

# P12: Religious Organizations in the Public Sphere. Communication & Reputation in an Era of Digital Change

We cannot examine "Digital Religion(s)" without looking at the public spheres based on digital media within a democracy. The public spheres define how religions and their organizations are perceived, evaluated and how legitimate or illegitimate they appear.

Our project comprises two parts:  
**A)** An analysis of the reputational constitution of Christian organizations in digitized media arenas and  
**B)** the investigation of topic developments in the context of the meta-construct "religion" in digitized public spheres.

## Key Questions

### RQ1:

- How do digital and societal changes influence the communicative descriptions and thus the reputation of Christian organizations via legacy and social media?

### RQ2:

- In digitized public spheres, which topics come to the fore in discussions of religions and their organizations and how are their reputations in the media and among the population constituted?

## Methodological Approach

- Representative survey
- Manual content analysis
- Computational content analysis: Topic Modeling

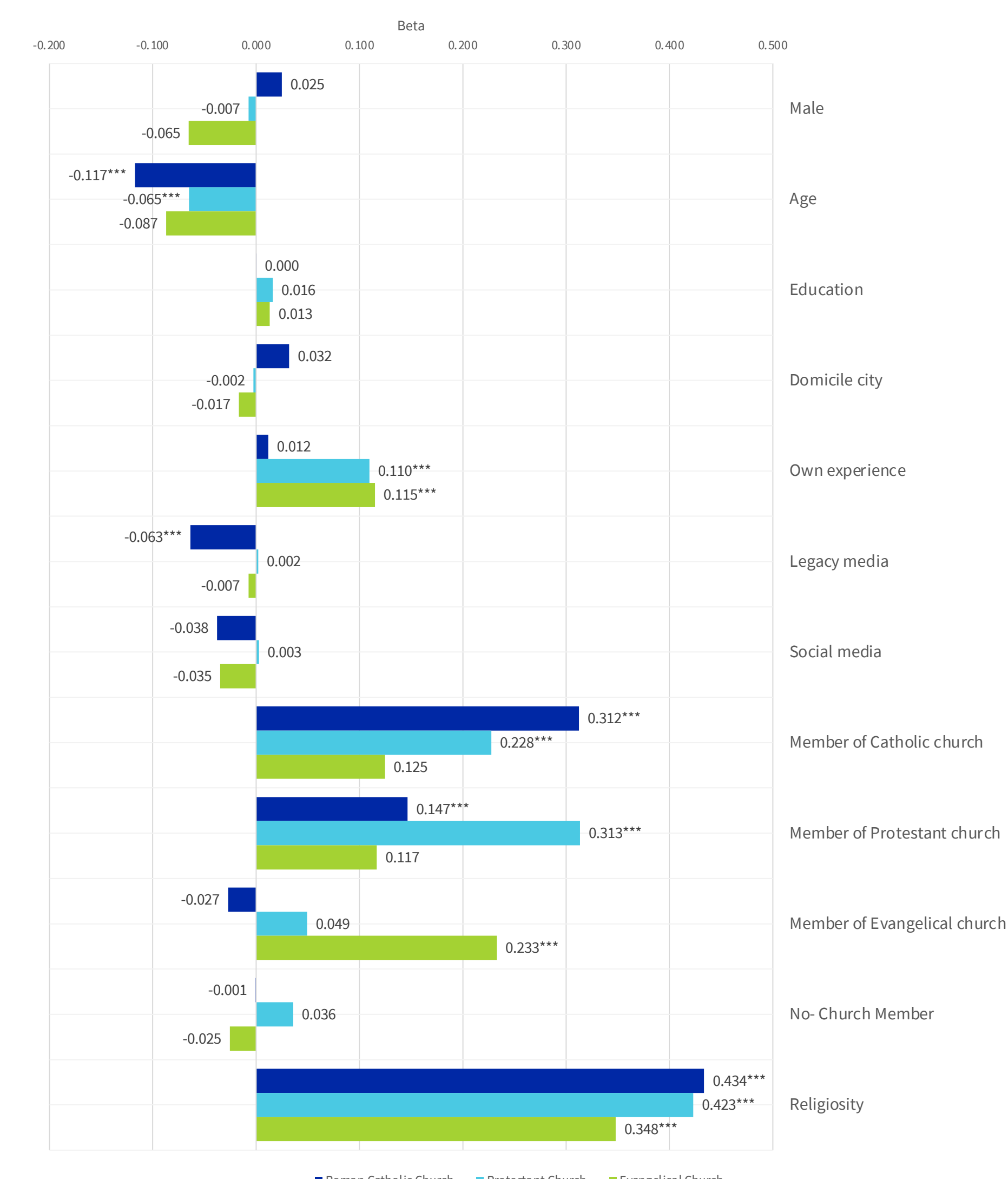


Fig.2: Regression Model: Reputational Configurations of the Roman Catholic Church, Protestant Church and Evangelical Church (Method: Survey)

The reputation of a societal actor (a person, an organization or an institution) is the result of a public assessment of criteria such as performance, social responsibility and the power of identification.



Fig.1: Church and Media @DALL-E

## Main Findings

### Reputation and Media Coverage of Churches and Religions

- Journalistic online media are more important in shaping the reputation of Christian churches than social media.** However, the most important factors in building reputation are interpersonal communication and personal experiences.
- The Roman Catholic Church and the Free Churches have a significantly poorer reputation among the Swiss population than the Protestant Reformed Churches. **The members of a church rate "their" own church better than other churches.** People with no religious affiliation rate churches significantly worse.
- The most important reputational dimension is the expressive one.** Notably, authenticity, inspiration, trustworthiness, and respect are critical factors in the evaluation of churches.
- In Swiss media, **the Catholic Church is reported on three to four times more frequently** than the Protestant Reformed Churches (religious affiliation 2022: 33% vs. 23%).
- The topic modeling revealed an increase in news coverage of Islam over the last two decades, while coverage of Christianity remained stable. In contrast to Christianity, **Islam is mentioned much more in contexts that damage its reputation** (war, terror, conflict, etc.).

## Contributions to URPP Objectives

- Our project investigates the reputation formation of Christian organizations **not only regarding the influence of digital sources, but also through other touchpoints** (such as journalistic online media, interpersonal communication, personal experiences). This allows us to more accurately determine the influence of digital versus non-digital communication/touchpoints.
- Our project focuses on the digitized media system of Switzerland with various sources (news media from all language regions; social media). The **empirical knowledge on the functioning of the Swiss media system** can be used by other URPP projects to contextualize their findings.

