The Dissonance of “Civil” Religion in Religious-Political Memetic Discourse During the 2016 Presidential Elections

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Abstract
This article explores the interrelationship between religion and politics as presented through memetic discourse surrounding the 2016 presidential election. Based on a study of 150 Internet memes of political candidates and core issues framed by religious discourse, and a case study of memes focused on then-presidential candidate Donald Trump, we investigated the distinct understanding of what constitutes religion that arises. Overwhelmingly, these memes evoke what is known as “Civil Religion,” where religion becomes a tool to interpret politics, with roots in nationalist ideologies. This challenges previous research suggesting religious memetic discourse primarily promotes a view of “lived religion,” or personalized interpretations of traditional religious beliefs and practices. Drawing on previous research of the dominant genres of religious memes and ways they frame religion, we find religious-political memes enact distinct strategies of political God Talk where religious discourse is read through a political lens, and vice versa. This is highly problematic as it presents religion in broad brushstrokes that fail to acknowledge the diversity of religious communities and their responses to politics within American cultural discourse. Overall, we argue religious-political memes showcase the dissonance created by mixing religion and politics in public discourse online, especially when meme messages representing conservative Christianity suggest they speak for all of American religious culture.

Keywords
civil religion, election, Internet, memes, politics, religion, God Talk

In Fall 2016, the United States watched as Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump faced off for the prize of the Oval Office. At the same time the Internet buzzed with comments and reactions to the latest scandal or debate. Religion often emerged within these digital discourses as people tweeted, pinned, and posted concerns about candidates’ religious backgrounds and religious supporters’ rhetoric surrounding candidates. Internet memes represented a growing platform where debates about religion and politics surfaced. Combining provocative and popular images with pithy comments, Internet memes serve as visual communication tools that can be easily circulated online. As succinct artifacts with highly recognizable captions and pictures often created by unknown Internet users, memes provide an interesting arena wherein we can identify the dominant or common opinions about the relationship between politics and religion within contemporary American culture. Internet memes in their essence often capture generalized and popular perspectives of particular individuals and public groups in a given context. Memes that go viral are those which carry traction, being understood and echoing the commonly held beliefs and arguments of those who share and “like” the messages they represent. Therefore, Internet memes, especially those generated around the 2016 US presidential election, provide an interesting context for studying popular assumptions about religion as displayed in discourse online.

This study investigated what ideas about religion were present in Internet memes engaging both politics and religion in a visual public discourse. Drawing on the Internet meme genres and frames identified by Aguilar, Campbell, Stanley, & Taylor (2017) we examined the ways religious-political memes enact distinct strategies of political God Talk where religious discourse is read through a political lens, and vice versa. This is highly problematic as it presents religion in broad brushstrokes that fail to acknowledge the diversity of religious communities and their responses to politics within American cultural discourse. Overall, we argue religious-political memes showcase the dissonance created by mixing religion and politics in public discourse online, especially when meme messages representing conservative Christianity suggest they speak for all of American religious culture.
framings of religion within these memes enabled us to highlight popular assumptions about religion online and the distinct understanding of religion these promote—that is, that of American Civil Religion. Here, when religion engages politics, it adopts a particular relational outlook resulting in a religious-nationalist discourse. This Civil Religion discourse draws on the value language of a specific segment of America’s dominant religious group, Conservative Protestant Christianity, to map out a distinct relationship and co-dependence between religion and politics.

This is done through two strategies involving God Talk, where religious worldviews are used to interpret and justify certain political actions, and vice versa. Gaddy (2005) identified these dominant language strategies as the “Politicization of Religion,” political mandates that inform and are seen as manifestations of certain religious morals and ethics, and the “Religiofication of Politics,” where religious rhetoric is used to achieve a political agenda. Our investigation showed how memes enact these discourse strategies and so promote the notion of religiosity as Civil Religion online. By doing so, these memes highlight certain religious stereotypes and ideological assumptions about religious individuals who choose to be publicly involved in political engagement. Our study suggests that mixing religion and politics, in memes and other contexts, is primarily divisive, as memes tend to spotlight theological or ideological inconsistencies between religious and political beliefs and actions.

Our findings show that mixing religion and politics in memes often creates fraught responses from both insiders and outsiders of the religion being represented. This happens because the form of religious discourse evoked in this mimetic discourse—that is, Civil Religion—draws on an intentionally politicized form of religiosity, wherein religious beliefs are filtered through a distinct political agenda. This distinctive performance of religion is not generalizable to all religious sectors of American society. While the form suggests it presents a broad view of religion, it typically fails to reflect the diversity of the religious traditions and denominations from which it claims to speak.

Overall, we will demonstrate that the Civil Religion enacted in these memes primarily speaks in the voice of Conservative American Christians and from a viewpoint often closely wedded to a Republican agenda. This viewpoint downplays alternative Civil Religion discourse also present in American religious culture, such as a more liberal social gospel understanding of Christianity, which uses the Bible to promote social justice action for the poor and marginalized (Hopkins, 1967). This article begins by defining key concepts related to analysis of these Internet memes, including the nature of memes, American Civil Religion, and God Talk. This leads us to an overview of our methods and study sample regarding the specific Internet memes investigated and the forms of analysis conducted. Then a discussion follows of our findings regarding the dominant genres of religious memes employed, the core themes discussed in relation to politics, and how these framed the interrelationship between religion and politics. Finally, by highlighting religious-political memes about presidential candidate Donald Trump, we demonstrate how memes enact distinct strategies of political God Talk where messages of dissonance and contradiction between religion and politics are highlighted. We also demonstrate how God Talk is enacted in meme culture, contributing to a distinct understanding of religion within digital culture.

