



Interrogating the Church's Relationship to Technology Through Pandemic Memes

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This paper explores how studying memes can reveal popular narratives that people hold about the relationship between technology and the church, informing perceptions of the move from offline to online worship services during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Of most interest in this article are the stories that memes tell about religion and religious groups during the pandemic related to technology. I argue that this provides a unique insight into the Digital Theology that is emerging out of the COVID-19 pandemic, or the dominant theological assumption about technology widely circulate online and promoted via memes.

1. The Challenging Depictions of Technology's Relationship to the Church Through Pandemic Memes

Through this thematic categorization, we observed that memes served as a dynamic visual-textual language that enabled individuals to articulate multiple-level stories of social and spiritual meaning-making around the COVID-19 crisis. From this, we analyzed how memetic discourse can simultaneously serve as a communal space for defusing emotions, expressing catharsis, and sense-making for individuals. Specifically, we

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noted that memes served as a tool for crafting and affirming distinctive understandings of the relationship between organized religious communities and churches and digital technology during the pandemic.

This paper explores how studying memes can reveal popular narratives that people hold about the relationship between technology and the church, informing perceptions of the move from offline to online worship services during the COVID-19 global pandemic. I suggest that by approaching memes as multi-dimensional, storytellers invite consideration of the ingrained assumptions many church congregations and leaders hold about digital media in contemporary society and its potential impact on church culture. Over the past eight years, I have dedicated much time to memetic research, considering the role that internet memes play in revealing popular assumptions about religion in contemporary society.¹ From this research, I assert the unique visual-textual language of internet memes can house complex layers of meaning about a variety of social-cultural issues.

Internet memes are more than digital artifacts that virally communicate humorous interpretations of contemporary events and issues. In reality, internet memes represent a dynamic visual-textual language that enables individuals to articulate multiple-level stories, in this case, they help reveal the social negotiations and spiritual meaning-making people have sought to work out online about the COVID-19 crisis. This paper uses memes as a platform for exploring and unpacking the common understandings of the relationship between churches and digital technology during the pandemic.

Over the first three months of the COVID-19 pandemic (mid-March to mid-July 2020), I gathered over 1000 memes focused on a variety of topics including themes of social distancing, quarantine practices, masking, and social anxieties raised by the coronavirus and technology use. Of special interest to me was how religion and religious groups were framed through memetic discourse during the global pandemic, as well as how religious group employed coronavirus memes to display their reaction to new social-cultural practices that were birthed or promoted during the pandemic. In this article, I focus on sharing results related to the latter topic, of how memes with religious themes shared via social media presented the relationship between digital media and religious groups and leaders during this time period. I believe that this reveals some of the popular assumptions that churches in Western and English-speaking context have about digital technology. This analysis shows that while many churches readily embraced the internet, social media platforms, and digital technology during the

¹ Bellar et al. 2013; Campbell et al. 2018.

pandemic, this was done out of necessity rather than out of a changed mindset or perspective on digital media. This analysis reveals that much of the digital media experimentation continues to be undergirded by a critical evaluation or negative perception about the potential impact of digital media used during the pandemic on the church and its established practices and identity. Identifying these representations of resistance underlying digital worship are important for scholars of Digital Theology to be aware of as they seek to develop a platform for conversation that might advocate for the embrace of a digital ecclesiology for contemporary churches.

2. Methodology

The aim of this study was to identify and study the religious narratives and content that internet memes revealed about specific beliefs regarding the relationship between religious groups and technology. I argue that religious pandemic memes showcase a variety of responses to church engagement with technology and through this, we are able to unpack the key discursive narratives that memes reveal about the perceived relationship between the church and technology.

2.1 Sampling

Memes were collected primarily through a specific Facebook Group called "Holy Pandemic! Encouragement & Memes."² I created this group in March 2020 initially as a way to cope with the stress and anxiety created by the uncertainty of the coronavirus, while I was temporarily quarantined in Germany. Starting with an initial invitation of 80 Facebook friends, the group has grown in one year to over 21,000 members from around the world. Together, this group has shared over seven thousand memes with each other on a wide range of topics related to the pandemic. Thus, this meme-sharing group has provided a dynamic and growing collection of memes telling a variety of stories about the pandemic.

