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An Analysis of Authority as Reflected in
the Social Media of Churches in New Delhi

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Faith Memes: An Analysis of Authority as Reflected in the Social Media of Churches in New Delhi[†]

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Abstract

Growing access to digital technology in India has led to increased reliance on the interface between religion and social media. The Internet provides traditional religious authorities with tools with which they can reinforce their official practices and beliefs. However, the Internet is also capable of generating multiple meanings from religious and nonreligious content. The multiplicity of meanings can establish a segregated, polarized, and nonhierarchical space. In this article, I seek to understand the use of faith memes on the churches' Facebook pages. I focus on issues such as authority and the lack of participation that are involved in the use of faith memes as expressions of religious faith. I also analyze the online responses to the faith memes as projected through online tools such as "comment" and "like." The analysis reflects a form of participatory social action on Facebook that may relate to the traditional hierarchical structure of Sacred Heart Cathedral Church (a Catholic church) and Abundant Life Church East Delhi (a Protestant church) as reflected in their Facebook pages. I employ visual rhetorical analysis of the two churches' Facebook pages to comprehend social media's interface with religion. I chose the sample of a Catholic church page and a Protestant church page in an attempt to provide a balanced analysis of the two largest Christian communities in India.

[†] Dr. John Bishop provided assistance as a reviewer and shared comments that helped to improve this article.

The Internet in India is part of the grand narrative of modernity that surrounds technology. The image of the Internet in the popular imagination as a challenge to authority figures is portrayed through popular movements online. Digital space has changed the established paradigms and encourages the questioning of established authorities, creating narratives of empowered interaction in spaces of power. The Internet provides space for any layperson to participate in dialogue and to contest established power structures in society. This ability to interact and challenge the existing forms of authority has led to an alliance between social media and forces promoting social change. Across the world, one can witness series of uprisings that have collectively been dubbed the Facebook and Twitter revolutions. The interaction between the religious community and digital space is an interesting case to examine to help in understanding the changing aspects of authority in the modern world.

A religious community may have many divergent practices while being united in principle through a common understanding of scripture or by means of other forms of authority that foster a shared religious belief. The dissemination of religious beliefs is a fundamental objective of religious institutions.

In the digital environment, religious institutions have been subjected to criticism, and their authority has been questioned in social media. In such an environment, social media have made it possible to listen to previously unheard questions and voices, especially those from minority communities. In India, social media have provided access to new testimonies that are emerging in opposition to the dominant Hindutva culture.¹ There is more fragmentation of old culture in new spaces that allow for creative expression. In the midst of various narratives, the public is becoming increasingly suspicious of people whose words would formerly have been taken as authoritative, such as bureaucrats, executive officers, and religious leaders. In the context of a growing crisis of trust in societal institutions, many victimized individuals have found their voice in social media. As decentralized spaces, social media undermine traditional authority. In response, the traditional authorities attempt to draw people back into compliance, using the very same media.

The adoption of social media by some churches is part of their objective to reaffirm and regain their authority and trust in the online world (Cheong 2013). One of the ways in which churches have achieved this is through attempting to establish a sense of sacredness in online spaces. The sense of the sacred is invoked through faith memes, among other things.

¹ Hindutva is a form of aggressive Hindu nationalism that has become the official ideology of Bharatiya Janata Party (the ruling party in India from May 2014 to the current time). Part of this ideology is an attitude of hostility toward all people who practice religions other than the Hindu religion.

Faith memes are catchy, provocative phrases that circulate the essence of a particular faith on the World Wide Web. Their intent is to develop awareness and spread the word about a specific religion (Cheong 2012). In this article, I focus on the use of faith memes on the Facebook pages of two churches: Sacred Heart Cathedral Church, a Catholic church, and Abundant Life Church East Delhi, a Protestant church. I chose these churches because of the regularity of their posts and because, in their respective denominations in India, these two churches have the largest online communities with a focus on social media. I will also discuss the extent of the dialogic and participatory functions of faith memes in each church's virtual space, to discern whether the church has reclaimed the legitimacy in the online spaces.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Individuals and Religious Authority in the Virtual World

New communication technologies tend to generate contentious relationships with existing power structures. According to Meyrowitz (1985), the merging of communication systems has the potential to generate frailty in authorities, especially in the age of the Internet. The online world is seen as a decentralized and open space of modernity and technology. The Internet can be seen to be playing a catalytic function in promoting individualism. People prefer watching films in the privacy of their homes instead of going to movie theaters, using search engines to get information, and seeking advice in online forums instead of consulting friends or family members. Even in public spaces, mobile content often replaces person-to-person interaction. The new personalized online space celebrates the structural changes offered by technology, which glorify competition, individualism, and personalized existence. The narratives of popular media and news media sing the praises of self-made men and women, lone rangers, and self-starters. Thus they drive individuals to seek individualistic heroism and diminish the worth of communal existence.

