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Digital Religion in the Public Sphere: Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) and Alternative for Germany (AfD)

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Abstract: While digital religion and digital protest can ideally serve the common good, religious nationalist and fundamentalist movements have exploited these tools to disrupt the social fabric and create dangerous political outcomes. This paper examines how religious communicators within Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) and Alternative for Germany (AfD) perceive and enact their responsibility within digital spaces, leveraging the power of “networked communities” and the collective identity of the digital “crowd” to advance their agendas of religious fundamentalism and political conservatism. Bypassing traditional media, groups like the AfD and TLP exploit digital religion to build communities, spread propaganda that merges religion with national identity, frame political issues as religious mandates, and mobilize collective action. Campbell’s concept of the “networked community” demonstrates how digital technologies form decentralized, fluid, and global religious communities, distinct from traditional, geographically bound ones. Both the TLP and AfD have tapped into this new digital religious space, shaping and mobilizing political and religious identities across virtual borders. Gerbaudo’s idea of the “digital crowd” complements this by examining how collective action in the digital age reshapes mass mobilization, with social media transforming how political movements operate in the 21st century. Although the AfD’s platform is not overtly religious, the party strategically invokes ethno-Christian identity, framing opposition to Islam and Muslim immigration as a defense of German cultural and Christian values. Similarly, the TLP promotes religious nationalism by advocating for Pakistan’s Islamic identity against secularism and liberalism and calling for strict enforcement of blasphemy laws. Recognizing digital spaces as tools co-opted by religious nationalist movements, this paper explores how communicators in these movements understand their responsibility for the social and long term consequences of their messages. Using Luhmann’s systems theory—where communication is central to social systems—this paper analyzes how the TLP and AfD leverage individuals’ need for purpose and belonging to mobilize them digitally. By crafting emotionally charged experiences, these movements extend their influence beyond virtual spaces and into the broader public sphere. Finally, this paper will reflect on the theological implications of these dynamics both on and offline. How do religious communicators in digital spaces reconcile their theological frameworks with the social impact of their communication? Can digital religious communities be harnessed to foster social cohesion and inclusivity instead of exacerbating social divisions? Through this lens, the paper seeks to deepen our understanding of the intersection between digital religion, political mobilization, and theological responsibility in the digital age.



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Keywords: digital religion; religious nationalism; political mobilization; digital crowd; networked community; digital groupings; digital theology

1. Introduction

This study examines the operations of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) and Alternative for Germany (AfD), two movements functioning within markedly distinct cultural and socio-political environments. Notwithstanding these distinctions, both leverage the capabilities of digital platforms to intertwine religion with political nationalism, galvanizing collective action and transforming public discourse. The study looks at how digital religion is used for exclusionary politics by using Campbell's idea of "networked communities" (2023) and Gerbaudo's idea of the "digital crowd" (2014). The TLP mobilizes under the banner of (Pan-) Islamic identity, whereas the AfD articulates its agenda within a conservative (ethno-) Christian setting. Both groups create narratives that evoke emotions and a sense of belonging, building a collective identity that surpasses geographical limitations. By analyzing the communicative patterns and affective strategies these groups employ, the study demonstrates how digital media is used to encode theological and political ideas into symbolic structures that sustain exclusion and moral polarization. The results highlight the dual potential of digital religion: to empower communities or to sustain division. Niklas Luhmann's systems theory, emphasizing the role of communication as the cornerstone of social systems, guides this exploration. Rather than treating digital religion as a neutral category, this paper asks how actors within these systems perceive and perform responsibility for the emotional and political impact of their messages. Furthermore, it reflects on the theological and socio-political implications of such mobilization, probing whether these digital spaces can be reimagined to foster cohesion rather than divisiveness.

2. Networked Community and the Digital Crowd

"Networked community" is a term which describes the dynamic and malleable nature of social relationships within a digital society, which allows for the emergence of digital religious communities that are decentralized, fluid, and not geographically-bound (Campbell and Bellar 2023, pp. 30–31). Understanding the "network" as a metaphor for community necessitates recognition of embedded narratives that are both positive and negative in nature. The complexity of such social systems offers pathways to the individual which yield opposing outcomes; on the one hand, the digital network may cultivate innovative relationship-building, and on the other, it may reinforce patterns of isolation (Campbell and Garner 2016, p. 24). Social media can enhance the facilitation of networked communities, drawing out "feelings of engagement" and connective action that can potentially result in offline organizing (Peterson 2022, pp. 6–7). An examination of networked communities, specifically in online religious spaces, suggests that bonded groups are commonly formed through a commitment to shared interest and engagement with group activities, more often than traditional or ritualistic rites of passage observed offline. Consequently, online religious communities are not static, but rather embody a breadth of depth and fluidity that can become highly individualized. This enables the construction of one's "storied identity", by which digital spaces offer a unique platform to assemble the online self, amplifying a particular narrative of the individual's deeply held beliefs as central to one's being (Campbell and Garner 2016, pp. 103–7). According to Campbell and Garner (2016), studies show that one's religious identity online is not distinctly separate from the identity of the individual offline, as there are often intentional efforts to mirror or complement the digital persona in life beyond the internet (p. 109). This blending of life online and offline

suggests that while digital networks are not capable of functioning as an isolated social and political catalyst, they can be a crucial component in the mobilization of bonded groups who share a specific set of deeply held beliefs and identities, be they religious, political, or, in certain cases, a union of both. In this way, digital activity may be understood as “proto-political”, by which political engagement is not the explicit aim, yet it maintains the potentiality to express itself in offline spaces, particularly among outliers within the political margins. Activists recognize the benefits of utilizing the digital, and social media in particular, to move beyond the limitations of physical space and engage new modes of protest, dissent, and resistance. (Peterson 2022, pp. 6–7).