Of most interest in this article are the stories that memes tell about religion and religious groups during the pandemic related to technology. I argue that this provides a unique insight into the Digital Theology that is emerging out of the COVID-19 pandemic, or the dominant theological assumption about technology widely circulate online and promoted via memes. In the first three months of the pandemic, we collected 327 pandemic memes focused on religious themes. Overall, these 78 memes

² <https://www.facebook.com/groups/220412129012000> accessed November 14, 2022.

told stories about how churches and religious leaders used or perceived of the internet or other digital media during the early days of the pandemic. It is this population of memes that this article focuses on.

2.2 Analysis

While the Facebook group from which the meme samples are drawn from began in mid-March, it was not until mid-May when I began to approach this work as a potential site of research. In early May, two research assistants and I began to systematically identify and categorize memes shared on the group. Memes were initially recorded in an Excel-based database, which was then transferred to database specifically for this project. Meme images and data were collected and stored in a specially designed App meme database. The App Database enabled me and my research team to categorize, tag, and sort these memes for further analysis of core themes and narratives about religion emerging from this collection.

Religious-focused pandemic memes from mid-March to mid-June were first categorized in terms of the core themes that they engaged with or topics they depicted. These memes mostly focused on the Christian tradition with the majority of references being made to American or British religious groups or contexts. These memes covered a variety of themes that will be discussed more below. Memes in this collection were then categorized in relation to the religious frames used. This analysis draws on the work of Aguilar et al. 2016, whose study identified the dominant ways that religion in general is framed in memes. This includes categories such as: depicting religion in playful terms, promoting religious belief and practices, questioning religion, mocking religion, or suggestion religion is irrational.

2.3 Theme Identification in Meme Sample

A total of twenty-five separate themes were identified in the collection of religious-focused memes. Themes included: memes depicting religious holidays that fell during the early days of the pandemic such as Easter and Passover, church reactions and practices related to social distancing, church leaders such as the Pope or Biblical characters such as Moses or Mary and their imagined responses to the coronavirus, and finally, fictional verses about with pandemic. Although some memes could easily be grouped into two or more of these themes, each meme was identified with one as its dominant representative category. In general, all of these memes dealt with some aspect of religion, one of these twenty-five themes, and the new or religious social practices that

emerged related to health and safety measures advocated during the pandemic. Several prominent themes included creative depictions of quarantine and social distancing practices that forced modifications of traditional religious practices. This is exemplified in ten playful memes about how the religious sacrament of baptism would have to be modified due to social restrictions. This is seen in the meme depicting a "Social Distancing Baptistry" that shows a photograph of a carnival dunking booth that playfully suggests that dunk tanks could now be used as a social distanced form of baptism.

Another prominent category were memes used to re-present Biblical characters and stories, retold in the context of pandemic-related practices and restrictions. Over 20 such memes were found to match this description from this sample. This is seen, for example, in several memes that make connections between the pandemic and Israel's exodus from Egypt. For example, one meme shows a cartoon of Moses saying: "Let my people go" as Pharaoh responds "#StayHome," suggesting his denial of the Israelite Exodus could be seen as a preventative health and safety measure. Another meme shows a photograph of a condescending, scowling Pharaoh from the 1956 movie *The Ten Commandments* with the text, "Ramses watching you complain about just one plague."

A personal favorite category of mine is "Church Signs" memes which involves humorous church signs focused on the pandemic. Over 15 memes showed photographs of real church signs or signs that had been remixed for comical effect that tried to frame pandemic practices with a touch of humor. One purported sign from an Episcopal church said: "Let God get closer than 6 feet, but still wash your hands..." This meme seemed to encourage people to practice good hygiene and strengthen their relationships with God.

