

# Digital Communication as Theological Productivity in a Participatory Church ‘For and With All’ – Empirical Observations and Ecclesiological Reflection

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The so-called religious ‘Sinnfluencers’ are a fairly new phenomenon in the German-speaking context. The German word ‘Sinnfluencer’ is a contraction of ‘Sinn’ (meaning) and influencer. It refers to people who explicitly present themselves as influencers in the theological and/or digital church context and enter into meaningful religious discourses with people. The ‘Sinnfluencers’ intensely communicate via social media by raising theological issues which at the same time are, or become, consistently connected with questions of life. In this sense they open specific spaces for pastoral care and theological productivity.

The phenomenon of Sinnfluencers was evident before the Covid-19 pandemic, but the pandemic-related restrictions made it both more public and more diverse. In this area in particular, the pandemic has a catalytic function and an increase in religious influencers can be expected. As influencers with thousands of ‘followers’ they do not only share their own experiences and living conditions, but also create space for individual meaningful theological expression of fear, hope and faith. In this chapter, we ask and investigate in which sense these influencers provide space for reciprocal religious experiences and contribute to a new understanding of the Church as a participatory church ‘for and with all’.

## Digital influencers

In recent years, a digital phenomenon called ‘Sinnfluencers’ has developed in the German Protestant churches, meaning ‘influencers in the field of

religious meaning-making'. The term refers to the broad phenomenon of secular digital influencers. They are characterized by sharing their lifestyle, personal thoughts and experiences with their followers in various social media forms. This form of media presence 'can be understood as a mindset and set of practices in which audience is viewed as a fan base; popularity is maintained through ongoing fan management; and self-presentation is carefully constructed to be consumed by others' (Marwick and Boyd, 2011, p. 140). Influencers are persons 'who regularly create and share social media content independently of the number of followers' (Yilmaz, Sezerel and Uzuner, 2020, p. 2). This means that the number of followers is not the only motivation for being present on social media: influence is not just a matter of having a lot of followers. It is also driven by expertise on subject matter and the relationship between the influencer and his or her followers (Wong, 2014). Through their communication and their tips, they exert a considerable influence on the individual lifestyle and the consumer behaviour of their followers (Garff and Kochwasser, 2020; Schulz, 2019).

The phenomenon itself shows a hybrid mixture of private and public. For these influencers usually film themselves in their own spaces and personal situations, thus turning their private space into a place of public presence. Through their language and the respective setting, authenticity as an 'intersubjectively shaped horizon of experience' (Wiesinger, 2019) is conveyed to the followers. In the sense of dialogical reciprocity, many influencers spend considerable time in contact with their followers. They record their questions in posts, blogs and videos in the mode of 'meet and greet'. On the follower side, a feeling of being 'seen' and of being in an authentic relationship with 'their own' influencer can arise.

### Religious 'Sinnfluencers'

Religious Sinnfluencers follow the logic of digital influencers and their public appearance (Ajibade, 2019). Systematic scientific research of religious influencers on social media platforms who adopt precisely this marketing logic has hardly been established so far, at least for German-speaking countries. Therefore the following descriptions of phenomena from the German context are intended to provide initial characterizations of this expanding group of people and, at the same time, to highlight the ecclesiological implications of these dynamics.

It should be noted at the outset that Heidi Campbell's recent differentiated analysis of digital creatives and their categorization into 'digital

entrepreneurs’, ‘digital spokespersons’ and ‘digital strategists’ offers at least a helpful heuristic for the Sinnfluencers in the Protestant Churches in Germany considered below. The following description is most likely to apply to them: ‘They seek to carefully manage their relationship with the religious organizations they chose to work within, especially because their work as digital leaders mean they have dual commitments and spheres of influence’ (Campbell, 2021, p. 204). They do not act as ‘religious leaders’ in the strict sense and do not have an official function in the sense of an *overarching institutional authority*. Nevertheless, the following description is quite obvious with regard to their public appearance, effectiveness and the ecclesiological implications associated with them: ‘By seeking authority as a relational communication process, digital strategists seek to model a new expression of authority, one that navigates between institutional and media contexts and establishes itself in a new blended space of influence and interaction’ (Campbell, 2021, p. 204). But to say this in advance: in the case of the present phenomenon, as will be explained in more detail below, it seems more appropriate to speak of a kind of implicit digital-strategic appearance and action and also to expand the criterion of ‘authority’ to include at least the aspect of authenticity.

