

Religion & Media UPDATE

Newsletter of the Religion & Media Interest Group of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication



The community built last year by sharing a selfie at an outdoor lunch overlooking San Francisco Bay is an important priority for RMIG members.

We value scholarship and friendships equally

By Katie Montalbano
University of Kentucky

The Religion and Media Interest Group of AEJMC is a lively, engaged, supportive and welcoming community.

RMIG members are equally committed to developing high-quality

scholarship centered on religion and media as we are to building a network of lifelong friends.

Part of our mission to grow our membership has been to invest in our graduate students and early-career scholars, and we will continue

Please see **WELCOME** on page 7

Note from the Head

This August, RMIG shows its vast scope

By Omar Hammad
Rutgers University

“Don’t talk religion and politics at the dinner table” is a phrase many people subscribe to in the United States, reflecting the belief that discussions of faith and politics are among the most contentious conversations in public life.

At RMIG, however, we move toward these conversations, not to ignite polarization, but to better understand the powerful roles that religion and media continue to play across societies.

How we discuss religion and



Omar Hammad

Please see **HEAD** on page 2

From the front page

Head: RMIG thrives amid changes

Continued from page 1

How we discuss religion and media matters.

Too often, conversations about religion begin with assumptions rather than questions. The same can be said about media. Both at times are praised as solutions to society’s problems or condemned as their source. This leaves little room for the nuance and complexity that characterize either.

RMIG provides a space in which scholars can move beyond such binaries and critically examine the ways religion and media shape culture, identity, and public life.

Religion and media occupy an interesting space in society because both help people make sense of their experiences and their lives.

While pondering on RMIG’s role as an intersection of ideas and perspectives, a theme highlighted by former Head Derek Moscato in last year’s newsletter, I am reminded of communication scholar James Carey’s argument that communication is not merely the end-to-end transmission of information, but rather the creation and maintenance of shared meaning.

This insight remains particularly relevant for those of us who study religion and media. Whether through sacred texts, news reports,



Communications scholar James Carey speaks in 1995 at an MIT forum.

films, social media posts, podcasts, or political discourse, people use communication to interpret their experiences, negotiate their iden-

ties, and understand their place within broader communities.

Regardless of whether one belongs to Generation X, is a Millennial, or a member of Generation Z, most of us begin and end our days participating in practices that help us construct meaning.

We check social media feeds, stream television programs and movies, listen to podcasts, follow the news, attend religious services, engage in prayer, and increasingly participate in faith communities online.

While these activities may appear routine, Carey reminded us that they are also ritualistic. They connect us to shared stories, traditions, values, communities, and cultures. In many

Continued on page 3

Serving the Religion & Media Interest Group for 2025-26

- Head**
Omar Hammad, Hunter College, CUNY
- Vice Head**
Rick Moore, Boise State University
- Research Chair**
Jordan Morehouse, University of Colorado, Boulder
- Teaching Chair**
Michael Longinow, Biola University

- Professional Freedom & Responsibility Chair**
Cylor Spaulding, California State – Fullerton
- Membership Chair**
Emily Guajardo Haskell, University of Oklahoma
- Communications Chair**
Kathryn Montalbano, University of Kentucky
- Newsletter Editor**
Doug Mendenhall, Abilene Christian University

From the front page

Head: Share the RMIG community

Continued from page 2

respects, both religion and media provide spaces in which we seek belonging and wrestle with fundamental questions about identity and purpose.

This is demonstrated across a wide range of media texts and platforms. Scholars in RMIG examine everything from faith-based films and television portrayals of religious communities to livestreamed worship services, religious influencers on TikTok, political messaging on X, podcasts, news coverage, and, increasingly, AI-generated religious content.

While these forms of media differ in format and audience, they intersect in important ways: they influence how people encounter, interpret, and communicate religious ideas.

As scholars, we are uniquely positioned to explore these developments and their implications around the globe.

The work of RMIG is not about defending or condemning religion or media. Rather, it is about examining both with the intellectual seriousness and rigor they deserve.

At a time when public discourse is often characterized by rigid certainty, our scholarship reminds us of the value of curiosity, dialogue, and critical inquiry.

