



# Network Sanctorum

## Reflections on an Image of Church Online

FREDERIKE VAN OORSCHOT

Universität Heidelberg

frederike.vanoorschot@oek.uni-heidelberg.de

*The paper examines digital forms of community and their theological interpretation in images of the church online. The image of the “network” Heidi Campbell and others proposed for the interpretation of digital religious communities serves as an exemplary way to think about digital ecclesiology. The ecclesiological implications of this image are discussed in the fields of identity and story, community and communion, open margins and the body of Christ, the future and the people of God and *communio* and *congregatio*. How “Network Sanctorum” is a helpful and future-oriented dogmatic interpretation of digital religious communities is discussed at the end.*

Images express who or what the church is: body, temple, people of God – these are the images with which we describe the community we are used to calling “church”. New forms of this community require new images of the church, which illuminate, comment on, and clarify existing images. This need is currently visible in the emergence digital forms of church life. Here the image of the church as a “network” is used frequently to describe the space, the structure and the character of church(es) online.<sup>1</sup>

These images of the church – as part of implicit theology, as Campbell puts it<sup>2</sup> – demand a conceptual re-thinking of traditional concepts of ecclesiastical life, and thereby

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<sup>1</sup> Campbell / Garner 2016; Cloete 2015: 1; da Silva 2020; Musa 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Campbell / Garner 2016: 10. See also da Silva 2020: 8–10; Musa 2020: 53.

also require a dogmatic reflection on the relation of images of church to the underlying ecclesiology. We must consider: how does the image of the network relate to other ecclesiological descriptions of the church? I propose we sharpen the image of the network in order to clarify its ecclesiological potentials and limits. This is of particular interest because the “network” is widely discussed not only in the field of digital church life but also in practical theology with a view to analog and digital church life. In the context of this conference and referring to the broad oeuvre of Heidi Campbell on this issue I will primarily focus on the debate about digital ecclesiology in the broader field of digital theology.

First I will describe the image of the church as a network following Heidi Campbell et al. In the second part I develop four dogmatic observations coming from my Protestant – German – background. These observations are discussed in the third part focusing on current debates on digital church.

## 1. Church as Network

Speaking of the Church as network usually is part of a media theory interpreting digital culture. Following Manuel Castells, this is described as a network society.<sup>3</sup> Heidi Campbell and Stephen Garner describe it as follows: “Network society is based on social relationships that are flexible rather than fixed. These relationships are loosely connected by needs and preference rather than tightly connected by tradition and institutions. [...] The image of the network further emphasizes that societal structures, and even our social relationships, are increasingly decentralized yet interconnected and supported by a social-technical infrastructure.”<sup>4</sup>

Transitions toward networks also influence the broad field of religious communities. Fluid communities are formed around religious topics, issues and persons. I see at least three basic forms relevant for my German context at the moment:

1. Digital worship services: These are mainly held as video or streaming worship services. Some take place in social networks (e.g. “Twomplet”, an evening prayer made up of short text messages on Twitter). On Instagram, church services are usually staged by pastors in a sequence of images, short video sequences or live videos. The same applies to platforms as TikTok and other channels

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<sup>3</sup> Campbell / Garner 2016: 3–10.

<sup>4</sup> Campbell / Garner 2016: 64. See also da Silva 2020: 7; Musa 2020: 54.

based mostly on visual communication. In most forms, community is built up and expressed in the form of liturgical interjections or prayer groups.

2. Religious communication and pastoral care networks: especially on social networks, communities are formed around one channel or account, sometimes related to church services. Following the description of “influencers” in social media, the term “Christfluencer” was formed in the German debate.
3. Virtual congregations: virtual congregations are congregations which live their congregational life as a permanent community in digital spaces. Such congregations exist in social networks, such as “Facebook Church”. Others organize their community life on their own platforms, via messenger services and streams (e.g. Virtual Reality Church <https://www.vrchurch.org/>).

One dimension of this form of community is described in the image of the “network.” The image is taken out of the socio-technical environment and serves to describe and integrate religious communities in the cultural-theoretical description of the network society. In this sense the image of the network is a reflexive concept.