In the area of the Protestant Churches in Germany, for example, the accounts ‘@seligkeitsdinge’ (Instagram), ‘Anders.amen’ (YouTube), ‘@theresaliebt’ (Instagram), ‘@pfarrerausplastik’ (Instagram), @pastor.engel (Instagram and YouTube), ‘@wasistdermensch’ (Instagram), or ‘#digitalespfarrhaus’ (Twitter) can be mentioned (Sonntagsblatt, 2020). In their digital appearance they also share highly personal, everyday experiences with their followers. However, it is interesting to note that these ‘Sinnfluencers’ are employed by the institutional Evangelical Church. They thus appear in an official function as pastors.

This ‘individual-institutional’ representation can be seen, for example, in the fact that these persons present themselves in many of their digital appearances in official pastoral clothing and in their church setting. In other appearances, they show themselves in normal clothing and in their ‘own private living space’. In terms of content, they share their ‘own stories’, suffering, doubt, anger, joy, justice, feminism, racial justice, hope, and much more. And they explicitly connect this with their own Christian beliefs and theological meaning. As an example, we can mention @seligkeitsdinge. The single, full-time pastor has two children. Her first child died on the day of birth. In her stories, she repeatedly addresses the loss of born and unborn children and explores the question of how she can be a pastor despite everything and how her faith gives her hope even when she is in despair.

This hybrid appearance of being an official and a private person is obviously intended to show high authenticity. At the same time, it becomes clear that these religious influencers position themselves very clearly in the context of the institutionalized church.

For example, behind the Instagram presence @wasistdermensch and the Twitter channel #digitalespfarrhaus, is the young Hessian pastor Jörg Niesner, who is actually the pastor of a 'normal', rural parish in his main job, so to speak. Interestingly enough, he exercises his social media presence on a voluntary basis. For him – as we found out in a personal conversation with him – social media channels themselves represent digital parsonages. He sees his motivation for this intensive service in the fact that people are primarily interested in people and not in institutions. Second, in view of the dramatic decline in church membership, he sees it as the task of the Church to identify its target groups on the internet. However, despite all the logic of digital internet presentation, it is clear to him that comprehensible theological language and forms of expression are required. This also means that theological content may not necessarily be new but can be expressed in a different way. In his view, this also justifies speaking of the digital church as a movement.

Sinnfluencers take up theological-dogmatic questions in partly unconventional ways. In this sense a kind of personal-authentic, life-world oriented theological productivity becomes obvious. Just to give a short definition here from our side: 'Productivity of theology' means a form of communicative practice of theological interpretation that implicitly or explicitly offers and shares individual interpretations of basic theological questions and topics. At the same time, this practice does not rely on certain dogmatic contents. Rather, it opens up a resonance space of free and independent theological interpretation, also in a certain critical manner towards classical dogmatic interpretations. By doing so, followers are invited to personal and reciprocal theologizing.

It is now interesting to see how this communication of the religious influencers manifests itself in the Covid-19 crisis. For example, @seligkeitsdinge very often discusses her daily challenges as a full-time working and single pastor, balancing her work, home-schooling the kids and everyday life. She does not sugar coat anything but points out how often she reaches her limits and encourages other parents not to remain silent with their excessive demands. One example is now presented more extensively. These observations will then be interpreted in the light of Paul Tillich's ecclesiological approach, because his ecclesiological theory seems to be especially insightful for interpreting 'religious digital phenomena'. For in Tillich's understanding, hermeneutical communities in the horizon of

life, the world and God's Spirit arise here, which points to the core of his understanding of the Church itself. From this reference to Tillich's approach, it is finally asked to what extent these forms of theological productivity can also be of relevance for the future shaping and practice of the Church itself beyond the Covid-19 crisis.

