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“You Might Be a Lutheran If Your VBS Snack is Tostadas”:
Mediated Nostalgia and Counter-Aesthetics in #DecolonizeLutheranism

The meme “You Might Be a Lutheran If Your VBS Snack is Tostadas” was first posted online in May 2016 by Paul Bailie, a white male pastor of a Spanish-speaking Lutheran church in Texas, near the Mexico border.¹ As is typical for memes, the complete message is found neither solely in the image of tostadas, nor only in the caption, but in the juxtaposition, which hails the situated knowledge of an implied audience who “gets” the meaning evoked by that juxtaposition—in this case, the particular combination of Lutheran identity and tostadas.

The *Lutheran Tostadas* meme poses a question of *religious aesthetics*: what does it mean for food to be presented as emblematic of a religious identity? The meme further hints at some cultural dissonance. In Latin America, home to more than 840,000 Lutherans in 15 different countries, Lutheran tostadas might be unremarkable.² However, this meme appears in the context of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the second least racially diverse religious group in the United States—and the whitest.³ What do tostadas signify here about Lutheran identity—and how and why did this meme spark a hashtag and movement called #decolonizeLutheranism?

¹ Joelle Colville-Hanson, “Social Media Campaign Challenges Lutheran Stereotypes.” *God’s Work. Our Blog. A Blog of the Leaders and Congregations of the Northeastern Iowa Synod*. April 21, 2016. <http://blog.neiasynod.org/2016/04/lutheran-stereotypes/>, accessed August 6, 2018.

² Lutheran World Federation. “The Lutheran World Federation – 2015 Membership Figures Summary.” <https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/2015/documents/lwi-2015-stats-en-low.pdf>.

³ Pew Research Center. “How Racially Diverse are U.S. Religious Groups?” http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/07/27/the-most-and-least-racially-diverse-u-s-religious-groups/ft_15-07-23_religiondiversityindex-1/. Accessed August 6, 2018.

This paper will seek to address the mediated religious aesthetics of the *Lutheran Tostadas* meme in connection to the Decolonize Lutheranism movement. First, I will offer some background and context for the creation of this meme, in order to discuss the particular religious, cultural and ethnic identities the meme is citing and challenging. I will then draw from Birgit Meyer's work on religious aesthetics to consider the meme as an example of the aesthetic formation of religious communities. Finally, I will argue that the *Lutheran Tostadas* meme and Decolonize Lutheranism offer an example of the linking of religion, media and culture by interpretive communities in digital spaces, and that they demonstrate the potential of mediated counter-aesthetics to challenge hegemonic nostalgia and to invite alternative practices of religious identity-building.

In 2015, the online company Old Lutheran, a purveyor of novelty items marketed to U.S. Lutherans, posted this meme to Facebook: a photo of a baking dish and caption, "You Might Be a Lutheran If You Can't Get into Heaven Without a Casserole."⁴ The meme alluded to the communal practice of church "potluck" meals in which all members bring food to share, and the one-dish meal known as a casserole or hot dish is a common contribution. The meme was liked or shared 3,900 times; and the original post garnered 187 comments debating the nostalgic celebration of American Lutheranism's predominantly white, mid-western, Scandinavian or other Northern European heritage.

A closer look at some of this online conversation reveals how an interpretative community in a digital space—bringing together participants from a wide variety of geographic and cultural contexts—facilitates a process of religious identity formation.

⁴ Old Lutheran. "You Might Be a Lutheran If... You Can't Get Into Heaven Without a Casserole." Facebook post, October 22, 2015. <https://www.facebook.com/oldlutheran/photos/a.134452158998.109480.10665908998/10153390786648999/?type=3&theater>, accessed August 6, 2018.

