SPREADING RELIGION AND CULTURE THROUGH INTERNET MEMES

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Abstract: This paper delves into the use of Internet memes as a means of spreading religion and ethical values in modern society. With the rise of the Internet and social media, memes have gained popularity as a form of shared content with the ability to convey meaningful messages. The research evaluates the prevalence and impact of memes in religious and ethical contexts. Through this research, the authors present their viewpoint after mulling over the findings of authors like Limor Shifman. The study asserts that memes can facilitate discussions, promote religious literacy, reinforce beliefs, and instil ethical values. Additionally, it anticipates that religious and ethical memes may influence individuals' actions in their daily lives. This research is significant as it examines the potential of memes to serve as a contemporary tool for spreading religion and ethics in a digital world.

Keywords: Internet Memes, Religious Memes, Ethical Memes, Digital Culture, Participatory Culture

1. Introduction

In today's world, Internet memes are widely used for communication and expression. They are units of popular culture that are widely circulated, imitated, and transformed by Internet

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users, creating a shared cultural experience. Internet memes, particularly those with political, religious, and social undertones, can empower ordinary individuals and challenge the control of the elite over mass media (Shifman 367). They can mobilize support for collective action and resist dominant narratives.

Internet memes are dynamic, making them a potentially subversive tool. They have also been proven to be a cost-effective marketing tool, effectively promoting brands and products. The versatility of memes allows them to bridge the gap between different communities (Wang and Wang 271), often taking the form of viral images or media on popular social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram.

Generally, memes are infused with humour, covering a wide range of topics, from societal, and ethical to religious and cultural matters. They are capable of conveying any idea or concept. They have been interlinked with disseminating religious texts, beliefs, and teachings. However, the role of memes in religion and ethical contexts has not been critically evaluated. Therefore, this paper sheds light on the potential of circulating religious and ethical messages through memes in our digitally connected society. It will examine the advantages and disadvantages associated with this practice.

2. What are Memes?

The term 'meme' was first used by Dr. Richard Dawkins, a renowned biologist, as a unit transmitting cultural information in his book 'The Selfish Gene' (Aunger 1). He used explicitly the term 'memes' as it was analogous to the term genes, symbolizing the replication and repetition feature. Like genes, the survival of the memes depends on various features that make them fit to live longer in people's minds (Dawkins 59). For a meme to survive long, they should allow different variations of themselves to float and quickly adapt to social, economic, cultural, and political changes around them.

Memes can be categorized into various forms. They can exist in images, text, video, slang, audio, ideas, symbols, practice, catchphrases, or any notion that has existed and replicated. Replication and imitation are essential stages that every meme

must undergo, as emphasized by Atran (352). The majority of memes exhibit a viral nature, as individuals enthusiastically contribute their interpretations and variations.

2.1 Memes and Viral Contents

While memes have the potential to become viral, it is not obligatory for every meme to achieve viral status, and not all viral content is exclusively confined to the realm of memes. Viral content is any content that has been spread to the masses without significant changes. Viral content does not require any modifications or changes; it just needs to fulfill the criteria of being shared and discussed by a large population of people or social media users (Blommaert and Varis 37). However, content should undergo modification or display variations to qualify as a meme. These alterations keep the context intact while adding a new twist to each user's modification. This customization gives the content a personal touch, showcasing the user's creativity (Shifman, YouTube, 190). Content that showcases variation replicability and allows creative modification is known as memetic content. This type of content allows greater creative engagement and personalization of content. It allows other users to draw from popular content and create their derivative work, expressing their chain of thoughts, leading to a participatory culture.

2.2 Can Memes Facilitate Participatory Culture?

Memes have become an integral part of online culture, enabling people from various backgrounds and social strata to express themselves on various topics, including religion, ethics, social norms, fashion, and trade. Sharing and commenting on memes allows for dialogue between individuals with different viewpoints, fostering the exchange of ideas and creating bridges for difficult conversations. Memes also foster a sense of community and belonging, allowing individuals from minority religious groups or with different beliefs to share their thoughts and be respected.