When digital political activism merges with religious identity, it can intensify the potential for networked communities to mobilize in offline spaces, especially when religious-political bodies consider the nature of their claims to be inherent, God-given, or divinely inspired (Peterson 2022, pp. 7–8). The culminating characteristics of “networked community” are useful in understanding the nature of the digital “crowd”. This concept provides a logical framework to make sense of how countless participants throughout specific countries, or even the world, separated by a diversity of socio-geographical factors, may come to perceive themselves as part of a common actor (Gerbaudo 2014, p. 264). While digital religion inherently challenges traditional hierarchical structures within faith communities, it also inevitably introduces, and occasionally replaces, conventional religious leadership with so-called “instant experts”, online personas who rise to significant positions of influence and power, bypassing time honored authoritative processes. When internet-based authority is established, this can often translate into offline influence and reconstruction of governance (Campbell and Bellar 2023, pp. 84–85). While this can be used as a mode of positive reform against spiritual gatekeeping, it may also permit dangerous redistributions of power. While digital communication redefines traditional leadership structures, it does not flatten them entirely; online socio-political movements still mirror offline distinctions between organizers and participants, by which digital leaders construct the basis for the movement’s online identity. In this context, the significance of technology is its ability to be appropriated by actors within the movement to designate its specific meaning and purpose. Technology usage becomes symbolic (e.g., hashtags) within digital protest culture towards the development of common identity that produces collective phenomena. As such, participation in the digital “crowd” is more than just an individual act; it is an assertion of one’s personal identity, and rooted in a deep sense of belonging, expressed in readily identifiable ways to those who participate in the digital culture from which these symbols derive their meaning (Gerbaudo 2014, pp. 266–68).

3. Luhmann’s Systems Theory

Niklas Luhmann’s “Systems Theory” offers a powerful conceptual toolkit for analyzing how meaning is generated, boundaries are maintained, and identities are constructed within modern society. At its core is the concept of operational closure, which suggests that social systems are self-referential: they produce meaning through internal communication and selectively respond to their environments based on what is system-relevant (Luhmann 2012, vol. 1, p. 40; 2013, p. xi). Rather than directly absorbing external complexity, systems simplify and reinterpret it according to their own internal logic, reducing disorder and stabilizing their identity (Luhmann 2012, vol. 1, p. 74). This framework becomes particularly useful in the study of digital religion, where online religious actors and communities operate as semi-autonomous meaning systems. Digital religious spaces filter global flows of information, imagery, and discourse through specific theological or ideological codes, allowing them to construct coherent narratives despite the overwhelming complexity of the digital environment. In line with Luhmann’s theory, these systems respond to external

irritations—such as conflicting beliefs, moral challenges, or political pressures—by re-coding them in ways that reinforce internal consistency and symbolic authority (Luhmann 2013, p. 210). This often leads to the creation of alternative communicative orders or parallel symbolic realities that can stand in tension with secular or pluralist norms (Luhmann 2013, pp. 229, 250).

In Luhmann's systems theory, the distinction between sacred and profane, or transcendent and immanent, functions not as a theological absolute but as a code through which religious systems organize meaning and communication. The sacred/profane difference helps the religious system handle complexity by separating what should be respected from what is mundane and ordinary, while the transcendent/immanent difference shows how the religious system connects to ultimate meaning (divine authority) compared to everyday issues. The ability of a system to stay focused on its internal processes while simultaneously registering external influences—like changes in political discourse or cultural dynamics—through its own communicative codes makes these distinctions essential to the self-referential sustainability of social systems.

Luhmann's emphasis on boundary-drawing through inclusion and exclusion also illuminates how digital religious communities distinguish themselves from perceived out-groups. Through mechanisms like curated content, moral binaries, and controlled interaction, these communities reinforce their internal cohesion and establish clear identity markers. In digital religion, then, exclusion is not merely reactive but structural—an active process by which systems maintain coherence and authority within a fragmented, fast-moving media landscape. In this way, Luhmann's systems theory offers a valuable perspective for understanding how digital religious movements navigate complexity, assert control over meaning, and maintain internal order through self-referential communication in online environments.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a systems-theoretical approach grounded in the work of Luhmann (2012), with particular emphasis on operational closure, binary coding, and self-referential communication. It engages existing analyses that have already typified the communicative strategies, symbolic structures, and affective framings of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) and the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). These typifications—developed by other scholars through empirical studies of protest messaging, digital campaigns, and ideological rhetoric—form the basis for a comparative theoretical analysis of how each movement constructs meaning, reinforces boundaries, and responds to external complexity. In addition to Luhmann, this analysis draws conceptually on the work of Campbell and Bellar (2023), whose notion of “networked communities”, and Gerbaudo (2014), whose idea of the “digital crowd”, help frame how these movements use emotion, grievance, and symbolic performance to mobilize online publics and sustain affective identity.

Typification in this context refers to the scholarly process of identifying recurring patterns in a system's discourse—such as motifs of martyrdom, betrayal, sovereignty, or cultural threat—and the binary oppositions they produce (e.g., sacred/profane, believer/unbeliever, native/foreign). This paper does not generate new typologies but interprets these existing patterns through the lens of Luhmann's systems theory in order to clarify the internal logic of each movement's communication system.