Traditional ideas of religious authorities are associated with dogmas, faith doctrines, and domains of hierarchical communication used by religious leaders, who are commonly called clergy, priest, pastor, guru, imam, monk, or the like (Cheong 2013). According to Campbell (2007), despite the growing research interest in online authority, there is currently no comprehensive theory of religious authority online. Nonetheless, authority has characteristics of voluntary compliance. This compliance assumes the belief that one's personal interests are dependent on obedience to the structure of power. The authorities' actions are supported by the belief that they are legitimate. The relationship is hierarchical, and it establishes a social order that governs all patterns of activity within the religious

institution. The legitimacy is provided through compliance, which emerges from the members' willingness to believe the claims of the authority figures (Mauss 2001; Weber 1968).

Max Weber outlines three types of authority: legal/rational authority, traditional authority, and charismatic authority. According to Weber (1966), religious authority displays charismatic as well as traditional forms of authority. Traditional authority is seen as reinforcing and preserving inequality in society through customs and practices without providing opportunities for challenging the existing structures. Charismatic authority reflects devotion and reverence toward the authority that is generated from the leader's unique personality, which is seen as extraordinary or even supernatural. The church as a religious site has both traditional and charismatic structures of authority wherein its members faithfully surrender in devotional reverence to the authority of the church and its clergy. The religious leaders' ability to organize committees and mobilize people to a cause reaffirms and enhances their status within the community. Campbell (2007) introduces four categories of religious authority: hierarchy (leaders), structure (community, organization), ideology (faith, belief, shared identity), and text (religious book, official teachings). These mechanisms are used to control and influence the members of a religious community in accordance with the church's cultural expressions. However, these forms of authority have been called into question through the decentralization of power with the agency of digital media.

The scope for authority in something other than the self in the online world is generated through various mechanisms, such as the creation of a sense of religious community. This is done through replicating most of the church's offline practices in the online space, such as ritual patterns, visual designs, symbols, and even organizational structure (Hutchings 2010). The familiar nature of these practices aids in shaping expected behaviors and reducing the spontaneous expression of disruptive creativity (Hutchings 2013). However, this nonhierarchical means of communication without the traditional gatekeepers allows possibilities for disrupting and displacing traditional authority and its doctrines. The corrosion of traditional religious authority can be correlated with the Internet's provision of diverse information that can establish new forms of online authority. This new authority can disrupt the established norms by revolutionizing the way in which religious faith is received and practiced. Online propagation of egalitarian community has few speech restrictions and a lack of centralized management (Cheong 2013).

The presentation and representation in the online space build and reinforce authority. An individual's control over a website allows space for expressing, criticizing, and defining what the individual wishes to show. This may threaten religious leaders as they are exposed to hostility and suspicion that undermine their authority. The online world also provides individuals with self-appointed authority if they use the available resources in a self-propagating manner. This is done

through creating websites about religious institutions where the individual dictates the communication practices in that space by becoming a moderator or webmaster. Such acceptance of a moderator as a governing authority makes the means to gain authority online an important component of the individual's skill set (Campbell 2005). The "techies" in the digital culture are gaining roles in religious leadership as a result of their skills, which allow them to create an environment that is conducive to online ritual activities.

A hierarchical organizational structure is maintained in the virtual world by providing visibility to authoritative symbols, texts, and leadership. However, the online space also facilitates a community network without physical human interaction; this aspect of the online world takes away the authentic church experience. Here, the online community is established on the basis of shared ideas or interest rather than "real" relationships (Hutchings 2013). The process of participating in a virtual community can give an individual the illusion of being connected. The social media and our immersion into them are causing the decline of flesh-and-blood relationships and withdrawal from the "real" (physical) world (Garner 2013). Nonetheless, this individualistic existence in the online world away from physical world provides an empowered space to people who have been on the periphery and oppressed because of their social status, class, or ideology (Ho and McLeod 2008). The possibility of anonymity of identity and status in the online world has made it easier to mount challenges to traditional religious authority in a growing digital culture (Cheong 2013).

There are instances in which collective acceptance is established as a result of an individual's charisma; such instances can generate celebrity status for the individual. However, this enhanced status can be challenged in digital spaces, for instance, through debates that could diminish the individual's authority. On the other hand, traditional authority figures can use their offline sources to establish themselves as online experts in their religious fields.

With growing access to religious content online, the idea that anybody can be an expert is gaining momentum. The Internet has aided in creating a decentralized understanding of religious practice, which functions without any central leader or institution (O'Leary 1996). Search engines make it easy to find religious content that undermines the traditional authorities who previously had exclusive access to such content.

Nonetheless, as the Internet has grown in popularity among the religiously oriented, it has become a primary resource for promoting social capital in digital religious interaction (Cheong 2013). This social capital can be networked back to the traditional authorities, who may not be threatened by the Internet but may challenge controversial interpretations of their doctrine, provide counternarratives in answer to the criticism, and disseminate their teaching online. These authorities view the digital realm as a positive development for their community and embrace

it as part of their theological mission of growth and expansion (Kluver and Cheong 2007).