## Theology-productive crisis communication of religious Sinnfluencers – exemplary insights

How does digital religious communication present itself concretely as opening a resonance space for theological reflection? As an example, we trace a course of commentaries on the YouTube channel 'Anders.Amen' during the time of the Covid-19 pandemic. This channel is operated in a highly professional way by two female pastors, Ellen and Steffi. As a 'queer lesbian pastor couple ... in the darned seventh year' (Tagesspiegel, 2020) they share pastoral duties in a village in Niedersachsen, in northern Germany. They have been online with 'Anders.Amen' since the beginning of 2020 and already have 20,000 subscribers (as of 21 March 2021) – with an upward trend. Some of their YouTube videos, which appear in approximately a weekly rhythm, have between 7,500 and over 62,500 hits.

In her video entitled 'Corona-Isolation endangers relationship – dispute escalates || Impulse #2' from 29 March 2020, Ellen makes a first attempt at interpreting the current situation ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=tjwEqZqZ1SY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tjwEqZqZ1SY), from 3:03):

And I think this is one of the most important things we have to remember now, during the Corona time: That God does not give us an answer to this 'Why?' just like that. And when people come along and say: It's very simple. The Corona virus comes because of same-sex marriages and stuff ... People don't even follow what the Bible says anymore and that's why God sent this plague to punish you. Then it's not that simple. God doesn't give a simple answer to that 'why?' Job got an answer, but not to his question. Maybe it just happens in communication with God that when he says something to us, he does not necessarily say what we want to hear.

Afterwards Steffi asks into the camera: 'Do you think God and Corona have anything to do with each other? I would like to know your answer to that question.' As a result, many comments follow upon this explicitly

theological question, in which the theodicy topic is taken up and productively worked on. Thus, it says in one commentary:

I think that God also has to do with Corona. Everything comes from God. Because of free will and the way it went, there are unfortunately also many bad things. But I read that God can use the negative in the world for good.


Another person writes more pragmatically:

Does God have something to do with the virus? ... I simply don't know why it is there or if it has a deeper meaning. I bear the ignorance about it, do my best and think of those directly affected, who lose someone or are ill ... Stay healthy and do my best and love from my heart.

Another person refers to Jesus' practice and, at the same time, writes in preaching mode:

Jesus does not heal all the sick people he has met. But he shows us that for him (for God) illness is not the problem. Corona is like every crisis, a chance to learn. And we need these crises to understand that we are not God ... But God also says in every crisis: I like you, child, I am with you, I love you and I hold you tight, in order to also mature through this problem. And if you can, please learn from it.

Another voice connects the crisis to the tradition of creation and also to the New Testament:

As for your question: God has something to do with Sars-CoV-2 in that the virus is part of creation, for whatever reason. But certainly not specifically sent as a 'punishment'. God once made a promise in the Old Testament to never again destroy all mankind, with  as a sign of this. This alone speaks against an unintended punishment. And then we're not even in the New Testament, where everything will be completely different.

These and other comments show not only different facets of the classical theodicy debate when it comes to the question of man-made causes or the question of the divine will. But it also becomes clear here that this platform of meaning in the midst of the overall crisis situation becomes a theologically productive resonance space. This is true even if direct references to earlier comments by other followers are seldom made. Nor do the two pastoral Sinnfluencers react explicitly to the various comments

– at least from a certain number of responses on. And yet, the aspect of dialogical reciprocity becomes clear. For Steffi and Ellen repeatedly affirm that every single comment is read, even the hate comments.