Materials referenced span 2017 to 2024 for TLP and 2016 to 2024 for the AfD. For TLP, these include analyses of protest events, digital rhetoric, and symbolic performance. For the AfD, sources include studies of campaign imagery, social media strategy, and ethno-nationalist discourse. Rather than aiming to replicate prior findings, the analysis re-

reads these typified materials to explore how each movement sustains symbolic coherence, produces exclusion, and mobilizes collective identity in digitally networked environments.

5. The Alternative für Deutschland (AfD): An Ethno-Christian Nationalist Movement

The Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) is a far-right populist political party, founded in Germany in 2013. As of 2024, the AfD held 77 out of 733 total seats in the German Bundestag, or federal parliament (Khan 2024, p. 1); by 2025, that number had risen to 151 (German Bundestag 2025). Occupying space within the right-wing political landscape of Germany, the AfD is positioned within an environment which not only caters to the conservative Christian constituency but collectively acts with other far-right Christian movements. One such organization is “Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident” (Pegida), whose name explicitly signals a defense of what it refers to as the Christian Occident (Althoff 2018, p. 336). The Islamophobic ideology propagated by both the AfD and Pegida is reminiscent of antisemitic rhetoric that took rise in the late 19th century, positioning Jews as foreigners who were unwilling and unable to integrate into German culture, and thus presented a threat and burden to the ethno-Christian German nation (Corry 2021, p. 568). The party’s voters have also self-organized, forming groups such as “Christians in the AfD (ChrAfD)”. Their demands demonstrate great overlap with the agendas of Christian fundamentalism, including the rejection of immigration, abortion, gay marriage, and women’s liberation. Two founders and former leaders of the AfD, Bernd Lucke and Frauke Petry, both hail from Protestant backgrounds with an active history in their respective churches. Unsurprisingly, the AfD has also seen a rise in membership from former constituents of the Christian Social Union (CSU) and the Christian Democratic Union (CDU). (Althoff 2018, pp. 349, 353, 357)

The AfD’s manifesto was approved in 2016 at the Federal Party Congress, convened in Stuttgart from 30 April to 1 May 2016. This document states in no uncertain terms that “Islam does not belong to Germany”. Drawing upon philosophical notions of nativism and pastism, by which the party hopes to “reform Germany and return to the roots”, the AfD manifesto explicitly defines its vision of German culture and identity as both Christian and anti-Islamic (Khan 2024, pp. 1–4). The Preamble states that the aim of the AfD is to “retain our Western Christian culture”,¹ arguing for “German as predominant culture instead of multiculturalism” in the heading of Section 7.2. German culture is then defined, “firstly”, by “the religious traditions of Christianity”,² considered to be in conflict with the values of Islam, as noted in Section 7.6, which states that Islamic practice opposes “the Judeo-Christian and humanist foundations of our culture”³ (AfD 2017). Despite the boldness of such assertions and the overwhelming adherence to political platforms that cater to conservative Christian constituencies, the AfD strategically refrains from branding itself with an overtly Christian identity. One possible explanation for this abstention may reflect their majority support in the former Communist and largely anti-religious demographics of Eastern Germany. As such, the narrative of a Christian dominant culture is primarily introduced when placed in opposition to a perceived Islamic threat to German Christian values and ways of life (van den Broeke and Kunter 2021, pp. 11–13).

Even if one were to dismiss all other evidence of the AfD’s affiliation with conservative Christian political agendas, it still cannot be ignored that the racialization of Muslims and corresponding anti-Islamic sentiments are historically bound to dominant Christian culture and the categorization of Muslims as inferior to white Christians. This positioning provided a narrative of justification for European colonization by which religious beliefs were a significant component in the development of racialized classification systems. The conflation of whiteness and Christianity and the propagation of narratives which protect

white Christians from the perceived threat of Islamic aggressors make it quite difficult to draw clear lines of separation between the AfD and undertones of Christian nationalism (Peterson 2022, pp. 24–25). This assumed threat to German culture and identity is inextricably linked to public sentiments around the influx of Muslim migrants and debate over whether cultural compatibility is possible between the East and West. The AfD's opposition to immigration is clearly expressed, as is its ideological correlation to reducing the spread of Islam in Germany. The strategy is particularly effective due to the Muslim identity becoming intrinsically linked to other actual or perceived politicized identity characteristics, such as refugees or asylum seekers (Pickel and Yendell 2022, pp. 154, 163, 168).

6. The AfD: Networked Community and the Digital Crowd

If one accepts Gerbaudo's (2014) assessment of the phenomenon of the "digital crowd"—as a transient yet emotionally charged collective formed through symbolic gestures and organized interactions on social media platforms, where individual involvement merges into a collective emotional environment capable of inciting political mobilization—then one must also acknowledge the plausibility for far-right ethno-Christian populist movements, like the AfD, to access and potentially exploit the phenomenon of digital culture. Supporters of the AfD are actors in a form of populist digital protest, driven by a collective anti-authoritarian value system that openly rejects the establishment, the ruling class, Islam, and globalization (Corry 2021, p. 567). Many diverse forms of media and visual communication strategies have been utilized by far-right populism, and the AfD specifically, to curate an emotional response from voters. The AfD has branded and popularized posters, displayed on billboards and social media, that conjure sentiments of ethno-nationalism, Islamophobia, and, at times, even homo-nationalism and femo-nationalism. In these instances, the AfD cleverly constructs images in defense of seemingly liberal ideas, such as the rights of women and LGBTQ+ persons, but positions Islam as the single greatest threat to their liberties. In this manner, the AfD's visual media constructs a seemingly universal narrative by which Islam is inherently incompatible with Christian-based German culture, life, and identity (Doerr 2021, pp. 2–6).

