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RECEIVED 06 September 2024

ACCEPTED 23 December 2024

PUBLISHED 17 January 2025

## CITATION

Rodenhausen L (2025) Disentangling  
“polarization in religion”.  
*Front. Polit. Sci.* 6:1492172.  
doi: 10.3389/fpos.2024.1492172

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# Disentangling “polarization in religion”

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This paper examines phenomena at the intersection of polarization, religion, and social media. In particular, it disentangles and highlights the concept of “polarization in religion.” Polarization is a well-studied concept in political science and it has been considered in relation to religion before. However, these attempts are usually either interested in political polarization and the role religion plays in it, or conflate socio-political attitudes and religious issues. To fully understand polarization as a phenomenon of religion, it is important to disentangle it from politics and examine the beliefs and identities that are unique to religious traditions. The focus is on the progressive and conservative characteristics that are specific to religious groups. It is proposed to conceptualize and study polarization in religion as the construction of new religious identities. A collective identity approach can be used to examine how “progressive religious” and “conservative religious” emerge as distinct and coherent identities. Identity formation is facilitated in digital space, which is one of the reasons why polarization in religion is conceptualized as inherently involving social media. Social media in general can contribute to polarization, and contemporary religion in general cannot be understood without considering digital religion. Religion encounters a particularly conducive environment for transformation processes on social media platforms such as the transformation process of polarization with the creation of progressive and conservative religious identities. The theoretical framework presented in this paper provides a foundation for future empirical research on polarization in religion, as its broader examination is necessary to develop a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon and thus of contemporary religion in general.

## KEYWORDS

collective identity, digital religion, polarization, political polarization, religion, social media

## 1 Introduction

The world is a religiously complex place; not characterized by a single, coherent trajectory of development but by decline, growth, and increased religious pluralism simultaneously (Singleton, 2014, xii). I came across an interesting development and form of religious pluralism on the social media platform Reddit. Reddit is a social media platform that enables the creation of subreddits, so-called “communities,” which are forums dedicated to a particular area of interest. The communities I have encountered are formed around a common interest as Christians. However, the kind of Christianity they are interested in is very different. The two subreddits under examination are r/OpenChristian<sup>1</sup> and r/TrueChristian.<sup>2</sup> The subreddit r/OpenChristian is a self-proclaimed community for progressive Christianity. They state that

1 Subreddit names are marked with the prefix “r/.”

2 <https://www.reddit.com/r/OpenChristian/>; <https://www.reddit.com/r/TrueChristian/>.

“as a progressive Christian sub, we are explicitly followers of Christ, as well as LGBTQ+ affirming and egalitarian.” Comments that condemn queer relationships or identities as sinful will be removed by moderators. In contrast, r/TrueChristian can be characterized as a conservative Christian community. For instance, it is evident that users on this platform regard same-sex relationships as sinful, and the subreddit’s rules prohibit the promotion of liberal theology.

Not only does this prompt the question of what characterizes those two different Christian groups but also illuminates the phenomenon of Christians organizing themselves into such opposing sides. It underscores the specific distinction within Christianity that is constituted by this particular division. It is noteworthy that both communities prohibit certain theological positions that are, however, not related to their denominational differences. Insults directed toward any Christian denomination are not permitted in either community.<sup>3</sup> This specific cleavage among Christians can be described as a case of “polarization in religion.”

Attempting to ground the analysis of this empirical case within a systematic theoretical foundation for this phenomenon proved challenging, however. Polarization is a strong buzzword used in scholarly, media, and everyday discourse alike; about religion but also society in general. In many cases social media is explicitly or implicitly mentioned in this context, often blamed for it. Nevertheless, to the best of my knowledge, a comprehensive examination of the specific intersection between polarization, religion, and social media does not yet exist.

“Polarization” is a concept mostly studied in political science. Studies that examine the intersection of polarization and religion tend to lack a disentanglement of politics and religion. It is important to distinguish between the perspectives of “religion in polarization” and “polarization in religion.” In political science and other fields that study political polarization, religion may be considered a contributing factor. “Religion in polarization” might look at how religious attitudes and actors influence political polarization and could also assume that political polarization changes them. The latter direction would also contribute to the understanding of transformation processes in the religious landscape.

However, if one is interested in polarization as a phenomenon of religious change, it is important to examine specifically religious polarized attitudes and identities. Although progressive and conservative religious people generally hold similar views to their respective political or social group, they have unique religious issues over which they disagree, such as the authority of scripture or the question of salvation. This is what I call “polarization in religion.”

A contemporary perspective must also take into account social media in relation to polarization and to religion, and in the interplay between the two. Social media is the space where polarization can be observed, but it can also be a contributing factor, with different explanations being discussed. Contemporary religion cannot be understood without the perspective of digital religion. Social media

provide a conducive environment for religious change as religious people encounter opportunities to break away from traditional institutions. It is the space in which contemporary religion in its transformed forms unfolds and continues to transform.

For the phenomenon of polarization in religion, I propose that new religious identities are being created, aided by social media. The progressive and conservative sides of a religious tradition could be understood as distinct and cohesive collective identities. The paper will introduce the concept of collective identity and explain how and why this perspective could be taken in research on polarization in religion. Before that, the concept of polarization, the disentanglement of the intersection between polarization and religion, and the role of social media will be discussed in detail.

## 2 What is polarization?

Whenever I have presented my empirical case and this topic, colleagues have agreed that polarization seems to be something that concerns religious communities as well, and have shared similar observations. However, polarization is not an established concept and a well-defined term in the study of religion. This is not surprising because, first, in everyday discourse and even in many academic debates, it is used imprecisely and without clear definitions. Second, the phenomenon in question, where we have a progressive and a conservative side, is more specifically called “political polarization” and is therefore most often studied within the discipline of political science, often with an emphasis on political parties.

A number of authors have attempted to organize the various scholarly discourses on polarization, noting a lack of clarity and consistent definitions within these debates. Without a common understanding of the concept, comparable research is not possible. Scholars offer slightly different systematizations of distinct phenomena that can be assigned to polarization (see for example [Bramson et al., 2017](#); [Lelkes, 2016](#); [Roose and Steinhilper, 2022](#)). It is essential to be aware of some general, common distinctions in polarization literature, which should also be considered in research on this intersection with religion and social media.

A substantial body of research has been conducted on the phenomenon of political polarization within the context of US politics, which is characterized by a two-party system. In the literature on political polarization, there is often an implication that the polarization is between progressive or liberal and conservative attitudes and groups. The main processes of the theories are still useful for understanding contemporary society in general, but more research on polarization in general and polarization in religion in non-US cases is needed to really be able to formulate a general theory.

It is not readily apparent whether the term “polarization” refers to a state or a process. When researching polarization it should be explained if polarization is understood and analyzed as a static property or as a trend. On another level, a distinction can be made between elite and mass polarization. There may be differences between the levels of polarization exhibited by political elites, like official party positions and representatives, and those observed in the general public.

