

Theological Reflections on Online Christian Neo-Tribes: A Case Study Using
r/DankChristianMemes

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Abstract

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This thesis investigates collective identity in spaces dedicated to Christianity, utilizing the subreddit r/DankChristianMemes as a case study. Drawing from the postmodern sociological theory of neo-tribalism, with specific emphasis added to its usage in qualitative studies of offline Christian micro-groups, this thesis explores how r/DankChristianMemes demonstrates a particular form of Christian neo-tribalization on the Internet. It does so by using multimodal theolinguistic analysis and a functional approach to language, thereby using three categories of the functionality of religious language (the axiomatic, social cohesive, and emotive) to establish empirical evidence for what constitutes the group's *puissance* and sociality – both Maffesoli-ian terms denoting the group's *raison d'être* and methods of establishing a process of identifying one's self with the group. The findings reveal that from the sociological perspective, r/DankChristianMemes creates an inclusive environment for fellowship among varying groups of Christians and non-Christians, centered upon humor using Christian language, images, and references. The group also creates grounds for collective identity by mocking and critiquing certain forms of Christianity, both denominational and cultural. From a theological perspective, this thesis concludes that r/DankChristianMemes demonstrates itself to be what Maffesoli terms an "interstitial utopia," where Christians may gather to practice the Christian ethic of permeability (the crossing of boundaries), as well as a specific process of theological belonging that Lucien Richard terms "the dialogical process."

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Table of Contents

List of Figures	vii
List of Tables	viii
Introduction.....	1
An Overview of the Field of Study: Looking Toward the Internet.....	4
Reddit –The Case Study.....	6
An Overview of the Research: Research Questions and Chapter-by-Chapter Breakdown	8
Chapter 1: A Literature Review of Scholarship and Theory	9
Natural Sociality in the Works of van Wijnen and Barnard: Making Connections to the Broader Neo-Tribal Literature	10
Considering the Realities of Neo-Tribal Boundary-formation and Belonging Theologically..	15
Conclusion.....	19
Chapter 2: Specifics of the Case Study and Methodology	20
R/DankChristianMemes, Internet Meme Culture, and Religious Memes	22
What is r/DankChristianMemes?.....	23
What are Memes?	24
Research Methodology.....	27
Method of Annotation	28
Limits of Research	29
A Brief Note on the Ethics of this Research	30
Conclusion.....	30
Chapter 3: Results of the Theolinguistic Analysis.....	32
Overview of the Results	33
The Axiomatic Function.....	37
The Social Cohesive Function.....	41
The Emotive Function.....	45

Conclusion.....	46
Chapter 4: Qualitative Discussion, Theological Reflection and Conclusion.....	48
The Qualitative Discussion	50
Functional Members: A Path Forward for Future Study.....	52
A Quick Summary of the Qualitative Discussion	53
The Interstitial Utopian Hermeneutic	54
The Theological Reflection.....	54
r/DankChristianMemes as an Interstitial Utopia for the Practice of Permeability	56
r/DankChristianMemes as an Interstitial Utopia for the Practice of Theological Belonging... and Another Avenue for Future Research	57
Conclusion.....	58
Bibliography	60

List of Figures

Figure 1. Social versus Sociality.....	14
Figure 2. “God loves all his children”	29
Figure 3. “Can’t get enough of that prayer” and “Firstborns beware!”	37
Figure 4. “Jesus will find a way no matter what you throw at him”	38
Figure 5. “it sure can be wierd sometimes” and “There is one mediator between God and man...”	39
Figure 6. “Factually correct” and “it be like that sometimes”	40
Figure 7. “Yup” and “Did I Stutter?”.....	41
Figure 8. “When you outgrow the edgy atheist circle jerk” and “Maybe for you.”	43
Figure 9. “🌍😊🙏🙏” and “Wow”.....	44
Figure 10 “ofc He doesn’t” and “🙏🙏🙏”.....	46
Figure 11. “Colonizing of paradise” and “Accurate summery”	50
Figure 12. “Seen” and “Sorry momma”	51

List of Tables

Table 1. Results of Analysis	33
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Introduction

Since (roughly) the 1950s, Western culture has undergone a noticeable change. For some scholars, this can best be understood as the fruition of “modernist” thought into the distinctly “postmodern,” which characterizes a cultural period of “postmodernity.”¹ While the details of what it means to be living in “postmodernity” are often disputed - we would be remiss to ignore that this period has also been termed late modernity² and liquid modernity,³ for example, while some even state that we have already moved beyond the “post” and are now in an era of metamodernity⁴ – it is a period generally understood as marked by the growing presence of capitalism and its effects on our cultural logic.⁵ For example, one of these shifts in cultural logic has been seen as society emphasizing marketability and utility over ethics. For the theologian Graham Ward, postmodernity may be understood as the era of “networks.”^{6,7} What this emphasizes, for Ward, is that the effects of neo-liberal economics are not just present at the macro-level of society but at the micro-levels of the personal and the social, as the era of neo-liberal networks has opened the grounds for identity to become fluid, and for community to become malleable and effervescent.⁸ Postmodernity is a period where one can construct their identity to fit into a group at a specific time and place, which Ward likens to how one may construct an avatar of oneself on the Internet.⁹ Thus, identity is beholden to the locality, as one may craft an entirely new avatar in a new location, demonstrating the “soft” nature of reality in

¹ Richard Barsky, “postmodernity,” in *the Encyclopedia of Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 304.

² See Lilie Chouliaraki and Norman Fairclough’s *Discourse in Late Modernity: Rethinking Critical Discourse Analysis*.

³ See Zygmunt Bauman’s *Liquid Modernity*.

⁴ Pavol Bargár, “The Modern, the Postmodern and... The Metamodern? Reflections on a Transforming Sensibility from the Perspective of Theological Anthropology,” *Transformation* 38, no.1 (2021); 3-4.

⁵ Richard Barsky, “Postmodernism,” 305. See also the influential work of the cultural theorist Frederick Jameson, and such works as *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* for more.

⁶ Graham Ward, “Theology and Postmodernism: Is It All Over?” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, no. 2 (June 2012); 470.

⁷ The cultural metaphor of the network has been used to portray how multiple structural facets of modern society, whether they be economic, political, or cultural, serve as connecting nodes which individually travel to and fro. See Heidi Campbell and Stephen Garner’s *Networked Theology*, pages 3 to 10 for more.

⁸ Graham Ward, “Theology and Postmodernity,” 471

⁹ Graham Ward, “Introduction, or, A Guide to Theological Thinking in Cyberspace,” in *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader*, (Oxford and Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 1997), xv-xvi.

postmodernity. As Kevin Hetherington states, such analyses of postmodern culture have often viewed these as the conditions by which alienation and disenchantment form in the broader culture.¹⁰ However, for a group of scholars who adhere to the social theory of neo-tribalism, these are the conditions by which individuals and micro-groups demonstrate a cunning capacity to be together and form new bonds that break past the rigid collective identities of modernity.¹¹

The originator of neo-tribal theory is the sociologist Michel Maffesoli. He popularized the term “neo-tribes” in academic circles with his 1988 work *Le temps des tribus: le déclin de l'individualisme dans les sociétés postmodernes*, which was later translated into English in 1996 as *The Time of the Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society*. As the subtitle suggests, Maffesoli saw contemporary society as the era where the notion of an individualizing process of postmodernity could be seen more as a process of de-individualization.¹² In strong opposition to the theory of neo-liberal individualism promoted by sociologists such as Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck,¹³ Maffesoli believed that the modern “individual” had now given way to the postmodern “person,”¹⁴ who existed in the social realm by being recognized by the gaze of the “other,” thereby giving themselves entirely to the group.¹⁵ Kevin Hetherington calls this the process of “identification,” *i.e.*, how postmodern tribes create their own unique criteria for assimilating to the group, whether it be through fashion choices, attitudes, cultural practices, or a mix of all of these. In relation to the book’s principle title, Maffesoli saw the neo-tribes as “caractérisé par la fluidité, les rassemblements ponctuels et l'éparpillement.”¹⁶ Unlike the small-scale groups we traditionally call “tribes,” neo-tribes are elective groupings, meaning that members choose which group to identify and belong to and disperse just as quickly as they gathered.¹⁷ They represent a subconscious return to an “archaic” desire to be together without the

¹⁰ Kevin Hetherington, *Expressions of Identity : Space, Performance, Politics* (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1998), 51.

¹¹ To be clear, the manner in which we have discussed “modernity” and “postmodernity” has relegated these two periods into distinct categories which can rightfully be critiqued and argued as somewhat problematic. As we will see in the next chapter, while speaking of the two as rigid categories may be beneficial for making initial distinctions between the norms and conventions of the “then” and the innovative nature of the “now,” both the “modern” and “postmodern” are themselves much more fluid and inter-related “categories” than this small introduction can relay. A more nuanced discussion will therefore follow in chapter one.

¹² *Ibid*, 8.

¹³ Kevin Hetherington, 7-8.; Anne Hardy *et al.*, *Neo-Tribes: Consumption, Leisure and Tourism*, edited by Anne Hardy, Andy Bennett and Brady Robards (Cham, Switzerland: Parlage MacMillan, 2018), 2.

¹⁴ Michel Maffesoli, *Le temps des tribus: le déclin de l'individualisme dans les sociétés postmodernes*, 4th Edition (Paris : La Table Ronde, 2019) 38.

¹⁵ Kevin Hetherington, 51.

¹⁶ Michel Maffesoli, *Le temps des tribus*, 146.

¹⁷ Kevin Hetherington, 49.

responsibilities and social contracts of standard (“modernist”) ideas of community.^{18,19} Thus, instead of relying upon any longstanding bonds or obligations to other members of the group, neo-tribes are groups based on pure fellow feeling. Distinct to these postmodern forms of socialization is their penchant for gathering around shared likes and dislikes, making taste and its expressive embrace an essential aspect of their social dynamics.²⁰

After the publishing of Maffesoli’s book, many scholars have used neo-tribal theory in sociology, ethnography, youth culture studies, and even business studies.²¹ These scholars have drawn on this theory in crafting their research design and methods, applying it to the study of food and music festivals,²² resorts,²³ and online snowboarding enthusiasts,²⁴ to name only a few. They have done the legwork to prove empirically that Maffesoli’s theory of neo-tribalism is a unique framework for understanding how postmodern people come to identify with others in highly localized spaces,²⁵ thereby cultivating belonging through ephemeral ties based on shared

¹⁸ Michel Maffesoli, *Le temps des tribus*, 5.

¹⁹ Mike Tyldesley states that we should understand Maffesoli’s use of the term “archaic” as something akin to a Jung-ian or post-Jung-ian approaches to “the archetypes of the collective unconscious,” which Maffesoli sees as those underlying categories which the postmodern person is identifying with when they believe themselves to be at their most individual. See Mike Tyldesley’s *The Thought of Sorbonne Professor Michel Maffesoli (1944-)*, pages 41 and 42. See also Michel Maffesoli’s *Le rythme de la vie : variations sur les sensibilités postmodernes*, pages 81 and 204.

²⁰ Michel Maffesoli, *Le temps des tribus*, 161-162; see Kevin Hetherington’s chapter titled “Tribal Vibes: Expressivism and Identification,” for more.

²¹ Mike Tyldesley, *The Thought of Sorbonne Professor Michel Maffesoli (1944-)*, 59.

²² Giovanna Bertella, “Vegetarian for a Day or Two,” in *Neo-Tribes: Consumption, Leisure and Tourism*, edited by Anne Hardy, Andy Bennett and Brady Robards (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), 33-50.; Ben Green, “Reconciling Neo-Tribes and Individualism: The Transcendence and Construction of Self Through Peak Music Experience, in *Neo-Tribes: Consumption, Leisure and Tourism*, edited by Anne Hardy, Andy Bennett and Brady Robards (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), 169-184.

²³ Oskaras Vorobjovas-Pinta, “It’s Been Nice, but We’re Going Back to Our Lives’: Neo-Tribalism and the Role of Space in a Gay Resort,” *Neo-Tribes: Consumption, Leisure and Tourism*, edited by Anne Hardy, Andy Bennett and Brady Robards (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), 71-88.

²⁴ Anja Dinhopf and Ulrike Gretzel, “The Networked Neo-Tribal Gaze,” in *Neo-Tribes: Consumption, Leisure and Tourism*, edited by Anne Hardy, Andy Bennett and Brady Robards (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), 221-252..

²⁵ By “localized,” we refer to Mike Tyldesley’s understanding of “localism.” What Tyldesley means by this is that neo-tribes are beholden to a specific space where connections are made; therefore the precise connections being made by a particular neo-tribe cannot be made outside of

likes and dislikes. As such, they demonstrate how postmodern culture allows people to form groups outside the purview of traditional social institutions,²⁶ giving them a sense of sovereignty²⁷ and allowing them to live within an “interstitial utopia”²⁸ that is brief, focused, and controlled mainly by the members. A specific branch of scholars in youth ministry, ecclesiology, and liturgical studies have also taken neo-tribalism as a framework for understanding how Christians in particular – usually Christian adolescents – come to gather, form a sense of belonging, and, eventually, worship.²⁹ Many of these scholars note the imperative of using such a social theory in studying para-ecclesial groups, such as the postmodern reticence toward institutions.³⁰ As Harmen van Wijnen and Marcel Barnard state, it is essential to understand how people gather and share in faith outside of traditional institutional structures of religion because these have significant impacts on how people come to understand themselves, their faith, and the “shared cultural conventions” which come with being in a specific faith community. Therefore, these scholars look to the neo-tribe as sites where socialization and faith intermingle outside, yet in relatively close ties with, traditional church communities and expressions of Christianity.³¹

An Overview of the Field of Study: Looking Toward the Internet

The following thesis looks to advance the similar socio-theological work of these scholars who have adopted neo-tribal theory to study the phenomenon of postmodern Christian gatherings. However, it seeks to do so by deploying such a socio-theological framework in an area that has gone unstudied by these scholars – the Internet. We may note two reasons for this choice beyond the noticeable “gap in the literature” this study looks to fill. The first reason is that the Internet is something we encounter daily. Joubert states, “the days of unmediated, technology-free identity formation or social interactions are over because all of reality now plays

this locality’s confines. See Mike Tyldesley, *The Thought of Sorbonne Professor Michel Maffesoli (1944-)*, 66-67.

²⁶ Michel Maffesoli, *Le temps des tribus*, 96.: see also Mike Tyldesley, *The Thought of Michel Maffesoli (1944-)*, 51-54.

²⁷ Riley *et al.*, “The Case for ‘Everyday Politics’: Evaluating Neo-Tribal Theory as a Way to Understand Alternative Forms of Political Participation, Using Electronic Dance Music Culture as an Example,” *Sociology* 44, no.2 (2010); 348.

²⁸ NOTE: We will be exploring this particular term in more depth in our final chapter. However, the curious reader may see Mike Tyldesley’s chapter titled “Maffesoli and utopianism,” in *The Thought of Sorbonne Professor Michel Maffesoli*, pages 157-172, for more.

²⁹ These scholars will be discussed more in-depth in chapter one.

³⁰ Harmen van Wijnan and Marcel Barnard, “Being-Together as a Basic Given: Finding New Ways in Youth Ministry in a Time of Transition,” *Ecclesial Practices* 4, (2007); 27-28.

³¹ *Ibid*, 37.

out on a continuum between virtual and real spaces.”³² Ardévol and Gómez-Cruz echo a similar sentiment when they state that our present “communicative ecosystem has been almost entirely digitalized.”³³ Thus, the Internet is a significant tool for crafting togetherness in the postmodern era and deserves its own attention. Another reason for which the Internet was chosen is its inherent postmodern quality. As Graham Ward states, the Internet is among the most salient cultural metaphors for postmodern culture, “the ultimate in the secularization of the divine,” which allows us to access unlimited knowledge, adopt an infinite number of identities, and create any number of associations which are no longer bounded to geographical space.³⁴ Therefore, it provides the tools by which Christians can express themselves freely and creatively in a space that promotes a flattened hierarchy.³⁵ Under the participatory culture the Internet engenders, any Christian anywhere may log onto the net and find their “tribe,” whether they be LGBTQ+ Christians, conservative traditionalists, or simply members of a specific denomination.³⁶ However, these digital networks can also foster echo chambers and tension among members, which pose interesting challenges to particular facets of “Christian life.”³⁷ For example, if Christians are called to love their neighbor, who is their neighbor on the Internet, where are they exactly, and how should they be treated online?³⁸ While this study does not look to answer these questions in particular, it takes seriously the notion that the Internet - as a digitally-mediated hub of broader postmodern social conditions – re-orientates certain traditional understandings of how Christians should relate amongst themselves and others.

³² Stephan Joubert, ““Flowing Under the Radar in a Multifaceted Liquid Reality: The *Ekerk* Narrative,” *HTS Theological Studies* 74, no.3 (2018); 5.

³³ Elisenda Ardévol and Edgar Gómez-Cruz, “Digital Ethnography and Media Practices,” in *The International Encyclopedia of Media Studies*, edited by Angharad N. Valdivia (Hoboken: Wiley Publishing, 2014), 7.

³⁴ Graham Ward, *The Postmodern God*, 1-2.

³⁵ By “flattened hierarchy,” we mean that the Internet allows users to participate in spaces where there is little in the way of institutional powers directly overlooking and regulated, in real-time, the interactions of users. In fact, it is actually everyday people who are placed in positions of authority - such as moderators for a forum, for example.

³⁶ Tim Hutchings, “Christianity and Digital Media,” in *The Changing World Religion Map*, edited by S.D. Brunn (Dordrecht: Springer, 2015), 3819-3823.

³⁷ Heidi Campbell and Stephen Garner, *Networked Theology: Negotiating Faith in Digital Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 14.

³⁸ For example, Campbell and Garner state that if loving your neighbor is a vital component of ethical Christian relations, than who is your neighbor online, where are they, and how should you treat them in light of these questions? Does the Internet reduce our neighbor to a subject? Does the Internet detract from our capacity to form real relationships? See “Merging the Network with Theology,” pages 79-96.