The AfD overwhelmingly outperforms other German political parties across all platforms on social media, with AfD TikTok videos receiving three times as many views as the other parties combined. Their social media posts achieve higher levels of engagement, likes, and shares, indicating heightened potential for the mobilization of online supporters (Classen et al. 2024, p. 106). Even when the AfD's overall activity on a particular social media platform is lower than other parties, they still manage to generate the most user interaction. On Instagram, the number of comments on the AfD's posts exceeds the sum of all post comments from other German political parties (Serrano et al. 2019, p. 220).

The AfD's strong presence on social media is unsurprising, given their distrust of traditional media and focus on appealing to users skeptical of mainstream news who favor social platforms for information. Their alignment with alternative media, combined with their vocal criticism of political correctness, contributes to their use of negative and aggressive tones that heighten user engagement. Evidence also suggests that social bots (automated fake accounts) were employed to amplify and spread the AfD's messaging (Serrano et al. 2019, pp. 215–16). The AfD achieves mobilization of their networked community through effective communication strategies which target feelings of anxiousness and insecurity among users as they relate to topics of the economy, crime, war, and personal freedoms. Essential and inherent to all their social media campaigns are anti-establishment sentiments, by which the AfD positions itself as a member of the homogenous ethno-Christian German populace and scapegoats Muslim migrants as the foreign enemy. This dichotomy is created and reinforced through stylistic means. The party intentionally curates its content in a

manner which is opposite TikTok recommendations, further branding itself as distinct from the establishment (Classen et al. 2024, p. 116).

The culmination of this analysis of the AfD brings about several observations regarding its relationship to digital religion, networked communities, and the digital crowd. While the AfD does not explicitly align itself as a Christian political party in the same manner as the CSU or CDU, it does clearly leverage ethno-Christian values as a cornerstone of its political narrative. Digital religion then becomes a tool for presenting Christianity as intrinsically linked to German identity while framing Islam as a cultural and existential threat. Their campaigns fuse religious undertones with political rhetoric, creating a distinct narrative of ethno-Christian populism that resonates with their audience. This mirrors digital religion to the extent that it is successful in networking communities bound by collective ethno-religious identity within digital spaces. Their audience coalesces around shared grievances, including opposition to Islam, globalization, and the establishment. Social media platforms facilitate this network by enabling users to interact, share, and amplify the AfD's content, fostering a sense of community and solidarity. By exploiting the emotional and performative aspects of online platforms and curating visual and textual content designed to evoke anxiety, insecurity, and outrage, the AfD effectively mobilizes users into a responsive and interactive digital crowd that transcends geographical boundaries. The heightened levels of engagement on their posts demonstrate, in contrast with all other German political bodies, the effectiveness of their strategy to elicit crowd-like behavior online, where users amplify their message through likes, shares, and comments. This networked engagement transforms online followers into a cohesive digital protest movement, united by their anti-authoritarian values and a sense of ethno-Christian German cultural identity.

7. The AfD Through a Luhmannian Lens

The AfD can be understood as a self-referential political communication system that maintains its identity through mechanisms of operational closure and systemic simplification. Its ideological framing—particularly in relation to Islam, migration, and German national identity—demonstrates a consistent filtering of environmental complexity through internally meaningful distinctions. The party's assertion that "Islam does not belong to Germany" (Khan 2024, p. 2) exemplifies this reduction, marking the boundary between system and environment by constructing Islam as a systemic threat to a Christian-defined national culture. Such distinctions allow the AfD to stabilize its communicative operations through binary coding: Christian/Muslim, native/foreign, and traditional/multicultural. These codes reinforce the party's vision of German identity and exclude incompatible elements, a textbook instance of boundary maintenance in Luhmannian terms (Luhmann 2012, vol. 1, pp. 40, 74). Islam, refugees, and political elites serve as external irritants that are re-coded within the AfD's communicative logic as existential threats, justifying systemic closure and strengthening internal cohesion (Luhmann 2013, p. 210).

This dynamic is heightened in the digital sphere, where the AfD outperforms other German political parties in terms of engagement and reach (Classen et al. 2024, p. 106; Serrano et al. 2019, p. 220). Social media platforms function as environments that intensify the party's operational closure by enabling recursive communication among like-minded users. Through visual and textual content designed to evoke anxiety, outrage, and urgency, the AfD constructs a parallel symbolic reality (Luhmann 2013, pp. 229, 250) that frames Islam as not only a theological divergence but a civilizational threat to the ethno-Christian order. The digital crowd that forms around AfD content exemplifies the creation of a networked system with its own internal codes and logic. Users engage with posts not simply as individuals, but as components of a system that continuously reproduces meaning

through interaction. This participatory communication stabilizes a sense of shared identity rooted in grievance, moral panic, and cultural defense. It is in this recursive loop that Luhmann's concept of autopoiesis becomes visible: the system reproduces itself through the very communication it facilitates.

The party's selective use of Christian symbolism—emphasizing “Christian heritage” when opposing Islam while avoiding overt religiosity in secular regions—demonstrates its adaptive response to environmental complexity (van den Broeke and Kunter 2021, pp. 11–13). Christianity is invoked not as a theological commitment but as a cultural code mobilized in opposition to Islam, underscoring how systems incorporate environmental elements only insofar as they can be made internally coherent.