Defining and Studying Internet Memes

Studying Memes

The meaning of the term *meme* has changed drastically since it was first coined by Richard Dawkins (1976) to describe a phenomenon wherein ideas were circulated and either multiplied or became extinct. Today, and in the context of this study, *meme* refers to images propagated online as “highly visual and emotive forms of communication employing popular culture images with succinct messages to communicate” (Bellar et al., 2013, p. 6). Internet memes are concisely defined by Shifman (2013) as “a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, that were created with awareness of each other, and were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users” (p. 8). Now memes represent short arguments or claims presented via an image with overlaid text relaying a simplified message.

Studies of Internet memes are increasing and have focused on a number of topics, including how meme virality has the capacity to create a collective identity (Gal, Shipman, & Kampf, 2016), how memes tend to rely on irony and critique (Milner, 2013), the ways irony in memes allows for the portrayal of more than one idea at once in an attempt to delegitimize a subject (Davis, Glantz, & Novak, 2015), and how variations on a meme can be used to address specific topics and present a finely focused argument (Huntington, 2015). Due to their viral nature, it is difficult to determine who created a given meme, and therefore difficult to determine the precise original intent of that meme. Therefore, the focus of this article is not to attempt to provide a full interpretation of the original intent of the memes studied. Rather, we seek to reveal the messages these Internet memes presented about religion and politics and what this can tell us about how politics and religion are perceived to interrelate within the online public sphere.

According to Shifman (2013), memes that are successful and go viral draw on select forms of humor, use highly recognizable images or characters, and present quotes or versions of slogans drawn from popular media or digital culture, with which their audience can identify. To achieve this success, meme creators dealing with controversial issues or topics of popular debate, such as religion, must synthesize complex ideas and make broad and bold assertions to create
a succinct message that garners attention. This means memes often deal in the currency of stereotyping by using popular assertions about particular groups, including their beliefs and practices. As Bellar et al. (2013) argued, religions communicated via memes “feature reductionist or essentialized understandings of religion and employ a limited range of popular assumptions or metanarratives about religion in order to communicate to a broad audience” (p. 24). This is especially true of memes that engage both religion and politics. This essentializing, we suggest, fosters a tendency toward Civil Religion discourse, which is illustrated below in our meme analysis.

**Studying Religion in Memes**

This analysis draws on Aguilar et al.’s six genres of religious Internet memes, which categorized images used in religion-focused memes and the tone of the text that accompanied them. Stock Character Memes with Religious Themes represents memes employing a nonreligious, popular-culture character commonly used in memetic communication—for example, Condescending Wonka from the movie *Willie Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*; Bad Luck Brian, an awkward teen in a red plaid vest; or other “stereotypical person[s] audiences readily recognize from frequent recurrences in a particular literary tradition” (Aguilar et al., 2017, p. 5)—to which religious text is added. Religious Figure Memes use a widely known religious figure, such as Jesus Christ or other popular leaders or figureheads of various religions, as the figure macro-template for the meme—for example, Story Time Jesus (Appendix Meme 1), depicting Jesus with a child on his lap as he tells a story that begins with the text, “So there I was. . . the only white guy in Jerusalem.” Reaction Memes are those that spotlight a positive or negative reaction to some current event and utilize images from popular culture without crossing into the realm of Stock Character Memes. These memes draw images of people or events from the news and rely on awareness of current events, as they tend to reference the event from which the image or the individual being invoked was taken. Aguilar et. al.’s three final categories of Religious Spoof Memes, Video Memes, and Implicit Religion Memes were not present in our study sample. This range of meme genres helped us interpret messages being communicated about religion through the different religious actors and ideals highlighted in our sample memes.

Our reading of memes also drew on the five religion frames noted by Aguilar et al., which highlighted common ways religion was presented in memes and dominant attitudes toward religion communicated. The Promoting Religion Frame shows how meme messages “promote or support shared beliefs, values, and traditions” (Aguilar et al., 2017, p. 14) of a religious community. The Playful Frame uses humor to present religious ideals without a real call to action to respond to this belief or any attempt to undermine a community. The Questioning Frame highlights contradictions observed within a religious belief or popular religious practice by posing a question about it. The Mocking Frame is deliberately designed to undermine a person, belief, or community by making light of religious individuals and/or values. Finally, the Religious Trope Frame highlights “common beliefs, sayings, or practices” with a tendency toward magnifying popular outsider stereotypes of that religion (Aguilar et al., 2017, p. 17). These frames aided our identification of overarching attitudes and perceptions about religion communicated within the memes studied. By reading the memes studied through the genres and religion frames utilized within them, we were able to analyze core messages about religions and the associated political ideals promoted, questioned, or mocked within this sample.

**Enacting Civil Religion and God Talk in Memetic Discourse**

Scholars of religion and media have often stressed the need to broaden public understandings of religion by considering the multiple ways religion can be enacted in society. Indeed, (Campbell, 2010) highlighted four distinct forms of religion that can be at work when religion and media intersect: (1) traditional religion focused on the broad commonalities present within a certain branch of a given world religion; (2) official religion, focused on how a specific community within a single religious tradition instructs about and performs their religious tradition; (3) lived religion, which focuses on personal interpretations and expression of religion by an individual or group as they seek to adapt their beliefs and practices to contemporary culture and everyday life; and (4) implicit religion, wherein secular activities perform a religious-like function in the lives of some people by offering shared meaning and common rituals.