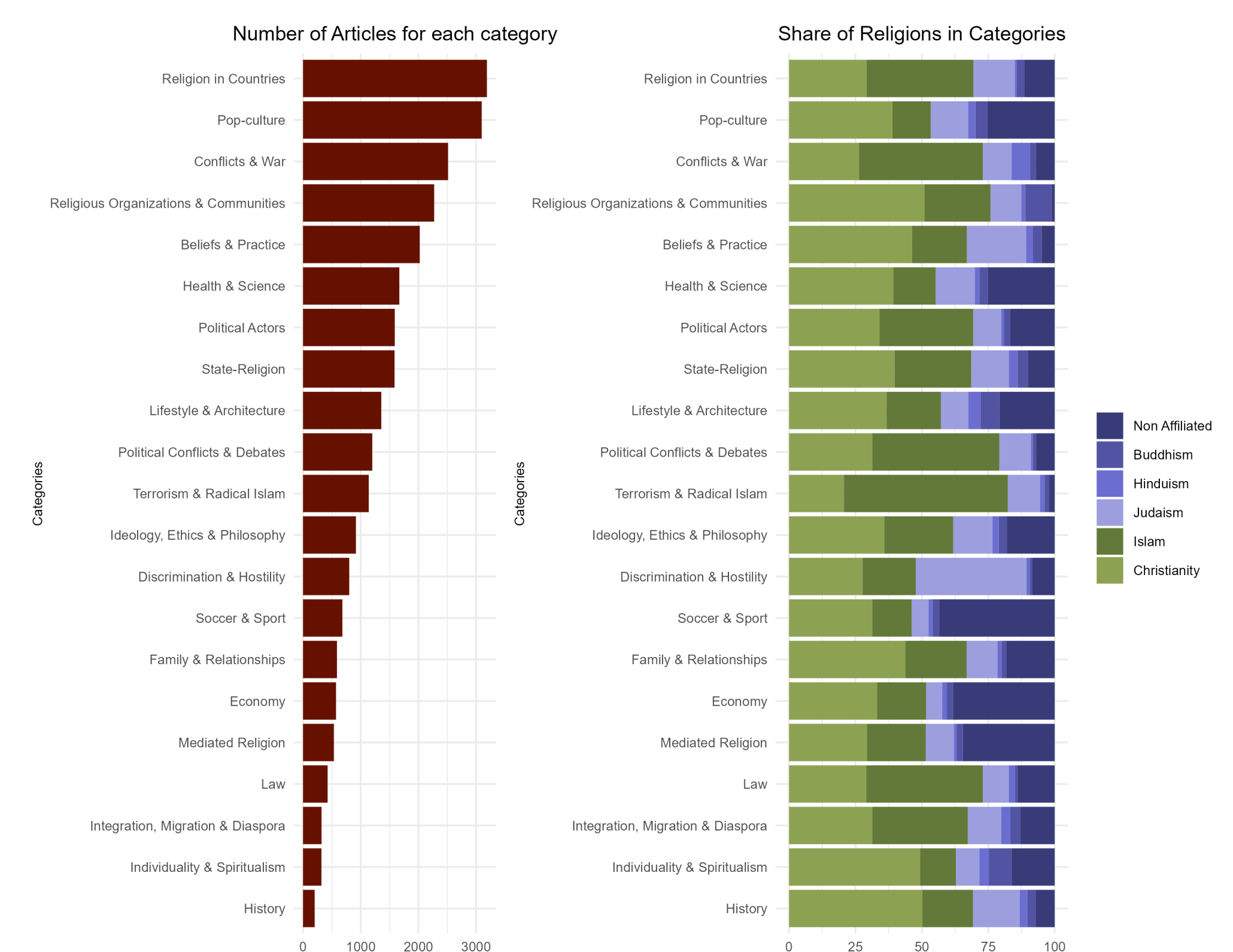
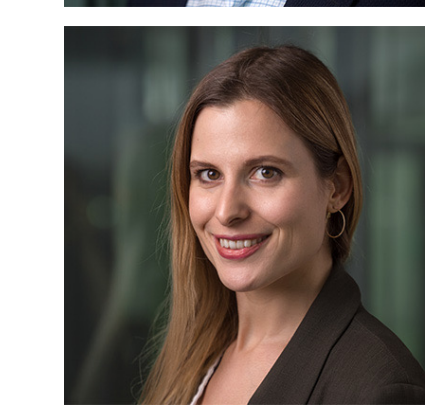


Fig.3: Prevalence of different categories in reporting on religion and distribution of the different religions inside the categories (Method: Topic Modeling and Word-Dictionaries)

## Team



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## Publications

- Rieser, R., Vogler, D., Eisenegger, M. (forthcoming). Constructing religion in Swiss news media – a longitudinal comparative analysis from 1998-2022.
- Rieser R., Schneider, J., Eisenegger, M. (forthcoming). The reputational configuration and dynamics of Christian Churches in Switzerland.
- Eisenegger, M., & Schäfer, M. S. (2023). Editorial: Reconceptualizing public sphere(s) in the digital age? On the role and future of public sphere theory. *Communication Theory*, 33 (2/3) <https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtad011>
- Fürst, S. & Rieser, R. (2023). Einstellungen gegenüber Medien. In: fög – Forschungszentrum Öffentlichkeit und Gesellschaft. Qualität der Medien. Basel: Schwabe, 143-150.
- Schwaiger, L., Schneider, J., Eisenegger, M., & Nchakga, C. (2022a). Verschwörung als Ersatzreligion? Religiosität, Spiritualität und Verschwörungsaffinität in Zeiten gesellschaftlicher Krisen. *Zeitschrift für Religion, Gesellschaft und Politik*, 1-22.
- Schwaiger, L., Schneider, J., Rauchfleisch, A., & Eisenegger, M. (2022b). Mindsets of conspiracy: A typology of affinities towards conspiracy myths in digital environments. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*.