

Using Digital Tools to study the Messages Internet Memes Communicate about Religion

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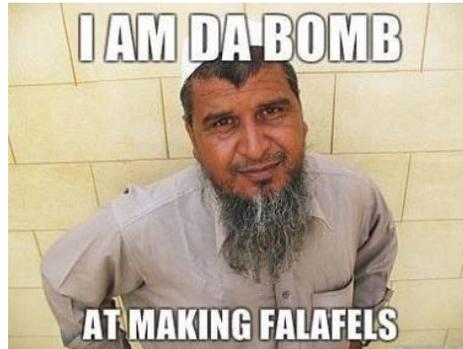
Our social media feeds are increasingly full of memes that are spread via Twitter retweets, Facebook shares, and Instagram posts. Internet memes can take on many forms from video clips, GIFs (moving image files), and digital photographs that tell a variety of stories about current events, people's opinions, popular culture, different cultures, and even religion. For the last eight years, I have focused on studying image-based memes, those that use digital pictures taken from popular culture that have been mixed with recognizable slogans or quotes to communicate "humorous" messages about a variety of religious beliefs and groups.

Memes often draw from a range of stock characters that have been commonly used to communicate by using distinct types of humor and reactions to a topic, from the playful, self-congratulatory responses of "Success Kid" to the ironic humor of "Condescending Wonka" who is subtly belittling contradictory claims. My research has also focused on identifying the emerging religious stock characters that have become prominent figures used to communicate positive and negative views about religion through memes; from "Buddy Christ" using depictions of Jesus from the movie *Dogma* that presents him as a hip, a friendly, and an approachable character to "Religion Pidgeon" who speaks about religious beliefs with a critical tone.



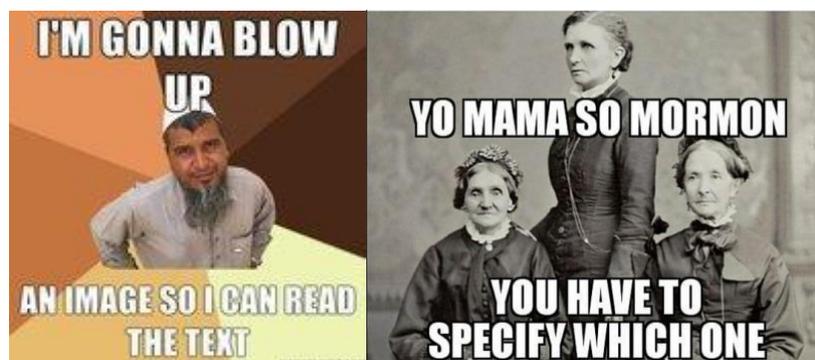
In the past five years, I have been using Internet memes in my classes as a way to explore and discuss with my students the common assumptions that people have and communicate about religious beliefs, individuals, and communities online. I have noticed that the anonymity of the Internet seems to encourage increasingly hostile and biased discourse about religion. Internet memes allow their hidden creator to present highly critical and oversimplified messages about religion. I argue that Internet memes that are used to talk about minority cultures and religion often showcase people's worst biases and beliefs about others. While some memes are playful and use seemingly benign sarcasm, we have consistently noted how memes about religion tend to echo and even amplify offline cultural stereotypes about religion made by community outsiders.

Take for example the “Ordinary Muslim Man” memes, where the original version used an image of a middle aged Southeast Asian man in a Muslim prayer hat readings texts like: “I am Da BOMB...at making Falafel.” While the meme seeks to use humor and irony to play with and question popular stereotypes about Muslims, it ends up echoing and inadvertently affirming this theme through the memes.



This research led me to a project studying Internet memes about religion and what they can tell us much about how religion is being conceived of and talked about in American culture. Initial investigations and early articles about religious meme discourse have shown internet memes frequently promote negative and mocking messages about most religious traditions and their believers (see: Aguilar et al., 2017; Campbell et al., 2018). Specifically, in my current book project “When Memes are Mean: Problem Stories about Religion Internet Memes Promote online,” I am trying to answer the question: What messages do Internet memes promote and circulate online about minority religious groups in America?

