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Reading Religion in Internet Memes

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Abstract

This article provides a preliminary report of a study of religious-oriented internet memes and seeks to identify the common communication styles, interpretive practices and messages about religion communicated in this digital medium. These findings argue that memes provide an important sphere for investigating and understanding religious meaning-making online, which expresses key attributes of participatory culture and trends towards lived religion.

Keywords: humor, internet, lived religion, memes, participatory culture

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Introduction

This paper presents the preliminary findings from a comparative study of religious-oriented internet memes. While scholars within internet studies have begun to give attention to memes as a unique form of online communication (i.e. Shifman 2013; Börzsei 2013) no published scholarly work on the study of religion and internet memes could be found at the offset of this research. Therefore a need exists for a general mapping of religious-oriented memes and issues raised by researching such memes. These issues are related to communication styles and interpretive practices associated with memes.

A research team was assembled to investigate a range of religious-oriented memes and genres in order to identify the different approaches used in the construction, meaning-making and circulation of such memes online. The intention of this exploratory study was to help identify key methodological issues, which would need to be considered before undertaking wider-scale systematic study of the area. Here the aim is to present an overview of this initial survey and highlight a range of ways religion is expressed through memes online. This report introduces several key concepts and a methodological approach we believe is fruitful for the study of religious-oriented internet memes. It also presents preliminary findings about the intentions behind religious-oriented meme practice, how these memes manifest traits of lived religion online and highlights areas for future investigation in the study of religious-oriented memes.

Framing Concepts

This project is framed by the understanding that religious-oriented memes function as expressions of participatory culture and exemplify trends towards lived religion online. In order to unpack this underlying assumption an overview of core concepts is offered.

Memes

A meme is an idea, belief or behavior that is spread through a given culture or social system through social or information sharing. The notion of meme as a thought that is replicated and spread like a “virus” throughout a given cultural system is drawn from Richard Dawkin’s (1989) discussions in *The Selfish Gene*. This idea has been closely associated with discussions of internet memes, used to describe the way digital images and messages are spread quickly and modified into new forms of communication online.

Internet memes are highly visual and emotive forms of online communication employing popular culture images with succinct messages to communicate in often humorous ways. They often employ images from popular culture, such as the photo of Sean Bean as Boromir in *Lord of the Rings* whose “One does not simply walk into Mordor” quote has birthed hundreds of “one does not simply...” spin-off memes with the help of sites such as quickmeme.com and memegenerator.com (<http://memegenerator.net/One-Does-Not-Simply-A>). Yet memes can also emerge from online culture creating new genres and popular meanings unto themselves. Take, for instance, the Lolcats genre and the famous “I Can Haz Cheezburger?” meme. Its roots are said to have originated from a 4chan message board site where users would post weekly cute cat

pictures to which phone texting-like language was added that became known as Lolspeak (Börzsei 2013). Lolspeak and Lolcats quickly spread across the internet and became a unique communicative style and even a popular culture franchise. Memes therefore rely both on popular icons and media images as well as recognizable language patterns and sayings that can be appropriated by individual users in creative ways to communicate concise and often humorous messages. It is important to note that the lifespan of internet memes is dependent on their ability to evolve throughout replication, imitation, and their ability to be adapted into new ideas and contexts.

Internet memes also typically rely on different genres of humor to communicate meaning. Shifman's (2012) work on humor in internet memes identifies several common categories employed in meme communication including playfulness, incongruity and superiority (p. 196). Playfulness is described as humor for humor's sake and invites the audience to take part in a game. Incongruity creates humor in the juxtaposition of texts and images that do not make sense together, often in the form of puns or play on words. Superiority refers to humor at the expense of an "other", and serves to maintain or build up the identity of the "superior" group by differentiating them from others.

Shifman's (2012) work is used here to help decode the meaning and impact of various religious-oriented internet memes. Here "religious-oriented internet memes" refers to memes circulated on the internet whose images and text focus on a variety of religious themes and/or religious

traditions. Discussion of different genres of religious-oriented internet memes is found later in the text.

Participatory Culture

Paying attention to internet memes is important, according to Knobel and Lankshear (2007), because they provide insight into how culture is produced and transmitted within new media contexts. Jenkins (2006) calls the process of cultural production and consumption within new media “participatory culture” in which individuals—not just the mass media—create digital cultural artifacts that are shared and circulated throughout the internet. Instead of a passive audience, new media is populated by prosumers, as online individuals serve as both producers and consumers of images and texts simultaneously. Meme creation and decoding practices exemplify this “participatory culture”. Jenkins (2006) argues that the power of digital culture lies in offering people new opportunities to engage in interaction, co-creation and collaborative authorship. For example, meme creators are able to draw images, texts and ideas from multiple sources to create new texts that remix original meanings, and so are freed from authorial intention and agenda.

