

Christ against trolling

The New Zealand shooter, meme culture, and alienation from meaning

by [Daniel Schultz](#)

March 20, 2019

To be fair, it's been a long time since I read H. Richard Niebuhr's classic *Christ and Culture*, and perhaps I didn't fully absorb it at the time. But I am reasonably confident that Niebuhr never had to wrestle with the idea of ironic memes, or the ways in which they can be [weaponized](#), as they were by the alleged shooter in the March 15 attack on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, which killed 50 people.

Anyone who's spent a lot of time online, especially at places like Reddit, 4Chan, or 8Chan, instantly recognized in the shooter's manifesto any number of inside jokes, references, and activities drawn directly from the seamier side of that culture.

If you don't understand any of this, consider yourself a fortunate normie. Here's what you need to know: a *meme* is most commonly a joke created by slapping text over an image. But it can be a video, a cartoon, even a chunk of text. The common thread of memes is that they're intended to go viral—spread through internet culture like a virus. In hardcore online culture, memes are traded—either intact or with slight, often ironic, variations. The result is called *shitposting*.

The term can refer to any kind of low-value conversation. At its most harmless, shitposting is lightweight banter and one-upmanship to see who can drop the funniest comment. At its worst, it's an attempt to derail or frustrate serious conversation, to be so obnoxious that anyone with any sense closes the browser tab and walks away angry. That's *trolling*. The opposite of a shitpost is *high-effort*, a post that is thoughtful or involves a lot of work.

If this lingo doesn't make any sense to you, it's not supposed to. There is a subset of people hanging around Reddit or the Chans who take their memes very, very seriously. They're protective of their memes because they start to take on inherent meaning of their own. They also serve as cultural shibboleths. If you know what the Navy Seal cypypasta is, you're in. If not, you're out.

White nationalists and other far-right extremists have been able to co-opt this process. The alt-right in particular uses online trolling to radicalize internet denizens and spread its message in a [well-defined process](#): load the hate into a "joke," let the meme distract the people who don't get it, and watch the real message spread as the surface content is discussed and spread around. This is why Nazis use a cartoon frog to comment on President Trump's Twitter postings, and why the Christchurch shooter loaded his manifesto with memes—and plenty of links to Islamophobic and racist material. The hope is that ordinary people will get drawn in by the inside references and so be exposed to the bigotry and hate.

We could take this situation as the occasion for another the-internet-is-terrible-we-should-all-leave-social-media tirade. It wouldn't be wrong. Pastors and other leaders should remind their people that just like in real life, hateful jokes online aren't really jokes, and they're certainly not harmless. Christians and other faithful people would do well to give wide berth to sites that allow or even encourage hateful shitposting.

At the same time, we should recognize that this sort of activity is anomic, in all the many meanings of that rich concept. It's normless, or at least transgressive of established norms. It's deranged. And it's created by people who have withdrawn their emotional investment in society. It's no accident that people who gravitate toward memes are often isolated, frustrated, finding it difficult to find meaning in anything outside their insular culture. Like Travis Bickle in Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*, they feel so much like God's forgotten children that they're not even sure they exist without their acting out. [Mother Jones quotes](#) Harvard researcher Joan Donovan explaining that the Christchurch shooter “tried to meme himself into existence by producing a press kit and quoting memes and social media influencers while carrying out such violence.”

Christians have made a lot of hay in recent years lamenting online "incivility." But the issues raised by Christchurch and the wider phenomenon of shitposting cut closer to the heart of the matter. We live in a time when technology makes it easier than ever for isolated individuals to become alienated from traditional sources

of meaning, including religious faith. In the face of that, how are we to proclaim an alternative truth that invites its hearers into equality, inclusion, mutuality, and justice for the targets of hate and violence?

In other words, how can the high effort of Christianity overcome the shitposting of the online world?