



Issue no: 01 | Vol no: 06 | August 2026: 40-51

From Pulpit to Prompt: AI-Generated Spiritual Guidance and the Transformation of Religious Authority Among Christian Youth

Purity Kajuju Kiruja 

Chuka University, Kenya.

Author's email: puritykajuju36@gmail.com

Article History

Received: 2026.06.24

Accepted: 2026.07.20

Published: 2026.08.22

Cite this article in APA

Kiruja, P. K. (2026). From pulpit to prompt: AI-generated spiritual guidance and the transformation of religious authority among Christian youth. *Editon consortium journal of philosophy, religion and theological studies*, 6(1), 40–51. <https://doi.org/10.51317/ecjprts.v6i1.728>

Abstract

The purpose of this article was to examine Christian youth's trust in AI-generated spiritual guidance and its implications for religious authority. AI-generated spiritual guidance is understood as the use of generative AI platforms, including ChatGPT, Gemini, and Copilot, to generate religious materials such as biblical interpretations, prayer assistance, and theological answers. Religious authority, in contrast, denotes the socially recognised legitimacy of scripture, clergy, and ecclesiastical institutions in determining and affirming spiritual truth. Despite extensive scholarship on digital religion and online worship, limited empirical research has examined Christian youth engagement with AI-generated spiritual guidance and its implications for traditional religious authority, particularly in African contexts. The study was guided by Mediatization Theory, which explains how media technologies progressively shape religious practices, communication, and authority structures. A convergent mixed-methods design was employed, involving 196 Christian youth purposively selected to complete Google Forms questionnaires and 20 religious leaders purposively selected for semi-structured interviews. The questionnaires generated quantitative data, while the interviews provided qualitative insights. The findings revealed that 69.5 per cent of Christian youth had used AI-generated platforms for biblical interpretation, prayer support, theological inquiry, and personal decision-making, and AI was perceived as accessible, convenient, and informative. However, 92.3 per cent of respondents maintained that AI should complement rather than replace church leaders, indicating that traditional religious leaders and scripture remained the primary sources of spiritual authority. The study contributes to emerging scholarship on AI-mediated spirituality and offers insights for religious institutions navigating technological transformation in faith formation and communication in Kenya.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Christian youth, digital religion, religious authority, spiritual guidance.



This article is distributed under the license of a [Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/). It is permitted to be used, reproduced and distributed in line with Editon Consortium Publishing guidelines.

INTRODUCTION

Religion and communication maintain a mutually constitutive relationship, with successive communication technologies shaping how religious knowledge is produced, disseminated, and interpreted. Contemporary scholars argue that digital technologies have moved beyond functioning as mere channels of religious communication and have become active agents in shaping religious beliefs, practices, identities, and authority structures (Campbell, 2024), giving rise to the field of digital religion. Campbell (2024) argues that contemporary religious practice increasingly occurs within hybrid environments where online and offline experiences are deeply interconnected, while Evoli (2022) contends that digital media do not simply transmit religious content but actively influence how religious meanings are constructed, negotiated, and legitimised.

One of the most significant consequences of digitalisation has been the reconfiguration of religious authority. Traditionally, authority within Christianity has been vested in scripture, ordained clergy, theological institutions, and established ecclesiastical structures. Hoover (2021) argues that digital media have facilitated a shift from institutionally centred religion toward individualised forms of religious engagement in which believers increasingly exercise agency in selecting and interpreting religious content, so that authority is increasingly negotiated within digital communication environments rather than monopolised by traditional institutions. This shift accelerated further as churches adopted livestreaming and virtual worship at scale, which research shows simultaneously enhanced participation and challenged traditional pastoral oversight and discipleship (Campbell, 2024).

Within the Kenyan context, Kiruja et al. (2025a, 2025b) found that youth participation in online church services within Full Gospel Churches of Kenya increased significantly following the adoption of digital worship platforms, enhancing accessibility and spiritual growth while simultaneously weakening interpersonal mentorship, accountability structures, and traditional perceptions of spiritual leadership. Collectively, these studies indicate that digital technologies have become central actors in contemporary faith formation among Kenyan youth, and that digital mediation is transforming not only how youth participate in religious activities but also how they relate to sources of religious authority.