Thus memes provide a medium in which the user can make sense and meaning of their beliefs through creating visual expressions of religion. These are then negotiated and reshaped by others who replicate and reinterpret these memes within their own understandings and experiences. Religious-oriented internet memes offer an interesting form for examination of how religious understanding is produced, consumed and circulated online. Analyzing which cultural

artifacts and ideas are used within religious-oriented memes – humorous or otherwise – reveals how various religious practitioners make sense of religion in their lives and how the public perceives of faith in contemporary society. Therefore internet memes provide a unique medium for studying religious meaning-making and knowledge about religion within participatory culture.

Memes as Lived Religion

Internet memes also provide interesting insights into lived religion. Lived religion is a process in which people draw from religious sources to make sense of their world, and experience the sacred in everyday practices (McGuire 2008; Ammerman 2006). Lived religion is an approach that sees religion as dynamic, experiential and rooted in the daily life of its practitioners.

Campbell (2010) suggests that lived religion can also be understood as the outcome of media usage, as individuals use resources from contemporary media culture to help enact their beliefs and spiritual meaning making. In this study we see new media as facilitating the process of meaning-making and as key tools helping individuals enact and express their personal religious beliefs. New media technologies enable users to create, reformat and interpret content and thus transmit their beliefs to a broader public. Similarly to lived religion, the internet offers a dynamic cultural environment within which user-generated cultural objects such as memes can be created and shared (Husted 2012).

Religious-oriented internet memes exemplify the traits of lived religion, as language and images of both a sacred and secular nature are assembled online, played with, modified, and reassembled

by people to create personalized understandings or expressions of the religious (Hall 1997). Religious-oriented memes can be used to affirm religious beliefs and identities in playful ways, as tools of critique, and to highlight popular debates and assumptions about religion. Memes represent an expression of lived religion, as memetic communication and meaning making is moderated by individual creativity, preferences and connections, over the accountability of bounded religious communities and institutions.

From this discussion of framing concepts, we see participatory culture provides a conceptual basis for looking at meaning making processes of lived religion, communicated through religious-oriented internet memes.

Methodology

Using a case study approach, each research team member investigated a specific meme platform or collection of memes focused on a particular religious tradition, figure or discourse in order to document how religion is portrayed and framed in a variety of memetic contexts. Each case study focused on a selective sampling of memes around a particular theme tailored to that specific study, which appeared online within a one-year time frame. Through online observation using visual and narrative analysis, each case study analyzed its sample of memes in relation to three specific areas: meme construction, use of humor to frame religious discourse, and audience reception. To analyse meme construction, attention was given to how selected memes have been produced. This involved visually decoding the origins of particular images. Additionally, attention was given to texts used and how they were adapted, assembled and remixed to create

particular messages about religion. Here Jenkins's (2006) concept of participatory culture was employed to consider how memes' production and the flexibility of the online environment encouraged and helped create different genres of religious-oriented internet memes.

Next, attention was given to what forms of humor were employed within particular collections, and how this influenced the messages about religion communicated. Shifman's (2012) categories of meme humor were used to consider how humor can frame ideas communicated about religion in these contexts. Finally, circulations of meaning and religious framings were considered in relation to how memes are read by various internet publics.

Team members investigated public discourse and responses to three specific memes found within their case studies, analyzing audience comments posted on the meme platform and related forums, and conducting online interviews with meme creators in order to learn what the intended message of the meme was, and creators' perceptions of audience interpretations of these memes. Attention was given to the ways religious memes may communicate multiple or conflicting messages to different audiences. The purpose of this three-fold approach was to identify the key areas scholars must consider when they seek to read and analyze the range of visual, textual and interpretive elements found within religious memes.

Case Studies

Six case studies were conducted, highlighting a range of meme genres dealing with a variety of religious topics and religions. Each case study involved an analysis of a dozen or more religious-oriented memes focused around a specific genre or theme appearing on the internet within the past year. A brief summary of each is provided here describing the focus, sampling strategy and motivations for investigation of each study.

Advice God

“Advice God” memes are those featuring an image of the Judeo-Christian God, as depicted in Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam*. This is situated on a background of blue and yellow triangles typically used for the "advice animals" meme series (Know Your Meme 2011), featuring texts that represent a dominant trait or archetype of the character featured, such as Courage Wolf or Socially Awkward Penguin. A dozen memes were chosen from select websites (memegenrator.com, knowyourmeme.com & ranker.com), a Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Advice-God/132179030171972>) and a blog (<http://www.bannedinhollywood.com/25-great-moments-in-the-god-meme/>, no longer available online), all of which featured the “Advice God” meme. The sampling strategy focused on identifying memes with “historical” or textual value (i.e. the first meme created) and where the audience reaction to the memes could be clearly identified. This was done to explore the anti-religious themes or critiques of religion often presented in this genre of memes.

