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ПЕРСУАЗИВНЫЕ ХАРАКТЕРИСТИКИ РЕЛИГИОЗНЫХ ТЕКСТОВ (ОТ БИБЛИИ ДО ЦИФРОВЫХ ПРОПОВЕДЕЙ)

В настоящем исследовании рассматриваются особенности религиозных текстов (начиная с раннего периода до настоящего времени), определяющие их персуазивный характер. Цель статьи – описать стратегии убеждения, используемые в религиозных текстах, классифицировать их в соответствии с основными принципами аргументации и описать языковые средства, используемые для их реализации. Персуазивное воздействие рассматривается в статье как социальное взаимодействие, в рамках которого адресант влияет на адресата с целью изменить его отношение к предмету коммуникации, не ограничивая его свободу выбора. Убедительная аргументация основана на трех основных риторических принципах: логосе, этосе и пафосе. Авторы акцентируют важность этосного и пафосного компонентов для убедительности религиозных текстов, т. к. рациональная аргументация может происходить только в

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атмосфере эмоциональной вовлеченности. Исследование проведено в рамках лингвопрагматического подхода. Корпус для анализа включает в себя коллекцию религиозных текстов, общий объем которых составляет более 40000 слов. Рассматриваются 2315 случаев использования персуазивных стратегий. Проведенный анализ позволяет описать механизм убеждения, применяемый в религиозных текстах, а также проследить эволюцию персуазивных средств. Отмечается, что в рамках рассматриваемого периода религиозный дискурс развивался вместе с культурными представлениями о роли личности и ее благополучии. В отличие от ранних религиозных текстов и средневековых проповедей, которые продвигали идеи божественной власти и богобоязненности, современный цифровой религиозный дискурс ориентирован на аудиторию и акцентирует ее возможности. Этот сдвиг отражает более широкие культурные тенденции, среди которых эгоцентризм и возросшее самосознание имеют первостепенное значение. Также отмечается мультимодальный характер современного религиозного дискурса.

Ключевые слова: религиозный дискурс, проповедь, персуазивность, логос, этос, пафос, диахрония

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PERSUASIVE FEATURES OF RELIGIOUS TEXTS (FROM THE HOLY BIBLE TO DIGITAL SERMONS)

The present research conducted within the framework of lingua pragmatics studies persuasive features of religious texts from the Holy Bible to digital sermons of nowadays. The aim of the paper is to identify strategies of persuasion used in religious texts in the indicated historical periods, classify them in accordance with basic principles of argumentation and describe linguistic means used to realize them. The

corpus for the analysis comprises a collection of religious texts belonging to different historical periods. The volume of the corpus subjected to analysis exceeds 40 000 words, the total number of persuasive strategies retrieved from the corpus subjected to analysis is 2315. Persuasion is viewed in the article as a type of social interaction aimed at influencing the audience and change their attitudes and post-communicative behavior in an atmosphere of free choice. Persuasive argumentation is based on three major principles: logos, ethos and pathos. The authors emphasize the importance of the ethos and pathos components of persuasion as rational argumentation may occur only in an atmosphere of emotional engagement. The authors give ample examples and present a thorough analysis of the persuasion techniques used in the analyzed corpus. The analysis allows to describe the mechanism of persuasion used in religious texts and to trace the evolution of persuasive means. It is noted that within the period under consideration, religious discourse developed together with cultural ideas about the role of the individual and his well-being. Unlike early religious texts and medieval sermons that promoted ideas of divine authority and piety, modern digital religious discourse is focused on the audience and emphasizes its capabilities. This shift reflects broader cultural trends, among which egocentrism and increased self-awareness are of paramount importance. The multimodal nature of modern religious discourse is also noted.

Keywords: religious discourse, sermon, persuasion, logos, ethos, pathos, diachronic approach

Introduction

The purpose of religious discourse is not only to communicate theological doctrines, moral principles, and spiritual experiences, but also shape people's views and change their post-communicative behavior (Perloff, 2017). Persuasive in nature, religious texts emotionally inspire the audience to act and reflect. The composition of religious discourse largely depends on the specifics of the target audience, discourse objectives, subject matter, cultural issues and major rhetorical strategies used to achieve the set objectives (Капачик, 2002).