In the social media space, the use of faith memes by religious authorities and their anticipated circulation have increased the hope of making traditional authority more visible and legitimate. The presence of social media in the daily lives of clergy members is understood to provide a positive influence on their work, as they are constantly engaging with their congregation through communications such as faith memes (Fischer-Nielsen 2012).

Faith Memes

Dawkins (1976) defines a meme as a unit of imitable content that is transmissible; the content can be an idea, a story, or any kind of behavior that may be subject to an evolutionary process. However, for the evolutionary process to continue, the replication process must have high fidelity. Dawkins sees memes as cultural replications, which are subject to selection and variation, similar to genes in the biological world. The idea of the meme revolves around information units inside the brain, which are localized and generate phenotypic effects in dispersion through behavior or other communicated products; these effects move the cultural product from one brain to another through imitation (Dawkins 1982). To maintain popularity as well as cultural relevance, the ability offered by memes to combine pictures and succinct texts helps in efficiently communicating messages about politics, popular culture, and religion in social media (Bellar et al. 2013).

Religious evolution has depended on the same processes of replication and transmission that have generated other cultural practices and traditions. Now, with increased mobility and transmissibility provided by the Internet, the copying processes have improved, providing greater fidelity (Blackmore 2003). Memes in the digital era have the function of disseminating ideas in a culture or social system in a digital format. However, the memes are subjected to selective pressures, and only the content that is robust or popular will experience longevity and get passed on. The producers of memes in the participatory community of believers confer certain advantages, such as the shared objectives of defending their faith, providing a counternarrative against criticisms, challenging controversial interpretations, and spreading their beliefs. These common objectives are encouraged through circulating a faith meme online. The circulation of memes and other content as part of the theological mission of expansion provides certain active online members more social capital, and it aids in establishing their authority (Cheong 2012).

Ease of reproduction, transfer, and media convergence have increased the longevity and reach of faith memes. Multiple faith memes are being generated to disseminate awareness of Christianity. They have the potential to be used as participatory tools. These memes incorporate language and images of a sacred nature to

disseminate a specific religious belief and an understanding of religious experience (Bellar et al. 2013). In the process of production, the content gets simplified as its creator seeks to draw consensus through recognition of the sacred item represented in the faith meme (Bellar et al. 2013).

In considering faith memes, some questions arise: Who is using faith memes? Are faith memes culturally relevant? What do faith memes mean for traditional authority?

Invoking the Sacred

Faith memes are not just part of the evolutionary process of transmission but provide agency to generate sacredness in the virtual space. Nonetheless, it is not always the transmission of scripture or message, but the nonconscious affective resonance that one feels with the source of the message, that generates a sense of the sacred (Shouse 2005). The consequence anticipated from the sharing of faith memes is to generate an epiphany as well as a sense of the sacred, which reinforces the idea of community, identity, and solidarity with other believers (Cheong 2012). Online faith memes provide opportunities for generating a new aesthetic in which there is abstraction from the original elements of sacred narratives with strong visuals and emotive forms that emerge through the employment of images from popular culture (Bellar et al. 2013).

An understanding of the sacred can be gained from the works of Emile Durkheim (1995 [1912]), who saw the religious nature of humans being witnessed through religious thought, which for him was a product of collective representation that constructs the symbols. Durkheim understood the sacred as coming about through prescribed modes of action that exist in a binary with the profane. In this conceptualization, religious belief represents the nature of sacred things and negotiates the relationship of the sacred with the profane in a systemic manner. The online world generates a way to experience the sacred that is aided by faith memes. For instance, Facebook pages may present faith memes as well as engaging users in practices of praying, preaching, and even worshipping through the content on the pages. Such expansive use of faith memes in sacred rituals sets them apart from the rest of the memes found on the Internet because of the religious experience faith memes provide.

The sacred pertains to certain things that are set apart. It is a socially influenced perception of ultimate truth with properties of transcendence; the sacred exists in an absolute duality with the profane (Durkheim 1995). Durkheim acknowledges that emblems or symbols that represent the extension of the sacred gain degrees of sacredness in relation to other objects, and the sacred is approached with reverence. The profane is the forbidden or taboo. It may involve places one may not go, things that should not be eaten, words that should not be

spoken, or people who are shunned. Through all these restrictions, religiosity is expressed, and the sacred is given dignity and superiority over the profane. Therefore invoking sacred symbols along with text gives faith memes an abstraction of reverence, as one cannot interact with the sacred without segregating it from the profane. Both sacred and profane have transformative aspects that involve a movement from sacred to profane and vice versa (Durkheim 1995). Thus the appropriation of sacred Judeo-Christian artifacts, including the Bible, embodies transformative approach toward faith memes that incorporate the sacred. The interaction of the individual with the sacred through faith memes can be a cleansing, inspiring, and fearful process as the profane self needs to be set aside and the individual needs to realign with the sacredness of the faith meme as would be done in the presence of other sacred artifacts. Therefore faith memes, through their presupposed sacred symbolic meaning, establish their authoritative credentials over the Facebook pages and their users. The memes can be further used as tools by individuals or institutions to gain social capital that legitimizes their authority in virtual space. I contend that attempts to use faith memes to contribute to the symbolic effect of religion, in this context, is important for understanding symbolism in religion.

