



Ecclesial Online Identities during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Scandinavian Majority Churches on Facebook, Christmas 2020

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Abstract

The majority churches in Europe are paradoxically considered to be both powerful and weak religious institutions. Their complex position in secular society makes it important for them to communicate who they are to the public. The Covid-19 pandemic was a situation in which churches and other religious institutions were 'forced' to use digital media as a primary arena of outreach. This article investigates how three Scandinavian majority churches negotiated their ecclesial identities on Facebook during 2020, the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic. The following question is explored: did 'online' enactments represent their religious identities and core values in new ways to the public? The data material consists of material from the official Facebook pages of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark (the ELCD), the Church of Norway, and the Church of Sweden, as well as interviews with Facebook editors from each church. The study demonstrates how the Church of Norway and the Church of Sweden enact church practices on Facebook, while the ELCD tries not to be too 'churchy'. Facebook emerges as a hybridized third space where Scandinavian majority churches pursue new logics and forms of meaning making to retain their position in secular societies. Overall, the churches' online identities on Facebook are not new representations but intensified versions of their distinct offline identities as 'folk churches' for the whole population.

Keywords: majority churches, mediatization, social media logics, sacred–secular, Christmas, Covid-19, digital religion, lived religion

The scholarly and public discourse about the majority churches in Europe is contradictory and complex. The majority churches are presented as powerful and privileged (Astor and Mayrl 2020) and as weak institutions experiencing an irreversible and accelerating decline (Monnot and Stolz 2018). This

article investigates how three Scandinavian majority churches negotiated their ecclesial identities on Facebook during 2020, the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic.¹ The issue of 'identity' has been a major concern from the very beginning of internet research. Initially, the internet was perceived as a virtual space where individuals were free to create online identities, and these were perceived as separate and alternatives to one's everyday identity (Turkle 1995). This perception was also a dominant view within early research contributions to what was called 'cyber-religion' in the mid to late 1990s. As researched by Heidi Campbell, cyber-religion suggested that religion on the internet meant new kinds of religious community and rituals freed from traditional constraints (Campbell 2013). As the internet developed and became part of the everyday, the concept of cyber-identities, as well as 'religion online' and 'religion offline' (Helland 2000), became increasingly blurred and blended.

The current research interest is rather to investigate the connections between online and offline religious practices, and how a 'third space' emerges when lived religious practice and digital culture meet within 'a hybridized and fluid context requiring new logics and evoking unique forms of meaning making' (Campbell 2013, 4). Thus, studying how Scandinavian churches negotiate their ecclesial identity on Facebook does not entail studying their online identities as segregated from their offline identities as churches. Facebook is perceived as a social medium that offers individuals – but also religious institutions – an opportunity to represent their religious identities and core values in new ways to the public (Lövheim 2016), but as Heidi Campbell and Mia Lövheim argue, multiple connections exist between who a person – or an institution – is online and offline. Of particular relevance for this article is that 'online expressions of religion can be seen as part of broader social and cultural transformations, where new media technology, as well as offline religious institutions, play a part' (Campbell and Lövheim 2011, 1084).

This emphasis on how new hybrid spaces evolve when religion online and religion offline connect is related to another major concept within the field of religion and media: *mediatization*, the long-term influence of media on religious structures and agency (Hjarvard 2016). Crucial for this study,

1 The preliminary analysis of this article was presented at the 'Religious rituals and community in an age of social distancing' workshop between 17 and 19 November 2021, which was sponsored by the ReNEW (Reimagining Norden in an Evolving World) research hub. Responses from Knut Lundby, as well as Henrik Reintoft Christensen, Erika Willander, Lene Kühle, Auli Vähäkangas, Olaf Aaagedal, and Ånund Brottveit have contributed to this article.

mediatization at an institutional level entails processes in which religious institutions integrate media logics into their workings (Hjarvard 2016). However, in a society where the impact of media, as intertwined with social media, transforms basic conditions and rules for social interaction, scarcely any institution, including religious institutions, can afford to avoid being part of these logics (van Dijck and Poell 2013). Nevertheless, the empirical investigation of how established religious institutions like the Scandinavian majority churches adopt or adapt different media (Nielsen and Johansen 2019) and social media logics (van Dijck and Poell 2013) in their everyday workings is a less explored area of research.

The article examines how three Scandinavian majority churches negotiate their ecclesial identities on Facebook and discusses whether their online enactments represent their religious identities and core values in new ways to the public. The data consist of material from Facebook pages using the official church logos of the Church of Norway, the Church of Sweden, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark (the ELCD), as well as semi-structured interviews with one Facebook editor from each church. Whereas religious institutions before the Covid-19 pandemic could decide how and to what extent they wished to pursue digital media technology (Campbell, 2010), the infection control regulations 'forced' all churches and other religious communities to communicate digitally almost overnight (Kühle and Larsen 2021; Campbell 2021). Yet the studied churches are not digital or social media novices. They have been digitally present from the internet's early stages (Lundby et al. 2018) and had implemented social media strategies before the pandemic (Moberg 2017; Den norske kirke 2021; Folkekirken.dk 2017–2020; Ershammar 2019).

