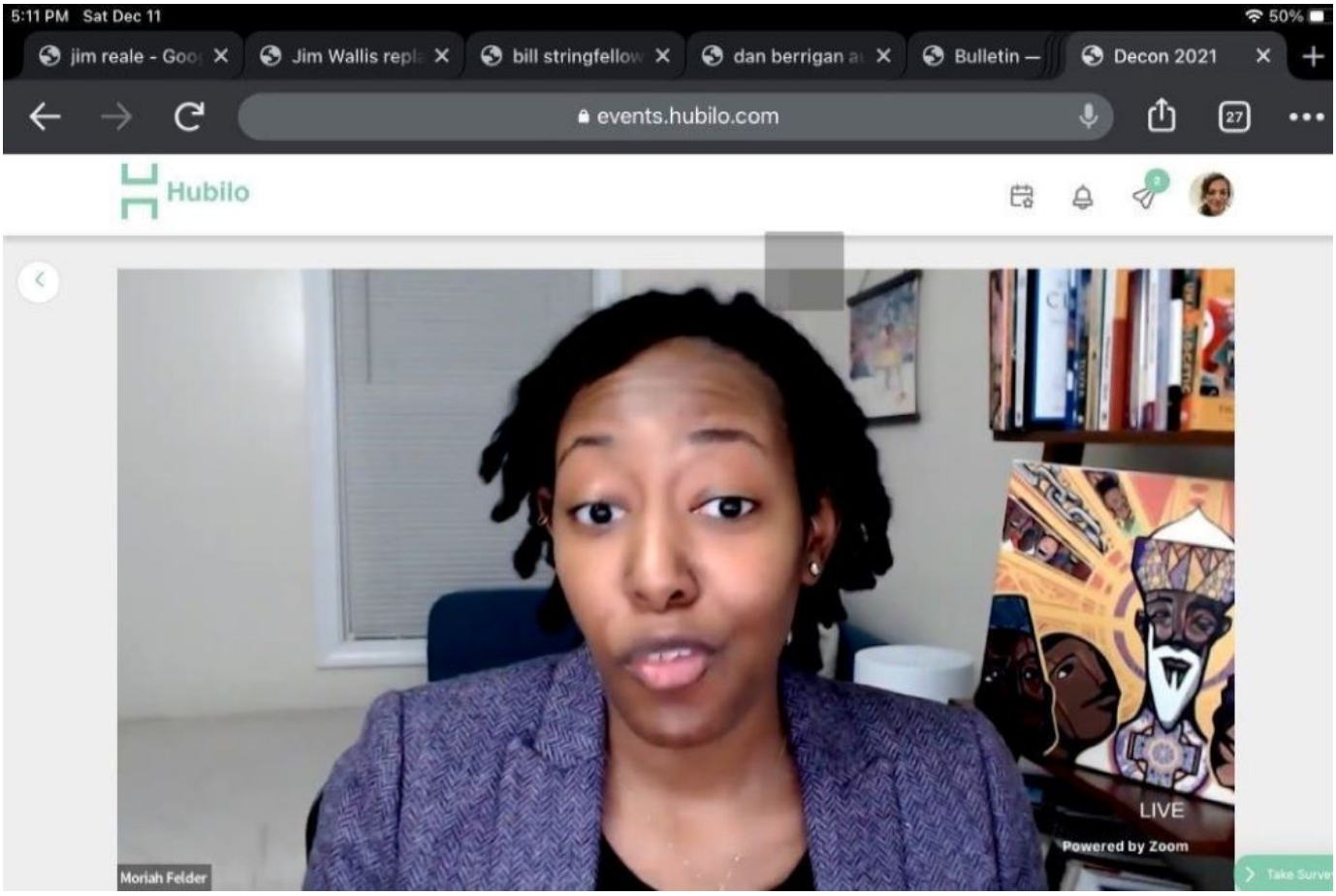


Moriah Felder, known as TikTok's Rev. Riah (@revriah), is a minister in the Vineyard Church movement. (NCR screenshot)



by Renée Roden

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Move over funny dances and milk carton challenges. Academic conferences may be the hottest new TikTok trend.

After less than six months of planning, four TikTok creators put on an online conference in December. Decon 2021 brought together some of the brightest TikTok stars of the "deconstruction" TikTok community for pastoral and academic conference sessions on race, gender and liberating faith from abusive theology.

TikTok, which quickly gained popularity after it became available in the U.S. in 2018, is a video-based social media site where creators make 15-second to three-minute videos dancing, completing challenges or talking.

