

Art, Memes, Elementarization

Toward a Systematic Analysis of Christian AI Short Videos. *By Max Tretter and Yannick Schlote*

By now, most people will have encountered them: those peculiar short videos on YouTube, Instagram, Reddit, TikTok, or the like that draw on biblical narratives and Christian symbolism. They come in many forms: from Jesus resurrecting fallen US soldiers or battling demons, to Moses, Noah, David, and other biblical figures recounting their experiences in influencer style, to deceased public figures being welcomed into heaven. Thanks to increasingly accessible text-to-video tools, these videos can be produced with minimal effort and reach audiences numbering in the millions on social media. The discourse that has emerged around these Christian AI videos is both intense and deeply divided. Positions range from appreciation as a timely presentation of religious content with genuine religious-educational potential to condemnation as “kitschy,” “blasphemous,” or simply “slop” (Goswami 2025).

The problem, however, is that these various judgments operate on fundamentally different levels and address fundamentally different aspects, without these differences being systematically distinguished in the discourse. The result is a debate that rarely moves beyond the relatively unstructured juxtaposition of positions. What is lacking is a framework that allows the various perspectives to be delineated from one another so that they can then be brought into ordered conversation and a more differentiated discussion can emerge. Providing this systematization is the goal of this article. Its guiding research question is: How can the current discourse on Christian AI videos be systematized in a way that allows the circulating normative judgments to be distinguished from one another and productively related to each other? The article develops three heuristic interpretive perspectives, each rooted in distinct theoretical traditions. The first reads Christian AI videos as religious art and situates them within the long-standing image-theological tradition of Christianity (cf. Freedberg 1991). This tradition extends

*Dr. Max Tretter
is postdoctoral
researcher and
Principal Investigator
at the Chair of
Systematic Theology
(Ethics) at Friedrich-
Alexander-Universität
Erlangen-Nürnberg.*

*Dr. Yannick Schlote
is a pastor of the
Evangelical Lutheran
Church in Bavaria and
advisor for bio- and
medical ethics and
sustainability at the
Church Office of the
Evangelical Church in
Germany (EKD).*

from Tertullian's rejection of figural representation through the Byzantine iconoclasm controversy to the Reformation-era image debates and more recent controversies over filmic Bible adaptations such as *Jesus Christ Superstar*. The second interprets the videos through the lens of meme studies, from Richard Dawkins' original coinage of the concept to Limor Shifman (2014) and other contemporary meme scholars. These scholars conceptualize memes as cultural invitations to participate in a discourse that spread through mutating replication. The third situates the videos in proximity to the religious-educational concept of elementarization, as developed in Wolfgang Klafki's theory of categorial education and the Tübingen approach. This concept aims at distilling complex subject matter to its core and making it accessible to specific audiences (cf. Baumann 2026).

Methodologically, this is a conceptual systematization effort rather than an empirical study. The starting point is a survey of the current discourse, which has so far been conducted primarily in blogs and magazines, alongside the relevant scholarly literature. In sustained engagement with both and with the phenomenon itself, three heuristic interpretive perspectives are developed that must prove their merit against concrete example videos: Christian AI videos as religious art, as memes, and as elementarization. For each perspective, the article identifies which normative criteria are associated with it. The approach is deliberately heuristic: the three perspectives make no claim to exhaustiveness but serve as analytical lenses that enable a more systematic grasp of the phenomenon and the discourse as well as a structuring of the judgments currently in circulation.

The article derives two normative criteria from each of the three interpretive perspectives. From the interpretation as religious art, these are piety (is the content treated with the respect that believers consider appropriate, or does it come across as disrespectful and hurtful?) and aesthetics (do viewers perceive the video as aesthetically accomplished and creative or as kitschy and banal?). From the interpretation as meme follow targeted attention (does the video reach an audience familiar with its cultural references, and does it generate a recognition effect?) and communicative uptake (does it invite viewers to pick it up, adapt it, remix it, and thereby produce further videos of the same kind?). From the interpretation as elementarization, finally, content adequacy (is the content made accessible without being trivialized?) and perspectival integrity (is it one-sidedly or even manipulatively channeled in a particular, e.g., political, direction?).

The resulting framework consisting of three perspectives and six criteria does two things. It explains how starkly divergent judgments about the very same video can coexist, once we see that they rest on different perspectives and apply different criteria. And it provides a structure within which those judgments can be ordered and brought into productive dialogue. What the framework expressly does not provide is a fixed ranking. There is no general answer to the question of which perspective should take priority or which criteria should weigh most heavily in any given case. Three reasons account for this. First, the sheer diversity of Christian AI videos precludes any single perspective or criterion from being treated as authoritative across the board. Second, the receptive openness of the videos must be taken into account. Which interpretation applies and which criteria take precedence is not fixed in the video itself but arises anew in each act of reception since different viewers may perceive the same video in different ways depending on their contexts and interpretive horizons, and may accordingly apply different criteria. Third, the three perspectives do not exclude one another but function as complementary lenses that can be applied to one and the same video simultaneously, enriching each other in the process.

The framework opens several avenues for further work. The most immediate is to put it to use: to take the discourse on Christian AI videos and subject the circulating judgments to the kind of systematic analysis the framework makes possible. Beyond that, it invites inquiry into whether and how the approach extends to adjacent phenomena such as non-Christian religious AI videos or Christian AI content in formats other than video. From a religious-educational standpoint, the perspectives developed here could ground a more targeted investigation into the conditions under which Christian AI videos can serve as genuine pedagogical resources in religious education. And from a media-ethics perspective, the criterion of perspectival integrity calls for dedicated attention—particularly where religious imagery is consciously harnessed for political ends and the boundary between pointed framing and outright propaganda threatens to dissolve.

References

- Baumann, Ulrike. 2026. "Elementarisierung." In *Wissenschaftlich-Religionspädagogisches Lexikon*. <https://doi.org/10.23768/wirelex.100014>.
- Freedberg, David. 1991. *The Power of Images. Studies in the History and Theory of Response*. Chicago.

Goswami, Chris. 2025. "Millions Are Watching These Bizarre AI Bible Videos on TikTok: Should You Be Worried or Encouraged?" In *Premier Christianity*, July 30. 7. <https://www.premierchristianity.com/opinion/millions-are-watching-these-bizarre-ai-bible-videos-on-tiktok-should-you-be-worried-or-encouraged/19850.article> (accessed June 13, 2026).

Shifman, Limor. 2014. *Memes in Digital Culture*. Cambridge, MA.

Full Article

(German):

Max Tretter/
Yannick Schlote:

Kunst, Memes,

Elementarisierung. Ein

Systematisierungs-

versuch christlicher

KI-Kurzvideos. In:

Communicatio Socialis

59 (3), S. 454-465.

DOI: 10.5771/0010-

3497-2026-3-454