Apart from reports published by the churches themselves (Fransson et al. 2021; Folkekirken udannelses- og videncenter 2020; Den norske kirke 2020), some of the first publications addressing Scandinavian majority churches and the Covid-19 pandemic were surveys. Unlike US surveys (Pew Research Centre 2021), surveys from the Scandinavian countries do not show an increase in self-reported religiosity as a result of the pandemic (Christensen 2021; Mauritsen et al. 2022; Rafoss and Agedal 2021). Similar to research on US churches (Raiber and Seabright 2020), surveys show that social media is mainly used to communicate with active church members, that worship and information purposes dominate (Hodøl 2021), and regarding digital services, that reconcilability, authenticity, and direct communication are important for the users (Hodøl and Sæbø 2021). None of these studies examines in depth what churches did online during the pandemic. My study

therefore contributes to the field by investigating Facebook material from three Scandinavian majority churches, and how users actually participated in church activities on these Facebook pages.

This study is connected with research on the targeted churches' ecclesial offline identities in several ways. The first part of the analysis identifies how each church explicitly framed the Covid-19 pandemic discursively. However, this is not a study of the churches' first emergency responses (Kühle and Larsen 2021) but of their digital enactments on Facebook when the pandemic had become a more settled part of the everyday. The second part examines the communal spaces and rituals the churches enacted on Facebook, and how the churches communicated digitally within these spaces. The study includes empirical material from the Christmas season. As Ole Riis and Linda Woodhead argue, Christmas is a major example of how 'the sacred secular' is enacted in contemporary Western societies (Riis and Woodhead 2010). The last part explores how the churches enacted Christmas on Facebook.

Data material and analytical strategy

When definitions of worship and rituals undergo reconsideration and change, Baker et al. (2020) urge researchers to be methodologically innovative and to pursue emerging epistemologies, mentioning 'lived religion' in particular. This article is part of a lived religion project examining what churches are actually doing online: how these ecclesial practices on Facebook become part of people's everyday lives; and how the churches' enactments are intertwined with political structures (Ammerman 2020; Nielsen and Johansen 2019; Repstad 2019).

The Facebook material dates from 29 November 2020 to 10 January 2021. During this timeline the Church of Norway published 114 posts, or about three times a day. The Church of Sweden published 42 posts, about once a day, and the ELCD published 25, about every second day. The NSD, the Norwegian Centre for Research Data, has reviewed and approved the study. The three churches were selected because although they differed, as indicated by their publication frequency on Facebook, they were similar enough to compare how they utilized social media (Flyvbjerg 2001). Such a comparative research design is not unique (Furseth 2018), but most research on churches in the Scandinavian countries focuses on one church at a time.

The data material has been thematically coded in three rounds, using Joshua Meyrowitz's concept of *media metaphors* (Meyrowitz 1993) as an

analytical device. Meyrowitz developed his description of media metaphors in a pre-internet era, but they are still in use (Hjarvard and Lundby 2018). Meyrowitz presents his article as a 'preliminary meta-metaphorical analysis', addressing how different media metaphors foster different perceptions of the media (Meyrowitz 1993, 56). His claims that 'a full consideration of any media-related issue, therefore, requires exploring questions that grow out of all three images of media' (Meyrowitz 1993, 63). I use the metaphors as three different analytical perspectives on the material I analyse from Facebook.

The first metaphor Meyrowitz discusses is 'media as conduits'. This metaphor leads to questions like: 'What is the content? What social, political, economic, organizational, ideological, and other factors influence the development and perception of content?' Meyrowitz is aware of the essentialist framework on which this metaphor builds, but the metaphor still exists and influences how people and scholars perceive media. I employ the metaphor to address what kind of content the churches publish on Facebook, and how recurrent themes across the studied timeline create a discursive message about their ecclesial identities on Facebook. I have used the conduit metaphor to examine the message the churches 'delivered' about the pandemic during the studied timeline. The coding strategy I followed was to identify every post that explicitly mentioned the pandemic.

According to Meyrowitz the second widely used metaphor about media, 'media as languages', focuses on the grammar of each medium, such as the expressive variables and production techniques. Meyrowitz states that analysts influenced by this metaphor often ask questions like: 'What are the variables that can be manipulated within each medium? What are the effects of such manipulations within each medium? [...] To what extent are the *grammatical codes* for each medium shaped by the physical nature of the medium?' (Meyrowitz 1993, 59). I have applied this metaphor to identify the expressive variables and production techniques of each church on Facebook and especially the kinds of community and rituals the churches establish on Facebook. I also examine the patterns of interaction they facilitate by investigating how the church logo appears in the comment sections and the churches' use of emojis. I have coded the material by asking if the churches use informational/formal and emotional/informal language, if the pictures and videos are from home/professional settings, and about the dominant aesthetic style, identifying how the actors appearing on Facebook are dressed, differentiating between casual/formal clothing. Finally, I have coded the camera perspectives across the different posts, categorizing them as dominated by distance/close-up perspectives.

