When Facebook Becomes Faithbook: Exploring Religious Communication in a Social Media Context

Henrik Åhman and Claes Thorén

Abstract
Processes of digitalization continue to have a profound effect on many old, traditional organizations. In institutions such as banks, theaters, and churches, established structures and practices are being challenged by digitization in general and the participatory logic of social media in particular. This article draws on Mark C. Taylor’s concepts of figuring and disfiguring to analyze empirical data gathered from the Church of Sweden Facebook page. The aim is to discuss how social media affects the conditions for religious communication and what the consequences are for a traditional religious organization such as the Church of Sweden.

Keywords
social media, Facebook, religion and culture, content analysis, communication

Introduction
Digitalization has affected, and continues to affect many old, traditional institutions. For instance, municipalities and government agencies are increasingly using social media platforms to communicate with citizens (Klang & Nolin, 2011; Linders, 2012), libraries are reorganizing their collections to be able to provide texts online (Conway, 2010; Gorman, 2003), and banks are encouraging their customers to perform their own banking online (Pikkarainen et al., 2004) and, if needed, communicate with bank personnel through digitally mediated communication channels (Gidhagen & Gebert Persson, 2011). These commonplace paradigmatic changes that have come to define what we often refer to as the digital society, or knowledge society (Drucker, 1993), pose more than mere technological or infrastructural challenges but also challenge the very identity of organizations resulting in questions like: What defines a librarian in a library where physical books are increasingly becoming digital?

Previous research has identified connections between the materiality of objects, information infrastructures and organizational identity (e.g., Gal, 2008; Leonardi, 2010). In other words, objects and organized practices are intimately linked with the construction of meaning in formal institutions and organizations. In processes of digitalization, the objects, rooms, and physical meetings that once defined and shaped the identity of that organization are now often replaced, altered, or supplemented with digitized and digital representations.

Importantly, as Tilson et al. (2010) argues, “we need to distinguish carefully digitizing—a technical process—from digitalization—a sociotechnical process of applying digitizing techniques to broader social and institutional contexts that render digital technologies infrastructural” (p. 2).

Against this backdrop, this article investigates the content of the Church of Sweden’s Facebook page to give some insight into a kind of digitally resituated religious practice that exists outside of the formal, brick-and-mortar arena to further understand how this digital side of religious practice is integrated into everyday working life of the church.

Being one of the oldest, perhaps even the oldest, still actively functioning organization, the church is characterized by centuries-old traditions and rituals. What makes the church a particularly interesting case for exploring digitalization, is its institutional familiarity with reconciling the immaterial with the material: a clear understanding of the relationship between the physical and the non-physical, or the virtual and the actual (Shields, 2005, p. 5). For some 2,000 years, the church has struggled with the question of how to materialize the immaterial, for example, representing
deity and faith through icons, music, and liturgical symbols. So, in that sense, some of the challenges that digitization (i.e., converting an analog technology or practice into a digital one) brings to this particular institution are challenges that always have been at the very core of its practices.

This article takes a poststructural approach to social media and institutions by drawing on Mark C. Taylor (1992, 2007) to explore the following research question: How does social media affect the conditions for religious communication for a traditional religious organization such as the Church of Sweden? This article will use Taylor’s concepts of figuring and disfiguring as a way to identify and discuss the role that a social media platform plays in preserving or reshaping religious practices.

This article proceeds as follows: In the next section titled “Previous Research on Digitization and Organized Religion,” we briefly outline previous scholarly work relevant for the present study. In the subsequent section entitled “The Materiality of Religious Practices,” we present the main analytical framework and introduce necessary theoretical concepts. Thereafter, “Research Design” outlines the methodological aspects of the study and strategies pertaining to data collection. In the subsequent sections, the findings of the study are presented and analyzed, finally followed by the discussion and conclusions.

Previous Research on Digitization and Organized Religion

Previous scholarly inquiries around digitization and organized religion cover a plethora of different phenomena, from Christian megachurches (Kim, 2007; Martin et al., 2011) and Islam (Lim, 2005; Piela, 2010) to Wicca religion (Cowan, 2004; Jensen & Thompson, 2008) and Orthodox Jewish women (Lev-On & Neriya-Ben Shahar, 2011; Livio & Tenenboim Weinblatt, 2007). Two of the most cited initial overviews of such research were published at the turn of the 21st century and have contributed to establishing the field of organized religion (Dawson & Cowan, 2004; Hadden & Cowan, 2000).

The Relationship Between Offline and Online

In general, there has been a shift in organized religion research from regarding online as a sphere clearly separated from the offline, to approaching the online and the offline as entangled spheres, which have a mutual impact on each other. For example, during the early days of research into religion and online contexts, Helland distinguished between “religion online” and “online religion” (Helland, 2000, 2002). According to Helland, “religion online” is an attempt by established religious institutions to utilize online tools for disseminating information, while “online religion” is a grassroots engagement in which individuals are empowered through technology and are provided tools by which they can shape their own religious practices and myths online. While this distinction has been used by many researchers in the field (Dawson & Cowan, 2004), it has also been criticized for not acknowledging the complexity of religious online practices in which established religious institutions often use the Internet for open discussions and negotiation of theological dogma while informal religious groups (i.e., “online religion”) use technology as a tool for information dissemination (cf. Young, 2004). Helland has since argued that the conceptual distinction still has validity despite these observations (Helland, 2005).

Similarly, Cheong et al. (2009) describe a development from a clear distinction between the online and the offline in which some saw the Internet as a limitless opportunity while others saw the Internet as a threat against the established order, to seeing the Internet as embedded into everyday life. According to the authors, this constitutes a rereading of the concept religion online, where the one-to-many model of communication drawing on a mass media logic is replaced with a many-to-many model suitable for contemporary technologies. A similar perspective has been shown to affect other industries with strong professional identities, such as the newspaper industry, where online news was simultaneously seen as a publisher’s utopia, and a nightmare from a business perspective (Thorén et al., 2014).