Campbell and Garner aim for a comprehensive theological reflection of these processes, which they call a contextual networked theology.<sup>5</sup> Part of this endeavor is constructing a “digital ecclesiology”: The corresponding volume from 2020 offers an impressive overview of current issues in this area from theologians around the world.<sup>6</sup> The image of the network is characterized in these and similar descriptions by five characteristics.

1. Inwardly, the image of the network is used to describe a community. There are fluid connections between the participants that can be changed at any time based on the personal choices of individuals, leading to strong or weak connections.<sup>7</sup>
2. The network structure is interpreted as egalitarian: Networks are described as communities of equals, as democratic, flat, and anti-hierarchical. Authority is acquired through authenticity and competence – therefore Campbell speaks

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<sup>5</sup> Campbell / Garner 2016: 10–12.

<sup>6</sup> Campbell / Osteen 2020: 70.

<sup>7</sup> Campbell / Garner 2016: 73; Cloete 2015: 1.

of “shifting authority”<sup>8</sup>. Office and assignment are losing importance, as are institutions and organizations.

3. The identity of the community is based on a connecting religious narrative: It serves as a center of gravity of the community. Campbell describes it as “storied identity”<sup>9</sup>. This description is connected with the Spirit of God, who connects the network variably in time and space – it is at the same time an asynchronous, timeless and placeless community.
4. Outwardly, networks are characterized by open margins. They are part of overlapping lifeworld networks and their practices – online and offline – are described as convergent practice and multisided reality by Campbell.<sup>10</sup>
5. The network is often deeply related to thinking about the future of the church: a future-oriented church beyond institutional, spatial and temporal boundaries seems conceivable in the network and can be connected to existing social forms.<sup>11</sup>

In these descriptions a second dimension of the network becomes visible: in addition to its reflective character outlined above, it seems to gain orienting character. Media structure is interpreted theologically, anthropologically and ecclesiologicaly. In this way, the network becomes a model, a dogmatic guiding principle, to which it is to be oriented.<sup>12</sup>

In summary: in discourse on religious online communities, the image of the network in its reflective dimension serves to describe and integrate digital church life within a cultural-theoretical framework. In its orienting dimension it is interpreted theologically, anthropologically and ecclesiologicaly and thereby serves as an ecclesiological model of Church. The two dimensions are often not explicitly differentiated in discussion.<sup>13</sup> As an ecclesiological model, the image of the network describes an egalitarian

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<sup>8</sup> Campbell / Garner 2016: 73; cf. 55, 77–78; Friesen 2009: 115.

<sup>9</sup> Campbell / Garner 2016: 68.

<sup>10</sup> Campbell / Garner 201: 77–78.

<sup>11</sup> Campbell 2020a: 3.

<sup>12</sup> In this double perspective Campbell describes their understanding of networked theology as follows: “At one level, networked theology is about theology and media in dialogue [...]. [...] At a deeper level, this books [on networked theology, FvO] seeks to engage Christians in their faithful living in a networked world [...]” Campbell / Garner 2016: 12–15.

<sup>13</sup> A quite similar double structure can be found in the German practical-theological debate about the network concept, even if it is somewhat different.

and sustainable community with open margins, whose identity is based on a common narrative and is founded in the spirit of God.

Now let us turn to four observations on this image of the church as network – following some „classical” biblical and (German) protestant descriptions of the church. A fifth observation focuses on the relationship between the different dimensions in play.

## 2. Network Ecclesiology

### 2.1 Identity and Story

The image of the network describes the informal connections of the believers in, between, and among relevant organizations – or completely detached from them. A common story, a shared narrative unites these communities: it expresses the common reference to God and connects the believers with one another. As Campbell states: “In storied identity we recognize that the religious self is malleable rather than fixed yet unified through connection to a shared religious narrative.”<sup>14</sup>

Following the German theologian Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher, one can describe these communities as communities of preaching and witness in a very concentrated form. These communities live out of the representation and circulation of the shared “God-consciousness” (“Gottesbewusstsein”).<sup>15</sup> According to Schleiermacher, these forms of circulation are not only characteristics of the worship service – rather, religion itself ushers in questions and answers and therefore inevitably leads to communicative interactions building up uneven and “fluid” religious communities.<sup>16</sup> This exchange of “pious self-confidence” (“frommes Selbstbewusstsein”) builds up communication networks, through which “strictly speaking” an “unlimited community” is formed.<sup>17</sup>

Tellingly, Schleiermacher differentiates between these unlimited communities and the churches by pointing out the need to distinguish between what is personally believed – in his words, “subjective religion” – and what is common believed – objective religion.<sup>18</sup> Schleiermacher emphasizes that the faith comes from the Word of God and

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<sup>14</sup> Campbell / Garner 2016: 77–78.