**Religious-Political Memes Display Civil Religion**

A unique insight gained through our study, but missing from the findings of other studies of religion in memes, is that the primary understanding of religion evoked here is that of Civil Religion. This claim is important because it challenges previous research arguing Internet memes primarily represent an enacting of “Lived Religion” (Aguilar et al., 2017; Bellar et al., 2013), where religion offers a picture of how individual people understand and live out traditional religion in their everyday lives. Hall (1997) defines “lived religion” as traditional religious symbols and narratives freed from their established structures and dogmas to become flexible tools, open to reinterpretation, allowing individuals to reconstruct or reimagine the spiritual meaning in daily life. Scholars have suggested that the viral and flexible natures of Internet memes and digital media allow consumers to simultaneously become producers. This echoes the dynamic, highly flexible nature of lived religion, which is distinct from religion tied to a specific community or hierarchy (Borrough & Feller,
2015). These studies of religious discourse within memes further suggest the Internet as a whole primarily promotes “lived religion” by offering resources and an environment innately resistant to the traditional boundaries of religious traditions (Bellar, 2017; Borrough & Feller, 2015). However, in this study a different structured form of religion was seen to be at work, drawing on established discourses of Civil Religion, through which arguments are intentionally and unintentionally filtered.

Civil Religion is a form of religion in which religious beliefs and practices are closely associated with a political viewpoint or religious practice, and religious values are infused with politically ideological stances. Bellah (1967) described Civil Religion as one that has a “public religious dimension” (p. 4) that allows for and even encourages the convergence of spiritual and political talk. Here religious ideas and language are used in political speeches, or political discussions are interpreted through religious narratives. Civil Religion uses the rhetoric and language of a nation’s dominant religion and infuses these with a supposedly apolitical purpose. Using the shared language of belief to promote a moral agenda, this process evokes religious sentiments by advocating core beliefs in truth and justice or the idea of God that are relatable to people of different religious backgrounds.

We saw American Civil Religion enacted through the memes studied. Here American nationalism was married to a set of religious beliefs. Bellah (1967) pointed out American Civil Religion is non-sectarian, in that it does not directly ascribe to the beliefs of one specific religion; rather, it adopts the value language of a society’s major religious groups to engage and convince all religious people of the divine and moral worthiness of a given position. This allows for the translation of “concerns into universally, rather than religion-specific values” (Copeland, 2009, p. 3). By referencing God without giving God a sectarian name—for example, Jesus from Christianity or Allah from Islam—this becomes a tool politicians can use to invoke people’s religious beliefs and give religious people a sense of belonging to a national cause, without ostracizing individual groups. Using vague religious language allows many different groups that believe in a Supreme Being or deity to feel included within this rhetoric. For example, as monotheistic faiths Muslims, Jews, and Christians can all relate to the concept of “God,” although they differ in their interpretation of his nature and name. This is what Klempp (2007) described when discussing the “moderating effects on the use of religious arguments in the public square” (p. 527). American Civil Religion evokes a non-sectarian God who favors and promotes nationalism, which is seen as at work within religion and its systems.

Civil Religion thus attempts to present a picture of religious inclusivity, one that suggests religious tolerance by speaking in terms of core shared beliefs and universal values:

At its best, [this is] a genuine apprehension of universal and transcendent religious reality as seen in or... as revealed through the experience of the American people. ... [and is] neither so general that it has lacked incisive relevance to the American scene, nor so particular that it has placed American society above universal human rights.” (Bellah, 1967, p. 12)

American Civil Religion can be seen as a rhetorical tool used to garner religious support and justification for America’s actions and goals. It uses religious language and ideas to explain cultural and political mandates without invoking one particular theology. It is important to note that the focus of American Civil Religion is not God, but America; invoking God or other religious imagery is done to give legitimacy to political actions. When the focus is on America and not a specific theology, the language used is often religiously vague and therefore inclusive, yet specific about the promotion of America and her goals. Our study showed using the meme steeped in American Civil Religion to portray a “transcendent religious reality” is highly problematic.

### Employing Strategies of God Talk

If American Civil Religion serves as the “what” being enacted in public discourse, **God Talk** can be described as the “how,” or the method by which this is accomplished. God Talk refers to specific ways language and rhetoric combine religion and politics in the public sphere. God Talk represents techniques used by both politicians and religious individuals to marry religion with politics and justify this intersection. Gaddy (2005) explained that in a society in which religion is so important, the absence of religious talk would be more problematic than its presence. However, “not all God talk is the same... some God talk has about it the ring of authenticity... other God talk has about it the clang of deception or manipulation” (p. 50). Gaddy noted two forms of God Talk that can be utilized as communication strategies: the Religiousization of Politics and the Polarization of Religion. Both forms were identified in the findings of this study. In Religiousization of Politics, a partisan group uses religion and religious rhetoric to achieve a sectarian agenda. The goal of the Religiousization of Politics is the achievement of a desired political end. In other words, Civil Religion uses religious language to establish a political stance as the moral center for decision-making. This morality is communicated via religious-sounding rhetoric used to describe a political value, rather than by appealing to any specific religion. The inverse of the above strategy is the Polarization of Religion. This presents the political as the necessary outflow of a specific religious belief or set of religious values (i.e., religious beliefs are central and should lead to certain social and political actions). Whereas the Religiousization of Politics is based on the notion of the inherent morality of the political view, the Polarization of Religion centers on religious belief and claims to be the logical outflow of those values in relation to a specific partisan action. In other words, religious beliefs are tied to and informed by what is presented as moral political action.
Through our study, we suggest Civil Religion is the result when, in an attempt to present a homogenized form of religiosity and its political impulses, memes combine religious rhetoric with political purposes in a public arena. Such attempts to create an all-inclusive religious narrative that supports a political agenda are shown to be highly problematic for religious discourse online, as well as for the way religion was perceived within the 2016 presidential elections.