Institutional discourse is traditionally described as communication between social groups within the framework of a social institution. Religion as a social institution emerged in response to the need of people

to understand, explain the world around them and add purposefulness to their lives. Historically, religion united societies and formed states, it also provoked conflicts. In the modern world religion serves as a moral regulator. For worshipers, religious values are fundamental, religious dogmas serve as a set of rules of conduct and guide people in the choice of their life path. As a social institution, religion is one of the most strictly hierarchical and conservative formations. The peculiarity of religious communication consists in its participants. The Church and the clergy act as mediators in communication (Salakhova, 2013), there is always another participant invisibly present – God and it is God who is the source of truth or knowledge that the clergy aim to convey to laity. Another feature of religious discourse is its rigid hierarchical structure according to which participants are assigned unequal roles in communication. Role inequality is enhanced by the fact that the mediators' authority is generally recognized, because they are perceived as a medium for conveying sacred knowledge which is to be unconditionally accepted and taken for granted, that is *to believe*. Religious practices are directly related to the believer's emotions. Hence, the linguistic means used to describe these experiences: metaphors, symbolism, positively or negatively loaded evaluative vocabulary, means of enhancing emotional tension and persuasion.

Theoretical background

Religious discourse is characterized by a variety of linguistic means and communicative strategies aimed to shape the audience's opinion. The choice of vocabulary is essential to convey emotional appeal and moral authority. The wisely selected language items (e.g. metaphors – *the light of truth, the path to righteousness*) make abstract theological concepts more accessible to the audience, reinforce the morale conveyed in the message being communicated (Fadhil & Tala'a, 2018). Grammatical characteristics of religious texts also contribute to the created persuasive effect and congregation engagement. Use of parallel structures builds up on the rhythmic of the utterance: key messages are emphasized, spiritual truths are reinforced: e.g. *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Mathew 5:3)*. Imperatives serve to instruct and guide, imparting a sense of urgency, they necessitate immediate reaction from the audience: e.g. *Repent and be saved. Follow the path of righteousness*. Rhetorical questions contribute to critical assessment of religious teachings and correlate them with experience:

e.g. *Who among you is without sin?* They enhance engagement and foster the audience's aspiration to accept the suggested ideas (Adam, 2017). Personal and possessive pronouns are not deprived of persuasive potential either. Pronouns signaling in-group identity *we / us, our / ours* contribute to the sense of shared belief and strengthen spiritual bonds between the preacher and the congregation. The pronouns *you / yours* reinforce the idea of individual responsibility for achieving the goals set in the church teachings. Forms of addressing the audience may be indicative of the preacher's authority (*beloved congregation*) or reduce the gap between the preacher and the congregates, thus serving as another tool of building in-group identity (*brothers and sisters*). The preacher is viewed as the spiritual leader, his connection with the audience is strengthened, which results in deeper trust and respect for the message conveyed (Pak, 2022). Modality is another effective tool of shaping the audience's opinion and prompting them to act in accordance with the traditional theological teachings or/and with the guidelines of the religious leader. Strong deontic modals, such as *must, should, ought to* indicate a high level of obligation imposed by church teachings. The message is presented as a strong moral imperative and is to be accepted and taken for granted: e.g. *You must love your neighbor as yourself*. However, the imposition may be softened by using weaker modals to make the conveyed message less dogmatic: e.g. *One may consider forgiveness*. The use of *may* reduces the imposition of the message and presents it as recommendation rather than order. In many cases the mitigated form of a religious truth makes it more appealing to the audience, which enhances the persuasive potential of the religious text / sermon. The hedging effect can also be traced in the use of many other linguistic means used either in isolation or in clusters. The clusters "impersonal pronoun *it* + epistemic passive verb", e.g. *it is believed that* and "pronoun of indefinite reference + modal verb", e.g. *some may argue* attenuate the imposition of the proposition and emphasize personal autonomy. They give the congregation a feeling that the message conveyed should not be treated as dogmatic and that their own beliefs and experiences matter. Combinations of intensifying and hedging devices used for persuasion purposes make religious texts more flexible, thus, more appealing to a greater number of worshippers, especially those lacking in spiritual commitment (Adam, 2017). The interplay of explicit intensifiers and mitigated claims allows to present divine truth