Hutchings (2011) identifies a shift between early research (Helland, 2000, 2005) that saw the Internet as something unsuited to hierarchical systems, such as traditional churches, to research that suggested that the online reproduces the offline, leading to anxiety over whether online churches would replace traditional churches. According to Hutchings (2011), recent research leaves this conflictual thematic behind and instead focuses on how the online substitutes the offline. The online is no longer considered a threat to traditional structures, but something that constitutes an opportunity to curate different aspects of life in different contexts.

The development of the field has also been described as a number of waves with different foci and different theoretical and methodological roots. Summarizing the first two waves, Hojsgaard and Warburg (2005) suggest that the first wave was characterized by “either utopian fascination or dystopian anxieties” (p. 5) over the impact of the Internet on religious life, while the second wave had a more reflexive and historic approach to the phenomenon. They also suggested that a third wave might be “just around the corner” (Hojsgaard & Warburg, 2005, p. 9). A few years later, Campbell and Lövheim (2011) described this new third wave as focusing on the entanglement of offline and online contexts. And recently, Campbell and Evolvi (2020) have added to these waves by formulating a fourth wave which remains focused on the entanglement between offline and online, but also includes dimensions such as race, gender, and class.
**Common Themes in Research on Religion and Digitization**

In recent years, a number of research themes have emerged in the literature. Campbell (2006) has presented an overview of nine themes she found in the research publications: theology/spirituality, religion, morality/ethics, practical/ministry applications, religious traditions, community, identity, authority/power, and ritual. To the point, this article focuses on what happens when religious practices are resituated into an online context, and how this affects the conditions for institutional authority.

According to Campbell (2007), authority works on four different levels: hierarchy, structure, ideology, and text. First, there is a hierarchical level related to the authoritative roles in the church, for example, priests and deacons. As religion is moving into online environments, questions concerning how these roles are negotiated become central. Are offline roles transferred to online environments or do new roles appear (e.g., moderators)? The second layer is structural and describes the community structure through which authority is propagated. How is this being restructured in online environments? The third layer is ideological and concerned with what is perceived as a common belief. When people interact beyond the local community context, these perceptions might be challenged and their ideological authority questioned. Fourth, there is a textual level which deals with the way religious texts and teachings are considered authoritative. The easy access to alternative texts can change the conditions for textual authority. So, this model suggests that authority needs to be understood as a complex phenomenon rather than as an easily defined, hierarchical, organizational function (Giorgi, 2019; Kołodziejska & Neumaier, 2017).

Some researchers describe the Internet as something that undermines religious authority in a radical way: “Doctrines and teachings that were once centralized and controlled can now be openly challenged, contradicted, or ignored through a medium that is accessed by hundreds of millions of people every day” (Krüger, 2005, p. 2). Other researchers argue that, even though technology has led to “processes of proletarianization and deprofessionalization” (Cheong et al., 2011, p. 941), this tends to re-embed authority through turning religious authorities into epistemic warrants that engage in online contexts to guide the members of the congregation through the overwhelming amount of online information. Religious authorities become arbiters in a context where information is abundant and difficult to value. From this perspective, religious authority is no longer about commanding, but about critically judging information (Cheong et al., 2011; Possamai & Turner, 2012).

A similar picture can be seen in the case of religious practice as it occurs in an online context. According to Young (2004), online environments tend to reproduce offline religious practices. For example, in his studies of Christian church websites, Young (2004) describes how the churches offer an opportunity to submit prayer topics online which are later prayed for by ministers offline. He also describes a more practical level of participation as visitors of The Church for All-website are invited to engage in ritual behavior in the form of the Lord’s Supper: Guided by texts and ritual components on the website, the person is supposed to participate in the Lord’s supper from home. This participatory practice is still, however, individual, given that there is no interaction or visibility between different users. So, while people are invited to participate in online religious practices, the activities are translations of offline rituals rather than a renegotiation of ritualistic behavior and meaning. A similar conclusion has been made by Jacobs, who has found that the way rituals are understood and practiced online is not predominantly affected by the fact that the rituals have been repositioned into online contexts. Instead, rituals performed online generally follow the same established structure as their offline equivalents: “However, despite providing a new arena, these examples do not seem to have a particularly significant impact as yet on the way in which sacred space is conceived or ritual is performed” (Jacobs, 2007, p. 1118).

Others argue that online environments provide an opportunity to (re)negotiate old religious practices and possibly also establish new ones. For example, Sanderson and Cheong showed how people used Twitter, TMZ.com, and Facebook to express their grief after Michael Jackson’s death in 2009. They illustrate how these platforms not only constituted virtual spaces where grief could be expressed and discussed, but also that new ritual behavior such as praying and engaging in regular commemoration (the so-called “Michael Monday”) was established (Sanderson & Cheong, 2010). According to Krüger (2004), the challenging of old religious practices in online environments can be explained by these environments providing increased access to knowledge about other kinds of rituals.

This article contributes to the field of research on religion in online contexts by illustrating how the conditions for interaction on Facebook result in new, emergent communicative patterns that reconfigure traditional notions of religious authority and religious practices.

**Theoretical Framework**

According to Mark C. Taylor, biological as well as social systems and structures are conditioned by two rivaling forces: one stabilizing and one destabilizing (Taylor, 1992, 2007). Looking at the Western theological and philosophical world, he argues that it has been characterized by, first of all, a foundational tradition. This tradition, that Taylor calls a figuring movement, strives for hermeneutical and institutional clarity and stability through emphasizing knowledge and identity as something that is maintained by the organizational structure. In this tradition, meaning is formulated as a conceptual abstraction, and seen as something collective, universal, and temporally stable. The second tradition is a
non-foundational strand that tends to disrupt this stability and sees meaning as an individual and contingent experience that needs to be established in a particular temporal moment in relation to a particular human being.