TikTokkers to watch on Catholic theology and deconstruction

@theologiaviatorum
@torybae
@revriah
@johndoenobody
@Red_sage1
@jcrummusic
@mr.leadwithlove

"I make these videos to train myself to communicate something significant in a short period of time," said Matthew Benfield (@theologiaviatorum), a former member of the Church of Christ and now a Catholic who uses the platform to connect with others about Catholic theology and deconstruction.

"Deconstruction" is a broad term for spiritual seekers, often raised Christian, who are sorting through the various "isms" that they have absorbed with their childhood faith — fundamentalism, sexism, homophobia and racism, among others — and trying to find a new version of belief free of those ideologies.

Many of the TikTok creators found deconstruction through the app itself, watching others' videos, hearing an unfamiliar term and realizing it applied to them.

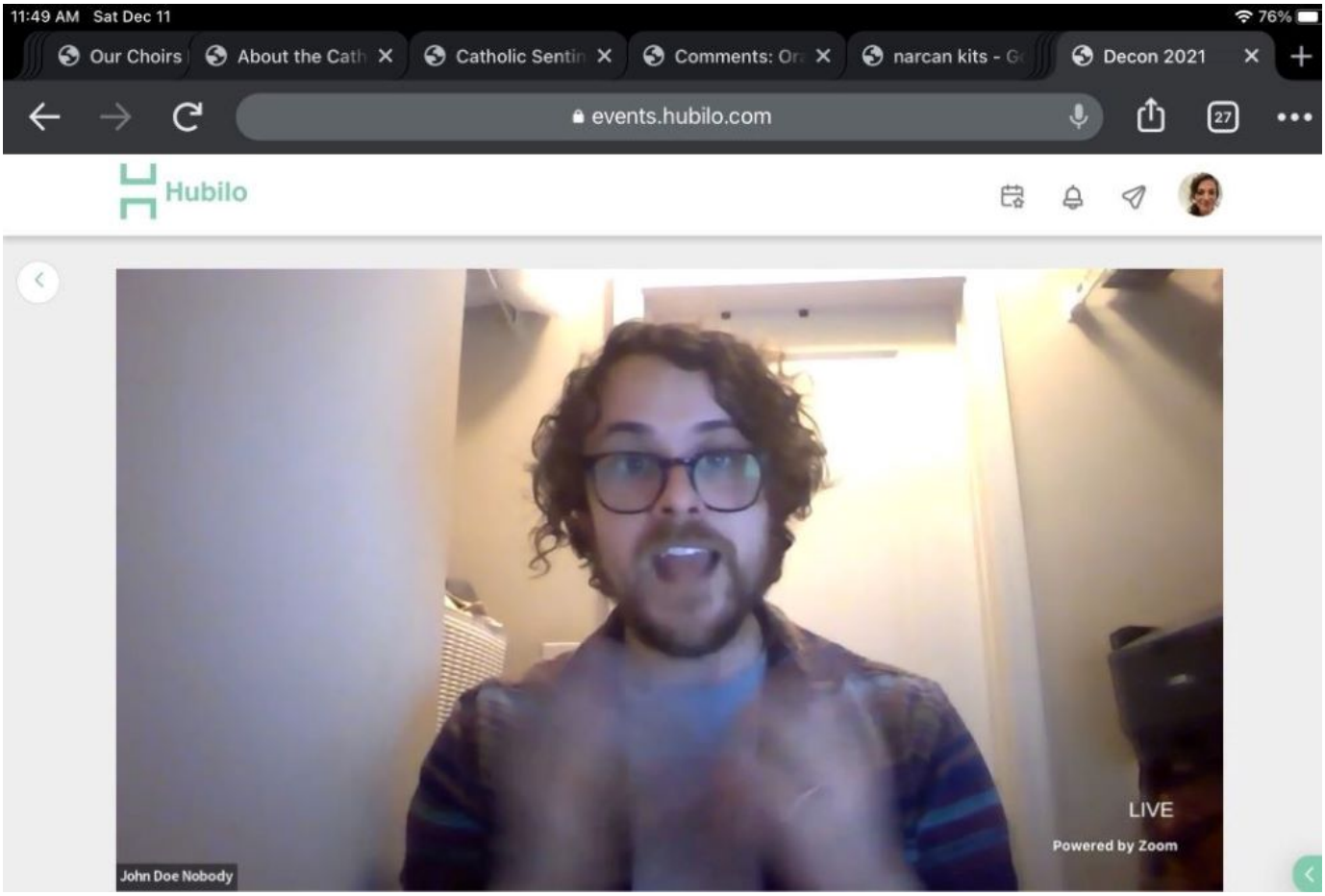
Catholic "creators" aren't as common in the deconstruction movement, but a handful of content creators exist in both the deconstruction and Catholicism

communities. Benfield is one of them.