Reddit –The Case Study

Analyzing the effects of the Internet as a specific site of postmodern social conditions on Christian social ties is of far too great scope for this thesis. Thus, this analysis looks to offer a case study of Christian neo-tribes on the Internet using the platform Reddit and a specific community known as r/DankChristianMemes. The decision to use Reddit, in particular, was based on its popularity, specific features, usefulness in data collection, and already proven neo-tribal nature.³⁹ Related to our first point, we may state that Reddit has become one of the most popular internet sites since its launch in 2005. Typically referred to as a “social news aggregating site,” such as Slashdot or Digg, Reddit allows its users – “Redditors” – to post content others may comment on or vote upon. Many researchers note Reddit’s voting mechanism as one of its foundational features. By this function, users may curate content, deciding which content is worthy of being seen by others.⁴⁰ This content is voted upon in “subreddits,” which are dedicated to a particular topic that any user can create and moderate.⁴¹ It is important to note that every group has rules, where moderators create, enforce, and update community regulations. Additionally, Reddit has site-wide policies that override individual subreddit rules. It even has a site-wide set of explicit norms and values known as “rediquette,” which are authored by community members and suggested reading for new Redditors.⁴²

From a researcher’s perspective, Reddit is a place of fertile academic usage because Reddit’s community is highly active, it is growing in popularity, and its data is publicly available.⁴³ Its subreddits offer researchers access to forums dedicated to specific topics,⁴⁴ with

³⁹ Also, we might add that the writer of this thesis is an avid user of Reddit.

⁴⁰ Botzer *et al.*, “Analysis of Moral Judgement on Reddit,” *IEEE Transactions on Computational Social Systems* 10, no.3 (June 2023), 947. <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2101.07664>; Elliot T. Panek, *Understanding Reddit* (London and New York: Routledge, 2022), 3; Adrienne L. Massanari, *Participatory Culture, Community and Play: Learning from Reddit* (New York: Peter Lang, 2015), 3.

⁴¹ Weninger *et al.*, “An Exploration of Discussion Threads in Social News Sites: A Case Study of the Reddit Community,” 2013 *IEEE/ACM International Conference on Advances in Social Networks Analysis and Mining*, 579-580.; Botzer *et al.*, 947; Medvedev *et al.*, “The Anatomy of Reddit: An Overview of Academic Research,” *Dynamics On and Of Complex Networks III*, edited by Fakhteh Ghanbarnejad, Rishiraj Saha Roy, Fariba Karimi, Jean-Charles Delvenne and Bivas Mitra (Charm, Switzerland: Springer, 2019), 185.

⁴² Adrienne L. Massanari, 73.

⁴³ Weninger *et al.*, 579; Schrading *et al.*, “An Analysis of Domestic Abuse Discourse on Reddit,” *Proceedings of the 2015 Conference on Empirical Methods in Natural Language Processing*, 2577.

⁴⁴ Zachary Kimo Stine and Nitin Agarwal, “Comparative Discourse Analysis Using Topic Models: Contrasting Perspectives in China from Reddit,” *SM Society*, 79. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3400806.3400816>; Judy Hanwe Shen and Frank Rudzic, “Detecting

posts not as limited character-wise on platforms such as “X” (formerly known as Twitter).⁴⁵ The content of these subreddits directly reflects the particular group’s judgment on specific content, as Redditors convey their interests through voting and commenting.⁴⁶ This is particularly interesting in subreddits with large numbers of members, as it may take many upvotes and comments to propel specific posts to the top of the group’s feed.⁴⁷ Record et al. argue that Reddit is a site prime for examining current trends in social media use and information engagement on a platform that looks to maintain its relevancy for the foreseeable future.⁴⁸ Reddit is a site whose popularity has only continued to grow and whose dedicated users have been likened to (in jest) a cult.⁴⁹

Finally, sociologist Brady Robards has already discussed this site as a neo-tribe, as previously alluded to. This is important because it allows this study to focus on the effects of Reddit’s neo-tribal nature rather than forcing us to prove its neo-tribal nature outright – a task that would go beyond this thesis’ scope and the methodological knowledge of this researcher. Robards’ analysis of Reddit is that it cannot be considered made of various “communities,” as its homepage might suggest.^{50,51} Robards uses the term neo-tribes to denote how Reddit users seemingly gather and disperse in grand numbers through the platform, sometimes leaving in their wake highly expressive and symbolic interactions within individual subreddits who are so opposed that they could never make a community. Instead, users’ expressive and symbolic interactions, according to Robards, point to Reddit being a hub of highly ephemeral, “temporal and place-based experience of affinity,” *i.e.*, a neo-tribe.⁵² Another of Robards’ prime examples is the site’s participation rate, which sees nearly 80% of its users never leaving a single post, comment, or vote. As such, Reddit is a site where most users never truly interact with one

Anxiety on Reddit,” *Proceedings of the Fourth Workshop on Computational Linguistics and Clinical Psychology*, 59.

⁴⁵ Proferes et al., “Studying Reddit: A Systematic Overview of Disciplines, Approaches, Method and Ethics,” *Social Media + Society* (April-June 2021); 1.

⁴⁶ Gaudette et al., “Upvoting Extremism : Collective Identity Formation and the Extreme Right on Reddit,” *New Media & Society* 23, no. 12 (2021); 3494.

⁴⁷ Botzer et al., 948; Gaudette et al., 3493; Medvedev et al., 188.

⁴⁸ Record et al., “I Sought It, I Reddit: Examining Health Information Engagement Behaviors among Reddit Users,” *Journal of Health Communication* 23, no.5 (2018); 475.

⁴⁹ David_in_France_YT, “Is Reddit a Cult?” Reddit, 2014, https://www.reddit.com/r/TheoryOfReddit/comments/6qdnal/is_reddit_a_cult/.; Isa Medina, “The Cult of Reddit,” November 23rd, 2023, Sounds Like a Cult, directed by Isa Medina, podcast, 54:16 <https://omny.fm/shows/sounds-like-a-cult/the-cult-of-reddit>.

⁵⁰ “Reddit: Homepage,” last visited February 12th, 2024. <https://www.redditinc.com/>.

⁵¹ Brady Robards, “Belonging and Neo-Tribalism on Social Media Site Reddit,” in *Neo-Tribes: Consumption, Leisure and Tourism*, edited by Anne Hardy, Andy Bennett and Brady Robards (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), 192-193.

⁵² Ibid, 202.

another but rather “lurk” upon the interactions of others. We may add to Robards’ argument by evoking Elliot Panek, who has argued that “community” is not likely to happen on Reddit.⁵³ Instead, Panek suggests that Reddit is more akin to a “place,” a bounded space where, like in a bustling city, large numbers of visitors may congregate pseudo-anonymously, moving from subreddit to subreddit like “tourists,” “vandals” or “residents.”⁵⁴ Thus, like Robards, Panek states that the term “community” is limiting when used on Reddit.⁵⁵ Instead, Redditors engage in something more than simple “community.” While Panek states that this is something more akin to a “network” or a “feed,” Robards calls Reddit a neo-tribe of neo-tribes, something more like a Russian nesting doll that allows users to seamlessly flow from one group to another, indulging in belonging just as much as one pleases.⁵⁶

An Overview of the Research: Research Questions and Chapter-by-Chapter Breakdown

Throughout four chapters, this thesis formulates the following as its guiding research questions: *How do the conditions of neo-tribalism shape Christian social ties on r/DankChristianMemes, and what value does this gathering have from a theological perspective?* To answer these questions, this research proposes a mix of qualitative research design and interpretation methods, which we meld with theological insight. We begin this process in chapter one by reviewing the finer details of neo-tribalism and how researchers have adapted it in theologically adjacent fields. We will also look at specific scholars in theology to begin theorizing how we might interpret neo-tribal social relations theologically. Overall, this chapter will help the reader understand the nuances of neo-tribal theory and serve as the necessary background information for our second chapter. Chapter two then discusses the group r/DankChristianMemes and delves into the methodology of our study. It will begin by developing how neo-tribal theory has been adapted to online groups, then touch upon various important topics such as meme cultures, multimodal discourse analysis, and how this study crafted its methodology under neo-tribal theory. While we will explore this in more depth, we may state for now that this study uses a unique blend of multimodal theolinguistic analysis as its principal methodology. In short, this method focuses upon the function of religious language as evidenced by the intention of “speakers” – in our case, Redditors and “memers.” By multimodal, we specify that the religious language used by the members of r/DankChristianMemes must be understood by combining text and image to understand its meaning entirely. Chapter three is reserved for detailing the results of our multimodal theolinguistic analysis, using relevant examples of r/DankChristianMemes’ most popular content to provide a holistic understanding of the group’s religious language in action. Finally, chapter four serves as the site for discussing said findings, connecting to the literature reviewed in chapter one, and concluding our study.

⁵³ Elliot T. Panek, 87.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 110-112.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 88.

⁵⁶ Brady Robards, 202-203.

Chapter 1: A Literature Review of Scholarship and Theory

According to Maffesoli and several scholars who have taken his neo-tribal theory to heart, the postmodern era is a period where we are all part of neo-tribes.⁵⁷ Whether it is as part of a subculture such as punk rock,⁵⁸ a leisure activity such as sharing an RV campground with others,⁵⁹ or sharing a hashtag on “X” (formerly known as Twitter),⁶⁰ we are all most likely at one point during the day, week or month occupying a space with others which is short-lived and centered upon a shared sentiment of enjoying (and sometimes disliking) the same thing. However, in what fashion does this reality shape how we should think about gathering theologically, especially concerning Christian gatherings? We may begin by evoking the thoughts of Phillip Kenneson, who has written about the act of gathering and its relation to worship at a general level. For Kenneson, gathering is a crucial aspect of worship, as “worship always implicates human gatherings.”⁶¹ Kenneson defines worship etymologically as the simple act of giving worth to something.⁶² Thus, in some sense, all gatherings serve as a form of worship, as they all gather around something deemed worthy of the group’s attention and dedication. In the Christian tradition, worship is focused on God. The ethical imperative when studying gatherings – those groups that inherently ascribe value to something or someone – is that they have a formative function. As Kenneson states: “Because human beings are social creatures, when they gather together, they inevitably presuppose and reinforce much about the shape, meaning, and purpose of the world that they understand themselves to inhabit.”⁶³ Thus, gatherings do more than express how people feel toward that which they worship; they likewise affect how they view it. Therefore, when we gather, especially in a “Christian” sense, then there

⁵⁷ Michel Maffesoli, *Le rythme de la vie : Variations sur les sensibilités postmodernes* (Paris : La Table Ronde, 2019), 165; Rob Shields, “Foreword : Masses or Tribes,” in *The Time of the Tribes : The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society*, translated by Don Smith (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 1996), ix; Mike Tyldesley, *The Thought of Sorbonne Professor Michel Maffesoli (1944-)* (Lewiston, Queenston and Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2010), 59-60; Hardy et al., *Neo-Tribes: Consumption, Leisure and Tourism*, ed. by Anne Hardy, Andy Bennett and Brady Robards (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), 1.

⁵⁸ Andy Bennett and Christopher Driver, “Music Scenes, Space and the Body,” *Cultural Sociology* 9, no. 1 (2015); 99-115.

⁵⁹ Anne Hardy et al., “Travelling Neo-Tribes : Conceptualising Recreational Vehicle Users,” *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change* 11, no. 1-2 (2013); 48-60.

⁶⁰ Monica Nadegger, “From Ephemerality to Organisationality: The Role of Hashtags in the Constitution of the #wirsindmehr Protest in Germany,” *puntOorg International Journal* 8, no. 1 (2023); 55-77.

⁶¹ Philip Kenneson, “Gathering : Worship, Imagination, and Formation,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, ed. by Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells (Malden, Oxford, and Victoria: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 53.

⁶² Ibid, 54.

⁶³ Ibid, 55.

is a near-pedagogical dimension being enacted where those gathering are being taught – or are practicing – what it means to worship and be “Christian.”

Thus, if neo-tribes are an everyday reality, and gatherings fundamentally affect how people view those things they worship, then what formative effect might neo-tribes have on those who gather in the Christian neo-tribe? The following chapter looks to review how two specific scholars of youth ministry, ecclesiology, and liturgical studies have already contemplated this question. By discussing the studies of Harmen van Wijnen and Marcel Barnard,⁶⁴ we will review their findings, the standard theoretical frameworks they have adopted from neo-tribal theory, and how their studies have added to neo-tribal theory itself. However, we should note that these authors tend to rely very much on neo-tribal theory as expressed in Maffesoli’s 1988 *Le temps*. Very little is done to add to the insights of sociologists who have adapted neo-tribal theory over time. Thus, this review connects Christian and neo-Maffesolian scholars to provide a more holistic understanding of some of Maffesoli’s key theoretical concepts.⁶⁵ Finally, this chapter will discuss one dimension that has gone unstudied in the works of Christian scholars – that of boundary formation. Boundary-formation is particularly interesting because various neo-Maffesolian scholars have pinpointed it as an essential area of study moving forward. This is where this thesis will begin to provide inroads toward a theological reflection upon the nature of neo-tribal social ties.

Natural Sociality in the Works of van Wijnen and Barnard: Making Connections to the Broader Neo-Tribal Literature

As van Wijnen and Barnard state, postmodernity has been understood as an era replete with the desire to be one’s self, a desire which naturally comes under the power of the individual as they seek to create an identity that is less directly controlled and influenced by the church institution.⁶⁶ For some, this is a natural detriment to the formation of Christian identity, as many

⁶⁴ It should be noted that others such as Ronelle Sonnenberg and Jos de Kock have been involved in several studies either evoking neo-tribal theory or using specific aspects of it in their empirical studies. However, this thesis has specifically chosen van Wijnen and Barnard due to the fact that these two scholars, who have produced multiple studies together, have undoubtedly provided the most extensive use of Maffesoli’s theory, as evidenced by how they use key secondary concepts of Maffesoli’s theory.

⁶⁵ Both the usage of the terms “Christian” and “neo-Maffesolian” are admittedly derivative terms, especially the former, that we are using to signify those who have used Maffesoli’s theory in Christian theological studies and those sociologists and ethnographers who have adopted Maffesoli’s theory after 1996.

⁶⁶ Harmen van Wijnen and Marcel Barnard, “Faith Tribes as Powerful Communities of Adolescents in Highly Differentiated Societies,” *Religious Education* 112, no. 4 (2017); 415;

may craft a notion of what it means to be “Christian” all on their own.⁶⁷ Likewise, this has been discussed as detrimental to communal aspects of faith; if one can determine what it means to be “Christian” on their own, why would they believe they need to participate in the Christian community itself? However, van Wijnen and Barnard’s studies have demonstrated the opposite regarding Christian youth in the Netherlands. Their major study, *Faith in Adolescents’ Small Groups*,⁶⁸ included five small groups (5-10 participants each) of Protestant adolescents (ages 15 to 21) in the Netherlands from 2009 to 2012.⁶⁹ Overall, their study included one-hundred and forty-eight adolescents and ten youth leaders. They met with them regularly for interviews, observing their interactions in many environments. These included small get-togethers, Christian music festivals, and church-sponsored events, thus ranging from formal to informal. Maffesoli’s neo-tribal concepts of “puissance” and “sociality” informed their theoretical framework, which van Wijnen and Barnard meld together as “natural sociality.” While we will further explore what these concepts imply and how they were used to interpret van Wijnen and Barnard’s results, we may state that both concepts were crucial to conceptualizing how small groups may be rooted in tradition and create new spaces for sharing communal faith.

By “natural,” van Wijnen and Barnard refer to Maffesoli’s framing of postmodern neo-tribalism as a vitalistic renewal of communal power.⁷⁰ This vitalistic power of the people is what Maffesoli terms *puissance* in the original French text to distinguish it from other forms of power.⁷¹ More specifically, it exists in opposition to *pouvoir* – which is the power exerted by social institutions and structures upon the everyday person.⁷² Thus, *puissance* has often been understood as a form of inter-personal politics or a form of politics that has less to do with the art of governing – although some have looked to neo-tribalism as a form of alternative political

Harmen van Wijnen and Marcel Barnard, “Being-Together as a Basic Given: Finding New Ways in Youth Ministry in a Time of Transition,” *Ecclesial Practices* 4 (2017); 28-29.

⁶⁷ van Wijnen and Barnard, Faith Tribes,” 418-419.

⁶⁸ The full report referenced here could not be located for use in this thesis. Its English translation is unavailable for purchase at the time of this writing, and it could not be located through library loans. However, van Wijnen and Barnard have published various articles based upon this study, which this thesis will be mobilizing.

⁶⁹ Van Wijnen and Barnard, “Faith Communities,” 419 and 420; van Wijnen and Barnard, Being-Together,” 28-31; Harmen van Wijnen and Marcel Barnard, “Connected to the Wellspring: Ecclesiological Capabilities of Small Groups of Adolescents,” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 13, no. 3 (2013); 210-211.

⁷⁰ See Michel Maffesoli, *Le temps*, pages 17 and 18, for an example, where he states that postmodernity is both a return to the “archaic,” which coincides with the renewal of a populist vitalism.

⁷¹ Don Smith’s 1996 translation kept the term “puissance” as a manner of highlighting the particular form of power driving neo-tribes. Most, if not all, scholars using neo-tribal theory have maintained this term in its original French version.

⁷² Michel Maffesoli, *Le temps*, 34.

participation in this sense⁷³ – and more to do with something akin to Sa Martino’s definition of politics as “the power to control discourses, meanings, practices, and representations of a person or group in society.”^{74,75} Neo-tribes allow people to gather according to affinities, defying notions of regulating membership by class, race, or gender. While class, race, and gender can realistically become the focus of the neo-tribe – Hetherington himself notes that it is unrealistic to think these are not still determining factors in how people relate and gather⁷⁶ – neo-tribes are groups based in primarily shared sensibilities of taste, fashion, and performance. Thus, it often does not explicitly matter who you are in terms of economic status, for example, but rather, what you like and your capacity to like that thing like the others with whom you wish to create communion.⁷⁷ Van Wijnen and Barnard follow this line of thinking, understanding *puissance* as the “inherent power” that drives the neo-tribe to commune. In their study, “Being-Together as a Basic Given,” they state that to unearth the group’s *puissance* is to decipher its driving force and that force’s relation to the group’s collective identity.⁷⁸

“Sociality,” on the other hand, revolves more around the part (or “role”) individuals play within the group.⁷⁹ By sociality, Maffesoli conceptualizes a distinct form of socialization that differs from the “social” of Modernity.^{80,81} As such, sociality is the manner in which “la personne (*persona*) joue des rôles, tant à l’intérieur de son activité professionnelle qu’au sein des diverse tribus à l’équille elle participe.”^{82,83} Within postmodern sociality, the person can now exist among those who share a common taste and who adopt a common costume. This opposes

⁷³ See Matthew Flinders and Matthew Wood, “Nexus Politics: Conceptualising Everyday Political Engagement,” *Democratic Theory* 5, no. 2 (2018); 56-81.