Regarding the distinction between sacred and profane, the AfD interprets this in a more secular way, promoting a culturally Christian/German identity to defend a national ideal from what they see as outside threats, often from Islamic sources. Although the AfD's rhetorical structure is less overtly theological, it still echoes religious coding by designating certain values—such as Christian heritage, national/racial identity, and social order—as sacred, while portraying multiculturalism or the presence of Islam as violations of the cultural sacred. In this way, the sacred/profane distinction is employed not in a traditional religious sense, but as a tool to advance political agendas and reinforce group identity within a landscape increasingly shaped by digital communication and symbolic, populist politics.

The AfD functions as a meaning-producing system that simplifies social complexity through exclusionary coding, reinforces ideological boundaries via digital media, and adapts selectively to its environment. Luhmann's theory helps make visible how the AfD's political success lies not only in content but in the structural form of its communication—a closed, self-reproducing system oriented around the maintenance of an ethno-Christian identity.

8. Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP): A Far-Right Movement of Pan-Islamic Nationalism

Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) is a far-right Islamist political movement operating within the socio-religious landscape of Pakistan. Emerging in 2015 under the leadership of Khadim Hussain Rizvi (Ali 2017), the party positions itself as a defender of the sanctity and honor of the Prophet Mohammad (namoos-e-risalat), often translating into a populist religio-political nationalism. While TLP has not secured a majority presence in Pakistan's National Assembly, it has gained substantial electoral traction, particularly in Punjab, where it won two provincial seats in the 2018 general elections and demonstrated significant vote shares in urban constituencies. Though its rhetoric centers around Islamic piety and constitutional protection of blasphemy laws, the movement often espouses antisemitic tropes, similar to the AfD's ethno-religious antagonism, particularly in its online narratives and street mobilizations. Its core message orbits moral outrage, sacrilege policing, and theocratic populism, which, when combined, generate a potent formula for mass mobilization and disruption of civic life.

TLP constructs a carefully curated public identity on its official website, presenting itself as both a grassroots Islamic political movement and a moral custodian of Pakistan's foundational religious ethos. Through a combination of affective slogans, historical commemorations, and visual narratives of sacrifice and resistance, the website positions TLP as a defender of the honor of the Prophet and of his finality of Prophethood. The website thus frames these as non-negotiable pillars of national identity. This self-portrayal is not merely religious in character but explicitly political: TLP aligns itself with the ideological legacies of Iqbal and Jinnah while calling for the enforcement of Shariah as the governing legal

and ethical system. (TLP n.d.) The party's repeated emphasis on anti-corruption, justice, and self-reliance—combined with its stark opposition to perceived moral deviance and Western influence—signals its effort to claim moral hegemony within Pakistan's Islamic public sphere. In this context, the website functions not only as a recruitment platform but also as a digital sanctum for ideological consolidation, offering visitors a sense of belonging to a righteous, embattled community that views itself as both victim and redeemer of the Pakistani nation. (TLP n.d.)

The party's emergence is self-described as an Islamic political movement formed in direct response to the execution of Mumtaz Qadri, who was convicted for the assassination of Punjab Governor Salman Taseer over his opposition to Pakistan's blasphemy laws (Haq 2019, pp. 95–97). Founded officially on 1 August 2015, TLP positions its identity around the defense of the honor of the Prophet, drawing on a populist religio-emotive rhetoric to assert its legitimacy. According to TLP's public narrative, its foundational moment emerged from the unity of religious scholars who organized under the banner of Tehreek Labbaik Ya Rasool Allah (TLYRA), with TLP operating as its political wing. TLP first entered the national political imagination through its surprising third-place performance in the NA-120 by-election, following the disqualification of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. Its most notable mass mobilization came during the Faizabad sit-in of November 2017, where TLP protested amendments in the electoral oath—a protest that eventually compelled the resignation of the law minister after a violent standoff that resulted in casualties among its supporters. This event marked the party's symbolic consolidation as a street-power force capable of influencing parliamentary decisions through religio-political pressure.

In subsequent years, TLP's trajectory has been characterized by a series of reactive mobilizations—against court judgments (e.g., the acquittal of Asia Bibi), cultural film productions (e.g., *Zindagi Tamasha*), and foreign policy decisions (e.g., the French ambassador episode following anti-Islamic caricatures). The party claims a strong following in Punjab, having secured over two million votes in the 2018 general elections despite limited media coverage and political marginalization.⁴ The party frames its actions as a form of religious duty, invoking historical continuity with Islamic political resistance. The rhetoric of martyrdom, betrayal by the state, and eventual “victory” through political agreements functions as a recurring motif. These narratives, disseminated through the party's digital platforms, cultivate a sense of collective victimhood and reinforce its legitimacy among its support base. In this framework, TLP's political struggle is cast not merely in legal or electoral terms (Ahmad and Mahmood Falki 2023; Haq 2019) but as a cosmic battle for the protection of Islamic faith, making the group's religio-political ethos resistant to compromise and fertile for digital mobilization. Often labeled a far-right Islamist nationalist movement, TLP seeks to enforce a rigid orthodoxy grounded in its interpretation of Islamic law, particularly surrounding the finality and sanctity of prophethood.