as both unattainable and tangible, makes the audience feel inspired by the authority and, simultaneously, makes religious messages emotionally appealing. The balanced selection of language imparts the necessary degree of persuasive power to theological texts and religious sermons. Today, despite preserving traditional approaches to interpreting divine truth, religious leaders are looking for more effective ways to emotionally and intellectually engage their congregates, motivate them to follow ecclesiastical morale and spiritual rules. In this way a stronger connection between the preacher and the audience is established, based on communal goals and, equally, features respect for individual rights. Overall, various linguistic strategies build up on the persuasive potential of religious discourse, hence enhance the audience's faith and aspiration for moral transformation and spiritual growth (Fadhil & Tala'a, 2018; Pak, 2022). The past two centuries have been characterized by technological advances, shift in values, and an overall decrease in trust and respect for church and religion. These changes prompted a revision of ways religious messages are conveyed, perceived and interpreted. Emergence and development of mass media technologies has brought about revolutionary changes in ways divine truth is spread. In the early 20th century, televangelists O. Roberts and B. Graham turned to television as a medium for conveying religious content to reach broader audiences. The popularity of their programs was ensured by eloquent preaching, emotionality and calls for action.

Based on the goals of religious discourse V. I. Karasik (Karasik, 2002) identifies several genres: praying, clarification, confession, ritual, calling, affirmation and sermon. Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary defines *sermons* as speeches given by preachers, priests, ministers, or rabbis during religious services as religious or moral instructions. Traditionally, the sermon is described as a form of religious communication, the preacher's monologue addressed to laity. The sermon as a speech genre has certain characteristics that distinguish it from other genres, these include intertextuality, subject-matter restrictions, canonicity – any sermon must convey dogmas officially recognized by the Church and suggestiveness (Salakhova, 2013). H. Malmström (2015) describes sermons as performative persuasive social communicative activity conducted in a religious setting. Persuasive nature of preaching is undeniable as its ultimate goal is to persuasively

engage with the audience to inculcate in them understanding of truths to further affect individual experience (Malmström, 2015).

Religious and secular persuasive texts are intrinsically different.

Table 1. Differences between religious and secular discourses

Features	Religious Discourse	Secular Discourse
Source of authority	Divine revelation, precepts of sacred texts, religious leaders' teachings	Empirical data, scientific knowledge, rational argumentation
Appeal to	Faith	Human reasoning, expert opinion
Objectives:	Strengthen belief, reinforce spiritual identity, encourage moral transformation on the path to salvation	Shape rational personal or public opinions
Rhetorical strategies	Symbolism, allegory, use of parable	Logical structure, reference to statistics, historical analogy
Audience engagement	Shared beliefs	Universal human rights, scientific truth
Language	Elevated, poetic diction, theologically loaded vocabulary inspiring reverence	Neutral, target-specific language aimed to inform and motivate
Contextual sensitivity	High Specific cultural, historical and ritual frameworks	Low Adaptive frameworks, flexible

The distinction between religious and secular persuasive discourse is crucial for understanding the function, structure, and impact of different rhetorical practices. Religious discourse is marked by its theological anchoring, ritual grounding, and spiritual purpose, whereas secular discourse is shaped by empirical reasoning, pragmatic goals, and civic concerns.