While the relationship between figuring and disfiguring forces can be described as a continuum between two binary positions on a horizontal line, for example, stability and instability, structure and chaos, collective and individual (Figure 1), it can also be described as an intersection between a horizontal line maintaining figuring structures that are stable over time and space and a vertical line which crosses the horizontal line at a particular position in time and space, interfering with the timeless structure of the figuring move (Figure 2). Such a description illustrates that the model can provide a non-conflictual perspective on online interaction. For example, in the case of religion, this means that, rather than a conflictual encounter between two different interpretations of a religious message, the relationship between figuring and disfiguring is a question of an encounter between a message and an experience of that message; between an abstraction and a concretization; between a dogma and an appropriation of that dogma. So, what happens in a religious system characterized by an interplay between figuring and disfiguring forces is not primarily a polarized hermeneutic battle over a specific dogma, but an encounter between institutional dogma and human experience.

Taylor further suggests that, over time, a system can shift character depending on the degree to which it is being influenced by figuring and disfiguring forces, respectively. During certain periods, a system can move toward a figuring position and become characterized by processes of solidifying the collective structure. During other periods, the same system can move toward a disfiguring position, increasingly acknowledging the diverse perspectives of the individuals, resulting in a reevaluation of the established structure. So, all systems will inevitably oscillate between these positions. However, there is a risk that the system moves so far toward one position that the system reaches a tipping point (a point of no return) and undergoes radical change. Thus, if the system becomes too heavily dominated by figuring forces, it will stagnate into a rigid structure that is unable to adapt to the changing environment, which will inevitably result in the system losing its relevance and thus shutting down. By contrast, if the system becomes too heavily dominated by disfiguring forces, it will become increasingly fragmented, and the connections between the nodes start breaking down. If this process goes far enough, the system will disintegrate into unstructured chaos. In order for a system to survive, it therefore needs to find a balance between figuring and disfiguring; between too much structure and too little structure; between abstract dogma and concrete experience. A system that manages to live on the edge of figuring and disfiguring has reached what Taylor calls a state of complexity and he argues that such systems are characterized by three core traits:

- First, in such systems, agency is distributed rather than centralized. Taylor compares complex social and cultural systems to a biological phenomenon like a flock of birds. A flock of birds can act as a whole, moving in certain directions and creating patterns and structures involving thousands of individuals, even though there is no one bird leading and coordinating the movements. Instead, the patterns observed on
group level are results of individual activities on a local level. This means that, even though the system is perceived as a stable structure, it is not centrally organized.

- Second, this means that the system’s character emerges through the relational connections between individuals in the system, implying that the identity of the system is an emergent phenomenon. The identity of the system does not precede the engagement of individual group members. Neither does the identity of the individual members precede the constitution of the system. Instead, the identity of the system and the identity of the individual are co-dependent phenomena, emerging through the interplay between the two.

- Third, since patterns and meaning in a complex system occur through the encounter between differences, diversity is not an anomaly or something challenging the purity of these systems. Instead, diversity or heterogeneity is a condition necessary for the system’s existence, and in that sense, a complex system is non-totalizing.

According to Taylor (2007), religion has the potential of acting as such a non-totalizing, emergent system in which agency is distributed rather than centralized. He argues that

[religion is an emergent, complex, adaptive network of symbols, myths, and rituals that, on the one hand, figure schemata of feeling, thinking, and acting in ways that lend life meaning and purpose and, on the other, disrupt, dislocate, and disfigure every stabilizing structure. (p. 12)]

To summarize, Taylor argues that systems, biological as well as social and cultural, are characterized by an encounter between figuring and disfiguring forces. In this article, the Church of Sweden is viewed as such a system. A figuring move, broadly speaking, is any activity or instance that contributes to the solidifying or stabilizing of an institutional community, in other words, the texts, dogma, and behaviors that are seen as reinforcing and protecting the constituting core beliefs, values, and practices over time. A disfiguring move, on the contrary, is any activity or instance that challenges the traditional order and forces the institution to reconsider established interpretations of religious life. In other words, behaviors and values that introduce individual perspectives and experiences of rituals and dogma, thus blurring existing institutional and dogmatic boundaries and creating new ones in their stead.

**Study Design**

In this article, we use Taylor’s model to analyze the data and identify communicative components that solidify the established institutional structures as well as components that disrupt these structures. Drawing on this analysis, we then discuss if and how social media can provide particular opportunities for revitalizing the religious structure through a balance between figuring and disfiguring forces that acknowledges diversity without disintegrating the whole.

This study employs a qualitative, inductive case study approach (Yin, 2017) —which is particularly suitable for understanding complex and contemporary social phenomena—to perform a content analysis of the Facebook usage of the Church of Sweden. What follows is a brief contextual exposition of the case background, and the significance of studying church/Facebook interactions in a Swedish context.

According to a 2018 study, “Swedes and the Internet,” 98% of the population has Internet access, and 9 out of 10 own a smartphone (Davidsson et al., 2018). According to the study, the “division” is no longer between those with or without Internet, but rather between high-level users and seldom-users. According to a study by Findahl and Davidsson (2015), 76% of Swedes use some form of social media. The same study shows that the yearly increase of social media usage in Sweden exceeded 10% between 2005 and 2010 followed by a somewhat more modest 2% increase between 2011 and 2013. In addition, almost all citizens that have an account on one social media platform, also have a Facebook account (Findahl & Davidsson, 2015).

**Case Background: The Church of Sweden**

The Church of Sweden is an institution with very strong historical ties to the Swedish state. For almost 500 years, the Church of Sweden has functioned as a Lutheran nation state church into which every newborn baby was automatically included as a member (Stegeby, 1999). It was not until the year 2000 that the Church of Sweden was formally separated from the Swedish state, and the church is still governed through democratic elections, which are partly dependent upon the same political structure as the one governing the national elections to the Swedish parliament (Cranmer, 2000). Thus, while this is now a free-standing organization, it still carries a strong historical heritage of being almost a state agency. In that sense, it still has a very broad connection to the Swedish population with 58% of the population being members of the Church of Sweden, and is considered a core institution not only for existential and religious questions, but also when it comes to ethics, cultural heritage, and so on.

