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The Illusion of a #RadTrad Identity

LAUREN HORN GRIFFIN

In the aftermath of the election of Donald Trump to the US presidency in 2016, political observers scrambled to explain what happened. Much of the focus revolved around understanding “evangelicals” in an attempt to figure out why so many white Christians supported Donald Trump despite his many publicized moral shortcomings.¹ News articles, academic books, and social media conversations tried to get at exactly who these “white evangelicals” were and why they did this. The presupposition was that an identifiable evangelical identity existed, and that their “culture” was the reason for their political action.² Many religious studies scholars attempted to point out how “evangelical” had become an overused, misunderstood, and largely incoherent term in modern American political and religious discourse.³ But in the runup to and aftermath of the US presidential election of 2020, similar pieces just kept coming. This time, though, they began to expand their questioning to conservative Catholics in addition to conservative Protestants.⁴ For example, one NPR piece on traditionalist Catholics posited that “for Trump, conservative Catholics are the new evangelicals.”⁵ Though the target is slightly different, the framework remains the same: traditionalist Catholics must be identifiable, and their culture spurred (or will spur) their political action. As they did with regard to conservative Protestants, political commentators, including scholars, have reduced traditionalist Catholics in some political rhetoric to “new right Catholic,” while at the same time many self-identified “trads” fear being treated as one-dimensional fundamentalists. In an attempt to understand this aspect of the American cultural landscape, scholars, pundits, and the general public have begun to discuss, and thus construct, “rad trads” as an object of study.

The term “traditionalist Catholic” has been used for decades to refer to those

Catholics who prefer the liturgy and/or social teachings of the Church before (what they see as) the “modernizing” reforms of the Second Vatican Council (or Vatican II, 1962–65).⁶ Sometimes “radical” is added to identify those who go further in their reaction to or rejection of Vatican II. The Southern Poverty Law Center describes “radical traditional Catholicism” as antisemitic and antidemocratic, and lists eleven “radical traditionalist” organizations as hate groups.⁷ The term “rad trad,” which has since become an internet meme, emerged in the early 2000s with Web 2.0, growing and changing within the Catholic blogging community. One of the earliest instances of the term that I have seen appeared in the London *Times* in 2008, in an article titled “American Catholics Must Stop and Listen to the Pope,” in which an American priest, Father Dwight Longenecker, bemoaned the “rad traddies.” He defined them as Latin Mass fanatics who “support schismatic groups opposed to modernising the Church” and wish to “turn back the clock to some golden age before the Second Vatican Council.” His usage of the term was hotly debated in the comments of “Insight Scoop,” a blog of the authors and staff of Ignatius Press, a well-known Catholic publishing house. One commenter, Catholic author Sandra Miesel, claimed to have coined the term and quibbled with Fr. Longenecker’s usage, arguing that “rad trad” involves “other social and political freight.” Others in the forum asked Miesel, as the inventor of the term, to lay it to rest, as they found it “smug” and inadequate to articulate the difference between mainstream lovers of Catholic tradition and those further out on the ecclesiastical and political fringe.⁸ Even in the blogs and forums of 2008, the term was already being debated and expanded to include more or less than some core users had hoped. The word was already getting away from them and, as this essay will show, has morphed even more in the internet culture of the 2020s.

In *The Illusion of Cultural Identity*, Jean-François Bayart argues that the very idea of cultural identity prevents us from grasping the cultural dimensions of a variety of phenomena we are curious about, from major political events to other social and economic phenomena.⁹ Continued efforts to understand “religion” in America, or even “American religion,” often focus on identifications. Scholars want to know what groups there are, how many practitioners are in them, and how these groups overlap with other identifiers like race, gender, sexuality, and class. In trying to identify and classify, scholars (along with journalists and other observers) actually produce the groups they are trying to analyze. This essay examines the contest over identifications, particularly in the context of subcultures within an established and legible “religion” like Catholicism and investigates how discourse on the category itself contributes to the production of a subculture. I use “trad” and especially “rad trad” Twitter