This share-ability leads to an increase in the engagement of the user and cause-mobilization. Through this, the attention of individuals can be brought to many ideologies - social, ethical, or religious (Mukhongo 155). It further enables them to create and share memes, giving out their viewpoints. Popular platforms and

their interactive features play a significant role in fostering participatory cultures among internet users. These platforms have opened up new possibilities for civil society and activists and have provided alternative spaces for participatory cultures. While these cultures existed before the internet, the affordances of digital media have made them more common and are now often discussed. The simplicity and ease of dissemination of participatory cultures can amplify religious messages and ethical conduct. Hence, they can facilitate participation, dialogue, and a sense of group identity among diverse people. This participatory culture and spreadable meme medium fosters collective action, redefines dissent and protest measures, and promotes religious texts.

3.   Internet Memes vs Religious Artefacts?

Memes come with a sense of playfulness, allowing severe and complex messages to be delivered with a hint of humor or a comic stance. Their simplicity, ease of creation, and playfulness lure the users into being a part of online meme creation and sharing; rendering them an acceptable way to communicate and educate fellow folks (Shifman, YouTube, 195). These attributes provide them a suitable option as a religious artifact crafted for education, disseminating information, entertainment, or restoring belief.

Shifman identified several topics such as sex, politics, the workplace, gender, race, ethnicity, culture, sports and religion on which memes were based. He suggested that most memes were based on popular culture or had a nostalgic touch, making them relatable to a more extensive section (Shifman, YouTube, 197). Memes can capture and reflect the zeitgeist of a community. They often encapsulate a group's shared experiences and feelings, making them relatable and enjoyable for others who encounter them. This can create a sense of solidarity and cohesion among members.

In addition, Knobel and Lankshear's research has studied the widespread influence of online memes on popular culture and social practices. Their study explores how these online memes contribute to shaping societal norms and behaviors and how these social practices and norms are transferred from generation to

generation, shedding light on cultural continuity and evolution (Knobel and Lankshear 221). This underscores the broader implications of their work in elucidating the interconnected relationship between digital culture, online Internet memes, and the perpetuation of societal norms across different generations (Knobel and Lankshear 221). Jenkins (443) and Mukhongo (148) have also acknowledged the role of internet memes in facilitating participatory culture and being adaptable to the ever-changing digital environment. Memes' inclusive and participatory nature increases people's interest in generating, circulating, and modifying memetic content. These explanations provide a foundation for viewing memes as religious artifacts. Due to their convenience and ability to foster online interaction, memes are well-suited for conveying religious information, promoting religious values, and sharing religious traditions or teachings. Thus, they can be classified as religious memes or memes centered around religion (Bellar et al. 6).

Overall, memes enable communities to unite and celebrate their thoughts, festivals, inside jokes, folklore, customs, traditions, and ethical values. Moreover, as society evolves technologically, more individuals seek spirituality and inner peace through online forums and platforms. This has led to a massive online presence that has never existed before, further impeding the need for religious and cultural memes to preserve society. Within these online communities, religious and spiritual memes have emerged as a way to engage with and explore one's beliefs in a lighthearted and accessible manner.

3.1 Memes Envisioned as Lived Religion

Lived religion is a perspective or an approach where the individuals experience the religious teachings in everyday life. Through this approach, the daily life routine of the believer is rooted in the teachings of the religion. The believer or the practitioner can share the transformation of their spirituality and the knowledge they have amassed online through memes. This can lead to religious, spiritual, and ethical activism by sharing memes through a click of the mouse, leading to 'Click-activism.' This click-activism allows the individual to be a part of everyone's religious or spiritual life with the ease of clicking. They can learn,

unlearn, reform, and correlate their practices to match others or bring uniformity. This new media of memes allows individuals to enact their religious beliefs and preach them to others (Bellar et al. 7).

Parents and religious affiliations wield significant influence in shaping interactions with peers and in the critical decision-making process of selecting a life partner. Within this context, spouses and peers emerge as influential catalysts that can shape an individual's choices, values, and beliefs. Parents often instill core values and belief systems in their children, setting the foundation for navigating relationships and interacting with their peers. Additionally, religious affiliations further contribute to forming a person's moral and ethical framework, influencing their decisions in various aspects of life, including relationships (Sherkat 152). The shared values and perspectives within a family unit and religious community may shape an individual's preferences for specific memes. For instance, a person from a religious background might be more likely to share memes that reflect their religious beliefs or cultural practices.