Research into **persuasion** goes back to Aristotle's day when rhetoric started to gain popularity. Since then persuasive argumentation has been seen as based on three major principles: 1) *logos* pertaining to rational thinking; 2) *pathos* or appeal to emotions used to involve the audience, and 3) *ethos* or moral argumentation which presents the speaker as a trustworthy person (Dzyaloshinsky, 2012; Darics & Koller, 2018). The notion of persuasion refers to "an attempt to bring about a change in attitudes as a result of providing information on a topic (e.g. delivering a message)" (Petty & Briñol, 2015: 2). According to R. Petty and P. Briñol (2015), persuasion is predicated upon processes of cognition on the one hand and emotional appeal, on the other. Cognitive response (*logos*) relies on critical thinking. By providing factual information and argumentation the speaker may trigger cognitive responses from listeners, hence, motivate them to carefully inspect or scrutinize relevant information and make reasonable judgements. Such judgements may ultimately lead to changes in their attitudes and behavioral patterns. However, a more powerful tool of persuasion is the emotional appeal, or *pathos*. In religious discourse, *pathos* is aimed at evoking in the audience strong feelings of love, fear, awe, joy, guilt, hope, etc. These emotional responses are indispensable to religious communication. Religious messages touch the hearts of congregants, making them feel as if encountering with the divine. This view aligns with the argument that hedging and persuasion are not mutually exclusive strategies, they coexist in discourse as complementary mechanisms of influence, especially in ideologically charged contexts such as religious texts. Thus, despite the assertive character of religious messages, they may be flexible in terms of rhetoric to reach broader audiences. When used in religious settings, *pathos* contributes to a sense of unity among congregants. Appeal to communal experience, such as shared worship, communal hope or sorrow strengthens bonds within the religious community (Adam, 2017). Another feature crucial for persuasion is *ethos*, or the credibility of the preacher and religious text. Persuasiveness does not depend on the religious leader's personal virtues, but rather on their ability to represent the holy authority (Adam, 2017).

Methods and materials

For the purpose of the analysis a corpus of English religious texts has been collected and subjected to thorough qualitative analysis. Instances of persuasive strategies were classified according to their form and the

function they performed in the text. The classified instances were further subjected to statistical analysis, which allowed to count their frequencies and relevance for the persuasive effect the text produced on the audience. Religious texts for the corpus were obtained from: The Holy Bible: Authorized King James Version [Электронный ресурс] (Режим доступа: <https://www.sacred-texts.com/bib/kjv/>), Blue Letter Bible [Электронный ресурс] (Режим доступа: <https://www.blueletterbible.org/>), Edwards J. Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God [Электронный ресурс] (Режим доступа: <https://www.ccel.org/e/edwards/sermons/sinners.html>), eNotes.com. Jonathan Edwards: Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God [Электронный ресурс] (Режим доступа: <https://www.enotes.com/topics/sinners-angry-god>), Furtick S. God, Show Me What's Next [Sermon]. Elevation Church [Электронный ресурс] (Режим доступа: <https://sermons.love/steven-furtick/7864-steven-furtick-god-show-me-whats-next.html>), Keller T. Preaching Resources [Электронный ресурс] (Режим доступа: <https://www.timothykeller.com>), Edwards J. Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God. CCEL [Электронный ресурс] (Режим доступа: <https://www.ccel.org/e/edwards/sermons/sinners.html>), Wesley J. Sermons on Several Occasions [Электронный ресурс] (Режим доступа: <https://archive.org/details/sermonsonseveral01wesl/page/12/mode/2up>), as well as online sermons and DesiringGod.org. The volume of the corpus subjected to analysis exceeds 40 000 words, the total number of persuasive strategies retrieved is 2315.

Results and discussion

Early religious texts, the King James Bible (KJV) and early Christian sermons⁵ are ethos and pathos (Aristotle, in Perloff 2017) oriented and display a wide range of persuasive strategies. Even in the early days of its history the primary purpose of religious discourse was not only to communicate ideas, language was also viewed as a powerful tool of persuasion. Early Christian sermons and the KJV emphasize

⁵ Digital collections of early religious texts, the King James Bible (KJV) and Christian sermons, can be accessed via BibleGateway, or retrieved from the Christian Classics Ethereal Library (CCEL) and the Internet Sacred Text Archive.

appeal to divine authority, emotional engagement and morale. They feature a great degree of clarity and maintain strong hierarchical relationships between the author / speaker, usually associated with divine authority, and the audience. Early religious texts were designed to inculcate in the audience the importance of reflection, commitment and obedience. All levels of linguistic expression contribute to persuasiveness from morphological to rhetoric, metaphor and symbolism.

