

## **META AND THE RITUAL OF POWER AND ACCESS**

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### **Abstract**

*This article critically analyzes Meta, a social technology platform, focusing on its thematic characteristics as a ritual platform. Drawing on Carey's ritual model and incorporating Couldry's media ritual framework, the study examines Meta's distinct features and their implications for ritual practices regarding religion. By examining Meta's ritual forms and their role in naturalizing sacred rituals, the analysis sheds light on the power dynamics and implications of Meta's ritualization process within the broader context of its social technology affordances. It also provides some recommendations for a scholarly appreciation of Meta's ritual relationship with religious communities.*

**Keywords:** Media Ritual Theory, Mediatization, Media and Religion, Meta, Social Media, Social Technology

### **1. Introduction**

Meta, the parent company for what was formerly known as Facebook and also owning platforms like Instagram, WhatsApp, and Oculus, commands a dominant position in social technology, boasting billions of monthly engagements.<sup>2</sup> This article delves into Meta's characteristics as a ritual platform, analyzing its implications for power dynamics and the naturalization of religious interactions. By drawing on concepts from ritual theory—mediatization and anthropological perspectives—the study aims to deepen our understanding of the ritual elements embedded within Meta's offerings and their significance within contemporary cultural forms such as religion. The article begins by exploring Carey's conceptualization of the ritual model of mass

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<sup>2</sup> Richter, Richter, F. (2021, October 26). Meta reaches 3.6 billion people each month. *Statista*. <https://www.statista.com/chart/2183/facebook-mobile-users/>

communication, which emphasizes concepts such as sharing, participation, association, and the representation of shared beliefs.<sup>3</sup> While Carey's classification does not fully encompass the evolving processes of mediatization, it nonetheless offers a framework for scrutinizing the ritual aspects of Meta. Couldry's seminal works<sup>4</sup>, along with his collaboration with Hepp,<sup>5</sup> deepens Carey's thesis by incorporating sociological and anthropological perspectives into the discourse on media rituals, thereby emphasizing the influential role of media in driving cultural shifts and facilitating mediatized meaning-making. Adopting this synthesized theoretical framework—which remains uncharted territory in existing literature concerning media rituals, religion, and social media—alongside integrating power dynamics and the naturalization of mediated worlds paves the way for an in-depth analysis of Meta as a ritual platform.

Therefore, this paper considers Meta's invocation of online religion, examining the role of Meta as a facilitator of shared rituals and a platform for sacred interactions. It explores Meta's influence on traditional conceptions of religious rituals and the blurring of boundaries between the sacred and the technological. The article also delves into the power dynamics inherent in Meta's ritualization, including access, agency, and determining valuable data. Similarly, it highlights the role of advertisement as a ritualization exercise and the centrality of data as the ultimate value in Meta's ritual typology. Thus, this critical analysis answers the question of what themes are in Meta's

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<sup>3</sup> Carey, J. W. (1989). A cultural approach to communication. In *communication as culture: Essays on media and society*. (pp. 13–36). Winchester, MA: Unwin Hyman. pp. 18–19. Also, see his earlier work in 1975 that provided a hint to the ritual theory framework. Carey, J. (1975). Culture and communication. *Communication Research*, pp. 2, 173–191.

<sup>4</sup>Couldry, N. (2003). *Media rituals: A critical approach*. New York, NY: Routledge. Couldry, N. (2005). Media rituals: beyond functionalism. In Rothenbuhler, Eric W. and Coman, Mihai, (eds.) *Media anthropology*. Sage Publications, Inc., Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, pp. 59–69. Couldry, N. (2008). Mediatization or mediation? Alternative understanding of the emergent space of digital storytelling. *New Media and Society*, 10(3), 373–391.

<sup>5</sup> Couldry, N., & Hepp, A. (2017). *The mediated construction of reality*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.

mediatization that justifies its reality as a ritual platform. Also, what are the implications of the Meta-religion ritualization to power dynamics and the naturalization of religious interactions? By drawing on ritual theory, this study aims to deepen an understanding of Meta's ritual elements within contemporary cultural forms and highlight their significance in the broader context of social technology platforms concerning religious groups. It provides religious leaders, media, and religious scholars with a fresh way of looking at the mediatization role of social technologies in religion. Thus, although there is a relationship between rituals in religion and media rituals, this work is not a study in religious rituals. Instead, it is an examination of the media rituals in relation to religious practices online.

