, and what those tools and technologies may look like,
- and how HCI researchers and/or designers should negotiate situations where the best option might be to *not* design or to continue research [4].

This call for speculations is open to HCI researchers, designers, and practitioners; theologians and religious studies scholars (especially with a focus on digital religion); religious or spiritual leaders; and members of religious or spiritual communities. We ask potential participants to please submit their speculations directly to [futureofparticipation@gmail.com](mailto:futureofparticipation@gmail.com) via email. The submitted, non-anonymized speculations will be used to generate discussion and ground the collaborative work during the workshop. Accepted speculations will be posted on the workshop website as open access before the workshop, and individuals will be given the option to anonymize their submissions or not share them publicly. Overall, we aim to recruit 25-30 participants.

### 3.1 Advertisement of the workshop

From organizing previous workshops, it has proven effective to distribute the call for papers via the social networks of the organizers, a separate website for the workshop, and via relevant mailing lists and call for papers boards. Given the transdisciplinary nature of the workshop, the organizers will also reach out beyond HCI and PD to religious studies and theology departments (e.g., the Department of the Study of Religion at the School of Culture and Society at Aarhus University, the Institute of Protestant Theology and Religious Education at Julius-Maximilians-Universität, etc.) as well as local religious communities (e.g., the Madni Masjid Aarhus, the Buddhistisk Center Aarhus, the Aarhus Domkirke, etc.). The organizers have also established a public website for the workshop (<https://sites.google.com/view/futureofparticipation>).

## 4 OVERVIEW OF ACTIVITIES

This one-day, in-person workshop will be held on October 9 during the NordiCHI 2022 pre-conference activities. A breakdown of the day's activities can be found in Table 1. We will begin the workshop with a brief welcome followed by an icebreaker activity that will allow participants to share their personal profiles, expertise, and expectations. This icebreaker activity will also ask workshop participants to split up into multidisciplinary groups and discuss their understandings for key terms (e.g., religion, spirituality, etc.). Next, the organizers will facilitate an opening panel dialogue between invited experts in HCI, PD, theology, and religion followed by a discussion and Q&A session with the workshop participants. Session 1 will then be dedicated to analyzing the submitted speculations and considering their implications for religious and spiritual communities, with participants engaging in affinity diagramming to identify common themes and desired futures. Session 2 will build on the affinity diagramming activity and be dedicated to identifying some guiding principles and best practices at the intersection of religion, spirituality, and PD that might help achieving the aimed-for futures. These insights will then serve as the starting point in Session 3 for drafting future agendas and action plans and discussing the publication and dissemination of the knowledge brought together in this workshop. We will conclude the workshop with a brief wrap-up and invite the workshop participants to join together in an optional dinner and visit to a local congregation.

Time	Activity
9:00 - 9:30	Welcome and icebreaker activities
9:30 - 10:30	Opening dialogue and discussion
10:30 - 11:00	Morning break
11:00 - 12:30	Session 1: Speculations
12:30 - 14:00	Lunch break
14:00 - 15:30	Session 2: Principles and best practices
15:30 - 16:00	Afternoon break
16:00 - 17:00	Session 3: Draft future agendas and action plans
17:00 - 17:30	Workshop wrap-up
17:30 - 20:00	Optional: Dinner and visit to local congregation

Table 1: The workshop structure.

## 5 ORGANIZERS

The workshop organizers come from diverse disciplinary backgrounds sought for in this workshop and have broad expertise in religious/spiritual contexts and the use of participatory methods:

**Robert B. Markum** is a PhD Candidate at the University of Michigan School of Information. His previous work in this area examines the effects of digital technology use on meditative and contemplative practices and transcendent experiences. More broadly, his work centers on understanding digital existence and human-computer interaction from existential, phenomenological, and ethical perspectives. Robert was a co-organizer of the CHI 2022 workshop entitled *Integrating Religion, Faith, and Spirituality in HCI* [20].

**Sara Wolf** is a PhD Candidate at the University of Würzburg, Institute Human-Computer Media. Her work lies at the intersection of faith, religion, and technology, and she currently works on understanding and designing for technology-mediated (religious) rituals. Sara Wolf is a founding member of the Participation Section in the German Informatics Society and as such intertwines the topics of participation and design for the religious context. She was a co-organizer of several workshops on participatory and socially responsible technology development (e.g., [15]).

**Simon Luthe** is a practical theologian and religious educator working on questions of pop culture and at the intersection of faith and technology. He is currently doing his PhD in a research project on blessing spaces in VR/AR at the University of Würzburg. Simon is also a vicar in the parish of Heide, Schleswig Holstein and involved in an international research project on churches online in times of corona (CONTOC) [19].

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