The last metaphor is ‘media as environments’. This metaphor operates with a perception of each medium as a type of environment, or a setting. The focus is on how a medium has relatively fixed features, and how these features influence both the content and the grammar of the medium in question. Questions often asked from this metaphorical perception are: ‘What are the characteristics of each medium (or each type of medium) that make it physically, psychologically, socially different from other media and live interaction, regardless of content and grammar choices? How do the features of a medium influence content and grammar choices?’ (Meyrowitz 1993, 61). This metaphor leads me to investigate Facebook as a specific social medium, particularly scrutinizing how this medium as an algorithmic medium influences the churches’ content and grammar choices. My strategy has been to identify the most popular posts published by each of the three churches, analysing these posts in depth. Yet, as has been mentioned, Meyrowitz’s theorization is pre-internet, and I have therefore included how social media logics such as ‘programmability’, ‘popularity’, ‘connectivity’, and ‘datafication’ are built into the architecture of Facebook (van Dijck and Poell 2013).

Conduits: pandemic discourse

Infection control regulation

In December 2020 the Covid-19 pandemic dominated most parts of public life and was the defining context of almost everything taking place in society, as in the Scandinavian churches being studied here. However, how the churches explicitly dealt with the pandemic during the studied Christmas weeks is an interesting entry point for an exploration of how their online enactments represent their ecclesial position, identities, and values in new ways to the public.

Approaching ‘media as conduits’, the ELCD addresses the pandemic through updates on government infection control restrictions throughout the studied timeline. These posts contain a short informative text and accompanying pictures of empty church buildings and a link to the church’s website for more detailed information (ELCD Facebook 7 Dec, 9 Dec, 10 Dec, and 21 Dec 2020). The first posts state the number of lockdown municipalities in Denmark and refer to the bishops encouraging the parishes to cancel everything except Sunday services and lifecycle rituals. The last infection control post, a couple of days before Christmas Eve, simply states: ‘We provide an overview of how you can attend Christmas services this year. In church, outside or from the sofa’ (ELCD Facebook 21 Dec 2020).

The ELCD's Facebook editor reports that they had a meeting with the Minister of Church Affairs the day after the first lockdown in March 2020. This meeting made it clear that the church administration was part of the government task force providing information to the general population:

It was clear from the very beginning that our task was to communicate coronavirus and church matters to the population. We were required to give updates, write about, and explain [the regulations] (editor, Denmark).

These infection control posts, as well as the editor's comment, clearly show that the ELCD is a majority church that can be categorized as a 'state church', contrary to the trajectories in most of Europe, including Norway and Sweden (Kühle et al. 2018). Their Facebook page is one of the ways through which the state informs the population about how to act during the pandemic. Even if the posts signal a limited autonomy as a religious institution online, the infection control posts also verify that parishes – and pastors – have a high degree of offline autonomy within the church organization (Strategi 2017–20 Folkekirken.dk). The bishops can therefore encourage local churches to cancel their planned activities, but they cannot make decisions on their behalf. Moreover, the advice to cancel every activity except the Sunday services, as well as lifecycle rituals, indicates that they are important parts of the ELCD's ecclesial identity – possibly more valued than diaconal work, for example. Hence, the explicit pandemic discourse on Facebook powerfully positions the ELCD as part of the state, and at the same time as premised by the state.

Pandemic experiences

The Church of Sweden split from the state in 2000 (Hanson 2020), and the Church of Norway followed suit in 2017 (Nylenna and Sirris 2023). Neither publishes infection control regulations on its Facebook pages. According to the Norwegian Facebook editor the Church of Norway tries not to focus on the coronavirus. 'It hasn't been very important for us to do that [focus on Covid-19]. I mean, everyone else is doing that.' The editor added: 'We'd like to strengthen faith on Facebook, make the church available. Information or things like that is not what we do on Facebook' (editor, Norway). That being the case, the Church of Norway explicitly addresses Covid-19 on Facebook but does so as part of a seven-episode talk show during the weeks under study (CoN Facebook 3 Dec, 12 Dec, 17 Dec, 21 Dec, 24 Dec,

26 Dec, and 31 Dec 2020). In each talk show episode two church employee hosts ask famous guests from popular culture, government, and the church about their ‘coronavirus experiences’, as illustrated in this excerpt:

Musician: [...] I’ve had more time to think this year. Reflecting about life and relationships. What counts, and what is less important. [...] It has given us a lot more time together as family too. [...] The world has become a bit clearer in a way.

Female host: I think, for me, when there are so many constraints on what you can do, I’ve got a stronger sense of what really counts. I think many of us have had a different year, but also quite a nice year (CoN Facebook 3 Dec 2020).