Buddy Christ Memes

Buddy Christ memes are inspired by the film *Dogma* (1999), which presented the image of Buddy Christ as friendly substitution for “wholly depressing” traditional Catholic crucifix (a line spoken in the film by Cardinal Glick, played by George Carlin). Twenty-one memes were collected between August and September 2013 by combining a Google image search (key word: “Buddy Christ”), a Christian Meme Facebook page search (www.facebook.com/MemesForJesus), and a Google search that led to an Episcopalian rector’s blog (Hooper, no date). Memes which expressly questioned or affirmed religious authority were selected for investigation.

Christian Memes on Facebook

Memos featured on the Christian Meme Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/MemesForJesus>), appearing between August and September 2013, provided the basis for a thematic analysis of framing of Christianity within memes. The first 12 memes posted during this timeframe constituted the sample, and provided insight into how Christians may use memes to express and make sense of their everyday religious lives.

Mitt Romney and Mormon Memes

This collection of memes involved religious themes surrounding Mitt Romney’s faith and popular perceptions of Mormonism during the 2012 US Presidential Election. Romney became the focus of many internet memes related to his religion and presidential campaign as the first Mormon presidential candidate. This case study examined a selection of memes drawn from a Google image search of the terms “Mitt Romney” and “Mormon” occurring between June and

November 2012, to uncover what memes communicate about public interpretations and understandings of the Mormon religion.

Muslim Memes on Facebook

A collection of memes which combined popular culture and media images with text expressing religious beliefs and rituals were selected and analyzed from the Muslim Memes Facebook Page (<https://www.facebook.com/MuslimMeme>). Memes selected were posted between August and December 2012, with both meme content and comments made regarding these memes being analyzed. The sample focused on memes using lighthearted and innocuous humor to present Islam in a playful, but positive light.

Tweeting Orthodoxies Memes

"Tweeting Orthodoxies" (<https://www.facebook.com/dosim.metsaitsimm>) is an Israeli-Jewish Facebook page, which features posting on Israeli-Jewish religious practices, community and cultural topics including memes. A sampling of memes appearing from September 2012 to August 2013, one meme per month, was taken to create a representation of memes focused around Jewish holidays and religious events, but also day-to-day routines. Selected memes employed images and texts drawing on international popular culture content (i.e. content related to movies, celebrities and organizations) combined with expressions of Jewish commandments, rituals and sacred texts. These memes are produced in Hebrew and were translated into English for this study.

It was noted that case studies fell into one of two distinct categories: “memes about religion” and “religious memes”. Memes about religion tend to focus on religion as a general construct with a tendency toward negative framings of religious beliefs, practices and traditions. Religious memes are those which are focused around a specific religious tradition and community. They are often produced by individuals associated with this group and used to communicate associated beliefs or rituals that used humor in playful ways. Thus, even when these memes are seen to critique the religion they spotlight, this is done in respectful ways. In this study, the case studies of Buddy Christ, Advice God and Romney & Mormonism memes fell into the “memes about religion” category, while those focused around the Muslim, Jewish and Christian Facebook pages exemplified “religious memes”.

Case Study Findings

While space does not allow for a full report on all three areas of observation for each of the case studies, here we highlight a summary of noteworthy findings for each study. This is done in order to draw attention to key initial reflections related to how and what memes about religion and religious memes communicate about lived religion in digital culture. A full record of the research diaries and initial observation for each specific case study can be found online at COMM 663: Digital Religion (<http://comm663tamu.blogspot.com/>) through postings appearing between 26 August to 1 November 2013.

Advice God: Exemplifying Religious Critique

Most of the Advice God memes are critical of religion and present God as a harsh or unethical entity to be questioned or viewed with suspicion. These memes present an image of God with text that provides a playful or cynical critique of religion. For example, one Advice God meme questions God's behavior with the following caption: "Thou shall not commit adultery / sorry Joseph", a reference to Jesus's Virgin Birth [Meme 1]. Another meme presents religion as a stupid choice. For example, we see God "saying": "Accidentally make humans smart / They stop believing in me" [Meme 2]. These memes attempt to present religion as ridiculous or contradictory and God as an actor who is cynical or even malevolent. Advice God memes demonstrate that religious symbolism may be used to undermine rather than promote religious narratives or worldviews in meme discourse.

Such memes also raise another question: can memes that express seemingly anti-religious messages be considered expressions of lived religion online? If we understand lived religion as any articulation or action associated with religion that seeks to communicate a personalized understanding of spiritual issues or ideals, such memes can be seen to match notions of flexible religious meaning making. Thus, Advice God memes illustrate an irreligious form of lived religion facilitated by participatory culture online.