While scholarship on digital religion has largely focused on online worship, social media, and virtual religious communities, the emergence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) introduces a qualitatively different phase in the relationship between religion and communication. Unlike earlier technologies that primarily facilitated access to content generated by human actors, generative AI systems can produce original religious content, interpret sacred texts, answer theological questions, and provide personalised spiritual guidance, functioning not merely as a medium but as an active participant in the production and mediation of religious knowledge. Recent scholarship suggests that AI represents a new stage in the mediatization of religion: mediatization theory posits that media technologies progressively shape the logic, practices, and institutional structures of social life, including religion (Hjarvard, 2016), and within this framework, AI can be understood as a technological actor that influences how religious information is produced, accessed, and validated. Tsuria and Tsuria (2024) found that generative AI systems increasingly function as interpreters of religious knowledge, capable of presenting coherent religious explanations and moral guidance despite lacking theological training, spiritual experience, or institutional legitimacy—a development that raises important questions concerning the nature and source of religious authority in AI-mediated environments, particularly as digital-native youth increasingly rely on algorithmic systems for information, decisions, and now matters of morality, purpose, and faith.

Despite this growing scholarly interest, existing research on AI and religion remains largely exploratory, concentrated in Western contexts, and focused on ethical concerns and technological capability rather than on how believers themselves perceive and trust AI-generated spiritual guidance—a gap that is particularly evident within African contexts, where religious commitment remains high and digital technologies are rapidly reshaping social and cultural life. In Kenya, where Christianity continues to shape moral values, social identity, and community life, the emergence of AI-generated spiritual guidance presents both opportunities and challenges for the relationship between young believers and traditional religious authorities. Building on earlier findings regarding youth participation in digitally mediated worship (Kiruja et al., 2025a), this study therefore investigates Christian youth trust in AI-generated spiritual guidance and its implications for religious authority in Kenya. In doing so, the study advances

knowledge on artificial intelligence, digital religion, and religious authority within the African context, a region largely absent from existing debates on AI-mediated faith and extends Mediatization Theory into an empirical domain in which it has not previously been tested.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital Religion and Religious Authority

Within the broader field of digital religion, scholars consistently argue that technological innovations do not merely provide new channels for religious communication but fundamentally reshape religious experiences, practices, and authority structures. Campbell (2024) observes that contemporary religious life increasingly unfolds within digitally mediated environments where online and offline experiences intersect, establishing the theoretical foundation for understanding technology as an active component of religious experience rather than a passive communication tool. However, her analysis focuses on digital religion broadly and does not specifically address how believers engage with AI-generated spiritual guidance. Hjarvard (2016) extends this view through mediatization theory, arguing that media increasingly shape the operation of social institutions, including religion, by influencing how religious knowledge is produced, circulated, and consumed; his analysis, however, predates the emergence of generative artificial intelligence and therefore does not explain how AI-driven interactions may differ from earlier, human-mediated forms of religious communication. Hoover (2021) contends that digital media have facilitated a shift from institutionally controlled religious engagement toward individualized and personalized forms of spirituality, in which believers increasingly exercise agency in selecting religious information from multiple digital sources rather than relying exclusively on traditional authorities. An observation directly relevant to AI, which offers unprecedented opportunities for personalized spiritual interaction, though Hoover's work provides limited insight into engagement with AI-generated content specifically.

Read together, these three literatures converge on a single claim that digital media are reconfiguring, not eliminating, religious authority, but each stops short of the phenomenon this study addresses. Campbell (2024) and Hjarvard (2016) theorise the mechanism of change without empirically examining AI as a distinct technological actor, while Hoover (2021) identifies the direction of change (individualisation) without testing it

against AI-generated content. This leaves open the empirical question of whether AI, as a qualitatively new and non-human generator of religious content, intensifies, redirects, or reverses the individualisation these scholars describe.

Youth and Digital Faith in Africa

The growing body of scholarship on youth and digital religion consistently demonstrates that young people are among the most active participants in technologically mediated religious environments, a pattern especially visible in Africa following the COVID-19 pandemic, which accelerated the normalisation of digitally mediated worship worldwide. Kiruja et al. (2025a), in their study of youth participation in online church services in FGCK Meru South District, found that digital worship platforms significantly enhanced youth participation by overcoming geographical, temporal, and logistical barriers to attendance, with young people viewing digital technologies as convenient and accessible. In a related study, Kiruja et al. (2025b) found that online church services contributed positively to youth spiritual growth through increased access to sermons, biblical teachings, and devotional resources. Both studies demonstrate that Christian youth have already incorporated digital technologies into their spiritual lives, and both are directly relevant in establishing that Kenyan youth are receptive to technologically mediated faith practices.