<sup>15</sup> Schleiermacher 1983: 746.

<sup>16</sup> Schleiermacher 1999: §6, 38, 39, §115, 255; Schleiermacher 2001: 4. Rede 97.

<sup>17</sup> Schleiermacher 1999: §6.4, 57.

<sup>18</sup> Schleiermacher 1999: §6, 41.

cannot be empirically determined or described. Yet objective religion in the Church has a definite content and a common direction. So Schleiermacher is not primarily concerned with a fixation on shared beliefs, but rather emphasizes the dynamic character evolving out of the community: The church for Schleiermacher is a “social communication community [...] which deepens and propagates the new relationship to God of the believers opened by Jesus through mutual exchange”, as Laube puts it.<sup>19</sup> For Schleiermacher, it is this common belief that defines the dynamic of the church – and that at the same time releases a different dynamic than a circling around itself. Schleiermacher emphasizes therefore the “special spirit of community” (besonderer Gemeingeist) of the church: The church aims to become more and more one, according to the invisible church that is active in it. Such a dynamic around what is commonly believed, a concentration around the identity-creating narrative, characterizes the church in contrast to an unlimited communication network.

What is striking in the descriptions of network ecclesiology is that while the subjective beliefs of individuals become accountable, the shared belief often remains indefinite: The common narrative, the shared story, is often not clearly discernable. Thus it remains open whether and how these narratives actually bind a community together – or whether they would implode in an attempt to determine their shared belief. The Swiss media scholar Felix Stalder describes this phenomenon as typical for digital communities.<sup>20</sup> According to Stalder, digital communities are communities of practice. Knowledge and shared insights arise out of the shared practice, but are not the aim in themselves. Rather, they are characterized by their common actions. In conversation with classical ecclesiological descriptions of the church, two questions arise. On the one hand: to what extent does this description provide a more precise picture of the reality of church communities – analogue and digital – better than ecclesiologies, which are primarily based on shared “content”? On the other hand, it must be examined whether and how this common content – classically described as the teaching and sharing of the Word of God (CA 7) – should or can continue to be constitutive for the description of communities as churches.

This leads to a further question: the question of the subject of the identity-creating narrative and thus the connection between community and *communio*.

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<sup>19</sup> Laube 2011: 148–149.

<sup>20</sup> Stalder 2017: 135–137.

## 2.2 Community and Communio

The starting point in the descriptions of the community is the individual believer, through whom communication networks arise. Thus, it is initially a horizontal description of human communion as a “community” – as the media-scientific and sociological origin of the image suggests. At the same time, the communities of digital churches see themselves as *communio digitalis*. They are founded in the Spirit of God and connected to one another through God. As Teresa Berger explains, the physical co-presence of the celebrants – i.e. the physical spatial proximity – is not a mark and therefore also not a constitutive element of spiritual community.<sup>21</sup> With this, Berger hopes to build up a network that spans time and space. In this context, the ecumenical character of the image of the network repeatedly comes into focus. Denominational boundaries are either not named at all or are marked as irrelevant and removed in the image of the network.

In this respect, the image of the church as a network shows similarities to the ecumenical *communio*-ecclesiology. *Communio*, the communion of saints that transcends space and time,<sup>22</sup> is not limited to what can be seen or seen locally. This communion is a community and at the same time a participation *in* something. The *communio Sanctorem* is therefore a community based on sharing in God. The image of the network takes up this description and thus comes to a theological interpretation of the digital community as *communio digitalis*.