Buddy Christ: Drawing on Intertextuality and Reflexive Discourse

Study of the Buddy Christ meme revealed the importance of intertextuality in religious memes' communicative practices. Intertextuality can be defined as the assembling and reading of fragmented, yet interrelated texts and as a stylistic device employed by media producers (Ott &

Walter 2000). It can be argued that the voices of both audience and producer are essential to understanding religious memes as intertextual units of collective knowledge. Buddy Christ memes juxtapose religious texts that assert authority with popular culture texts that question religious authority claims. One example features the words “The body of Christ is snackrelicious” superimposed on the image of Buddy Christ, making a playful and irreverent reference to the communion meal [Meme 3]. While superficially playful, the intertextual message is one that questions the spiritual authority of the Christian sacrament of communion. Despite this contradictory message offered by the meme’s creators, seeming to undermine religion, memes about religion can also be framed to affirm the authority of religious leaders. An example of such reflexive discourse is found in an Episcopalian rector’s blog, where a Buddy Christ meme was used in order to suggest that readers should reflect on whether or not they personally demonstrate the joy of the Buddy Christ. Parish members affirmed this meaning in the comments section. In this case, a religious leader’s choice to embrace the intertextuality of the Buddy Christ meme generated reflexive discourse and an affirmation of religious authority. This case study illustrates that memes about religion can employ intertextuality that may either affirm or provoke religious authority, and represents a departure from traditional framings of religious authority.

Romney Memes: Promoting Stereotypes of Mormonism

The study of Mitt Romney and Mormonism memes revealed two notable findings: first, religious memes are necessarily reductive in nature, and second, memes at the intersection of faith and politics use humor to critique religion. Memes that featured Mitt Romney’s religious beliefs

tended to be reductionist in nature, meaning that they reduced Romney's religious belief to its most simplistic terms. This created a caricature of Mormonism that its practitioners would not recognize or agree with. This was seen in all of the memes as both sacred items and aspects of LDS doctrine were misrepresented or oversimplified. For example, a meme with the character of Romney waving in the background reads: "Says marriage has been 'one man and one woman' for 3000 years / Great-great-grandfather had 12 wives", highlighting the contradiction of his advocacy of traditional marriage with the facts of his own family's non-traditional background [Meme 4]. In this instance, a logical contradiction between Romney's interpretation of marriage and LDS past practice of polygamy is implied. However, the truncated nature of the meme does not allow for development or discussion, rather offering a pithy or humorous caricature of Mormonism. This leads to a second issue, the use of humor for the purpose of critique. All of the memes in this case study invoked humor by superiority, which features "people who are unintentionally, or at least not clearly intentionally, funny" (Shifman 2012, 196). Romney was cast as humorous through text highlighting decontextualized and seemingly ridiculous aspects of his faith. Another example showed Romney and Obama during the debate with the text, "Mitt Romney's policies are like Joseph Smith's golden plates / No one else has ever seen them and only stupid people buy the bull crap" [Meme 5]. Disbelief in a key tenet of Mormon doctrine is expressed, illustrating that memes combining religious and political frames often simultaneously essentialized and critiqued both frames using humor.

Tweeting Orthodoxies: Employing Postmodern Meta-narratives

The study of memes on the “Tweeting Orthodoxies” Facebook page highlights that memes employ communicative practices associated with postmodern culture. They construct a bricolage of online images, sayings and texts drawn from various popular culture canons and religious sources to present a new message containing a diversity of interpretations. For example, one meme, which was posted during Passover, shows a picture of Disney’s Aladdin eating a piece of bread, a time in which Jews are forbidden to eat bread. The written text states – “thank god for making me Yemeni at Passover” [Meme 6]. This meme can be interpreted as playful, highlighting the diversity of adherence to some religious traditions, or as exhibiting a prejudicial attitude toward Oriental/Yemeni Jews as religiously inferior, a prejudice often expressed in the ethnically torn Israeli society, often dominated by Ashkenazi Jews. Still, this meme does not subvert traditional religious understandings and beliefs, but essentially functions to affirm the religious tradition. This illustrates how memes can serve as a multi-layered site of religious and cultural meaning-making, drawing from various sources of knowledge at once. Thus memes featured on “Tweeting Orthodoxies” show how digital culture creates a space for lived religious practice, so religion can function as an exegetical frame that can engage secular, popular culture and religious Jewish people within a shared contemporary discourse. Another meme shows Santa Claus arriving at a home of an Ultra-Orthodox family, with Santa apologizing and remarking how he has come to the wrong home [Meme 7]. Orthodox Judaism, rather than being seen as purely outside popular culture, can be understood as able to engage in a limited way with it through such intertextual communication in internet memes as reflected in this case study. Memes allow religious groups to attach new meanings to cultural artifacts, and ideal religious practices can become tools for culture jamming in meme culture. These break the construction of

the religious meta-narrative into fragmented, smaller understandings of religion that at the same time affirm the larger meta-narrative.