⁷⁴ Luis Mauro Sa Martino, *The Mediatization of Religion: When Faith Rocks* (Surrey and Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2013), 2.

⁷⁵ See Riley *et al.*, “The Case for ‘Everyday Politics’: Evaluating Neo-Tribal Theory as a Way to Understand Alternative Forms of Political Participation, Using Electronic Dance Music Culture as an Example,” *Sociology* 44, no. 2 (April 2010); 345-362.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 63-64.

⁷⁸ Van Wijnen and Barnard, “Being-Together,” 33-36.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 36-38.

⁸⁰ Michel Maffesoli, *Le temps*, 11.

⁸¹ Mike Tyldesley, *The Thought of*, 60 and 61.

⁸² Michel Maffesoli, *Le temps*, 147.

⁸³ Emphasis is added by Maffesoli in the text. To clarify, by using the term “person” in tandem with “persona,” Maffesoli looks to anchor his understanding of the term “person” with its Latin etymology of “persona,” which may be translated as “mask.” This is a common rhetorical maneuver of Maffesoli in *Le temps*, as he cements the idea that the postmodern person is continuously involved in the act of adopting different “masks” and “roles” within the theater of life as a means of participating in various neo-tribes. See chapter one of *Le temps* titled “La communauté émotionnelle: Arguments d’une recherche” for more.

the “social” of Modernity, which Maffesoli states relies on function. Thus, Maffesoli envisions modernist groups/communities as relying on some common form of static identity, *i.e.*, a shared identity that cannot be necessarily chosen but is more born into or a contractual agreement one falls into with another.⁸⁴ Scholars have noted how Maffesoli appears to be working with a notion of community highly influenced by the sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies, whose concept of *Gemeinschaft* (translated as “community”) relies on the forms of thickly bounded notions that *pouissance* seeks to break everyday people out of.⁸⁵ In opposition to this modernist paradigm, neo-tribes exist as places of a performed identity, where the person shares a communal form of expression, whether through style or general ways of being.⁸⁶ Their role is not functional, as the group would exist without any one individual member; however, they play a part in maintaining the effervescent spirit of the tribe and participating in its existence. As a primary conceptual category of neo-tribal theory, sociality may therefore be understood as the process by which identification leads to the emotive/affectual bond between members, allowing the person to assimilate into the postmodern tribe.

Interestingly, in van Wijnen and Barnard’s “Being-together as a Basic Given,” they note that how sociality occurs in their study does not align perfectly with Maffesoli’s original theory.⁸⁷ For Maffesoli, neo-tribes are continuously operating in relation to the “masses.”^{88,89} Maffesoli saw neo-tribes as, in effect, looking beyond social institutions and acting as the fragments of larger mass society, such as in the graphic below taken from Maffesoli’s *Le temps*, which van Wijnen and Barnard likewise produce in its English translation in “Being Together as a Basic Given;”⁹⁰

⁸⁴ Mike Tyldesley, *The Thought of*, 62 and 63.

⁸⁵ Donald Levine, *Visions of the Sociological Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 203; Tyldesley, *The Thought of*, 62; Shields, “Foreward,” ix.

⁸⁶ Kevin Hetherington, *Expressions of Identity*, 56 and 57.

⁸⁷ van Wijnen and Barnard, “Being-Together,” 37.

⁸⁸ Michel Maffesoli, *Le temps*, 38.

⁸⁹ Mike Tyldesley states that we should not necessarily view Maffesoli’s *pouvoir-pouissance* polarity as having no fluidity between the two, but that there is a strong current of populist *pouissance* coming to the forefront of socio-cultural relations. Tyldesley likens this to a pendulum swinging backwards with a vengeance. See *The Thought of*, 54.

⁹⁰ van Wijnen and Barnard, “Being Together as a Basic Given,” 36.

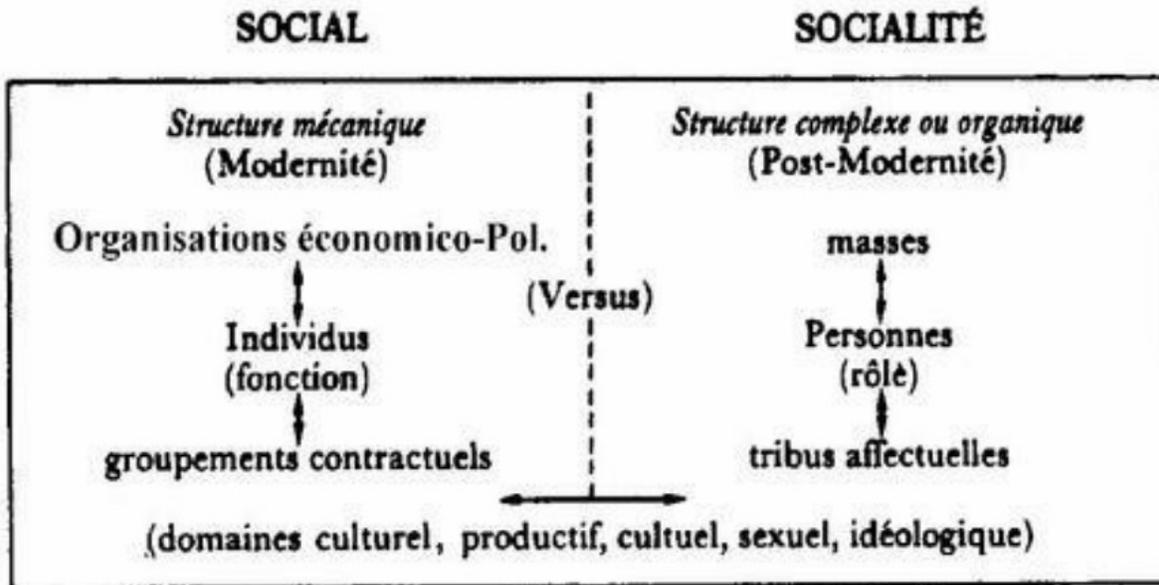


Figure 1. Social versus Sociality⁹¹

Wijnen and Barnard note that Christian neo-tribes do not forego any connection to organizations or institutions; they do not follow the neatly separated categories drawn out by Maffesoli. They found that the groups they studied all had some form of a relationship to one or both of these, such as a school or local church community.⁹² This echoes some scholars' criticisms of Maffesoli's theory, as discussed in *Le temps*. Kevin Hetherington, in particular, criticized the Maffesoli-an narrative that a stark difference existed between a modernist "social" and a postmodernist "sociality." As Hetherington states:

"The main weakness of Maffesoli [...] is that he ignores power relations, constraints and uncertainties placed on identity choices when he indicates that such factors such as class, gender and ethnicity are no longer relevant in establishing styles of life. Maffesoli's approach continues to think in the Euclideanism of 'before and after' and associates contrasts about moves from one type of society to another."^{93,94}

⁹¹ Michel Maffesoli, *Le temps*, 39.

⁹² van Wijnen and Barnard, "Being Together as a Basic Given," 37.

⁹³ Kevin Hetherington, *Expressions of Identity*, 53.

⁹⁴ David Evans shares a similar sentiment with an added nuance. As he sees it, Maffesoli, "strictly speaking," would avow that dichotomies of modern-versus-postmodern are too simplistic to account for the complexities of daily life. However, Evans notes that Maffesoli

We will return to Hetherington's notion of the negative qualities of neo-tribalism. However, for now, we may state that postmodernity must not be seen as a breaking away from the social-like relations to institutions or structures of before. Instead, postmodernity is a period where both the "social" and "sociality" co-exist.⁹⁵ In fact, van Wijnen and Barnard note that within the neo-tribes of Christian adolescents, they studied, some members adopted more as "functional" members of the group, something akin to informal leaders who facilitate discussions about faith and quasi-administrative subjects such as when the group would be meeting next and at what time.⁹⁶ Furthermore, as van Wijnen and Barnard state, the groups they studied did not seek to exist as something wholly separated from institutionalized or organizational Christianity but acted more as "wellsprings" of faith participating in institutionalized or organized Christianity at particular moments.⁹⁷ On their own, these groups looked to offer an alternative space where faith is lived out in correlation with socialization – where faith is not always the main point of the group's activities. However, these groups always maintained a relationship with the Christian tradition inspired by their families and local church communities.⁹⁸ This is what they term "faith socialization," how faith and socialization intertwine in the group, where faith is seen as a shared language and underlining common belief tied to a common faith institution (*i.e.*, a particular local church community or denomination). As such, while faith is not always the prime motivator of why the group is joining together, it acts as an underlying belief tying the group together, which may be explicitly called upon as a topic of conversation – for example – when needed.

Considering the Realities of Neo-Tribal Boundary-formation and Belonging Theologically

As we noted earlier, one of Hetherington's chief criticisms of Maffesoli's theory is how Maffesoli emphasizes a romanticized view of how postmodern social relations break away from the forms of social boundaries relevant to Modernity. Elias le Grand also echoes Hetherington's sentiments, stating that the exclusionary aspects of neo-tribalism have often gone understudied due to the idea that these groups typically defy social barriers and are rather inclusive.⁹⁹ We may

himself demonstrates certain "modernist" tendencies when he reduces ways of being in everyday life to such dichotomies, another being Maffesoli's reliance on similar polarities such as Promethean-versus-Dionysian. See David Evans, "Michel Maffesoli's Sociology of Modernity and Postmodernity: An Introduction and Critical Assessment," pages 228, 230 and 231.

⁹⁵ van Wijnen and Barnard, "Being-Together," 42-43.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 37 and 38.

⁹⁷ van Wijnen and Barnard, "Connected to the Wellspring," 214-217.

⁹⁸ van Wijnen and Barnard, "Faith Tribes as Powerful Communities," 427.

⁹⁹ Elias le Grand, "Rethinking Neo-Tribes: Ritual, Social Differentiation and Symbolic Boundaries in 'Alternative' Food Practice," in *Neo-Tribes: Consumption, Leisure and Tourism*, ed. by Anne Hardy, Andy Bennett and Brady Robards (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), 17-31.

note that Maffesoli does make an illusion of this in *Le temps* when he states that neo-tribalism is inherently paradoxical; it is at once a force of integration, of breaking down barriers, and also of “affective refusal” of that which lies outside the new barriers created through new emotional/affectual communities.¹⁰⁰ Maffesoli clarifies that postmodern (elective) sociality is based on equal forces of attraction and repulsion.¹⁰¹ This is because when people gather intentionally around an affinity, there will come a degree of intentionality in deciding the parameters of who is in and who is out of the group. Hetherington goes as far as to state that Maffesoli’s concept of neo-tribalism (specifically the postmodern emphasis on identification) is itself a “micro-politics of identification and localized resistance;” by identifying with one group, there is often a sentiment of not identifying with another and may present itself as a deliberate choice.¹⁰²

However, this aspect of Maffesoli’s theory is typically left untouched, and we see this among the Christian scholars who have adopted neo-tribal theory within their work. While van Wijnen and Barnard leave this aspect untouched, we may look to Sonnenberg *et al.*’s study “Being Together in Worship” as a prime example of the positivist deployment of neo-tribal theory. This may be best seen in their usage of Maffesoli’s concept of the emotional community.¹⁰³ This concept, essentially borrowed from Max Weber,¹⁰⁴ denotes how Maffesoli viewed neo-tribes, by their affectual nature, as exuding a shared sense of empathy among members.¹⁰⁵ For Maffesoli, the empathy neo-tribes produced is correlated to their de-individualizing nature – because they erase the perceived individuality of members and instead bring forth collective identities, members naturally empathize with one another even to bring about this connectedness. Using this theory, Sonnenberg *et al.* find a way of conceptualizing feelings of trust, equality, and openness among members, even toward non-Christians.¹⁰⁶ However, they do not seek to uncover how, if at all, these groups create new boundaries for inclusion, a critique we may extend to van Wijnen and Barnard as well.

This thesis aims to provide a more holistic understanding of neo-tribalism as it may be seen empirically within Christian groups online. Thus, the neo-tribal capacity to create exclusion or group dynamics (“us-versus-them” forms of discourse, for example) will likewise be taken seriously, in addition to the “positivist” qualities of populist *puissance* and communion

¹⁰⁰ Michel Maffesoli, *Le temps*, 106.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, 116.

¹⁰² Kevin Hetherington, *Expressions of Identity: Space, Performance, Politics* (London, Thousand Oaks, and New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 1998), 68.

¹⁰³ Ronelle Sonnenberg *et al.*, “Being Together in Youth Worship: An Empirical Study in Protestant Dutch Contexts,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 71, no. 2 (2015); 2 and 3.

¹⁰⁴ Michel Maffesoli, *Le temps*, 47.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 23.

¹⁰⁶ Sonnenberg *et al.*, “Being Together in Youth Worship,” 5-8.

demonstrated within them. We may ask how we should approach this reality theologically, however. While a discussion of the theological views of exclusion and boundary formation goes beyond the scope of this research, we may state that the presence of boundaries *tout court* is theologically justified for some, as long as those boundaries remain permeable.¹⁰⁷ For Jeremy T. Law, for example, boundaries allow humans to begin understanding the world around us.¹⁰⁸ Boundaries – where one thing ends, and another begins – differentiate things in the world, such as the words of a sentence, and are, as such, a fundamental aspect of reality and, therefore, a fundamental aspect of God’s created order. In Law’s boundary theology, creation is based on forming boundaries. For example:

“Formless void and darkness is attended by the potentiality of the Spirit of God (Genesis 1:1). Into this chaos is spoken the structuring word of God: “Let there be....”As a result, light is separated from darkness (vv. 3–5); the firmament of heaven separates the waters (vv. 6–8); earth is separated from sea (vv. 9–11); and various living things are formed (separated) according to their kind, their class of being (vv. 12ff.). Penultimately, humanity is made in the image of God, separated from the rest of the creatures by the defining role of exercising dominion (vv. 26–30). Finally, the Sabbath rest is separated from the days of work (Genesis 2:1–3). *Creation as separation is essentially creation as boundary formation.*”¹⁰⁹ (emphasis added)

Law further relates the idea that boundaries are an essential aspect of the created order to the scientific view of life to demonstrate how boundaries interact, shift, and maintain life. Considering evolution, Law states that life is an “active, intentional process” that constantly shifts in reaction to outside forces to continue a species’ existence.¹¹⁰ Thus, the boundaries of living things, for example, are fluid and permeable; organisms exist as clearly distinct, yet never as atomized beings existing in individual vacuums that never meet and interact. Law also gives other examples; cell membranes and meaning-making among humans are biological and socio-cognitive signs of how boundaries exist to be permeable yet not wholly broken.

For Law, in his theology of boundary, permeability itself points toward a “boundary-integrated future of redemption.”¹¹¹ In his work, creation is depicted as establishing boundaries, while redemption is portrayed as overcoming these boundaries to achieve integration. The process of redemption, symbolized by Jesus’ death and resurrection, integrates previously separate entities into a unified whole; of life overcoming death, for example.¹¹² The Trinity’s

¹⁰⁷ See Gerald Ens’ *Boundaries Thick and Permeable*.

¹⁰⁸ Jeremy T. Law, “Toward a Theology of Boundary,” *Zygon* 45, no. 3 (September 2010); 740.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 754.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, 744.

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, 759.

¹¹² *Ibid*, 755.

dynamic relationships are viewed as the “ground plan” for redemption, suggesting that participation in the Trinity's paradoxical nature (God-as-three, and yet three-as-one) could underlie the boundary-integrating nature of redemption.¹¹³ Thus, being bounded-to-boundary is human (as in, we cannot escape boundaries in our reality); however, permeability is a divine quality of life reflecting what it means to be redeemed. While Law does not present permeability as a social ethic for Christians, this thesis looks to his theology of boundary and its emphasis on permeability as a possible beginning to thinking theologically about neo-tribal boundary formation. This discussion is not meant to be an exhaustive theological review of boundaries (their meaning and value). By invoking Law's theology, this thesis essentially claims – as its underlying theological assumption about the nature of existence - that boundaries are natural parts of the human experience, and that permeability may be understood as a Trinitarian ethic of redemption.

We may add that boundaries are just as much a natural part of the human experience as the desire to belong,¹¹⁴ another critical element of neo-tribalism. Theologically speaking, van Wijnen and Barnard state that “being together” is a Genesis-like creation process, where we as individuals “become” by being with others.¹¹⁵ However, much like we began this chapter by bringing a non-neo-tribal scholar into the conversation – Phillip Kenneson – we would like to end by recalling Lucien Richard's writing on theology, belonging, and tradition as a means of further elaborating upon what online Christian neo-tribes may have as theological value. For Lucien Richard, to be “Christian,” to adopt this identity and be versed in its discourse, is to *belong*.¹¹⁶ Richard states that being a believer, even doing theology, means belonging to a faith tradition and ecclesial community. However, Richard evokes the sentiments of Bernard Lonergan, stating that conversion is to be attained through the harmonization of this ecclesial belonging and “authentic subjectivity.”¹¹⁷ Thus, faith is a dialogical process¹¹⁸ that “involves an affirming, a refusing and a moving beyond.”¹¹⁹ This means that the believer, belonging to a tradition, must be willing to trust that tradition and transform it authentically when necessary.¹²⁰ Richard's neo-tribal language should be noted; his last quote mirrors Maffesoli's focus on affinities, repulsions, and breaking social/institutional boundaries. Therefore, this thesis will later discuss the results of its analysis by looking at Richard's concept of the “dialogical process” of

¹¹³ Ibid, 756.

¹¹⁴ See Allen *et al.* “Belonging: A Review of Conceptual Issues, an Integrative Framework, and Directions for Future Research,” *Australian Journal of Psychology* 73, no. 3 (2021); 87-102.

¹¹⁵ van Wijnen and Barnard, “Being-Together,” 42.

¹¹⁶ Lucien Richard, “Theology and Belonging: Christian Identity and the Doing of Theology,” *Religious Education* 79, no. 3, (Summer 1984); 397 and 404.

¹¹⁷ Lucien Richard, “Theology and Belonging,” 406; See Bernard Lonergan's *Method in Theology*, page 29.

¹¹⁸ Richard also uses the term “dialectical.”

¹¹⁹ Lucien Richard, 406.