content (specifically, the discussion surrounding radical traditionalist Catholics on Twitter) as an example of the ways in which identities are created in discourse and, moreover, the ways in which we implicitly and explicitly treat these identities as an explanation for a particular behavior or action. An online “trad” subculture has been variously imagined by Church leadership, journalists, scholars of religion, and users of Twitter (and other social media). The conversations surrounding #RadTrad, however, say more about the concerns of the social actors engaging in the conversation than about any essential components of a “trad” identity, and ultimately demonstrate the equivocality of cultural identity. Journalists most often focus on the relationship of rad trads to the Trump movement, while Catholic leadership focuses on their relationship to Vatican II. Susan Harding’s well-known essay “Representing Fundamentalism: The Problem of the Repugnant Cultural Other” (1991) addressed in detail how scholars themselves shape their objects of study, particularly those they find “repugnant” or harmful and which they wish to address for the social good.¹⁰ In trying to articulate contemporary US Christianity’s relationship with right-wing populism, “religion” as an independent variable often still proceeds untroubled in scholarship.¹¹

Social media are prime spaces to apply this type of discourse analysis because such spaces are solely dedicated to performing and consuming imagined identities. It is sometimes fun and always profitable to try to identify and name social media subcultures. While the majority of social media data collection and analysis is done by those looking for a market for their products, users themselves identify and name subcultures they see arising from the content they are fed through the algorithms of the applications they are using. Consumption, then, creates the idea of subcultures. In her *New York Times* article on Catholic Twitter, Tara Isabella Burton compares social media platforms to fertile soil for some communities, allowing users to locate like-minded individuals.¹² But what if, instead of imagining social media as the “fertile soil” for the “communities” that organically grow there (as if these identities existed and simply needed a space to find each other for a community to take root), we instead thought of social media and religious identities as co-constitutive? Because of the interaction between human and machine through the generation of catchy names, hashtags, images, and algorithms on social media, the more a term is used and explained, the more it attracts the types of people who might be drawn to it, constantly constructing, reflecting, and reconstituting itself.

While the representation of what constitutes a rad trad is created by scholars, Catholic leadership, and journalists, this essay focuses on how the term

has been used and consumed on social media, specifically Twitter. To get a sense of what those posting on #RadTrad Twitter say about themselves, I used a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to analyze the Twitter data. I retrieved tweets that contained “#radtrad,” “rad trad,” or “radtrad” from a two-year period between January 1, 2019, and December 31, 2020, resulting in a corpus of 6,684 tweets.¹³ I will focus on two issues revealed by the word frequency analysis: First, gender roles are a central feature of rad trad conversations online, but one that has not been highlighted by Catholic leadership, news media, or scholarship. Second, a large portion of the conversation surrounding rad trad is self-referential, or a theoretical discussion of the category itself. This is, of course, due in part to my methodology—searching for the term in isolation is naturally going to pull tweets that are talking *about* the term itself. But that is exactly what we are after here: getting a glimpse into contemporary debates over the term demonstrates the fluid and contingent nature of these categories, which in turn highlights the pitfalls in assuming a stable “religious culture” that might explain political action.¹⁴

Like all Twitter subcultures, #RadTrad Twitter is an imagined community. But how is it imagined, and to what social ends? I focus here on the semantic dimensions of algorithmic culture by emphasizing digital rhetoric and its uses on social media.¹⁵ Interrogating representation itself, just as Harding did with “fundamentalists,” we may ask how #RadTrad Twitter was manufactured, what categories and assumptions were imposed upon it, and what trajectories are implicit in its narrative representations. This theoretical approach is not new, but it is still not consistently applied to “religious” objects—which shows how these culturalist assumptions still operate uncritically within contemporary discourses on “religion.” Thirty years after Harding’s essay, we now live in what some call the digital society or the information society, and new media processes have drawn new boundaries and created new affinities.¹⁶ One tweet that stands out in demonstrating this point comes from a user bemoaning what she sees as the overly committed users on her timeline, noting that it was full of kpoppers, e-girls, normies, ancap, radtrads, and MGTOWs.¹⁷ In this user’s list, identities that we might call religious, political, or cultural are not cordoned off—these are all “very online” identifiers, blurring our presupposed categories. In complicating what it means to be a present-day “rad trad,” this essay demonstrates yet again how terms demarcate groups and, in doing so, reduce their complexity; moreover, it serves as a specific instance of how internet technologies (particularly social media) have transformed how we communicate and how we imagine our communities. This all-encompassing digitality must be central to the study of communities we call religious.