This emphasis on the pandemic as something that makes life different but also provides opportunities for reflection and close relations is a theme of each talk show episode. The Minister of Church Affairs, as part of the government task force, speaks about how the year has been for him:

Minister: It’s been very different, as it has been for all of us. At the same time my everyday has been a little different from most. I had to go to work. [...] We have to fight the virus. We have to get Norway through this. This purpose has made it a very meaningful year (CoN Facebook 24 Dec 2020).

Contrary to the ELCD, the Church of Norway gives space for the pandemic as something that has altered daily life, but not only negatively. The talk show communicates that the church can combine serious discussion of the pandemic and entertainment. It promotes an image of the online church as an up-to-date and modern institution with influential and powerful friends. The pandemic discourse on Facebook thus presents the online church as a religious institution that is part of secular society, but on its own terms.

The lonely and isolated

In its Facebook posts the Church of Sweden focuses more on the pandemic than the other two churches. One of their recurrent posts – established long before the pandemic – is a weekly three-minute live devotion. Every devotion across the studied timeline (CoS Facebook 1 Dec, 3 Dec, 8 Dec, 10 Dec, 15 Dec, 17 Dec, 29 Dec 2020, and 6 Jan 2021) except one explicitly addresses the pandemic. Overall, the church presents the pandemic as causing painful experiences, and that the church is there to help with care and words of hope:

It's dark around us, not just because of the winter but also because of the pandemic. We can't see the way we use to. It's dull and dim. Almost like walking in a continuous nightmare. [...] But we'll see the light again one day. God has given us that promise (CoS Facebook 8 Dec 2020).

This very firm focus on pain and suffering made me ask the editor if the church tended to 'overdo' the pandemic on Facebook. The editor responded resolutely: 'Yes, we communicate particularly with the lonely and isolated. If you don't feel that way, well, then, good for you, so to speak' (editor, Sweden).

This diaconal orientation online has been a prominent part of the Church of Sweden's offline ecclesial identity for several years. Particularly since the split from the state the offline church has increasingly communicated itself as a welfare agent in a secular society (Petterson 2011). Diaconal work is therefore an essential part of the church's self-understanding, but establishing itself as an offline welfare agent is also a way for the church to receive financial support from the state after the split (Edgardh 2011). Enacting the church as a care provider on Facebook benefits people requesting church care, and publicly demonstrates that the church fills a lacuna the state itself is unable to fill. Its online emphasis on care thus represents the church as an important part of secular society.

Languages: The religious landscape on Facebook

A platform for user interaction

This second part of the analysis focuses on the media languages or grammar each church applied on Facebook during the weeks of Christmas 2020. Attention to the expressive variables, production techniques, and the interaction with their users (Meyrowitz 1993) makes it possible to discuss whether the churches' online grammars publicly represent these churches in new ways.

The ELCD editor reports that live or recorded worship is unthinkable on their page. They assess how their followers react to their content, and 'if we get too "churchy" a lot of them disappear' (editor, Denmark). Those interested in services can visit their local parish's online and offline worship. The ELCD strategy is therefore to stay away from worship material and to publish links to podcasts, interviews, or articles written by pastors or other intellectuals (ELCD Facebook 18 Dec, 23 Dec, 27 Dec, 28 Dec, 30 Dec 2020, and 7 Jan 2021). An example is this post published a few days before Christmas:

We should meet each other with forgiveness and reconciliation rather than condemnation and fear. This is the message of Pastor [name], who will preach at the DR's service on Christmas Eve (ELCD Facebook 18 Dec 2020).

The expressive grammar on the ELCD page is thus informational. It provides the users with information about events taking place offline and on other online platforms. Yet there are some posts where the ELCD invites user interaction and receives many comments. One of their most popular types of Facebook posts features recordings of hymns ending with a question like: 'What are the Christmas hymns you cannot celebrate Christmas without?' These posts work as a catalyst for people to share family memories, traditions, and long lists of their favourite hymns. The Facebook editors reply to direct questions, but the church's logo is otherwise absent in the comment section:

We have a strategy that differs from most others. We are often quite withdrawn. Because when we withdraw, dialogues between our users appear. That is our aim. That they share and communicate with one another. The ELCD logo in the comment section makes people more reserved. The communication become more authoritative. We think the best thing is to create communication among our users (editor, Denmark).

The ELCD grammar is therefore to offer information about online and offline church practices. The church facilitates user interaction on Facebook but tries not to interact with users directly. The local parish and the pastor, not the ELCD Facebook page, are the primary ecclesial place for religious community, care, and interaction. The ELCD is on Facebook, but the online and offline church take place in the parishes.

Strategic authenticity

The editor in the Church of Sweden also defines online and offline worship as the responsibility of local parishes. One of the frequent posts on this Facebook page is 'digital postcards' (CoS Facebook 7 Dec, 9 Dec, 14 Dec, and 19 Dec 2020). These posts contain a photo, often in dark or blurred colours, of a sad-looking person or a single candle in the foreground and a sentence stating, for example, 'God, be with me tonight, Amen' (9 Dec) or 'You are not lonely' (19 Dec). As in the devotions, the grammar of the digital postcards is clearly emotional but simpler to produce. However, the

users respond extensively. Every post has a comment section in which users express feelings of existential pain and loneliness, often framed as prayers or requesting prayer. Notably, each user receives a personal comment from the Church of Sweden in return, as in this excerpt:

I'm so afraid. What awaits? The future looks very dark.