Methodology and Sampling
This research began with a mapping study of religious-political memes conducted in collaboration with a class of 24 undergraduates in Fall 2016. Students were instructed to select 8–12 Internet memes pertaining to a single political candidate or issues related to religion and politics, and visible during the last 6 weeks of the 2016 elections. The aim was to gather a broad sampling of the range of Internet memes dealing with religious and political themes to see how religion was presented in these memes. Students were instructed to conduct a Google image search and select memes from the first 200 images appearing on the search results page to study (1) their chosen theme or political candidate or (2) to study memes involving both religion and politics coupled with specific stock characters or religious figures (clearly identified on knowyourmeme.com). From this research 24 separate case studies were conducted, including studies of religion and political candidates Ted Cruz, Hilary Clinton, Mike Pence, Bernie Sanders, and Donald Trump, as well as studies of key election issues such as immigration and religion, Islam and religion, and religious groups’ responses to poverty and gun control. The average student analyzed eight memes over a 4-week period between October and November 2016, or about two memes per week, which were recorded in online research diaries. In seven cases, initial online searches performed in week 1 of the study led students to a specific Instagram account or Facebook page focused around their research theme, from which they drew their additional memes for study. From this work, a sample of 189 memes was identified. Admittedly, this is a selective sample of memes, and so prevented us from making broad claims about the representative nature of the sample and analysis. However, by gathering memes posted online during a specified period of time, and found on the top page of Google image searches, we were able to consider some of the common religious-political themes discussed and conversations circulating online at the end of the election cycle through memes. Through analyzing these themes, we were able to identify some of the common ways religion was presented in common, popular viral memes appearing during the final days of the presidential election. Students analyzed each meme in their individual case study, focusing on the messages communicated about the political candidate or issue and reflecting on set themes regarding what messages about religious community, identity, and authority were presented. These findings were documented in individual research-diary blogs.

After this initial research, a team of three undergraduates was selected to conduct further analysis of the 189 memes. At this stage, all memes were entered into a password-protected research database that recorded meme images, source information, identifying meme topics, and the genres used to visually and/or textually reference both politics and religion. The sample was carefully examined and culled to include only memes that simultaneously and explicitly displayed both religious and political content. The result was a final study sample of 150. For example, Buddy Christ Appendix Meme 4 was classified as a religious-political meme, because it references both a religious characteristic—in this case the similarity of comparing a political candidate with Christ—and has a political dimension, because it promoted Bernie Sanders’s candidacy.

The final study sample then underwent a further thematic analysis by three team members. Memes were coded according to Aguilar et al.’s genres and religious frames. Aguilar’s definitions of meme frames were extended in this study to investigate how both politics and religion were presented in these memes; frames of promoting, mocking, being playful, or creating a trope were applied to see what aspects of religion and politics were framed in distinct ways in these meme messages. Finally, memes were analyzed to identify which God Talk strategies were at work in each meme. For consistency, each meme was coded by two separate members of the research team, each identifying religious meme genres, religion frames, and God Talk strategies at work to ensure the accuracy and consistency of these designations. After analysis was complete a team meeting was held and discrepancies in identification were discussed. This coding comparison found no differences in coders’ genre designations, only eight categorization differences in religion frames (or a .053% differentiation), and only nine differences in God Talk strategy identifications (or a .06% differentiation). Each of these discrepancies was then discussed until a standardized designation could be agreed upon by the team.

Meme Analysis
Our analysis spotlighted tensions created when religion and political themes are combined in memetic discourse. This was done by exploring the specific religious meme genres, frames, and God Talk strategies present in our sample of 150 memes, as well as how these were employed. Thus, we found memes mixing religion and politics often evoke a form of Civil Religion and paint mainstream religion in American culture in a critical or negative manner.

Meme Genres Highlight Critical Reactions to Religious-Political Intersections and Figures
The most common meme genre found within this study was the Reaction Meme focused on humorous or blunt reactions toward a political event, issue, or individual (n = 92). Memes here primarily featured reactions toward Donald Trump’s
statements and persona \((n=30)\) or current and proposed policies or laws \((n=8)\). Reaction Memes tended to showcase perceived positions of the religious public about pressing social issues and potential notable societal changes showcased during the elections, especially those related to issues of the environment, poverty, and the rights of minority populations. This can be seen in Appendix Meme 5, a photo of Donald Trump paired with text that reads, “With liberty and justice for all . . . unless you are a Muslim.” The United States of America has long been known as the “melting pot” of the world, where American citizens can freely worship however they choose. However, this meme points to the controversy surrounding Trump’s stance on radical Islam and the potential ban on Muslims many feared Trump would propose. In Appendix Meme 6, we see a somewhat anxious-looking Indiana Governor Mike Pence, Donald Trump’s chosen running mate, seeking to reassure Christian voters concerned about growing lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBTQ) rights by touting his support of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act. In both memes religion is framed as exclusionary, which runs counter to the inclusivity Civil Religion seeks to represent.