Beyond the individualized expression of faith through memes, religious communities can expand their influence by showcasing their initiatives online. These communities, grounded upon shared ideologies from diverse religions like Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, or Buddhism, actively participate in online platforms such as *4chan* and *Reddit*. Through chatrooms and groups, they can lead discussions utilizing memes, fostering a bridge between the teachings in religious scriptures and the daily practices of their followers. This engagement contributes to a more lucid comprehension of the meanings inherent in religious commandments. Religious communities can use these online discussion platforms to connect with individuals who share similar beliefs and discuss queries or worries pertaining to religious faith. The availability of digital platforms has made it convenient for religious communities to engage and interact online and offline.

3.2 *Online Presence through Memes among Religious Sects*

Memes are unique, easy, and preceding to curate a positive image online through memes. They are relatable and trendy. They

represent youth and are an innovative means of giving the world everything known to humankind. Memes may manifest as stereotypical image-centric, inconsequential textual compositions or as impact-creating user-generated content. They can function as informative conduits within the realm of digital art, thereby re-conceptualizing perspectives on matters about religiosity, cultural dynamics, and social inclinations.

Memes facilitate the easy sharing of opinions and can be quickly circulated among the masses. Hundreds of software applications, such as Meme Generator, Meme Fun, and Mematic, are available online, which conveniently help users to create, share, and circulate memes for free or at a minimal cost, leading to a significant increase in the movements prophesying individuality and self-expression. Each individual can express religion or culture through memes because it allows modification. They can have their versions. It allows individuals to deviate from conventional norms or expectations and discover their distinctive voice within the digital era. As a result, there has been an increased sense of empowerment and autonomy among individuals.

Reiterating the above, memes allow us to put one point of view forward due to their participatory nature, which can become the voice of various religious sects, marginalized groups, and minorities. This voice can further morph into an influence. This influence can mobilize the thought process of thousands of people in creating and sharing a safe place within the realm of religious and spiritual awakening. This will foster faith, secularism, and respect for other beings and their belief systems. This is what an ideal society looks like, where we respect and flourish together without hurting the sentiments of any living thing.

Moreover, memes are a safe space to discuss, react, and resolve issues. The offline religious conflicts can be eliminated with an arrangement to discuss matters in cyberspace. At times, face-to-face confrontation can lead to heated discussion, it is better to switch to a more accepting place to pacify all the negativity.

However, despite their advantages, it is essential to use them wisely. The rise of virtual platforms and digitalization has led to increased consumption of religious texts. However, there is

limited control over the distribution of information within and outside religious groups. This can give rise to the dissemination of inaccurate, conflicting, or manipulated information, distorting meaning and spreading uncontrollably. Such a situation can sow chaos within societal and religious contexts on a broader scale. Furthermore, online exposure through memes can give rise to numerous ethical dilemmas.

To avert potential discomfort, it is essential to tackle the problem and introduce measures to minimize the negative impact of misleading and confrontational memes. These measures include enhancing digital literacy to improve users' critical thinking abilities, promoting responsible meme creation and sharing guidelines, and establishing mechanisms for fact-checking and promptly rectifying misinformation. Collaborative initiatives involving online communities, content creators, and social media platforms foster a more informed and discerning digital landscape.

4. Ethical Issues Concerning Meme

Over time, the role of religions has evolved in tandem with the rapid pace of modern life, widespread online presence, and heightened consumption patterns. With virtually everything accessible at the click of a button, individuals are more deeply immersed in consumerism, influencing the dynamics of religious and cultural practices. A growing inclination towards personalized products and experiences tailored to individual routines, budgets, preferences, and habits is evident. This surge in consumerism raises ethical concerns and sparks conflicts between individuals and online communities of spiritual and ethical enthusiasts affiliated with different religious sects.

The commercialization of spiritual rituals can devalue their spiritual significance, reduce trust and admiration for these practices, and put the authenticity of the spiritual community at risk. A research study on young adult Catholics in the United States revealed that these individuals had reservations regarding the commercialization of online religious practices and questioned the genuineness of religious experiences on the Internet (Zaidman 356).

A significant problem emerges when there is a lack of attention to the directives of religious and spiritual authorities, and a more individualistic approach to religious expression is adopted. There can be differences between the teachings of what the religious authorities want and what an individual is ready to believe in, leading to disagreements. If this wedge of disagreements between the authorities and individual enthusiasts grows, it will hamper society's overall peace, harmony, and growth (Possamai 57).