Symbolic Effect

According to Clifford Geertz (1993: 90), religion is

a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.

Religion as an institution gives existential meaning to life and provides symbols that generate sacred experiences that affect the community of believers. The roles of faith memes on churches' websites and Facebook pages have reinforced in virtual space the socially identifiable forms, preconditions, and effects of sacred artifacts. Faith memes may assist a church in regaining authority from individual expressions online by reawakening the conditioning of traditions and culture, which establish certain symbols and artifacts as sacred within a religious culture. This reference to tradition and its sacred attributes helps to return legitimacy and trust to the institutional religious authorities, who are increasingly threatened by individual expressions of faith. This process is made possible through conceptions of religious symbols.

As Geertz (1993: 91) explains, symbols are "tangible formulations of notions, abstractions from experiences fixed in perceptible forms, concrete embodiments of idea, attitude, judgements, longings, or belief." The utilization, apprehension, or even construction of symbols is a social event, which uses the intersubjectivity

of common understanding that shapes and is shaped by public behavior (Geertz 1993). Social and historical conditions play a crucial role in framing the salient symbols of religious beliefs and action. Cognitive knowledge is structured through religious institutions that emerge in symbolic interaction between the institution and the human actor. Therefore symbols exist as a set of relationships that are conditioned by social relations; a child growing up is indoctrinated with the culture's symbols through social activities that the child is encouraged or obliged to undertake (Asad 1993). The conditions that create the symbol have already been established as authoritative; therefore the symbols represent authority. According to Geertz (1993), cognitive knowledge of the religious symbol provides meaning to religious practices, which bring forth distinctive sets of dispositions for the worshipper (Geertz 1993). The participation in religious practices and the indoctrination of the symbols affect the quality of the worshipper's experience. St. Augustine broke down the religious function of symbols in terms of conditions of power. He argued that constraints that are encouraged or enforced through education, warning, and fear create discipline, which leads to great achievements for humans (as cited by Brown 1967); therefore discipline through subjection to God's laws mediates the believer's interaction with religious symbols. Thus a disciplined approach toward religious symbols will determine the quality of one's religious experience.

Within this context, I look at religious memes posted by Sacred Heart Cathedral and Abundant Life Church East Delhi and seek to understand how the sacred is used in memes to reinforce traditional authority.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, I utilize a collection of faith memes from a Catholic diocese and a Protestant church, both based in New Delhi. My intention is to enable understanding of how religion is portrayed and framed in faith memes. Using purposive sampling, I selected the Facebook pages of the churches that have the largest number of members on Facebook from the Catholic and Protestant denominations in New Delhi. Among Catholic churches, Sacred Heart Cathedral's Facebook page has the most members (833); the membership of every other Catholic church's Facebook page is less than half that of Sacred Heart Cathedral. The Facebook page of Abundant Life Church East Delhi has 2611 members, the largest number of members of all Protestant churches in New Delhi.

For both churches, I used visual rhetorical analysis on the most recent ten faith memes posted on their Facebook pages as of October 4, 2014. Visual rhetorical analysis deconstructs central concepts to critically analyze the structures that establish the primacy of a certain ideology and knowledge base (Foss 2004). The system of signs displayed through faith memes can be decoded by using these

three aspects: (1) studying the nature of images, (2) explicating the intended function of the image, and (3) evaluating the image. Studying the nature of the image seeks to capture the distinguishing features of the image; explicating the function enables an identification of the purpose the meme serves for its audience, and evaluating the image determines whether it accomplishes the intended function. The evaluation will also seek to understand the effect the religious institution intended to elicit in posting the meme as well as the audience's reception to it, which will be analyzed through the comments posted on the faith meme's page on Facebook.

CASE STUDY: SACRED HEART CATHEDRAL

The Nature of the Faith Memes

The faith memes of the Sacred Heart Cathedral Church's Facebook page² were all posted by the church. One of the faith memes that I sampled for this analysis is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Faith Meme from the Facebook Page of Sacred Heart Cathedral Church in New Delhi (Image courtesy of eDrugSearch, edrugsearch.com.)



² www.facebook.com/SacredHeartCathedralChurch.