In addition to the aforementioned distinction between these two levels, it is crucial to differentiate between two phenomena that can both be conceptualized as polarization and are interconnected but are very different forms. On the one hand, there is ideological polarization,

<sup>3</sup> r/OpenChristian see Rule 3: <https://web.archive.org/web/20240820135819/https://www.reddit.com/r/OpenChristian/?rdt=52253;r/TrueChristian>  
moderator post: [https://web.archive.org/web/20240820141941/https://www.reddit.com/r/TrueChristian/comments/15lc6z9/no\\_more\\_protestant\\_catholic\\_and\\_eastern\\_orthodox/?rdt=42593](https://web.archive.org/web/20240820141941/https://www.reddit.com/r/TrueChristian/comments/15lc6z9/no_more_protestant_catholic_and_eastern_orthodox/?rdt=42593).

which is also referred to as issue or cognitive polarization. This is what is often meant by polarization and describes the divergence of opinions or attitudes. It can be related to specific topics or general ideologies. Research on ideological polarization would be interested in the distribution of opinions on certain issues – which is why I prefer the term “issue polarization.” Affective polarization, also called social polarization, is a different phenomenon. It differs from issue polarization in that it focuses on the relationships between actors rather than on different opinions on policies. The phenomenon describes positive feelings toward the political in-groups and negative feelings toward the out-group (Bramson et al., 2017; Lelkes, 2016; Roose and Steinhilper, 2022).

There is a general perception that contemporary society is deeply polarized. A quick Google search on news about political polarization at the time of writing this paper (August 2024) reveals headlines about “a Polarized Brazil” (Bardini, 2024), South Korea “grappling with political polarization” (Casanova, 2024), uncertainty ahead of Poland’s presidential election due to political polarization (Stratfor, 2024), and “US political violence” in the “escalation of political polarization” (Yong, 2024). However, political scientists debate whether there is actual evidence for the existence of mass polarization (in the US). A camp around Alan I. Abramowitz sees clear proof for ideological polarization (see for example Abramowitz and Saunders, 2008) while an opposing side around Morris P. Fiorina calls their arguments a misleading exaggeration and negates polarization in the American public (see for example Fiorina et al., 2008).

In the absence of a clear consensus on ideological polarization, others have shifted their focus to affective polarization which they claim is better suited to explain contemporary society. Iyengar et al. have adopted a social identity perspective on polarization and conducted a study with several measures in which all indicators show the result that “American partisans are highly polarized in their feelings about each other” (Iyengar et al., 2012, 421). A possible cause for this increasing affective polarization is negativity in advertising campaigns and general exposure to political campaigns (Iyengar et al., 2012, 427).

Liliana Mason also emphasized that partisan polarization should not and cannot be understood in terms of policy differences. Rather, it is explained by social psychological processes. Mason identifies social sorting as the main process driving (social) polarization. Social sorting refers to the alignment of social identities into well-sorted mega-identities. From Mason’s perspective, it “involves an increasing social homogeneity within each party, such that religious, racial, and ideological divides tend to line up along partisan lines” (Mason, 2018, 18). However, the phenomenon extends beyond these identities. Republicans and Democrats prefer different TV shows, restaurants, cars, and more (Mason, 2018, 43–44). The problem with this development is that group identity leads to in-group bias and anger toward out-groups. This effect increases when multiple groups are aligned. Polarization is driven by the disappearance of people with cross-cutting identities because those are the ones who respond to out-groups with less anger (Mason, 2018, 99).

Scholars largely agree on the existence of affective polarization and social sorting (in the US public). Castle and Stepp (2021) introduce a new perspective to the ongoing debate on issue polarization by examining it in a way that draws on the logic of affective polarization. Measured in this way, “the data suggest that while most Americans hold moderate views on the issues, substantial

portions of the population do express polarized views, particularly on cultural issues” (Castle and Stepp, 2021, 1,329). They analyzed the role of social identities in issue polarization, hypothesizing and demonstrating that social identities can lead to issue polarization. This identity-based theory of issue polarization provides insight into the relationship between issue and affective polarization, as both can be linked to social identities. Mason deliberately does not address issue polarization, but she does propose an account of how opinions on issues can give rise to (affective) polarization. A shared opinion can evolve into a perceived group membership at which point it works just like any other social identity (Mason, 2018, 114). She bases this claim on a social psychology paper in which the authors argue that a lot of collective action is not rooted in identities, which are social categories externally assigned to individuals, but rather emerge from so-called opinion-based groups.

“Merely holding the same opinion as others is not sufficient for such a group to be said to exist, rather the shared opinion needs to become part of that social identity. In this way, people can come to perceive and define themselves in terms of their opinion group membership in the same way as they would with any other psychologically meaningful social category or group” (McGarty et al., 2009, 846).

Mason gave the example of pro-life and pro-choice groups. Another example can be found in the area of measures implemented in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Eilders et al. (2022, 358) mention the emergence of affective polarization along the opinions on measures during the pandemic, which was made possible by the fact that the respective groups perceived themselves as belonging to a group.

### 3 “Religion in polarization” is not “polarization in religion”!

Religion has not played a role in the presented theories yet. Obviously, has religion not played a role in the presented theories yet. The literature on polarization comes mostly from the perspective of political attitudes and groups, but more broadly it describes a general divergence of opinions and social groups, including religious ones. The theoretical background on political polarization is highly relevant to the present issue, but it needs to be discussed how it relates to the context of religious beliefs and actors. I am going to present a review of the literature that has dealt with the issue of polarization and religion. As will be shown, this work lacks a disentanglement of politics and religion and does not differentiate polarization as a phenomenon specific to religion, as would be necessary in the study of religion.

Just like the political polarization research, the cases that include religion are also mostly limited to the USA and to the Christian tradition. It would be desirable to close this gap in diversity. As a starting point for outlining the phenomenon of polarization in religion, the following sources will have to suffice for now.

The political science literature on polarization cited earlier includes the relationship to religion in some places. As mentioned above, social sorting theory can include religious identity as one of the social identities that are part of the alignment. Castle and Stepp in

their identity-based theory of issue polarization include religious identity as one of the social identities that fuel issue polarization. They research how religious tradition, by which they mean several Christian traditions and the “unaffiliated,” and religious commitment structure polarized issue positions. Another example of this perspective is Perry’s (2022) article in which he explains the need to consider religion in polarization research. He emphasizes the “tight connection between religious factors and various indicators of partisanship, political ideology, or affective polarization” (Perry, 2022, 92).

All of these examples are interested in the role of religion in the phenomenon of political polarization. They consider religion to be one of the factors that can influence, shape, or increase polarization but their main focus is the polarization itself. The authors of the works cited in the previous section do hint at religion being more complex and nuanced and at times portray it as more than a static constant that exists independently of polarization. They mention the possibility that polarization or sorting influences religious identity rather than religion contributing to polarization. For example, Perry’s article (2022, 92) briefly refers to a study that found that Evangelicals exhibit different religious behavior, such as less frequent church attendance, when they identify as Democrats (Rhodes, 2011). Thus, there is also some indication that political polarization or sorting may affect religious identities. This two way relationship is supported by Campbell et al. (2018) who found that religious and secular identities are a cause as well as a consequence of political orientations.