Features of early religious texts (given from most to least common).

Appeal to divine authority (including use of 3d person pronouns) – 156 e.g. <*The Lord hath spoken*> or <*Thus saith the Lord*>. Appeal to divine authority as a rhetorical strategy makes any admonishment from the part of the speaker justifiable and counteracts or silences any potential argument from the part of the audience. The speaker is perceived as a mouthpiece of divine will, thus reinforcing the legitimacy of the message.

- (1) Syntactic parallelism – 103 e.g. <*Blessed are the meek <...> Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness... Blessed are the pure in heart*> or <*Let the sea roar, and the fulness thereof <...> let the fields rejoice, and all that is therein*> is a widespread syntactic persuasive strategy, which reinforces key ideas and principles of morale. It imparts a sense of importance and rhythmic solemnity to the delivered message.
- (2) Binary oppositions – 94, <*Light vs darkness*> or <*Righteous vs wicked*> e.g. <*The way of the wicked is as darkness... But the path of the just is as the shining light*>, <*He that is not with me is against me*> abridge the audience's freedom of choice by making the opposition of two possible options stark clear, one of them being fatal or erroneous, as a rule. Negative choices are usually linked to possible repercussions / wages of sin such as anguish, ailment or death, mentioned with the aim of rising fears.
- (3) Use of imperatives and commands – 88, usually including second person address forms *thou* and *ye* – 96, e.g. <*Thou shalt not*> or <*Repent ye*>, <*Be ye holy*>, <*Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart*> <*Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?*> This form of imperative / command

usually reinforces the speaker's authority, pointing to the other party's lower status and necessitates obedience.

- (4) Metaphors and symbolism – 76, e.g. <Ye are *the light of the world*>, <Ye are the salt of the earth> or <*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want*> make abstract ideas palpably tangible, on the one hand, and impart high-flown manner and eminence to the text.
- (5) Rhetorical questions – 61, e.g. <*What is man?*>, <*How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation?*>, <*What is man, that thou art mindful of him?*>, <*Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?*> or <*How shall we escape?*> aim to foster introspection, prompting the audience to consider their own position in relation to the divine.

Table 2. Features of early religious texts

Appeal to divine authority	156
Syntactic parallelism	103
Second person address forms <i>thou</i> and <i>ye</i>	96
Binary oppositions	94
Use of imperatives and commands	88
Metaphors and symbolism	76
Rhetorical questions	61

The vocabulary used can be described as evaluative *wicked, unclean, righteous, pure*; sacred / emotive e.g. *blessed, holy, salvation, damnation, repent, repentance, exhort, exhortation, judgment*; eschatological e.g. *hell, fatal, death* or describing apocalyptic scenarios.

Early religious discourse is formal and authoritarian, texts feature high-flown elevated language, heavily influenced by Latin. They emphasize doctrinal accuracy, theological rigor and rigid hierarchical relationship between the clergy and laity, who relied on the church for interpretation and understanding of religious texts. The purpose of religious texts was to invoke awe and respect for the divine, promote doctrinal authority and purity, reinforce the authority of morale and the church through complex theological arguments.

The analysis of earlier religious texts enhances our understanding of how persuasive strategies evolved in later periods. Subsequent analysis

provides insights into why earlier texts laid the foundations for emotionally intense audience-focused strategies that emerged in the revivalist era.