Another issue is that the wrong representation of religious and cultural practices can deform religious beliefs. Religious memes can go viral and be enacted or followed by millions, who may consider the act presented in the meme or the facts displayed to be true to their religion, leading to misinterpretation of religious teachings. It will necessitate keeping the information forwarded through memes in check, as it can create unrest within different sects of society.

Furthermore, another point of contention is that memes are comical in a harmless way. However, this does not guarantee that everyone will enjoy them the same. Digital presence allows everyone to comment and express themselves on everyone's posts. Commenting recklessly or sharing inappropriate memes without acknowledging the feelings of others will increase tension between different religious sects. We co-exist in a world where different religious beliefs exist. Each individual has the right to preach what he or she believes in and follows. Moreover, each religion is considered sacred and respected equally. The same respect and secularism are expected and should be achieved through religious memes.

Moreover, the spreading of hatred and hate speech, preaching of ill- teachings, and satanism through memes can also become a serious concern. Memes allow free flow sharing of thoughts. They are also a medium for venting out anger, disappointment, conflict of opinion, or expressing a point of view that may not go well with others. Sometimes, these fruitful and open discussions caused by religious or ethics-based memes can turn into a dreaded space where people, rather than being compassionate, counter-attack

each other and spread hatred. All this can lead to an unfriendly environment and disrupt the harmony around us (Răileanu 56).

5.   Practical Ethical Implications and Solutions

The above issues are not comprehensive, but they provide a superficial overview. Key issues include the commercialization of religion, excessive focus on individual expression, misinterpretation of religious texts, marginalization of religious authorities, the spread of animosity, disruption of harmony in diverse communities, and an increase in lack of compassion due to inappropriate use of memes.

In order to address ethical concerns, religious organizations, and cultural representatives should perforate profoundly and expand their presence online. This encompasses educating followers about the genuine essence of religion, participating in virtual gatherings, resolving religious uncertainties, providing a platform for marginalized and under-represented communities, and promoting a positive mindset through meme content.

In addition to the apex bodies, everyone should fulfil their responsibilities. They should actively encourage and assist one another, refrain from conflict, behave responsibly, cultivate empathy through memes, share positive and enjoyable meme content, and respect different religions, cultures, traditions, and customs. The aim should be to create a better society where unity and cooperation are valued above all. Promoting harmony and gently correcting others when they are mistaken is essential. Additionally, it is important to respect religious leaders and refrain from using disrespectful language in memes or otherwise. It is essential to consider the type of memes created and shared. Memes must avoid being offensive and contain a hint of humour without ridiculing others.

Online platforms enabling meme creation, sharing, modification, and commenting should include regulatory measures to prevent unpleasant situations, civil discomfort, and abusive language. While many platforms already have reporting features to identify individuals who engage in antisocial behaviour, these features should be improved to include reporting to the appropriate authorities. This way, every user's

account can be monitored, ensuring that no harmful memes that target any or all religions and cultures are circulated.

6.   Influence of External factors

Having explored the influence of internet memes on religion and cultural diffusion in prior discussions, it is crucial to acknowledge the involvement of various factors such as content, individuals, platforms, and religious/cultural authorities. To delve into this complex interplay comprehensively, we will employ the DEEPLIST framework. Through this analytical approach, we aim to unravel the intricacies of the mutual relationship between memes and the dynamics of religion and culture. It becomes evident that memes reflect and are shaped by religious and cultural contexts, establishing a reciprocal influence between the two.

The DEEPLIST framework comprises of Demographics, Economic, Environmental, Political, Legal, Informational, Social, and Technological (Perera et al. 6) factors. This framework can give a broader perspective on how macro external factors can affect the dynamics of religion and culture with internet memes in the virtual atmosphere (Patuk et al. 195).

Demographics: Age, educational background, employment status, income level, gender, and ethnicity all play a role in determining the types of religious and culturally themed memes that individuals choose to share. Furthermore, these factors influence individuals' perspectives and attitudes toward memes related to religion and culture. Additionally, regional differences in these demographic factors contribute to varying viewpoints and behaviors regarding these memes.