However, all of these political science perspectives start from the phenomenon of political polarization and still think of changes in religious identities and changes in this context as belonging to religious, secular, or various static denominational groups. The possibility that religious identities themselves are polarized is touched upon, but not further elaborated. Perry mentions religious liberals several times but does not characterize this group further. Similarly, Mason mentions specifically conservative Christianity associated with the Republican Party. One of the sorting developments she elaborates on is the disappearance of the Protestant-Catholic divide between the Republican and Democratic parties. Conservatives among Catholics moved toward the Republican Party, while liberal Protestants became Democrats (Mason, 2018, 33–37). Since the main focus of the book is on partisan polarization, these intra-denominational developments are not explored further. Overall, Mason understands religious identities as fixed, objective categories: “when I discuss partisan, religious, or racial identities, the meaning of each will be clear. These are all simple identifications with a group” (Mason, 2018, 22).

This perspective, which I call “religion in polarization” and which takes political polarization as its central object of study, is not helpful in understanding transformation processes in religion. I argue that “polarization in religion” needs to be differentiated and studied as a development in contemporary religion. This is not to say that it is a completely different phenomenon. It may involve the same people, attitudes, and social developments but from a different perspective.

Scholars of contemporary religion are interested in the forms religion takes in modern societies. They try to capture and analyze trends in what is happening to the religious landscape. Theorization and empirical research lead to and are led by master narratives, paradigms, process concepts, etc. The sociology of religion, where the interest in these general trends in the development of religion in modernity is mostly situated, has roughly followed a trajectory regarding religion “from taken-for-granted significance, through

assumed decline, to a reestablished place in the canon” (Davie, 2003, 61). The founding fathers of sociology included religion as an obvious variable for understanding human societies. However, the modern discipline, itself a product of the Enlightenment, has also shown a general bias toward the incompatibility of rationality and religion (Dillon, 2003, 6). Outside of academia, this bias still characterizes the status of religion in polarization. The assumption that religion is incompatible with modernity and that progress must be based on rationality and science, while religious beliefs are backward shapes the alignment of secular and progressive on the one hand, and religious and conservative on the other. While secularization theory—the assumption that modernity necessarily leads to the decline of religion—was the master narrative in the sociology of religion for decades, it has been rejected by more and more scholars since the 1990s, until “[c]riticism of secularization theory has often itself become a master narrative” (Pollack and Rosta, 2017, 2). Peter L. Berger, once a proponent of secularization theory, rejected it later in his life, arguing instead for a more nuanced theory of pluralism. Other than originally predicted, secular discourse has not replaced religious discourse in modernity. Instead, in modern societies, alongside the pluralism of different religious communities, there is a pluralism of secular discourse and different religious discourses (Berger, 2014).

Not everyone supports pluralism as a single overarching, generalizing explanation for all religious developments in global society, but there is a pluralism of theories about developments in contemporary religion. In a summary of the various trends in the global religious landscape, Abby Day presents key theories of religious change in three categories. “Retreat” describes variants of secularization theses that are still meaningful in capturing processes of religious change in the world. “Reinvention” means a shift in the focus of the study of religion, especially a shift toward lived religion, as also mentioned in this paper. There are also a number of New Religious Movements that characterize the modern religious landscape. Finally, “resurgence” describes all the theories about religion possibly being “back” (assuming it was “gone”) but in new and different forms (Day, 2020). The German *Handbuch Religionssoziologie* [Handbook sociology of religion] presents a number of process concepts that are often applied to capture religious change. These are: secularization, individualization, privatization, subjectivization, pluralization, globalization, dispersion, transformation, and sacralization (Pollack et al., 2018). “While grand theories of change appear to have had their heyday, more modest, context-specific accounts of religious change have won support” (Singleton, 2014, 49).

All of the narratives and concepts presented attempt to theorize empirical observations of religious people, beliefs, and practices in order to identify and explain abstract regularities. The point of presenting all of this is to provide the context in which the concept of polarization in religion should be situated. I propose to think about and study polarization as one of these “context-specific accounts of religious change” in contemporary society. Polarization is, of course, related to and probably grows out of other processes such as individualization, pluralization, differentiation, and so on. This is not limited to the realm of religion. Mason (2018, 41–42) also locates the roots of social sorting in developments in modern society like (religious) individualization. However, just like with political polarization, polarization in religion needs to be conceptualized and researched as a concrete phenomenon in order to understand contemporary religion.

The examination of this phenomenon is not entirely new, but it has not necessarily been done under this term and as a specific process concept of religious development. There are some older observations to which current research on polarization in religion can relate.

James Davison Hunter's *Culture Wars* (1991), which cannot be omitted in the context of this paper's topics, deals simultaneously with both perspectives on polarization and religion. Ultimately, the topic is what might be called the general polarization in the US. But this is explained by changes in the religious landscape. "The truth of it is that the contemporary culture war evolved out of century-old religious tensions – through the expansion and the realignment of American religious pluralism" (Hunter, 1991, 67). Previous religious – and also social and political – categories that characterized boundaries and conflicts were denominational, most importantly Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism. By the early 1990s, however, these groups were composed of remarkably similar people who did not consider their denominational affiliations to be their most important differences. Instead, the same polarity between orthodox and progressive believers can be found within each religious tradition.

So far, this analysis resembles Robert Wuthnow's account of American religious history, which he had published shortly before. He also explained how social, political, educational, economic, etc., differences between faith groups equaled out and how American religion restructured into a single cleavage between "religious conservatives" and "religious liberals" (Wuthnow, 1988). Hunter's book is explicitly intended as an extension of this argument (Hunter, 1991, 329). The "culture war" he describes goes beyond a religious divide. It is a conflict that is rooted in a disagreement over moral authority. For those that are termed "orthodox," "moral authority arises from a common commitment to transcendence, by which I mean a dynamic reality that is independent of, prior to, and more powerful than human experience" (Hunter, 1991, 120). On the progressive side "moral authority is based, at least in part, in the resymbolization of historic faiths and philosophical traditions" (Hunter, 1991, 122). From this perspective, moral truth is conditional and relative. Both versions can be held by religious and secular people alike. Religious people with a progressive understanding of moral authority do not believe in an objective and final revelation from God. For seculars with the orthodox vision of moral authority, their transcendent foundation can be a form of humanism in which natural law or the social order holds non-negotiable truth (Hunter, 1991, 120–24).

Even though orthodox and progressive positions on moral authority are said to exist across different religious traditions and secular groups, the impression remains that progressive is a more secular position, and even more so that orthodox is understood as the religious side. The blurb on Hunter's book reads "A riveting account of how Christian fundamentalists, Orthodox Jews, and conservative Catholics have joined forces in a battle against their progressive counterparts for control of American secular culture." And Perry summarized in his paper that "(Hunter 1991, 1994) articulated a 'culture war' thesis pitting religiously orthodox conservatives who affirm external and transcendent moral authority against cultural progressives who embrace a more relativistic approach to authority and include religious liberals and seculars" (Perry, 2022, 90). Orthodox seculars do not seem to play a significant role in Hunter's analysis of the American population. Surveys showed him that the majority of secularists are progressive (Hunter, 1991, 45). The number of secular

Americans was in general not that large, around 10% when he formulated his theory (Hunter, 1991, 76). A theory that states that the current polarization of American society grew out of polarization in religion. The culture war is explained as an extension of disputes over theological modernism.