Hi [name], yes, I agree, it looks dark for the moment, but I don't think God will abandon us. God will embrace you with his love. [name], editor.

The church's particular emphasis on those who feel lonely and isolated creates a digital space where several Facebook users find support and engage with people more than they might do in face-to-face encounters (Jin 2013).

Responding personally to every individual leaving a comment on Facebook has been part of the Church of Sweden's social media strategy before the pandemic:

We have a very thoroughly prepared strategy for this. We always start by writing the name of the person contacting us. Like, 'Hi Birgitte...'. Then we try to mirror the feelings in what they have written. [...]. Then we sign with our name and role. Editor or pastor, or something like that. To let them know who they are talking to, since the logo is the Church of Sweden's (editor, Sweden).

Apart from being knowledgeable about the importance of authenticity when communicating as a church in a secular society (Høeg 2020), the church enacts Facebook as a place for devotion and pastoral care. Hence, in contrast to the ELCD, the Church of Sweden does not distinguish between the online and offline church. Overall, the Facebook grammar of the Church of Sweden implies that the church expects to be at least as genuine online as it is offline. On Facebook the church is not about information but about being and doing church.

Regular and vicarious religion

The Church of Norway is the only church that publishes regular worship on Facebook. An emerging ritual behaviour on Facebook is to show acknowledgement and indicate participation through emojis and short comments (Åhman and Thorèn 2021). Worships on Facebook generate little user interaction (CoN Facebook 29 Nov, 6 Dec, 19 Dec, 24 Dec, 25 Dec, and

26 Dec 2020, and 1 Jan, 3 Jan, and 9 Jan 2021). However, one service has a significantly higher level of interactive user responses, with 1,000 likes, 138 comments, and 48 shares. This is a grief and memorial service after a huge landslide outside Oslo just a few days after Christmas.² The comment section has many heart and prayer emojis and comments expressing compassion for those affected. Several write that they are grateful for the opportunity to attend online. However, such ‘vicarious religion’ (Davie 2015) seems to be more of an emergency phenomenon (Agedal et al. 2013). The Covid-19 pandemic affecting the everyday for a prolonged period seems not to have caused a significant increase in participation in worship.

Despite this, the Church of Norway has a frequent post, at least three times a week, called ‘Words at Night’, the user interaction of which is quite high (CoN Facebook 29 Nov, 3 Dec, 4 Dec, 5 Dec, 9 Dec, 10 Dec, 11 Dec, 12 Dec, 16 Dec, 18 Dec, 19 Dec, 20 Dec, 23 Dec, 25 Dec, 27 Dec, and 31 Dec 2020, 1 Jan, 8 Jan, 9 Jan, and 10 Jan 2021). This production is similar to the one in Sweden in terms of length and camera perspective. Yet the Norwegian devotions are more informal, featuring pastors from all over Norway, often dressed in hooded sweaters and casual clothes. As the editor explains, the pastors do not talk about the pandemic directly. Yet they all have a pastoral care approach, addressing loneliness, loss, and fear. The texts accompanying the devotional videos are telling in their emotional grammar:

The first Advent candlelight is standing strongly alone. How are you doing today? (29 Nov 2020)

Regardless of how deep we fall as humans, Jesus has been even deeper (12 Dec 2020).

Most user-generated comments consist of prayer and heart emojis, short comments expressing gratitude, and some private greetings to the pastor in the videos. The Church of Norway replies with a heart emoji to everyone leaving an emoji or comment.

One might ridicule it, getting a heart from the church, is it worth anything? Well, the response we get is that people feel seen by the church (editor, Norway).

² The Gjerdrum landslide was a quick clay landslide that occurred in the early hours of 30 December 2020. It spanned a flow-off area of 300 by 700 metres and additionally affected 9 hectares through debris flow. Several buildings were destroyed, most of them houses and apartment buildings. As of 22 March 2021, ten people had been confirmed killed by the landslide. 2020 Gjerdrum landslide – Wikipedia (accessed 23 August 2022).

The video devotions with pastors in their home contexts, filming themselves more or less successfully, make the productions appear sincerely authentic. The amateur filming, combined with an expressive emotional grammar, may therefore explain why so many users recognize and appreciate the devotions as ‘their faith’ (Høeg 2020).

An analysis of the technical production and expressive grammar shows that the Church of Norway perceives Facebook as a proper church space, which differentiates it from the ELCD. The Church of Norway thus enacts an ecclesial identity closer to that of the Church of Sweden but has a broader profile than being a church for the lonely and isolated.

Environments: A merry Facebook Christmas

Joseph booking a room

This third part of the analysis approaches Facebook as a social media environment. Each church has one post with a remarkably higher level of participation than all its other updates. I will examine how the fixed features of this algorithmic medium influence the churches’ content and grammar choices by studying their most liked, shared, and commented Christmas posts.