## **2. Theoretical and Methodological Background**

Carey distinguishes between two approaches to mass communication: the transmission model and the ritual model.<sup>6</sup> While the transmission model emphasizes information transmission and media effects, the ritual model, influenced by Durkheim's work, highlights concepts such as sharing, participation, association, fellowship, and the representation of shared beliefs.<sup>7</sup> While Carey's categorization overlooks transactional capacities and emerging mediatization processes, it still deserves consideration and examination. Durkheim's work on rituals significantly influenced Carey's ritual model, albeit with certain anthropological aspects left unexplored by Carey. According to Carey, rituals are characterized by concepts of commonness, communion, and community, serving as foundational elements of communication.<sup>8</sup> Ritual theory views communication not as the extension of messages in space but as a means to maintain society over time and represent shared beliefs. However, Carey's perspective tends to be more functional than grounded in anthropological roots, particularly regarding the media's role in ritual and the naturalization of dichotomized realities.

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<sup>6</sup> Carey, 1989.

<sup>7</sup> Durkheim, E. (1995). [1912] *The elementary forms of religious life* tr. K. Fields. Glencoe: Free Press.

<sup>8</sup> Carey, 1989, p. 18

Couldry expands on Carey's ideas by integrating sociology and anthropology into the study of media and the Internet. He deepens the notion of ritual within communication studies by emphasizing the media's pervasive yet decentralized nature, where individuals engage in ritual activities across various media platforms while forming communities around technological products. Couldry's conceptualization of ritual, referred to as mediation and mediatization, complements Carey's work by incorporating anthropological perspectives and highlighting the role of media in cultural change and meaning-making. Couldry applied and expanded Carey's view in the study of media and the Internet, with a depth fleshed out from sociology and anthropology deepened in the idea of media mediation, if not mediatization.<sup>9</sup> Couldry sees a more decentralized yet pervasive media, as individuals participate in ritual activities in various media while forming part of the community molded around communication and technological products' engagements.

Contrary to the functionalist view of media communication and drawing on the works of Durkheim,<sup>10</sup> Bourdieu<sup>11</sup> and Bloch,<sup>12</sup> Couldry deepens Carey's introduction of ritual in communication studies. His version of the ritual theory, more appropriately, *mediation*,<sup>13</sup> *mediatization*,<sup>14</sup> and later, *deep mediatization*,<sup>15</sup> takes from the Meyrowitz's technological deterministic *medium theory*<sup>16</sup>—and Postman's<sup>17</sup> *Technopolis*—by inserting it in the corpus of Carey's, but with nuanced and deepened anthropological grounds beyond

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<sup>9</sup> Couldry, 2008.

<sup>10</sup> Durkheim, 1995.

<sup>11</sup> Bourdieu, P. (1991) *Language and symbolic power*. Cambridge: Polity. Also see, Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>12</sup> Bloch, M. (1989). *Ritual, history, and power: selected papers in anthropology*. London: The Athlone Press.

<sup>13</sup> Couldry, 2003.

<sup>14</sup> Couldry, 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Couldry, & Hepp, 2017.

<sup>16</sup> Meyrowitz, J. (1994). *Medium theory* in D. Crowley and D. Mitchell (eds) *Communication Theory Today*. Cambridge: Polity

<sup>17</sup> Postman, N. (1993). *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*. Vintage.

functionalism. Durkheim's contributions to the study of ritual are acknowledged by both Carey and Couldry, despite Carey's criticism of Durkheim's anthropology. Thus, Couldry strongly advocates for including a more robust anthropological framework within the scholarship of ritual theory. He considers cultural institutions as shaped by the media's ways of interaction. This theoretical synthesis emphasizes the power dynamics inherent in structuring or naturalizing mediated and non-mediated worlds, drawing from Bloch's<sup>18</sup> distinction between the sacred and the non-sacred and their power relationship.

As discussed within media ritual theory, therefore, power pertains to structuring mediated communities regarding access, agency, and determining valuable data. Media rituals assume a transcendental value, distinguishing initiates from non-initiates and establishing boundaries of belonging and social isolation. Furthermore, power is evident in the media (or media conglomerate) dominance of the naturalization of media rituals, shaping users and communities' interactions within a mass-mediated world. By examining Meta's ritual forms and their role in naturalizing sacred rituals, this study sheds light on the implications and power dynamics of Meta's ritualization. The analysis considers the blurring of boundaries between the sacred and the technological, the normalization of interactions, and the complex reordering of institutions in media terms, within the broader context of Meta's social technology affordances. Thus, this theoretical background provides a framework for investigating the potential of Meta as a ritual platform, analyzing its implications for power dynamics and the naturalization of religious interactions within its platform. By drawing on concepts from ritual theory, this study aims to deepen our understanding of the ritualistic elements embedded within Meta's offerings and their significance in contemporary cultural forms. First, a primer on Meta's invocation is a way to proceed in this critical investigation.