In this perspective, it is not so different from Wuthnow's analysis of American religion. Hunter says of the changes in religious history that "conflict in each tradition has extended beyond the realm of theology and ecclesiastical politics to embrace many of the most fundamental issues and institutions of public culture: law, government, education, science, family, and sexuality" (Hunter, 1991, 95). When Wuthnow traces the deep divisions between religious conservatives and religious liberals, the central issues around which they have developed are civil rights, the Vietnam War, abortion, homosexuality, and feminism. The divisive issues are "at the center of the political stage" (Wuthnow, 1988, 222).

Hunter describes an extension of polarization in religion into a more general polarization, and Wuthnow describes the polarization in religion as religious groups being divided over non-specifically religious issues. Without the inclusion of religious people and beliefs, they cannot imagine a conservative-progressive polarization and divided opinions on these issues. And both explain that these "non-religious" issues characterize the current polarization in religion, while theological, ecclesial, and liturgical issues are no longer the only and most important differences. These two books have been presented as examples that deal with polarization in religion, but do not look at it the same way and do not describe exactly the same phenomenon that is outlined in this paper. With their non-disentangled perspective on polarization and religion, issues that are not only characteristic of religious groups are presented as central to a religious phenomenon, while theological issues aren't seen as playing a pivotal role in the conflict. The socio-political issues they mention are obviously divisive in contemporary religion, but they do not try to consider whether there are issues and arguments that are specifically religious. To look at the development in this way makes it difficult to observe polarization in religion as a specific phenomenon of contemporary religion. Scholars of religion should take into account the motivations and justifications for polarization that are specifically available to religious people.

The missing disentanglement of a general polarization and polarization in religion might be rooted in the authors' specific subject of the US American society in the late 1980s. It is also common in the cited political science literature to equate religious and conservative on the one hand and secular and liberal or progressive on the other hand. The religious-secular divide between the Republican and Democratic parties has been studied for some time (e.g., Claassen, 2015; Layman, 2001). However, this generalizing perspective can conceal more intricate developments within the religious landscape. It also makes this correlation seem like an inevitable causal relationship.

A comparison with Germany, which has a religious landscape that is different in many respects, shows the possibility of an alternative situation that underlines the need not to conflate polarization in religion with general observations about society.

A representative study of the German population conducted in 2022 found that people with different levels of religiosity – from religious and active church members to secular – did not differ significantly in their political orientation (EKD, 2024). Two examples: 85% of the German population are in favor of legal same-sex marriage.

Among Protestant and Catholic church members the results are 86 and 84%, respectively, (Wunder et al., 2023, Appendix 2: 3). On the issue of immigration, religious people are more often in favor of taking in more refugees than the more secular parts of the population (Wunder et al., 2023, 54; Appendix 2: 4). That relationship is also apparent when comparing former West and East Germany. The eastern population is a lot more secular (73% vs. 53%) (EKD, 2024) and has a higher proportion of people with a right-wing authoritarian orientation (31% vs. 24%) (EKD, 2024).

A conservative socio-political attitude is not automatically a religious position and vice versa. The conflict over LGBTQ+ themes is a good example to illustrate this disentanglement, as it is the most central issue that has divided Christians in recent decades. But not only Christians, as the study above shows. It is not a conflict that is unique to religious people. Hunter reported on a culture war between religious conservatives and (mostly) secular progressives, but in Europe, which is generally more secular, conservative attitudes are not necessarily related to religious identities. Wuthnow identified political themes as the divisive issues that separate Christians. But if the same divergent attitudes, for example on homosexuality, also exist among seculars, they are not well suited for distinguishing polarization in religion from polarization in general. In the case of religious traditions, we can observe specific issues and arguments that are unique to them. I would like to mention a study that reports on the specifically Christian arguments in this conflict.

Christopher Craig Brittain (2015) conducted a study of the Pittsburgh diocese of the Episcopal Church USA, which split over controversies between liberals and conservatives. The issue that finally caused conservatives to leave the Episcopal Church was the inclusion and acceptance of queer people in the church. However, one of the departing reverends told Brittain: “the issue is not sex. The issue is the Bible.” Accepting something that “the Bible quite clearly forbids and prohibits” would make the authority of the Bible secondary. He insists on the normativity of the Bible that progressives would neglect (Brittain, 2015, 61–62).

What is specific to the polarization in Christianity is not different attitudes toward homosexuality, which also exist outside of Christianity. It's different beliefs about the Bible, whether it can be studied from a historical-critical perspective or whether it must be divine, inerrant truth. Furthermore, while conservatives emphasize personal salvation, progressives focus on improving society and reforming of social institutions as their duty as Christians (Utter and True, 2004, xi). This is another aspect of the oppositional views on the issue of homosexuality.

These divergent beliefs and emphases that characterize today's polarization have a longer history in Christianity. As Hunter and Wuthnow have also mentioned, polarization in (American) religion has continuities to inner-Christian conflict that can be traced back to the 19th century. However, they also emphasize the discontinuities, since they see the later split as being over a different set of issues. I do not want to deny the discontinuities, but in order not to discredit the theological continuities that still characterize polarization in Christianity today, a brief sketch of the relevant history and issues will be given.

Preceded by Enlightenment influences, biblical criticism was established in Germany in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. A scholarship emerged in which the Bible was studied with historical-critical methods like any other book written by humans. This movement also provoked

counter-reactions that sought to counteract biblical criticism and instead restore the traditional Christian faith with the Bible as the inerrant Word of God. In Protestantism, conservative and liberal theology developed in demarcation against each other in the 19th century. There was also progressive scholarship in Catholicism, but the Vatican officially rejected biblical criticism until 1943 (Beutel, 2012; Hunter, 1991, 80–83; Rogerson, 1990).

These trends spread to other countries and also structured the religious landscape of the United States. In 1910, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America specified a list of doctrines considered essential to the Christian faith. The items, informally called “the five fundamentals,” are: biblical inerrancy, Christ's virgin birth, Christ's substitutionary atonement, Christ's bodily resurrection and ascension, and Christ's performance of miracles. These were intended as a defense against the higher criticism of liberal Christianity, those who were called “modernists” (Gundlach, 2019, 98). This debate was not limited to the Presbyterian Church. Conservative Christian authors from various Protestant denominations were involved in the essay series “The Fundamentals,” which built a united opposition to modernism. It became the foundation of what was came to be called the “fundamentalists” (Marsden, 1982, 119). This “fundamentalist-modernist controversy” went on from the 1920s to the 1930s and peaked in the 1920s with the Scopes “Monkey” trial of 1925 as its center and symbol (Gundlach, 2019, 97).

As emphasized earlier, the legacy of this controversy can still be seen in the contemporary polarization in Christianity. It started with the fundamentalist-modernist controversy that “[d]enominational labels became increasingly less definite markers of particular beliefs. In doctrinal terms, liberal Presbyterian often shared more with liberal Methodists, for example, than either did with fundamentalists within their denomination” (Gundlach, 2019, 111). Conservatives or fundamentalists typically held the beliefs stated in the “five fundamentals.” Progressives or liberals often doubted these (Utter and True, 2004, xi).

I propose a more nuanced concept and analysis of polarization in religion that takes seriously that inner-religious conflicts are still based on theological differences that are actively used in arguments. It should recognize that a conservative-progressive polarization can also be observed among non-religious people and without regard to religious beliefs. As noted above, more modest context-specific theories have proven themselves in the social scientific study of contemporary religion.