Network ecclesiology and *communio* ecclesiology thereby focus primarily on the church as a spiritual community. Clarifications are necessary with regard to the relationship between this description and the description of the network as a communication community. Firstly, I observe a tendency to identify the virtual character of communalization with spirit-driven communion, which is based on digital mediatization. A careful distinction must be made here: virtual communities are not founded in the spirit *per se*, but initially only characterized by a different form of mediatization.

Secondly, this focus on the spiritual community follows a specific assignment of virtuality and materiality, following Castell’s concept of the “culture of real virtuality”, where the biological, carbon-like coming together loses its relevance and is interpreted in the virtual presence.<sup>23</sup> These connections are currently leading to discussions about the physical dimension of community that go far beyond the description of net-

<sup>21</sup> Berger 2017: 39. See also Chia 2020: 21; Musa 2020: 55.

<sup>22</sup> CS Z 1, Z 5.

<sup>23</sup> Castells 2017: 425, 502.

work ecclesiology.<sup>24</sup> But for the image of the Church as network, we must ask: what is the relationship between *communio* and the corporeality of a concrete *congregatio*?

Thirdly, if we describe a spiritual community, some questions regarding its constituting factors need to be clarified. Is it the spirit that inscribes the individual or is it the believers? Does the network understand itself as *creatura verbi* – as a narrative community? How can these dimensions be related to one another? Where and how is one inscribed in biblical stories? This touches on the question of whether and how the common narrative is intended to be connected with the word of God and preaching.

### 2.3 Open Margins and the Body of Christ

The description of the “storied identity” shows that identity in networks is build up from within – or from above? – but not from the outside. Rather, the image of the network shows the possibilities for continuities and connection. The church should be “everyone’s home,”<sup>25</sup> an “open we.”<sup>26</sup> The relation to other networks is described not only as a cybernetic possibility, but as an essential characteristic of the church – networks merge and overlap. Network nodes are never just nodes in a network; other networks with which they are connected also cross at these nodes.

The resulting networks are interpreted theologically with the biblical image of the body of Christ. With this biblical image, a new dimension of the identity comes into view: It describes the integration into the identity of the spiritual community as a new being. Here, too, the focus is on the connection with one another.<sup>27</sup> Paul describes the connection of otherwise separate groups in the body of Christ and the abolition of the differences in the new being of the members of the body. This connection with one another is based on being in Christ. This also leads to a new identity of the community and of individuals. This vertical reestablishment of identity leads at the same time to a distinguishability through the following of Christ.<sup>28</sup> Being called to and baptized into the body of Christ not only leads to a common narrative of callings, but to a new being as the body of Christ.

The new identity of believers must be recognizable in the concrete coexistence of believers. Because Christians are members of the body of Christ, their behavior in the

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<sup>24</sup> We touched this already in other parts of the workshop – see the articles by Clifford Anderson and Selina Palm.

<sup>25</sup> da Silva 2020: 10.

<sup>26</sup> Friesen 2009: 55–56.

<sup>27</sup> See for the following Wolff 2011: 302–304.

<sup>28</sup> CS Z 21.



community has theological significance. This communion of the body of Christ is visibly modeled in the communion of the worshipping congregation.<sup>29</sup> In and through this new identity, the community appears open and inviting to the outside world.

#### 2.4 The Future and the People of God

This only ever succeeds selectively: the physical community of believers is not only a realization of the image of the body of Christ, but often also an imposition for individuals.

The ecumenical descriptions of *communio* recall this in the image of the wandering people of God: the church is on the way, and is undergoing pilgrimage and fellowship on the way.<sup>30</sup> The image of movement implies a goal that has not yet been reached in the current being. This creates a curious dynamic: the eschatological perspective of what was promised constitutes ways towards the goal – and at the same time makes the provisional nature of one’s own, constantly changing location recognizable as such.

Combining this dynamic with the descriptions of the Church as Network outlined above would be a fascinating endeavor. At first glance, the hope for the future of the church seem to arise from the presumed connections to existing social forms on the one hand and the multiple connection points of an open network – temporally, spatially and beyond the institutions<sup>31</sup> – on the other hand. I would be interested in balancing the tension between connecting with the existing and approaching what is to come. This brings into focus what I would like to call an “eschatological flaw.” The ecumenical community is not a complete community and the goal of this path lies beyond human scope for shaping. This moment of inadequacy in comparison to what was (or “is”?) eschatologically promised represents for me a fundamental moment of the church in all its forms and practices. The community always falls short of what is biblically attested and eschatologically promised. The hope for the future of the Church rests on resolution of this eschatological tension.