The ten faith memes from this church that I analyzed were spread over six months with low levels of interactivity on the Facebook page. Of the ten images, five frame an effect of holiness by depicting radiant rays coming through script as well as images of people. They make use of the imagery of halos surrounding the central figures and messages. Two of the faith memes are presented as prayers. The others include images of Noah's ark, Jesus on the cross, Jesus' body being taken down by Mary Magdalene and a disciple, Mary with baby Jesus and a divine representation of Mary, a Caucasian woman praying, Jesus' nail-pierced hands reaching for another hand, God shining through the clouds, and an image of a hand in which a white light is held. The text of the memes suggests principles of gratitude, humility, sorrow, sacrifice, hope, awaiting the second coming, unconditional love, questioning one's love for God, uniting with God, and God as an everlasting support even in troubled times. Only three of the Sacred Heart Cathedral Church's faith memes ask for participation and circulation; however, nobody shared those memes further. The maximum participation was a "like"; the comment section for these participatory and transmissible memes had only "amen," which is something that people say at the end of a prayer (sometimes in unison) and means "So be it." This statement is ritualized and rarely carries conscious intentionality. People commented "Amen" because the faith meme asked people to say it if they agreed with the content; thus "amen" reflects compliance with authority. This action of compliance can be associated with the drive to accumulate social capital to achieve favor and higher religious status from the established structure through obedience.

The Function of the Faith Memes

Faith memes attempt to generate a sacred effect by reminding the users of God and his omnipotent attributes that can provide salvation or help in coping with the profane world. The faith memes posted by Sacred Heart Cathedral Church can be categorized as prayer memes, sacrifice memes, and end-of-days memes, depending on their functions.

Prayer Memes. Various prayer formats are used in the memes to promote a culture of prayer by attracting users into reading the text of the meme and praying as a consequence. Prayer memes try to engage people in a conversation with God; the content of the prayer is based on the values embedded within the scripture of love, mercy, and forgiveness. The effect these memes is trying to convey is the relative ease with which one can pray. They show that praying does not need to be a long, tedious ritual but can be short, understandable, and a genuine conversation with God. The prayer memes attempt to make the practice of prayer easier to access and popular with people who may have no religious literacy.

Sacrifice Memes. Sacrifice memes try to generate a sense of gratitude that obliges people to adhere to a particular way of life. These memes reaffirm belief through visualizations of the sacrifices God made for humans. The images have a halo aura surrounding them, which celebrates a selfless lifestyle and encourages users to live in a similar fashion. The potency of such imagery creates a sense of reverence in the minds of people who do not belong to the church's religious tradition. These messages are simple and are therefore attractive to people outside the tradition. The depiction of sacrifice is aimed at reaffirming the belief in the love (*agape*) that God has for humans; the goal is to generate a sense of obligation toward Jesus' sacrifice on the cross by living according to God's law.

End-of-Days Meme. End-of-days memes use narratives and images to communicate the Second Coming of Jesus. The end of days marks the destruction of the world as well as the idea of living in hell, which is a world of pain and suffering after the Second Coming of Jesus. End-of-days memes are used to generate fear in the minds of users. Fear works as a foreshadowing threat that affects the individual in the present; however, it requires a preexisting understanding of the scripture that provides the reference for the separation of good from that which is evil on Judgment Day (end of days). God delivers those who perform godly deeds by taking them to heaven and punishes those who do evil. Therefore the question of whether you are ready to meet God elicits urgency on the part of the believer, who may prepare for this eventuality through righteous living. The end-of-days meme therefore shows the glory and sacredness of God only to users who have knowledge of the biblical doomsday and will thus be motivated by dormant fear of the Second Coming.

CASE STUDY: ABUNDANT LIFE CHURCH EAST DELHI

The Nature of the Faith Memes

The ten faith memes that I sampled from the Facebook page of Abundant Life Church East Delhi³ were posted between mid-September and early October 2014 by Emily Salomon, a member of the church. One of these faith memes is shown in Figure 2.

³ www.facebook.com/groups/319346984831995.

Figure 2: Faith Meme from the Facebook Page of Abundant Life Church East Delhi (Image courtesy of Free Christian Wallpapers, www.facebook.com/versecovers/.)



The Facebook group of Abundant Life Church East Delhi is very active in comparison to that of the Sacred Heart Cathedral. However, there is no participation in the faith memes; only one was given two likes, both by a single user, Jovelyn Fabro. All the memes except one are quotations from scripture. The backgrounds do not contain images of significance; the text carries more importance than the images do, owing to the centrality of the text. There are just two significant images; one has Jesus in the role of a shepherd; the other is the cross. There are four images with flowers as background, one image with sunglasses in the background, and three memes with plain colored backgrounds to draw attention to the text. The narrative of the images is centered on the principles of love, peace, discipleship, the power of God, grace, and kindness. None of the faith memes ask for participation or circulation; they simply provide content.