Religious Figure Memes \((n=40)\) were the second most common, using characters such as Republican Jesus \((n=19)\) and Story Time Jesus \((n=8)\), which highlight the dominance of Christian religious narratives in memes. This emphasis suggests God is partisan and/or Christian-centric. Republican Jesus, seen in Appendix Meme 7, illustrates this tendency: Jesus poses with a rifle, an image captioned with the phrase, “Republican Jesus loves you . . . if you are American, Republican, Christian, white, straight, male.” Republican Jesus memes often spotlight contradictions between Christian values/beliefs and Republican policies/ideals. So religion is not only presented as biased, it is characterized as highly sectarian. Story Time Jesus memes also note these perceptions, but use humor that is more satirical and more exemplary of other religion frame used. This shows that while memes can present religion and humor in lighthearted, less cynical ways, this may be markedly less common when religion and politics are combined in memetic discourse.

It was further noted that the majority of memes in this study referenced (and frequently mocked) Christian Conservative voters and self-proclaimed Christian candidates (such as Ted Cruz and Donald Trump). We believe this is because such candidates frequently incorporated God Talk into their campaigns as a rhetorical strategy to gain support for certain political policies; statements to that effect were often featured in memes studied. This can be seen in Appendix Meme 17, which juxtaposes a quote from Ted Cruz—“our rights come from God, not the constitution”—against an image of the Founding Fathers responding, “Pardon us while we roll over in our graves.” In such cases, we found it was important to consider the possible motive behind such God Talk by considering the specific strategy used and its potential implications.

Meme Framing Mocks Religious Engagement with Politics

During our analysis of the frames used to present both religion and politics, we noted a prevalence of negative frame references to religious individuals and their beliefs. The Mocking Frame \((n=116)\) was most common, where a specific religious individual, idea, or event was made fun of. We noted that to fully understand the claims being made and religious aspects being mocked through such memes, it was necessary to identify the particular policies, religious ideals, and/or candidates targeted. Most common were specific groups, such as the Republican Party \((n=18)\) or Democratic Party \((n=4)\); candidates, such as Donald Trump \((n=31)\), Hilary Clinton \((n=11)\), and Ted Cruz \((n=7)\); and specific policies \((n=18)\), especially those pertaining to controversy over perceived religious positions on taxation, welfare, affordable healthcare, minorities, and the Religious Freedom Act. Playful Memes were the second most common frame found \((n=15)\), mostly focused on religious characters—specifically Jesus—associations with politics. However, Mocking Memes were over five times as common as any other religion frame used. This shows that while memes can present religion and humor in lighthearted, less cynical ways, this may be markedly less common when religion and politics are combined in memetic discourse.

The Politicization of Religion strategy uses discussions of religious beliefs or metaphors as the basis for describing political decision-making or justifying certain political actions \((Gaddy, 2005)\). This is demonstrated in three ways, by highlighting (1) the ways religion was used to establish credibility for a candidate or policy, (2) candidate quotes showcasing their personal faith, or (3) how candidates used political language to connect back to US religious-cultural
tradition. The Politicization of Religion is clearly seen in Appendix Meme 9, where side-by-side images of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump are paired with the phrase, “The only election that matters is in Romans 9 and Ephesians 1.” These biblical passages refer to the Christian doctrine of divine election or “pre-destination,” which speaks to whether or not someone has been chosen by God to be a Christian, is truly “saved,” and will go to Heaven after death. This meme communicates a theological or religious-insider perspective held by many Conservative Christians, particularly those coming from the Reformed tradition. It inherently argues that the results of a secular election are secondary to God’s ultimate predestined plan for America. Here religious beliefs and sanctioning are presented as ranking above politics, as key decision-makers in the divine destiny of a candidate. Similarly, Appendix Meme 10 is aimed at a specific group of Christian voters—that is, Christian Liberals or Progressives—and seeks to draw on their theological convictions to establish political credibility for a specific candidate, Bernie Sanders. The meme reads, “Voting for the socialist Jew who condemns bankers is literally the Christian thing to do.” This phrase refers to Jesus, who himself was a Jew and blatantly condemned manipulative bankers in the Bible. Jesus is labeled a socialist by some Progressive and Liberal Christians, who place emphasis on his care for the poor (Hird, 1908). This meme’s satirical text encourages Christian voters who view Jesus as the ultimate authority figure to recognize Bernie Sanders’s “similarities” and consider giving him their vote. In both examples, memes employ distinctive theological narratives from the Christian tradition as a way to validate specific candidates and establish their credibility with the religious electorate. Here, they attempt to appeal to religious voters by suggesting certain candidates are divinely approved options. The Politicization of Religion strategy in these memes links religious beliefs and affiliations to certain political actions and entities, suggesting to readers that some choices should be seen as religiously sanctioned and mandated.