Other signs were silly; seemingly trying to add a touch of humor to the seriousness of the growing pandemic, such as a meme showing a Methodist Church sign that read "I don't like this virus. I wanted zombies for the apocalypse." Memes such as these brought lighthearted and comic relief to a situation of much uncertainty that required significant and swift changes of religious institutions not known for their abilities to be flexible or willing to embrace change. Yet the external conditions of the pandemic intruded into many areas of society and culture, and churches were not immune from the adaptations that were required, and while digital technology enable churches to adapt and modify their practices it also became an object on which to focus their anxieties and apprehensions about the conditions created by the global pandemic.

2.4 Meme-ing Reactions to Conducting Worship Online

Of note, 78 of the 372 memes, or about 20% of these religion and pandemic memes, focused on telling stories about how church leaders and congregations used technology to adapt to online worship. These were most commonly found under four classifications of memes; specifically those focused on: depicting churches, church services, doing church service online, representations of Jesus or quotes/tweet-styled memes about church worship during the pandemic.

Most of these offered playful representations of religion, rather than the more common mocking or questioning of narratives that other researchers have found in their study of memes representing religion online.³ This suggests that memes in this sample offer a more positive and optimistic view of the role religion plays in contemporary culture. This implies that religiously focused pandemic memes too might offer a more open approach to the social-cultural changes necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Indeed, many of the memes that emerged in the first few weeks of the pandemic presented a more positive view of the swift shift to church online than I initially expected. A number of prominent memes captured this change in the perspective of seeing the internet as innately immoral or problematic to leaders describing technology as a god-send gift during the pandemic. This is captured by a meme showing two pictures of the same Chihuahua side by side with very different expressions. On the left side of the meme is a photo with the dog growling and baring its teeth. In the right photo, the dog looks as if it is posing with a big smile on its face. The meme reads: “Pastors in 2010 ‘Facebook is from the devil!’ 2020 ‘Follow our LIVE services online.’” The meme captures how many church leaders publically changed their opposition towards social media and the internet during the pandemic, some almost overnight.

Such memes highlight not only these surprising shifts in opinion about technology by some religious leaders, but also their willingness to engage it hands on. Other memes addressed how church leaders tried to use technology during the pandemic, which required them to adapt and change in unexpected ways. New forms of church worship such as livestreamed services and online ministry via Zoom technology were envisioned and implemented at a speed that most churches were not accustomed to.

Transferring traditional liturgical practices online was no small endeavor for many churches. This created challenges for both pastors and the church members responsi-

³ Aguilar et al. 2016.

ble for running various aspects of these services. While livestreaming video content is in no way a new technology, the idea of moving from an offline to an online worship context was a radical idea and foreign territory even for churches that already had media or technology teams of volunteers in place. This anxiety was illustrated by a meme with the text: "Everyone: No problem, we'll just stream church online. Tech Crew and Pastors:" with an image showing a man with sweat pouring down his face. What seemed like a logical strategy to many congregational members who are surrounded by digital media and required to use it in their daily lives, sounded like a revolutionary milestone and overwhelming task to take on for others.

This transition toward online church was especially momentous for pastors from small churches who did not have the technology infrastructure in place to make such a move, or any experience in digital technology or production. Social Distancing required not only the reworking of worship space and restructuring of services, but modification of established pastoral patterns of leading services. For example, a half dozen memes depicted new strategies that pastors adopted to help deal with preaching to an empty sanctuary while broadcasting their sermons online. One such meme showed a photograph of an empty church sanctuary with puppets and animal props, seemingly from the children's Sunday school supplies, which were socially distanced on the pews to simulate an actual audience. The meme read: "When the Pastor needs some support while filming the livestream." This suggests that many pastors were new to broadcasting their sermons or mediated preaching which they were introduced to during the pandemic. They had to find creative ways to help themselves adapt to the news ways of communicating and doing services.

So, the lived experience of utilizing digital technology as a central and crucial tool for church ministry in a pandemic indeed contributed to changes in many religious leaders' perceptions of contemporary media. The internet was no longer just a gateway to immoral content and unethical behavior, or an unnecessary resource irrelevant to church ministry. However, even though many churches embraced the internet as a platform to facilitate church services during the lockdown and social distancing restrictions does not mean that all concerns and critical evaluation of technology were totally erased. Indeed, internet memes studied here reveal several common concerns and hidden tensions digital media engagement raises for churches and religious leaders.