9. TLP: Networked Community and Digital Strategies

Despite an initial denunciation of mainstream media and digital broadcasting, TLP gradually cultivated a massive online presence through its leadership's fiery sermons, which were disseminated via social platforms like YouTube and Facebook. These digital speeches attracted a domestic following and resonated with diasporic Pakistani youth, particularly in the Gulf and Western countries. Over time, the movement's digital infrastructure evolved into an elaborate ecosystem that employs madrasa students and social bots to flood the internet with emotionally charged content, ensuring algorithmic virality and ideological saturation. Their digital religio-political communication forms could be observed as a proto-religious vigilantism—an effective mobilization that enforces

theological boundaries through online surveillance, public shaming, and, in some cases, physical violence.

The movement's strategic use of alternative media reinforces its narrative, often targeting not only non-Muslims but also practicing Muslims accused of sharing, liking, or commenting on content deemed "blasphemous". Viral vlogs, emotionally charged audio-visual clips, and hashtag campaigns serve as stimuli for social boycotts, mob lynching, unlawful imprisonment, and, occasionally, targeted killings. These are not isolated outcomes but part of a systemic digital culture that thrives on moral panic and theological absolutism. Given the rapid digitization of religious communication, there is an urgent need for scholars and digital theologians to engage critically with such spaces, articulating clear theological and political boundaries to curb the misuse of digital platforms.

TLP's digital evolution exemplifies what [Campbell and Bellar \(2023\)](#) term "networked communities"—decentralized yet emotionally charged religious collectives forged through algorithmic intimacy and shared grievances. The party's networked community gained renewed vitality with the rise of Saad Hussain Rizvi after death of his father, Khadim Rizvi, marking a rather intensified continuation of political defiance with performative religiosity. In merging religious identity with political digital activism, TLP radicalizes online interaction into proto-religious vigilantism. Its campaigns have normalized a rhetoric of extrajudicial punishment, evidenced by its glorification of individuals like Mumtaz Qadri and its vocal support for international acts of violence such as the killing of French teacher Samuel Paty ([BBC 2020](#)). Emotional vlogs, manipulated footage, and selective Qur'anic citations converge to generate fear, humiliation, and guilt among Muslim and non-Muslim audiences alike.

TLP's methods typify what protest theorists term "direct action"—non-mediated intervention designed to challenge institutional authority through public disruption. While such strategies are common in civil resistance movements, TLP's variation is distinguished by its sacralization of political objectives. Typification was carried out through close reading of digital artifacts—tweets, press releases, campaign videos, and protest material—collected during the key mobilization periods of the party (2017–2024). The digital analysis used a mixed strategy: thematic coding of key motifs (e.g., martyrdom, sovereignty, betrayal) and affective framing, followed by network tracing of hashtags and symbolic references. TLP's digital religiosity reflects a broader trend in the intersection of faith, media, and protest in the Global South. The promise of digital religion—as a space for interfaith dialogue, pluralist ethics, and spiritual nourishment—stands compromised in the face of algorithmic radicalization. As [Campbell and Garner \(2016\)](#) suggest, networked communities need not be inherently dangerous but become so when epistemic closure and theological absolutism overwhelm the multiplicity of online discourse.

This necessitates urgent scholarly intervention. Theologians, religious educators, and digital ethicists must engage with the affective economies of platforms where theology becomes spectacle and protest becomes ritual. Beyond condemning TLP's methods, there must be an active effort to reclaim digital spaces as arenas of reflective religiosity, inclusive identity formation, and dialogical encounter. Recent investigative reporting by Ahmad Noorani, a Pakistani journalist and human rights advocate based in Washington, D.C., has uncovered a systematic entrapment of Pakistani youth through what is now referred to as the 'Blasphemy Business'. In his report titled 'Pakistan Prosecutes Over 400 Bright Youth on Blasphemy Charges' ([Noorani 2024](#)), he reveals that more than 400 individuals—primarily poor or lower-middle-class Muslim youth, including engineers, graduates, and even seminary-trained clerics—have been accused of online blasphemy, often through orchestrated traps.

Noorani's findings uncover a concerning pattern: members of the Blasphemy Business Group (BBG), an extremist network, collaborate with the Federal Investigation Agency's (FIA) Cyber Crimes Wing to allegedly ensnare individuals through WhatsApp and Facebook groups. Entrapment methods include luring individuals into private chats or group conversations, where they are then sent blasphemous content (Noorani 2025). When victims question the content, they are manipulated into forwarding it back—creating the false impression that they are the originators. Screen captures and metadata are then used to lodge First Information Reports (FIRs) under sections 295-A, B, C, and PECA 2016.⁵ The case exemplifies how blasphemy laws have been weaponized to obstruct justice, intimidate victims' families, and enable extrajudicial killings. Noorani's documentation shows that victims' lawyers are threatened, judges are pressured, and families are coerced into silence. This growing nexus among BBG operatives, FIA officials, and segments of the judiciary necessitates urgent action.

As Arafat Mazhar has demonstrated in *The Untold Truth of Pakistan's Blasphemy Law*, this legal edifice has not only enabled widespread misuse but has evolved into a potent mechanism for personal vendetta and sectarian oppression, an effect exponentially magnified by digital communication platforms (Abbas 2022; Nafees n.d.). Mazhar underscores how the confluence of legal ambiguity and digital virality has intensified the weaponization of blasphemy allegations, particularly against religious minorities (Kaura 2021).