Religiofication of Politics in Memes: When Religion Promotes Politics It Is Contradictory

The Religiofication of Politics strategy is different in that it specifically uses religious language to promote a political agenda or to frame political policies as religious actions (Gaddy, 2005). This is demonstrated when religious language is used in memes as a tool to describe the actions or agenda of a politician in an effort to garner support from religious voters for the policy or political group. Appendix Meme 11 points to Donald Trump’s attempt to use religion to show Christian voters that he is one of them: “I don’t read the bible very often, but when I do I read Two Corinthians.” Here it is implied that Trump’s self-proclaimed Christianity is disingenuous, as indicated by his inaccurate pronunciation of the Bible passage typically described as “Second Corinthians.” This highlights Trump’s flawed attempt to use God Talk to promote his religious identity and thus gain a firmer electoral position with Christian voters. Similarly, Appendix Meme 2 exhibits this strategy by using biblical language as a means of affirming Republican public policy. It reads, “And then Republican Jesus said: Only feed the ones who pass the drug test.” This caption alludes to the controversy over proposed Republican policy arguing that Americans on welfare should be drug tested before receiving support. The meme uses the figure of Republican Jesus to expose and highlight the conflict between conservative policies and Christian values, specifically Jesus’ teaching about caring for the poor. The rhetorical strategy of the meme suggests religious Republican voters misguidedly use their religious ideals to affirm certain political policies. As Duerringer (2016) argued in his study of Republican Jesus, memes employing this character in particular exemplify a critique of contemporary religious Conservatism by highlighting the ideological tensions that often exist between the religion and political stances of the Christian Conservative electorate. These memes show how political action becomes religiously framed and contextualized through the strategic use of common religious narratives and language. The Religiofication of Politics strategy uses religious language as a tool to build support for certain political policies, yet it can also turn into a form of critique of religious support for a political policy perceived as riddled with moral inconsistencies.

Summary of Initial Findings

Overall, we observed God Talk at work in these Internet memes through these two strategies. The Politicization of Religion surfaces in memes either by using religion to stress a political candidate’s natural expression of faith, or as a tool to establish/undermine the credibility of a religious person or certain issues. Memes highlighting the religious beliefs or identity of a candidate use this strategy when they show how this identity informs what truly matters to the candidate and how they view important issues in an election. The strategies can also be used to establish or undermine credibility or reveal attempts to make correlations (especially noting contradictions) between the actions or statements of candidates, especially those concerning Christian beliefs or Jesus’ teachings. Memes using the Religiofication of Politics employ religious language as a tool to frame electoral politics or as a way to advance policies by speaking in religious metaphors or stories to draw in a target audience. In memes attempting to advance support of certain public policies, we found positions on poverty and welfare often utilized a distinctive religiously informed rhetorical strategy to justify or critique controversial social-political stances or actions. From these findings, we concluded that it is not simply religious beliefs or people that are being mocked or questioned, but the very notion of how religion intersects with politics and the problematic nature of religion being employed within political
discourse. This overview of general findings sets the stage for a focused investigation spotlighting the difficulty of using religious-sounding positions, critiques, and/or correlations as justifications for political beliefs or actions, and the implications this has for public perceptions of religion.

**Trump Political and Religious Memes: A Case Study of Memetic Civil Religion and God Talk**

In order to further discuss how God-Talk strategies are evoked in memetic discourse, we offer a focused analysis of memes found online in October and November 2016 from our sample featuring then-presidential candidate Donald Trump. Through this analysis we will demonstrate how these memes present a version of Civil Religion that offers a select and potentially biased representation of religion in American culture.

In our study, nearly a third (46 of 150) of the memes referenced Trump, either mocking his political stance in relation to his self-proclaimed religious beliefs, or reacting to a religiously informed statement or action made during his candidacy. As in our broader study, Reaction Memes were the most common genre within Trump memes (n = 35), and the majority spotlighted negative reactions to statements he made in 2016. Mocking Religion was also predominant frame used (n = 36), as memes made fun of religious references made by Trump and the way he used this language. The dominant subjects of these memes included critique of Trump’s character (n = 14), Trump’s religion (n = 11), and quotes from Trump (n = 10). Our analysis showed most enacted a “Religiofication of Politics” strategy, highlighting how his campaign attempted to incorporate religious language in order to garner support for his political position. In the latter half of his campaign Trump was noted for his public attempts to self-identify as a Christian and affiliate with various Christian Conservative groups. These memes drew attention to these actions and note how Trump’s Christian identity, behaviors, and beliefs were perceived negatively by a broader public. Thus, these memes became tools of critique, not only of Trump and his religion, but of the problematic of a politician performing religion in the public sphere.

**Genres: Questioning Trump’s Religious Identity**

First, these memes referenced instances when Trump touted his religious identity and Christian affiliation as opportunities to undermine his credibility. Appendix Meme 11 is an example of a Reaction Meme that does this, as it refers to when Trump mistakenly said “Two Corinthians” during a speech he gave at Liberty University, an evangelical college. This caption is critical in tone because it mocks and questions Trump’s basic biblical knowledge, since 2 Corinthians is typically pronounced Second Corinthians by Evangelicals, one of Trump’s targeted demographics. This meme demonstrates Trump’s flawed attempts to use religious rhetoric—that is, seeking to appeal to a Christian audience by using shared language—to accomplish and build his political agenda. By using a Mocking Frame, making fun of his incorrect biblical reference, the meme delegitimizes or questions Trump’s claims of religious affiliation and knowledge. It also presents Conservative Christians as lacking in their own biblical literacy. Appendix Meme 14 suggests the absurdity of Trump’s identity as a Christian. It shows him holding up a Bible at a political rally with the exclamation, “Look at me, everybody! I’m a Christian! Howdy,” yet presents his public proclamation of being a Christian as one not to be taken seriously.