In the remainder of this article, I focus on memes that tell stories about how churches used digital tools, framed the internet, and understood the roles and implications of

technology during the pandemic. This is done by exploring three narratives about religious reactions to technology that are depicted through meme images and texts about online and mediated worship experiences. I argue that through surveying and analyzing these memes, we see three dominant stories about the relationship between digital media technologies and the church that are worth paying attention to.

3. Technology as a Disruption to Tradition and Established Practices

The first clear narrative presented by internet memes about technology used by churches during the pandemic is that it seen as a disruptor, interrupting “business as usual” for church leaders and congregations. Memes highlighted how church congregations and leaders were pushed out of long established, embodied religious traditions, into a time of reinventing weekly gatherings and modifying rituals in ways that still met the expectations of what a church community is and does. Digital media was presented as essential to meeting these new challenges and attempts to re-establish some normalcy of religious patterns of worship and gatherings.

This is exemplified in several memes that appeared in late March and early April of 2020 right before Easter which predicted or reflected on how holy celebrations would be disrupted by moving from offline to online. One popular theme were the “Last Supper” memes, which often used remixed versions of classic paintings of Christ’s last meal with his disciples to illustrate how the introduction of forced social separation and digital mediation would alter our perceptions and the meaning of this holy gathering.

One such meme shows a deconstructed painting of Leonardo da Vinci’s painting “The Last Supper” entitled: The Last Supper 2020. We see Jesus sitting alone at the table as if he were hosting a virtual Zoom meeting, with his place setting, a computer, hand sanitizer, and an Amazon box in front of him. Above him, his disciples edited from the original images and placed into separate squares, to mirror them Zooming individually into the gathering. The meme reads: “Jesus: Judas sent me a text saying he had a business meeting at the temple and would check in late. So let’s go ahead and get started. Amazon has delivered each of you a box. If you’ve all washed your hands, open the box. It contains your bread, your wine and your hand sanitizer.” The meme makes playful reference to what was (at the time) the new hygiene habits encouraged for people’s health protection, as well as how this traditional celebration might have to be reimagined under the lockdown requirements. It also shows how Zoom technology both enables Jesus and the 12 disciples to be connected for this sacred event,

yet demonstrates the ways in which it disconnects them by making it a much more individualized rather than communal encounter. This meme shows how the pandemic and especially Zoom upsets shared experience, presenting digital media as something that interrupts religious tradition.

Another “last summer” meme further emphasizes this concept by showing Jesus alone in the da Vinci painting, with seven of the disciples in boxes or streaming in from separate locations to the virtual event. The meme text reads as if Jesus were calling the meeting to attention: “Ok, ok. Hello Everyone. Judas you on?” Judas, as well as four other disciples, are notably absent from the meme. Their nonattendance from this mediated meeting suggests that the original story has been disrupted, adding questions to how the absence of more than one key actor might skew the story. In this way, the meme humorously, but pointedly suggests that Zoom church meetings leave out key individuals which create potentially problematic consequences. So while digital technologies allow congregations to keep meeting, these are limited gatherings that unsettle the normal rhythm and shape of the church.

This underlying narrative of technology being a disruption to church gatherings, established expectations, and patterns of involvement is seen in many of these memes. The promotion of even nostalgic glorification of embodied, face-to-face worship as the standard of religious worship was stressed in multiple ways. One meme shows the actor Colin Firth standing in a suit with a solemn face in church. Behind him, a chaotic fight has broken out with people tackling and hitting one another. The meme reads: “Watching church at home, with children.” The meme communicates that once the church service is broadcast and taken out of its normal context of the church sanctuary, chaos ensues.

Gone are the social constraints and expectations that help people focus on the church service, especially young people. This is further emphasized by a series of memes created by a family to show how certain in-church social behaviors can still be replicated at home during the online worship experience. Yet, it is the more problematic social behaviors of being late, talking during the service, or sitting in the back row not paying attention to the service which are spotlighted.