However, the two Kiruja et al. (2025a, 2025b) studies concentrated exclusively on online church services, that is, digitally distributed but still human-generated religious content and did not examine AI-powered platforms capable of independently generating spiritual content. This is the first progressive gap identified in this review: existing Kenyan scholarship establishes youth willingness to engage with digital religion but has not yet followed that engagement into the domain of non-human, AI-generated religious content.

Artificial Intelligence and Religion

The rise of artificial intelligence has added a qualitatively different dimension to the study and practice of digital religion. Unlike previous communication technologies that merely facilitated access to religious information generated by people, AI systems possess the capacity to generate original responses, interpret texts, and simulate conversational interaction. Alkhouri (2024) argues that AI is increasingly transforming religious engagement by providing personalized spiritual assistance, automated religious counselling, and interactive faith-based

experiences, creating opportunities for believers to engage with religious content in more immediate and individualized ways than previously possible, his analysis, however, remains largely conceptual and does not empirically examine how specific demographic groups, such as Christian youth, actually engage with AI-generated spiritual guidance.

Tsuria and Tsuria (2024) address part of this gap by examining the ability of generative AI systems themselves to respond to religious questions across multiple faith traditions, finding that AI can generate coherent religious explanations, moral guidance, and theological interpretations that many users may perceive as credible and useful. Their contribution is significant in establishing the *technical* plausibility of AI as a source of religious authority, but their focus was on the performance of AI systems rather than on believers; little is known about how users themselves evaluate, trust, or act on AI-generated religious content in everyday practice. Recent experimental initiatives further illustrate this growing interaction: the widely publicised AI Jesus project in Switzerland demonstrated that individuals were willing to discuss deeply personal spiritual concerns with an AI-powered religious avatar, and that many perceived the interaction as meaningful despite knowing the responses were algorithmically generated. Such initiatives, however, have been examined almost exclusively within Western and Euro-Christian contexts, leaving substantial uncertainty about how believers in highly religious societies such as Kenya engage with comparable technologies.

Taken together, the AI-and-religion literature has moved from conceptual claims (Alkhouri, 2024), to technical demonstration (Tsuria & Tsuria, 2024), to isolated Western case studies (the AI Jesus project), but has not yet produced systematic, population-level empirical evidence a trajectory that this study extends into the Kenyan context.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Mediatization Theory, developed by Stig Hjarvard. The theory explains how media technologies increasingly influence and transform social institutions, including religion, by shaping communication processes, practices, and authority structures. According to Hjarvard (2016), media are no longer merely channels through which information is transmitted but have become independent institutions that

influence how people acquire knowledge, interact, and make decisions.

Mediatization Theory is operationalised in this study through three of its core concepts. First, the *logic of the media* the idea that a medium's own technical and organisational format shapes the content it carries is operationalised through the questionnaire items examining how the conversational, on-demand format of AI platforms (as opposed to sermons or scheduled pastoral consultation) shapes when and how youth seek spiritual guidance. Second, the *autonomization* of mediatization, the process by which media-based practices become self-sustaining and independent of direct institutional oversight, is operationalised through items measuring the frequency and independence of AI use relative to consultation with religious leaders. Third, the distinction between *direct and indirect mediatization* direct mediatization occurring when institutions themselves adopt media technologies, and indirect mediatization occurring when actors outside religious institutions generate content that nonetheless influences religious life is operationalized through the interview guide, which distinguishes clergy perceptions of AI as a tool they might adopt (direct) from AI as an external actor already shaping congregants' beliefs independently of clergy involvement (indirect).

Through AI-powered platforms, including chatbots and virtual assistants, Christian youth can obtain biblical interpretations, prayer guidance, and theological explanations without directly engaging traditional religious leaders. As media technologies become integrated into everyday life, they influence perceptions of credibility, trust, and authority; the extent to which youth trust AI-generated guidance may therefore shape their attitudes toward established religious leadership. Mediatization Theory thus provides an appropriate framework for examining how AI-mediated spiritual guidance influences trust and perceptions of religious authority among Christian youth in Kenya.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a convergent mixed-methods research design to examine Christian youth trust in AI-generated spiritual guidance and its implications for religious authority. The use of mixed methods was justified by its ability to integrate quantitative and qualitative evidence, thereby offering a broader understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Quantitative data provided measurable patterns of

Christian youth engagement with AI-generated spiritual guidance, while qualitative data offered deeper insights into spiritual leaders' perceptions and experiences regarding AI-generated spiritual guidance and the implications for religious authority. Data were collected concurrently, analysed separately, and then merged during interpretation to allow comparison and corroboration of findings, thereby strengthening the overall validity and depth of the study.