#### 2.5 *Communio* and *Congregatio*

This tension does not release one from the careful examination of the communities of the Church in the world – including virtual communities. A mere virtual ontology of

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<sup>29</sup> Schröter 2011: 53.

<sup>30</sup> CS Z 27.

<sup>31</sup> EKD-Zentrum für Mission in der Region 2016: 24; EKD-Zentrum für Mission in der Region 2017: 6; EKD-Zentrum für Mission in der Region 2015: 4.

an “electronic temple”<sup>32</sup> is in danger of overlooking the necessity – and the reality – of the concrete space, place, and structures of the spiritual *communio* in this world. In the Lutheran tradition, this reference to concrete communities has a prominent place, in response to other theologies, which mainly focus on the spiritual community. *Confessio Augustana* states in its seventh article that the church is not only *communio*, but also always concrete *congregatio sanctorum*. This *congregatio sanctorum* can be found where “*evangelium recte docetur et recte administrantur sacramenta*” (CA 7). In this sense, CA 7 emphasizes concreteness: the concrete situation of the communities gathering in the spirit and their actual practices and forms of organization are central.

For me, the double dimension of the network outlined above proves to be a strength at this point. Network ecclesologies not only develop an ecclesiological model, but also provide an analytical structure that can be analyzed by social-scientific means. Thereby the empirically describable social structures – the concrete *congregatio digitalis* – comes into view and can be discussed. I will now briefly sketch some ideas of such an institutional and empirical concretion of the network church.

Looking at an institutional level, facing the *congregatio* the relation between fluid communities and organized and institutional forms of Churches comes into sight. Schleiermacher stresses this point: churches, in contrast to potentially unlimited religious communication networks, are “pious communities” that communicate “within certain limits” in such a way “that one can somehow achieve certain recognition about which individual belongs to it and which not”.<sup>33</sup> Churches are therefore characterized by some kind of “orderly interaction and cooperation.”<sup>34</sup> For Schleiermacher this is not a question of control or ministry, but rather arises out of the need to organize a community which reaches a certain size. A look at the New Testament texts adds a further perspective: the formation of organized structures there is essential to ensure durability. And I would add a third perspective: for me, it is a sign of ecumenical respect to relate to other Christian groups as legitimate community. Not in order to become part of them, but in order to let the connectedness in faith, in the spiritual community, also become recognizable in the *congregatio*.

So, how fluid network communities are connected with other forms of church organization and institution is an old question asked newly to digital church networks –

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<sup>32</sup> Musa 2020: 55.

<sup>33</sup> Schleiermacher 1999: §6, 40 (“daß irgendwie zu bestimmter Anerkennung gebracht werden kann, welcher Einzelne dazugehört und welcher nicht”).

<sup>34</sup> Schleiermacher 1999: § 115.

medially, personally, structurally, liturgical and dogmatically. Focusing on analogous church networks, Roleder points to the constitutive interplay of formal structures and informal networks that maintain and promote one another.<sup>35</sup> Horst Gorski describes an “institutional resistance” of the church – which can be brought into the future vision of digital networks not only as an obstacle, but also in a constructively irritating manner.<sup>36</sup> The decentralized understanding of authority<sup>37</sup> and the associated changes in the understanding of ministry<sup>38</sup> are of special importance regarding the possibilities of participation and realizing the priesthood of all believers – and at the same time ecumenically highly problematic issues to discuss.<sup>39</sup>