## 4 Does social media influence polarization?

So far, this has been discussed without the factor of social media playing into it. Implicitly and explicitly, however, social media are discussed as part of both political polarization and polarization in religion. In this section, the specific ways in which social media are involved in these contemporary processes will be explored.

A significant challenge in conducting social media research is that studies often claim to examine a specific phenomenon, yet they may not be directly comparable due to inherent differences in the platforms. Furthermore, the rapid evolution of the social media landscape, such as the emergence or decline of platforms, can render

previous findings increasingly irrelevant over time. Platforms have different characteristics and features, such as being text, image or video based, or allowing equal contributions as in forums, or having an influencer style with a sender and a responding audience.

Nevertheless, there must be some shared characteristics, as they are perceived to be part of the same phenomenon. Social media are defined as interactive technologies that facilitate the sharing of content and the formation of networks. It should be noted that the ability to share information, communicate, and establish social networks was not exclusive to the advent of social media. The term is used to refer to internet-based applications, especially those in the Web 2.0 category. It describes the era of the internet in which people are not only consumers but also producers of content. Social media requires the engagement of its users. For this, individuals and groups create profiles, as the unique identifying information is necessary for social network connections between accounts (Obar and Wildman, 2015). Frequently, the term “digital media” is employed in contexts referring to social media. Social media can be defined as a subset of digital media, yet it is important to recognize that digital media encompasses a far broader range of forms. Digital media is any communication of digitized information including, for example, databases and e-books. As the social aspects are necessary for the following thoughts, I will consistently use the term “social media” throughout for clarity.

Religion on and through social media is an area that has received attention from scholars for quite some time. Research on the intersection of new media technologies and religion is by now an established field of study under the label “digital religion” (Tsuriya and Campbell, 2021). However, it is not just the place to study those religious actors and practices that happen to use social media.

“[D]igital religion is a unique and distinct approach to the study of religion in digitally created and informed cultures. It recognizes religion as a whole is increasingly informed by the social structures and cultural practices of living life in a technologically infused and information-driven society, where religion is lived out in online and offline contexts simultaneously” (Campbell and Bellar, 2022, 9).

Whatever happens online has a context and consequences offline, and religion in “technology infused and information-driven society” can never exist untouched by the digital. Digital religion research is the study of contemporary religion. The characteristics observed in contemporary religion are represented in digital religion. Echchaibi and Hoover (2023, 6) go so far as to suggest that “the religious’ and ‘the digital’ [...] have co-evolved temporally. [...] Across the same recent historical period that digital technologies and practices have remade private and public communication, religion has arisen as a more and more common—and largely re-imagined—feature of private and public life”. The “return” of religion and the modern transformation processes instead of the expected secularization were then only possible because of digital developments. It would be tedious and pointless to predict what religion would look like without the possibilities of the new media. “Co-evolved” is probably the best description. New technologies may facilitate processes such as pluralization and individualization in society and religion, but at the same time, new technologies are built in the context of contemporary, i.e., individualistic, pluralistic, etc., cultures. Social media and digital religion cannot exist independently of the

characteristics of the society in which they emerge, while simultaneously shaping said characteristics so that contemporary society and religion cannot be understood independently of digital media.

If contemporary religion is digital religion, the latter also shows a variety of characteristics and trends. We can observe traditional religions and traditional religious authorities establishing a presence online and maintaining hierarchies and belief systems. They may use established one-sided forms of religious communication. However, because of the features of social media, we can also observe dynamic and interactive forms of communication. Religious practices and communities outside of official institutions and authorities can thrive (Helland, 2016, 9–10).

Since digital technologies and social media are fully embedded in many people’s everyday lives, “[d]igital religion is often described as a form of ‘lived religion,’ which focuses attention on how people integrate religious beliefs and practices into their lives and talk about them” (Campbell and Bellar, 2022, 10). “Research on ‘lived religion’ focuses on the everyday practices of ordinary people, in contrast to the study of official texts, organizations, and experts” (Ammerman, 2015, 1). The communities under investigation are not affiliated with any official religious organization. The participating users are lay people or, in the case of religious experts such as pastors, they are not considered to represent any institution and thus have no different status among the users. Social media allows for mass participation making it an obvious space where mass polarization (in religion) takes place. Digital technologies make lived religion more visible—and easily accessible to researchers. “By studying how people are engaging digital religion with their phones, their computers, and their tablets, scholars may now have the greatest opportunity to explore everyday lived religion on a massive scale” (Helland, 2016, 193).

Since social media are considered a crucial factor in this specific phenomenon of polarization in religion, the specific relationship between the general phenomenon of polarization and social media also needs to be worked out. There are several perspectives that can be taken for this intersection.

The perspective of polarization *in* (social) media should be differentiated from an assumption of polarization *through* (social) media (Eilders et al., 2022, 353). First of all, social media could be seen simply as a space where polarization can be well observed. This perspective does not assume any causality and explains the perception that social media has something to do with polarization simply by the visibility that social media features give to representatives of different groups and conflicts. Because it is easier for everyone to participate in discourses, including those with more extreme or minority opinions, polarization can be well observed online (Eilders et al., 2022, 352). This perspective already gives a reason why social media data should be used to study polarization. It is a valuable source where this phenomenon can be observed very well. Polarized opinions and groups may be particularly present online not only because anyone can participate, but also because of other aspects that lend themselves to conflict. Psychological research describes the online disinhibition effect, specifically toxic online disinhibition, in which individuals engage in more hostile and aggressive behavior in online communication due to the anonymity, invisibility, lack of immediate consequences, and absence of nonverbal cues that reduce accountability and empathy (Lapidot-Lefler and Barak, 2012; Suler, 2004). This does not necessarily imply causality. It could just mean

that the part of human communication that takes place online is more polarized than the average society.

It could also be the case that the features and possibilities of social media influence opinions and groups in ways that increase polarization. “Scholarship seeking to explain the rising polarization has centrally implicated the digitalization of media and communication systems” (Törnberg, 2022, 1). Brittain also included “the New Media” in the study on the liberal-conservative church split in the Episcopal Church. He mentions the more polemical atmosphere of the debate due to the compression of time and space online and the way social media supposedly weakened the boundary between truth and falsehood (Brittain, 2015, 172).

“Selective exposure” is a dominant hypothesis about a causal mechanism of how social media increase polarization. The assumption is that on social media, people can be isolated from divergent opinions and only receive information that supports their own positions, which may diverge to be even more extreme (Törnberg, 2022, 1). The “echo chamber” and “filter bubble” hypotheses have become popular in this field, also outside of academic language. The echo chamber concept was introduced by Cass Sunstein. It posits that social media and their algorithms, particularly the personalization of content to only suit the user’s interests and preferences, would lead to a fragmentation of society. The filter bubble concept, first formulated by Eli Pariser, similarly suggests that algorithmically curated platforms prevent people from receiving the same information (Bruns, 2021, 34–35).