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<sup>18</sup> Bloch, 1989.

### **3. Meta Ritual Platform: The Invocation of Online Religion**

Historically laden with religious connotations, the term ‘invocation’ signifies a call or request to be part of something larger than oneself. It embodies the collective ambition of a group or a person for something beyond the present. In recent discussions surrounding religious communication on social media, specifically Meta,<sup>19</sup> a contentious issue emerged—does Meta's invitation (or invocation) to religious communities strengthen their engagement and rituals?

The ritual perspective explores this question, focusing on sharing, participation, engagement, access, and the quality of these interactions within the media ecosystem. It articulates a deeper desire to belong to a group, *belongingness*. Some optimists laud Meta for its pioneering role as a social network site with rich User Interfaces (UI), facilitating habitual sharing routines and interactive participation that foster that belongingness. Since half the world's population uses one or another of Meta's social technology apps, three of which rank among the top four largest global social media platforms,<sup>20</sup> with an impressive user engagement ratio of about 3.6 billion monthly engagements,<sup>21</sup> faith communities should join this global congregation.

This study sits within a broader context, in any case. While a ritual perspective analysis also hinges on freedom of expression and the problem of access, this paper applies these principles rather than offering a substantive treatment. Access to a communication ritual equates to a community of expression akin to the prized notion of freedom of speech. In this sense, rituals embody fundamental rights to knowledge, participation, and inclusion in a community where mutual exchanges of meaning occur. To be part of the community and live the rituals of their daily communicative acts is also a question of access and

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<sup>19</sup> Dias, E. (2021, July 25). Facebook's next target: the religious experience. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/25/us/facebook-church.html>

<sup>20</sup> Statista. (2022). Leading social networks worldwide as of January 2022, ranked by number of active users. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/>

<sup>21</sup> Richter, 2021.

freedom. Meta capitalizes on these levels of expression through its platform. Some argue that Meta's invocation simplifies the continuation of routine rituals for faith communities—access to shared prayer, fellowship, and community. They view Meta as providing an online platform for sacred rituals, democratizing access for religious individuals and those favorably disposed to the practice of religion. Various Meta features are thought to enhance community and improve access, offering experiences comparable to physical sacred rituals. This argument holds if we clarify what type of ritual we are referring to and if we consider mediated forms of community to be as pivotal as non-mediated ones. It becomes even more relevant if the technological component assumes the values of the religious forms.

However, the claim that Meta makes rituals easier warrants further scrutiny. Considering Meta's ambitious vision for a Metaverse,<sup>22</sup> how would 'easier' be measured for a religious community in a remote African or South American village lacking basic digital infrastructure and literacy? What technological infrastructure would they need to engage with the augmented reality of the Metaverse fully?

From a user perspective, Meta has woven unique rituals into its user journey for religious communities. It blurs the line between religion online and online religion,<sup>23</sup> creating its brand of community and expanding its unique rituals using pseudo-religious language. Religious leaders and communities that adopt Meta's standardized network find a sense of community upon which many rites of invocation are built. But a fundamental question must be addressed: How does Meta serve as a ritual platform? What evidence supports its characterization as such, and how does this challenge or enrich traditional conceptions of religious rituals in contemporary society? An analysis of Meta's advertising as ritual, data as the ultimate value in Meta's ritual

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<sup>22</sup>Zuckerberg, M. (2021a, October 28). Founder's letter, 2021. *Meta*, <https://about.fb.com/news/2021/10/founders-letter/>

<sup>23</sup>Frost, J. K. & Youngblood, N. E (2014). Online religion and religion online: Reform Judaism and web-based communication. *Journal of Media and Religion*, 13(2), pp. 49-66, DOI: 10.1080/15348423.2014.909190

typology, and the richness of Meta's ritual interactions, algorithms, and the rituals of care, religion, access, and membership, are answers to the question. First is a defense of the claim that Meta is a ritual digital technology of power.

#### **4. A Ritual of Power**

Some proponents argue that Meta's collaboration with faith communities represents a mutually beneficial partnership. This optimistic viewpoint highlights Meta's recognition—as one of the most prominent social technology platforms—of the relevance of sacred rituals in an industry where faith is often regarded as a relic of the past. From this perspective, since half of the world's population uses one or another of Meta's social technology apps and the user engagement ratio is optimal with about 3.6 billion monthly engagements,<sup>24</sup> it would be counter-intuitive for faith communities not to participate in the invocation, where half of the world's population engage. However, it also raises concerns about religious communities' endorsement of big tech's power. The convergence of communication rituals and religious rituals brings to mind Couldry's anticipation of naturalization through media communication technology.

