

Grassroots and indigenous digital faith-based activism

Hybrid / IASH, 2 Hope Park Square (enter via Meadow Lane)

Friday 4 April 2025, 09:30 – 17:15 UK time. To register for in-person at IASH, RSVP Dr Steve Taylor at kiwidrsteve@gmail.com and advise any dietary or access requirements. Lunch is provided. Bookings are limited to 8 people.

Virtual delegates can register at <https://iash55.eventbrite.co.uk>. This will allow access to all events associated with the IASH's 55th Anniversary Celebrations: Institute Project on Decoloniality Conference on Thursday 3 April and Friday 4 April.

09:30 Welcome: acknowledgements of people and place – **Dr Steve Taylor** (colloquium organiser)

09:35 **Dr Gillian Chu** (Hong Kong Baptist University): *Hong Kong (online) Christians: social media engagement and influence on faith identity*

10:05 **Dr Steve Taylor** (IASH / University of Otago): *The visual grammar of online faith-based climate activism: case studies of grassroots moana theologies from Oceania*

10:35 Weaving with decolonial colloquium theme and the work of each other; working with Pasefika mat making

Followed by a coffee break

11:15 **Dr Taimaya Ragui** (Oxford Centre for Religion and Public Life): *Digital initiative, Indigenous heritage: a catalyst for digital theological discourse and digital activism*

11:45 **Dr Ikenna Paschal** (Université Catholique de Louvain): *Making public theology out of digital activism: the case of #endsars*

12:15 Further weaving with decolonial colloquium theme and the work of each other; working with Pasefika mat making

12:30 Lunch

13:30 Keynote Address: *Digital Powers and Principalities and Faith-Based Activism*
Dr Jonas Kurlberg (Spurgeon's College)

14:10 **Dr Thiu Elias KC** (University of Edinburgh): *The Falcon in the Web: digitality and indigenous knowledge in Manipur, India*

14:45 Further weaving with decolonial colloquium theme and the work of each other; invited responses from panel (names to be confirmed).

17:10 Thanks and next steps in moving toward publication of papers – **Dr Steve Taylor** as colloquium organiser

17:15 Close

Full Abstracts

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Friday 4 April 2025, 09:30 – 17:15 UK time

09:30 Welcome: acknowledgements of people and place – **Dr Steve Taylor** (colloquium organiser). Full Call for Papers details [here](#).

09:35 **Dr Gillian Chu** (Hong Kong Baptist University): *Hong Kong (online) Christians: social media engagement and influence on faith identity*

Church activities moved and continue to remain online in some form after COVID-19, and Hong Kong Protestant Christians have creatively imagined a leaderless Christian community through hashtag movements such as #deltaδmovement. As years have gone by, how did this hashtag evolve, and how does it continue to impact Hong Kong Christians in online/offline identity formation? Local identities evolved as Hong Kong Christians continued to migrate abroad, especially to Britain, through the British National (Overseas) visa. My aim is to make Hong Kong Christians' identities, local or otherwise, visible, and explore how their identities are interpreted, especially in light of recently implemented national security laws in 2020.

This paper seeks to investigate the faith identity of Hong Kong Christians through analysing their online social media activities on Facebook and Instagram, commonly used by Hong Kongers for sharing their daily lives. I will gain an understanding of how Hong Kong Christians construct their identity and self-understanding on these platforms. The main objective of this paper is to create a digital theology suitable for the Global South, specifically in the context of Hong Kong. I argue that current theorisations of digital activism (Christina Neumayer and Jakob Svensson, 2016) are Anglo-Eurocentric, and researching digital grassroots activism from the Global South not only requires a different model, but that such models, when created, can, in turn, inform the understandings of digital activism in Global North, through different ways of acting and being. Present-day globalisation and large-scale migrations blur the traditional lines of the Global North/South divide. This paper attempts to decolonise existing ways of theorising.

Based on research conducted, I found that Hong Kong Christians' social media interactions are focused on creative uses of Bible verses and hymns, conveying doubts about religion, drawing faith-based conclusions from their life experiences, and expressing concerns about societal issues. A point of exploration is how Hong Kong Christians use traditional Christian resources, and display them in a visually appealing way on social media platforms, to express their social concerns. An example would be making the connection of nostalgia by using Christian hymns translated from colonial times (Rennie Chow Choy, 2021, p. 45). The key point of this investigation is to make sense of Hong Kong Christians' self-understanding and identity formation through the sea of ever-changing posts. Being able to construct a Hong Kong Christians' online identity will be the key deliverable in creating new knowledge and impact on Hong Kong Christianity and digital theology.