On the other hand, CA 7 forces dogmatic reflection on digital network churches into empirical concreteness. Here we touch several questions from social networks analysis and media theory. One could ask, for example, to what extent the image of constant connectivity and openness is actually fulfilled in the networks described? Where are church networks ostensibly open, but still lead to exclusion – through language, aesthetics, know-how, etc. (Reckwitz), but also through the necessary technical infrastructure? Network theory has clearly worked out how network structures lead to segregation and homogenization. How and where are these processes recognizable and ecclesiological reflected in the church networks? How can these processes of demarcation and exclusion be related to the ecclesiological model of open margins? Another question is: How do the media structures relate to the model? Youtube rankings, search algorithms and personalized timelines in social networks are of crucial importance for the question of who can network with whom. How democratic are these structures and where do new hierarchies arise – and with them new structures of authority? And – connected to Rendtorff’s description of the church as an institution of freedom<sup>40</sup> – where is there perhaps a potential of freedom in finding and connecting to an institution? As a dogmatic theologian I can only sketch out these questions, which are far beyond my expertise and form central components of an interdisciplinary reflection on digital church practices and their images of the church.

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<sup>35</sup> Roleder 2020: 299, 302.

<sup>36</sup> Gorski 2018: 206.

<sup>37</sup> Dyikuk 2020: 35; Rice 2012: 4.

<sup>38</sup> EKD-Zentrum für Mission in der Region 2017: 15.

<sup>39</sup> Berger 2017: 45; Campbell 2020b: 52; Cloete 2015: 5; Dyikuk 2020: 35; Rice 2012: 4.

<sup>40</sup> Rendtorff 1977: 130.

### 3. Network Sanctorum?!

If one considers the ecclesiological potential of the image of the network, the description as a network of saints at second glance is less remote than it seems. The image of the network focuses on the spiritual community, which is the *communio Sanctorum*. At the same time using the image of the network provides a specific social structure. Reflecting on these two dimensions, I want to conclude my considerations.

At the level of the social structure, I have highlighted central questions for further reflection on concrete *congregationes digitales*. Network analyses open concrete empirical access to existing communities. There is also great potential here for the perception and representation of ecumenical community. While the ecumenical description of communion remains at the level of the spiritual community, network ecclesiology offers a more precise definition. Based on the structure of *communio* as a network, the different forms and levels of what is called “Ecumene” come into sight and relate to each other. The formal and informal structures of ecumenical practice such as ecumenical prayers etc., can be combined with theological searching in ecumenical discussions as well as institutional cooperation. Described as a network, these are independent and equivalent forms of ecumenism – without releasing anyone from the responsibility to reflect on the indissoluble relationships to one another.

In my remarks, I have modeled what such a reflection can look like from a dogmatic perspective. On the level of the ecclesiological model, different aspects can help to sharpen the image of the church as a network. Especially the common narrative and its references to what is commonly believed, the relationship between communication, community and spiritual community, and new identity, as well as the determination of the relationship between virtual, spiritual, and corporeal community must be specified more precisely. In particular, the determination of the office and the institution must be specified further.

The specific potential of the image of the network lies in the connection of these levels. Schleiermacher also provides a good basis for such a connection. He was first – and only? – to introduce a theological discipline called “ecclesiastical statistics” in dogmatic theology at the University of Berlin in order to grasp and dogmatically reflect on the variety of concrete forms of church life.<sup>41</sup> Responding to this concern, the interdisciplinary examination of the image of the church in the network contributes to the readjustment of ecclesiology at the intersection of practical theology and social

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<sup>41</sup> See Gräß 2013.

sciences. Focusing on the relation between the dogmatic concept of the church and empirical reality not only serves the development of instruments in dealing with social science perspectives in dogmatic theology, but also helps to adjust interpretive figures and ecclesiological images of the church.<sup>42</sup>

My thoughts on the image of the church as network thereby showed something fundamental: Community in churches cannot be described and captured in one picture. One requires many pictures that illuminate, inform, and clarify each other. As Campbell describes, it is one task of theology to develop some images of the world and the church.<sup>43</sup> To incorporate the image of the network sanctorem constructively into this endeavor, searching for a – post-pandemic?<sup>44</sup> – “digital ecclesiology”<sup>45</sup> from a dogmatic perspective was my aim today.

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<sup>42</sup> For this task in the German context see Laube 2011: 163.

<sup>43</sup> Campbell / Garner 2016: 12–15.

<sup>44</sup> Dyikuk 2020: 35.

<sup>45</sup> Campbell 2020a: 3; Campbell / Osteen 2020: 66–67.

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