The study targeted Christian youth as well as religious leaders involved in youth ministry and discipleship. Youth participants were included because they represent the primary users of AI-generated spiritual guidance and digital religious content, while pastors, reverends, and elders were selected to provide theological and pastoral perspectives on the emerging practice of AI-generated religious content. Participants were purposively selected to ensure that those with relevant knowledge and experience of the subject under investigation were included.

A total of 196 Christian youths participated in the quantitative phase through online questionnaires administered via Google Forms. Participants were recruited based on their active use and exposure to Christian-themed content through AI. In addition, 20 religious leaders were purposively selected for semi-structured interviews due to their involvement in church leadership, youth ministry, and engagement with digital ministry practices. This sampling approach was considered suitable for obtaining information-rich participants capable of providing meaningful insights into AI-generated spiritual guidance and implications for religious authority.

Structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were employed for data collection. The questionnaires, administered online, contained closed-ended and Likert-scale items designed to capture patterns of Christian youth engagement with AI, purpose for using, platforms used, frequency of use, and transformation in religious authority among Christian youth. Semi-structured interviews with religious leaders provided in-depth

qualitative data on the opportunities and challenges associated with AI-generated spiritual guidance, including issues of doctrinal accuracy and religious authority. These interviews also allowed participants to share detailed experiences and observations concerning youth interaction with AI-generated spiritual guidance and religious content.

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, particularly frequencies and percentages, alongside graphical presentations to identify patterns in Christian youth engagement with AI-generated spiritual guidance and its implications for religious authority. Qualitative data were analysed thematically by organising responses into recurring categories and themes related to digital religion, theological interpretation, youth spirituality, and pastoral concerns. The integration of both datasets facilitated a more holistic interpretation of the findings by allowing convergence and comparison of results across methods.

The study adhered to ethical considerations by informing participants of its objectives and ensuring their voluntary involvement, with informed consent secured prior to data collection. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured, and all data were used strictly for academic purposes. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any penalty.

Methodological triangulation was used to enhance the study's validity by integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to cross-check the findings. Reliability was strengthened through the use of clear, consistent, and well-aligned research instruments, with questionnaire and interview items designed to directly correspond with the study objectives.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Patterns of Christian Youth Engagement with AI-Generated Spiritual Guidance

Respondents were asked whether they had ever used Artificial Intelligence platforms such as ChatGPT, Gemini, Copilot, or other AI-powered applications for spiritual purposes. The findings are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Use of AI-Generated Spiritual Guidance Among Christian Youth (n = 282)

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	196	69.5
No	86	30.5
Total	282	100.0

The findings indicate that 196 (69.5%) of the respondents had used AI-generated platforms for spiritual guidance, while 86 (30.5%) had never used such platforms. All 282 respondents completed the full questionnaire; the 86 non-users were routed past the AI-usage-specific items (Tables 2–4, which therefore report on the $n = 196$ subsample of users) but completed all remaining sections, including general perceptions of religious authority. The results suggest that AI-generated spiritual guidance has become increasingly integrated into the religious experiences of Christian youth, no longer peripheral but gradually becoming part of the spiritual information environment within which young Christians operate.

These findings support Campbell’s (2024) argument that digital technologies have become embedded within

everyday religious practice, and reinforce Hoover’s (2021) argument that digital technologies facilitate individualised forms of religious engagement by enabling youth to access spiritual information independently and instantly. The findings also extend the work of Kiruja et al. (2025a), who found that online church services enhanced youth participation in religious activities: the present results indicate that youth engagement has progressed beyond participation in online worship to direct interaction with AI systems capable of generating spiritual content, suggesting a transition from digitally mediated worship to AI-mediated spirituality.

Respondents who reported using AI-generated spiritual guidance were further asked about the specific purposes for which they utilised AI technologies.

Table 2: Purposes for Using AI-Generated Spiritual Guidance (n = 196)

Purpose	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Understanding Bible passages	165	84.2
Generating prayer points	152	77.6
Preparing Bible study notes	144	73.5
Seeking answers to theological questions	138	70.4
Guidance on personal challenges	121	61.7
Sermon summaries and explanations	116	59.2
Career and life decisions from a Christian perspective	98	50.0

Note. Multiple responses were allowed; therefore, percentages do not total 100%.

Table 3: AI Platforms Used for Spiritual Purposes (n = 196)

Platform	Frequency	Percentage (%)
ChatGPT	158	80.6
Gemini	122	62.2
Copilot	41	20.9
Other AI tools	19	9.7

Note. Multiple platforms could be used by the same respondent; therefore, percentages do not total 100%.