Furthermore, this partnership raises the broader question of religious faith communities' role in social technology rituals. With unlimited access to primary user data, Meta possesses the power to target and personalize ritual experiences for each individual. While Meta's brand of virtual worship may appear global and inclusive in its non-doctrinal ontology, fundamentally individualistic in its data segmentation and user profiling, and socially isolating in its delivery of sacred interactions, it assumes a performative nature akin to a theatrical production, where actors are aware of the plot while audiences may not be unless explicitly disclosed. The assumptions of *produsage*, where users are considered active and equal participants in shared interactions or engagements,<sup>25</sup> fall short of acknowledging the influence of Meta's

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<sup>24</sup> Richter, 2021.

<sup>25</sup>Axel, B. (2007). *Produsage: towards a broader framework for user-led content creation*. In Shneiderman, B (Ed.) *Proceedings of 6th ACM SIGCHI Conference on*



algorithms in determining the ritualistic order of interactions. Engaging in Meta's rituals as an initiate of its community with a substantial free subscription to its hosted membership for the religious content may suggest the technology giant's endorsement of the power of sacred rituals. It could also signify a democratization of power or an imbalance thereof. It might also be believed that religious communities are exerting an impact on the technology ecosystem by contributing to the enrichment of user-generated (UG) and user-created (UC) content, as well as providing free audiences and data for the ongoing improvement of AI and machine learning. It might also be posited that there is a semblance of control and power balance in community building and fostering shared spiritual values. While these claims recognize the market share relevance of faith communities in the evolution of social technology and seemingly acknowledge the importance of religious rituals, they draw erroneous conclusions regarding the location of power and who holds or has control over it. A more accurate conclusion is that the power previously held by religious groups and their presumed significance in community building, if it still holds, dissipates within the crevices of digital rituals that many of their leaders do not comprehend and are hesitant to confront. The power of social technologies like Meta is subtle, structured around the perception of democratized ritual communities and shared values, with a clever knack for downplaying its interest in power while firmly grasping its true potent tools: access and data. It is akin to control through reverse engineering. Leveraging the strategic size and strong bonds of faith communities, Meta views them as a unique opportunity for growth, gradually assimilating their distinctive experiences into the platform's ritual forms.

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*Creativity and Cognition* 2007. Association for Computing Machinery, United States of America, pp. 99- 105.

Axel, B. (2005, November 3). Some exploratory notes on producers and produsage. *Smurblog*.

Retrieved from <http://snurb.info/node/329>.

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Meta's introduction and fortification of a partnership program with faith communities<sup>26</sup> serve as a testament to the outcomes of its strategic proselytism. This revitalized enthusiasm for collaboration aims to position the tech giant to acquire a larger share of data from religious communities. This data will serve as a resource for formulating and iterating its brand of media forms, specifically tailored for its unique ritualistic experiences. Meta's claim of utilizing user data for a better user experience can also be interpreted as harvesting data to enhance its form of rituals, aligning with its brand of the community and progress in the realm of virtual and augmented reality—the Metaverse. It is about creating more targeted advertisements, increasing profit margins, and improving the bottom line of the alternative web. It pertains to the power to shape the ways and means by which organizations, whose inherent sociological strength lies in community building, will follow the lead of big tech's rituals in their digital interactions. Moreover, it pertains to who will control the digital ecosystem in the next phase of digital evolution, as data becomes the ultimate value in the race for control.

### **5. When Ads Become Rituals and Data, the Ultimate Value**

Furthermore, from the beginning, Meta's mission claims to have been building community rather than solely making money.<sup>27</sup> The initial technologies designed by the ingenious teenager and his collaborators aimed to address the need for connection within the Harvard student community. This pursuit of connection evolved into a connection ritual that transcended the confines of Cambridge, Massachusetts, eventually becoming a global ritual. It extended to encompass the broader realms of higher education, financial institutions, political organizations, and social groups and garnered attention from tech leaders in Silicon Valley.

It is undeniable that this argument holds factual evidence in Meta's favor, for no other social technology has had a massive share,<sup>28</sup> close to

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<sup>26</sup> Dias, 2021.

<sup>27</sup> Zuckerberg, 2012a.

<sup>28</sup> Statista, 2022.

half the world population if the entire Meta networks are combined. However, it is essential to critically examine this claim for prioritizing community-building and avoid making incorrect inferences or informal fallacies. While it is true that Meta's technology is marketed as a means to build community, with monetization taking a secondary role, understanding business pitches reveals that values are the driving force behind financial success, not the other way around. It would not be a shrewd business communication strategy for Meta to deviate from standard efficiency principles in a sales pitch. Therefore, embracing the claim of a community-building end goal without delving into the fundamental aspects of Meta's technology and its design concerning its mission appears overly simplistic. An organization's priority value could be seen not based solely on what it says about itself but on its business model as well as the gleaned experiences of its customers.