10:05 **Dr Steve Taylor** (IASH / University of Otago): *The visual grammar of online faith-based climate activism: case studies of grassroots moana theologies from Oceania*

Digital technologies provide ways to activate for change. In response to climate change, faith-based organisations use visual images on social media to advocate for justice. While most digital research occurs in the USA and Europe, research into grassroots and indigenous activism provides ways to centre decolonial knowledge-making. Methodologically, Kress and van Leeuwen demonstrate that visual images have a “grammar.” Tools of colour, perspective, framing and composition provide ways to understand visual images as identity statements full of meaning. Theologically, Elaine Graham suggests that case studies of grassroots activism offer “vivid illustrations” of how to respond to the multi-faceted challenges facing contemporary society.

This paper presents research on online grassroots digital activism by faith-based organisations. No Pelesitiki – Kingdom of Tonga uses Facebook to activate for sustainability in Tonga. The Anglican Church of Melanesia Environment Observatory hosts a website to promote the work of Christian leaders as citizen climate scientists in the Solomon Islands. “Pasefika Rising” is a music video created by musicians in Fiji that portrays Pacific solutions as an immersion in the waters of Oceania.

This paper outlines how these digital portrayals of praxis centre an ocean or “moana” theology that is immersive rather than distanced and activism that is communal, prayerful and mutual. Hence, these online portrayals of Indigenous activism embody what geographer Adam Bobbette calls “Indigenous eco-theologies.” Further, these grassroots activism can be brought into fruitful dialogue with what Pasefika theologian Winston Halapua calls “moana” theology, in which the ocean is life, embrace and space. The implications include a demonstration of how the case studies can centre local and indigenous meaning-making as primary sources in decolonial knowledge-making and challenge existing and Eurocentric theorisations of digital activism by offering decolonial categories for grassroots and indigenous praxis.

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Followed by a coffee break

11:15 **Dr Taimaya Ragui** (Oxford Centre for Religion and Public Life): *Digital initiative, Indigenous heritage: a catalyst for digital theological discourse and digital activism*

This paper suggests that engaging in the revisiting and recovering Indigenous heritage is to initiate decolonisation process, representing individual or community efforts to move away from the captivity of colonial ideologies. It will analyse Indigenous Christian initiatives, namely in the field of contemporary music and fashion, aimed at reclaiming cultural heritage using digital technologies and platforms among the Indigenous Tangkhul Nagas – and making it accessible and engaging for the contemporary generations. These creative initiatives exemplify a form of digital activism and are noteworthy, as Indigenous heritage, including their way of life, beliefs, and intellect, was previously described as demon worship and rejected by colonisers.

In this exploratory paper, I will argue that creative use of digital technologies and platforms by Indigenous communities has the potential to inform digital theological discourse and contribute to discussion of digital activism, particularly among the Tangkhul Nagas. The proposed work positions digital theology within a decolonial framework, arguing that revisiting and recovering

Indigenous heritage constitute liberation from colonial ideologies. Furthermore, rather than a “radical democracy” framework,¹ my contribution to digital activism is reframed as a process that challenges not only current power structures, but also their disregard for Indigenous heritage.

11:45 **Dr Ikenna Paschal** (Université Catholique de Louvain): *Making public theology out of digital activism: the case of #endsars*

When the 2020 #EndSARS protest in Nigeria shifted from the digital platform X (formerly Twitter) to the streets, a clear ‘incarnational’ pattern was established. Well-intentioned dissent, such as the #EndSARS protest, can move from words to actions that seek to promote and fulfil the Gospel’s vision of abundant life. Despite being brutally suppressed, the protest highlights a dramatic shift in the political consciousness of young citizens, with consequences for any political, religious, economic or ethnic assent to impunity. By articulating a common good agenda, the protesters not only provided a context for theological reasoning about social change, but actually, from their grassroot context, provoked a religious or theological response, both online and on-ground, to oppression. How exactly did this theological provocation happen? And how exactly can the theological provocation help to reposition Christian churches for a proactive engagement within the public sphere for the purpose of social transformation? In engaging with these questions, this paper underscores the presence of a ‘theology from below’ in the #EndSARS protest in view of a radical agenda of abundant life for all.