A systematic review of research on the role of (social) media in political polarization found that there is “consistent evidence that exposure to pro-attitudinal news content is a driving force in political polarization” (Kubin and Von Sikorski, 2021, 195). However, many aspects of the relationship remain unclear, with mixed and contradictory results. Moreover, just as it was mentioned in the respective section, political polarization is often not well defined and studies research different phenomena vaguely under the same concept. The authors also found that a large number of studies use Twitter data and focus on the issue of climate change, so it remains unclear whether they describe a more general trend. Finally, it is important to note that the vast majority of studies on the relationship between polarization and the media examine the US. There are also a significant number from South Korea and several European countries, but the unbalanced focus on Western societies is apparent. It remains to be seen whether consistent findings from the American context can be generalized to other societies (Kubin and Von Sikorski, 2021). Nevertheless, this systematic review confirms a link between social media and polarization, especially due to selective exposure to pro-attitudinal content.

However, Axel Bruns, who conducted another review of empirical studies, specifically those that attempt to find echo chambers and filter bubbles, describes a clear lack of empirical evidence. He argues that these theories “constitute an unfounded moral panic that presents a convenient technological scapegoat (search and social platforms and their affordances and algorithms) for a much more critical problem: growing social and political polarization. But this is a problem that has fundamentally social and societal causes, and therefore cannot be solved by technological means alone” (Bruns, 2021, 33). It is worth mentioning that Kubin and von Sikorski’s (2021, 194) review, in coming to the conclusion that pro-attitudinal content increases polarization, did not focus on the selection of content through algorithms which has rarely been studied.

Petter Törnberg (2022) agrees with the rejection of the selective exposure hypothesis, but still understands social media as a driver of (affective) polarization. He outlines “a model which essentially turns the echo chamber on its head: it is not isolation from opposing views that drives polarization but precisely the fact that digital media bring us to interact outside our local bubble” (Törnberg, 2022, 1). Following Mason, this theory understands affective polarization as rooted in sorting. But then the question remains, what is the reason for (increased) social sorting? Törnberg hypothesizes—and shows with a computational model—that when individuals only interact locally, they are involved in cross-cutting conflicts. There are counterbalancing effects of heterogeneity. People may vote for different parties but share the same hobbies or visit the same local church. However, as social sorting theory explains, this disappears with an alignment into two increasingly homogeneous mega-parties. Törnberg argues that non-local interaction through digital media is a driving force behind this development. On social media, people become part of global conflicts and are forced to take sides which drives an alignment of conflicts and cleavages. It creates “a maelstrom in which additional identities, beliefs, and cultural belonging become sucked into a growing and all-encompassing societal division, which threatens the very foundation of social cohesion” (Törnberg, 2022, 10).

A study of reactions to the Drag Queen Story Hour (DQSH) on Reddit shows how, in the digital age, there may be no distinction between abstract and tangible threats, making all cultural conflicts clear and omnipresent (Davis and Kettrey, 2022). The researchers collected posts about drag performers reading books to children in public libraries. These were all about specific events related to DQSH in geographically circumscribed communities. “Yet, members of r/The\_Donald [a subreddit dedicated to Donald Trump] perceived DQSH to be a sign of omnipresent danger, threatening what they presumed to be the dominant cultural norms of America” (Davis and Kettrey, 2022, 33). They find that on social media, local threats can be perceived as a threat to the values of an online community.<sup>4</sup>

Brittain’s study on the split in the Episcopal Church also briefly hints at this causal mechanism. In a more globalized world due to new media, conservatives who were in the minority in the Episcopal Church in the USA found they had more in common with Anglicans in African countries who were in the majority and held similar conservative views. The expansion of the previously local conflict attributed to the conservative-liberal cleavage (Brittain, 2015, 173–77).

Both of these relationships – between social media and religion and between social media and polarization – support the argument that polarization in religion, as a concept describing changes in religion in the 21st century, inherently includes social media. Contemporary religion is automatically digital religion because all aspects of contemporary society are hard to understand without the digital. And social media in general is closely connected with and contributes to polarization. For the field of digital religion, it has been presented how religion can break free from traditional institutional contexts, so that a transformation process such as polarization finds a particularly suitable environment here.

<sup>4</sup> Davis and Kettrey follow the theory that selective exposure to pro-attitudinal content increases polarization, but I think their data can also be interpreted as supporting Törnberg’s theory.



## 5 Researching polarization in religion as the construction of new collective identities

I want to offer another perspective that explains what might be specific about polarization in digital religion, or what social media might specifically contribute to polarization in religion, and suggest that this perspective can be taken when analyzing polarization in religion. In a digital space, religion encounters an environment that is particularly conducive to the construction of concrete identities. This is a way this current polarization in religion is unique compared to historical polarization dynamics that have already been present.

I have argued that research should focus on polarization as a phenomenon specific to religious traditions and consider religious beliefs and issues that are unique to this kind of polarization. Polarization is also a transformation process in contemporary religion. In this context, scholars are interested in how the religious landscape is changing. I propose to consider that in this process new religious identities are being constructed.

As early as the 1980s, Wuthnow described a restructuring of American religion into religious progressives and religious conservatives. He did not go so far as to suggest that these had emerged as new religious identities. It was mentioned that these changes “involve new modes of religious identification” (Wuthnow, 1988, 10), but in general he does not deal with identity or identification in more detail. Similarly, Hunter speaks of orthodox and progressive “impulses “and of interfaith “alliances” but the polarized sides are not conceptualized as identities.

Both describe the disappearance of the relevance of denominational labels and differences. However, Wuthnow (1988, 97) also emphasizes that denominationalism still carries weight and specifically mentions the organizational realities. The Christian infrastructure is established along denominational lines. In the religious structure Wuthnow describes, people are still tied to their denominations and polarized within them. This also means that conservatives and progressives worship in the same churches because these are denominationally organized (Wuthnow, 1988, 219).

In digital religion, however, these traditional organizational structures can be dissolved more easily. It can also be observed that progressive and conservative Christians try to avoid attending the same churches. They turn to online communities precisely because they do not feel like they belong in their local church. In a study of religious Instagram use, Novak et al. (2022) have found that in social media intrareligious boundaries become blurred. Wuthnow had already found that as interregional migration increased, the US became more religiously homogenous in the sense that the different denominations became more similar to each other in their composition of people. On a qualitatively different level than greater mobility and migration, social media can completely dissolve local boundaries, rendering physical local structures obsolete and instead providing an environment conducive to the construction of new identities.

In the systematic breakdown of all the separate elements of the intersection, identity has already played a role several times. Returning to the polarization theories, affective polarization can be explained by the sorting of social identities, and issue polarization may also be based on identities. Identity is also highlighted in the context of social media. It is a key concept in digital religion studies and the

connection between polarization and social media can also be explained using identity. As Törnberg (2022, 10) argues, it is digital media that is “affording a form of politics rooted in identity rather than opinion”. The role of social media in this process is “as spaces for social identity formation and for symbolic displays of solidarity with allies and difference from outgroups” (Törnberg, 2022, 10). The importance of social media for identity formation is also precisely the reason for its importance as a concept in digital religion research.

So far, the concept of identity has not yet been elaborated and it is important to note that the perspective proposed in this paper does not entirely follow the same perspective on identity as, for example, Mason in the sorting theory of social identities. Pratt (2003, 162) observed that identity as an explanatory concept is often overused and underspecified to the point that “‘identity’, which has the potential to explain so much, is in danger of explaining little”.