Christian Memes: Communicating Conflicting Meaning through Humor

Collective knowledge is one attribute of participatory culture that can be negotiated through multiple and sometimes conflicting meanings. “1 John” is a seemingly simplistic meme [Meme 8], but thorough analysis reflects how creators and users of memes can conceive of multiple and conflicting messages. The meme’s playful nature may give the impression that it is not much more than a pun for Christian readers to recognize, seeing “1 John” as a reference to first “john,” a book in the Bible believed to be written by John the evangelist, but also slang for a toilet. However, the decoding process shows that people construct and share their own meanings thus creating “spreadable media” (Jenkins 2006) and generating shared knowledge. For instance, some members of the Facebook community found relating the Bible with a toilet defiling. Others came together to create different meanings about the nature of God. One user posted, “oh dear, too funny, God does have a sense of humor ya’ll” (Christian Meme Facebook page, comment posted 30 Aug 2013). Another chimes in, “In case everybody didn’t know, Jesus had to use the restroom at times. Fully human, yet fully God” (Christian Meme Facebook page, comment posted 30 Aug 2013). We can see from these comments that some readers reject the notion of the pun as offensive and even reconcile it to their religious beliefs by reflecting on the nature of God. Other users rely on the interpretation of other members’ comments in order to make sense of the meme. One writes, “I read those books of the Bible as “first” and “second, not “one” and “two”, so I would not have gotten this if not for the comments” (Christian Meme Facebook page,

comment posted 30 Aug 2013). Rather than being left to figure out or make sense of the memes themselves, these users relied on the nature of participatory culture, which generates shared meanings.

Muslim Memes: Popular Culture and Religious Literacy Required

The Muslim memes case study demonstrates that both religious and popular culture literacy are needed to understand the full meanings of religious memes. Many memes require a certain level of knowledge about popular culture (such as recognizing popular media characters and what they represent (e.g. Captain Jack Sparrow) or internet culture (recognizing a meme genre, e.g. Bad Luck Brian)), to decode the elements of irony or humor used. Religious and cultural literacy are also required for reading religious memes, especially when they are designed for a specific religious public. For example, one meme showed Disney's Aladdin speaking to Princess Jasmine saying "I can show you the world/but first we have to do nikah" [Meme 9]. Facebook page members made comments expressing laughter such as 'lmao' and 'looooo' at this meme. The meme's innate humor required knowing that nikah is the Arabic word for marriage and the expectation that Aladdin cannot show Jasmine the world until they are married. Another meme shows a picture of Captain Jack Sparrow from the *Pirates of the Caribbean* film franchise with the text "Oh guuurl, that amount of makeup with your abaya?" [Meme 10]. The humor lay in knowing an abaya is a cloak worn by some Muslim women which covers them from head to foot. The layered text is meant to offer humor through the juxtaposition of the cloak, which is conventionally seen as modest, to the heavy amount of makeup, which probably implies immodesty. The interpretative group for Muslim memes is a narrower public than those whom

view and interpret many other religious memes. This requires the audience to have special knowledge which allows them to 'get' the memes' punch lines. These humorous memes can therefore be categorized as parochial humor, or inside jokes. Muslim memes use parochial humor that members of the in-group would understand, and thus demonstrate that some religious memes require their audience to have specialized knowledge in order to fully comprehend the punch lines.

Areas for Consideration in Future Investigations of Religious-oriented Memes

Through comparing and contrasting the findings of these six case studies a number of shared observations were noted by the research team regarding areas of important consideration when it comes to studying religiously oriented memes. Through this initial survey of memes we suggest the following issues be considered by other scholars seeking to conduct systematic research of such memes.

Attention to Meme Context

When studying memes it is important to start by carefully considering the context in which certain memes are produced and consumed, especially in three areas. First, religious literacy is required in order to identify and decode the meaning behind basic religious tenets, beliefs and practices expressed in such memes. Without some rudimentary understanding of a given religious tradition and culture of a particular meme, punch lines and humorous framings may be easily misinterpreted or missed altogether. Second, how different forms of humor may be

employed within memes and how these may shape the message is important. Shifman (2012) argues that humorous memes may use parochial humor mixed with playfulness, incongruity, and superiority. Each form utilizes different techniques and leads to different positive or negative framings of religion. Awareness of these different styles of humor and how they function as tools for meaning making is essential. Third, considering a meme's audience and identifying where memes are circulated is essential. Whether a meme is shared and consumed within a controlled space, such as on a Facebook page which may limit the boundaries for interpretation, engaged by a broader audience such as those housed on meme websites (i.e. memegenerator.com), or circulated through social media, impacts the way a given meme is understood, decoded and potentially modified by its interpretive community. Religious literacy and the ability to identify styles of humor and a meme's audience are vital when seeking to read religious-oriented memes.