The Function of the Faith Memes

The faith memes on the Facebook page of Abundant Life Church East Delhi communicate the undisputed authority of the sacred text, which emerges from a

complete belief in living according to scripture. The faith memes provide a check and a reassurance as to whether the members are living according to the prescriptions of scripture. Therefore no participation in the meme is needed, as the scripture is the absolute truth and members are subordinated to its authority. These memes are loaded with meaning, but they function to reaffirm values, clarify misconceptions, and encourage people to be grounded in the scriptures. The faith memes of the Abundant Life Church East Delhi aim to inspire people to look up the scripture and to understand their faith better. However, these memes also attempt to capture and reflect the principles behind certain beliefs through the use of imagery and text.

Through faith memes, Facebook generates a sacred experience that is culturally shared as the persuasion offered by the memes affects various communities differently within Christianity. Certain memes specifically affect individuals who have cultural familiarity with them. Therefore the memes of Abundant Life Church East Delhi encourage religious literacy as they enforce the authority of the scripture. All the faith memes have the theme of identity, since the scriptures that are used in the memes reinforce a sense of belonging and its entitlements.

Identity Faith Memes

Faith memes that use the support of scripture portray group membership to the believer. The meme itself inspires strong and poignant feelings that motivate members to reassert their Christian identity and become part of the community. The memes refer to strength, support, and help from God, which comes through becoming a believer. The memes are a composition of emotions and a product of the desire for promoting one's belief. This theme is emerging at a time when minority communities in India have come under attack by the dominant Hindutva regime, which is supported by the government that is currently in power (U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom 2015). In recent years, the number of atrocities against Christian communities has risen as part of the Shuddhikaran⁴ and Ghar Wapsi⁵ movements (Dayal, 2015). The faith memes that are posted on Facebook inspire courage and encouragement to hold on to one's

⁴ Shuddhikaran is an event of purification in which, owing to their embracing of or interactions with other religious communities, individuals are deemed unclean and therefore need to undergo the process of Shuddhikaran to enter the Hindu fold.

⁵ *Ghar wapsi* is Hindi for "home coming." It emerged as popular discourse among the right-wing Hindus who believed that all Indians were initially Hindu but were coerced into converting to other religions, especially Islam and Christianity. Therefore organizations such as Vishva Hindu Parishad and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh have launched a nationwide reconversion drive to bring members of other religious communities back into the Hindu fold. However, many of the resulting reconversions have been forceful and deceptive, causing communal rifts in Indian society.

identity as a child of God and provide the reassurance that God will protect and provide for his children. Therefore the memes on the Abundant Life Church East Delhi aim to reinforce an identity of belonging to God, who provides for and protects his own.

EVALUATION

This study revealed that certain communities use faith memes to manifest agendas that are shaped by shifts in the larger socioeconomic environment. For instance, reinforcing of identity and giving prominent authority to scripture are seen on the Facebook page of the Protestant Abundant Life Church East Delhi. The Facebook page of the Catholic Sacred Heart Cathedral Church shows an inclusive orientation through its faith memes, which carry content based on generic goodwill that can be understood and accepted by a wide range of individuals. The Catholic Church's faith memes carry reinterpreted text that fits into a universal message about working out of love toward God and each other. They do not draw directly from scripture, as the church wants to be colloquial and to attract people from other faiths through simple and highly graphic memes. Therefore the purpose of the faith memes on the Sacred Heart Cathedral Church pages is to preach the religious practices of prayer and selflessness in anticipation of reward and punishment in the afterlife. Moreover, in the process of evangelizing, the faith memes attempt to affirm the fundamental nature of reality, to validate the user's cosmological existence in purview of God's plan. These memes attempt to draw the individual away from that which is profane, chaotic, painful, and unjust toward preservation of order, fraternity, sacredness, and morality.

The Protestant church is inwardly oriented, and the faith memes of Abundant Life Church East Delhi use scripture, thus creating an exclusive community that is established by giving prominence to narratives from scripture and using them to interact with and educate one another. There is no interaction with the faith memes on the Protestant page because of the reverence, authority, and sacredness attributed to the scripture in this community. These memes are simply posts on the church's Facebook wall that substitute for sacred texts from the Bible.

By contrast, the emphasis in the Catholic site's faith memes is on the visuals, which are enhanced by the text. This furthers the evangelical tradition of the Catholic Church in modern Internet culture. Nonetheless, with so much imagery and a shortage of scriptural support and interpretation, the messages of these faith memes are prone to highly subjective interpretations. For instance, an image of a lighted cross carries multiple meanings in different cultures; for the Lutheran and Methodist churches, the lit cross symbolizes the fiery light of Jesus, an old symbol that was originally used on the hillsides of Scotland, whereas for African-American communities, the symbol of a cross on fire calls to mind acts of racial

violence committed by the Ku Klux Klan. The lighting of the cross was used by the Klan as a symbol to intimidate as well as a call to arms (Dixon, 1905). With sufficient contextual grounding, a community can correctly interpret the symbols in a faith meme. However, when the meme has traveled across cultures, its intended meaning may be lost, and it may unintentionally offend people of other cultures. Similar problems arise with excessive dependency on scriptural support, which may cause the larger theme or value to be distorted by a narrow, conservative, or irrational outlook. For instance, consider the verse “I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet” (1 Timothy. 2:12 New International Version). The literal translation of this verse has been used to relegate women to an inferior status in churches, barring them from attaining leadership positions. However, an examination of this verse in context will show that it was written against feminist women congregants who were spreading Gnosticism and usurping authority from the traditional leadership. As this example illustrates, the faith memes that are circulated need to be given a firm contextual grounding within the congregation. Otherwise, they can counter the intentions of the Catholic and Protestant authorities.