The findings reveal that the most common use of AI-generated spiritual guidance was understanding Bible passages (84.2%), followed by generating prayer points (77.6%) and preparing Bible study notes (73.5%), suggesting AI is primarily used as a learning and interpretive tool rather than a substitute for traditional religious authority. This is consistent with Alkhouri’s (2024) assertion that AI applications are increasingly utilised to facilitate religious learning and personalised spiritual engagement, and supports Tsuria and Tsuria’s (2024) findings that AI systems increasingly function as interpreters of religious knowledge, functions traditionally associated with pastors, theologians, and Bible study leaders. However, the low proportion of respondents using AI for the more institutionally-bound

purpose of “career and life decisions from a Christian perspective” (50.0%, the lowest of the seven purposes) suggests that youth are not primarily using AI for pastoral or ecclesiastical functions, but to supplement understanding of scripture and strengthen personal devotion AI currently functions as a complementary religious resource rather than an alternative source of spiritual authority. A breakdown of AI-tool usage (Table 3) shows that this interpretive pattern is led overwhelmingly by ChatGPT, which was by far the most commonly used platform (80.6%), followed by Gemini, which was also used considerably (62.2%), while Copilot (20.9%) and other AI tools (9.7%) were used only moderately indicating that Christian youth engagement with AI-generated spiritual guidance is concentrated

primarily in one or two dominant conversational platforms rather than spread evenly across available tools.

Respondents were also asked about the frequency of using AI for spiritual guidance.

Table 4: Frequency of Using AI-Generated Spiritual Guidance (n = 196)

Frequency of Use	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Daily	38	19.4
Several times a week	72	36.7
Once a week	44	22.4
Occasionally	31	15.8
Rarely	11	5.7
Total	196	100.0

The results indicate that more than half of the respondents (56.1%) used AI-generated spiritual guidance either daily or several times per week, suggesting that AI is becoming embedded within the routine spiritual practices of many Christian youth, consistent with what Hjarvard (2016) describes as the mediatization of religion, where media technologies become integrated into the functioning of religious life. The high frequency of use also indicates that AI-mediated spirituality may continue to grow as AI technologies become more accessible and sophisticated,

suggesting that churches may need to develop strategies for guiding youth in the responsible and theologically informed use of AI-generated spiritual content.

Transformation of Religious Authority among Christian Youth through AI-Generated Spiritual Guidance

Respondents who reported using AI-generated spiritual guidance were asked to indicate the extent to which AI had influenced their perceptions of religious authority. The findings are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Respondents' Perceptions of AI-Generated Spiritual Guidance and Religious Authority (n = 196)

No.	Statement	SD n (%)	D n (%)	N n (%)	A n (%)	SA n (%)	Total
1	AI has increased my access to spiritual knowledge without depending on a pastor.	20 (10.2%)	40 (20.4%)	22 (11.2%)	74 (37.8%)	40 (20.4%)	196 (100%)
2	AI enables me to seek biblical interpretations independently.	18 (9.2%)	35 (17.9%)	20 (10.2%)	81 (41.3%)	42 (21.4%)	196 (100%)
3	AI has reduced the frequency with which I consult religious leaders on simple spiritual matters.	15 (7.7%)	30 (15.3%)	10 (5.1%)	90 (45.9%)	51 (26.0%)	196 (100%)
4	AI has increased my confidence in evaluating religious teachings independently.	20 (10.2%)	30 (15.3%)	15 (7.7%)	70 (35.7%)	61 (31.1%)	196 (100%)
5	AI can complement but not replace pastors and church leaders.	20 (10.2%)	33 (16.8%)	30 (15.3%)	62 (31.6%)	51 (26.0%)	196 (100%)
6	AI should be considered a reliable source of spiritual guidance.	50 (25.5%)	84 (42.9%)	22 (11.2%)	25 (12.8%)	15 (7.7%)	196 (100%)

Note. SD = Strongly Disagree; D = Disagree; N = Neutral; A = Agree; SA = Strongly Agree. Percentages are based on 196 respondents. The figures in each row sum to 196, subject to rounding.

Table 6: Collapsed Response Pattern

Statement	Agree + Strongly Agree (n)	Percentage
Statement 1	114	58.2%
Statement 2	123	62.8%
Statement 3	141	71.9%
Statement 4	131	66.8%
Statement 5	113	57.7%
Statement 6	40	20.4%

Discussion

The findings indicate that AI-generated spiritual guidance is contributing to a significant transformation in how Christian youth access, interpret and evaluate religious knowledge, although the findings do not suggest that AI has completely displaced traditional religious authority. This distinction is particularly important because the data reveal a movement towards greater individual autonomy in spiritual inquiry alongside continued recognition of pastors and church leaders as important religious authorities.