RMIG highlights

Those values will be reflected throughout this year’s RMIG programming at the AEJMC conference in New Orleans.

We begin on **Tuesday, Aug. 4**, from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., with our annual Sacred Spaces Tour, featuring a VIP guided visit to St. Louis Cathedral and the Old Ursuline Convent

Museum.

On **Wednesday, Aug. 5**, members can explore emerging scholarship during the Scholar-to-Scholar Poster Session (1:45–3 p.m.) and join our research panel, *Beyond Roux and Voodoo: Race, Religion and Food in a Southern Context* (3:30–4:45 p.m.), which examines questions of representation, culture, identity, and religion through a distinctly Southern lens.

Our programming continues on **Thursday, Aug. 6**, with *Covering Religion and Spirituality in the United States: Pedagogical Approaches for Journalism Ethics and Reporting Courses* (11:30 a.m.–12:45 p.m.). This teaching panel addresses the challenges and opportunities of integrating religion into journalism education at a moment when religious issues continue to shape public discourse in the United States and beyond.

Later that day, our *Top Refereed Research Paper Session* (4:45–6 p.m.) will showcase award-winning scholarship examining topics ranging from digital mental health support and disaster response to visual rhetoric and religious authority. We will then gather for our annual *Members’ Meeting* (6:30–7:30 p.m.), where members can connect, share ideas, and help shape the future of RMIG.

On **Friday, Aug. 7**, RMIG will host *Mediating Religious Identity: Representation, Meaning, and Misbelief Across Media Contexts* (8–9:15 a.m.), a refereed research session featuring work on social media, popular culture, history, and religious communication.

We will conclude our programming with *Compelling Faith: The Growing Tensions Between the Free Speech, Free Exercise, and Establishment Clauses of the First*

Amendment (3–4:15 p.m.), a timely panel examining some of the most significant legal and cultural debates surrounding religion in contemporary society.

Whether your interests are in digital religion, journalism, law, race, culture, history, emerging technologies, or communication theory, this year’s program reflects the breadth of our field.

I hope you will join us in New Orleans as we continue to ask difficult questions, share new research, and strengthen the scholarly community that makes RMIG such a vibrant intellectual home.

A growing community

Before closing, I would also like to extend an invitation to help our community continue to grow. Like many of my RMIG colleagues, I found my way to the RMIG family because someone took the time to welcome me, encourage my work, or introduce me to a community of scholars who shared similar interests.

If you know a colleague, graduate student, practitioner, or friend whose work touches on religion, spirituality, media, journalism, technology, culture, or communication, I hope you will consider inviting them to learn more about RMIG.

Our interest group is strengthened by the diversity of voices, perspectives, and experiences that its members bring.

By welcoming new members, we not only expand our organization but also help ensure that the study of religion and media remains inclusive and relevant for years to come at AEJMC.

RMIG Events at AEJMC26 in New Orleans

RMIG will stay busy in New Orleans

The Religion and Media Interest Group has a diverse range of programming for the 2026 AEJMC Conference in New Orleans. Here’s a brief rundown of events to help you plan those that are of most interest to you.

TUESDAY

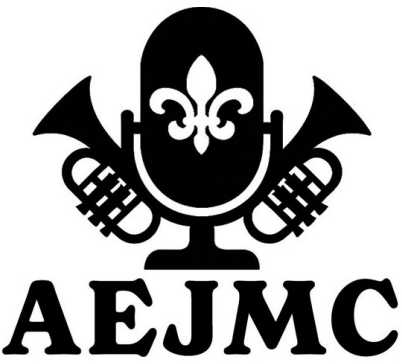
Aug. 4, 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.
RMIG Offsite: Sacred Spaces VIP Guided Tour of St. Louis Cathedral and Old Ursuline Convent Museum

Guests will enjoy a private guided experience inside the cathedral, exploring its history, architecture, and role at the heart of New Orleans for nearly 300 years. Immediately following the cathedral tour, the group will go to the convent museum for a visit as the doors open. This will be followed by a visit to the Voodoo Spiritual Temple. Space is limited. For questions, please contact Cylor Spaulding at cspaulding@Fullerton.edu. (RMIG) Pre-registration is required. Participants should wear comfortable footwear and dress for the area’s weather conditions.