¹²⁰ Lucien Richard, “Theology and Belonging,” 407.

belonging (specifically to a faith community) as a means of reflecting upon this group from the theological perspective.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, we sought to highlight critical empirical studies within the field of theology, which utilized neo-tribal frameworks and concepts. Mainly focusing on the works of van Wijnen and Barnard, we noted their use of “natural sociality” as a means of theorizing micro-groups of Christians as demonstrating a populist desire to live out one’s faith among others. We likewise noted that this desire was not to be understood as breaking away from traditional/institutional faith structures, such as ecclesial communities, but as living in proximity to these organizations. Then, this chapter turned its attention to what certain scholars have stated is understudied within neo-tribes – exclusionary and boundary formation practices. We noted how Christian scholars conducting empirical studies typically depict a positivist view of neo-tribalism. As such, this thesis looks to provide a holistic view of neo-tribes as places of inclusion and exclusion and of changes in how faith and theology are understood among members of the Christian tradition.

However, we looked to Jeremy T. Law’s theology of boundary and Lucien Richard’s dialogical process to state that we are not necessarily looking to critique these neo-tribes in exploring boundary formation and negotiation. We are not conducting a wholly “critical” study of exclusionary practices. Instead, using the theologies mentioned above, we wish to ground this study in what Maffesoli would term “radical thought” instead of “critical thought.”¹²¹ For Maffesoli, critical thought represents a form of stating what something should be, *i.e.*, the *devoir-être*. Radical thought, on the other hand, is based on a *metanoic* process of attempting to understand why something is the way it is. By grounding our study in the theological notion that belonging, boundary-formation, and the negotiation of faith are natural to the human condition, it is not to ignore that they do not come with moral imperatives. However, we do not wish to demonize boundary formation and negotiation as perversions of how faith should be lived and practiced. Instead, we are looking to understand what boundaries and negotiations are forming in online Christian communities, using the subreddit r/DankChristianMemes as a case study and interpreting these results through the socio-cultural concept of neo-tribalism, using specifically *puissance* and sociality, and then providing a theological reflection through the hermeneutical lenses of Law’s concept of permeability and Richard’s concept of the dialogical process of Christian belonging.¹²²

¹²¹ Mike Tyldesley, *The Thought of*, 56-58, see also 79-83.

¹²² We may further liken this to Maffesoli’s “analogical method” which he discusses in *Ordinary Knowledge, An Introduction to Interpretive Sociology*. Maffesoli states that theoretical frameworks must be constructed as “conditions of possibility.” Everyday life, according to Maffesoli, is impossible to deduce to a single theory or hypothesis. By analogy, the researcher

Chapter 2: Specifics of the Case Study and Methodology

In the introduction, we noted that neo-tribes are groups defined by their fluidity and capacity to gather and disperse around a central affinity. Then, in chapter one, we elaborated upon neo-tribal theory to focus on the concept of “natural sociality,” which is van Wijnen and Barnard’s manner of combining Maffesoli’s concepts of “puissance” and “sociality” under one umbrella term. As the reader may have noticed, focusing on these groups as small and tight-knit was especially important to van Wijnen and Barnard. They studied groups of no more than ten adolescents who had known each other for a long time.¹²³ Therefore, they focused on how these micro-groups created somewhat insular moments between members while maintaining connections to their local “macro” church communities. However, this view of Christian neo-tribes as literal “micro-groups” becomes immediately challenged when we begin to think of applying it to the online realm. Reddit alone has millions of users who adopt a specific avatar to make fleeting impressions in a topic-specific community (*i.e.*, the subreddit) through posts, comments, and votes. That is when Redditors decide to make that impression – most users simply “lurk” on other users’ activity and interactions. In this sense, we must already begin shifting how we think about the Christian neo-tribe online, especially on Reddit. This site appears to engender fleeting encounters between many individuals, with thousands of community members interacting throughout the day.

Additionally, we should note an essential difference between offline and online neo-tribes – online neo-tribes such as subreddits are constituted of digitally mediated communication first and foremost. As Davidov and Andersen state, language becomes a primary means of forming togetherness in the online neo-tribe. For them, online neo-tribes produce in-group affiliations for their members through a shared language, protocols for using said language, and fluid or codified rules for integration.^{124,125} These online neo-tribes are thus often policed in a specific manner

invokes “a way of interpreting unstable phenomena by comparing them to similar situations and experiences.” Therefore complex relationships may be better vulgarized through a familiar turn of phrase, metaphor or analogy. However, we cannot state that what we are referring to is wholly understood through the metaphor; instead, the metaphor/analogy highlights those pertinent aspects of the research being conducted. Therefore, when we state that r/DankChristianMemes displays neo-tribalism, or interpret it through this lens, we are not saying that this is the only lens it should be analyzed through, and we acknowledge that there are elements which are being de-emphasized within our study. See Michel Maffesoli, *Ordinary Knowledge: An Introduction to Interpretive Sociology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996) 88.

¹²³ Harmen van Wijnen and Marcel Barnard, “Being-Together as a Basic Given: Finding New Ways in Youth Ministry in a Time of Transition,” *Ecclesial Practices* 4, (2017); 28-30.

¹²⁴Veronica M. Davidov and Barbara Anderson, “Mimetic Kinship: Theorizing Online ‘Tribalism,’” in *Electronic Tribes: The Virtual Worlds of Geeks, Gamers, Shamans, and Scammers*. Ed. by Tyrone L. Smith Adams and Stephen A. Smith (Austin, TX: The University of Texas Press, 2008), 25 and 33.

different than how offline neo-tribes are regulated. As such, online groups go beyond the offline neo-tribal quality of implicit ethical codes. Forums, for example, often have strict rules that participants must follow,¹²⁶ usually centered around how one communicates with the group.¹²⁷ These norms become how allowable discourse is controlled, and dynamics of inclusion and exclusion are produced.¹²⁸ Adams and Smith add that these groups use standard protocols and procedures to initiate a “consensual exchange of information and opinions.”¹²⁹ O’Neil makes a similar argument when he states that online neo-tribes are based on exclusion and differentiation because their very nature affirms visible boundaries, which, if crossed, means one’s expression (by way of a post or comment) becomes deleted from the group.¹³⁰ However, we should not think online neo-tribes are prone to producing homogenization; Kristine de Valck notes that these groups often have members within their ranks who conflict with each other.¹³¹ Thus, boundary formation in the online neo-tribes is not necessarily about squashing confrontation but making sure confrontation occurs amongst individuals who will not cross certain norms and values of the group.

With these critical amendments to neo-tribal theory in consideration of their online variety, it becomes clear that language plays a crucial role in how individuals within online neo-tribes construct and express their identities. As such, this study decided to forgo the traditional route of qualitative interviews and participant observation used by most neo-tribal scholars, including Christian scholars such as van Wijnen and Barnard. Instead, it takes seriously the idea that online neo-tribes, such as subreddits, are often constructed and maintained through textual

¹²⁵ These groups may require some form of measurement that your offline identity matches the required identity of the group. See Davidov and Andersen, 29.

¹²⁶ Kubra Asan *et al.*, “Cohesion in Cycling Neo-Tribes: A Netnographic Approach,” *Leisure Studies* 41, no. 3 (2022); 390 and 392.

¹²⁷ Tyrone L. Adams and Stephen A. Smith, ““A Tribe by Any Other Name...” in *Electronic Tribes: The Virtual Worlds of Geeks, Gamers, Shamans, and Scammers*. Ed. by Tyrone L. Smith Adams and Stephen A. Smith (Austin, TX: The University of Texas Press, 2008), 16.

¹²⁸ Ronald E. Rice, “Foreword,” in *Electronic Tribes: The Virtual Worlds of Geeks, Gamers, Shamans, and Scammers*. Ed. by Tyrone L. Smith Adams and Stephen A. Smith (Austin, TX: The University of Texas Press, 2008), x-xi.

¹²⁹ Tyrone L. Adams and Stephen A. Smith, 17.

¹³⁰ Mathieu O’Neil, “Radical Tribes at Warre: Primitivists on the Net,” in *Electronic Tribes: The Virtual Worlds of Geeks, Gamers, Shamans, and Scammers*. Ed. by Tyrone L. Smith Adams and Stephen A. Smith (Austin, TX: The University of Texas Press, 2008), 253.

¹³¹ Kristine de Valck, “The War of the eTribes: Online Conflicts and Communal Consumption,” in *Consumer Tribes*. Ed. by Bernard Cova, Robert V. Kozinets and Avi Shankar (London and New York: Routledge Press, 2011), 262.

data and associated with other semiotic elements, such as images.¹³² Thus, this study uses discourse analysis, precisely the method of theolinguistic analysis, to understand group dynamics, identity formation, and communication patterns within Christian neo-tribal gatherings. This is not to say qualitative interviews would not give a more holistic understanding of neo-tribal relations in r/DankChristianMemes. However, this study is interested in understanding how language and imagery are utilized in creating a collective “Christian” identity for the group. As Johnson and Ambrose state, online communities are rich in anonymous, authentic interactions within the group.¹³³ As such, discourse analysis works better for this study, as we are interested in what is authentically being stated to the group and how this informs collective identity.

R/DankChristianMemes, Internet Meme Culture, and Religious Memes

Before we delve into what theolinguistic analysis is and how we conceive of this aiding our further neo-tribal analysis, we must first tackle another salient aspect: the nature of studying memes. On Reddit, memes act as a potent form of “karma,”^{134,135} allowing users to cultivate easy upvotes due to the site’s thriving and vibrant meme culture. As such, they have become a popular communication genre on Reddit;¹³⁶ Reddit hosts a plethora of meme communities, and studies have been conducted on specific meme-orientated groups,¹³⁷ the use of memes as a popular genre of communication in specific groups,¹³⁸ and the use of specific types of memes across multiple groups.¹³⁹ Furthermore, they are what Massanari calls the platform’s most prevalent

¹³² Ruth Page *et al.*, *Researching Language and Social Media: A Student Guide*, ed. by Ruth Page, David Barton, Johann W. Unger, and Michele Zappavigna (London and New York: Routledge Press, 2014), 16.

¹³³ Grace J. Johnson and Paul J. Ambrose, “Neo-Tribes: The Power and Potential of Online Communities in Health Care,” *Communications of the ACM* 49, no. 1 (January 2006); 111.

¹³⁴ Jordan Eschler and Amanda Menking, “‘No Prejudice Here’: Examining Social Identity Work in Starter Pack Memes,” *Social Media + Society*, (April-June 2018); 4.

¹³⁵ “Karma” refers to the points allotted to a Redditor for receiving more upvotes than downvotes on their posts and comments.

¹³⁶ Albin Wagener, “The Postdigital Emergence of Memes and GIFs: Meaning, Discourse, and Hypernarrative Creativity,” *Postdigital Science and Education* 3, (2021); 837.

¹³⁷ Ioana Literat and Sarah van den Berg, “Buy Memes Low, Sell Memes High: Vernacular Criticism and Collective Negotiations of Value on Reddit’s MemeEconomy,” *Information, Communication & Society* 22, no. 2 (2019); 232-249.

¹³⁸ Alex Georgakopoulou *et al.*, “Making Memes Count: Platformed Rallying on Reddit,” in *Quantified Storytelling: A Narrative Analysis of Metrics on Social Media* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 61-93.

¹³⁹ Miranda J. Brady *et al.*, “Good Karen, Bad Karen: Visual Culture and the Anti-vaxx Mom on Reddit,” *Journal of Gender Studies* 32, no. 6 (2023); 616-631.

form of “play.”^{140,141} Thus, the reader needs to understand meme culture, as it has specific rules of “play” that will need to be kept in mind when detailing the results of analysis, and then discussing these results in line with our sociological and theological lenses.

What is r/DankChristianMemes?

r/DankChristianMemes is a subreddit founded on March 8th, 2015. When this study was conducted, it had 816,289 members and ranked within the top 1% of subreddits by size. When one enters this group, they might first notice the profile picture: a winking Jesus pointing forward with one hand while the other gives a thumbs up. This picture is commonly referred to on the Internet as “Buddy Chris,” a cartoonish statue of Christ from the film *Dogma*, which has now become a familiar meme image.¹⁴² This same picture is also embedded within the page’s sidebar content, under its “about community” and “filter by flair” sections. Here, r/DankChristianMemes’ “Buddy Christ” can be found in front of a Pride flag with the caption: “an open and affirming community.” It is a statement that the group’s moderators appear to take seriously; at the top of the page, the symbols of the rainbow and the cross are within the page’s official title. Likewise, the group’s “stickied” post¹⁴³ is a post made by the moderator “The Dank Reverend,” titled “r/DankChristianMemes is open and affirming to LGBTQIA+ people.”¹⁴⁴ Within this post, the “Dank Reverend” provides the only two comments; one provides resources for LGBTQ+ Christians, including organizations, podcasts, and other subreddits. The other provides exegetical arguments for why one should not judge LGBTQ+ Christians. Likewise, r/DankChristianMemes bans all forms of racism, homophobia, and transphobia. The group includes LGBTQ+ Christians, people of all faiths, and even non-religious people, as its bio

¹⁴⁰ Adrienne L. Massanari, *Participation, Culture, Community, and Play: Learning from Reddit* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2015), 96.

¹⁴¹ We would be remised to note that Massanari states that memes are among the least interesting examples of play on Reddit, as it is a genre of communication widely seen on other platforms.

¹⁴² “Buddy Christ,” knowyourmeme.com, last modified October 5th, 2020. <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/buddy-christ>.

¹⁴³ Stickied posts are posts which moderators “pin” to the top of the group’s feed, making them immediately visible to those visiting. See “Sticky Posts,” Reddit, last visited April 4th, 2024. <https://support.reddithelp.com/hc/en-us/articles/15484641176724-Sticky-posts#:~:text=Once%20you%20have%20stickied%20a,you%20distinguish%20as%20a%20mod.>

¹⁴⁴ u/Broclen, “R/DankCHristianMemes is open and affirming to LGBTQIA+ people,” Reddit. https://www.reddit.com/r/dankchristianmemes/comments/13x4x7d/rdankchristianmemes_is_open_and_affirming_to/.

states.¹⁴⁵ Finally, we may add that its sidebar hosts a section titled “The Dank Charity Alliance.” This “alliance” is a group of different subreddits, including r/SatanicTemple_Reddit, r/PaganMemes, and r/49ers – a fan community dedicated to San Francisco, California’s National Football League team.

What are Memes?

As evidenced by the group’s name, the most central concept of r/DankChristianMemes, other than its Christian identity, is its proclivity for memes. This is an essential element to elaborate upon for our case study, as internet memes are a genre of communication with their own norms and values. At the broadest level, memes are popular combinations of images and words spread through the Internet and are typically humorous.¹⁴⁶ Memes typically find users taking a “macro” – a popular image or template with text – and adding their own text to garner a reaction from others online. Sometimes, a meme is called “dank” when it is particularly good. However, “dank” memes are in themselves a sub-genre of memes. For example, Max Mahood states that a meme can be understood as “dank” when it contains absurdist content. Thus, a “dank meme” is understood as having a more surrealist sensibility and refers specifically to “image-text patterns” with a “low-fi” humor and aesthetic quality. As Yvette Granata writes, “dank memes” are a form of mass micro-politics; they refuse to be art, *i.e.*, aesthetically pleasing, and often depict humor that is “common” or “petty.” Much like neo-tribes themselves, these memes are political by nature, not political by way of a specific agenda, but in how they exist outside the norms and values of other social institutions and structures – a sort of micro-rebellion “against systematic capture.”

The term “meme” stems from the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins’ 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*.¹⁴⁷ Dawkins theorized that cultural units multiply much like genes do, propagating from person to person via imitation, which eventually leads to this unit – or “idea” –

¹⁴⁵ Its bio reads: “r/DankChristianMemes is a place for all kinds of Christians and all kinds of non-Christians to enjoy memes and fellowship. Remember to love thy neighbor and be excellent to each other! 🙏🙏”

¹⁴⁶ Alice Marwick, “Memes,” *Contexts* 12, no. 4 (2013); 12.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/153650421351121>.; Knobel and Lankshear, 199.

¹⁴⁷ Alice Marwick, 12; Limor Shifman, “Memes in a Digital World: Reconciling with a Conceptual Troublemaker,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communications* 18, (2013), 362; Christian Bauckhage, “Insights into Internet Memes,” *Proceedings of the Fifth International AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media* 5, no. 1 (2021), 42; Bradley E. Wiggins and G. Bret Bowers, “Memes as Genre: A Structural Analysis of the Memescape,” *New Media & Society* 17, no. 1 (2015); 1888, 1889 and 1891; Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear, “Online Memes, Affinities, and Cultural Production,” in *A New Literacies Sampler*. Ed. by Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007), 200.

becoming a well-known piece of cultural capital. Internet theorists eventually took hold of Dawkins' "meme" theory, applying it to Internet culture and calling it "mimetics." Speaking upon this "hijacking" of his original meme theory, Dawkins stated:

"Instead of mutating by random chance, before spreading by a form of Darwinian selection, internet memes are altered deliberately by human creativity. In the hijacked version, mutations are designed — not random — with the full knowledge of the person doing the mutating."¹⁴⁸

Wiggins and Bowers follow Dawkins' idea that Internet memes are less like a cultural virus and more like "catalysts" for developing small units of culture.¹⁴⁹ Additionally, Wiggins and Bowes state that these small cultural units may carry particular meanings beyond simple humor and may seek to modify narratives within culture.¹⁵⁰ Therefore, they can carry an added (everyday) political power – other than the "mass micro-politics" described by Granata above – in that they explicitly look to alter how we think about specific events or ideas.

Finally, we may mention that memes have widely been noted as emblematic of participatory culture, a theory popularized by the media scholar Henry Jenkins.¹⁵¹ They represent a cultural shift from the everyday person being a strict consumer of a given cultural good to the everyday person producing cultural goods for others to consume.¹⁵² For Jenkins, participatory culture is defined by minimal barriers to entry, promotes creativity and sharing, and often has a degree of mentorship embedded within it. Thus, not only can anyone participate, but the tools of participation are readily available to those looking to join in. Furthermore, by their nature, memes are participatory, as they rely on being shared from person to person, varying as they go along, which invariably extends their "shelf life."¹⁵³ Several websites are dedicated to making memes, such as quickmeme.com and makeameme.com, and social media platforms have made participating in disseminating content more accessible than ever before.¹⁵⁴ Memes likewise have an affective dimension to them. As Katz and Shifman have stated, they "represent a whole body

¹⁴⁸ Bradley E. Wiggins and G. Bret Bowers, 1890; See Marshmallow Laser Feast, "Just for Hits Richard Dawkins,"

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T5DOiZ8Y3bs&ab_channel=MarshmallowLaserFeast.

¹⁴⁹ Bradley E. Wiggins and G. Bret Bowers, 1890.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 1892.