In its simplest definition, identity is about “who is who” and “what is what” so that we can classify or map the human world and our place in it (Jenkins, 2014, 6). “The notion of identity always refers to these three features: the continuity of a subject over and beyond variations in time and its adaptations to the environment; the delimitation of this subject with respect to others; the ability to recognize and to be recognized “(Melucci, 2004, 4).

Of course, with religion as part of the human world, there are religious identities. These are of interest in the study of religion. Simply put, they can be understood through social interactions, in which “‘religious’ actors, ideas, institutions, and experiences play a role in the story of who we are and who I am” (Ammerman, 2003, 216). Heidi Campbell introduced the concept of “storied identity “as a key characteristic of digital religion. It is inspired by theories from Goffman and Giddens, according to which people’s identities in contemporary society are malleable and dynamic, contextually performed. The fragmented self needs to be curated from its diverse parts. Social media offer new and conducive ways to uniquely construct religious identities (Campbell and Bellar, 2022, 101–3). It is a theory that focuses on religious *individuals*. It is interested in how religious individuals can build uniquely curated, personalized selves. This concept cannot capture how religious groups or communities, such as progressive Christians and conservative Christians, construct something that can also be understood as an identity. Therefore, I would like to move directly to the concept of “collective identity” which I would argue can be used in the conceptualization of polarization in religion. Collective identity can be applied to groups of any size or form (Pratt, 2003, 163). Alberto Melucci introduced a concept of collective identity in his work on the analysis of contemporary social movements (see Melucci, 1989). In an attempt to find the common aspects of social movement definitions, Diani finds that there is a consensus that the “boundaries of a social movement network are defined by the specific collective identity shared by the actors involved in the interaction” (Diani, 1992, 9). Melucci introduced collective identity from a social-constructivist perspective. Collective identity is actively produced by the plurality of actors involved and its analysis should be about its construction process (Melucci, 2004). The interest cannot be in an essentialist set of characteristics or a single determinant attribute, some kind of defining essence of a collectivity. Instead, the focus is on the construction and maintenance of the collective identity (Snow, 2001, 5–6). This, of course, does not undermine the social reality of these phenomena. “Groups may be imagined, but this does not mean that they are imaginary “(Jenkins,

2014, 12). It is possible to distinguish between two aspects of the creation of a collective identity. First, by sharing ideas with others, “these exchanges produce a shared sense of ‘we’ and, by extension, a collective identity.” Second, “a collective identity is further developed through the construction of an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ binary” (Gaudette et al., 2021, 3,493). This also recalls the two phenomena of issue and affective polarization. Issue polarization is concerned with shared attitudes and opinions. Of course, it is about differences of opinion, but each side or end of the spectrum would consist of people who share them. Affective polarization, on the other hand, does not necessarily assume that there are any attitudes shared by one group of people and not another. It only focuses on how two sides are opposed to each other.

In order to explain *collective* identity, it is important to make clear how it differs from *personal* and especially *social* identity. Mason speaks of social identities that are sorted and refers to social identity theory as established by (Mason, 2018, 23). However, social identity, like personal identity, refers to an individual’s self-concept. Personal identity means a person’s idiosyncratic characteristics, what makes up their “I.” Social identities refer to the “we” parts of the self, something shared with other members of a category. Social identities refer to a collective but reside within the individual. Collective identities, on the other hand, reside in groups of individuals (Pratt, 2003, 168). It can be conceptualized that social identity at the level of the individual and collective identity at the level of the collective are linked through “group identification.” For the construction of the collective identity of a group, it is necessary that there are individuals who identify with the group. At the same time, identification with a group is what constitutes a person’s social identity. While the collective identity of a group can then be studied through the analysis of shared symbols, beliefs, rituals, etc., an individual’s identification with a group could be studied through the person’s beliefs, use of the symbols, participation in rituals, and commitment to the group (Klandermans and de Weerd, 2000).

It should also be briefly mentioned that the concept of collective identity is different from “community.” Both deal with collectives and are closely related but they describe different things. Community is a debated concept, but generally refers to a group of people who have relationships with each other. Traditionally, it can mean a small-scale group in face-to-face contact (Calhoun, 2002, 82–83; Etzioni, 2006). A more networked view of community, independent of geographical aspects, is more useful for a modern definition, especially in the context of social media (Campbell and Sheldon, 2021). The network metaphor implies ties and interactions between individuals. While social relationships are necessary for the construction of collective identities, they are not the focus, whereas they are central to the community perspective. Progressive and conservative Christians, for example, use social media platforms to come into contact, communicate, and build relationships, which would be relevant if one would want to study their communities. However, this is different from the collective identity of progressive and conservative Christians, which can be constructed through this communication, but the social relationships themselves are not what the concept is about. Community understood in terms of Benedict Anderson’s concept of “imagined community” would be similar to the concept of collective identity in that it does not depend on people actually being in contact, but only on them imagining themselves as members of the community (Turner, 2006).

The concept of collective identity is inherently intertwined with social media. Contemporary work on collective identity in the context of social movements often includes cases from social media platforms. The internet, and social media in particular, offer an “enhanced capacity [...] as a site for the shared construction of identity” (Perry and Scrivens, 2016, 1). Social media offer a range of affordances that contribute to the construction of collective identities. For example, Khazraee and Novak (2018) illustrate how the identity of an Iranian women’s rights campaign is formed through textual and visual content on Facebook. Gaudette et al. (2021) analyzed Reddit posts, in particular the role of the platform’s voting algorithm in the construction of a right-extremist identity by members of the subreddit r/The\_Donald.

The use of social media has the capacity to enhance key elements of collective identity formation. In their analyses of the construction of a global White identity, Perry and Scrivens present four of such key elements (based on Snow, 2001) and the internet’s contribution to them. These are:

“A collective identity provides an alternative frame for understanding and expressing grievances; it shapes the discursive ‘other’ along with the borders that separate ‘us’ from ‘them’; it affirms and reaffirms identity formation and maintenance; and it provides the basis for strategic action” (Perry and Scrivens, 2016, 4).

This model could also be applied to cases of polarization in religion. Social media platforms specifically dedicated to a progressive or conservative position in a religious tradition often function as safe spaces to share grievances with like-minded people with similar experiences. Digital religion provides an “alternative frame” outside of traditional authorities. The communication can also be used to express negative opinions and sentiments about the oppositional group that they believe is in the wrong. In these special interest groups, users can discuss their side’s opinions, which will be affirmed and possibly expanded upon by like-minded believers. The “action” that results from online communication can mean a variety of things. In the case of religious groups, proselytizing would be an obvious example of action arising from collective identity.

The concept of collective identity is not used much in research on religion, especially not to describe a specific group of religious people as constructing a collective identity. Those studies that do bring collective identity and religion together tend to think of religion-established religious traditions—as contributing to or being part of contested constructions of collective identities. For example, Christianity as a feature of the collective identity of Europeans in the context of immigrant integration (Mattes, 2017). Another study examined the role of collective identity factors among young Muslims of Turkish and Moroccan descent in the Netherlands for attitudes toward violent in-group defense (Bergen et al., 2015). In another case, religion is called a significant marker of Turkish collective identity for the Turkish diaspora in Britain (Küçükcan, 2004). I have found a case that mention religion as collective identity (Rumble, 2011) and as a possible empirical manifestation of collective identity, just like sports fans, gender categories, or nations (Snow, 2001, 3–4). This is the perspective I would like to propose here for a better understanding of polarization in religion as it is occurring in contemporary society.