METHODOLOGY

In my corpus of 6,684 tweets, 24 languages were detected. The largest group (54 percent) were in English, followed by Portuguese (34 percent), while 5 percent were in Spanish, 2 percent were in German, and 1 percent were in Tagalog. The remaining 4 percent were in other languages, but no other language made up a significant portion of the corpus. Determining where the tweets came from is difficult because not everyone lists their location in their bio, but rad trad tweets in English came from Canada, Britain, Australia, Europe, Latin America, and South America. However, the clear majority of rad trad tweets in English, based on what I could determine from Twitter profiles and the content of the tweets, came from the United States. A large portion of the conversations revolved around the US Church (mentioning US clergy, public figures, parishes, and so forth) and US politics.¹⁸

Conducting a word frequency analysis of just the English usages showed that—after self-referential words like “catholic,” “traditional,” and “twitter”—the most frequently utilized words in conjunction with rad trad were “pope” (141), “god” (90), “latin mass” or “TLM” (67), “love” (67), and “women” (61). Conducting a sentiment analysis showed that #radtrad (with the hashtag) was used more positively than the term alone, without the tag, which trended toward negative usages.¹⁹ Though the “rad trad” sobriquet has pejorative uses, many self-described rad trads have claimed it and displayed it proudly with the hashtag. There were some ironic and critical usages of the hashtags, but most were intentional signals of a person’s identification with the imagined subculture. The most commonly used tags in conjunction with #radtrad (which did not include some variation of “catholic[s],” “tradition[al],” or “twitter”) were #popefrancis, #latinmass, #sspx, #proudboys, #knightsrepublic, #prolife, and #stevebannon.²⁰

Many of the concerns and fixations described in the news media and academic articles were not emphasized in the Twitter data. For example, in a recent and very thorough exposé for *Vanity Fair*, Kathryn Joyce describes rad trads as mapping Catholicism onto existing alt-right conspiracy theories that center on fears about “globalism,” freemasonry, and communists. Thus, racism figures centrally into Joyce’s profile, creating an image of online Catholics anchored by white supremacy and (specifically) antisemitism.²¹ Others have focused on Islamophobia, especially in the years following President Trump’s 2017 restrictions on travel from some predominantly Muslim countries. Archbishop Vigano (a figure who is heavily emphasized by Joyce) is only mentioned ten times in conjunction with “rad trad” in my corpus of tweets (and all mentions were in English). In those tweets, users debated whether or not he

was of “rad trad” identity. While a few tweets saw him as a very extreme figure, some talked about him not being extreme enough, viewing him as a latecomer to “radtradism.” Islam is only mentioned eight times in my corpus of tweets—not an oft-discussed topic, especially in comparison with their main social issue: the roles and rights of women.²² Islamophobia was likely a hotter topic in 2016 and early 2017, but my Twitter dataset does not include those years. Of course, the Crusader imagery that appears in some posts and as profile pictures could certainly be considered in an analysis of antisemitism, Islamophobia, and white supremacy on #RadTrad Twitter, but my dataset focuses on rhetoric (thus, without commentary these images are left up for interpretation). The point here is that, while Islamophobia is unquestionably present in some self-identified rad trad groups and individuals, it is not an essential—or defining—component of #RadTrad Twitter. It may well have been more discussed in 2016–17 #RadTrad Twitter, but that reinforces the contingent, fluid, and situated nature of “rad trad culture.”