Responses to the *Lutheran Casserole* meme fell into several categories. *Assenters* commented on the felt truth of the meme or recounted favorite potluck memories. *Expanders* built on the meme's narrative by referencing additional cultural tropes such as jello, coffee, or the Scandinavian-American phrase "Uff Da." *Critics* questioned the meme's accuracy and exclusionary implications, such as: "This meme reinforces the idea that Lutheranism is a Midwest specific ministry for people of German and Scandinavian descent. Is that who we want to be? Are we the church for a certain type of white people?"⁵ Finally, *defenders* claimed that since the meme was "just a joke" it did not merit critique, as in one response: "I think people are to [sic] sensitive and everyone needs to lighten up... We all believe in Jesus Christ and God and to me that is the important thing and don't get so hung up on being politically correct."⁶

Paul Bailie, creator of the *Lutheran Tostadas* meme, commented: "NO! This is wrong and culturally insensitive. Jokes and memes about Lutherans and their hotdish racistly confuse Lutheran identity with white Midwestern identity. . . [and marginalize] Lutherans of non-Northern European ancestry into a sort of second-class Lutherans who aren't quite Lutheran enough. Being Lutheran is about confessing a theology, not about eating a certain food."⁷ Bailie's subsequent *Lutheran Tostadas* meme inspired similar acts of meme-making that tackled issues of Lutheran identity, race, and culture, such as: "You Might Be a Lutheran If This [curry] is Your Sunday Brunch"; "You May Be

⁵ Lura Groen, comment to Facebook post, <https://www.facebook.com/oldlutheran/photos/a.134452158998.109480.10665908998/10153390786648999/?type=3&theater>, accessed August 6, 2018.

⁶ Holly Hefley, comment to Facebook post, <https://www.facebook.com/oldlutheran/photos/a.134452158998.109480.10665908998/10153390786648999/?type=3&theater>, accessed August 6, 2018.

⁷ Paul Bailie, comment to Facebook post, <https://www.facebook.com/oldlutheran/photos/a.134452158998.109480.10665908998/10153390786648999/?type=3&theater>, accessed August 6, 2018.

Lutheran If These [Elephants] Are In Your Backyard”; or “You Might Be Lutheran If the ‘Protest’ Part of Protestant Isn’t Restricted to a Romanticized Memory of 1517.”

As these exchanges unfolded, Lutheran seminarian Elle Dowd coined a hashtag, #DecolonizeLutheranism,⁸ later adopted as the name for a Lutheran movement seeking to address structural racism and a lack of diversity in Lutheran communities through mediated images and narratives that address and challenge a dominant white Lutheran aesthetic, like this tweet from Rozella Haydée White: “I’m a 3rd generation black Puerto Rican Lutheran who consistently gets asked when I became Lutheran.”⁹

The Decolonize Lutheranism movement includes a website, logo, and social media accounts, conferences in Chicago and Philadelphia, and anti-racism workshops in congregations and official church gatherings, with the aim “to raise up alternative historical and theological narratives to take center stage in our church’s culture—its liturgies, hymns, polity, worship, food, poetry, art—even ways of life together. . . [both] to counter notions of Lutheranism that are weighted by White Eurocentric models and theologies, [and] to revitalize how we collectively express our confessional identity.”¹⁰ A video on the homepage ties the movement’s genesis to the *Lutheran Tostadas* meme.¹¹

We may note a tension between Paul Bailie’s assertion that “Being Lutheran is... not about eating a certain food,” and Decolonize Lutheranism’s identification of food and other “ways of life together” as appropriate and desirable arenas for mediating alternative ideas of what it means to be Lutheran.

⁸ #Decolonize Lutheranism, Homepage. <http://decolonizetest.cmmaven.com>, accessed August 6, 2018.

⁹ Colville-Hansen, *ibid.*

¹⁰ #Decolonize Lutheranism. “Our Beliefs.” <http://decolonizetest.cmmaven.com/our-beliefs/>, accessed August 6, 2018.

¹¹ #Decolonize Lutheranism, Homepage.

Birgit Meyer and Jojada Verrips, writing on “religious aesthetics,” suggest a way to consider these two claims as complementary rather than contradictory. Meyer and Verrips identify religious aesthetics as “an embodied and embedded praxis through which subjects relate to other subjects and objects and which is grounded in and offers the ground for religious experience.”¹² This recognizes the role of multi-sensory experiences of sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste in the formation of religious subjects and religious communities, no less than the abstract concepts of theology or creed. These experiences, which Meyer terms “religious sensations,” are “negotiated and authorized within religious traditions,” and serve as “modes... [that are] key to invoking and affirming links among [religious subjects].”¹³ Thus, Meyer argues, “aesthetics is also central to the making of religious communities that thrive on a shared aesthetic style”¹⁴; and religious aesthetics participates in the creation and maintenance of “imagined community,” Benedict Anderson’s term for a nation, which Meyer here applies to the formation of religious community.¹⁵