ANALYSIS

The discourse of faith memes systematically redefines the online experience through a shift from individual representation and dialogues toward having the presence of the sacred in the form of institutional traditional authority, which is recreating and defining religion on social media. Faith memes authenticate certain ways of living and, in the process, affirm the authority of the traditional structures as well as certain individuals as communicating models of truth. The belief that religion requires authorized doctrine is endorsed by the agency provided to human authority figures who interpret and contextualize the religious content as well as the symbolic authority attributed to positions and artifacts of the two denominations studied here. However, both churches’ Facebook pages rely on preexisting attitudes toward religious symbols to generate sacred experience.

The two churches also make their online pages sacred by moderating the pages in a manner that does not provide space for profanity or vulgarity. The social order that celebrates the sacred requires self-regulation from users, and the faith memes, through the use of graphics, generate an aesthetic of sacredness on the virtual pages. Therefore on both sites, memes play a role in affirming the existing belief system of the church through the use of symbolic meanings linked to the idea of general order, including the established authority of the church.

The Facebook pages of both churches can be considered in the context of a struggle for authority. The Protestant site shows an individual member attempting to gain authority through online interaction. Nonetheless, there is a uniformity of

practices based on the traditional authority of scripture. For instance, it was the reflection of scriptural knowledge in the posts or comments on the Abundant Life Church East Delhi's Facebook page that brought credibility to the member making the post or comment. In this case, the memes may also represent an attempt to establish religious authority or to seek mobility in the church's religious hierarchy through participation in social media. Faith memes provide graphics to support scripture, thus making the church's online presence highly visible. The content that is posted is intended to persuade visitors to the church's Facebook page to align their life with the knowledge of God and to manage their actions accordingly. The faith memes' creation of the sacred both encourages and molds the opinions and conduct of church members. The faith memes generate motivation to comply with the church's hortatory discourse. The purposes of these memes are to influence the conduct of users and to establish authority through manifesting such content.

One of the most striking features of these churches' Facebook pages is that the comments, likes, and postings reflect a religious structure that provides no space for voicing dissent. No comment challenges, questions, or even elaborates on the faith memes. The faith memes posted on Sacred Heart Cathedral Church Facebook page, which has more audience participation in the memes than does Abundant Life Church East Delhi's page, drew only sixteen comments in total, ten of which were "Amen," a term that expresses consent and submission to the statement made by the meme. One of the other five comments asked where the church was located, and the rest were in complete support and appreciation of everything portrayed and stated on the website. In this case, the tools provided by Facebook were used to reinforce the idea that the primacy of authority lies in the hands of the Sacred Heart Cathedral Church's management. The widespread view of social media as a space of cocreation and collective intelligence or as a community of believers is not borne out on this church's Facebook page. It has not brought forth a participatory culture on the part of the congregation. This page reflects the successful manner in which religious leaders have gained and maintained authority in social media. The perception of the churches' Facebook space as a sacred space has contributed to self-censorship, with individuals constraining expression of their thoughts and feeling in the virtual space. There is no cooperation here, just management by the church's hierarchy, which is reflected in its ownership of the site, its offline resource advantages, and its ideological means of gaining back authority. However, it is also noteworthy that the memes that are offered deal only with safe topics such as sacrifice, love, and kindness that will not be disputed by the religious community. Thus by avoiding controversial issues such as sexuality, corruption, or the war on terrorism, the church reinforces consent and complacency on the part of its members. The church maintains its legitimacy and authority

by controlling consensus that is generated through expression of universally safe ethics and values.

CONCLUSION

Through their use of religious symbols, faith memes posted on social media provide hope of making the world justifiable and bearable. However, this possibility of orderly existence requires the functional authority attributed to traditional religion to produce knowledge and encourage personal discipline. The prior acceptance of authority guides the user toward a religious experience, which has now been channeled through new media. Faith memes are reminders as well as products of religious knowledge that assert support for a particular way of life in an increasingly digital world. The meaning of the text is augmented with imagery and, in some cases, with sources of the information, which enable the user to inquire further into religious knowledge using the reference provided on the memes. The Facebook pages of both the churches in this study are trying to shape their users' experiences, which the users can take into the profane space of mundane existence.