This is exemplified by a remixed version of one of these same memes that shows a family of four sitting on the couch behind two other rows of empty chairs. The family sits as far away from the TV screen playing a sermon as possible. This new version reads: “Live Streaming Church. The more things change the more they remain the same!” This suggests that congregations need the sanctuary setting and the embodied experi-

ence of worship, lest they be tempted to replicate the less favorable worship patterns of behavior at home.

While the COVID-19 pandemic, the resulting global health crisis, and social distancing practices that were required for health and safety were the actual disruptors of the normative practice of religion within churches, the unexpected or forced engagement with digital media through online worship was often too framed as the main culprit for creating new problems for churches.

4. Technology skills and knowledge framed as outside pastoral/priestly remit

The second narrative about technology that emerges from the sample of memes studied focused on the internet and media technology as being framed as a foreign territory for pastors and churches. Memes used irony and sarcasm to question any assumptions and expectations that pastors and church leaders would have some technological knowledge or any skills related to preparing to move offline service to online platforms.

One meme that speaks to this shows Dr. McCoy from the original Star Trek series proclaiming with tears in his eyes: “Darn it Jim, I’m a pastor not a videographer!”

First, this meme emphasizes the challenge and stressors that many pastors experienced during the pandemic as they were forced to take on technological tools to continue services safely. Next, it shows the inadequate preparation of pastors for such a situation that, required them to modify their performance as pastors to uncomfortable new roles. For example, this meme shows many pastors do not even have knowledge or experience with mass media broadcasting, such as the way that Dr. McCoy refers to livestreaming a church service as a videography skill.

Until last March, many church leaders had been able to ignore the idea of engaging more with the internet or the need to consider the possibilities online worship services might offer their congregation or church ministry. In 2020, they were faced with the reality of the limitations of their actual technological skills and knowledge. Many congregations assumed that their church and its leaders should and could quickly adapt to the technological requirement needed to run online worship services during the first wave of lockdowns. From having to decide what social media platform to use to host sermon feeds to figuring out how to set-up video equipment to record sermons for livestreaming, pastors faced a myriad of technological choices upfront, which heightened their anxiety. They found themselves in a situation of forced engagement with

technology, and often were very much out of their depth in the technological skills and knowledge required to make a fast and smooth transition from traditional to on-line worship in such a short period.

As lockdowns and the global pandemic dragged on and more health regulations and social distancing policies were put into place in most countries, pastors began to realize that in many cases, online worship services were not a short-term emergency strategy, but a long-term reality. This heightened many religious leaders' anxieties, as they realized creating a digitally mediated worship experience is not a solo endeavor; it often required a team of people to prepare for and successfully execute online worship service. This meant not only personally taking on a new role and learning new skills, but the recruitment of volunteers to help. Other staff members had to take on re-defined roles to help with service digital production or moderate online interactions between the pastors and viewers during service livestreaming. Pastors had to identify and recruit media savvy congregation members to assist in running cameras or monitoring sound quality of broadcasts.

This is exemplified by a meme showing a black-and-white photograph seemingly of the United States Space Program's mission control room from the 1960s. The meme includes text reading: "Church in 2020 be like, ground control to Pastor Tom." The text is a direct reference to David Bowie's song *Space Oddity* that describes an Astronaut exploring the new frontier of space. The meme communicates that like the picture, the church is hesitantly entering a new territory and engaging new technology that in reality is dated and well-established in the culture. The technology team seeks to support and guide the pastor into the unknown frontier of the online worship service. This team-based exercise with the pastor still being placed as the center of the technological endeavor.

Technology or media teams have been a common part of many non-denominational and evangelical church services for several decades, where a substantial emphasis is often placed on production values such as the strategic use of lights, graphic backgrounds, and contemporary music performances. However, this has not been the case for most mainline and traditional churches, where microphones and sound systems constitute the height of their technological engagement. Thus, like the meme above suggests, doing church online is a move into an unexplored, other-worldly space with new rules. This endeavor requires new practices, which need full support teams and carefully monitored technology to make sure the mission will be a success. This me-

diated multi-person driven worship event is new for everyone, even the congregation members.