**Facebook Data Collection**

While there are several ways to manually collect content data, this article opted for an automated approach (e.g., Williams & Gulati, 2013). Data collection was performed using the Netvizz Facebook app (Rieder, 2013). In short, Netvizz archives Facebook Page activity. Of specific interest here was the ability to retrieve and store all posts authored by the Page owner, as well as the associated metadata, such as
likes and shares, over a certain period of time. Netvizz, furthermore, allows for the option to limit oneself to a specific number of posts. The former approach was chosen due to the general nature of this inquiry, to capture a dataset that is as broad as possible, covering all annual and recurring religious events and holidays.

During the period 1 February 2017–31 January 2018, the Church of Sweden posted 304 original posts. These original posts generated in total 17,355 comments with an average of 57 comments per post. However, there is a widespread of the number of comments per post. Three posts generated >550 comments each, 12 posts generated 200–300 comments, while the remaining 289 posts generated <100 comments per post.

Coding

After an initial round of coding, 13 content categories were identified, a total of 304 posts were categorized, and 240 made it to the second round to be included in the coding. The criteria for selection was that the number of original posts had to be >20. These 240 posts were aggregated into 6 new categories or themes to structure the analysis, including a maximum of 150 comments. For each category, one prominent post (the post with the largest amount of comments) was analyzed yielding a final analysis comprised of 6 posts and 810 comments (see Table 1).

Ethics

Collecting data from online, open discussion forums can be an ethically gray area (Krotov & Silva, 2018). Bruckman (2002) argues for the importance of protecting the anonymity of online forum members, and ensuring that individuals cannot be identified, which is why this study has removed all names and pseudonyms. This article follows the “ethical guidelines for research online” formulated by Bruckman (2002) and De Kosnik et al. (2015). The data on display in this article are freely available, online information that has been analyzed without consent from its authors. Importantly, the data were obtained from a publicly visible web page that does not require a membership or login to access. The authors acknowledge that this article describes, and frames the activities of an online group that has to do with personal faith, making it particularly sensitive (De Kosnik et al., 2015; Milner, 2011, p. 22). Sensitive data is defined by GDPR and the Swedish Data Protection Authority (2020) as information pertaining to a person’s “racial/ethnic origin, political opinions, religious/philosophical beliefs, membership of a trade union, health, sexual orientation, genetic/biometric data.” As such we have taken all measures to make sure that the data cannot be traced back to its original poster.

Findings and Discussion

Let us revisit the research question: How does social media affect the conditions for religious communication for a traditional religious organization such as the Church of Sweden? Generally speaking, our findings show different types of consequences of digitization (or de-materialization where physical objects become virtualized as software). Particularly these findings focus on the blurring of boundaries between gatekeeping/openness, priest/congregation, religious/social practices, and one-way/two-way communication. In the following sections, we investigate instances of figuring and disfiguring movements in the context of the activities on the church’s Facebook page.

Theological Discussions

The most common post category is Theological discussions. Most of the posts in this category consist of priests publishing summaries of their ideas for the coming Sunday’s sermon with links to a blog where a more substantial analysis of the

| Table 1. Categorizing and Coding. |
|-----------------------------------|
| 1. Original categories (N = Comments) |
| Theological message (n = 64) |
| Questions about the church or theology (N = 150) |
| Information about activities to participate in (N = 150) |
| General questions (N = 150) |
| Insight into the church’s activities (n = 146) |
| Worship/prayer (N = 150) |
| Omitted categories |
| General information |
| Encouraging practical commitment |
| Invitation to church activities in other places |
| Quiz |
| Ethical advise |
| Social communication |
| Other |
| 2. Analysis categories (p = Posts) |
| Theological discussions (p = 2) |
| Community building (p = 2) |
| Testimonies (p = 2) |
| Rituals (p = 1) |
| (Not included) |
themes and texts for that Sunday can be found. The comments in this category are mostly related to the theological message in the original post. People comment or ask questions in relation to the theme, and the church often responds with clarifications or supportive remarks. It becomes clear that dialogue, an inherent promise of social media in general, is fostered here, much more than in a traditional sermon context. For example, in a post where a priest discusses whether it is our own work or God’s grace that saves us, one person questions the priest’s formulation “Who is best at being Christian?” The user argues that being Christian is not a competition: “Best at being a Christian? When has Jesus ever said that this is a competition?” The priest then acknowledges the critique and further explains why she expressed herself the way she did:

You are absolutely correct! Of course it is not a competition, which was also what I emphasized in the text. However, in a competitive society like ours, we often think that faith is a competition, or at least that is the way I have experienced it. It is good that not everyone has fallen into the same subconscious trap!

Another user then enters into the discussion, suggesting that there are themes in the Bible that can actually support the view of Christian life as a competition where a final reward awaits the winner:

It can be related to Paul’s thoughts about the victory crown. Who does not think of competition then?

This dialogue indicates that through content co-creation fueled by open participation, different aspects, and perspectives of the theological message are being teased out (e.g., van Dijck & Poell, 2013), emphasized, and explored, that would perhaps in a traditional setting remain unchallenged.

Some users also take the opportunity to ask theological questions not related to the original post. For example, in the thread mentioned above, one user posts a question asking why young people used to be taught by the church that sex is something bad. This initiates a discussion where both priests and other users participate to reflect upon the nature of sexuality and how that relates to the Christian faith. So, the post category theological discussions functions as a place for all kinds of theological discussions, not only those directly relating to the distributed message. The interactive disjointedness of a hijacked thread also deviates from a traditional one-way sermon in that the discussion can deviate at any point, and anyone on Facebook is able to participate and start a discussion with the authority figure as well as with congregational peers.

Another common type of post in this category is when the church asks direct questions about religion. The questions often contain a combination of institutionalized aspects of religion (e.g., dogma) and individual, personal dimensions and experiences. This combination invites for a more participatory hermeneutic activity in which meaning is negotiated (agreed-upon) rather than preached. For example, one question reads:

Our Father, who art in heaven. Thus begins one of our most famous prayers. Is heaven only something blue above our heads? Or is heaven within us, as Jesus says? Please share your thoughts.