WEDNESDAY

Aug. 5, 1:45 to 3 p.m.
RMIG and Communication Theory and Methodology, Cultural and Critical Studies, and History: PFR Panel Session: Scholar-to-Scholar (Poster) Refereed Research Paper Session

- Religion and Media Interest Group:**
- 40. **Digital Hybridity: The Mediatization of the Vietnamese Hau Dong Ritual in Pop Music.** Ha Ly Nguyen, Shanghai Jiao Tong University
 - 41. **The “Fortune Tellers” in Cyberspace: A Comparative Study of AI Divination Behavior and User Perception from a Cross-Cultural Perspective.** Bingqi Zhu, Shanghai International Studies University
 - 42. **Awareness and Acceptance of HPV**



New Orleans • August 2026

Vaccination Among Young Muslim Women in China: An Application of the Health Belief Model. Ruofei Gu, Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunication

Discussant
Cylor Spaulding, California State Fullerton

Aug. 5, 3:30 to 4:45 p.m.
RMIG and Minorities and Communication Division: Research Panel Session: Beyond Roux and Voodoo: Race, Religion and Food in a Southern Context

Moderating/Presiding
Rafael O. Matos, Northwestern

Panelists
From the Margins to the Center: Engaging in Decoloniality in High on the Hog & No Passport Required
Nahla Bendefaa, Oregon
Tewodros Workneh, Kent State

Reclaiming Edna Lewis
Teresa Moore, San Francisco

AI and Religion in the American South
Nihar Sreepada, Louisiana State

Voodoo and the American Press
Joseph B. Treaster, Miami

An examination of representation and misrepresentation of race, religion and culture, especially in the American South and other borders, real and imagined. the relationships between minority and majority cultures. Topics will include: a discussion of Debra Freeman’s documentary about Edna Lewis’s legacy among Black chefs and food writers; representations of the culinary histories of the African diaspora in global media;

Southern religion in an AI world; and how mainstream secular press portrays Voodoo within a secular and materialist culture.

THURSDAY

Aug. 6, 11:30 a.m. to 12:45 p.m.
RMIG and Media Ethics Division: Teaching Panel Session: Covering Religion and Spirituality in the United States: Pedagogical Approaches for Journalism Ethics and Reporting Courses

Moderating/Presiding
Kathryn Montalbano, Kentucky

Panelists
Allyson DeVito, Kentucky
Will Mari, Texas A&M

This teaching panel will be especially important with the growing coverage of religion stories in the United States despite the gradual decline of the religion beat, as reporters who work outside of this beat might refine their coverage of politics, sports, and more through a deeper understanding of this sociological pillar of U.S. culture and society.

Aug. 6, 4:45 p.m. to 6 p.m.
RMIG Top Refereed Research Paper Session

Moderating/Presiding
Omar Hammad, Rutgers

From Faith to Features: How Religious Affiliation Shapes Communication Preferences for Digital Mental Health Support in the U.S.*

Nathalie Laura Neuendorf, Katharina Angermayr, and Sebastian Scherr, University of Augsburg

Faith-based Organizational Networks in Disaster Response and Recovery: Opportunities for Cross-Sector Collaboration**

Xiaochen Zhang, Kehinde Adesina, and H M Murtuza, Oklahoma

The Future [of the Catholic Church] Is Female: Visual Rhetoric in Edward Berger’s “Conclave”***

RMIG Events at AEJMC26 in New Orleans

Erika Engstrom and Beecher Reuning, Kentucky, and Ralph Beliveau, Oklahoma

More than Transcendence: Techno-Salvationism and the Reconfiguration of Religious Authority in Asian Buddhism****

Yuheng Wang, National University of Singapore

Discussant
Rick C. Moore, Boise State

- * First Place Faculty Paper Award
- ** Second Place Faculty Paper Award
- *** Third Place Faculty Paper Award
- ****First Place Student Paper Award