In his TikTok videos Benfield offers a short exegesis on C.S. Lewis or an analysis of religion through the lens of philosopher Jacques Derrida, often while sporting a kerchief and flanked by several crucifixes.

Benfield was a preacher at Church of Christ parishes in Mississippi and Texas for 10 years. Benfield said reading Lewis began to chip away at his certainties. After an experience visiting a Catholic church on a service trip in Mexico, he was shaken. "I felt like I had entered a holy place," he told NCR. "And I just was kind of like electrified."

Benfield was fired from his position as a preacher at a Church of Christ parish in Lubbock, Texas, a year ago. Although he was not given a clear reason, he believes it was in response to his pastoral style. And he knows his more "Catholic" practices — such as praying the Our Father and Apostles Creed — had sparked some discontent.



ikTok creator John Doe Nobody (@johndoenobody), a former minister in Baptist and evangelical churches, during the conference for the platform's "deconstruction"

community. (NCR screenshot)

Benfield walked down the block to the local Catholic parish and told the pastor he wanted to convert. Benfield is now part of the church's Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults. He bought a ticket for Decon 2021 at the invitation of organizer ToryBae (@torybae) and others. The day of the conference, he was unable to attend because of his work as a FedEx driver.

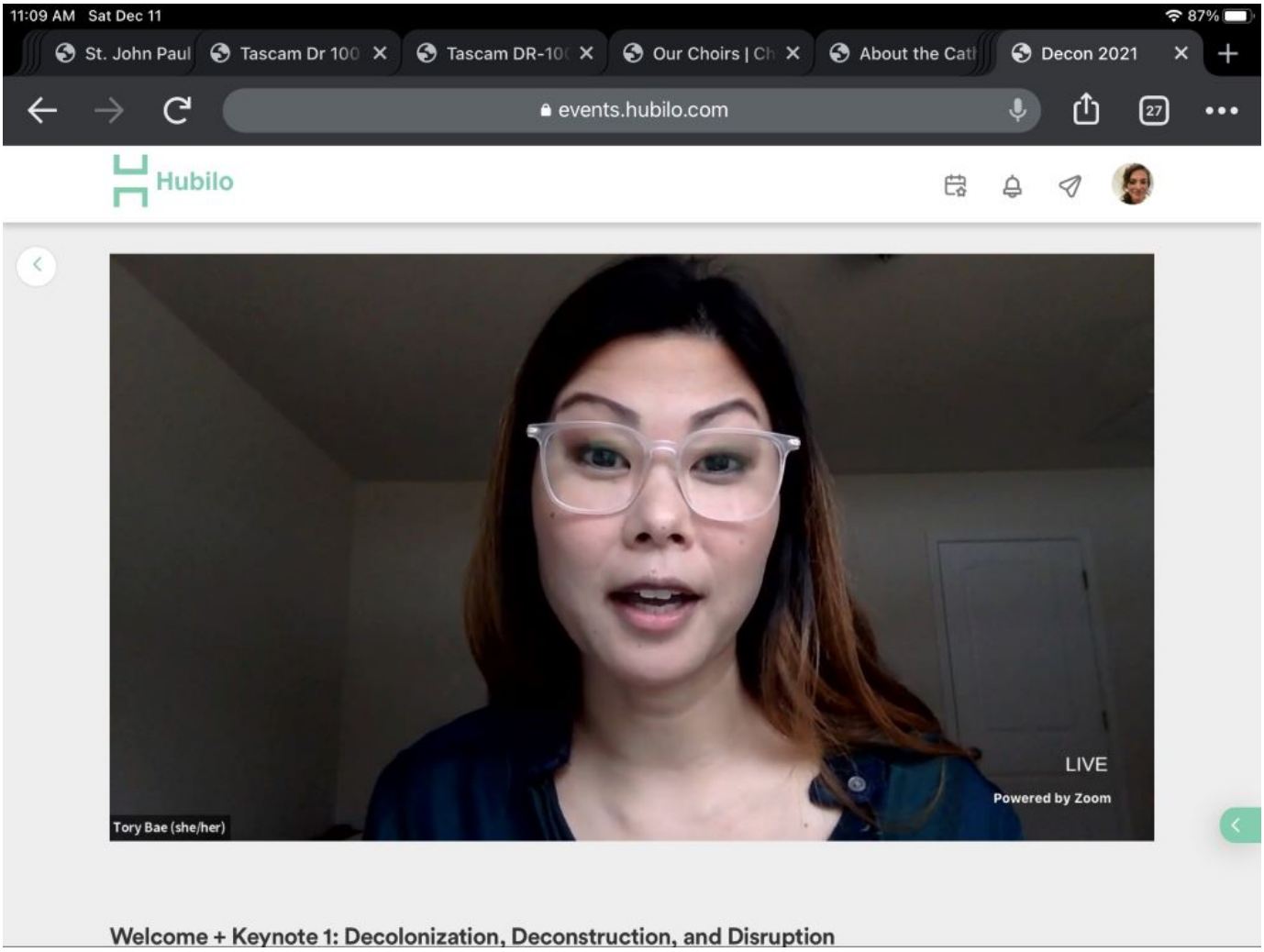
Benfield thinks some Catholic tradition can provide a sense of continuity for an often disjointed deconstruction community, "Because you can't decide what direction you're all wanting to go in, you can't help each other go in that particular direction," he said. "In the midst of the great support you get, there's kind of a lack of support."