Hence, it is essential to distinguish between different types of communities within this ritual typology to address the issue at hand. If communities mean groups that share popular culture and experiences or loosely defined systems of social interaction and communication, the kind Tönnies describes as 'Gesellschaft,'<sup>29</sup> comparable to Anderson's 'imagined community,'<sup>30</sup> then Meta's perspective may be more readily justified. Similarly, Meta's defense may be more robust if groups are artificially constructed sets and subsets of people based on shared interests and values. However, suppose it pertains to catering to the specific needs of groups to promote their thriving and engagement with deeply ingrained values that underpin their ritual practices while leveraging these for enhanced benefits or transcendent values. In that case, more probing questions need to be addressed. These questions are pivotal in determining whether the primary focus of Meta's rituals lies in securing more ads or fostering shared bonds, including those formed through religious rituals. A roadmap to addressing this issue involves

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<sup>29</sup>Tönnies, F. (1887). *Community and society (Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft)*. Macmillan.

<sup>30</sup> Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Verso Books.

examining how Meta generates revenue and whether its ad-centric model is integral to its rituals.

Meta's primary source of revenue derives from advertisements<sup>31</sup>—a simple reality that has complex implications regarding the type of groups prioritized and optimized within its rituals. The business model of Meta revolves around data collection to generate ad revenue. It is a well-known practice in social technology companies that increased access to consumer data and a better ability to predict click-through-behavior results in greater profitability from advertisers. In essence, engagement—the highly acclaimed mantra of communication as sharing and participation—aligns with improved access to user and community data, which in turn becomes a strategy for maximizing ad revenue. Meta's collection and mining of intimate experiences within religious communities' interactions online enhance the precision in predicting ritual-related clicking behavior for that group of its customers. The structure gears toward gathering more data for more ads, and the various touchpoints of interaction rituals within Meta serve as strategic means of retaining user attention. It is a calculated positioning within the competitive landscape of the 'race for attention'.<sup>32</sup> Consequently, Meta's ad-centric business model is integral to its formal interaction ritual and an inherent aspect of its ritual DNA.

## **6. The Claim of Richer Ritual Interactions**

Moreover, an additional perspective arises from religious leaders who embrace Meta as a platform to enhance their religious experiences,

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<sup>31</sup> Meta Platforms Inc. (2022-2012). Annual reports. *Meta Investor Relations*. Retrieved from <https://investor.fb.com/financials/default.aspx>

<sup>32</sup> Harris, T. (2017, April). The race for your attention: How a handful of tech companies control billions of minds every day. TED. [https://www.ted.com/talks/tristan\\_harris\\_how\\_a\\_handful\\_of\\_tech\\_companies\\_control\\_billions\\_of\\_minds\\_every\\_day?referrer=playlist-the\\_race\\_for\\_your\\_attention](https://www.ted.com/talks/tristan_harris_how_a_handful_of_tech_companies_control_billions_of_minds_every_day?referrer=playlist-the_race_for_your_attention). See also, Ordikhani-Seyedlar, M. (2017, April). What happens in your brain when you pay attention? TED. [https://www.ted.com/talks/mehdi\\_ordikhani\\_seyedlar\\_what\\_happens\\_in\\_your\\_brain\\_when\\_you\\_pay\\_attention?utm\\_campaign=tedspread&utm\\_medium=referral&utm\\_source=tedcomshare](https://www.ted.com/talks/mehdi_ordikhani_seyedlar_what_happens_in_your_brain_when_you_pay_attention?utm_campaign=tedspread&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=tedcomshare)

viewing it as a complement to their rituals. More optimistic advocates of this position argue that Meta increases the likelihood of delivering healthier, spiritual, and religious messages to the faith community. Some stretch their view to singing the praises of Meta as the savior of the new era of religion online. They contend that Meta's influence extends beyond merely amplifying what religious groups do, as it brings religion into the mainstream and provides it with equal standing alongside businesses and nonprofit organizations worldwide. This argument assumes that online religious experiences are comparable to business conversations. While there are shared aspects, such as the involvement of individuals with diverse motives—as studies in Uses and Gratification theory show—blurring the distinction between the nature of the Meta communication and its purpose weakens this argument.