Tracing the genealogy of South Asia's blasphemy laws, Anne Stensvold identifies colonial India's 1860 legislation as "one of the most radical innovations", wherein the state placed the protection of "religious feelings" of individuals—irrespective of religious affiliation—above traditional theological arbitration (Stensvold 2021, p. 14). By empowering laypersons rather than clerical authorities (muftis, priests) to define the boundaries of blasphemy, the law detached sacred interpretation from institutionalized religious authority. The legacy of this colonial apparatus continues in contemporary Pakistan, where Section 295-C⁶ functions as a socio-political weapon deployed by actors such as Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), particularly in their 2017 Faizabad sit-in Bralvi organizations (Introvigne 2021; Sareen 2021; Haq 2019; Mañoi 2022), which was triggered by accusations of blasphemy against a federal minister allegedly sympathetic to the Ahmadi community (Stensvold 2021, p. 15).

Digital platforms have become the newest arena for this juridical-ideological struggle. The convenience and "playfulness" of circulating blasphemous images via smartphones have sparked not only inter-religious tensions but also intra-sectarian unrest (Rollier et al. 2019). The affordances of digital media allow for "everyone" to participate in public accusation, thereby collapsing traditional boundaries between jurisprudence, clerical authority, and populist sentiment. Stensvold aptly observes that social media becomes the site where "the traditional divide between blasphemy and free speech is played out in new and unexpected ways" (Stensvold 2021, p. 19). Among the more insidious developments in this context is the phenomenon of "online blasphemy entrapment"—a digital variant of honey-trapping in which alleged victims are sent provocative or defamatory content via private messages. When the recipient inquires or forwards the message back (sometimes unknowingly), the sender captures screenshots and files a blasphemy case. These digital traps are strategically deployed in the absence of concrete evidence and often serve to settle personal scores or enact sectarian agendas.

10. A Luhmannian Reading of TLP

One could interpret TLP's identity formation through the lens of Niklas Luhmann's systems theory, particularly his concept of "operational closure" and the differentiation of social systems from their environments. According to Luhmann, social systems do not

construct identity by directly excluding individuals or groups, but rather by drawing a boundary between the system and its environment—constructing meaning internally based on what is system-relevant (Luhmann 2012, vol. 1, p. 40). However, religious and moral exclusion happens as a result of the system's inability to directly deal with outside complexities, so it has to simplify or change them using its own way of thinking (Luhmann 2012, vol. 1, p. 74). In this context, TLP uses exclusionary tactics in its manifesto and messaging as a way to handle the confusing variety of different religious and political views.

By simplifying these external discourses into binary oppositions—sacred/profane, believer/unbeliever, loyal/traitorous—the party stabilizes its ideological position and consolidates a radical narrative that appeals to its target constituency. This systemic reduction of complexity serves to reinforce the party's boundaries, legitimize its mission, and sustain its populist religio-political identity in both digital and offline spaces. This logic of systemic simplification aligns TLP with far-right movements elsewhere. TLP's ideological alignment mirrors far-right movements like Germany's AfD in its reliance on moral panic, identity politics, and exclusionary rhetoric. However, unlike AfD's emphasis on Christian cultural heritage, TLP mobilizes under the banner of an uncompromising Sunni orthodoxy, asserting a pan-Islamic identity rooted in devotional and piety politics. Its manifesto clearly outlines goals such as implementing Sharia-based law, eliminating secular media culture, supporting global Muslim solidarity, and training youth in both technical skills and religious militancy. Among its most controversial objectives are the propagation of Jihad fi Sabeelillah as a national ethos and a demand for legal safeguards against all perceived blasphemy.

Systems theory also sheds light on how TLP's protests function as mechanisms of systemic boundary enforcement. According to Luhmann, protest movements like Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) can be considered ways for unhappy groups to show their anger about unfairness (like blasphemy) through actions that disrupt normal communication. TLP's performative protests, right from orchestrated digital campaigns to mass sit-ins, not only articulate dissent but actively construct a parallel sociopolitical reality. Luhmann's notion of operational closure is crucial to reflect here: "Social systems operate through self-referential communication and maintain their boundaries by filtering external irritations through internally meaningful codes". (Luhmann 2013, p. xi)

In this context, protest functions as a systemic disturbance that forces either adaptation or resistance, potentially leading to shifts in public expectations or institutional responses (Luhmann 2013, p. 210). For TLP, this dynamic is evident in how the group builds ideological coherence through narratives of divine mission, life threats, and parajudicial vigilantism—often reinforced by digital campaigns and acts of religious zealotry.

Within this symbolic system, blasphemy becomes not only a theological transgression but also a political instrument—a means of asserting religious authority while suspending normative civic order. As Luhmann points out, these systems driven by protest can help create new groups, opposing identities, and ways of communicating, bringing people together into a structure that opposes the norm (Luhmann 2013, pp. 229, 250). TLP shows how religious populist movements use systemic closure to make their message clearer, simplify outside challenges, and strengthen extreme ideas in both online and offline spaces. Regarding the sacred/profane distinction specifically, TLP channels its political fervor through a combination of religious devotion and national pride, framing the honor of the Prophet (namoos-e-risālat) as both a sacred obligation and a measure of political loyalty. In doing so, it uses the sacred/profane binary not in a strictly theological sense, but as a communicative code to advance political aims and solidify group identity in a digital environment shaped by symbolic, populist discourse.