¹⁵¹ Alice Marwick, 12; Heidi E. Huntington, "Subversive Memes: Internet Memes as a Form of Visual Rhetoric," *Selected Papers of Internet Research* 14, (2014); 1; Bradley E. Wiggins and G. Bret Bowers, 1888 and 1891.

¹⁵² Alice Marwick, 13; Bradley E. Wiggins and G. Bret Bowers, 1896.

¹⁵³ Alice Marwick, 13; Limor Shifman, 362.

¹⁵⁴ Gabrielle K. Aguilar *et al.*, "Communicating Mixed Messages about Religion Through Internet Memes," *Information, Communication, and Society* 20, no. 10 (2017); 1500.

of interdynamic parameters that link both physical and digital realities.”¹⁵⁵ They, therefore, reflect how creators and those consuming the meme feel about specific aspects of life and likewise reflect certain “contexts and meanings discernible to some and less discernible to others.”¹⁵⁶

To elaborate on this last point, Bauckhage notes that memes are typically “inside jokes,” which will only be understood by those “in on it.”¹⁵⁷ However, they are more than this; they serve as possible grounds for researchers to understand the “ideas, values, repertoires, practices and conditions” that constitute specific individual and communal online cultures,¹⁵⁸ allowing them to alter culture units and meaning itself. As such, religious memes, particularly, have been studied as sites demonstrating “tensions” and “fissures” of religious individuals and communities on the Internet.¹⁵⁹ Memes and meme-specific communities allow individuals to connect with others and critique certain aspects of their faith and faith communities.¹⁶⁰ As Burroughs and Feller state:

“The study of religious memetics is a unique site for the understanding of not only memetics in popular culture but also the everydayness of religious faith and the increasing articulations of religion in digital contexts. Religious memes should be understood on their own terms and can differ in substantive ways from normative iterations of popular culture memes. This is not to say that religious memes are not constantly in dialogue with the memes of popular culture; however, religious memes articulate particular meanings unique to religious institutions and religiosity.”¹⁶¹

The meme genre brings about a new form of everyday religious togetherness,¹⁶² where complex matters of doctrine, for example, are “condensed into digestible bytes”¹⁶³ and made available to a

¹⁵⁵ Albin Wagener, 840; See also Yuval Katz and Limor Shifman, “Making Sense? The Structure and Meanings of Digital Memetic Nonsense,” *Information, Communication & Society* 20, no. 6 (2017), 824-842.

¹⁵⁶ Constance Iloh, “Do It for the Culture: The Case for Memes in Qualitative Research,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 20, (2021); 3.

¹⁵⁷ Christian Bauckhage, 42.

¹⁵⁸ Constance Iloh, 4.

¹⁵⁹ Benjamin Burroughs and Gavin Feller, “Religious Memetics: Institutional Authority in Digital/Lived Religion,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 39, no. 4 (2015); 2.

¹⁶⁰ Benjamin Burroughs and Gavin Feller, 3; Aya Yadlin-Segal, “Communicating Identity through Religious Internet Memes on the ‘Tweeting Orthodoxies’ Facebook Page,” in *Digital Judaism: Jewish Negotiations with Digital Media and Culture*. Ed. by Heidi A. Campbell (New York and London: Routledge Press, 2015), 111.

¹⁶¹ Benjamin Burroughs and Gavin Feller, 2.

¹⁶² Benjamin Burroughs and Gavin Feller, 16; Gabrielle K. Aguilar *et al.*, 1518.

broader public.¹⁶⁴ As Yadlin-Segler states, memes may act as “safe places” for individuals and groups to speak about their convictions and culture.¹⁶⁵ However, memes can also challenge religious institutions and traditional beliefs.

Research Methodology

When considering methodology and data extraction, this study had to consider the nature of memes and the neo-tribal dimensions of language it looks to unearth. This study used multimodal theolinguistics, which was both inductive and deductive at specific points in its analysis. Multimodal analysis refers to analyzing various “semantic modes” at once.¹⁶⁶ By “semantic modes,” we mean the various methods of communication that the Internet affords. Because Internet communication may rely on various means of communication, such as text and image, in the case of memes, scholars have had to consider how modes interact to create meaning, giving rise to multimodal discourse analysis (MDA).¹⁶⁷ In short, discourse analysis seeks to understand the meaning produced by texts using linguistic analysis and social theory,¹⁶⁸ attempting to decipher meaning as it relates to the text and the social world it inhabits.¹⁶⁹ Thus, MDA performs the same manner of analysis, relating linguistic features, such as semantics or syntax, to theories of social relations. However, MDA also considers the context of the images in which the text pairs itself. This is where the method of theolinguistic analysis becomes essential to our study because this study takes a specific interest in the particularities of Christian language and images and how these explicitly relate to constructions of collective identity in r/DankChristianMemes.

Theolinguistics refers to the linguistic study of religious language. Following Valerie Hobbs’ conceptualization of theolinguistic analysis, this study takes a functional approach to language, thereby looking to understand the *purpose* behind language, correlating it with social behavior.¹⁷⁰ Thus, it relies heavily on classic theories of discourse, which view language as operating at a level “above the text.” By this, we mean that text cannot be read in a vacuum; one must remember that all utterances and texts are taken from and interact with their socio-cultural environment and other discourses. Therefore, a “functional” approach takes the text and asks

¹⁶³ Benjamin Burroughs and Gavin Feller, 17.

¹⁶⁴ Wendi Bellar *et al.*, “Reading Religion in Internet Memes,” *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture* 2, no. 2 (December 2013); 7.

¹⁶⁵ Aya Yadlin-Segal, 116; Wendi Bellar *et al.*, 7-8; Gabrielle K. Aguilar *et al.*, 1518.

¹⁶⁶ Ruth Page *et al.*, 16.

¹⁶⁷ Ruth Page *et al.*, 96.

¹⁶⁸ Ruth Page *et al.*, 94.

¹⁶⁹ Valerie Hobbs, *An Introduction to Religious Language: Exploring Theolinguistics in Contemporary Contexts* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 26.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 26-32.

what function it plays, or as Valerie Hobbs put it: “What is the text doing?” For Hobbs, religious language has three distinct functions: it is axiomatic, provides social cohesion (and thereby exclusion), and contextualizes emotion. This involves deciphering the claims being made (the axiomatic), how group dynamics are formed (the social cohesive), and what emotions are being conveyed in reaction to the specific “complexities we encounter in the world, in nature, in human experience.”¹⁷¹ This method allowed us to track the following dimensions of r/DankChristianMemes religious language:

- (1) **The axiomatic:** Are the most popular memes of this group led by a desire to recount certain fundamental Christian principles, values, or beliefs? If not, do any explicit core beliefs and values underpin this group’s most popular content?
- (2) **The social cohesive:** Are boundaries being made against an explicit out-group or enemy? Do these memes attempt to avoid making statements about other groups of people?
- (3) **The emotive:** Does the group demonstrate affective bonds based on certain explicit emotions, or do memes remain purely affective, only serving to form bonds over humor?

By these three dimensions, this study easily related the results to the framework of neo-tribalism discussed in chapter one. This was because we would be able to test whether the group’s *puissance* (i.e., driving force behind collective identity) and sociality (capacity to readily fill in an ephemeral “role” within the group) were based on these three dimensions – determining whether the desire drove them to gather around axiomatic statements, certain emotions or the repulsion of some out-group, and therefore found the original poster (OPs) filling in a specific role befitting to these dimensions of theolinguistics.

Method of Annotation

Data was therefore extracted in the following manner. First, this study used the “top-post-of-all-time” function on the r/DankChristianMemes subreddit. In doing so, the top 50 most popular memes were copied and pasted into a Word document where they could be manually annotated. These memes were analyzed for their axiomatic, social cohesive, and emotive functions, especially as they pertained to the explicit religious vocabulary and imagery depicted within the memes. This meant going beyond the apparent quality of humor when needed. For example, as in the meme below with the post title “God loves all his children,” we can detect that this meme is not simply meant to be humorous but is instead sending a more significant message among r/DankChristianMemes members, one which garnered upwards of 26.8 thousand votes, with 83% of them in the positive.

¹⁷¹ Ibid, 32-36.



Figure 2. “God loves all his children”

From the axiomatic perspective, this meme is making a relatively straightforward statement that God loves LGBTQ+ people, relating it to Paul’s letter to the Galatians. Specifically, the meme refers to Gal. 4:16, where Paul states: “Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?” As evidenced by the text provided below the image – “They hated Jesus because He told them the truth” – this meme looks to cement further the statement “God loves LGBTQ+ people too” as a factual claim according to scripture. It likewise creates explicit group dynamics between those who oppose such a message; the out-group is made of those who hated Jesus for telling the truth, the truth within this meme being that God loves the LGBTQ+ community. Lastly, there is an emotive function within the meme: those who oppose the meme’s axiomatic statement demonstrate an outward “hatred” through the statement “shut up.” It appears to claim that those who believe in this axiomatic statement will be hated like Christ Himself, offering Biblical precedence for the limits of man to receive the truth and the emotional responses they produce in light of this.

Limits of Research

Each of our fifty memes were annotated like the meme above, focusing on Hobbs’ three dimensions of a functional approach to religious language. Once these were annotated, connections were made between memes regarding how these three functions played out, following an inductive analysis model.¹⁷² One note we may make here is that this study

¹⁷² By stating we use an “inductive” and “deductive” approach, we mean that the discursive analysis was deployed in a manner which allowed the researcher to create their own categories of analysis based on connections between the memes analyzed. This would be inductive. Thereafter, we used a “deductive” approach by making sense of our results in light of neo-tribal theory. For more on “inductive” and “deductive” approaches, see Mohammed Reza Armat *et al.* “Inductive and Deductive: Ambiguous Labels in Qualitative Content Analysis,” in *The Qualitative Report* 23, no. 1 (2018); 219-221.

recognizes the subjectivity that arises from annotating these memes by hand. In regards to memes, while machine annotation with large datasets can provide valuable insights and scalability, hand annotation offers certain advantages regarding depth, quality, and flexibility, particularly in research contexts requiring detailed qualitative analysis.¹⁷³ Memes can be highly nuanced, context-dependent, and culturally specific. As such, this study used hand annotation to allow the researcher to capture these complexities more effectively than automated methods, which may struggle with understanding sarcasm, irony, or cultural references.

Also, it must be stated that this study lacks generalizability due to its small data set. However, a more extensive quantitative data set would not necessarily benefit our overall goal. While a larger data set would provide more complex empirical evidence of trends in Christian memes, for example, this study is using its data set and results as the springboard for a further socio-theological snapshot of how social conditions of postmodernity persist on the Internet in particular ways which provide innovative avenues of Christian faith socialization. While knowing the percentage of Jesus memes compared to Bible memes may provide interesting insights for another study, this research believes that small datasets facilitate close reading and careful interpretation of religious texts or symbols, allowing the exploration of the intricacies of theological themes, doctrines, and beliefs. We view this close engagement with the data as leading to richer insights and interpretations of how this particular group's collective identity is formulated by the social conditions of postmodernity, which will then inform a more nuanced theological reflection as it pertains to this particular group's most popular content.

A Brief Note on the Ethics of this Research

This research was not subjected to an ethical review, as under the “Policy for the Ethical Review of Research Involving Human Participants” of Concordia University, research relying only upon “publically available information” does not require doing so.¹⁷⁴

Conclusion

This chapter sought to detail the choices in methodology, data extraction, and annotation style before delving into the formal analysis results. Part of this was finishing our elaboration of neo-tribalism by referencing the literature on online neo-tribes, which noted how these online

¹⁷³ Maxim Dupont, “Manual Data Annotation vs. Augmented Annotation: Pros and Cons,” Labelvisor.com, uploaded July 21st, 2023. <https://www.labelvisor.com/manual-data-annotation-vs-augmented-annotation-pros-and-cons/>

¹⁷⁴ See the “Policy for the Ethical Review of Research Involving Human Participants” form from Concordia University’s “Acquire ethics approval” webpage (<https://www.concordia.ca/research/for-researchers/ethics.html>).

neo-tribes are highly centered in communication. Then, we introduced the subreddit r/DankChristianMemes, which led us to discuss the nature of its primary communication genre – the meme. With the online neo-tribal focus on language and the multimodal nature of memes, this study stated that it used multimodal theolinguistics analysis as its method. Using Hobbs’ conceptualization of theolinguistics in particular, we stated that this research focused upon a functional approach to language, using Hobbs’ dimensions of the axiomatic, social cohesive, and emotive to determine the desired effect of the meme within the group, attempting to decipher whether r/DankChristianMemes’ top 50 memes were based in a strict superficial desire to make each other laugh, or whether there were other dimensions worth noting to this group’s attempt to form togetherness. We then detailed how data was extracted and annotated, providing an example of annotation with the meme titled “God loves all his children.” We then finished by mentioning this research’s limits regarding the subjectivity of annotation style and the lack of generalizability of results due to the small data scale. Lastly, we noted that this research was exempt from an ethical review due to its use of publicly available data.

Chapter 3: Results of the Theolinguistic Analysis

The following chapter will detail the results of our theolinguistic analysis. Below is a table of our top 50 memes from when this study began its theolinguistic analysis on February 1st, 2024. Our memes have been placed in order of their popularity, therefore the order in which they appeared at the top of “all time,” from most popular to least. Our table includes the titles and the annotations given to each meme using Valerie Hobbs’ three social functions of religious language. Once the reader has gone over the general overview of the results in this table, the rest of our chapter will provide more in-depth examples of how these three functions were displayed within the group. Before beginning, we may clarify what the specific results listed in the table below mean:

(1) When determining whether memes made axiomatic statements, we found two significant categories: non-axiomatic and axiomatic. Afterward, the axiomatic was separated into three categories: memes making statements about sacred authorities of Christianity, those making statements about non-authoritative figures, and those making statements about the non-authoritative with the aid of the authoritative. We should also note that some of these axiomatic statements are “discursive.” By “discursive,” we mean that the axiomatic is not listed but implied by the meme at a clear discursive level, *i.e.*, at a level “above the text.” Because memes work with sarcasm, irony, and parody, using visuals to state what they mean rather than relying purely on the text, we determined that it was fitting to include this discursive manner of relating the axiomatic because it is evident certain memes have something “factual” to say about reality, without outright saying it in explicit manners like others.

(2) We found three significant categories when determining the boundaries being made for social cohesion. The first would be the “experiential.” This refers to memes that depict something related to the experience of the Christian life. These included memes referring to going to church, reading Scripture, or stereotypes of Christian relationships. The second category is “right-thinking,” which refers to memes that blatantly critique another group for their theology, way of following Christ, or sinful behavior. The third category is “humor,” a broad term denoting any meme that uses Christian language, images, or references to make a joke. The humor depicted includes absurdist memes about ducks asking a preacher to state the Lord’s prayer (“the one about the bread”) and memes about scriptural passages.¹⁷⁵

(3) When determining the emotive function, much like the axiomatic, we have to decipher between memes that were “non-emotive” (what we will term from now on purely “affective”)

¹⁷⁵ It may seem obvious why one, such as the absurdist meme, is designated as “humor,” but not the example of the Bible meme. The Bible meme is included in the “humor” category because it is not relating anything about the experience of reading scripture, nor is it relating anything about the right way to read or interpret scripture. Instead some memes simply make jokes about a biblical narrative, depicting Isaac with a worried expression on his way to be sacrifice by his father, for example.

and those that had added “emotive” functions. By “affective,” we mean that the meme does not appear to have that added emotive function, *i.e.*, it does not display emotive language or visuals (such as facial expressions), making sense of these emotions through the Christian narrative. Essentially, we were determining whether the meme made an extra attempt to display some form of feeling or emotion meant to relate to the Redditor concerning their faith.¹⁷⁶ We then split those few memes from the “emotive” category into two further sections: emotive memes referring to the act of rebuking another (what we term the legitimization of “righteous anger or mockery”) and those making general, relatable claims of why someone feels a certain way concerning an aspect of the Christian faith (what we term “general relatability”).

Overview of the Results

Table 1. Results of Analysis

r/DankChristianMemes’ top-50-memes as of February 1 st , 2024				
Position	Title	Axiomatic	Social Cohesive	Emotive
1	Factually correct	Yes	Experience	Affective
2	Jesus will find a way no matter what you throw at him	Yes	Experience	Affective
3	It sure can be wierd sometimes ¹⁷⁷	Yes (discursively): “White Christians” do not follow the teachings of Jesus.	Experience	Emotive
4		Yes (discursive): “White Christians” do not adequately follow the teachings of Jesus.	Right-thinking	Affective
5	There is one mediator	Yes (discursive): The Pope/Catholics have a	Right-thinking	Emotive

¹⁷⁶ We recognize that in our previous chapter, we used an example of a meme which depicted a different form of the emotive function. In it, we stated that the emotional dimension of the meme was in how the word “hated” and the depiction of a crowd yelling was used against Jesus, who was in essence the relatable person of the meme. This was an instance of the emotive being conjured to make sense of an emotive response against a belief which is assumed to be held by the reader. However, in our analysis of the top 50 memes, we did not see such an occurrence, at least not related to theological beliefs.