Social media have provided the religious institution as well as individuals with mechanisms to claim authority and to move up and down the religious ladder. However, to participate in these religious online spaces, some preexisting religious knowledge is required. By using faith memes and preexisting religious knowledge, traditional religious institutions can exercise their power and authority through social media. By adapting to the virtual environment, religious institutions have the opportunity to counter negative, inflammatory, and false discourse online. The changing communication strategies provide the opportunity to reconcile relational bonds and enhance the credibility of religious authorities online. On the other hand, this form of adaptation by the clergy contradicts the participatory, dialogic, and empowering role of social media and the tools they provide, which include faith memes.

The use of faith memes has also assisted churches in creating a sacred space in the virtual world that reminds their congregations of the threat of the contemporary world and the fear of being left behind. Faith memes provide a solution through prayer and safe messages about the life one should lead to avoid the impending threat. If the threat does not materialize, that does not make it false. The threat is not denied but deferred; its potential remains. The felt reality of the threat legitimizes the preemptive action provided by the memes. The preemptive action will always allow the individual to avoid the threat. By using faith memes, a church can provide guidance to people who are straying away from their faith or live in a world that will always guide them away from God. Through social media, the church can keep these individuals in a continued relationship with God.

The expectations for this relationship are communicated by the church and its traditional authority. The ability of the threat to be self-causing by its mere existence in the world serves as a constant reminder that one is always living with a threat. However, the threat's intensity increases and decreases depending on the content that a person is exposed to or actively consumes.

The perception that the world is corrupt and leads to further corruption of individuals through its inherent value system, which propagates greed, violence, domination, oppression, coercion, deception, and manipulation, exists as the underlying cause for eliciting consent. Because of the danger of self-destruction that is posed by living in world dominated by wealth and a craving for power, members of a church need constant engagement with the church and its doctrines. This will assist the members in navigating the evil world and in maintaining a close relationship with God. In a growing digital world, this requires the church to be present online and constantly feed religious content to its congregation digitally.

The offline social stratification and hierarchy that are characteristic of these two churches in New Delhi are reflected in their religious practices, which are governed by the churches' religious authority. In contrast to the church activity that is regulated by the authority of the clergy, social media provide an opportunity for laypeople to engage actively and coproduce, connect, and circulate the sacred through faith memes. However, by connecting faith memes to the authority of the churches by posting the memes on their official Facebook pages, these churches have diminished the participatory nature of such memes. Thus the churches use faith memes to draw on the power of the sacred to replicate the churches' offline structural dominance in the online space.

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Appendix: Online Locations of the Faith Memes Used in This Analysis

The images used in this analysis were available at the following web addresses as of October 6, 2015.

Sacred Heart Cathedral:

www.facebook.com/SacredHeartCathedralChurch/photos/a.161520834012214.1073741828.161276437369987/262792717218358/?type=3&theater

www.facebook.com/SacredHeartCathedralChurch/photos/a.161520834012214.1073741828.161276437369987/262792673885029/?type=3&theater

www.facebook.com/SacredHeartCathedralChurch/photos/a.161520834012214.1073741828.161276437369987/217244015106562/?type=3&theater

www.facebook.com/SacredHeartCathedralChurch/photos/a.161520834012214.1073741828.161276437369987/238363539661276/?type=3&theater

www.facebook.com/SacredHeartCathedralChurch/photos/a.161520834012214.1073741828.161276437369987/238362879661342/?type=3&theater

www.facebook.com/SacredHeartCathedralChurch/photos/a.161520834012214.1073741828.161276437369987/238362759661354/?type=3&theater

www.facebook.com/SacredHeartCathedralChurch/photos/a.161520834012214.1073741828.161276437369987/239249102906053/?type=3&theater

www.facebook.com/SacredHeartCathedralChurch/photos/a.161520834012214.1073741828.161276437369987/225785880919042/?type=3&theater

www.facebook.com/SacredHeartCathedralChurch/photos/a.161520834012214.1073741828.161276437369987/225785714252392/?type=3&theater

www.facebook.com/SacredHeartCathedralChurch/photos/a.161520834012214.1073741828.161276437369987/225785390919091/?type=3&theater

Abundant Life Church East Delhi:

www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=349269921864323&set=o.319346984831995&type=1&theater

www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=349449645179684&set=o.319346984831995&type=1&theater

www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=349985911792724&set=o.319346984831995&type=1&theater

www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=350295938428388&set=o.319346984831995&type=1&theater

www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=350295938428388&set=o.319346984831995&type=1&theater

www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=352179804906668&set=o.319346984831995&type=1&theate

www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=352388814885767&set=o.319346984831995&type=1&theater

www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=352833651507950&set=o.319346984831995&type=1&theater

www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=353059371485378&set=o.319346984831995&type=1&theater

www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=353818568076125&set=o.319346984831995&type=1&theater