Aug. 6, 6:30 to 7:30 p.m.
RMIG Business Session and Members’ Meeting

Moderating/Presiding
Omar Hammad, Rutgers

FRIDAY

Aug. 7, 8 to 9:15 a.m.
RMIG Refereed Research Paper Session: Mediating Religious Identity: Representation, Meaning, and Misbelief Across Media Contexts

Moderating/Presiding
Jordan Morehouse, Colorado Boulder

Faith in the Feed: Health Consciousness, Social Media Use, and Religiosity in Human Gene Editing Misbelief

Yujin Kim, Seoul National University, Heesoo Jang, Massachusetts-Amherst, Chul-joo Lee, Seoul National University, and Suhwoo Ahn, Kookmin University

Mormons Meming about Media: Mormonads’ Representations of Media and Pop Culture

David Scott, Utah Valley

Mediating an Endless Homesickness: The Infrastructure of Religious Communication Across the Taiwan Strait During the Japanese Colonial Period (1895–1945)

Yiran Liu and Jiuhui Liu, Peking University

What Must It Be Like to Grow Up That Beautiful?: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Jewish Femininity in The Nanny

Kyle Stanley and Lyric Mandell, Nevada
Digital Hybridity: The Mediatization of the Vietnamese Hau Dong Ritual in Pop Music

Ha Ly Nguyen, Shanghai Jiao Tong University

Discussant
Doug Mendenhall, Abilene Christian

Aug. 7, 9:45 to 11 a.m.
RMIG Scholar-to-Scholar (Poster) Refereed Research Paper Session

Reconciliation Through Care Ethics: The Role of Religious In-Group Identity in Organizational Culture Crises

Erika Schneider and Victoria Kyriakopoulos, Syracuse

Eschatological Velocity: Religion and the Iran War

Ibrahim Abusharif, Northwestern University in Qatar

Discussant
Jordan Morehouse, Colorado Boulder

Aug. 7, 3 to 4:15 p.m.
RMIG and the Law & Policy Division, Research Panel Session: Compelling Faith: The Growing Tensions Between the Free Speech, Free Exercise, and Establishment Clauses of the First Amendment

Moderating/Presiding
Kathryn Montalbano, Kentucky

Panelists
Rick Clifton Moore, Boise State
Israel Balderas, Elon
Susan Keith, Rutgers
Will Mari, Texas A&M

Recent Supreme Court rulings reveal intensifying conflicts among First Amendment clauses, equal protection, and civil rights laws. This panel examines how decisions such as Masterpiece and 303 Creative elevate religious expression, reshape debates over compelled speech, and influence disputes in schools and universities, exploring who may speak, under what conditions, and what legally counts as speech.

Please volunteer to write about one of RMIG’s events at AEJMC

As editor of Religion & Media Update, the official newsletter of RMIG, I set a high priority of keeping our members informed about our interest group’s role in the annual AEJMC Conference.

Update’s current edition, for example, is filled with news about upcoming panels and session and social events in New Orleans the first week of August.

However, for the next edition, due out in the fall, our attention will shift to recounting how the conference went, with stories about as many of the RMIG-related events as possible. Because I serve as editor of both this newsletter and that of the Small Programs Interest Group, I will spend most of the conference running from event to event, taking notes for both publications. It’s fun, but it’s a lot. So, if you will be in New Orleans for AEJMC in August, please consider volunteering to help me provide coverage by writing about an RMIG event you attend. They’re all listed on the following pages.

Your responsibility would be to listen, take notes, snap a picture or two on your phone, and write maybe 500-600 words explaining in a newsy format what happened.

Your deadline will be to complete in the next week or so after the conference ends.

If this sounds doable for you, just tell me before the conference in an email (doug.mendenhall@acu.edu) which event you’d like to volunteer to cover. I’m happy to answer any questions you have.

And I’ll thank you deeply.

– Doug Mendenhall

A letter from the RMIG Research Chair

New Orleans will offer a microcosm of our field's wide-ranging interests

By **Jordan Morehouse**

University of Colorado Boulder

Each year, the Religion and Media Interest Group offers a glimpse into the questions shaping our field. This year's program in New Orleans suggests that religion and media scholarship is both expanding and deepening, grappling with emerging technologies, revisiting enduring questions of identity and authority, and increasingly embracing global and interdisciplinary perspectives.