**Framing: Mocking Trump’s Performance of Religion in the Political Sphere**

Second, these Trump memes used his identification with specific religious behaviors as ways to mock his religion. Appendix Meme 12 highlights Trump’s made-up quote where he sought to appeal to Christian voters by claiming the Bible is his favorite book, suggesting his familiarity with the text. This is another example of Religiofication of Politics. The meme stresses Trump’s religious familiarity with Christianity’s sacred word, suggesting it informs his political actions. Yet in this meme, Trump’s face is superimposed on the body of notable religious meme figure Buddy Christ, often used to mock religion, especially Christianity. (Buddy Christ emerged in the movie *Dogma*, where he was presented in a sarcastic manner, as an outdated Catholic Church sought to replace the depressing image of Christ on the Crucifix with a user-friendly, more accessible Buddy Christ in order to garner interest in the religion.) By replacing the face of Jesus/Buddy Christ with Trump, this meme seeks to appeal to America’s dominant religion, Christianity, but in a way that challenges the candidate’s performance of religion. Just as Buddy Christ represents a playful, nontraditional, and potentially heretical character, Trump is portrayed as a Christian leader, but one whose actions and character are not to be taken seriously. This presents an argument that Trump only performs his religion in order to target and appeal to Christian voters, but these actions do not exhibit a true, natural expression of faith. Therefore, this meme mocks Trump’s statement and character, and introduces a multiple-layer critique that enacts Civil Religion.

Again, Appendix Meme 13 juxtaposes Trump with Buddy Christ in order to amplify the contradiction between Trump’s behaviors and proclaimed faith. We see Trump saying, “I could stand in the middle of 5th Avenue and shoot someone and I wouldn’t lose any voters.” Below Trump, Buddy Christ gives a “thumbs-up” affirmation with a finger pointed seemingly at Trump, but his gesture could also be seen to mimic a gun. The meme displays Trump’s belief that his religious supporters would follow him even if he acted in an extreme
Religiofication of Politics: Trump’s Political Position Trumps (and Informs) His Christianity

Third, Trump memes in our study highlighted the contradiction between Trump’s purported religious beliefs and basic Christian teachings. In Appendix Meme 15, Trump is critiqued for holding beliefs contradictory to the teaching of Jesus. This meme presents Trump as one of Jesus’ followers, but here he is seen interrupting Jesus’ famous Sermon on the Mount to challenge him and claim that, “Blessed are the Poor . . .” is a “Wrong!” teaching. Appendix Meme 16 critiques not only Trump, but his religious supporters. Here Trump is called out for claiming never to be wrong, and thus, not in need of forgiveness. The meme’s sarcasm lies in its implicit critique of that claim as it alludes to biblical admonishments like “all have sinned and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23), or “pride comes before the fall” (Proverbs 16:18). Such memes call Trump’s religious beliefs into question based on the fact that they directly contradict the teachings of Christ.

Through this case study, we noted a strong connection between Donald Trump memes and Republican Jesus, in which Trump was presented as utilizing a Religiofication of Politics strategy to gain religious support. Just as Republican Jesus presents the religious figure cloaked with and proclaiming political ideology of a specific group, these Trump memes used parody to frame Trump as a religious figure/character, by presenting political views as religiously sanctioned. Trump memes turned the spotlight on his Conservative Christian base supporters, who were presented as comfortable with his misuse of religious language to frame his political agenda in this election, even when this approach raised clear contradictions. These memes highlighted ways in which Trump, his supporters, and even his critics, emphasized the religious identity he portrayed during the election as one directed specifically toward the Conservative Religious Right and their understanding of the role religion should play in society. These Trump memes also demonstrated the fact that combining religion and politics in memes creates a space of dissonance, where their intersection simultaneously promotes and critiques Civil Religion.

Conclusion

Overall, this study offered four insights on how religion is treated and tends to be represented within religious-political memes.

Religious-Political Memes Speak the Language of Civil Religion

First, our research argued memes about religion and politics enact a form of Civil Religion, rather than lived religion, as other studies have suggested. Memes about religion and politics enact Civil Religion by presenting religious belief and practices as actively mixed with political engagement. So religion as seen in these memes focuses only on very specific areas of civil and social engagement, rather than broadly defining religious actions of everyday life.

Religion as presented in such memes advocates seeing certain actions and political issues through a religious lens. This use of religion as a way to support political agendas is challenging, because though it suggests a universal response from religious practitioners and seeks to present a general religious response to political action, it is typically drawn from and emulates the specific tradition and cultural context of the nation’s dominant religion. This form of religion is inherently politicized and focused on political action in the guise of religion, rather than the enactment of religious ritual and beliefs. This framing of religion in religious-political memes may be at odds with the religious understandings of some faith-based practitioners ostensibly represented by this discourse, especially those who see politics as category external to religion and not to be mixed with religious ideology. We argue such Internet meme discourse about politics and religion creates an inherently fraught relationship, as these memes promote a form of “political” God Talk seen as problematic by many American religious practitioners. This study finding that the majority of memes linking religion and political ideals highlight conservative ideals, especially the Republican platforms in the 2016 election, suggests the need for further study. Such a skewed view of religion, suggesting religious-political memes promote a Civil Religion that only engages one particular set of voices within the American public, is a proposition in need of further interrogation and exploration.