The purpose of the post seems to be to spark discussion, and to invite different perspectives, rather than preaching. Most of the comments to this post revolve around the different translations of this particular prayer, and can be identified as constituting two different positions: (1) a traditionalist perspective, according to which the old translation is considered preferable and the new translation is considered compromising the established traditions of the church and (2) a reformist perspective, according to which the religious language needs to change according to changes in people’s everyday language. The discussion around these perspectives is an example of how the church’s Facebook page provides a space for the encounter between a collective tradition and individual appropriations and interpretations.

In the category Theological discussions, the interaction between figuring and disfiguring forces is evident. When the church presents an established Bible text or a religious dogma, the church is performing a figuring move by which a foundational religious component is presented; the presented texts or dogma can be argued to have a constitutive, general and historically relatively stable character with the help of which the church has traditionally been constituted and maintained. In the comment field, the users then (re)appropriate this text or dogma, sharing their own experiences and interpretations, constituting a disfiguring move through which the universal, stabilizing character of the text meets the temporal particularity of the individual’s experience.

This encounter between figuring and disfiguring forces results in a restructuring of religious authority (Taylor, 2007). A traditional model of authority built upon canonization, teaching, gatekeeping, and epistemic warranting (Cheong et al., 2011) is replaced by a prosumerism that resembles media scholar Henry Jenkins’ notion of the mechanisms of fan fiction (Jenkins, 2006). According to Jenkins, individuals in fan communities engage with cultural content (books, movies, music, video games, etc.) not only to consume stories and music, but also to use these cultural resources productively to express themselves and to explore aspects of their own identity. When the church invites the users to engage with the religious myths and texts in the online context, people engage in hermeneutic activities through which the figuring components of the institution can be used as cultural resources with which individuals can explore different aspects of their identity and their experiences in much the same way as Harry Potter fan communities use the stories, myths, and aesthetics of J. K. Rowling’s books to explore.
and negotiate their individual and social identity. By being the one who provides these foundational cultural and religious resources that people want to appropriate, the church gains a particular position of authority that comes with being a content owner and provider which results in feelings of gratitude from the users; in the comment field, on multiple occasions, users express that they are grateful to the church for providing important resources that enrich their lives. Thus, the church’s authority in this context does not lie in the power of commanding, nor in the competence of judging information, but in the providing and curating of a loved content.

So, through the posts in this category, we see how the social media platform offers a space where an encounter between figuring and disfiguring forces can occur, and how this reconfigures the conditions for authority, from theological gatekeeper to provider of hermeneutically accessible content.

Community Building

A total of 16% of all the original posts fall into the category of Community building. Most of the posts in this category consist of direct questions from the church, and the user engagement is almost exclusively straightforward answers to those questions. For example, a priest asks “What is your favorite Christmas song?” and people respond with the title of their favorite song. Another example is when the church publishes a post saying “Happy new year! What are your hopes for 2018?” and people answer by mentioning the things that they hope for during 2018. Another way of building the community is through invitations to services that the church offers. The services often consist of different support programs, for example, family counseling or priests available for therapeutic support, conversations, and confession. These posts generate a lot of discussion about what the church should be and what activities it should provide.

There are also posts that encourage practical engagement in the community, for example, through a call for supporting the international work that the church organizes:

For 2 Swedish kronor, a child living on the streets in the Philippines can have a shower! It will cover the costs for water and shampoo. 100 kr = 50 showers! Contribute your gift to this year’s Christmas campaign! #lamalife svenskakyrkan.se/julkampanjen.

The posts can also be a call to engage in the Church of Sweden through, for example, encouraging people to vote in the church election. In different ways, these posts all constitute a move toward establishing and maintaining the religious institution, that is, a figuring force. However, there are voices challenging the current form of the community and its established practices, thus enacting a disfiguring move:

No, I want to have interested laymen governing the church, not politicians. Then there is no one to vote for. How many money-changers will there be in the temple after the election?

What we see here is, from Taylor’s (1992, 2007) perspective, an interplay between figuring and disfiguring forces. First, the established religious authority is strengthened through a figuring move, in which the priest solidifies the current governance structure of the Church of Sweden. Then, the commenter engages in a disfiguring move by first offering an individual, experience-based perspective on the structures governing the church and then engaging in a critical hermeneutic act, challenging the current structure of authority by comparing the elections of the Church of Sweden with the temple-based money-changing practice that Jesus argued desecrated the religious institution of his day (Mt 21:12-17). The commenter uses one religious authority (scripture) to critique another (the election process), which is in line with Campbell’s suggestion that religious authority is a diverse and complex phenomenon where some dimensions of religious authority can be accepted while others are discarded (Campbell, 2007; Giorgi, 2019; Kołodziejska & Neumaier, 2017).

Thus, the category Community building also illustrates that the Facebook page provides a space where an encounter between figuring and disfiguring forces can be enacted. Through this encounter between collective structure and established traditions on one hand, and individual experience and hermeneutic critique on the other, the validity of the religious authority is being renegotiated.

Testimonies

This type of post consists of accounts where the church offers an insight into different kinds of activities, often with a focus on social welfare. These accounts are often stories about people in need, for example, people having lost their jobs or people who are struggling with chronic disease. One typical post reads:

“I am the one who has to cope” says the single mother sitting in front of me. She is on long term sick leave and in chronic pain. Her entire being radiates hopelessness. Neither she nor her children have any social networks. She dreams of going back to work, being needed, and able to earn her own money. As a deacon, my role is to listen. Together, we contact societal actors who can change her situation. We think and reflect together. She is not alone with her thoughts anymore. Sharing is an important tool in social welfare work—it makes a difference. During 2016, we collected stories about the welfare work of the Church of Sweden. These stories have been collected in the book “Sweden between the chairs,” and reflect both everyday care and life-defining meetings.