One theme that runs throughout this year's sessions is the growing entanglement of religion and technology. Artificial intelligence, digital mental health, social media, pop culture, and mediated rituals appear across the program in ways that suggest technology is a central concern for religion and media scholars.

Indeed, researchers are increasingly asking how technological systems influence religious meaning-making, reshape authority structures, alter health and communication practices, and create new spaces for community and identity formation.

At a moment when digital technologies are rapidly transforming everyday life, RMIG scholars are examining what these changes mean for religious communities and what religion can teach us about broader questions surrounding trust, ethics, belonging, and human connection.

At the same time, this year's program highlights the remarkable breadth of religion and media scholarship. The work represented in New Orleans spans historical and



Jordan Morehouse

contemporary contexts, critical and quantitative traditions, and organizational, interpersonal, and cultural levels of analysis.

Questions of representation, identity, health, crisis, memory, and public life appear throughout the sessions. Taken together, these projects remind us that religion and media scholarship cannot be confined to a single theory, method, or disciplinary boundary. Rather, it thrives because it brings diverse perspectives into conversation with one another.

The international character of RMIG is equally evident in this year's program. Presenters represent institutions across the United States, China, Singapore, South Korea, Vietnam, Germany, and Qatar.

Their work examines religious communication across cultural contexts and historical periods, reflecting both the global reach of contemporary media systems and the enduring importance of local contexts in shaping religious experience.

While the specific questions differ, many of the papers share common concerns about how people negotiate meaning, navigate uncertainty, and construct identities in an increasingly interconnected world.

Another encouraging feature of this year's conference is the visibility of emerging scholars. The program includes multiple research-in-prog-

ress projects alongside top student papers and award-winning scholarship. These presentations offer attendees an opportunity to engage with ideas at different stages of development – from promising new directions to fully realized projects recognized for their scholarly excellence.

They also serve as a reminder that some of the field's most exciting contributions often emerge from conversations across career stages, institutions, and methodological traditions.

Perhaps this is one of RMIG's greatest strengths.

The interest group has long served as a gathering place for scholars who might otherwise be scattered across divisions and disciplines. Historians, critical scholars, health communication researchers, organizational scholars, and digital media scholars all find common ground in conversations about religion and media.

The result is an intellectual community characterized by curiosity, generosity, and a shared commitment to understanding how religion continues to shape – and be shaped by – the media environments in which we live.

As you plan your conference schedule in New Orleans, we encourage you to engage in RMIG's poster sessions and paper presentations. Come ready to ask questions, challenge assumptions, make new connections, and perhaps encounter an idea you hadn't expected to find. If this year's program is any indication, the future of religion and media scholarship is intellectually vibrant and full of possibilities.

From the front page



Photo courtesy of Sheraton

The Sheraton New Orleans Hotel is located at 500 Canal Street, between the bustling Central Business District and the edge of the historic French Quarter. It's a two-block walk from Bourbon Street and within a 15-minute walk of major attractions including the Audubon Aquarium and the French Market.

Welcome: Join us at AEJMC, please

Continued from page 1

to support those embarking on these beginning stages of their careers.

We also are intentionally visible and present on our social media platforms as a means of showing the human faces behind the posts, emails, and conference programming.

It follows that we firmly believe in the power of human connection as vital to our mission of maintaining and growing our community.

It is in these small moments and exchanges at the conference and throughout the year that we learn

from one another and help each other grow as both scholars and human beings.

Through our conference programming, midwinter symposium, and other venues for sharing our work and ideas, we showcase the significance of the field of religion and media.

Religion is a central part of the human experience for so many people around the globe. As such, one cannot understand communication or media without also understanding – or at least considering – religion.

We invite you to be part of this

conversation at the annual conference in New Orleans in August. Swing by a panel, join our Sacred Spaces pre-conference or business meeting, or simply introduce yourself to one of the executive team members.

We can't wait to meet you!

Katie Montalbano is the communication chair (and a past head) of AEJMC's Religion and Media Interest Group. Her email is kathyrm.montalbano@uky.edu.