The 18-th century saw the rise of revivalist and evangelical preaching driven by the scholarly and religious effort of some prominent figures of the time among whom are B. Sunday (*The Real Billy Sunday*), J. Wesley (*Sermons on Several Occasions*) and J. Edwards (*Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*). This period brought about changes in religious language, which signaled a major shift in the role of speaker-audience relationship, making it more audience-oriented, less authoritative and more emotionally charged with the focus on personal engagement, transformation and will. Revivalist rhetoric in the form of personal testimonies and narratives becomes more experience focused. Preachers not only relate and translate God's precepts, but they also tell their own stories of spiritual transformation, making them trustworthy figures. The effect is reinforced using plain declarative language that eliminates any theological complexity to make messages more succinct and understandable. However, revivalist texts are not devoid of imagery, descriptions of acts that incur God's wrath and the pains of the damned aimed to refuel the audience's fears and underscore the necessity of instantaneous effort towards change, this amplifies emotional appeal created by love, hope, fear and guilt. These emotions are regarded as visceral, related to self-containment and personal commitment, those able to bring a person to the path of salvation. Revivalist discourse stands in stark contrast to earlier religious texts often described as formal, restrained, centered on tenets of doctrine, morale and absolute truth.

Features of revivalist and evangelical preaching (given from most to least common).

- (1) Eschatological and apocalyptic narrative intended to escalate tension and elicit emotional response from the audience – 179, e.g. *<The bow of God's wrath is bent, and the arrow made ready on the string... and it is nothing but the mere pleasure of God <...> that keeps the arrow one moment from being made drunk with your blood>* (J. Edwards, 1741).
- (2) Audience engagement and direct address (use of 2nd person pronouns) – 102, e.g. *<You are hanging by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it <...> and you have*

nothing to hold on to>. Direct address intensifies immediate threat, gives the audience to understand that they are morally endangered, enhances introspection and prompts immediate action towards salvation, encouraging individuals to o live lives of faith, unimpeachable moral rectitude and integrity. The next example features a combination of strategies: <*You say you love God – but do you obey Him?*> Direct address, rhetorical questioning and binary opposition.

- (3) Binary opposition – 88, e.g. <*Heaven is real, hell is real. You will go to one. There is no middle ground*>. Binary logic seen in <Heaven or hell> or <Christ or chaos> aims to simplify complex theological concepts, make the process of decision-making easier for the audience, abridge the audience’s freedom of choice.
- (4) Syntactic parallelism and tripling – 87, e.g. <*You must repent. You must believe. You must surrender*>
- (5) Testimonial Narrative (Appeal to experience) – 65, e.g. <*I remember the day I laid it all at the feet of Jesus <...> I wept, and for the first time, I knew peace*>, <*I used to hate the gospel <...> now I live by it*>.
- (6) Rhetorical questions – 57, e.g. <*What will you say before the Lord?*>
- (7) Hyperbole – 36, e.g. <*The Devil is real! The Devil is in this city! The Devil is after your soul!*> draws the unseen into immediate reality, intensifies threat and proximity, creates the effect of something looming.

Table 3. Features of revivalist and evangelical preaching

Eschatological and apocalyptic narrative	179
Audience engagement and direct address	102
Binary opposition	88
Syntactic parallelism and tripling	87
Testimonial Narrative (Appeal to experience)	65
Rhetorical questions	57
Hyperbole	36

Overall, revivalist and evangelical preaching may be described as awe and fear-driven discourse. The key persuasive strategy is Appeal to fear, for example J. Edwards in the renowned sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” described sinners as being *<held over the pit of hell by a slender thread>*, this was intended to emphasize their precarious position and bring them to the path of salvation to seek redemption before it was too late. J. Edwards's use of metaphors *<loathsome insects held over a fire>* served to illustrate how fragile human existence was in the face of God's wrath, e.g. *<the flames of the wrath of God>* and *<the black cloud of God's wrath>*. Revivalist and evangelical preachers tended to provide vivid descriptions of heaven and hell, the joys of salvation, and torments of sin and eternal damnation to elicit strong emotional responses from the audience which, as they thought, would bring about the intended changes in their behavior.

A comparison of early religious revivalist and evangelical texts allows to conclude the following.