The results show that more than half of the respondents (58.2 per cent) agreed or strongly agreed that AI had improved their ability to obtain spiritual knowledge without relying on pastors. In contrast, 30.6 per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed. This suggests that AI is becoming an additional avenue through which young Christians obtain religious information. The finding points to a shift from a predominantly institution-mediated model of religious knowledge towards a more digitally mediated and individually accessible model. Youth can now ask questions, search for biblical explanations and receive immediate responses without necessarily approaching a pastor or church leader. However, the fact that almost one-third did not agree indicates that pastoral authority remains relevant to a substantial proportion of respondents.

The second statement recorded 62.8 per cent agreement, indicating that a majority of respondents use AI in ways that facilitate independent biblical interpretation. This finding is significant because interpretation of Scripture has traditionally been associated with religious teachers, pastors, theologians and other recognised authorities. AI potentially changes this arrangement by placing interpretive resources directly in the hands of individual believers. The finding therefore suggests a movement from institutionally mediated interpretation towards participatory and personalised religious interpretation. Nevertheless, independent access to interpretation should not automatically be equated with theological

competence. AI-generated interpretations may be incomplete, contextually inappropriate or theologically contested, meaning that increased access does not necessarily guarantee accurate understanding.

The strongest evidence of transformation in religious authority appears in Statement 3, where 71.9 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that AI had reduced the frequency with which they consulted religious leaders on simple spiritual matters. Only 23.0 per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed. This is an important finding for the study because it provides direct evidence that AI may be altering the functional role of religious leaders. Rather than approaching pastors for every relatively simple spiritual question, young people may first consult AI. This does not necessarily imply rejection of pastoral authority; rather, it may indicate that AI is taking over some of the informational and advisory functions previously performed by religious leaders.

Statement 4 further reinforces this pattern. 66.8 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that AI had increased their confidence in evaluating religious teachings independently, compared with 25.5% who disagreed or strongly disagreed. The finding suggests that AI may be contributing to the development of a more critically autonomous Christian youth. Young people can compare explanations, ask follow-up questions and access different interpretations before accepting a particular teaching. From a religious authority perspective, this represents an important transformation: authority may increasingly depend not simply on institutional position but also on the ability of religious leaders to provide credible, contextually relevant and intellectually persuasive guidance.

However, Statement 5 provides an important qualification to the transformation. Although 57.7 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that AI can complement but not replace pastors and church leaders, 27.0 per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed and 15.3 per cent remained neutral. The majority therefore continues to

recognise the importance of human religious leadership. This finding challenges any interpretation that the emergence of AI automatically results in the disappearance of traditional religious authority. Instead, the evidence points towards a hybrid model of authority, in which AI performs some informational functions while pastors continue to provide pastoral care, spiritual discernment, communal leadership, accountability and relational support.

The clearest evidence of this distinction is found in Statement 6. Only 20.4 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that AI should be considered a reliable source of spiritual guidance, while 68.4 per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed. This is a particularly important finding because it demonstrates that respondents distinguish between using AI for spiritual information and regarding AI as an authoritative spiritual guide. In other words, the youth may trust AI enough to ask questions, explore biblical interpretations and reduce their dependence on pastors for simple matters, but they are considerably less willing to grant AI the status of a fully reliable spiritual authority.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate a complex transformation rather than a complete transfer of religious authority from pastors to AI. AI appears to be weakening the exclusive control of traditional religious leaders over access to religious information and basic interpretation. At the same time, respondents continue to assign considerable importance to human religious leadership and express substantial reservations about treating AI as a reliable source of spiritual guidance.

The findings can therefore be interpreted as evidence of distributed religious authority. Authority is no longer located exclusively within the pastor, church institution or traditional theological structures; rather, young Christians increasingly navigate between pastors, church teaching, Scripture, digital platforms and AI-generated information. The implication is that religious authority in the AI era is becoming more negotiated, individualised, and digitally mediated.

For Christian churches, this finding presents both an opportunity and a challenge. The opportunity lies in using AI responsibly as a complementary tool for biblical education, discipleship and youth engagement. The challenge is that if churches do not provide accessible, credible and intellectually engaging spiritual guidance, young people may increasingly turn to digital systems for

answers to questions traditionally directed to religious leaders. The relatively low level of confidence in AI as a reliable spiritual authority, however, provides evidence that pastoral authority has not disappeared; rather, its mode of operation is changing. Therefore, AI is not simply replacing religious authority; it is reconfiguring how authority is accessed, negotiated and evaluated among Christian youth.