Engaging in online commerce by selling goods and services through Meta's extensive user database can be a savvy business strategy, depending on the marketer's investment. In advertisements, it is common practice for organizations to pay for ad space. Religious organizations also purchase ads, the extent of which depends on their budget and desired outcomes. If Meta's proposition pertains solely to ads for religious communities, it would entail a different type of conversation. However, the concern here is that Meta presents an illusion of free reach to communities, which, in reality, is not the case. An even more pressing issue is that while religious communities may receive funds and engage in business activities to ensure financial sustainability, their primary mission revolves around addressing religious needs. The critical problem lies in cornering religious communities by giving them the impression that Meta's ritual elements offer superior audience reach while excluding those communities from their networks unless they paid Meta.

In essence, if 'richer rituals' imply paying for increased reach, implementing a redesigned keyword and key phrase structure for immersive rituals, and integrating augmented reality into the liturgy of ritualistic technology, Meta has indeed become an enticing alternative

for sacred rituals, complementing and transforming them. Suppose it entails the reconfiguration of the sacred and the assimilation of mediated modes of interaction into every facet of the sacred to the point where the sacred becomes absorbed within the mediated form. In that case, Meta has accomplished its ultimate objective. It is a ‘richer’ experience for Meta, radically reconstructing religion and endowing it with a new visage that, in the long run, may not be recognizable to its waning devotees.

### **7. Meta's Algorithm, Ritual of Care, and Religion**

Furthermore, some proponents advocate for Meta's need-centric approach to addressing the challenges posed by COVID-19 restrictions and the post-COVID-19 world. They argue that Meta's repurposed COVID-19 content activism can be viewed as a technology of care, constituting one of the platform's elaborate rituals. Undeniably, the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted researchers to recognize the significant role of care in human interactions.<sup>33</sup> Meta has responded in ways that have benefited individuals and numerous institutions. It is worth noting that during the pandemic's peak, faith communities greatly benefited from Meta's features, including live broadcasts of religious services through Meta, along with other video content platforms such as YouTube, Google Meet, Zoom, and Windows Meet. Suppose this inquiry is confined to the level of need fulfillment and user accessibility. In that case, the argument is strong enough to counter the alternative, except in regions lacking digital access, a topic deserving further study, although the digital divide problem is a challenge that Meta did not create. However, a more rigorous examination would reveal that beneath the surface of facilitating live worship events, there exists a fundamental algorithmic structure that requires scrutiny.

Meta's algorithmic framework is designed so that when faith communities are aggregated, Meta controls the visibility (or non-

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<sup>33</sup> International Communication Association. (2021, May 27-31). 71<sup>st</sup> annual ICA conference theme. *Engaging the essential work of care: communion, connectedness, and social justice*. Virtual conference.

visibility) of content within these communities. While it is true, as many argue, that as a private company, Meta has the right to determine how and when faith audiences can access their messages online, this is implied in the platform's free subscription business model. It would be unreasonable to expect extensive control over a service for which one has free access. Free services do not entail entitlement to dictate operational aspects, nor does one possess regulatory authority over a company that one does not own. Some may extend this argument further by invoking an attitude of gratitude, a common theme in religious discourse. Some might see Meta as a gratuitous technology that, like the benevolent Creator, has provided a free technological realm for unrestricted use. While this sentiment may not be articulated in a clichéd pious manner, it is evident in certain circles where religious leaders become voluntary advocates of Meta to their vast congregations, comparing it to the Internet or their telecom service providers. This token of gratitude assumes a ritualistic element when it becomes a responsibility to give back to the technology that offered them a space for worship, especially when the pandemic necessitated institutional lockdowns. Religious leaders demonstrate an unsolicited support for Meta by voluntarily promoting the platform on their global, national, regional, or diocesan digital and print spaces and resources, without a thorough examination of the underlying implications of their endorsement. It is worth considering the potential consequences if similar support were extended to other media technologies or telecommunication providers. Nevertheless, this perspective presents another problematic argument. Care in the context of this discourse is meaningful when it does not diminish the recipient's position compared to its initial state. At the heart of any discourse that fosters care lies not so much in what is said or sold, but in the ability and opportunity to express oneself within one's circle whenever one feels to do so. Even more crucial is whether members can communicate with their claimed community, which they constructed within a free platform. In a scenario where one lacks the means to communicate with their community, how much access does the leader truly possess, and to what extent can it be deemed care?

Most importantly, if an algorithm renders it impossible for a community to hear an individual's message, can one genuinely claim to have access? The right to speak implies the freedom to be heard, and when this freedom becomes unattainable, how can communication be considered truly free? How does one care when one stifles the ability to be heard? This question is one of Meta's arguments against net neutrality, a cause that Mr. Zuckerberg has championed across different regions, including Asia, Africa, and America, through his internet.org global initiative and Free Basics program aimed at countries with limited digital access—a laudable endeavor, nonetheless. Could a similar argument be made against Meta since it offers its services for free while restricting access to members if hosts do not reciprocate through paid promotions?