Understanding Intertextuality and Comparative Work

Studies of religious memes may be limited if they choose to focus on only one type of meme. We suggest that comparative work is needed within the study of religious-oriented memes, in order to fully consider how different genres of meme communicate meaning and set boundaries around interpretation. Scholars who choose to study religious memes should consider a thematic body of memes rather than one type within that body, to ensure that their work can access and describe lived religion in digital context. If the study of Buddy Christ memes, for example, had investigated other genres of memes utilizing other images of Jesus, more significant conclusions about how memes communicate about key religious figures or shape religious authority may have emerged from the findings. This underscores the layered nature of memes. Images, text,

contexts, and audience knowledge all contribute to an intertextual body of knowledge that evokes meaning from larger religious discourses. Sites such as knowyourmeme.com can be used to identify the origins and initial design intent of a meme, as well as trace how it has evolved over time and mutated into new forms. Furthermore, examining thematic bodies of memes is more likely to give researchers access to more vibrant online discourses that include meme creators. Indeed, meaning making through memes is a communal process for internet users. Thus, researchers should attend to both meme audiences and creators, and consider how they discuss, contest, defend, and remix the intertextual layers of memes. Finally, future research should consider the construction of a broader typology of religious memes. Though a meme typology may result in normalized research discourses and narrow the focus of comparative work, it will also enhance the coherency of meme research and thereby establish a functional foundation for future studies.

Identifying How Memes Create and Reflect Emotive Discourse

Mememes are often communicated using emotive discourse. Such discourse reflects strong moods and poignant feelings that the producer of the meme seeks to communicate. For example, a creator of a Jewish meme promoting modesty restrictions claimed in an email conversation that he created the meme as an emotional response to another meme that offended him. The production of a meme to deliver a message based on a personal-emotional response is an insight that can be reached only by thick description (Geertz, 1973). Consumers' reactions to religious memes also reflected emotional motivations. On a Facebook page dedicated to Advice God memes, a self-proclaimed Christian asked page members to "stop misrepresenting and mocking

God, it is really hurtful, and I imagine very hurtful to God” (Advice God Facebook page, comment posted 3 March 2013).

Emotions are embedded in the creation of and reaction to memes. Memes’ creators and consumers are motivated by a strong need to promote and defend their religion or attack religious attitudes they find problematic. Thus researching the use of emotive discourse and motivations underlying such framing of religions within meme culture is pivotal to fully understand the intended meanings of memes. Scholars should carefully study the meaning-making process as explained by both creators and consumers of such memes. This can be done by directly contacting prosumers or by analyzing their reactions online. Thus, studying memes requires a sensitive understanding of the multi-layered process of online meaning-making in general, and online religious meaning-making in particular.

Analyzing Memes as Essentialized Religion

This study revealed that internet memes typically tend to essentialize religion by relying on popular dominant metanarratives and popular assumptions about religion, which they seek to either reinforce or challenge. Depending on the community that the meme is intended to reach, this can be either helpful or problematic. When memes are used within a specific religious community to comment on particular aspects of a religion, they can serve to reinforce identity (as seen in the Muslim and the Jewish memes case studies). However, when an outside community or individual uses memes to engage in discourse about someone else’s religious beliefs, the memes become problematic (as seen in the Advice God case study). In the case of Mitt

Romney's Mormon belief, these memes functioned as simplistic, and sometimes incorrect, pieces of criticism regarding Mormonism.

Memes can also reinforce or challenge dominant discourses or stereotypes about religion. The practice of creating and sharing memes in and of itself can challenge traditional boundaries, by mixing the sacred and profane (as in the Christian memes case study) as well as questioning notions of authority (as in the Buddy Christ memes). In the Mormon case study, for example, atheist readers actively engaged the mythology of religion, while also framing religion as a crutch for those unable to think for themselves. Knowledge of and attention to popular metanarratives about religion is necessary for scholars of religious-oriented memes.

Additionally, the context and intent of these memes must be examined in order to determine whether the (re)interpretations being presented are true to the interpretations that religious practitioners would offer.

Summary



In summary, our study shows that careful attention is needed to the context of memes and the way in which humor is employed. Memes can be used both to affirm and critique religious ideas and identities, and interpretation is often dependent upon the audience of the platform in which the meme is situated. Research must also be conducted in regards to how certain images and sayings are appropriated within memes and their evolution over time, which plays an important role in shaping positive and negative framing of religion within memes. Furthermore memes often feature reductionist or essentialized understandings of religion and employ a limited range of popular assumptions or metanarratives about religion to communicate; this is especially true within memes about religion. Also religious memes often require a certain level of religious literacy for accurate or full decoding. Overall, this study seeks to provide insights into how religious-oriented internet memes are constructed and utilize certain communicative strategies and how digital culture and audience reception frame and propagate religious discourses online. It is our hope that future scholars will benefit from these preliminary observations and recommendations as they undertake more rigorous investigation of religious-oriented memes.