Stories like these function as catalysts for people to share stories of their own experiences of similar situations (cf.
Friesen, 2017). Often, the users’ stories are accounts of difficult experiences or accounts of how the church has helped in times of crisis. This category of posts thus fills a very important purpose: Through offering an officially sanctioned narrative of life as being, not only fantastic, but also challenging and fragile, the church provides an arena where people feel like it is ok to share their own stories about challenges and difficulties. Ordinary users are thus invited to participate in discourse production and they respond by, to a large extent, reproducing the notions expressed by the church. Often, the users’ stories include a confessional element that describes how important the church is for the person sharing, thus also functioning as a way for him or her to express loyalty toward the institution and its message. So, by sharing their stories, the participants reproduce the notion of the church as an institution that serves a particular purpose. The stories that people tell also trigger a lot of social communication. Almost half of all the comments are social communication where both the priests and the other users respond to the shared stories, often by offering comfort and support, or by acknowledging that they have had similar experiences. Sometimes this support comes in the form of kind words and prayers, and sometimes in the form of recommendations and suggestions for getting help through contacting social agencies, churches, and so on. So, in a way, this category fosters a sense of social community based on caring which can be seen as a practical instantiation of the officially sanctioned Christian faith.

There are, however, also instances where users challenge the official image of Christian life and share contradictory stories and testimonies. One example is in a post where the church describes how a deacon helped a homeless man get his medicine from the pharmacy, and how that act had created a solid friendship between the two. A user then intervenes and argues critically that this is not the only perspective on what the church does for people:

My mother was very ill, almost bedbound, for many years. The church office was next door, close to my parents’ house, in a small community where everyone knows everyone. Not once did a priest or a deacon visit her . . .

The priest then answers:

I am very sad to read your words. How lonely she must have been, when all these “good samaritans” who were actually not good samaritans at all, just passed by. This is also what Jesus describes in the Bible, he talks about how priests only pass by those who are in need.

Here we can witness a three-step move where figuring and disfiguring forces interact (Taylor, 1992, 2007). First, through the original post in this category, the church engages in a figuring move by normatively suggesting a model for what Christian life is (should be) all about. Most of the comments confirm this image and contribute with similar stories from people’s own lives, thus stabilizing and solidifying the message suggested by the church. Second, the user quoted above then makes a disfiguring move that challenges the validity of the stabilizing effort of the original testimony. Third, what the priest then does is to offer sympathy and comfort, but also to recontextualize the commenter’s experience from being something that contradicts the church’s message to something that is actually described in the Bible, and thus forms a part of the Christian narrative. This is a (re-)figuring move by which the priest stabilizes the commenter’s individual disfiguring experience by turning it into a recognized part of the dogma. What we see here is not merely a difference of opinion regarding the way that the church succeeds or fails in its outreach program. It is, on a deeper level, an encounter between a historically established collective ideal connected to the Christian dogma and an individual, temporal experience that seems to contradict this dogmatic ideal.

In this category, we have shown how Facebook offers a platform through which the users can be encouraged to engage in identity construction and community building by reproducing officially sanctioned stories and images of human (Christian) life. This practice serves a therapeutic, confessional function for the individual while functioning as a mechanism by which the institution can strengthen the community and the sense of a collective identity. While this practice stabilizes the institution, it also contains a critical dimension. Through the sharing of political and social issues experienced by the members of the congregation, the practices of the institution are challenged in a destabilizing move, something that is then stabilized through the priest’s theological interpretation of the individual’s experiences as being a genuine part of the official Christian dogma.

Rituals

The type of posts that generate the most activity in the comment section is Rituals. While users do use the comment function related to these types of posts to pray, a large part of the interaction in this category consists of everyday social communication containing exclamations such as “what a nice thing to say!” or sharing of personal stories. These comments are often met by both priests and other users with confirmation and validation.

From Taylor’s (1992, 2007) perspective, the church’s invitation to pray (often for a particular, named cause) can be seen as a figuring move aimed at constituting a religious community through collective prayer at the initiative of the priest. The users who instead ask questions or make social remarks in the comment field in those posts can be seen to engage in a disruptive practice through which the ongoing religious ritual is destabilized. This would differ from a traditional, offline worship practice in the Church of Sweden, in which the stabilizing liturgical format rarely allows for disfiguring spontaneous introductions of discussions in the context of worship and
prayer. If a discussion would be taking place during the liturgical prayer in an offline context, that discussion would most likely be held whispering between two people and not as an open, audible discussion in which the priest also engages while performing the religious ritual. In this online ritual context, however, priests engage in social communication while the ritual is ongoing. This can be suggested to relate to the asynchronous character of social media communication in which an introduction of social communication into a religious ritual does not necessarily interrupt or disturb the ritual. These two activities can coexist.

This means that the Facebook platform allows for a transgression of the foundational, compartmentalizing boundaries between different kinds of practices, encouraging an encounter between figuring and disfiguring forces. This effectively re-embeds religious rituals into the context of social communication, while simultaneously re-embedding social communication into the context of religious rituals. Thus, the appearance of everyday social communication in the context of religious rituals is not an indication of a secularization of a religious sphere, but of a restructuring of certain practices that already exist in the offline church. Again, according to Taylor (2007, p. 12), such convergence is, in fact, a core characteristic of religion as such. Practices that have always been central components in the church but that have often been separated in the offline context, are now merged and mixed in the online context. Our findings suggest that the Internet has provided a space where participation redraws the map of institutional practices through the encouraging of an interplay between figuring and disfiguring forces. This also has effects on the nature of authority: A ritual like praying has traditionally been exercised mainly by the priest or another representative of the church, whereas social interaction during church coffee after the Sunday service has been the only context in which everyone can initiate interaction. Converging these two practices in the same online space diffuses the boundaries between a domain which has traditionally been governed by the priest and a domain that has been more open to spontaneous participatory interaction.

In addition, several comments consist of only posting emojis without further explanations. Images of hearts and hands held together in prayer are frequently used as free-standing communicative actions. In fact, 18% of all communication in Rituals posts consists of emojis only. This seems to be a way of translating offline ritual behavior into online ritual behavior: Praying in services in the Church of Sweden is often done either silently or by reading preprinted prayers collectively in the congregation. Posting emojis seems to be an emerging ritual behavior that acknowledges the ongoing prayer and indicates participation but without having to translate prayers into words. While the practice of commenting with only emojis exists in other categories as well, most of these comments occur in the Rituals category. Thus, it seems as if this practice can be categorized as an emerging form of prayer in which abstract realities are articulated into visible entities rather than words, retaining the abstract nature of the category. Emojis can be seen as a figuring move that connects back to the tradition of expressing immaterial realities in material form, such as the practice of religious iconography, though emojis emphasize the visual aspect, in other words, expressing immaterial realities in visual form.