¹⁷⁷ Note that the misspelling of “weird” as “wierd” is intentional in our results as this is the post’s actual title.

r/DankChristianMemes' top-50-memes as of February 1 st , 2024				
Position	Title	Axiomatic	Social Cohesive	Emotive
	between God and man...	faulty understanding of God.		
6	Preach it	Yes	Experience (due to its title)	Emotive
7	Can't get enough of that prayer	No	Knowledge	Affective
8	Time to convert	No	Knowledge	Affective
9	I write in the Lord's name	No	Rightness	Affective
10	We are all saved by Jesus' blood on this blessed day.	Yes	Rightness	Emotive
11	This is the only thing they serve at monastery cafeterias.	No	Knowledge	Emotive
12	it be like that sometimes	Yes	Experience	Affective
13	Happy easter!	No	Knowledge	Affective
14	Jesus knows my pain	No	Knowledge	Affective
15	F**k me in the a** cause I love Jesus	Yes	Experience	Affective
16	Colonizing of paradise	Yes (discursive): The Queen of England is Old.	Knowledge	Affective
17	When you outgrow the edgy atheist circle jerk.	Yes (discursive): r/DankChristianMemes is cooler than r/Atheism.	Experience	Affective
18	The Lord giveth...	Yes (discursive): People are shocked when the Lord taketh, but happy He giveth.	Experience	Affective
19	Did I Stutter?	Yes	Rightness	Emotive
20	什么？	No	Knowledge	Affective

r/DankChristianMemes' top-50-memes as of February 1 st , 2024				
Position	Title	Axiomatic	Social Cohesive	Emotive
21	Crossover in creation	No	Rightness	Affective
22	Christian dating in a nutshell ♂	Yes	Experience	Affective
23	Asian Dad tells it like it is	Yes	Rightness	Affective
24	Veggie Burn	Yes	Experience	Affective
25	Yup	Yes	Experience	Emotive
26	Gentleman in the pews, homie with the youths	Yes	Experience	Affective
27	Thanks guys!	No	Knowledge	Affective
28	Wow	Yes (discursive): The Catholic Church is greedy.	Rightness	Affective
29	Merry Christmas!	Yes	Experience	Affective
30	(Awkward silence)	No	Knowledge	Affective
31	Everytime.	Yes (discursive): Leaving church is hard because everyone wants to talk to you.	Experience	Affective
32	Firstborns beware!	No	Knowledge	Affective
33	This is how we should treat those who practice other religions	Yes	Right-thinking	Affective
34	Accurate summery	Yes	Experience	Affective
35	Sorry momma	Yes	Experience	Affective
36	We are saved once more!	Yes	Knowledge	Affective
37	Dad...what are you going to do?	No	Knowledge	Affective
38	Seen on tinder subreddit	Yes (discursively): sexual immorality is	Rightness	Affective

r/DankChristianMemes' top-50-memes as of February 1 st , 2024				
Position	Title	Axiomatic	Social Cohesive	Emotive
		wrong according to Scripture. ¹⁷⁸		
39	👹👹👹	Yes (discursive): Rich Christians have gotten greedy.	Rightness	Emotive
40	Not a detail missed,	No	Knowledge	Affective
41	ofc He doesn't	Yes	Rightness	Emotive
42	When the faith is strong	Yes (discursive): Some Christians are delusional.	Experience	Affective
43	We need to set up an emotional support program for Joseph. He's got bad trust issues.	No	Knowledge	Affective
44	האלה היהודים משהו מתכננים	No	Knowledge	Affective
45	We have work to do	No	Knowledge	Affective
46	Dew it	Yes	Experience	Affective
47	Seen	Yes (discursive): No one wants to help stack chairs after service.	Experience	Affective
48	Maybe for you.	Yes (discursive): Christians are going to heaven.	Rightness	Affective
49	Cover has been blown!	Yes (discursive): Jesus and God probably do not listen to every word you say.	Experience	Affective
50	White girls on Instagram coming back from a	Yes (discursive): White girls coming back from missionary trips can have an	Experience	Affective

¹⁷⁸ We should acknowledge a meme like this could just be a tongue-in-cheek joke, and not truly pushing an axiomatic ideal of sexual relations.

r/DankChristianMemes' top-50-memes as of February 1 st , 2024				
Position	Title	Axiomatic	Social Cohesive	Emotive
	mission/service trip in Africa	inflated ego.		

The Axiomatic Function

Of our 50 memes, 34 were making some form of axiomatic statement, either explicitly or discursively. Thus, almost half of our sample did not. For example, see memes one (“Can’t get enough of that prayer”) and two (“Firstborns beware!”) below:



Figure 3. “Can’t get enough of that prayer” and “Firstborns beware!”

They do not make any attempt to state something factually about prayer or Biblical narratives – in the case of “Firstborns beware!”, we are speaking of Exodus 11:1-12:36. When analyzing the rest of sample through our initial lens of the axiomatic, we may decipher three major happenings, which we may relate to relations between r/DankChristianMemes “members” and depictions of what Valerie Hobbs terms “sacred legitimating authorities” and what this study terms “non-authoritative actors.” By sacred legitimating authority (SLA), Hobbs’ *Introduction to Religious Language* is more acutely referring to a discursive strategy or a manner of constructing an air of authority around a text, person, or supernatural entity.¹⁷⁹ Part of this discursive strategy is deploying this sacred authority to legitimate a way of being reflected from that authority. The non-axiomatic memes examined above include SLAs. However, again, they do not make any statement about the nature of these SLAs — their goal is humor.

¹⁷⁹ Valerie Hobbs, *Introduction to Religious Language: Exploring Theolinguistics in Contemporary Contexts* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 57.

From Hobbs' perspective, SLAs typically have two traits: (1) they are considered "exemplars of sacred ideals and practices," and (2) they have an authoritative status that is difficult to question.¹⁸⁰ In terms of our first example, we may see that r/DankChristianMemes contains content that does not disrupt this traditional relationship between the one evoking the SLA and the SLA itself:



Figure 4. "Jesus will find a way no matter what you throw at him"

In this video gif with the post title "Jesus will find a way no matter what you throw at him," the axiomatic statement is explicit. Concerning the gif's content, Jesus is depicted as a soccer player making his way through sex, drugs, alcohol, blasphemy, and even the subreddit r/Atheism to score a goal past the goalie embodying the heart. Not only does this goalie embody the heart, but it is more explicitly titled "Your heart," meaning the heart of the Redditor viewing the gif. Therefore, this gif cements the sacred, salvific nature of Jesus Christ. However, not all SLAs are as equally cemented as this previous example; some are probed or outright questioned. As discussed in our previous chapter on methodology, memes are a communication genre that allows individuals and groups to use image macros and pop culture references to critique established ideas and authorities. In the following two examples, memes four ("it sure can be wierd sometimes") and five ("There is one mediator between God and man...") demonstrate subtle or outright questioning of select SLAs.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, 57.

She lusted after lovers with genitals as large as a donkey's and emissions like those of a horse.

Ezekiel 23:20

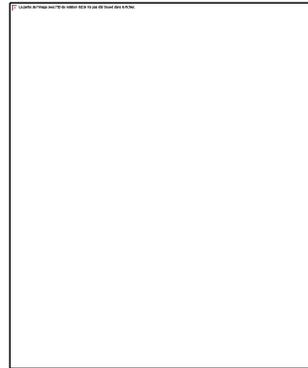


Figure 5. “it sure can be wierd sometimes” and “There is one mediator between God and man...”

We may first note that from an axiomatic perspective, these memes operate differently from each other. Meme four axiomaticly relates a statement of how weird the authority (Scripture) can be. It presents it as a relatable experience to the group. Hobbs notes that intertextual units such as direct quotation are often used to create a clear distinction between the person who cites and the text or authority being evoked.¹⁸¹ However, concerning SLAs, this is typically done as a means of imbuing the person who cites with a form of second-hand authority; for example, one evokes the Bible to state that one way of being is the right way of being, therefore the person who cites “takes on some measure of that authority for themselves.” Instead, in true meme fashion, this meme is a source of individual and group power over a cultural unit. It allows individuals and groups to position themselves differently concerning the SLA and share a relatable feeling toward said unit. This is taken to the level of criticism and mockery in meme five. This meme is specifically referencing The Pope’s declaration that during COVID-19 lockdowns, Catholics could pray directly to God while awaiting the return of confessional.¹⁸² In the lower panel of the meme, the meme uses the characters of Michael Scott (right) and Jim Halpert (left) – both adorned with specific hats – to further mock the Pope while legitimating another SLA - Martin Luther. Further pushing this mockery of the Pope is the sarcastic statement, “wow that is good. Can’t believe no one’s thought of this.” However, its axiomatic statement is the post’s title, which references 1 Timothy 2:5: “For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus” (NOAB). Compared to what we saw in meme 2, Scripture is now being leveraged in the meme against the Pope, cementing the SLA of Luther.

¹⁸¹ Valerie Hobbs, 101.

¹⁸² “Pope: If you can’t go to confession, take your sorrow directly to God,” Franciscan Media, uploaded May 16th, 2020. <https://www.franciscanmedia.org/news-commentary/pope-if-you-cant-go-to-confession-take-your-sorrow-directly-to-god/>.

However, what r/DankChristianMemes demonstrates is that individuals gathering upon the Internet to meme are not doing so purely at the expense of SLAs. As evidenced by the two examples below, the laypeople are also targets for axiomatic, memetic humor:

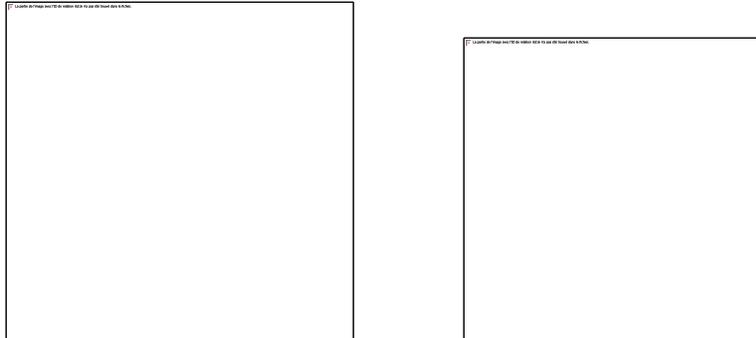


Figure 6. “Factually correct” and “it be like that sometimes”

From an axiomatic perspective, what we may note about these two memes are their titles – “Factually correct” (meme six) and “it be like that sometimes” (meme seven). While we cannot ignore the tongue-in-cheek nature of these memes, both attempt to present memes that reflect factual statements to the group, thereby stereotyping laypeople. Meme six, specifically, stereotypes Christian women into two “career paths,” while meme seven stereotypes how young Christian men typically fall in love quite easily at Bible College – a stereotype we see again with the meme “Christian dating in a nutshell.”¹⁸³

Finally, regarding the axiomatic, we may note that most memes involve a mix of explicitly mentioning or referencing both SLAs and non-authoritative actors, such as Christian laity. Much like meme five, these tend to veer into criticism. However, the criticism is not always pointed at an explicit other (i.e., out-group, although we will touch on this in our section on social cohesion), but rather, pointed at Christians in general:

¹⁸³ See the meme listed at number 22 in our “results of analysis” table.

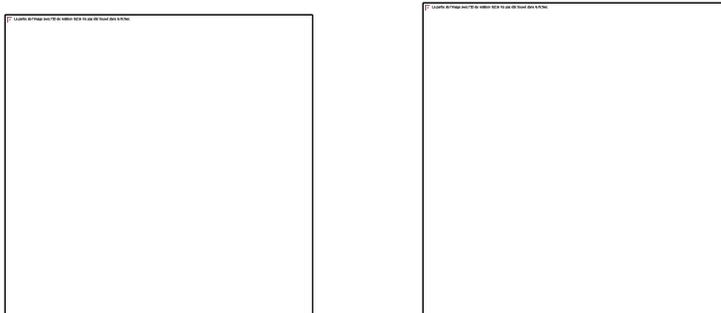


Figure 7. “Yup” and “Did I Stutter?”

In memes eight (“Yup”) and nine (“Did I Stutter?”), the axiomatic statements are self-criticisms. Meme eight’s axiomatic statement, in conjunction with the image macro, can be interpreted as making the factual claim that complaining to the one who was crucified about “how hard [sic] life is” is ironic. In meme seven, the axiomatic statement is pointed at “Us,” the entirety of the Christian community. It uses the common Christian adage of “love one another,” a direct quotation of John 13:34. However, it is a sentiment echoed numerous times throughout the New Testament (examples include Romans 13:8-10, Matthew 5:43-48 and 1 John 4:7-8). As such, meme seven depicts an angry God – represented by the character of Stanley from *The Office* – reprimanding Christians who do not live up to this moral code. Another pertinent example would be the meme “Preach it.”¹⁸⁴ It depicts a *The Simpson’s* macro of Lisa Simpson before a screen and reads: “Having a bible verse in your bio doesn’t make you a good person.” The meme holds no discursive indication that the Redditor or meme-maker is themselves a Christian. However, it does explicitly evoke the SLA of Scripture in their criticism of Christian laity, or at least individuals who attempt to use the Bible as a form of virtue signaling.

The Social Cohesive Function

Perhaps evident to the reader is that within the axiomatic analysis of r/DankChristianMemes’ top fifty posts is the social cohesive function of its theolinguistics. Thus, in the following description of results, memes previously discussed will be referred to by the number previously assigned to them within this in-depth analysis (and not the number assigned to them in our table of results). From the social cohesive perspective, this study noted three categories of social cohesion: experience, knowledge, and rightness. The first, “experience,” was the most recurring category, with 21 memes. By experience, we mean that a sacred boundary is being drawn around relating to some aspect of everyday Christian life – memes such as memes

¹⁸⁴ See the meme numbered 6 in our “results of analysis” table.

six and seven reward those who know of the stereotypes being mocked within them. Memes four and eight likewise reward those who have had experiences of being put off by Scripture or have felt guilty in a moment of prayer. Our second category, “knowledge,” consists of 17 memes that reward those who make a joke using Christian language, images, or references. Essentially, these memes do not make any statements about the Christian experience – no one has ever had three ducks in a trench coat ask for the Lord’s Prayer at a church service, such as in meme one. Likewise, Mickey Mouse’s line, “It’s a surprise tool that will help us later,” does not reflect the Christian experience, such as in meme two. Instead, it is a joke highlighting a particularly brutal passage in Scripture. As such, like meme one, it simply rewards fellow Redditors for knowing some aspect of the Christian religion; case in point here, a Biblical story that admittedly anyone could be capable of knowing.

Our last category is “right-thinking,” made of memes explicitly critiquing another group, Christian, atheist, or another subreddit. These accounted for 12 of our sample of 50 memes. However, we would be remiss not to mention that there are implicit dimensions of out-group formation in the category of “experience.” What we mean by this is that memes such as meme four rely on evoking recognizable stereotypes to garner a reaction from fellow group members. Thus, the in-group dynamic is clear – like any other joke, one must recognize the references or cultural units to find it funny and be “in on the joke.” In terms of being specifically Christian, this entails recognizing specific aspects of Christianity and, for Christians themselves, being willing to make fun of them or at least place them in a humorous light. However, what if you are the stereotype that is being mocked? This does not constitute a hard out-group discourse; the Christian women discussed in meme four are not outright being vilified, for example. However, while it may be tongue in cheek, meme four could be seen as degrading to Christian women, as it relegates them to two career paths, one of which is less-than-flattering (“pyramid scheme”). While our sample is small, and therefore, we cannot make a generalized statement about this sort of “soft” out-group formation about Christian women, we may note two other memes directly mocking “Christian girls.”¹⁸⁵

Again, “right-thinking,” as this study defines it, refers to those memes that critique another group, either explicitly or implicitly stating they are in the wrong in some fashion. Memes ten and eleven below, referencing atheism or “secular” people, demonstrate how these critiques may be directed to non-Christians. We first encountered this with meme three, the soccer Jesus gif. In it, one of the temptations embodied is that of r/atheism, which Jesus skillfully skirts. Similarly, r/atheism is likewise “out-grouped,” this time in a meme whose OP appears to be labeling themselves as an atheist themselves:

¹⁸⁵ See the memes ranked 15 and 50.

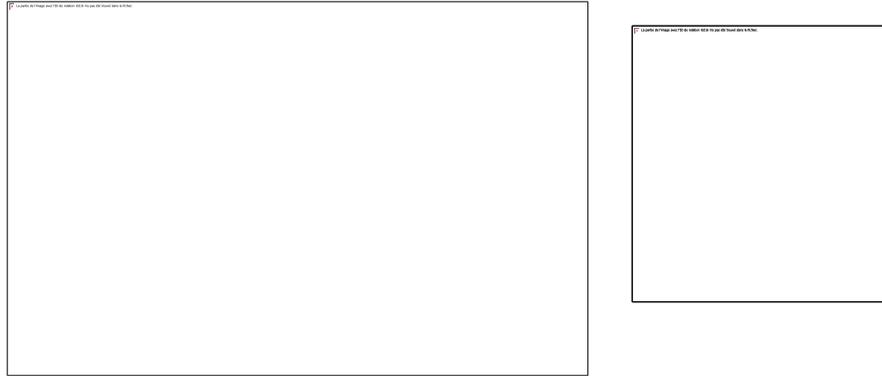


Figure 8. “When you outgrow the edgy atheist circle jerk” and “Maybe for you.”

Concerning meme ten (“When you outgrow the edgy atheist circle jerk.”), we may begin by framing the axiomatic statement, interpreted best as r/atheism, being the “edgy atheist circle jerk” in question, is not as “cool” (for lack of a better term) than r/DankChristianMemes. This other subreddit, r/Athesim, is being explicitly termed a “circle jerk,” a metaphorical term for referring to any echo chamber that serves as intellectual masturbation for its members.¹⁸⁶ However, in meme eleven (“Maybe for you.”) the Christian depicted in the meme (again, by way of Jim Halpert) is taking a somewhat antagonistic role to the secular notion of there being no life after death. While it does not go as far as meme ten in using near-derogatory language to describe the out-group, it does explicitly frame a certain way of thinking as, essentially, laughable, and that the in-group (“Christians”) are beholden to a secret knowledge which makes them “in on the joke” that is the afterlife.¹⁸⁷

However, other memes take a more antagonistic tone toward an out-group. Meme five is a prime example of how memes create in-group/out-group dynamics; blatantly, the Redditor shares a meme depicting the Pope as akin to the “clueless educated gentry” that is Michael Scott

¹⁸⁶ James Harbeck, “It’s Time We Got a Handle on Circle Jerks,” Slate, last modified June 21st, 2016, <https://slate.com/human-interest/2016/06/what-exactly-is-a-circle-jerk.html>.