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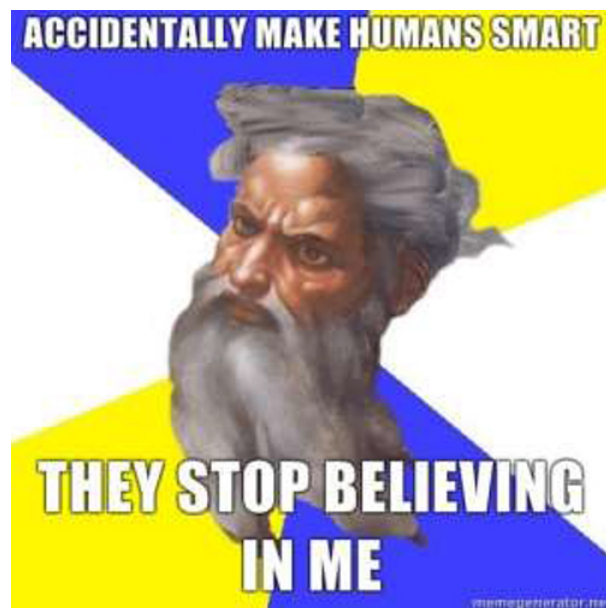
Appendix: Memes Referenced

Meme 1



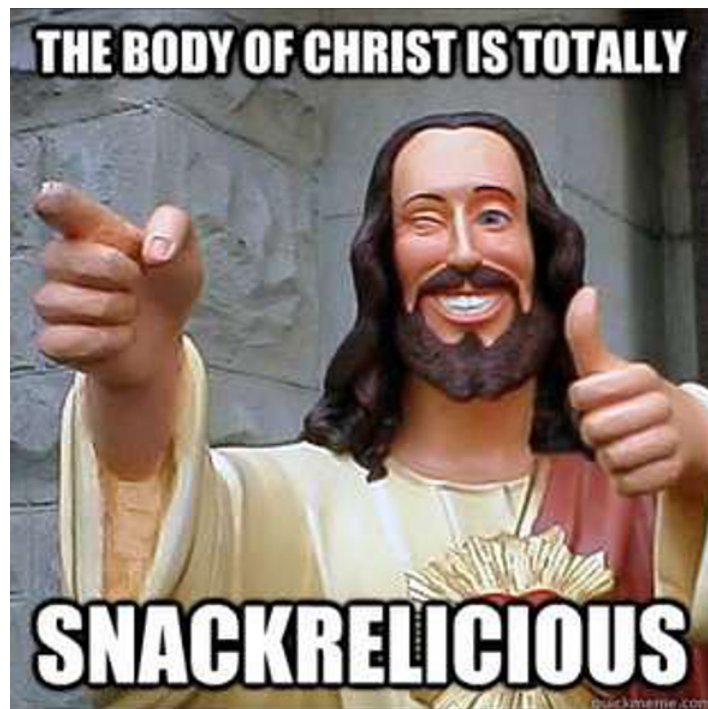
Available at “Banned in Hollywood” blog, <http://www.bannedinhollywood.com/25-great-moments-in-the-god-meme/11joseph/>. [Accessed October 8th 2013]

Meme 2



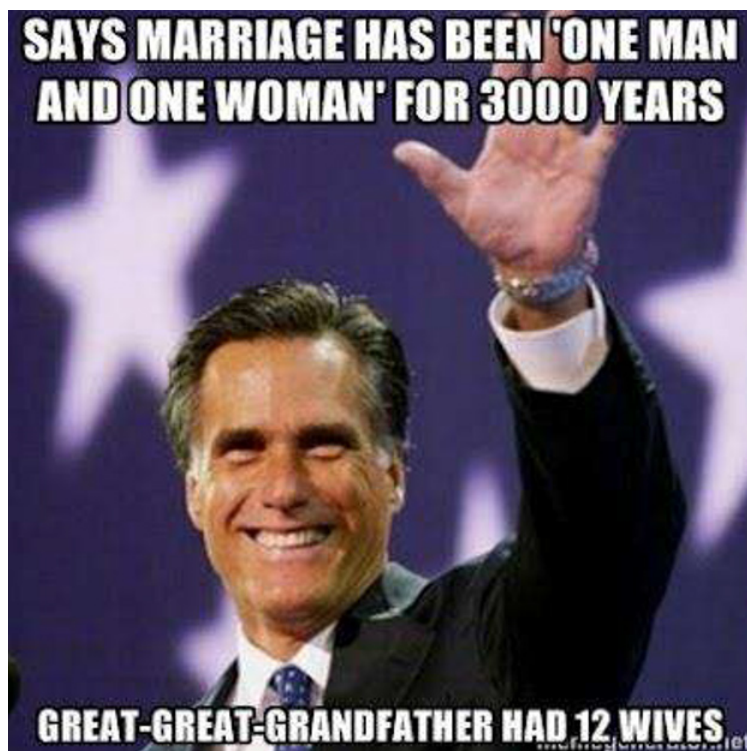
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Meme 3



Available at Quick Meme Website, <http://i.qkme.me/3s2ee7.jpg>. [Accessed October 8th 2013].