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13:30 Keynote Address: *Digital Powers and Principalities and Faith-Based Activism*
Dr Jonas Kurlberg (Spurgeon’s College)

By providing channels of communication for public engagement beyond the control of traditional media gatekeepers and with the promise of instantaneously reaching large populations across the world, the internet is an effective means of activism. Yet, whilst the internet is burgeoning with socio-political activism in every shape and form, early optimism concerning the democratising propensity of the internet has long faded. We are today conscious of the imperialistic ambitions of the tech giants, the extended capability of surveillance, the hidden authority of algorithmic forces, the implicit epistemologies of the internet, and the extension of state regulation. Digital spaces are never neutral channels for dissemination of information, rather they are contested, value-laden spaces with their own power dynamics, governed by their own ‘powers and principalities’.

With this in mind, this paper will primarily engage with two perspectives. Firstly, Walter Wink’s work on unmasking the Powers will be employed to unveil the ‘principalities’ that operate in the digital; some of which are more visible or at least investigable, whilst others, such as the algorithmic forces that operate in the background, are more obscure. Secondly, and building on this work, the paper will heed Kwok Pui-Lan’s call to develop a ‘postcolonial imagination’ and

¹ Neumayer and Svensson, “Activism and Radical Politics in the Digital Age: Towards a Typology,” *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 20.4 (2014): 415-433.

reflect on its implications for faith-based digital activism. Suggesting that the aims of faith-based digital activists cannot merely be to utilize digital platforms for immediate issue-based objectives, but to challenge and subvert the digital Powers that be, the paper will conclude by exploring how faith-based activists might engage in and through digital spaces.

14:10 Dr Thiu Elias KC (University of Edinburgh): *The Falcon in the Web: digitality and indigenous knowledge in Manipur, India*

This research examines the ethical implications of digital activism among the upland Baptist tribals of Manipur, India, focusing on the Rainforest Club Tamenglong (RCT) and their conservation efforts for the *Akhuaipuina* (vernacular name for Amur Falcon). RCT, an indigenous organisation, employs Christian scripture and ethics to advocate for their activism and utilises digital media to disseminate their work. While acknowledging the potential of digital mediation for grassroots advocacy and collaboration, the study critically investigates the potential for these technologies to undermine indigenous self-determination and knowledge sovereignty: such as with the impact of ‘surveillance capitalism’ and the incursion of modern scientific and state rationality. Who really owns the knowledge production process? Could we speak of an ‘epistemic coup’² through technological infrastructures and “algorithmic authority”³ that undermine and displace indigenous knowledge systems? The primary methodology for this inquiry will combine qualitative research (interviews and digital content analysis) and critical analysis drawing from wider discourse on surveillance capitalism, digital theology, and critical indigenous studies. This project will further demonstrate the value or limitations of Euro-American analytical frameworks in examining digital activism,⁴ surveillance technology, and digital theology.⁵

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² Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*.

³ Campbell, *Digital Creatives and the Rethinking of Religious Authority*.

⁴ Neumayer and Svensson.

⁵ Chow, ‘Public Faith, Shame and China’s Social Credit System’.

Biographies

Ann Gillian Chu, PhD, SFHEA, FCCA, is an Assistant Professor in the Academy of Chinese, History, Religion and Philosophy at Hong Kong Baptist University and a Visiting Research Fellow in the Centre for Religion and Public Life at the University of Leeds. She received her Doctor of Philosophy from the School of Divinity at the University of St Andrews, her Master of Divinity from Regent College in Vancouver, Canada, and her Master of Arts (Hons) English Language from the School of Philosophy, Psychology, and Language Sciences at the University of Edinburgh, having completed her undergraduate thesis on the phonology of Hong Kong Englishes under the supervision of Professor Alice Turk. Her research interests are in decoloniality, digital religions, social movements, Chinese Christianities, and interdisciplinary research. She published an article titled “[#deltaδmovement: Hong Kong’s Lay Theologies in the Making \(Digitally\)](#)” in the *Asian American Theological Forum*. Prior to her academic career, Prof. Chu worked as a chartered accountant for over a decade in China and Canada, in one of the Big Four accounting firms, the government, and the education sector. She used to be an active contributor to online lifestyle magazines in China, including with *Lifestyle Asia* and *That’s Zhejiang*.

Thiu Elias KC (Rathi lung) is a Rongmei Naga from Manipur state in India. He is currently a Teaching Fellow in the School of Divinity at the University of Edinburgh, where he recently completed his PhD in World Christianity. His doctoral research was an interdisciplinary analysis of Christology and indigenous lifeworlds, which is being prepared for publication as a monograph. His wider research interest covers indigenous thought/lifeworlds, ecology and theology, global evangelicalism, Anthropology of religion/Christianity, and Highland Asia. He has previously worked at the Centre for Theology and Public Issues (CTPI), Edinburgh and continues to lead the academic network, Researching Indigenous Studies and Christianity (RISC).