To summarize, the category Rituals illustrates that the online environment enables the foundational boundaries between ritual and social practices to be transgressed, reconfiguring established practices that have historically constituted a foundation for the religious authority of the priest.

**Conclusion**

Our findings confirm what previous studies have suggested: That social media tends to flatten hierarchies, promote open sharing of content, and enable producer/consumer co-creation (i.e., the term “prosumer” or the co-creation of innovation as open practices). For example, we see how canonized material such as Bible texts and prayers are brought into a context conditioned by a participatory logic that spurs processes of interpretation, negotiation, and contestation. We also see how this participatory logic, combined with the asynchronous nature of an unfolding Facebook thread, blurs the boundaries between ritual and social practices, resulting in the emergence of new forms of interaction and communication. Finally, we see how these changes reconfigure religious authority from an epistemic warrant and institutional gatekeeper to a provider of a loved content being made available for people to use as a tool for reflection and identity construction.

However, applying Taylor’s model to this material also illustrates that the participatory dynamic on this Facebook page is not just a matter of leveling hierarchies or including more people into a process through which they can voice their different opinions in a democratic manner. This is also an encounter of two qualitatively different movements: one focusing on collective, universal, and temporally stable aspects of religion, and the other focusing on individual, experiential, and contingent aspects of religion. For example, when the priest quotes a Bible text, a traditional hymn, or a liturgical prayer and asks people to share their thoughts and experiences of those, what we see is a collective, temporally stable component encountering an individual, contingent appropriation; a figuring force encountering a disfiguring one.

Following Taylor’s argument that well-functioning complex systems (biological as well as social and cultural) are characterized by a balance between figuring and disfiguring forces, one can suggest that the disfiguring activities that we have seen on the Facebook page are not necessarily to be understood as threats to the religious community, as challenges that need to be fought or moderated. Instead, they can come to constitute an important condition for the system’s vitality and continued survival. Without diversity, systems
will inevitably stagnate and die. The participatory logic provided by social media is thus not only a functional matter of who contributes content to the community, but of ontology: It has the power to reconfigure the systems as such by providing opportunities for an encounter between figuring and disfiguring forces.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Claes Thorén https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2876-0952

References

Bruckman, A. (2002). Ethical guidelines for research online. https://www.cc.gatech.edu/~asb/ethics/
Campbell, H. (2006). Religion and the Internet. Communication Research Trends, 25(1), 3–18.
Campbell, H. (2007). Who’s got the power? Religious authority and the Internet. Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 12(2), 1043–1062.
Campbell, H., & Evolvi, G. (2020). Contextualizing current digital religion research on emerging technologies. Human Behavior and Emerging Technologies, 2(1), 5–17.
Campbell, H., & Lövheim, M. (2011). Introduction. Information, Communication & Society, 14(8), 1083–1096.
Cheong, P. H., Huang, S., & Poon, J. P. H. (2011). Religious communication and epistemic authority of leaders in wired faith organizations. Journal of Communication, 61(5), 938–958.
Cheong, P. H., Poon, J. P. H., Hung, S., & Casas, I. (2009). The Internet highway and religious communities: Mapping and contesting spaces in religion-online. The Information Society, 25(5), 291–302.
Conway, P. (2010). Preservation in the age of Google: Digitization, digital preservation, and dilemmas. The Library Quarterly, 80(1), 61–79.
Cowan, D. E. (2004). Cyberhenge: Modern pagans on the internet. Routledge.
Cramer, F. (2000). The Church of Sweden and the unravelling of establishment. Ecclesiastical Law Journal, 5(27), 417–430.
Davidsson, P., Palm, M., & Melin Mandre, Å. (2018). The Swedes and the Internet. Internetstiftelsen.
Dawson, L. L., & Cowan, D. E. (2004). Religion online: Finding faith on the internet 2018. Routledge.
De Kosnik, A., El Ghaoui, L., Cuntz-Leng, V., Godbehere, A., Horbinski, A., Hutz, A., Pastel, R., & Pham, V. (2015). Watching, creating, and archiving: Observations on the quantity and temporality of fannish productivity in online fan fiction archives. Convergence, 21(1), 145–164.
Drucker, P. F. (1993). The rise of the knowledge society. The Wilson Quarterly, 17(2), 52–72.
Findahl, O., & Davidsson, P. (2015). The Swedes and the Internet 2015. Stiftelsen för Internetinfrastruktur.
Friesen, N. (2017). Confessional technologies of the self: From Seneca to social media. First Monday. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v22i6.6750
Gal, U. (2008). Boundary matters: The dynamics of boundary objects, information infrastructures, and organisational identities [Doctoral thesis]. Case Western Reserve University.
https://etd.ohiolink.edu/apexprod/rws_etd/send_file/send?accession=case1202807329&disposition=inline
Gidhagen, M., & Gebert Persson, S. (2011). Determinants of digitally instigated insurance relationships. International Journal of Bank Marketing, 29(7), 517–534.
Giorgi, A. (2019). Mediatized Catholicism—Minority voices and religious authority in the digital sphere. Religions, 10(8), 463.
Gorman, M. (2003). The enduring library: Technology, tradition, and the quest for balance. American Library Association.
Haddan, J. K., & Cowan, D. E. (2000). Religion on the Internet: Research prospects and promises. JAI Press.
Helland, C. (2000). Online-religion/religion-online and virtual communitas. In J. K. Hadden & D. E. Cowan (Eds.), Religion on the Internet: Research prospects and promises (pp. 205–224). JAI Press.
Helland, C. (2002). Surfing for salvation. Religion, 32(4), 293–302.
Helland, C. (2005). Online religion as lived religion. Methodological issues in the study of religious participation on the internet. Online—Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet, 1(1), 1–16.
Hojsgaard, M., & Warburg, M. (Eds.). (2005). Religion and cyberspace. Routledge.
Hutchings, T. (2011). Contemporary religious community and the online church. Information, Communication & Society, 14(8), 1118–1135.
Jacobs, S. (2007). Virtually sacred: The performance of asynchronous cyber-rituals in online spaces. Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 12(3), 1103–1121.
Jenkins, H. (2006). Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide. New York University Press.
Jensen, G. F., & Thompson, A. (2008). “Out of the broom closet”: The social ecology of American Wicca. Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 47(4), 753–766.
Kim, K. (2007). Ethereal Christianity: Reading Korean mega-church websites. Studies in World Christianity, 13(3), 208–224.
Klang, M., & Nolin, J. (2011). Disciplining social media: An analysis of social media policies in 26 Swedish municipalities. First Monday. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v16i8.3490
Kołodziejska, M., & Neumaier, A. (2017). Between individualisation and tradition: Transforming religious authority on German and Polish Christian online discussion forums. Religion, 47(2), 228–255.
Kroto, V., & Silva, L. (2018, August 16–18). Legality and ethics of web scraping. In 24th International Conference on Information Systems (AMCIS) (pp. 1–5). Association for Information Systems, New Orleans.
Krüger, O. (2004). The Internet as distributor and mirror of religious and ritual knowledge. Asian Journal of Social Science, 32(2), 183–197.
Krüger, O. (2005). Discovering the invisible internet: Methodological aspects of searching religion on the internet. *Online—Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet, 1*(1), 1–27.