In this way, they point by their own everyday theologizing to the productive potential of individual theological interpretation. By the invitation to answer and connect, they signal that despite their professional training they do not have an exclusive truth of interpretation at their hands (Kumlehn, 2019). The possibility of a crisis-relevant theology is thus productively shared right from the beginning. And at least indirectly, the followers are encouraged to become theologically and hermeneutically active themselves. Thus, a digital form of theological communication becomes recognizable here, which in its obstinacy, its challenging character, and thus in its relevance for church practice should by no means be underestimated.

By the way, this is also experienced by the people involved in this YouTube chat as a positive experience compared to their normal experiences with church. It is formulated exemplarily: ‘You are super. I have distanced myself from the church for a long time, and had some bad experiences with it. But I like listening to you. If only [there] were more like you.’

### **Ecclesiological reflection in orientation to Paul Tillich**

This small example can be illuminated against the background of Paul Tillich’s basic ecclesiological considerations. Interestingly, probably none of the ecclesiological approaches of the twentieth century appears more clearly connecting and correlating the spaces of church and world (Thelander, 2012; Jeanrond, 2010).

His approach is all the more relevant today, as he embeds his reflections in the horizon of a fluid and changing context. Basically, from his point of view, the following applies: ‘The history of the churches is the history in which the church is actual in time and space’ (Tillich, 1963, p. 377). Against this background, his pneumatologically-oriented concept of ‘church’ as well as his idea of a hermeneutic communal practice, are highly fruitful for the examination and interpretation of digital religious practices.

However, it should already be pointed out that the concept of church itself is defined by Tillich in a quite differentiated way (Harasta, 2011; Kühn, 1980, pp. 119–32). Essential here is the distinction made by him, particularly strongly in his late work between spiritual community and church. In his words: between a ‘latent church’ (or ‘unconscious

Christianity') and a 'manifest church' (Bernhardt, 2010), which interestingly enough refers to Martin Luther's distinction of the 'visible' and the 'hidden church' (Danz, 2017, p. 249). Here, it is worth noting that Reformation theology was aware of and avoided the term 'invisible church', because the Church is never invisible – because the word and sacraments are never invisible (Tietz, 2011).

One of the essential points of his ecclesiological approach is his idea that belonging to the 'spiritual community' basically goes beyond membership of the Church. In other words, orientation and participation in the perspective of the 'ultimate concern' is not an exclusive practice or ability of only those who call themselves members of the 'manifest' church or profess their Christian faith in a traditional sense. Rather, the 'spiritual community' includes those who, through their thoughts, faith, and actions in their own way of life, give space to precisely this dynamic spirit. Or, as one of the relevant quotations reads: 'The Spiritual Community contains an indefinite variety of expressions of faith and does not exclude any of them. It is open in all directions because it is based on the central manifestation of the Spiritual presence' (Tillich, 1963, p. 155).

This broad concept of spiritual community has considerable consequences for the self-understanding and practice of the Church. It must not and cannot be understood as something in opposition to the world. Rather, it gains its form and plausibility only in the strongest possible correlation with the world. As a Church, it will do justice to its original meaning only if it understands itself in a close connection to culture and opens itself to the existential questions of all people. Church is and becomes Church only where it consciously deals with the crisis-proneness of the world and the crises of each individual human being that occur again and again: 'In the seriousness of their despair, God is present to them. To accept this paradoxical acceptance is the courage of their faith' (Tillich, 1963, p. 228).

Only in this elementary sensitivity for the living conditions of each individual and only by a plausible theological practice of interpretation can the Church appear as a culture- and life-relevant factor. Only by the correlative treatment of the Christian claim to truth and the everyday life it proves to be a life-serving institution. Tillich expresses this as follows: 'the Protestant principle of the infinite distance between the divine and the human undercuts the absolute claim of any doctrinal expression of the New Being' (Tillich, 1963, p. 177).

Thus, Tillich's ecclesiological approach shows the permanent reference to an anthropological and deeply reformatory conviction. It is always human beings who, in their dignity and vulnerability, constitute the

Church. Therefore, they are not to be regarded as objects of church practice. But they are constitutive subjects of how the Church and its communication of the gospel appears. In this sense, Church is not only 'church for others'. But for the best anthropological and theological reasons – in the sense of the priesthood of all believers – especially in times of crisis, Church becomes church 'through all' and 'with all'.