Table 4. Analysis of early religious revivalist and evangelical texts

Early religious texts	Revivalist and evangelical texts
The author of religious texts is portrayed as a prophet of the divine, advocate of God’s ideas and a person vested with power to translate God’s ideas.	Preachers take on the role of witnesses or exhorters who know from experience how to find the path to salvation, they directly prompt the audience to follow them along the path of change.
Emotional focus on fear, awe, God’s wrath and judgment, emphasis on divine authority and the repercussions of sin.	Necessity of transformation and change, empathy, urgency and possibility of salvation.
Archaic sacred vocabulary, often Latin.	A mingling of biblical and everyday vocabulary, which made religious texts more accessible to wider audiences
Complex and scriptural sentence structure, challenging for the audience.	Short, rhythmically arranged sentences that are easy to perceive, process and memorize, aiding to oral delivery, with

	instances of syntactic parallelism and tripling used for intensification purposes.
Monological, imperative, distant. The genre is liturgical sermons.	Dialogical, engaging, directly addressing the audience and inviting them to contemplate their lives. These texts feature genre expansion to include personal testimonies, tractates, and revival speeches.
Delivered orally or via church manuscripts within religious communities.	Reached broader audiences via printed media, mass preaching, and even early recording.

Contemporary Religious Discourse is associated with the names of P. Washer, Bishop D. Sanborn, Bishop T.D. Jakes, C. Conlon, Ch. Ripperge, D. Wilkerson, Dr Ch. Stanley, S. Anderson, T. Evans, S. Furtick, S. J. Roberts, and many other online preachers whose texts can be found on digital platforms. Technological advancements of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the rise of social media and digital platforms have made religious discourse more accessible, enabling religious leaders to reach wider, more diverse audiences, target them online and create real-time tailored messages. One of the aims of modern religious discourse is to enhance its relevance to modern life and attract the younger generation. This is reflected at all stages of text creation, from the choice of the topic for discussion – vegetarianism, ecological problems, Internet use, politic behavior, love, self, money, leadership, etc. – to persuasive language used in digital sermons. Issues related to mental health, personal growth and empowerment, discovery of self and inclusion have become particularly common. Digital religious discourse indicates a further shift towards emotional appeal, but unlike revivalists’ texts which urged the audience to seek salvation and deliverance from sin, contemporary religious discourse relies on intimacy, emotional support and engagement, it signals significant transformations in the speaker’s role, the importance of rapport and elevated role of the audience. Contemporary self-centered audiences, particularly the younger generation, show a distinct preference for audience oriented persuasive strategies which make them feel valued. The relevance of

emotional appeal to doctrinal authority, God's wrath or the wages of sin has dwindled over the past decades. The advent of digital interactive platforms has made it possible for religious leaders to create internet feeds where audiences share personal experiences, comments, estimates and evaluate content, making them active participants of the persuasive act. Accessibility of content materials and facilities offered by social media make religious texts more targeted, tailored to the audience's emotional and psychological needs. Most persuasive sermons are built on the following pattern: they comprise the introduction (introduces the topic of the sermon), the main part (justifies the choice of the subject and reveals its meaning), moral application (moral conclusions drawn from the discussed experience that could be applied in life) and conclusion (logical and psychological insights that echo the ideas expressed in the introduction and frame the contents of the sermon. In his work "Preaching in uncertain terms" H. Malmström (2015) [Malmström, 2015] changes which have occurred within the western preaching tradition over the past few decades. The author describes these changes as *stance* changes which have affected linguistic expression of attitude or commitment towards a proposition. These changes may be described as (1) The 'turn-to-the-listener' preaching paradigm and (2) The modern sermon has departed from the traditional assertive way of declaring the truth, the aim of religion is perceived as supporting and convincing listeners of the truth of its dogmas, giving them freedom to either accept them or not.

Features of contemporary religious discourse (given from most to least common).