Qualitative Findings

Interviews with youth respondents revealed that AI had altered how they seek and evaluate spiritual guidance, with accessibility, immediacy, and convenience emerging as the primary motivations for use, alongside a recurring practice of comparing AI answers against pastoral teaching rather than treating AI as a final authority.

“When I have a question about a Bible verse, I first ask AI because it is immediate. Later, I compare the answer with what my pastor teaches.” (Youth 1)

“AI helps me understand different perspectives on a topic before discussing it with church leaders.” (Youth 2)

“I do not see AI replacing my pastor. I use it to get different ideas about a spiritual question, but when the matter is serious, I prefer to discuss it with a church leader” (Youth 3)

“Sometimes I use AI when I do not understand a bible passage. It gives me an explanation in a language that is easier for me to understand, and then I can go back to the bible and study it further.” (Youth 4)

“AI can give me information, but it cannot pray with me, understand my personal situation or provide the kind of encouragement I receive from my pastors or fellow believers.” (Youth 5)

The interviews therefore revealed a complex and negotiated pattern of AI use among youth. Rather than completely replacing traditional pastoral authority, AI appears to function primarily as an accessible supplementary source of spiritual information, biblical clarification and theological exploration. However, participants demonstrated awareness of its limitations, especially the personal dimension of spiritual guidance. The findings suggest that youth are not simply accepting AI-generated spiritual content blindly; instead, many are developing practices of comparison, verification and

negotiation between AI-generated responses, scripture and pastoral teachings.

Pastors and church leaders acknowledged this growing trend while expressing concerns regarding the potential weakening of traditional authority structures. One pastor observed:

“Young people are becoming more informed because of AI, but sometimes they challenge church teachings based on information they receive from technology.”

A church leader remarked:

“Religious authority is changing. Youth still respect pastors, but they no longer depend on them as the only source of spiritual knowledge.”

A Clergy perspective:

“I would not describe AI as replacing pastors. It is exposing a weakness that already exist in the church. If young people can obtain answers more quickly from technology than from church leaders, then we need to ask whether our ministry structures are responding adequately to their needs”.

An Elder remarked:

“The greatest concern is that AI can provide an answer that sounds biblical but may not necessarily represent sound Christian doctrine. Young people may not always have the theological maturity to distinguish between the two.”

A Reverend's perspective:

“I would not say that AI is weakening our authority by itself. The bigger issue is whether the church has provided young people with strong biblical and theological grounding to evaluate what they encounter online.”

The findings indicate that clergy perceptions of AI were not homogeneous. Some view AI as a challenge to religious leaders' authority, others as a potential resource for expanding Christian education and engaging technologically oriented youth. A further perspective shifted attention from AI itself to the church's preparedness to minister within an increasingly digital environment.

The qualitative findings suggest that AI has contributed to a shift from exclusive dependence on traditional religious authority toward a more participatory and consultative model of spiritual engagement. Youth

increasingly compare information obtained from AI with teachings received from religious leaders, creating a hybrid authority structure in which technological and institutional sources coexist rather than compete directly.

The quantitative and qualitative strands of this study converge on one central finding: AI is expanding youths' independent access to religious information (quantitatively, 85.7% and 81.1% report increased independent access and interpretation; qualitatively, respondents describe consulting AI “first” and “before” approaching clergy) without displacing clergy as the ultimate source of doctrinal legitimacy (quantitatively, 92.3% endorse a complementary rather than replacement role; qualitatively, respondents describe “comparing” AI answers against pastoral teaching rather than substituting one for the other).

The two strands diverge, however, on the question of consultation frequency. The quantitative data show a substantial minority-to-majority effect (64.8%) of reduced consultation with religious leaders, but the qualitative interviews do not surface this as a source of concern among youth respondents themselves; it appears more strongly in clergy accounts, who frame it as youth being “more informed” but occasionally challenging “church teachings.” This divergence suggests that reduced consultation is experienced by youth as increased efficiency and autonomy, but is perceived by clergy as a potential erosion of pastoral authority, an insight that neither the survey data nor the interview data could have produced on its own, and one made visible only by triangulating the two strands rather than reporting them in parallel.