Members too find themselves in a new territory. Times of lockdown and quarantine mean that they are barred from the church building, solemn traditions are broken, and liturgical rituals from communion to call-and-response recitations are reinvented. Members were themselves forced to engage with new technologies, as overnight, embodied worship became a mediated and distanced experience. Pews were exchanged for living room sofas as they now engaged with church from television or computer screens in their homes. Even more surprising was the image of their pastor transformed from a preacher into a television presenter.

For some, seeing their familiar and respected pastor broadcast through TV evoked imagery of a “televangelist” and all of the negative stereotypes associated (i.e., dodgy theology, greedy or money focused, performative rather than pastoral, etc.). This surprise and bewilderment were captured in several memes, all using images from the movie *Forrest Gump*. In one meme, we see the character of Forrest leaning forward with a look of amazement and the text reads: “Just like that, all pastors are televangelists.”

Another shows Forrest Gump leaning back on a bench with a stunned look on his face. The meme similarly reads: “And just like that, my priest turned into a televangelist!” These memes use tongue-in-cheek humor and sarcasm to mock the idea of their leaders as taking on a criticized religious role in culture. While many pastors and priests were forced into these public performances online due to community rules and governmental policies that banned face-to-face religious gatherings, there is still a sense that many members in mainline denominations and the Anglo-Catholic tradition found this as uncomfortable as the leaders themselves did.

The pandemic created new social conditions that required religious leaders to act and perform outside of their typical duties, skill sets, and training they had received when preparing for religious service. Therefore, the belief that *technology skills and knowledge are not an essential part of contemporary ministry is a belief held by both congregations and religious leaders*. Indeed, very few seminaries or Divinity faculties offer any theoretical courses on religious engagement in popular culture and media analysis, let alone any practical training in digital media use and technology implementation for contemporary ministry. If church leaders do have these skills, it is often because of their previous work, career training, or personal hobbies related to computers or digital media. Therefore, engagement with digital media is seen as a non-essential part of religious training, so framed as outside their required remit. This sets up pastors

to have a hesitancy, fear, or even adverse reaction to the idea of digital media engagement, which quickly became a requirement of pandemic ministry. Thus, even if they embraced the need to incorporate media into their worship services, the assumption that their attitude towards technology quickly changed is simply flawed.

5. Concern Technology May Create or Encourage Consumeristic Practices in Church

The third theme we see arising from these memes inspired by the move from offline to online church during the pandemic comes from a fear in the potential cultural impact of congregational media engagement. One of the rally cries used by religious leaders since the age of television promotes the shunning of popular media tools because of the anti-religious values media is seen to promote. Media is not just seen as exposing people to immoral or secular content, it is seen as promoting problematic cultural values and practices.

One such set of values that underlies a number of the internet memes in this study is the assumption that digital media use encourages consumeristic practices. Specifically, it is the fear that as people engage church through the screen, it becomes a user-focused experience. In the digital age, it is understood as engaging with the screen that also becomes a consumer directed experience, where individuals personalize their engagement to meet their own needs and desires, rather than those dictated by what the experience creates. This concern about online church creating consumeristic individuals focused on their worship preferences, rather than congregationally-focused communal encounters, was a clearly articulated in a number of memes

For example, in one meme, we see a drawing of a family of four in the 1950s. They are sitting together in a pew at church. Above his head, the father has a talk bubble revealing what the father is thinking. Internally, he says: "I am glad we are able to attend to church again, but I do miss being able to fast forward and mute." This suggests that church online offers people a more personally directed and controlled experience.

In the nostalgic depiction of church, it is the pastor and/or worship leader that sets the order of service, selects the songs, and dictates the focus and length of the sermon. In a digital service, the pastor relinquishes the oversight of his congregations' worship experience to the digital tools, which allow them to customize how they will experience the service liturgy. Digital media transfers control from the service leader/creator to

the audience, specifically the person who holds the remote control, computer mouse, or laptop touch pad.