It is worth probing Meyer’s emphasis on the “negotiated and authorized” nature of religious sensations. While these memes and the interpretive communal conversations about them clearly constitute a process of *negotiation*, it is less clear whether these mediated forms can be considered *authorized*. Neither the Old Lutheran company nor Decolonize Lutheranism are official representatives of the ELCA. Additionally, memes as a form typically connote a certain “unauthorized” nature, as

¹² Birgit Meyer and Jojada Verrips, “Aesthetics.” *Key Words in Religion, Media and Culture*, ed. by David Morgan. New York and London: Routledge, 2008, 27.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Birgit Meyer, ed., *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion, and the Senses*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, 3.

memes often juxtapose recognizable or authorized images with text that offers reinterpreted, unauthorized meanings. Part of what memes *do* is to call into question interpretive authority: who determines meaning? The *Lutheran Tostadas* meme asks: who determines which aesthetics are definitive, or at least normative, for Lutherans?

Overall, Meyer's work on the role of mediated "aesthetic formations" of religious identity offers a helpful framework to consider what is happening in a digital space in which an image of a casserole, combined with text claiming that casserole as essential to Lutheran identity, evokes powerful feelings of nostalgia and belonging for some, and in others produces an equally powerful feeling of alienation and negation. The concept of aesthetic formation can also resolve the paradoxical claim that Lutheranism as imagined community cannot be confined to one aesthetic; and yet specific aesthetics do play a role in the formation and expression of that religious identity.

We could therefore say that Lutherans are not only formed and bound together by a shared set of beliefs, liturgical practices or ethical actions, but also that in some sense Lutherans really "are what they eat." Yet if aesthetic formations help to create the identity of religious subjects and communities through a shared culture, there is also always the question of who is included in and excluded from the aesthetic, and consequently the imagined community. This is precisely the argument of Decolonize Lutheranism, offered in the spirit of Gayatri Spivak's decolonial critique of the positioning of the European (or Euro-American) subject as the default, neutral, or "transparent" subject against which the "subaltern" is measured or defined.

Decolonize Lutheranism also emphasizes intersectionality, the field of theory begun by Kimberlé Crenshaw and developed by many other feminist scholars and

scholars of color, such as Brittney Cooper, who argues that “intersectionality is not an account of personal identity,” but rather provides an “analytic frame” for “interlocking systems of power and oppression” connected to structural identities of race, gender, sexuality, class, physical ability, and others.¹⁶ Intersectional approaches do not merely highlight marginalized communities—a move that would do nothing to displace the hegemonic centering of whiteness—but work to reveal the power dynamics which position whiteness as the “invisible center” and construct non-white communities as peripheral, exotic, “other” identities. In other words, it’s not simply a matter of inviting to the table those who have been excluded, or placing some token tostadas among the casseroles, but dismantling a table constructed and operated under the assumption that whiteness owns the table and controls the guest list.

This decolonial and intersectional approach explains what is accomplished through the deliberate aesthetic dissonance created by the *Lutheran Tostadas* meme. The meme does partly function to “expand the table,” by pointing toward the diverse cultural aesthetics of global Lutheranism. There are now more Lutherans in Ethiopia, Tanzania, India, and Indonesia than in the U.S; thus, to say that you *might* be a Lutheran if your cultural aesthetic includes tostadas, curry, elephants, or political protest is not a hypothetical “what-if”—it is already true. Yet as a counter-meme aimed at decolonizing and intersectionalizing the church, the *Lutheran Tostadas* meme also reveals the *Lutheran Casserole* aesthetic as hegemonic—as one, ethnic-specific aesthetic, in and of itself valid and real, which is mediated as *the* complete, normative expression of Lutheran identity rather than as one table among many.

¹⁶ Brittney Cooper, "Intersectionality." In *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*. Oxford University Press, 2016-02-01. <http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/du/odm.ocl>

Moreover, as the catalyst for a movement that has expanded into both digital and physical spaces of the church, gaining increasing recognition and authorization, this meme that imagines a Lutheran tostadas aesthetic, together with a Lutheran curry aesthetic, a Lutheran elephant aesthetic, or a Lutheran protest march aesthetic, offers a glimpse of what is possible when media, religion and culture intersect in digital spaces to disrupt the aesthetic formation of religious identity and to expand it beyond the monocultural and the hegemonic—to set new Lutheran tables for a more just feast.

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