¹⁸⁷ We may note that the reader might sense that meme eleven bears a resemblance to the “soft” out-grouping we discussed with meme four. As this thesis sees it, the meme depicting Christians as antagonistic toward “secular” individuals for their lack of belief in the afterlife perpetuates an “us-versus-them” narrative, and serves to reinforce the idea of a divide between religious and non-religious individuals, even if tongue-in-cheek. On the other hand, the meme about Christian women’s career choices, while stereotypical, does not necessarily promote intergroup conflict or division in the same way, as it focuses on a narrower aspect of life rather than overarching beliefs or identities.

in *The Office*.¹⁸⁸ Another notable example from the top-twenty-five analysis is meme eight below:¹⁸⁹

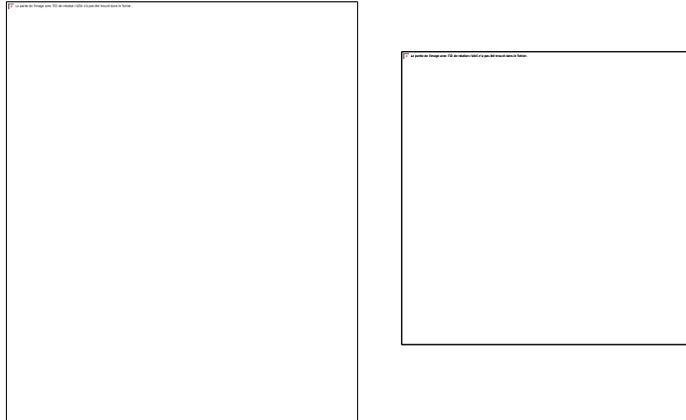


Figure 9. “🌐🙄🙄🙄🙄” and “Wow”

Here, we may note first the axiomatic statement being made by this meme, which we may interpret at the discursive level as being as follows: “White Christians” do not live what they preach when it comes to immigration, and may even be outright denying Christ in their views on immigration and refugee policies. Thus, the SLA of Jesus Christ is evoked to position the out-group’s political position as inauthentic to the exemplar of certain Christian ideals. Then, meme thirteen above (“Wow”) follows an anti-Catholic bent previously seen in meme five. Mr. Krabs – a character from *Spongebob Square Pants* continuously depicted as excessively greedy¹⁹⁰ – is used as a cultural metaphor for the Catholic Church. While one could argue that the greed being parodied in the meme is based on a theological thought – for example, we could say that greed itself is a sin and unbecoming of a Christian institution such as the Catholic church – this meme

¹⁸⁸ In Brewer Eberly’s piece for Mere Orthodoxy, Eberly states that Scott, and characters such as Andy Bernard Dwight Shrute, represent the clueless educated gentry. They are “the middle layer of managers and Cornell grads. Those concerned primarily with performance, becoming elite, and being liked. They are unable to see the world clearly as a result. They don’t know what they don’t know. Sometimes they begin sentences without knowing how they will end them.” See Brewer Eberley, “Pam Against Posturing: On the Michael Scott Theory of Social Class,” Mere Orthodoxy, uploaded March 15th, 2021. <https://mereorthodoxy.com/michael-scott-theory-social-class>.

¹⁸⁹ Due to this post’s title being made of emojis, it could not be reproduced in this thesis without certain emojis being changed. Therefore the title has been left out as to not confuse or mislead the reader.

¹⁹⁰ For those unfamiliar with the character of Mr. Krabs, or the show *Spongebob Square Pants*, see “Mr. Krabs,” from the Villains Wiki site using the following link for a brief introduction to the character and his typically greedy behaviour: https://villains.fandom.com/wiki/Mr._Krabs.

is not making such a claim, it is simply depicting greed in simplistic terms, making no grounds to base it in theological thought, or anything much more than simple mockery. As such, it operates differently than the critique made of “White Christians” in meme eight and is more of a low-brow mockery of the Catholic Church in line with the general sensibilities of meme culture. Nevertheless, both present antagonistic discourse toward an explicit out-group of fellow Christians, using, we might add, pop cultural references as a means of further presenting said out-group as a joke.

The Emotive Function

As discussed in Chapter Two, memes are an affective communication genre; by nature, they seek to garner reactions from people. On Reddit, this is usually followed by sharing, liking, upvoting, or commenting upon said meme. Concerning the emotive function, we seek to decipher whether these memes depict or discuss any particular feelings or emotions that seek to make sense of the world through the framework of the Christian faith. As Hobbs states, we may also think of this in the following terms: how is religion, through language, used to help the OP and others “cope existentially?”¹⁹¹ We may begin by stating that many memes do not appear to offer more than the standard meme fare: a joke that does not go deeper than offering others a laugh in exchange for the usual upvote or comment. We determined that 41 out of 50 memes stayed within this “affectual” (near “contractual”) realm. However, this means nine memes appear to offer more to r/DankChristianMemes members. One sub-category we found of the emotive was “general relatability.” What we mean by this is that these memes make sense of a feeling or emotion concerning some aspect of the Christian faith that others can relate to. What is interesting about these sorts of memes is that by attempting to create the grounds for relation, they likewise are making sense of the SLA in question: one *feels* Scripture is weird because it *is* weird or *feels* complaining to Jesus about their life is ironic because of who Jesus *is*, *i.e.*, the crucified Messiah.

In other memes, feelings of anger are legitimized through reference to the Christian faith, especially Jesus Christ. See memes fourteen (“ofc He doesn’t”) and fifteen (“🐪🐪🐪”) below:

¹⁹¹ Valerie Hobbs, 36.

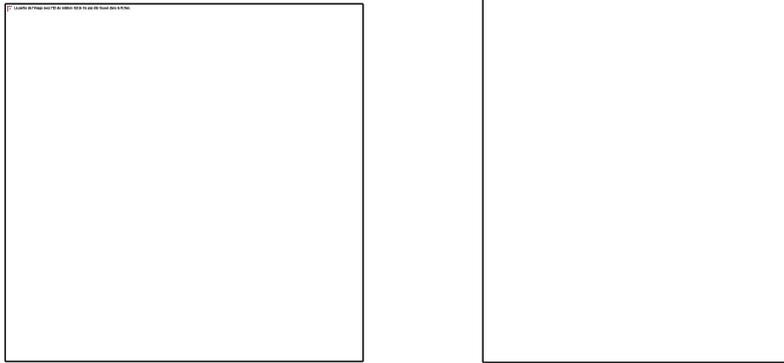


Figure 10 “ofc He doesn’t” and “🐪🐪🐪”.

We can see that in both, Jesus is presented as using emotive language, such as a swear in meme fourteen, or having an aggressive and antagonistic attitude in meme fifteen when dealing with “rich Christians.” What these memes are essentially doing is legitimizing the feelings or resentment that the Redditors, especially the Christian members of the group, have for those who do not practice Christian love toward those of same-sex attraction or who practice other religions. Likewise, Jesus is depicted as a fervent anti-capitalist in meme fifteen, mock-crying as the “rich” state that they “earned” their wealth and did not wish to give it away to the poor. Much as we saw with the intertextual method of direct quotation and paraphrasing of Scripture in memes four and five, memes fourteen and fifteen use a similar form of referential textuality (fourteen referencing the passages of Jesus stating to love one another, and fifteen referencing Mark 10:21) to legitimize not only the proper way of being Christian but the emotive responses that one has against those who have an inauthentic understanding of Jesus’ message.

Conclusion

This chapter displayed the results of our top fifty memes theolinguistic analysis of r/DankChristianMemes. Using an inductive approach to Valerie Hobbs’ method of theolinguistics, which focuses upon three distinct functions of religious language (the axiomatic, social cohesive, and emotive), this analysis brought to life three significant findings. First, this sample could be considered almost evenly split between non-axiomatic and axiomatic statements. While our sample is small, the fact that these are the most upvoted and commented posts of all time within the group appears to show that while many memes appear to be making axiomatic statements (whether explicit or implicit by way of sarcasm, irony, or parody), many of these memes also exist to be simply jokes. Their agenda does not go beyond being found funny or “dank” by the community. Secondly, concerning the social cohesive function, we found that

most of our top 50 memes could be interpreted as belonging to the category of “experience,” *i.e.*, they appeared to be rewarding fellow Redditors who have had similar experiences as those depicted in the memes. This was followed by “knowledge,” a more general category we conceived to attest to memes that do not reward those who have experienced something similar to what is depicted in the meme but instead reward the Redditor who knows the Christian references being made. Then, we stated that the smallest category pertained to memes that blatantly critiqued or mocked other individuals or groups and sometimes had a tongue-in-cheek manner of creating boundaries. Others, however, were more antagonistic of specific out-groups. Then, we spoke briefly of the emotive function due to our sample’s lack of an explicit emotive role. In all, we found less than 1/5th of our memes had an added emotive function, which veered between creating “general relatability” and others that legitimized “righteous anger and mockery.”

Chapter 4: Qualitative Discussion, Theological Reflection and Conclusion

In Mike Tyldesley's final chapter of *The Thought of Sorbonne Professor Michel Maffesoli* (1944 -), the author delves into a vital issue of Maffesoli's thought: utopianism. As Tyldesley writes, Maffesoli's theory of neo-tribalism can be seen as at odds with classical utopianism.¹⁹² Neo-tribes, as ephemeral and presentist gatherings, are not prone to the form of future-orientated projects that come with "Modernist" utopian thought. However, as Tyldesley rightly argues, Maffesoli's thought is not anti-utopian but articulates an innovative postmodern utopianism. This postmodern utopianism, in short, is evidenced by neo-tribes themselves. Neo-tribes – as opposed to utopian projects that look to a future political or spiritual transcendence – are presentist, localized, ephemeral forms of togetherness with no overt political or salvific project; they seek *to be*, by their porous terms.¹⁹³ They are utopian in that they give those participating the space to exist by the conditions they see fit, conditions which would not be accepted or possible by those outside of the group, *i.e.*, "the masses," but which all those in the group either explicitly or implicitly gather around and to which they adhere. As such, neo-tribes, or instead, the bonds they create, are a form of "interstitial" utopia or "utopia-in-the-gaps." This is not to say that these "big projects" of classical utopian thought are not still lurking around in people's minds and aspirations. We cannot say for sure, and it would seem highly unlikely, that all members of r/DankChristianMemes have no belief in heaven (the transcendental utopia) or of a perfect political system that could be installed on earth (such as Socialism or Marxism) – two of the utopian projects Maffesoli sees as a "hangover" of Modernity. However, postmodernity is a time of supply and demand; we want what we want now, even in small ephemeral doses.¹⁹⁴ Those "doses" are the "utopias-in-the-gaps," which come about through neo-tribalism.

With this in mind, our final chapter looks to couch its qualitative discussion of results and theological reflection within the concept of the "interstitial utopia." Admittedly, this is a positivist move, as will become apparent in our theological reflection where we argue for the possible benefits of participating in a group such as r/DankChristianMemes.^{195,196} Our qualitative

¹⁹² Mike Tyldesley, *The Thought of Sorbonne Professor Michel Maffesoli (1944-): Sociologist of Postmodernity*, 157.

¹⁹³ Mike Tyldesley, 163; see Michel Maffesoli, "Utopie ou utopies interstitielles : du politique au domestique," *Diogene* 2, no. 206 (2004); 32-36.

¹⁹⁴ Mike Tyldesley, 69-72.

¹⁹⁵ We refer to our interpretation as demonstrating "possible" benefits, because it is precisely an interpretation. We can't say empirically, by way of, say, qualitative interviews that r/DankChristianMemes provides "theological" benefits to its users. Essentially, we can't say if being a member of this group makes someone a "better" Christian. However, we will be arguing that r/DankChristianMemes provides the space for Christians, and non-Christians alike, to practice certain aspects of faith unknowingly, and that this in and of itself may be considered a "good" thing.

discussion looks to deductively interpret the results of the theolinguistic analysis through the neo-tribal lens of *puissance* and sociality, thereby comparing these results with those of van Wijnen and Barnard. By doing so, we hope to showcase how neo-tribalism is a productive framework for contemplating Christian faith socialization online. We will note where this faith socialization maintains key characteristics of offline Christian neo-tribes and where the online variety proves innovative. Then, we will embark on a theological reflection that admits the formative limits of a group such as r/DankChristianMemes. However, with the help of Maffesoli's concept of the interstitial utopia, we will discuss r/DankChristianMemes as a site that has formative value, nonetheless, even with its flaws. With mention of Jeremy T. Law's theology of boundary, we will argue that r/DankChristianMemes can be understood as an interstitial utopia for the practice of permeability. Then, referring back to our discussion of Lucian Richard's "Theology and Belonging," we will first argue that r/DankChristianMemes can be understood as an interstitial utopia for the practice of theological belonging.

¹⁹⁶ As previously stated in note 121 – which can be found in the conclusion of Chapter One – this study, from a sociological perspective, is highly influenced by Michel Maffesoli's idea of "radical" analysis. To reiterate, "radical" analysis involves looking at a sociological phenomenon and asking what is this phenomenon in non-critical terms. By this, we mean that we are not necessarily looking to provide a critical analysis of the phenomenon of online Christian neo-tribe, although this does naturally come about in our results and discussion. Simply put, the goal of this thesis is not to say what these groups should be. Instead, by using the analytical lens of the "interstitial utopia," this thesis looks to provide a final framework which, essentially, forces us to understand what benefits this online Christian neo-tribe may have, from both a sociological and theological perspective.

In strictly theological terms, we might relate this to Graham Ward's discussion of how Christians are called to suspend judgement in *Cities of God*. Speaking specifically on how Christians should come to view and interact with other faith communities in the postmodern cityscape, Ward states: "As Christians we have to suspend judgement concerning other faiths... We must suspend our judgement about those who pursue love, mercy, justice, and righteousness in other practices, in other communities, with other liturgies and symbolic exchanges. We must sink ourselves deeper into our own traditions, mediating upon the grammar of the faith we live, the Scriptures that embody that grammar, and we must not be afraid that others do things differently... We share so much... To deny relation is an act against the theological condition of things." Again, while Ward is speaking specifically about Christians interacting with literal faith communities in physical spaces, and not online neo-tribes as this thesis does, Ward is echoing a similar idea to Maffesoli's "radical" stance: judgement must be suspended in order to understand others in the hopes of creating some form of unity amongst those of different worldviews (an ironically utopian sentiment for someone such as Maffesoli, who we have stated has derided the future-orientated projects of modernist utopianism).

The Qualitative Discussion

One significant distinction we may make immediately is that unlike the groups studied by van Wijnen and Barnard, where members were known to have the same faith backgrounds and yet discuss topics other than faith, the faith socialization of r/DankChristianMemes relies wholeheartedly on a shared religious “vocabulary” between its members.¹⁹⁷ This vocabulary is more of a toolkit that includes Christian language, references, and imagery. Likewise, dissimilar to van Wijnen and Barnard’s noted faith socialization among Christian adolescent micro-groups, r/DankChristianMemes does not rely on members being confessional Christians. As stated in its bio, and as evidenced by at least one meme taking an Atheist perspective,¹⁹⁸ this group is open to people of different faiths and those of non-faith. However, as made clear by the rules of r/DankChristianMemes, they must still communicate using Christian language and imagery, or the moderators may delete their posts. As such, “faith socialization,” at least as it begins with the posting of a meme by an OP, is based on the desire to make jokes using Christian imagery, language, and references. This can sometimes involve making fun of Christianity (not necessarily in an antagonistic sense) or making fun of a non-Christian actor or thing, such as in memes sixteen (“Colonizing of paradise”) and seventeen (“Accurate summery”) below:

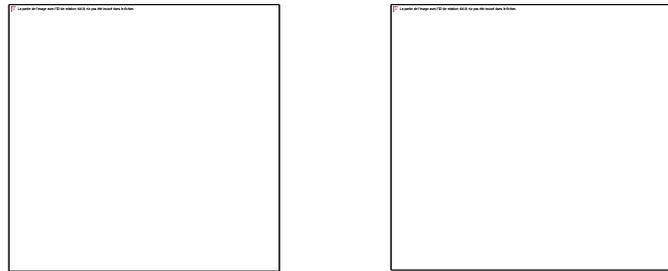


Figure 11. “Colonizing of paradise” and “Accurate summery”

Thus, at the most general level, these Redditors share the desire to create humorous content using Christian language and imagery. We may state that this is their primary drive, *i.e.*, their *puissance*. Regarding sociality, the “role” for Redditors is relatively easy to assume; one does not have to be a confessing Christian. All they need is to post a meme using this shared Christian “vocabulary,” and they are part of this distinctively “Christian” group. However, the basis of using the theolinguistic method was to delve deeper into the religious language of these memes and decipher possible nuances of this group’s *puissance* and sociality.

¹⁹⁷ van Wijnen and Barnard, “Belonging-together as a Basic Given,” 34 and 35.

¹⁹⁸ See meme ten (“When you outgrow the edgy atheist circle jerk.”) from chapter three.

In terms of a more nuanced understanding of the group’s natural sociality, as it relates to the strict function of social cohesion, this study found it to be grounded in three desires: the desire to share memes (1) relating the experience of being Christian, (2) making assertions about the “right” way of being a Christian, and (3) the standard desire to share laughs over memes such as discussed in the previous paragraph. Many stay within the “affective” realm, only seeking to create humor rather than making sense of real-world emotions. This final point on the affective contrasts van Wijnen and Barnard’s results, where they noted how groups of adolescent Christians often had deep social ties – which involved strong, emotional ties.¹⁹⁹ However, r/DankChristianMemes does demonstrate similar capacities to the micro-groups studied by van Wijnen and Barnard in that, like those micro-adolescent-groups, r/DankChristianMemes’ top posts often stay clear of exclusively discussing faith as it relates to the personal opinions of the group’s members.^{200,201} As evidenced by the axiomatic analysis, r/DankChristianMemes is not a group whose most popular content routinely makes “factual” claims about the nature of Christ or God or how individuals relate to those entities.

Concerning r/DankChristianMemes’ relation to traditional institutions, we may state that this group retains a close tie to the macro-tradition of Christianity, which may sometimes be antagonistic but is never in whole rejection of it. Some memes do reject certain denominations within it, such as Catholicism, or other monolithic groups, such as “White Christians” or “rich Christians.” Also, no memes demonstrate any strict allegiance to a church community. Instead, they speak from the perspective of someone who has attended church, such as memes eighteen (“Seen”) and nineteen (“Sorry momma”) below:

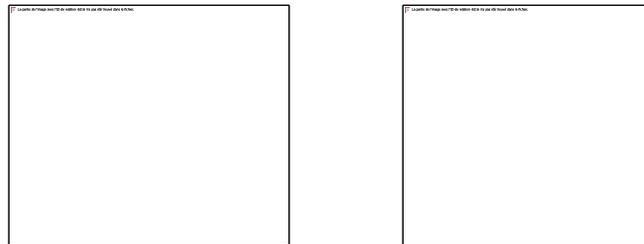


Figure 12. “Seen” and “Sorry momma”

¹⁹⁹ Harmen van Wijnen and Marcel Barnard, “Connected to the Wellspring: Ecclesiological Capabilities of Small Groups of Adolescents,” 214.

²⁰⁰ Van Wijnen and Barnard, “Being-together as a Basic Given,” 34; van Wijnen and Barnard, “Faith Tribes as Powerful Communities of Adolescents in Highly Differentiated Societies,” 421.

²⁰¹ To reiterate, van Wijnen and Barnard noted that the adolescents they observed did not often partake in discussing their religious beliefs.