In the context of the Meta Faith Hub and other features targeting faith experiences, along with the public page, even if one has diligently built a membership base of one million people, the reality is that the person's members do not have access to participate in their rituals unless the account owner pays Meta to unlock that access to all members. Meta establishes terms for each level of access, despite members already being part of the account owner's network. How does this compare to access to worship in physical spaces? Given that many faith communities have unintentionally migrated their members to the platform and that the algorithm structure segregates them into subsets, it becomes apparent that the entire community is enclosed within isolated compartments, if not silos. If Meta decides to restrict all interactions, it accomplishes such a task with the click of a button. In this scenario, who truly owns the community? This problem raises profound questions about ownership and control within the Meta platform. While faith communities may have willingly embraced Meta and brought their members into the digital realm, the underlying Meta's algorithmic structure can confine them and limit their access to meaningful participation. The power to decide who sees what content within these communities rests solely with Meta. Although Meta's status as a private company grants it the autonomy to shape the platform according to its policies, the implications for community ownership and



the ability to freely express and engage with one's chosen community are not to be overlooked.

Comparing the accessibility of worship in physical spaces with Meta's digital environment highlights the disparities, if not the limitations, of the online experience. In a physical space, individuals can express their beliefs and participate in rituals without monetary barriers or restrictions imposed by an algorithm. However, within the Meta platform, access to participation in rituals and community engagement is contingent upon financial transactions and adherence to Meta's terms and policies, whose lists of fine prints can be a deterrent to readership. This dynamic creates a disparity between physical and digital spaces, as the inclusive nature of physical worship experiences may be partially replicated within the confines of a digital platform in Meta's current structure.

Furthermore, the segmentation of faith communities into silos within the algorithmic structure exacerbates the issue of limited access. While faith leaders may have diligently built their communities on Meta, the platform's design can isolate members and impede the free flow of communication. If Meta decides to wall off interactions or impose further restrictions, it can effectively restrict the ability of faith communities to communicate with one another. In this sense, the question of ownership becomes even more crucial. Who indeed possesses the authority to control and determine the fate of these communities within the Meta platform? Who could grant them access to worship or not to worship; to pray or not to pray; to fellowship or not to fellowship? Not even the pope or the high priest does. The answer remains with Meta, as it retains the power to shape the boundaries and limitations of these digital spaces. In short, the underlying algorithmic structure of Meta's platform, coupled with the limitations on access and control, raises important questions about community ownership and the ability to express and engage within digital spaces freely. Recognizing these complexities is essential for a comprehensive understanding of the intersection between Meta's algorithm, the ritual of care, and religion within the context of social technology platform.

## **8. Meta and the Ritual of Access and Membership**

Similarly, Meta's algorithm determines the content accessible to its audience. Choosing to embrace the Meta platform entails accepting and engaging in its practices, much like adhering to the rituals of religious faith. The User Interface (UI) elements Meta (alongside other social media technologies) provides—such as sharing, liking, commenting, posting, feeds, reels, and other features—serve as communication tokens for initiates. They establish the terms for accessing and engaging within predefined frameworks, dictating the tone of interactions and the permissible modes of communication. In this ritualistic context, sharing serves as sermons, liking as antiphons, commenting as responses, posting, feeds, and publishing as acts of proclamation. Emojis embody the expression of feelings arising from these ritual elements. Meta has honed the art of its rituals and bestowed upon them a contemporary taxonomy. It has begun to influence the conversations of other rituals, regardless of their sacred nature. Soon, if not already, the liturgy will transform into the Metaverse, communion will give way to the community, subscriptions will replace initiation rites, sermons will become shares, confession will take the form of emojis, baptisms will become immersive augmented reality experiences, prayer will manifest as engagement, and the faith journey will be synonymous with search. The divine will assume the form of what Detweiler called iGods.<sup>34</sup> When one's access to what was once familiar is superseded by the unexpected, albeit appealing, the available content becomes highly desirable. The allegation is that the platform's design intentionally prioritizes trendy and sensational content.<sup>35</sup> Meta does this, at least in part, to restrict access to alternative content while maximizing exposure

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<sup>34</sup> Detweiler, C. (2013). *iGods: How Technology Shapes Our Spiritual and Social Lives*, Brazos Press.