I suggest to focus on the construction of two distinct and concrete collective identities of progressive and conservative when studying polarization in religion. Probably mostly within an established religious tradition, such as the identities “progressive Christian” and “conservative Christian.” More than just vague sides of religious progressives and conservatives or polarizing impulses, it should be considered that new religious collective identities are formed in polarization in religion as a process concept of religious change in contemporary society. The inherent entanglement of religion and polarization with social media in contemporary society is a crucial contribution as it provides a conducive environment for the formation of collective identities. As was explained above, this can involve the sharing of common ideas to produce a sense of “we” on the one hand, as well as the creation of an “us” vs. “them” binary on the other hand, similar to the distinction between issue and affective polarization. The phenomena of issue and affective polarization can be linked through identity. When an identity is built based on opinions about an issue, that group can be viewed from the perspective of affective polarization. From this angle, we can see the simultaneous interplay of polarization and the construction of collective identities. In polarization in religion, religious collective identities are constructed that build the two sides of the polarization.

This process in the religious landscape is not isolated from polarization and sorting in society in general. I want to elaborate on the role of the creation of two polarized identities in the perspective of religion in polarization. If a religious or Christian identity is typically aligned with political conservatism, this may explain the creation of the explicit identity of “progressive Christian” while conservative Christians mostly do not seem to label themselves as such. For the United States, it has been hypothesized and demonstrated that the close association between the Republican Party and religion creates cognitive dissonance among Democrats or liberals. Many resolve this by abandoning their religious identity. The perception of a connection between Republican and religious is a prerequisite for this mechanism (Campbell et al., 2018). Adopting the identity of “progressive religious” would be an alternative way to deal with the dissonance. Since conservative and religious is the established association, conservatives can more comfortably claim the general label of “Christian.” From their perspective, this is the only way to be Christian anyway. They often deny the possibility of being Christian and socio-politically progressive/liberal.<sup>5</sup>

From the perspective of religion in polarization, it can be observed that these two different Christian identities participate in social sorting. The polarization literature tends to emphasize the alignment of conservative and religious identities on the one hand, and liberal/progressive and secular ones on the other. One might think, therefore, that people who are progressive and Christian would hold these cross-cutting identities that dampen the hostility. What I suggest is happening instead, however, is the formation of two distinct identities that become part of the alignment, so that there are still two

well-sorted sides. The creation of explicit progressive and conservative Christian identities helps to avoid cross-cutting identities. Mason (2018, 43) reports that “Democrats and Republicans have become different types of people”. More generally speaking, this could be applied to progressives and conservatives. Under this assumption, it would be difficult for them to share one religious identity. Instead, they are expected to form two religious identities that are part of the mega-identity divide that results from social sorting.

Interestingly, as the example of Germany shows, the seemingly typical alignments of religious-conservative and secular-progressive do not even have to be the norm. Many people on what might be called the conservative side of the spectrum are not religious. Still, progressive Christians may feel the need to highlight their specific identity in some way. To explain this, we need to go back to the former dominance of secularization theory. It was accepted not only in academia, but in society in general, that religion was a phenomenon of the past, incompatible with modernity (Casanova, 2007, 338). It is widespread in German society to regard religion as outdated and harmful (EKD, 2024; Wunder et al., 2023, 36). Although liberals are just as likely to be religious as conservatives, religion is still associated with conservative positions, so it is understandable that progressive religious people need to establish this specific progressive identity. A globalized, social media-based society—even with all its local cultural complexities and subtleties—has common discourses, lines of conflict, and identities.

The proposed perspective on polarization in religion captures the process within the religious community, traces the formation of the two identities, and also addresses the issues involved. “The formation of collective identity is a process of boundary work, which consists of the ongoing production, performance, and validation of values, codes, and norms through discourse” (Gal et al., 2016, 1,699). Therefore, an analysis in this area focuses on the discourse that forms the polarization and the participating identities. In-group similarities that create a “we” as well as differences toward the “other” should be taken into account. Polarization in religion is conceptualized as a phenomenon that is relevant to research on religion. It is therefore particularly welcome if the analysis focuses on elements that are unique to the religious tradition.

## 6 Discussion

Further empirical research on polarization in religion should determine if and how these religious collective identities are formed and shed light on religious change through polarization. This paper has provided a theoretical foundation for such research to work with or start from. Not much systematic work has been done on the intersection of polarization, religion, and social media, which motivated the writing of this paper. I came across an empirical case at this intersection, but no theoretical considerations that specifically fit it. The areas involved are often perceived as somehow related without making clear how each of them is understood and how they might be connected. I have synthesized and presented the state of research in a way that makes clear the possible connections between the areas. As it has been shown, just polarization as a concept itself is complex and diversely discussed. Different phenomena can be understood as polarization and it should be defined what one is referring to. From the perspective of the study of religion, it has been particularly important to disentangle political polarization from phenomena in

<sup>5</sup> This can be seen in the two communities that inspired the theoretical thoughts of this paper. The subreddit *r/OpenChristian* is labeled “Progressive Christianity,” *r/TrueChristian* “A subreddit for followers of Jesus Christ.” The latter claims to be “a subreddit for Christians of all sorts” but they only accept conservative theology as valid, and users repeatedly state that, for example, one cannot practice homosexuality and be a Christian.

religion while still applying the polarization scholarship to religion. Polarization in religion is highlighted as a concept of religious change in contemporary society. Religious identities are not understood as objective, fixed entities. Instead, they are subject to polarization.

I approach this phenomenon under the assumption that new collective identities are being created. This perspective on polarization in religion assumes that social media are inherently part of the phenomenon, as they provide a particularly conducive environment for the polarization transformation process of religion and the construction of polarized religious identities. The cleavages and issues between progressives and conservatives have long been present, but it should be considered that and how new collective identities are being formed in contemporary religion. It has been argued previously that there are discontinuities with earlier inner-religious debates, that is, less focus on the theological positions and instead having political issues at the center. I argue that this perspective misses the disentanglement from political polarization and obscures the central issues of polarization in religion. Instead, the discontinuities can be seen in the construction of explicit, concrete, and cohesive progressive and conservative identities, as digital religion offers different possibilities for disrupting traditional structures.

The theorization is primarily informed by expertise in the Christian tradition. It is crucial to conduct further research on this phenomenon across different religions and geographical regions. It is likely that further research and expertise on different online and offline cases and different religious traditions will add new perspectives to be able to formulate a more general theory. Nevertheless, the conceptualization presented here will be helpful beyond this case. I have tried to provide the theoretical background of how these areas might be related and how this religious change might be understood, so that the necessary empirical research has something to go on.

## Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

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## Author contributions

LR: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

## Funding

The author(s) declare that financial support was received for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. The work on this paper was funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) -SFB 1475 -Project ID 441126958.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank all of the people who have given me their input on the various occasions on which I have presented this topic. I am particularly grateful to the two reviewers who provided valuable questions and suggestions on an earlier version of this paper.

## Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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