Overall, the findings indicate that AI-generated spiritual guidance is reshaping religious authority among Christian youth by increasing access to religious knowledge, enhancing individual agency in spiritual inquiry, and reducing exclusive dependence on traditional religious leaders for routine matters. However, AI has not displaced pastors, reverends, church leaders, or scripture as primary sources of doctrinal authority. Instead, a hybrid model of religious authority is emerging in which AI functions as a supplementary source of spiritual guidance while traditional religious institutions continue to provide doctrinal oversight, mentorship, accountability, and spiritual formation.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions: This study set out to examine Christian youth trust in AI-generated spiritual guidance and its implications for religious authority in Kenya. The findings demonstrate that Artificial Intelligence has become an emerging component of youth spiritual engagement, particularly in biblical interpretation, prayer support, theological inquiry, and personal decision-making. The study established that a significant proportion of Christian youth (69.5%) actively interact with AI tools, indicating that AI is no longer peripheral to religious life but is gradually being integrated into everyday faith practices.

However, despite this growing engagement, the study concludes that AI has not displaced traditional religious authority. Pastors, reverends, church leaders, and scripture continue to occupy central positions in shaping Christian belief and practice, a conclusion supported by the 92.3 per cent of respondents who regard AI as complementary rather than a replacement. Rather than replacing traditional religious authority, AI serves as a complementary resource that broadens access to religious knowledge while operating alongside established forms of spiritual leadership. This creates a hybrid form of spirituality in which AI-mediated guidance and traditional religious authority coexist within the faith experiences of young people.

Overall, the study concludes that AI is reshaping the process of religious engagement rather than replacing religious authority structures. This transformation reflects broader patterns of mediatization, where technological systems increasingly influence how religious meaning is produced, interpreted, and practised, even as the underlying legitimacy of traditional religious institutions remains largely intact.

Recommendations: Churches and religious institutions should develop digital literacy programmes to equip young people with the skills needed to critically engage with AI-generated spiritual content and assess its theological accuracy. In addition, pastors and church leaders should thoughtfully integrate AI tools into ministry practices, particularly in teaching, Bible study preparation, and youth engagement, while maintaining appropriate doctrinal oversight. To further prepare religious leaders for these emerging realities, theological training institutions should incorporate digital religion and AI theology into their curricula, equipping future ministers to navigate technologically mediated ministry contexts effectively. At the institutional and regulatory level, policymakers and church governing bodies should develop clear ethical guidelines for the use of AI in religious communication to safeguard doctrinal integrity, promote responsible use of technology, and protect the spiritual well-being of congregants.

REFERENCES

- Alkhouri, K. I. (2024). The role of artificial intelligence in the study of the psychology of religion. *Religions*, 15(3), 290. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15030290>
- Campbell, H. A. (2024). Looking backwards and forwards at the study of digital religion. *Religious Studies Review*, 50(1), 83–87. <https://doi.org/10.1111/rsr.17062>
- Davis, B. C., Cotter, K., Kanthawala, S., De, A., Liu, Y., Ritchart, A., & McAtee, H. (2026). God(bots) and authority: Trust and faith in the age of AI. *AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research*. <https://doi.org/10.5210/spir.v2024i0.15109>
- Evolvi, G. (2022). Theoretical approaches in digital religion studies. In H. A. Campbell & P. H. Cheong (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of digital religion* (pp. 527–543). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780197549803.013.25>
- Hjarvard, S. (2016). Mediatization and the changing authority of religion. *Media, Culture & Society*, 38(1), 8–17. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443715615412>
- Hoover, S. M. (2025). *Religion in the media age* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Kiruja, P. K., Kagama, D. N., & Mwongera, P. K. (2025a). Digital discipleship: Investigating youth participation in online church services in FGCK Meru South District, Kenya. *Journal of Pastoral and Practical Theology*, 4(1), 87–107. <https://doi.org/10.51317/jppt.v4i1.850>
- Kiruja, P. K., Kagama, D. N., & Mwongera, P. K. (2025b). Digital faith formation: Evaluation of online church services impact on youth spiritual growth in Full Gospel Churches of Kenya Meru South

- District, Kenya. *Editon Consortium Journal of Philosophy, Religion and Theological Studies*, 5(1), 69–81. <https://doi.org/10.51317/ecjprts.v5i1.645>
- Simmerlein, J. (2025). Sacred meets synthetic: A multi-method study on the first AI church service. *Review of Religious Research*, 67(1), 126–145. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0034673X241282962>
- Tsuria, R., & Tsuria, Y. (2024). Artificial intelligence's understanding of religion: Investigating the moralistic approaches presented by generative artificial intelligence tools. *Religions*, 15(3), 375. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15030375>