Jonas Kurlberg is the Director of Taught Postgraduate Studies and a Lecturer in Theology at Spurgeon’s College, where he also manages the world’s first MA in Digital Theology. He has for nearly a decade researched and taught in the field of digital theology. His research outputs span issues related to digitally mediated Christian practice, the nature and task of theology in digital culture, and theological ethics in digital societies. Through this work he has collaborated with computer scientists and media and technology scholars, and as the founding chair of the Global Network of Digital Theology, he has enjoyed engaging with theologians from different traditions and parts of the world. He holds degrees in theology (London School of Theology) and sociology (London School of Economics), whilst his PhD is from the Department of Foreign Languages, University of Bergen. He has previously worked at Colombo Theological Seminary, the University of Edinburgh, and Durham University. He is the author of *Christian Modernism in an Age of Totalitarianism: T. S. Eliot, Karl Mannheim and the Moot*, and co-editor of *Missio Dei in a Digital Age* and the *Oxford Handbook of Digital Theology* (forthcoming).

Ikenna Paschal Okpaleke holds the chair for Catholic ecclesiology and ecumenism at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, is a member of the research institute of Religions, Spiritualities, Cultures, Societies (RSCS), as well as the director of the Centre Vincent Lebbe (CVL), Université Catholique de Louvain. He is a member of the Pan-African Catholic Theology and Pastoral Network (PACTPAN) team currently working on the African Palaver Series on the Future of the Church in Africa with a focus on synodality. Prior to joining UC Louvain, he was a visiting researcher at the Institute of Hermeneutics, University of Bonn, where he co-convened the Research Colloquium for Intercultural Theology and Ecumenical Studies, and

also collaborated in executing a theological training project for young people leading peacebuilding initiatives across the world under the Bonn G_NET Project: Enemy, Stranger, Neighbor, Friend (ESNF): Religion and the Semantization of In-/Out-Groups (with Dr Matthew Ryan Robinson, Lani Anaya, and Dr Andrew DeCort). In 2022, he won the Maiden Ulrich Winkler Award for Comparative Theology and the Study of Religions for his 2020 doctoral dissertation. Some of his publications include *Ecumenical and Interreligious Identities in Nigeria: Transformation through Dialogue* (Lexington Press, 2022), and *The Making of a Synodal Church: A Primer on Co-Participation in Existing Ecclesial Structures* (Paulines, 2024).

Taimaya Ragui is an Indigenous researcher-theologian from Ukhrul, Northeast India. He serves as the Academic Lead & Deputy Head at The Shepherd's Academy, Oxford Centre for Religion and Public Life, where he oversees the quality assurance of the Bachelor of Theology programme, contributes to the design and development of theology courses, and facilitates workshops for faculty members (tutors). He has a PhD in Theology from the South Asia Institute of Advanced Christian Studies (SAIACS), with a dissertation that focuses on an entryway to the discussion between theological interpretation of Scripture and contextual theology (i.e., tribal theology). He is the author of the book *Confessing Community: An Entryway to Theological Interpretation of Scripture in Northeast India* (Fortress, 2023). His current research focuses on revisiting and recovering Indigenous knowledge, developing an Indigenous methodology for theological research/interpretation, and developing digital theology through the lens of Indigenous communities.

Steve Taylor, PhD, is Director of AngelWings Ltd and provides high-quality research and bespoke educational resourcing in cultures of change. He maintains academic accountability as Research Affiliate, Otākou Whakaihu Waka, University of Otago and Senior Lecturer, Flinders University. He received his PhD from the University of Otago, his Masters in Theology with first class honours from the University of Auckland and undergraduate degrees in theology and horticulture from the University of Auckland and Lincoln University respectively. Steve has previously held academic leadership responsibilities including as Principal, Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership; Principal, Post-graduate Coordinator, Uniting College of Leadership and Theology and Senior Lecturer, Laidlaw College. He is author of *First Expressions* (2019), *Built for Change* (2016), *The Out of Bounds Church* (2005) and co-editor of *Transforming Work* (2024). He has written over 60 peer reviewed articles and book chapters. He is a film reviewer for *Touchstone* and a regular columnist for *Zadok* and has produced over 280 public scholarly pieces. Current research projects include faith-based digital activism as a Visiting Research Fellow 2024, Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities, University of Edinburgh and the social impact of religious practices with University of Birmingham Theology-Psychology Cross-Training Fellowship (2024-25).