The most popular post from the Church of Sweden is an animation video in which ‘Joseph’ is chatting with ‘a bed and breakfast host’ and trying to book a room in Bethlehem (CoS Facebook 14 Dec 2020: 2, 200 likes, 102 comments, 541 shares, accessed 25 June 2021). The host turns down Joseph’s request at first, but Joseph begs him. His fiancée is furious that he is so late: she is extremely pregnant and will have a baby at any moment. The host asks him to wait, returns, and tells them he has managed to find a barn, a quite rustic place. ‘I’ll take it,’ Joseph replies. The host reminds Joseph that they cannot have more than eight people in the room. Joseph reassures him, ‘Don’t worry – it will be a calm night with just the two of us.’

This video on Facebook exemplifies comedy as part of external church communication. Comedy is often based on some sort of incongruence where something is misplaced or surprising (Häger 2019). Placing Joseph in the contemporary situation of trying to book a room online is an obvious example. However, to find comedy amusing, one needs to understand and recognize it. The comment section indicates that many users did. Comments like ‘Just love it’, ‘You have to see this!’, and ‘Can’t stop laughing’ are frequent. Presumably, late bookings, frustrated partners, and desperation when no rooms are available is a familiar situation for many of them.

However, a few users were critical, posting comments like, ‘Why? Why does the Church of Sweden do this?’, ‘Has the church lost its mind?’, and ‘Just don’t like. I prefer the original’. They therefore find the comedy religiously offensive and feel it is inappropriate for the church to make such jokes. In relation to the church’s ecclesial identity, the function of comedies is often to draw lines between groups, an ‘us’ and a ‘them’ (Häger 2019). In distinction from much Christian comedy, the Joseph post does draw a line based on religious belonging or knowledge. It is understandable, regardless of people’s relationship with the church or the Christian faith.

As on other parts of their Facebook page, this use of comedy is part of a thoroughly prepared social media strategy:

We’ve found that they like it when we’re a little funny. Yet we don’t have to be very funny for it to be appreciated [...]. It’s an easy way to communicate the message. We think it’s hilarious and love to do it, but we don’t want to overuse it by doing it too often. I think it [the Joseph video] made people see the events behind Christmas in a slightly new way (editor, Sweden).

The comment that they have found that their users like it when they are funny implies what van Dijck and Poell (2013) term ‘a datafication logic’. This means the church has gathered information about their user’s profiles and tastes, and this has helped them fine-tune their programming decisions (van Dijck and Poell 2013). Yet the church does not have to compromise its main ecclesial identity to achieve social media popularity. Being just a little funny is enough to boost the ranking mechanisms built into Facebook as a medium. The editor also actively endorses ‘programmability’ as a logic, where a platform triggers users’ creative and communicative contributions. She and the staff ‘love’ to create funny content on Facebook. However, they know that they cannot publish comedies too often. This would reduce the incongruence of seeing a biblical character in a contemporary situation. Comedy is therefore a tool they use cautiously.

The Gospel according to Ane

The ELCD also has a video that was particularly popular during Christmas 2020 (ELCD Facebook 1 Dec 2020: 6,700 likes, 801 comments, 13,000 shares, accessed 10 Oct 2022), and it has even more likes, comments, and shares than the Joseph video. The ELCD video is a cartoon-like animation in which a girl, ‘Ane 4 years old’, tells the Christmas story, accompanied by authentic

drawings done by 'her 9-year-old brother'. 'It all started with Augustus,' the girl's voiceover begins. 'He wanted to know how many people he ruled over in the whole world – and then we have Joseph and Mary.' We then hear and see how Mary and Joseph travel to Bethlehem, with sudden inserted comments like 'I've been to Bethlehem once, with the kindergarten,' as a bus full of small children goes by. Eventually, Joseph and Mary find the barn, and 'then they baptized him in the crib.' We also meet angels who help herds dressed in Santa hats find Jesus, 'the quietest baby in the world'. In the end, everyone looks up into the sky, and an angel waves and smiles, wishing them 'Merry Christmas', and 'everyone was extremely happy'. Some of the same incongruent comedy elements in the Joseph video are present in this one. Some of the names, costumes, and animals are unfamiliar to Ane, but other things are part of her everyday life. Childish misunderstandings such as Bethlehem as a place she has been to are thus an important part of the comedy. The large number of shares and comments in which people make their friends aware of the video indicates that the video is understandable and relatable. The comment section shows that users find the gospel told by Ane entertaining, but that it also touches several users emotionally: '[name], you just have to see this one, amazingly cute ❤️'; '[name], this is the story I told you about, just listen to it! ☺'; and 'Thanks. It made be warm all the way to my stomach. The real joy of Christmas'.