Younger individuals may share humorous or ironic memes, while older individuals may share memes that reflect traditional values. Those with higher education levels may share intellectual, religious, or satirical memes with layered meanings. Employment and income can also impact the types of memes shared, with individuals in high-stress jobs seeking relaxation may be more oriented toward spiritual memes. Lastly, individuals of the same

ethnicity may share memes referencing their cultural or ethnic experiences.

Economic Factors: The development and mindset of individuals are significantly influenced by various economic factors, comprising elements such as unemployment, inflation rates, and credit policies. For those individuals who adopt a progressive stance and prioritize personal growth, there is a notable receptivity to new ideas, exemplified by their engagement with concepts like memes. Concurrently, these forward-thinking individuals exhibit a keen interest in broader societal and ethical issues, reflecting a multifaceted approach to personal and cultural development.

On the contrary, individuals facing economic challenges often prioritize economic stability over considerations of religion and culture. The urgency and immediacy of economic difficulties may lead them to focus on pragmatic concerns, diverting attention from more abstract or philosophical aspects. Consequently, their engagement with cultural and religious themes may manifest differently, with a potential shift towards activities that contribute to economic stability, such as a heightened involvement in sharing, creating, or commenting on content related to economic concerns, as opposed to religious or cultural topics. This dichotomy in priorities underscores the dynamic interplay between economic circumstances and individual attitudes toward cultural and religious aspects.

Environmental Factors: Climate change, pollution, and energy consumption have influenced the world's economies. People strive to make more environmentally friendly choices in all aspects of life. Internet memes provide a platform for virtual interactions and discussions, reducing the need for physical gatherings. By embracing spiritual or cultural memes, we can create a more inclusive world that values the ethical practices of individuals and promotes cleaner and environmentally favourable behaviours to minimize our carbon footprint.

Religious and cultural memes can be pivotal in encouraging nature-friendly choices. By harnessing values and traditions that prioritize the planet's well-being, individuals can raise awareness and persuade others to embrace sustainable practices. Cultural

memes can also shape behaviour by promoting ethical practices that align with sustainability, such as consuming locally-sourced and organic foods. Sharing memes highlighting these practices can inspire others to make similar choices and decrease their carbon footprint. Furthermore, internet memes offer a virtual platform for discussions and interactions, reducing the environmental impact of physical gatherings and rituals. Embracing virtual interactions through memes not only provides a more inclusive and accessible avenue to celebrate and share religious and cultural traditions, but also minimizes the negative environmental consequences associated with such activities.

Political Factors: Governments, media, and regulatory bodies have the authority to control the flow of information and determine what type of content, including memes and other user-generated material, can be circulated among the citizens. They also have the power to set boundaries on freedom of expression. In a hostile environment, an individual's content will be subject to scrutiny and potential censorship. However, in a progressive and supportive environment, all content, including memes regarding any religion, tradition, or cultural practice, will be permitted for sharing and discussion, no matter how critical it may be.

Legal Factors: Laws, regulations, countries' codes of conduct, and rules governing advertising and communication collectively influence the nature of content generation, sharing, and dissemination. These serve as guidelines, dictating what is permissible and what is not. They contribute to upholding the harmony of a nation by establishing stringent criteria against the sharing of discriminatory, vulgar, obscene, or negative memes that may cause a nuisance. It is important to show reverence for all religious sentiments and to share memetic content that maintains dignity and respect for various religious and cultural groups. Adherence to laws safeguarding religious practices is essential.

Informational Factors: The boundaries and characteristics of the information that individuals are allowed to share are defined by various regulations, such as consumer protection laws, data protection laws, laws about information technology and communication, data privacy regulations, data security measures,

and cyber-crime laws. These regulations establish the guidelines for sharing activities, aiming to safeguard users from online harassment and stalking while preventing physical altercations. They establish the parameters within which individuals should operate. Individuals are prohibited from sharing religious or cultural memes that may offend others or disrupt national harmony.

Social Factors: It is important to avoid engaging in social discrimination and exclusion through memes based on religious teachings or are supported by culture. These memes should instead promote awareness and contribute to the overall improvement of society. In the digital age, memes can be misused to propagate discriminatory ideas and exclude certain groups. Mocking religious beliefs or cultural practices through memes perpetuates harmful stereotypes and discrimination. It is essential to exercise freedom of speech responsibly and consider the impact of such content. Memes should promote dialogue, understanding, and empathy among diverse groups, challenge biases, and bridge cultural and religious gaps. By using memes positively, we can promote tolerance, respect, and work towards a united society.