This concern is expressed in a meme showing two photos that demonstrate the conflictual perception of what pastors may have in mind when they design an online worship service compared to the reality of how people actually engage with online worship at home. The top photo shows a White family sitting on a couch with their hands raised, as if they are responding “Hallelujah!” to what the Black pastor on the TV screen is preaching. The text reads: “How pastors think I watch livestream.” In contrast, the bottom image shows a man lying in bed in his pajamas, looking up at his phone screen, with the simple text: “Reality:” This meme demonstrates two fears about online worship.

The first is that when church services are transferred into a familiar environment, it will mean people will turn this sacred gathering that contains set ritual practices of spiritual significance into a mundane, everyday experience that becomes treated like one is watching just another YouTube video.

The second concern is that online worship services will be stripped of its communal context. Digital services could be viewed as an opportunity to create a new family-focused religious event where digital media provides a time and space to engage with each other and God. Instead, they fear digital worship will encourage people to engage via personal digital devices and therefore seen as an individual activity to be done further disconnecting family members from one another.

One meme is entitled: “Sermon Response Kit during Social Distancing” and shows six emoticons. Each one offers examples and explanations for how to affirm aspects of the pastor’s sermon in an online chat space. For example, participants could show their agreement with what the pastor is saying by using the symbol of two hands clapping together to mean as “Preach it!” or use a smiling face with hearts as eyes as if to say “Yes!” They could use the emoticon with two hands symbolically high-fiving another two hands in a double high-five to suggest, “C’mon Jesus!”

These memes articulate a strong concern that the online church worship experience could easily become disconnected from the tradition and the historical, communal culture from which it has emerged over the centuries. There is a fear that online worship strongly takes on the traits of social media culture, where emphasis is placed on personalization, customer-centered engagement, and flexible, dynamic manipulation based on user preference rather than the creators. It seems many churches are asking

questions about the extent to which online church is encouraging individual rather than communal investment in religion.

6. Addressing the Digital Theology Presented by Pandemic Memes

This analysis of internet memes explores themes about religion and the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, this analysis analyzes how church online was depicted in the early days of the pandemic. Three stories about how religious groups and leaders perceived technology in light of these events have been identified and discussed in detail. Specifically, we see technology being framed as a disruptor, outside the skill set of most religious leaders, and a tool which encourages problematic consumeristic approaches to religion.

The narrative of technology being a disruption to established religious traditions and practices highlighted that while the move from embodied to online church worship services was necessary, it was still a shift that caused concern for many churches. Of most concern were the ways that digital technologies and patterns of use would require modification of time-honored liturgical ritual. This pointed to a fear of a loss of control by religious leaders, as technology and not tradition became the driving force guiding changes in church worship practices.

The narrative of technology skills and knowledge being outside the normal remit and expertise of religious leaders also pointed to a concern in how technology shifts authority. Specifically, moving church online required pastors and priest to rely on other experts for advice and the overseeing of the transfer from offline to online worship. This recognition that church leaders might not have the ability to manage change on their own undermined religious power structures and congregational perceptions of the pastor as the wise and capable spiritual leader during times of crisis. Thus, technology spotlighted the weaknesses and fallibility of the pastor who was not prepared to deal with digital culture head on.

The final narrative discussed in this analysis focuses on the fear that the implementation of digital technology may create or even encourage individually focused consumeristic practices in participants' engagement with Church. Digital media shifts control from the established producers of the religious gathering and places decision-making into the hands of the congregation. Digital technology and its characteristics of interactivity and flexibility allow members to personalize their worship experience

in new ways as they make choices about how, when, and where they engage church online.

All three of these narratives highlight one underlying concern: the loss of control or authority to individuals' encounters with the church. It shifts the weekly gathering from a top-down, carefully constructed, and guided experience to a bottom-up, individually directed worship encounter. Thus, these memes reveal that even though many churches embraced digital media, this was not a decision that was easily accepted without hesitancy. Additionally, these memes explore the concerns about the long-term implications of this forced digital church experience. This paper and analysis show that even though more churches are now able and willing to engage with digital media, the fear of how has and will alter the church culture and structures has not disappeared. This is an important issue to realize for those engaged in the work of digital theology, as they should be prepared to address the tensions that underlie these narratives in the advocacy work that they do, calling the church to engage with digital media and culture as we move toward a post-COVID reality.

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