<sup>35</sup> (Scott, 2021; U.S. Senate Hearing, 2021) Scott, P. (2021, October 3). Whistleblower: Facebook is misleading the public on progress against hate speech, violence, misinformation. *C.B.S. News. 60Minutes*.<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/facebook-whistleblower-frances-haugen-misinformation-public-60-minutes-2021-10-03/>. See also, Senate Hearing. (2021, October 5). Live: Facebook whistleblower testifies at Senate Hearing. Uploaded by N.B.C. News, October 5, 2021. [https://youtu.be/\\_lhWeVHxdXg](https://youtu.be/_lhWeVHxdXg)

to content that re-enforces users' prejudices, enhances attention retention, thereby creating valuable ad space and time. The user experience of the community is not the primary concern here, although the rituals associated with the experience may be given perfunctory attention.

The platform's algorithms make it challenging for users to discover and view messages. Suppose Meta's faith initiative aims to expand faith communities. Why is the algorithm structured to facilitate the growth of content and data trails in a way that deepens the segmentation of individuals and hinders cross-interactions across divergent user modules? It reinforces biases and segregates individuals, impeding triangulation between opposing users' perspectives. Meta presents itself as offering free services to its adherents. However, it monetizes its data as its product and service. Meta is not truly free. Users are not the beneficiaries of free usage; they are the commodities being sold. The commoditization of rituals is prevalent within the platform. Users unwittingly become sacrificial offerings for Meta's ritual technological advancements. The sacred rituals of religious groups online are a significant part of these sacrificial elements. Ultimately, religious communities and leaders realize the extent to which their rituals may have been mediatized and distorted in the dominant space and power of Meta.

## **9. Conclusion**

From the foregoing, some conclusions are inevitable. The invocation of online religion on Meta raises complex questions regarding the role of social media platforms in facilitating religious engagement and rituals. While some proponents argue that Meta's platform provides opportunities for religious communities to strengthen their rituals and expand their reach, a critical examination reveals underlying concerns and limitations. Firstly, the claim that Meta makes rituals easier should be scrutinized, considering the digital divide and lack of infrastructure in certain regions. Access to Meta's platform and participation in its augmented reality features may be challenging for communities that still need basic digital literacy or adequate technological infrastructure.

The notion of accessibility needs contextualizing within the global landscape of digital disparities. Moreover, secondly, while Meta is a partner to faith communities, it is crucial to question the power dynamics at play. Meta's algorithms and data collection practices give the platform control over targeted advertising and personalized ritual experiences. The platform's ad-centric business model, driven by data collection, raises concerns about prioritizing profit over the authentic fostering of shared spiritual values. The subtle power exerted by Meta through its strategic assimilation of religious experiences into its forms should be noticed. Again, the claim of Meta's focus on community-building needs critical examination. While Meta promotes community-building, it is essential to consider how this aligns with its business model and revenue generation through advertisements. The ad-centric model and data-driven engagement strategies are integral to Meta's rituals, shaping the type of communities prioritized and optimized within its platform. Still more, the notion of richer rituals on Meta should be approached with caution, too. If it implies paying for increased reach and the assimilation of mediated modes of interaction into the sacred, it raises questions about the transformation and reconfiguration of religious practices. Meta's rituals may offer new experiences but risk diluting the essence of traditional religious rituals and alienating devoted followers. Finally, Meta's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and its provision of features for remote worship should be acknowledged. Not only was it timely, but it was also effective in solving some problems posed by social distancing. However, beneath the surface of facilitating live worship events, the algorithmic structure of Meta raises concerns regarding content visibility and control. The platform's algorithmic framework determines the visibility of content within faith communities, posing questions about the extent of control exerted by Meta over religious messages in the platform's mediation of religious practices.

In light of these observations, religious leaders and communities must approach Meta's platform critically. Recommendations for religious leaders include being mindful of the limitations and potential risks associated with online rituals, especially if driven by the race for

attention, and ensuring that the authenticity and integrity of religious practices are maintained in the digital realm. Religious communities should also strive for a nuanced understanding of the power dynamics inherent in their engagement with social media platforms and actively participate in shaping the digital ecosystem in ways that align with their values.

Acknowledging the limitations of this research is necessary. The analysis presented here represents a specific moment in time and is limited by the available data and understanding of Meta's platform within that time-frame. Further research is needed to explore the long-term implications of Meta's role as a ritual platform and the evolving dynamics between social media and religious engagement. Additionally, investigations into the impact of digital disparities and the consequences of assimilating religious experiences into digital forms are areas that warrant future exploration.

In conclusion, while Meta's platform offers new opportunities for religious engagement and mediatized rituals, a critical examination reveals underlying power dynamics, limitations, and potential risks. It requires religious leaders and communities to approach Meta's platform carefully, ensuring that the integrity of religious practices is preserved while actively shaping the digital ecosystem in ways that enrich their values.