The emotional engagement on Facebook indicates that the video works as a catalyst for people to share feelings and stories related to the Christmas gospel (Åhman and Thorèn 2021, 8). The video seems to have brought several people into touch with the religion Hervieu-Léger terms 'a chain of memory' (Hervieu-Léger and Lee 2000). Just as a religious ritual has the potential to activate deep emotions and a sense of social connectedness (McGuire 2016), this narration of the Christmas gospel on Facebook became a ritual practice embedded in the participants' minds/bodies (Helland and Kienzl 2021). It was enjoyed by most users, but there were also some critical comments as well. As in Sweden, some users criticized the church for not taking theological knowledge seriously, and for not drawing clear lines between 'us' and 'them' (Häger 2019).

Accordingly, the Gospel told by Ane shows how the ELCD negotiates a 'not too churchy' ecclesial identity on Facebook. Their overall aim is to communicate that the ELCD is a church for the majority of the population. Taking into account that traffic on social media requires programmability in terms of users' participation in steering content (van Dijck and Poell 2013), their grammar and content choices in this case reflect the algorithmic

mechanisms of liking, sharing, and commenting being built into Facebook as a medium (Meyrowitz 1993). Yet the ELCD also tries to use Facebook in ways that stimulate a religious interest that goes beyond outputs like the Ane video:

It's all about finding the right cut. When does it [the content] have to be simple, and when can we go a little deeper – more depth and substantial reflection? One might say that when we narrate the Christmas gospel with Ane's words, we are on page one in the Christmas book, so simple that everyone can understand it, but as a church what is expected from us in a time of coronavirus and crises? We want to go deeper – more complexity – but still be available to ordinary people (editor, Denmark).

This ambition runs quite contrary to Facebook as a medium. As van Dijck and Pell claim, Facebook is a platform where 'like-scores automatically select emotive and positive evaluations of topics, rather than asking for complex assessments' (van Dijck and Poell 2013). However, the ELCD manipulates this mechanism by using the Ane video as an entry for more complex material. Consequently, the ELCD tries to reinforce the effect of the Ane video by republishing parts of it four times during the Christmas weeks (ELCD Facebook 11 Dec, 15 Dec, 20 Dec, and 24 Dec 2020), each time with a new link to extended articles offering reflections and theological knowledge. However, as the Church of Sweden underscores, the effect of comedy requires surprise. Every time the ELCD republishes the Ane video, the level of user interaction declines.

Taken together, the given medium influences how the ELCD negotiates its ecclesial identity on Facebook. It actively applies a comedy customized for Facebook to communicate that it is a church for the whole population. Yet the church tries to pursue Facebook popularity and still provide additional theological and church-oriented cultural content with greater depth.

Fairest Lord Jesus line by line

The Church of Norway has a video in which various people, mostly celebrities, sing the hymn 'Fairest Lord Jesus' line by line (CoN Facebook 15 Dec 2020: 13,000 likes, 565 comments, and 8,200 shares, accessed 19 Oct 2022). Compared to the other two churches, this video generates the most likes and a high level of comments and shares. The first thing happening in the video is that we hear the voice of Jahn Teigen, a famous pop star in Norway

who had died some months previously, singing the first lines of the hymn. The camera then zooms out, and the Minister of Health and Care Services appears in his office while listening to Teigen on his computer and starts to sing the next line. Thereafter, a mix of well-known people from popular culture, theatre, talk shows, reality TV, sport, and the presiding bishop of the Church of Norway, as well as a hospital doctor, ambulance personnel, and a couple of homeless people, sing one line each. The video ends in a beautiful cathedral where a choir sings the last lines of the hymn.

This video uses a hymn that most people living in Norway know, particularly the majority population. It is not a comedy like the two other videos, and the comments on the 'Fairest Lord Jesus' video are almost unanimously positive.

Very touching. We had that hymn at my father's funeral. He was born at Christmas time. Had to cry.

Goosebumps every time. We're in this pandemic together, and we're going to march out of it together.

These comments show that the video touches many people. As such, the interaction resembles the Ane video, working as a catalyst for people to share stories and feelings. However, the emotional response to the 'Fairest Lord Jesus' video is more intense. Several write that the hymn made them cry – not laugh as is the case in the two other videos – and that they have watched it several times. They connect their feelings of being touched to memories from childhood and family funerals, and the hymn makes them hope for a better Christmas in the current coronavirus situation. The 'chain of memory' this video evokes is therefore less sentimental and more related to personal memories. In addition, the line-by-line production not only creates a mental memory chain, but it also creates a tangible chain of people. The 'Fairest Lord Jesus' video becomes an embedded ritual practice on Facebook in which the Church of Norway enables deep emotions and experiences of social connectedness in a situation where social distancing dominates everyday life.

Like the other two churches, the Church of Norway takes social media logics seriously and works strategically to gain Facebook popularity:

We were very conscious about the choice of 'Fairest Lord Jesus'. It's a hymn everybody knows, regardless of their relationship with the church. You know, Jahn Teigen, one of the most loved artists in Norway, and the others

[celebrities], they had also been visible during the year. We worked especially consciously to end it inside church. It [the video] became longer than we planned, and as you know, that's a risky business – people don't bother to watch for very long. Yet it worked very well. I think it's about the whole coronavirus situation. [...] I think the film would have worked without the coronavirus, but the situation made it even stronger (editor, Norway).