Meme 4



Collier, K. (2012) "Mitt Romney gets the Scumbag Treatment", The Daily Dot, 14 May.

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Meme 5



Available at “Religions Poisons” blog,

<http://religionpoisons.wordpress.com/2012/06/11/this-is-what-mitt-romney-believes/>. [Accessed

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Meme 6



Available at Tweeting Orthodoxies Facebook Page,

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=513726675340187&set=pb.408459909200198.-2207520000.1379349987.&type=3&src=https%3A%2F%2Fscontent-a-dfw.xx.fbcdn.net%2Fphotos->

[ash4%2F482817_513726675340187_447579507_n.jpg&size=390%2C356](https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=513726675340187&set=pb.408459909200198.-2207520000.1379349987.&type=3&src=https%3A%2F%2Fscontent-a-dfw.xx.fbcdn.net%2Fphotos-ash4%2F482817_513726675340187_447579507_n.jpg&size=390%2C356). [Accessed October 8th 2013].

Meme 7



Available at Tweeting Orthodoxies Facebook page,

[https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=460725823973606&set=pb.408459909200198.-](https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=460725823973606&set=pb.408459909200198.-2207520000.1379350228.&type=3&src=https%3A%2F%2Fscontent-b-)

[2207520000.1379350228.&type=3&src=https%3A%2F%2Fscontent-b-](https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=460725823973606&set=pb.408459909200198.-2207520000.1379350228.&type=3&src=https%3A%2F%2Fscontent-b-)

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[prn1%2F300039_460725823973606_2122057653_n.png&size=613%2C418.](https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=460725823973606&set=pb.408459909200198.-2207520000.1379350228.&type=3&src=https%3A%2F%2Fscontent-b-) [Accessed October

8th 2013].

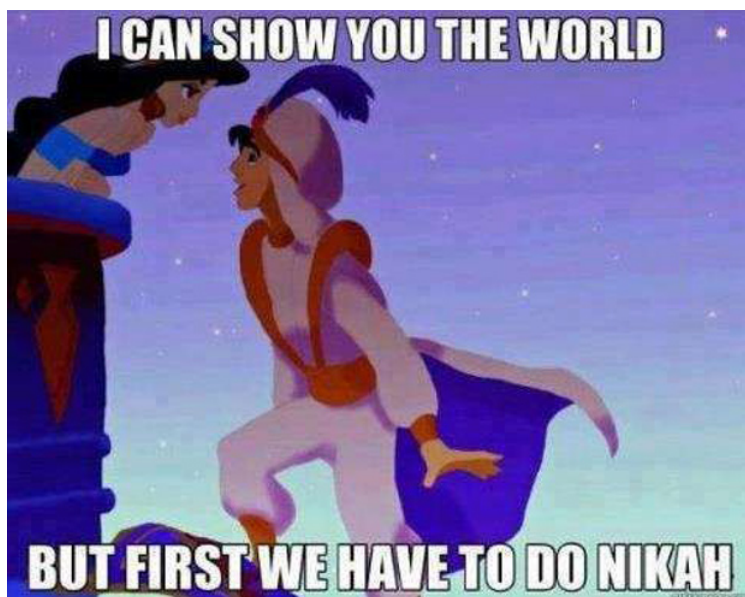
Meme 8



Available at Christian Meme Facebook page,

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=433914666727116&set=a.430594160392500.1073741836.192696347515617&type=1&theater>. [Accessed October 8th 2013].

Meme 9



Available at Muslim Memes Facebook page,

[https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=513726675340187&set=pb.408459909200198.-](https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=513726675340187&set=pb.408459909200198.-2207520000.1379349987.&type=3&src=https%3A%2F%2Fscontent-a-)

[2207520000.1379349987.&type=3&src=https%3A%2F%2Fscontent-a-](https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=513726675340187&set=pb.408459909200198.-2207520000.1379349987.&type=3&src=https%3A%2F%2Fscontent-a-)

[dfw.xx.fbcdn.net%2Fphotos-](https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=513726675340187&set=pb.408459909200198.-2207520000.1379349987.&type=3&src=https%3A%2F%2Fscontent-a-)

[ash4%2F482817_513726675340187_447579507_n.jpg&size=390%2C356](https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=513726675340187&set=pb.408459909200198.-2207520000.1379349987.&type=3&src=https%3A%2F%2Fscontent-a-). [Accessed October

8th 2013].

Meme 10



Available at Muslim Memes Facebook page,

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=391955170881912&set=pb.246409818769782.-2207520000.1382636797.&type=3&theater>. [Accessed October 8th 2013].