This process is further illuminated by Anne Stensvold's (2021) sociological reading of blasphemy politics. In her concluding reflections, Stensvold describes such engagements as a "potent instrument of social control", wherein blasphemy laws are appropriated by both non-state actors and state institutions to serve political interests (p. 259). Within religious communities, she argues, blasphemy accusations often become tools of internal power struggles, functioning as a means of boundary-policing to suppress dissenting or reformist discourses (p. 261). This dynamic resonates with Niklas Luhmann's theory of in-group/out-group logic, where social systems construct identity through exclusionary mechanisms. TLP, in this framework, exemplifies a populist religio-political entity that instrumentalizes both Islam and penal structures to demarcate ideological borders, stigmatize minority voices, and bolster its legitimacy through mass mobilization (Mehmood et al. 2022; Janjua 2021). Furthermore, Stensvold's (2021) insight that "blasphemy thrives on rumors" encapsulates the epistemological instability at the heart of such accusations. When concrete evidence is lacking, TLP affiliates have resorted to sabotaging legal proceedings, intimidating defense attorneys, or issuing threats to obstruct judicial scrutiny. The reluctance of lawyers to represent the accused—whether due to social ostracism, professional risk, or physical threats—further collapses the procedural integrity of justice.

The digital age introduces a radical epistemic shift. As Stensvold (2021) notes, "the internet literally detaches the voice from the person and liberates communication from the restraints of personal relationships" (p. 265). Detached from embodied relationality, rumors become disembodied agents—floating freely across networks with unpredictable and often fatal consequences. When such rumors implicate religious transgression, their viral propagation triggers a moral economy of outrage that digital spaces are structurally ill-equipped to contain. Blasphemy, in this sense, is no longer a legal infraction to be adjudicated; it becomes a collective effect, a performative claim on sacredness, and a call to punitive action.

11. Conclusions

Based on the brief analysis above, it is clear that the digital strategies used by TLP and AfD are not just abruptly made choices but rather planned and executed strategies to become socially and digitally potent. The aforementioned groups build their religious and political power, create a sense of emotional connection, especially in youth, and turn social and political issues into moral causes. These strategies operate within what Campbell and Bellar (2023) call networked communities—emotionally charged collectives sustained through digital intimacy and shared grievance—and engage what Gerbaudo (2014) terms the digital crowd, a responsive and performative public mobilized through orchestrated affect and symbolic messaging. In this sense, the movements can also be understood as self-referential systems, in Luhmann (2012, 2013) terms, selectively filtering external information and producing meaning internally to reinforce group identity and manage complexity.

However, instead of asking abstractly what responsibility "digital religion" as an academic category might bear, we argue for a more precise and actor-centered inquiry, i.e., how do religious and political communicators operating within these digital ecosystems perceive themselves as responsible for the social and theological ramifications of their messages, posts, and vlogs? And how do they interpret their use of digital platforms in relation to their moral or ideological commitments? This change of inquiry is important because it focuses on the specific beliefs and understandings of the persons involved in digital spaces, rather than blaming a vague system (i.e., political or religious party), helping us understand the emotional impact and broad influence of religious and political movements online. By focusing on how communicators see themselves and the religio-political ideas they use, we can better understand the emotional impact and broad influence of their online presence.

The goal is to create a space for a more thoughtful and ethical discussion about digital religious communication(s)—one that looks closely at how networked religiosity, shaped by both systemic closure and digitally mediated collective emotion, can both harm and help our society in a world that is becoming more connected.

One area where this call for reflection becomes especially urgent is in how religious institutions, such as churches, engage in online communication themselves. For example, when churches share content that frames political issues—such as immigration, sexuality, or nationalism—through absolutist moral binaries without context or pastoral sensitivity, they risk participating in the same affective and exclusionary dynamics exploited by far-right movements. In light of this research, churches must attend not only to what they communicate, but to how digital formats amplify emotional polarization and symbolic boundary-making. This requires a deeper awareness of the networked conditions under which theology circulates online, as well as an intentional commitment to digital practices that foreground empathy, pluralism, and dialogical openness. Moving forward, ethical digital religiosity will depend not on abandoning platforms but on resisting the algorithmic incentives that reward outrage and division—reorienting communication toward care, nuance, and the integrity of relational witness.

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Notes

- ¹ The full statement in the Preamble is as follows: “We shall continuously strive to uphold human dignity, support families with children, retain our Western Christian culture, and maintain our language and traditions in a peaceful, democratic, and sovereign nation-state for the German people”.
- ² Section 7.2 claims three sources of German culture: “The AfD is committed to German as the predominant culture. This culture is derived from three sources: firstly, the religious traditions of Christianity; secondly, the scientific and humanistic heritage, whose ancient roots were renewed during the period of the Renaissance and the Age of Enlightenment; and thirdly, Roman law, upon which our constitutional state is founded”.
- ³ Per Section 7.6, “The AfD firmly opposes Islamic practice that is directed against our liberal-democratic constitutional order, our laws, and the Judeo-Christian and humanist foundations of our culture”.
- ⁴ TLP also went through a banned phase for some time ([Dawn 2021](#)).
- ⁵ The PECA Ordinance is an ordinance that states that the exemption for Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA)-licensed TV channels has been abolished in the Electronic Crimes Act 2016, after which fake information about any person on television.
- ⁶ Section 295-C of Pakistan’s Penal Code reads: “Whoever by words, either spoken or written, or by visible representation (images, memes, etc.), or by any imputation, innuendo, or insinuation, directly or indirectly, defiles the sacred name of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) shall be punished with death, or imprisonment for life, and shall also be liable to fine”. Interpreted as a divine ordinance by the country’s judiciary, the clause prescribes a mandatory death sentence—rendering the life imprisonment clause defunct after the 1991 Federal Shariat Court ruling.

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