### **Ecclesiological conclusions and perspectives**

These insights can be applied once again to the phenomenon of meaningful crisis communication by religious influencers. In the dialogical appearance of religious influencers an image of God appears that is essentially shaped by the spiritual dynamics of mutual encounter:

'Personal God' does not mean that God is a person. It means that God is the ground of everything personal and that he carries within himself the ontological power of personality. He is not a person, but he is not less than personal ... The divine life participates in every life as its ground and aim. God participates in everything that is: he has community with it: he shares in its destiny. (Tillich, 1973, p. 245)

In any case, what is exciting is that these influencers do not use the digital media for a one-dimensional practice of proclamation. Rather, the digital platforms they provide deliberately open up for dialogue. The use of social media by these authentic representatives of the Church does not take place in a 'one to many' format, but to a certain extent in a 'many to many' format.

Digital communication is therefore not limited to the 'professionals'. Implicitly, these religious influencers live and represent an almost alternative form of church, which is close to Tillich's ecclesiological approach. Although they are representatives of church, they do not only represent the 'manifest' but also the 'latent church'. Thus, membership in the Church is not only determined by the local membership community. Rather, the Church lives as a public opportunity to 'follow' in plural participatory and interactive ways. Thus these 'public followers' themselves take on an important share of responsibility. A certain variety of the priesthood of all believers is revealed in these digital formats.

The multi-dimensionality of proclamation and the possibility to respond, shaped by the digital formats, creates a resonance space of communal theologizing. These influencers of meaning open their own theological

interpretation to other theology-productive practices. By doing so, they provide for individual experiences of crisis for their followers a pastoral space. The everyday and current experiences of the crisis are not simply theologically exaggerated or one-sidedly interpreted. But they are transferred into a dynamic of common interpretation in the horizon of the Christian claim to truth.

Such practice of dialogue can therefore also be understood as a form of (theological) empowerment. A focus on theological empowerment aims to strengthen the theological autonomy and self-determination of people and communities and to create space for them to shape their own lives. The theological reading of empowerment discussions takes up again the ideas of the Reformation with its slogan of the universal priesthood of all. The common priesthood is empowerment for theological maturity, responsibility and participation (Müller, 2021). The encouragement for this self-acting theologizing and the joy of trying this out in new digital formats is certainly characteristic of this digital form of theological empowerment as promoted by many Sinnfluencers. In the theological perspective of justification and grace the potential and vulnerability that people have also in times of crisis are deeply recognized. For in this ecclesiological respect anthropological insights into the fragmentation of the human being are combined with the theological interpretation of his unconditional dignity (Luther, 1992).

In this respect digital communicative spaces are the best signals to each individual not to be simply forgotten in this situation of crisis, but to be absolutely worthy of unconditional recognition and acceptance at all times.

From these assessments, important perspectives for the future practice of a church as a 'spiritual community' result. Public articulations of faith cannot simply be delegated to a few professionals. Rather, for the 'normal' practice in pastoral, everyday life one has to learn from those theologically productive, charismatic and passionate influencers. The Sinnfluencers raise theological questions, offer their view of things, and thus naturally also assume a form of (functional) authority on the basis of their own expertise. At the same time, they open up a possible theologically productive exchange. This could be seen from Tillich's understanding in the best sense as inspiration in the light of the presence of the divine spirit, with Schleiermacher as a form of a – so to speak virtual – free productive sociability or as exchange of souls and thoughts. This applies both in view of their appearance, their theological expertise and their empathic ability to perceive everyday questions of life. For it pastors need in future a 'digital theological literacy'. Under this precondition, such new digital

forms of theological productivity can provide inspiration for all pastoral practice. And this applies to all experiences of crisis, which will certainly continue to be expected long after this current crisis.

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