In this sense, we may state that by not outright rejecting the church experience, a relation to the church is being maintained. To relate this to the studies of van Wijnen and Barnard, the members of their adolescent micro-groups had an apparent affinity for their local church community and for the authorities, such as preachers, who their participants noted were vital to learning about the Christian faith.²⁰² In our small sample, which, again, reflects the most popular content of the group, no such praise was seen within the memes themselves. Instead, human authorities are made “the butt of the joke” in a humoristic reversal of power. Here, we see how *puissance* and sociality interact within the group. Specific posts within r/DankChristianMemes are evidence of a neo-tribal desire to gather around these sorts of jokes, allowing members to access a different public role within their relation to clergy members of the Christian faith.

Functional Members: A Path Forward for Future Study

In relating the neo-tribal interpretation of our results back to those of van Wijnen and Barnard, we may also note a particular area where our results lack true resonance with those of van Wijnen and Barnard and, therefore, where we might offer a future avenue of research when it comes to the study of r/DankChristianMemes and groups like them. This path would explore the functional role that certain members play within a group such as r/DankChristianMemes. Like van Wijnen and Barnard, we can state that some members of r/DankChristianMemes have a “function,” and others have “roles.” To refresh the reader’s memory, van Wijnen and Barnard defined “function” as the desire to organize the group.²⁰³ At the same time, “role” is akin to filling out the “mask” one wears to assimilate into the neo-tribe. “Function” is a specific type of role that steers the group toward a specific goal. “Role” is more about the expression one makes in the group to fit into affective togetherness. Members with functions are the moderators who ensure rules are followed, adding, adjusting, or eliminating rules as needed. While OPs have a distinct “role” – they post within the group to form the fleeting interpersonal relationships that define neo-tribal togetherness, not necessarily for a definitive end goal – we would like to draw attention to the fact that OPs do sometimes demonstrate a “functional” aspect to their content. Some memes we noted have emotive dimensions that serve a larger purpose of relating to fellow members about their feelings. In this sense, OPs sometimes facilitate discussing these emotions and feelings, especially as they relate to certain aspects of the Christian faith.

As such, conducting qualitative interviews with members such as Moderators would prove valuable in seeing how they view their functional role within the group. Likewise, interviews could be conducted with OPs whose content seems to have a communal end goal of providing something akin to pastoral care through memes. Likewise, it would be valuable to have more demographic data on members (precise numbers on who are Christians versus non-Christians, for example) and to more accurately decipher if specific memes, such as those

²⁰² Ibid, 215.

²⁰³ Van Wijnen and Barnard, “Being-together as a Basic Given,” 37.

making jokes out of pastors and Bible passages, have a more explicit desire to de-legitimize these authorities of the Christian faith, or whether they indeed are simply jokes. If they have a more explicit, thought-out desire, this could be considered a “functional” role, as the OP might be attempting to steer the group toward de-legitimizing Christianity rather than the simple sharing in fellowship that the group purports it provides in its bio.

A Quick Summary of the Qualitative Discussion

To summarize our qualitative discussion, the primary drive of this community is to create humorous content using Christian elements, constituting its *puissance*. From the perspective of sociality, becoming a member is relatively straightforward – one needs to post a meme that aligns with the group’s theme. In comparing our results with those of van Wijnen and Barnard, we found the following five significant findings:

(1) **Faith Socialization Re-defined:** Like the groups studied by van Wijnen and Barnard, r/DankChristianMemes relies heavily on a shared religious vocabulary; however, this vocabulary is much more present and expanded within r/DankChristianMemes: all posts must involve some aspect of the Christian faith, whether it be through the use of Christian language, references, and imagery. Faith socialization becomes (1) multimodal, (2) more based on language as a style (*i.e.*, a linguistic aesthetic) rather than a pure reflection of belief, and (3) consistently explicit (or “present” as previously stated).

(2) **An Inclusive Christian Faith Socialization:** Unlike the groups van Wijnen and Barnard studied, membership is not restricted to confessing Christians. However, it extends to individuals of various faiths or non-faith backgrounds as long as they communicate using this Christian “vocabulary.”

(3) **A Micro-Politics of Resistance to Certain Christian Ways of Being:** We may also note that even this “inclusive” faith socialization has its boundaries; certain sects of Christians, such as pro-capitalist “rich Christians” and “White Christians” with an anti-immigration and anti-refugee worldview, are out-grouped by specific memes. We may also add that the group’s rules and the stickied post mentioned in Chapter Two reject any expressions of Christianity that criticize the LGBTQ+ community.

(4) **A Micro-Politics of Humor toward Certain Christian Authorities:** While the group maintains ties to Christianity, it often critiques certain denominations or groups within the religion, reflecting a nuanced relationship with traditional institutions. Additionally, in contrast to previous studies on adolescent Christian groups, r/DankChristianMemes lacks explicit praise for church authorities. Instead, human authorities are often ridiculed, demonstrating a humoristic reversal of power dynamics. This reflects how *puissance* and sociality interact within the group, allowing members to access different public roles related to clergy members.

(5) **A Plurality of Sub-Desires:** A more profound exploration using the theolinguistic method reveals three underlying desires: sharing memes about Christian experiences, asserting “right” Christian thought, and creating humor. The memes largely remain within the affectual realm, focusing on humor rather than deep emotional connections or theological discussions.

The Interstitial Utopian Hermeneutic

Due to several factors, the neo-tribal relations of r/DankChristianMemes can be seen as an interstitial utopia. The first would be the inclusivity mentioned before. Unlike many religious communities, membership in r/DankChristianMemes is not restricted to confessing Christians. As such, it represents a space where Christians and non-Christians may interact and do so with a shared purpose: to create humorous content using Christian elements. Another factor that plays into this group’s interstitial utopianism is its reality of being a space for critiquing other Christians and denominations. Despite its ties to Christianity, r/DankChristianMemes often critiques certain denominations or groups within the religion, challenging traditional institutional norms. Finally, the group demonstrates a humoristic reversal of power dynamics, where human authorities are often ridiculed instead of praised. This subversion of traditional authority figures suggests a desire for empowerment among members, which may not be allowed outside of the group or within the confines of one’s church community but go unchallenged and is celebrated in r/DankChristianMemes. It is a place where strangers of any faith background find their particular desire to gather around memes using multimodal theolinguistics fulfilled and where hard-lined rules may be implemented to ensure certain expressions never poison the neo-tribe’s intended identity. R/DankChristianMemes is not a blueprint, such as classical ideas of utopianism, but rather is a pit-stop for those looking to be themselves, say what they want to say and enjoy themselves in this inclusive Christian faith socialization and micro-politics of resistance to specific Christian ways of being and ecclesiological relations.

The Theological Reflection²⁰⁴

²⁰⁴ Until now, we have not properly defined what this study means by “theological reflection.” This thesis takes its understanding of this term from Elaine Graham, who states that “‘theological reflection’ is a way of referring to the many ways in which Christians reflect on experience in the light of their faith. At its best, it functions as an educational and formational tool to assist people to explore life’s challenges and to bring the wisdom of theological and biblical tradition to bear.” She also adds that theological reflection, as a method, places as its primary objective to serve as a mediator between “theology and experience, or God and the world.” Again, we want to note that while Graham insists that theological reflection is “problem-orientated,” this research has coupled its theological reflection with a Maffesoli-an “radical” desire to resist making claims of what something should *be*, and rather reflect on what something *is*, using sociological metaphors

Before delving into our theological reflection, we may re-invoke Kenneson's sentiments toward gathering and Christian worship. In the introduction, we stated that our research questions were essentially grounded in distinguishing how social ties work at the discursive level within r/DankChristianMemes. Chapter One elaborated on why this inquiry was deemed necessary, stating that, as Kenneson argues, Christian gathering inherently has a formative function. As van Wijnen and Barnard state within their studies, even if worship is not always at the forefront of the neo-tribe, it is always underlying it, *i.e.*, faith and socialization were always integrated within the Christian neo-tribes they studied. However, as noted in our qualitative discussion, faith socialization takes a new twist in r/DankChristianMemes. Thus, we find it fitting first to contemplate this group's form of faith socialization in light of Kenneson's Christian ethic of Christian gatherings in order to make clear that a group such as r/DankChristianMemes has a formative function drastically different from the ideal form of Christian gathering of which Kenneson speaks. Traditional churches have long been the cornerstone of Christian gatherings, providing a physical space for worship, fellowship, and spiritual growth. However, with the advent of the Internet and social media, new forms of Christian community have emerged, challenging the norms and practices of traditional churches. Thus, we begin our theological reflection to shed light on the limitations and shortcomings of digital communities such as r/DankChristianMemes. While r/DankChristianMemes offers a space for believers to connect and engage with their faith innovatively, they fail to provide the depth and richness of experience in traditional church gatherings.

To be precise, as a "Christian" gathering, using Phillip Kenneson's criteria, r/DankChristianMemes falls short of being an actual, formative *ekklesia*. For Kenneson, upon the gathering, the *ekklesia* provides specific orientations for its members to later disperse into the world as the "embodied sign and foretaste of God's continuing work of reconciliation and healing in the world."²⁰⁵ These are to learn to (1) "glorify and enjoy God," (2) to be attentive to God's presence and work in the world, especially in the Christian gathering space, (3) "speak truthfully" about God and the *ekklesia*'s nature concerning God, and (4) to take the posture of dependence in God (or to acknowledge that we all participate in God, and not as autonomous beings) and be humble in this.²⁰⁶ Kenneson also states that the *ekklesia*, ideally, fosters hope and trust in God, to be confident in its waiting upon God, and to be used to make God's presence known in the world. If we follow these four criteria, r/DankChristianMemes lacks a Kennesian sense of what being a "Christian" gathering means. Based on the most popular memes we have studied, the group does not have an ethic that finds them focused on the glorification of God. As a practice of attentiveness, it is more focused on paying attention to and relating upon

such as that of "postmodern tribes" to highlight certain particularities of modern phenomenon. See pages 1 and 19 of Elain Graham's "Theological Reflection" for the *St. Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*, accessed by way of <https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/TheologicalReflection>.

²⁰⁵ Philip Kenneson, "Gathering : Worship, Imagination, and Formation," 60.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 55-65.

experiences, “rightness,” and absurdities than God’s work in the world. However, to certain degrees, we may state that some of these memes claim how humans relate to and participate in God – the Jesus soccer gif relates to the Redditor Christ will overcome any obstacle on the way to their hearts. The meme “ofc He doesn’t” demonstrates how the group does include memes that see “others,” such as those of same-sex sexual orientation and non-Christian religions, as deserving of Christian love.

However, r/DankChristianMemes falls short of what Kenneson would state is the formative function of Christian assembly because it is not within r/DankChristianMemes that one will learn the specific “skills, convictions and dispositions” of Christian living in daily life amongst others that Kenneson has laid out.²⁰⁷ Of course, this is not to say that this is what the group *should* be doing; not every Christian gathering has to, nor can, live up to these standards, and we should not expect them to. If so, the groups that van Wijnen and Barnard studied could likewise be criticized as failing in similar regards – although they stated the micro-groups they studied tended to orient their members toward Christ and their local church communities at some point in their gathering. As Kenneson states, the *ekklesia* is imperfect; this is why it gathers; they need re-orientation toward the “good.”²⁰⁸ Also, as Michael L. Budde states, expecting people to change how they spend their time online is futile. It effectively “demands the miraculous” and pushes us to ask others to adopt a performative form of being.²⁰⁹ Thus, we wish to conclude that, even if we must acknowledge r/DankChristianMemes as an “incomplete” form of Christian gathering, and incomplete is not to reduce it, we may still learn something about what it means to gather in a different sense. This is where we must look to the sentiments of Richard Lucien and Jeremy T. Law. With their aid, this theological reflection suggests that even in r/DankChristianMemes’ imperfect nature, a lesson is still being advocated toward its members.

r/DankChristianMemes as an Interstitial Utopia for the Practice of Permeability

The first lesson is that of permeability as defined by Jeremy T. Law. In fact, we might state that r/DankChristianMemes is an interstitial utopia for the practice of permeability. To reiterate, permeability refers to “the possibility and its extent, of interchange between intext and context across a boundary. This interchange may take the form of material resources, or of information.”²¹⁰ As chapter one notes, Law views boundaries as a fundamental aspect of our

²⁰⁷ Ibid, 59.

²⁰⁸ Ibid, 66.

²⁰⁹ Michael L. Budde, “Collecting Praise: Global Culture Industries,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, ed. by Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells (Malden, Oxford, and Victoria: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 133.

²¹⁰ Jeremy T. Law, “Toward a Theology of Boundary,” 743.

reality.²¹¹ For example, evolution, in Law’s mind, is a “sign and parable” for a boundary-integrated redemption:

“In its various interweaving, dynamic relationships between intext and context, as an exchange both in currency of resource and information, life constitutes a vestige of the Trinitarian life of loving exchange.”

As such, we would like to offer the group we have studied, r/DankChristianMemes, as an interstitial utopia of practicing permeability, where we see the capacity to cross boundaries in multiple ways. For Christians, this is a place where humor pushes the boundaries of faith, making light of the sacred and integrating the “profane” – through pop culture, for example – with the “sacred.”²¹² As previously discussed, it allows the integration of Christians and non-Christians to share in a multimodal Christian language. However, we may state that this permeability is imperfect because the group still creates certain explicit and implicit boundaries, even though it blurs or outright eliminates others. In this sense, we are confronted with the undeniable limits of what it means to “permeate.” We live in a world of boundaries; only God is boundless. To believe that we may eliminate boundaries, much like demanding perfection from the human gathering of Christians (if we define the ideal by Kenneson’s standards), without erecting others is futile. However, we cannot deny that r/DankChristianMemes demonstrates a natural desire to permeate boundaries by allowing many individuals to join in on Christian faith socialization. Overall, the community’s embrace of diverse members and its willingness to challenge relations to sacred authorities through humor and pop cultural references all contribute to its nature as a site of permeability.

r/DankChristianMemes as an Interstitial Utopia for the Practice of Theological Belonging... and Another Avenue for Future Research

The second lesson is dialoguing with a faith tradition. In essence, r/DankChristianMemes is an interstitial utopia where Richard’s “dialectical” process of theology can be seen at work. As Richard states, the flourishing of “personal and subjective religious identity” relies on being in dialogue with the past – with ancient texts and faith communities.²¹³ It goes hand-in-hand with negotiating with this past, accepting certain aspects while refusing or looking to change others.

²¹¹ Ibid, 749.

²¹² In using the terms “profane” and “sacred,” we are borrowing terminology from the sociologist Emile Durkheim. We do so in order to distinguish between those things which are explicitly religious – the “sacred” – and those things which are typically viewed as non-sacred or elements of everyday life – the “profane.” See Valerie Hobbs, *An Introduction to Religious Language: Exploring Theolinguistics in Contemporary Contexts*, 15.

²¹³ Lucien Richard, “Theology and Belonging: Christian Identity and the Doing of Theology,” 406.

In our sample of r/DankChristianMemes, we found precisely a willingness to refuse ways of being by critiquing other forms of Christianity. We likewise found an acceptance of certain aspects of Christianity, of Jesus' salvific qualities, the bizarreness of scripture, and the Golden rule to "love thy neighbor." Thus, while Richard himself is directly speaking to the feeling of belonging among theology students, a similar form of belonging is created within the group. The group resonates with Richard's notion of authentic transformation within a tradition: (1) any Christian participating in the group must have a certain degree of willingness to challenge and reject certain aspects of Christianity (or at least be comfortable with others doing so, demonstrating a level of maturity in their faith) and (2) therefore the group provides the grounds for authentic transformation within their particular faith tradition. However, while we can argue that this group provides the grounds for such a process, we do not know to what degree it functions as such in the individual lives of members. That is why, as the sub-title of this section suggests, we could look to qualitative interviews of members as an avenue of future research, where we may delve further into whether this group provides authentic religious belonging in individual r/DankChristianMemes' members' lives.

Conclusion

In our introduction, we stated that postmodernity has given rise to a new form of social formation known as neo-tribes. These neo-tribes are defined by their capacity to gather and disperse around shared affinities. Certain liturgical, youth ministry, and ecclesiology scholars have adopted this framework to study groups of Christian adolescents and young adults. For our study, we proposed using the insights of these scholars, specifically van Wijnen and Barnard, to study the phenomenon of online neo-tribalism among Christians, using the group r/DankChristianMemes as a case study. We then formalized our research questions as follows: *How do the conditions of neo-tribalism shape Christian social ties on r/DankChristianMemes, and what value does this gathering have from a theological perspective?* Chapter One discussed the empirical studies of van Wijnen and Barnard using neo-tribal framework. It emphasized their exploration of "natural sociality" among micro-groups of Christians who seek to live out faith alongside traditional institutional structures rather than break away from them. Additionally, it suggested adopting a theological perspective informed by Jeremy T. Law's theology of boundary in association with Lucien Richard's pedagogical theory of religious belonging in the study of theology as a means of approaching a theological reflection of the online neo-tribalism of r/DankChristianMemes. Then, in chapter two, we focused on the method of multimodal theolinguistics to extract the necessary data for our neo-tribal analysis and theological reflection. This chapter outlined the methodology, data extraction, and annotation style employed in the study and discussed the specifics of multimodal theolinguistics analysis, using Hobbs' conceptualization to understand the desired effect of memes within the group with a functional approach to language.

After we detailed the results of our multimodal theolinguistic analysis in chapter three, we discussed them in chapter four. To answer the first of our research questions, the qualitative discussion revealed that r/DankChristianMemes primarily focuses on creating humorous content using Christian elements as its main drive. The community's social dynamics emphasize inclusivity, albeit with boundaries, and resistance to specific interpretations of Christianity and mockery/critique of traditional Christian authorities and institutions. Additionally, there is a plurality of underlying desires centered around sharing Christian experiences, asserting "right" Christian thought, and generating humor rather than deep theological discussions. We then summarized r/DankChristianMemes as a space for individuals of various faith backgrounds to gather around humorous Christian content, challenge institutional norms, and find empowerment through expression and interaction. Then, to answer the second of our research questions, the theological reflection began by revisiting Kenneson's perspective on Christian gathering and worship, contrasting traditional church gatherings with digital communities like r/DankChristianMemes. We argued that while platforms like r/DankChristianMemes provide innovative spaces for believers to connect, they fall short of the depth and richness of traditional church experiences. However, it acknowledges that the group still offers valuable lessons, such as the practice of permeability and the dialectical process of theology. We, again, used the concept of interstitial utopias to state that r/DankChristianMemes is a place where people may gather to participate in these two practices in a light-hearted environment dedicated to faith socialization rather than the specific orientations Kenneson sees as the theological imperative of the *ekklesia*, the Christian gathering *par excellence*, and which we noted is often most reserved for the physical church.

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