There has been a significant rise in the number of language elements which are traditionally referred to the class of hedges – 229 (Fraser, 2010; Hinkel, 2005; Lakoff, 1972; Malmström, 2015; Markkanen & Schröder, 1997), e.g. <For the next 60 seconds I want everything that's got breath in your body and ashes under your feet to just worship God, any kind of way you feel it, any kind of way you experience, any kind of way you want to express it, just come on you got 45 seconds to just do this>. This text also features instances of tripling.

- (1) Enhanced attention the ethos component of persuasion – 176, seen in such strategies as:

-Projection of the speaker's self, e.g. *In the tradition I was born into, and in which I live today, men and women don't shake hands with*

each other. That's the kind of life I want to have <...>;

-Appeal to experience, e.g. *One day, when I was walking down the street with one of my teachers, we were approached by a young couple; I once knew an elderly couple whose marriage seemed to be terrible <...>;*

-Appeal to communal activity, e.g. *To God we may say <...>;*

-Appeal to authority, e.g. <Therefore, say to the house of Israel, thus says the lord God> or <Now he says something very important here, in verses in verse 24, he says: "And I will take you from the nation's gather you from all the lands and bring you into your own land". Now this is very important>.

- (2) Use of 2nd person address *you* to create a sense of direct engagement, encouragement and inclusion – 152, e.g. <You are not your failure. You are God's masterpiece>.
- (3) Narratives of personal growth, transformation, mental health and empowerment. Emphasis on God's unconditional love and support. Indication of positive outcomes – 143, e.g. <Stop counting yourself out – God already counted you in>, <You are loved. Period. ❤️ #FaithOverFear #GodIsGood>, <God does His best work when you feel the weakest>, <God can use this too – even the things that don't make sense yet> or <You will survive this storm>. Faith is portrayed as a path to inner peace, healing and a sense of purposefulness, rather than obedience to divine law. This rhetorical shift reflects broader cultural trends, including the growth of therapeutic language and spirituality.
- (4) Syntactic parallelism and Tripling – 141, e.g. <That is not true. Young people let me ask you a question: how do you know that you're Christian? How do you know that you have truly come to know Christ? How do you know that if you died right now you would go to heaven and be accepted by God Almighty before his throne? How do you know... You say, well, it's all of grace. Yes, it is all of grace. We are not saved by works, we are saved by grace, we are saved by believing the promises of the gospel>.
- (5) Metaphor and Symbolism – 68, e.g. <I don't know what storm you're going through, but Jesus is in your boat>.

- (6) Use of hashtags, emojis, and digital cues – 64, e.g. <You are loved. Period. ❤️ #FaithOverFear #GodIsGood or Drop a 🙏 if this word hit home>.
- (7) Cultural intertextuality, reference to modern pop and youth culture – 54, e.g. <Even when it feels like Netflix is more comforting than the Bible - don't stop seeking>.

Table 5. Features of contemporary religious discourse

Linguistic hedging	229
Ethos strategies of persuasion	176
Use of 2 nd person address <i>you</i>	152
Narratives of personal growth, transformation, mental health and empowerment	143
Syntactic parallelism and Tripling	141
Metaphor and Symbolism	68
Use of hashtags, emojis, digital cues and graphics	64
Reference to modern pop and youth culture	54

Conclusion

Throughout its history religious discourse has evolved together with cultural perceptions of the role of individuals and their well-being. Unlike early religious texts which projected the power of divine authority and the fear-driven rhetoric of Medieval sermons, contemporary digital religious discourse tends to be audience oriented and empowering. This shift mirrors broader cultural trends, among which egocentrism and increased self-awareness are of paramount importance. This has necessitated attention to audience engagement and interactivity. Language has become simplified both in terms of content and syntactic structure, the formal high-flown and theologically dense language of traditional religious literature has been supplanted by easily understood motivational sermons aimed at eliciting emotional response from diverse audiences. Contemporary religious discourse is a multimodal form of communication because it is impregnated with emojis, visual or animated images and graphics, contemporary digital content materials often incorporate elements of pop and mass culture, making them more up-to-date and culturally relevant. Similarly, persuasion has evolved from a purely verbal activity to a multimodal experience.

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