This excerpt demonstrates that the church intentionally makes choices based on Facebook as medium. The hymn is chosen because it is familiar, and the line-by-line production with famous people is a grammar familiar from TV and other media (Meyrowitz 1993). As van Djick and Poel (2013) argue, entanglements of social and mass media reinforce one another. In this case the video may have added to the popularity of the celebrities, and some of the celebrities in the video, including the Minister of Health and Care Services, shared it on their Facebook pages, significantly boosting the popularity of the video. Accordingly, this video communicates the church's association with several famous people in Norway, a strategy not used in the two other churches. The popularity of the video also adds to the visibility of individuals representing the church. In commenting on the length, the editor confirms that the church thinks of itself in terms of social media logics and tries to shape its material accordingly (Hjarvard 2016).

Overall, the analysis of the most liked, shared, and commented posts from each church shows that the three majority churches enact themselves as churches for the large majority of the population. Their use of comedy and popular culture enables participation well beyond regular churchgoing members. Apart from their entertaining dimension, the Ane video and the 'Fairest Lord Jesus' video also assume a ritual value. The emotional response from a large number of users confirms that Christmas online can be a major example of the sacred-secular in contemporary society, and that the Scandinavian majority churches negotiate their ecclesial identities as part of this secular-sacred interface on Facebook.

Conclusion

Have 'online' enactments represented the Scandinavian majority churches' religious identities and core values in new ways to the public? In early April 2020 the economist Dani Rodrik claimed that the Covid-19 pandemic had turned countries into exaggerated versions of themselves (Kühle and Larsen 2021). Working on the data material, I have asked myself if a similar claim

is true of the churches studied in this article. In an initial analytical phase I tended towards a confirmatory conclusion. However, thorough analysis and some distance from the pandemic have modified my final argument.

First, the pandemic discourse on each Facebook page reflects the churches' historical and current positions towards the state and society. The ELCD presents and understands itself as part of the state, and as a state church it is obliged to provide public information on religious matters to the whole population. The material does not indicate that the church finds this troublesome or contested. It appears more as a position that is taken for granted, even if it is an exception in the Scandinavian region, as well as in Europe (Kühle et al. forthcoming). The Church of Norway, on the other hand, represents the pandemic as a talk show topic. However, the political and famous guests in combination with church leaders signal that the church still plays an important role in society. Contrary to the ELCD, the Church of Norway needs to consolidate itself anew after the recent split from the state. The Church of Sweden is more independent from the state, and its Facebook page reflects this by focusing only on church matters. However, a large part of this diaconal offline church is possible because the church receives financial support from the state, not as a church but as a welfare provider. Its online appearances therefore testify to the broad public that the church is there to help when life is hard.

Second, this study has found that the three Scandinavian majority churches have distinct 'online-offline' identities, and that these correspond well with their offline organizations. The ELCD presents the church on Facebook but is not a church itself online. It is primarily the local parish level that is considered as the church in the ELCD, and structures at a national level are not entitled to represent the church on behalf of individual parishes or pastors. The Facebook editor and staff present the ELCD on Facebook, but they cannot be the church or enact church practices online (Folkekirken.dk Strategi 2017–20). The grammar of the Church of Norway also negotiates the online church in accordance with the formal church organization (Den norske kirke 2021). The church's synod has therefore decided on a social media strategy in which the offline church acknowledged before the pandemic that Facebook was about doing the church online (Den norske kirke, 2020). Yet few people are employed to do this. The Church of Sweden has a more professional grammar, reflected by the church's emphasis on employing people educated in communication. As in Norway, the synod of the Church of Sweden has decided that the online church is the equal of the offline church (Ershammar 2019).

Third, all three churches have integrated media and social media logics into their operations. They are knowledgeable about Facebook as an environment, make conscious choices, and can utilize the medium as a platform for user interaction, as well as ritual practices. At Christmas the churches contributed to deep emotions and social connectedness. Moreover, mediatization also entails a transformation of basic conditions and rules for social interaction. How will the online churches' content and grammar influence the offline churches after the pandemic? What will be the long-term effects of a period in which almost all churches and religious institutions were 'forced' to think of themselves in media terms? How will it affect their agency and religious structures? Research on religion in a post-pandemic society is needed to address these questions.

In conclusion, this study provides new insights into how three Scandinavian majority churches utilize Facebook to enhance their public position as important and relevant religious institutions in secular societies. The study demonstrates how the Church of Norway and the Church of Sweden enact church practices on Facebook, while the ELCD tries not to be too 'churchy'. Overall, the churches' online identities are not new representations of their identities and values, but rather intensified versions of their established and complex offline identity as 'folk churches' for the whole population. Nevertheless, Facebook emerges as a hybridized third space where Scandinavian majority churches pursue new logics and forms of meaning making to retain their contested position in secular societies.

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