Technological Factors: The spread of religion and culture via internet memes can be influenced by innovation, the adoption and acceptance of new technology; infrastructure development, communication advancements, and the evolution of the internet and the World Wide Web. Memes act as peripherals and catalysts in the growth of religion and culture, adapting to the changing demands of a world seeking progress.

Religious or cultural memories result from creative thinking and combine images, text, and humour to convey messages or ideas. As new online platforms and social media sites emerge, people are exposed to many internet memes, leading to their adoption and sharing. Access to fast and reliable internet connections is crucial for sharing and consuming online content, and as internet infrastructure improves, more people gain access. Communication advancements, such as instant messaging apps and social media platforms, allow for easy sharing of memes, enabling them to travel and reach a large audience quickly.

7.   Online memes and Offline Socio-Spatial Activities

Internet memes can transcend the online world and impact real-life interactions. They can often shape people's attitudes and behaviours without realizing it. Memes can convey instructions, messages, and codes of conduct that influence how individuals act daily. In a study on the government of Brunei during the COVID-19 pandemic, Mohamad (350) highlighted the government's use of media to engage with the public. The youth played a significant role in spreading the government's message by sharing creative memes. These memes encouraged people to adhere to social distancing protocols, exhibit ethical behaviour during challenging times, and maintain high morale (Mohamad 354). Our real-life actions will become part of the online world, and the ambiance created online, whether through memes or other means, will impact our real-life behaviour. These two worlds have become intertwined, and they are simultaneously influencing the results of each other. Digital memes bring us back to the world's possibilities and rejuvenate mental, spatial, and corporeal dimensions.

Mukhongo highlighted that memes can become the voice of people, which can further be converted into influence (Mukhongo 167). Social media users or digitally connected people can be influenced, motivated, or demotivated towards an event, movement, notion, or segment of thoughts, leading to online and offline engagements (Zuckerman 138). Geographical barriers do not limit memes and can have a significant impact by exposing inappropriate behaviours of individuals, groups, or even entire nations. They can also gain popularity and garner support for causes, as demonstrated by the #Blacklivesmatter hashtag, which uses memes to raise awareness about the discrimination faced by Africans worldwide.

Additionally, memes can be used to question the validity of old rituals that have been blindly followed in religious customs for generations. These rituals often lack logical explanations, and through memes, individuals who have had similar experiences can call for a boycott of these outdated practices. Examples of such practices may include animal sacrifices, burning explosives, or wasting natural resources. People can unite, connect, and form

support groups or non-governmental organizations to turn their online movements into real-life actions.

8. Conclusion

Adapting to current trends and embracing the technological advancements is essential in this rapidly evolving era. This approach will enable individuals to stay updated and connected with their heritage, culture, and belongings, allowing them to pass down these valuable aspects to the next generation. At this juncture, memes provide a platform for different segments of society to learn, preach, and spread their beliefs and practices. It has emerged as a new medium to keep faith alive in the ever-changing surroundings. They have a multidimensional influence on the people and on the religious segments existing in society. They lead to inclusiveness and facilitate the involvement of everyone by providing them with an accessible, feasible, technological advance medium to 'voice' their opinions. If used judiciously, these memes can preserve cultural and religious authenticity, raise awareness about spirituality and peace, shed light on pivotal societal topics, give individuals a forum to initiate discussions, and help society outgrow its fear. Lastly, it can lead to a more tolerant and secular environment.

There are a few things to be kept in mind while using memes. They should not be weaponized and used against any sect. They should be used to create a harmonious dialogue rather than a war among existing philosophies. They should nurture new thinking and create a support system for those with the same experiences. Further investigation is required to understand the impact of memes on different religious groups and traditions and establish authentic and meaningful ways of incorporating digital technology into religious practices. Religious groups must be mindful of the potential risks and challenges of meme creation, such as the propagation of false information and weakening social unity. The convergence of memes with religious cultures is a multifaceted and ongoing process that calls for continuous research and examination by scholars, practitioners, and community members. By carefully examining these matters,

religious communities can adapt and evolve in the digital era while staying true to their fundamental values and beliefs.

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