Leonardi, P. M. (2010). Digital materiality? How artifacts without matter, matter. *First Monday*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v15i6.3036.

Lev-On, A., & Neriya-Ben Shahar, R. (2011). A forum of their own: Views about the Internet among ultra-Orthodox Jewish women who browse designated closed fora. *First Monday*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v16i4.3228

Lim, M. (2005). *Islamic radicalism and anti-Americanism in Indonesia: The role of the Internet* (Policy Studies 18). East-West Center Washington.

Linders, D. (2012). From e-government to we-government: Defining a typology for citizen coproduction in the age of social media. *Government Information Quarterly, 29*(4), 446–454.

Livio, O., & Tenenboim Weinblatt, K. (2007). Discursive legitimation of a controversial technology: Ultra-Orthodox Jewish women in Israel and the Internet. *The Communication Review, 10*(1), 29–56.

Martin, P. P., Bowles, T. A., Adkins, L., & Leach, M. T. (2011). Black mega-churches in the internet age: Exploring theological teachings and social outreach efforts. *Journal of African American Studies, 15*(2), 155–176.

Milner, R. M. (2011). The study of cultures online: Some methodological and ethical tensions. *Graduate Journal of Social Science, 8*(3), 14–35.

Piela, A. (2010). Muslim women’s online discussions of gender relations in Islam. *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs, 30*(3), 425–435.

Pikkarainen, T., Pikkarainen, K., Karjaluoto, H., & Pahnila, S. (2004). Consumer acceptance of online banking: An extension of the technology acceptance model. *Internet Research, 14*(3), 224–235.

Possamai, A., & Turner, B. S. (2012). Authority and liquid religion in cyberspace: The new territories of religious communication. *International Social Science Journal, 63*(209), 197–206.

Rieder, B. (2013, May 2–4). Studying Facebook via data extraction: The Netvizz application [Conference session]. WebSci’13 conference, Paris, Association for Computing Machinery. http://thepoliticsofsystems.net/permsfiles/rieder_websci.pdf

Sanderson, J., & Cheong, P. H. (2010). Tweeting prayers and communicating grief over Michael Jackson online. *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society, 30*(5), 328–340.

Shields, R. (2005). *The virtual*. Routledge.

Stegeby, K. E. (1999). An analysis of the impending disestablishment of the Church of Sweden. *Brigham Young University Law Review, 1999*(2), 703–767.

Swedish Data Protection Authority. (2020). *Sensitive personal data* [https://www.imy.se/en/verksamhet/data-protection/this-applies-according-to-gdpr/the-purposes-and-scope-of-gdpr/personuppgifter/sensitive-personal-data/]

Taylor, M. C. (1992). *Disfiguring: Art, architecture, religion*. University of Chicago Press.

Taylor, M. C. (2007). *After God*. University of Chicago Press.

Thorén, C., Ågerfalk, P. J., & Edenius, M. (2014). Through the printing press: An account of open practices in the Swedish newspaper industry. *Journal of the Association for Information Systems, 15*(11), 779–804.

Tilson, D., Lyytinen, K., & Sørensen, C. (2010). Research commentary—digital infrastructures: The missing IS research agenda. *Information Systems Research, 21*(4), 748–759.

van Dijck, J., & Poell, T. (2013). Understanding social media logic. *Media and Communication, 1*(1), 2–14.

Williams, C. B., & Gulati, G. J. (2013). Social networks in political campaigns: Facebook and the congressional elections of 2006 and 2008. *New Media & Society, 15*(1), 52–71.

Yin, R. K. (2017). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods*. SAGE.

Young, G. (2004). Reading and praying online: The continuity of religion online and online religion in Internet Christianity. In L. L. Dawson & D. E. Cowan (Eds.), *Religion online: Finding faith on the Internet* (pp. 93–106). Routledge.

**Author Biographies**

Henrik Åhman (PhD, Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm) is a senior lecturer at the Department of Informatics and Media, Uppsala University. His research focuses on how digital technology in general and social media in particular is used as both an arena and a resource for processing philosophical and existential questions. He is also interested in questions relating to discourses on technology, in particular, how research perspectives in Human–Computer Interaction and Interaction Design reflect dominant narratives grounded in modernity.

Claes Thorén (PhD, Karlstad University) is an associate professor at the Department of Informatics and Media, Uppsala University. His research revolves around the consequences of digitalization for different parts of society, often with a focus on cases where some kind of ambivalence to the digital as a paradigm occurs, and the organizational and individual coping mechanisms (negotiations) that arise as a result. Through phenomena such as “digital disengagement” or “technology non-use,” the understanding of what the digital does with organizational processes, identity creation, and our relationship to modern technologies can be increased.