"The community is — and I don't mean this in a negative way at all — it's messy," Moriah Felder (@revriah) said, describing deconstruction in a Zoom interview. But there's camaraderie in sorting through the messy entanglements of faith and systems of oppression. "It's really productive — we're all doing the same messy work together," said Rev. Riah, a minister in the Vineyard Movement.

TikTok creator John Doe Nobody (@johndoenobody), a former minister in Baptist and evangelical churches, had been actively participating in the deconstruction conversation on TikTok for about a year. Then, in June, he decided to do something more. "I felt like, are we talking in circles on the internet or are we actually doing anything with this?" John said in a Zoom interview. He began reaching out to other creators and found eager co-conspirators.

"I kept expecting to be told 'no,' only to find people were more excited about this than I was," said John, who like a number of TikTok creators prefers to not use his real name so he can express his views in public without fear of career repercussions.

Roughly 480 people from Canada to Sweden filled the virtual seats for Decon 2021: a conference app, Hubilo. It featured many amenities of a real academic conference: exhibit booths, a lounge and multiple simultaneous breakout sessions.



TikTok creator ToryBae (@torybae) helped organize the conference for the platform's "deconstruction" community. (NCR screenshot)

But the day was far more effusive than a regular academic conference. Speakers exuded love, affirmation and inclusion. Andrew (@Red_sage1), an ordained Christian minister now community organizer who helped organize the conference and also does not use his real name on TikTok, said that conferencegoers told them, "What made me excluded in other communities made me feel a part of this one."

Andrew felt that this conference demonstrated the organizing muscle of the deconstruction movement. "People are tired of waiting for structures that have their own power to decide that they are valuable enough to be invited at the table," he said.

Heidi Campbell, a professor of communications at Texas A&M University, said young people like those taking part in the TikTok deconstruction community are showing how the internet is transforming the experience of religion for digital natives.

The internet, she said, is an environment where authority is often attached to how much attention an author can attract rather than how much training they have.

"For the last five years, we've been talking about the 'nones,' but now we're seeing the rise of 'dones,' " said Campbell. "They're saying, 'I'm still evangelical or Baptist or Catholic, but I'm so done with the church, with the way the structures work.' "

> 'TikTok allows the spiritual 'dones' to flourish — you don't have to go through seminary or have someone recognize your spiritual gifts — you can just go out there and do it.'
> —Heidi Campbell
>
> Tweet this

Young people can now preach and lead prayer outside of physical or institutional church structures.

"TikTok allows the spiritual 'dones' to flourish — you don't have to go through seminary or have someone recognize your spiritual gifts — you can just go out there and do it," Campbell said.

Speakers at the conference shared their own spiritual journeys, described their experiences of racism or homophobia in the institutional church, and grounded their queer or Black liberation in biblical texts. In a session titled "Black Guy, White Jesus," session leaders and rap artists J.Crum (@jcrummusic) and K!D Casper (@mr.leadwithlove) discussed their experiences as Black hristians.

"We live in an anti-Black society," said K!D Casper, "And one of the earliest lies that we receive on that Christianity is a white man's religion."

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One gift of deconstruction that Benfield believes Catholics can learn from is the ability to listen to the marginalized. "The deconstruction community is replete with

people whose voices have been muted and it emboldens them: There's a place here where they're not coerced into agreement with others in the community."

Rev. Riah, who gave the final keynote on womanist theology, said the main thing she hoped audience members took away from her talk was community. "We are not alone in our question-asking," she said. "All of us desire to be loved even in our questioning and not knowing exactly where we fit. And sometimes that community is strangers on social media."

Although there's often no single answer to anything in the deconstruction community, Rev. Riah summarized her own goal for deconstructing, which many Catholics and Deconstruction subscribers might agree with: "passing on a faith that doesn't have to be deconstructed."