Religion Shown as at Odds with Conservative Political Ideals

Second, our findings pointed to an overall critical assessment of the perceived dominant religious beliefs at work within American religious culture, taking the form of Conservative Protestant Christianity. Memes in this study drew attention to an innate conflict between public understandings of Christianity and conservative political ideals; meme humor helps highlight this tension. Many of these memes criticized Republican social-welfare positions and platforms, pointing out how those run contrary to a social-gospel understanding of Christianity, an ideology found within Progressive and some Mainline Christian groups (Hopkins, 1967). A social-gospel perspective would emphasize the social teachings of Jesus, such as selflessly assisting the poor. However, in these memes
we found the religious message communicated emphasized the alignment between Republicans and (Conservative) Christians, who want to enforce policies designed to make the poor meet requirements before receiving help. This contradictory framing was exemplified by Republican Jesus memes that showed how religious characters like Jesus are transformed into ideological tools when imported into memetic communication. This study showed what happens when religious symbols are mixed with certain political ideologies, thus promoting sect-specific narrative as representative of an entire religion “as it locates and pries open spaces of dissension in hegemonic articulations of Christianity with capitalism, militarism, neo-conservatism, and neoliberalism” (Duerringer, 2016, p. 9). Thus, these memes employed a distinctive version of Civil Religion cloaked in a particular political persuasion and using a specific interpretive structure.

Civil Religion Enacted in Memes Struggles to Stay Apolitical

Third, the above problematic was especially true in the case study of Trump memes presenting Trump’s attempts to present his religious belief, practices, and identity as aligned with this Conservative form of Christianity. These memes demonstrated how Civil Religion can be used against itself, by showing the difficulty in being apolitical when engaging religious language that caters to a specific group. Trump leaned on religion to promote his candidacy and so affirmed religion and politics can and should be intertwined. Yet he only acknowledged Conservative Christianity as a valid context for this engagement. In fact, other memes showcased how Trump blatantly alienated Muslims and Progressive, Liberal Christians in his presentations of Civil Religion. Yet one can no longer vocally contradict religious beliefs without having those contradictions captured, discussed, or critiqued online. Furthermore, disingenuously trying to combine politics and religion for the sake of promoting a political purpose creates an open space of critique in an age when technology makes it easy to point out such presented paradoxes between the two.

The Problematic of Essentializing Religion Through Political Discourse in Memes

Fourth, scholars studying memes about religion and politics, as well as other aspects of religion, must be aware that such memes often present religion as a broad, all-encompassing rather than nuanced category. Findings here and in other scholarly work on memes about religion suggested meme creators “tend to focus on religion as a general construct with a tendency toward negative framings of religious beliefs, practices and traditions” (Bellar et. al., 2013, p. 13). Thus, it should not be surprising to discover that memes dealing with religion and politics have a tendency to overgeneralize religious beliefs and stereotype religious groups in their depictions. The limitations inherent in a single image and minimal text should be recognized, especially the fact that these prevent nuanced conversation. Previous research has echoed this tendency for memes to use broad generalities as cultural shorthand (Shifman, 2013), so the fact that they take a negative or critical stance on the religious context being described should come as no surprise. This has been shown in the dominance of Questioning and Mocking Frames found in our study and in other studies of memes and religion.

Overall, religious-political memes offer a channel for succinctly communicating widely held opinions online, through their ability to concisely summarize arguments in memorable, often satirical ways. By employing God Talk strategies, they act like visual sound bites within digital culture to capture core beliefs and assumptions about religion and politics. Future work on religion and political discourse in Internet memes should consider how different audiences read religion in Internet memes, as the context of meme meaning and interpretation would vary depending on the time during which these memes were consumed and shared. In addition, future researchers should consider to what extent the discourse observed in the memes and the way religion was employed within them were a distinct response to the 2016 Presidential election or have broader connections to the current American cultural milieu.

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Meme Appendix

Meme 1. Story Time Jesus.
Source: Obtained through Google image searches.

Meme 2. Republican Jesus.
Source: Obtained through Google image searches.

Meme 3. Story Time Jesus.
Source: Obtained through Google image searches.

Meme 4. Buddy Christ on Bernie Sanders.
Source: Obtained through Google image searches.
Meme 5. Donald Trump on Islam.
Source: Obtained through Google image searches.

Meme 6. Mike Pence and the Religious Freedom Restoration Act.
Source: Obtained through Google image searches.

Meme 7. Republican Jesus.
Source: Obtained through Google image searches.

Meme 8. Story Time Jesus.
Source: Obtained through Google image searches.

Meme 9. Trump, Clinton, and the election.
Source: Obtained through Google image searches.
Meme 10. Jesus and Bernie Sanders.
Source: Obtained through Google image searches.

Meme 11. Donald Trump and 2 Corinthians.
Source: Obtained through Google image searches.

Meme 12. Donald Trump/Buddy Christ Spoof.
Source: Obtained through Google image searches.

Meme 13. Donald Trump and Buddy Christ.
Source: Obtained through Google image searches.

Meme 14. Donald Trump, I'm a Christian!
Source: Obtained through Google image searches.
Meme 15. Donald Trump Spoof Meme.
Source: Obtained through Google image searches.

Meme 16. Trump and Religious Right.
Source: Obtained through Google image searches.

Meme 17. Cruz and the Founding Fathers.
Source: Obtained through Google image searches.