My research has revealed that popular memes about religion are created by those outside of these religious groups and primarily feature broad generalizations about cultures and their religious beliefs. For example, prominent memes in our Google search often frame all Muslims as terrorists and all Mormons as polygamists. When memes lean on and promote broad generalizations about these religious cultures and their religious beliefs—i.e., all Muslim are essentially terrorists, or all Mormons are polygamists—they promote messages laden with inaccuracies and even degrading characterization.



For this project, I have collected over 1000 internet memes that depict popular perceptions of Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and minority Christian groups such as Mormons online. One of the key challenges that I have faced with this project is issues with how to manage and work with these unique visual-textual digital artifacts. Much time has been spent trying to come up with a systematic way to collect, categorize, and analyze the common themes and communication strategies these memes use to talk about religion. As a Lived Religion Fellow, I have used the resources and time provided to create a digital tool that would allow me to centrally store copies of the memes that I had collected, and also provide features for deeper analysis of these memes including the ability to compare and contrast meme messages communicated with a single religion or between different religious contexts.

Through the help of an educational app designer, I was able to create an interactive database app. The app is designed to upload and store meme images store information about each one as a separate entry. These entries allow for the tagging and categorization of each of these memes using specific themes identified in my research. This has allowed me to code the memes along the lines of the dominant styles of humor and religious framing techniques used, as well as the prevalence of certain meme stock characters, and the most common stereotype used.

The app allows memes to be stored in separate “collections” allowing me to group them along different research themes and topic. Specifically, I have focused on creating two collections. The “Religious Meme Characters” collection documents religious-focused meme templates and characters. The “Stock Characters with Religious Themes” collection identifies popular meme characters that are commonly used to talk about religious topic or groups, as identified in my previous meme research and the religious stereotypes memes collected. Also, due to doing this work during the COVID-19 global pandemic, I collected both religious-inspired coronavirus and pandemic memes, and used the app to create a “Coronavirus & Religion” collection.



Although I am still in the process of entering and tagging memes related to my research, the database app has allowed me to identify and make a number of observations. Internet memes depicting religious groups such as Muslims, Jews, Hindus, and Buddhists focus primarily on representing what are viewed as key or archetypal religious practices, and “typical” or “central” religious beliefs. Yet, because these memes speak as a voice of one that outside the religious tradition being represented, their identification of core practices and beliefs is often inaccurate. For example, Buddhist memes suggest that all that followers of Buddha do all day is meditate all day when this is simply one part of their spiritual discipline and devotion. Memes about Islam stress the doctrine of jihad, which in reality, is a minor teaching and not a major of what most religious Muslims would see as a core value of learning, respect for all, or the acknowledgement of the oneness of God. By placing memes in a centralized space and providing options for tagging, these patterns become more evident and pronounced both visually and through textual analysis. The meme database app has been helpful in identifying the main types of stereotypes that are presented and promoted through Internet memes that are under study. Thus far, three common categories of stereotypes have emerged as highly prominent amongst these memes. These are: (1) stereotypes about religious gender norms and roles, (2) anti-social depictions of how religious people engage with secular or mainstream culture, and (3) assumptions about the inauthenticity of religious practice and motivations. While these observations are in need of more unpacking and exploration from this early analysis, we see how digital tools, specifically and strategically designed to study religious digital media, offer a valuable way to not only collate and maintain such valuable research data, but also to provide unique opportunities to compare and contrast Internet memes that can lead to valuable insights for scholars of religion.

SOURCES

Aguilar, A., Campbell, H., Stanley, M. & Taylor, E. (2017) "Communication Mixed Messages About Religion through Internet Memes", *Information, Communication & Society*, 20 (10): 1458-1520.

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