ORTHODOX OUTLAWS AND “TRADWIVES”

The word “pope” is by far the most used word in conjunction with “rad trad,” and #popefrancis was the most used hashtag in conjunction with #radtrad. Not only Pope Francis, but also the theoretical role of the pope, the authority of the pope, the history of the papacy, and past popes loom large in rad trad conversations on Twitter, highlighting the centrality of authority in these discussions. The sentiments on papal authority and Pope Francis, though, vary widely. Some self-identified rad trads express enthusiasm about Pope Francis, others recognize him as pope but are highly critical, and yet others believe not only that the papal seat is vacant but that “Bergoglio” (often referred to by his surname as a slur) is an antipope. Many nontrads (sometimes called “normies”) attempt to describe rad trads as rejecting Pope Francis, which then leads to a discussion in which rad trads appear in their mentions to clarify their own position on the pope. These conversations, however they end up, often contain a common theme: rad trads feel misunderstood, marginalized, or angry in relation to conversations about authority. One user laments that their personal Catholicism is hanging by a thread, and that their only remaining hope is that a trad pope would end the (perceived) persecution of the traditional Latin Mass (which was the Mass celebrated until 1962, when what is now called the “ordinary form” and its allowance for Mass in the vernacular became standard).

Talking of betrayal, both within the Magisterial Church and in society at large, the tweets craft a sort of gritty noir image of an irreverent but deeply

pious cowboy, made an outlaw by society's lack of scruples and the Church's inability to see the truth. Only the few, the true remnant, now remain, though on the margins. These narratives of persecution are quite common, especially in and around discussion of the pope. Some users use terms like "despicable," "demonic," "Masonic," and "Antichrist" to describe Pope Francis, who they say has made the Vatican nothing more than a homosexual cabal. One user argues that the swamp in the Church must be drained, and the Church should become much smaller and offer only the Latin Mass. Twitter users also perceive certain rad trads as being drawn to the "extremes" or to the margins of the margins. One user remarks that they are always weirded out by the people online who have gone from "Muslim extremist" to "trans anarcho-communist" to "radtrad sedevacantist."²³ The tweeter jokingly urges readers to stick to one single extremist ideology "like the rest of us." The joke, of course, was meant to highlight how this attraction to fringe communities is due precisely to the edginess and boundary-pushing rebelliousness itself. Political scientist Michael Barkun argues that those with "fringe" notions are drawn to the fringe precisely because of what he calls "stigmatized knowledge," or ideas that are rejected by authorities and institutions.²⁴ Similarly, Donovan Schaefer has pointed out that much of the appeal of this fringe is how exciting it feels to have insider information, highlighting the role of emotion in shaping beliefs.²⁵ By continuously discussing rad trads as an embattled few on the margins, it seems, more and more users who like the image of the "orthodox outlaws" are drawn to the thrilling and stigmatized idea of #RadTrad.

At the same time, because the term is humorous and playful, some fear that too many are now identifying as rad trad who really do not deserve the term. Indeed, a Redditor recently expressed their misunderstanding of the term, explaining that they had been using it because it sounded like a fun meme word for Catholics who like rosaries. Others do not seem to be drawn to the orthodox outlaw image, as they combine some mainstream Catholic ideas under the "rad trad" moniker. For example, there is a very interesting combination of identifying terms in one bio I came across, including pro-life, pro-distributism, pro-Pope Francis, and pro-rad trad Catholic. As the term continues to be used and adopted, the policing of authenticity continues, with some users painting with a broader brush, making #RadTrad feel more mainstream, while others continue to define it more narrowly, attempting to make #RadTrad refer only to sedevacantists or political extremists (however defined).

Another hot topic in #RadTrad Twitter that is not discussed as much by the academic discourse or media coverage (both the church media and news

media) has to do with women. In fact, some Twitter users suggest that young men are pulled into #RadTrad Twitter precisely because of “the manosphere,” or online communities of “incels” (involuntary celibates), “PUAs” (pickup artists), and “MGTOWs” (Men Going Their Own Way). Feminist Catholics who prefer traditional liturgy argue that these men are drawn to this side of Catholic Twitter because it is inherently and explicitly patriarchal, emphasizes masculinity, and strongly opposes feminism. One trad describes how she wandered too far into #CatholicTwitter and discovered the “rad trads.” She expressed surprise that there seemed to be such a large contingent of “anti-19th amendment folks” using Catholicism to authorize their takes. Indeed, there are many opinions on what women should do (work in the home, have many children) and how they should dress (long dresses, veiled at Mass). One Twitter user with a Crusader knight as his avatar exclaimed that he would love to take his cousin, a Christian feminist, to a Latin Mass and “watch her throw a fit” over women wearing the veil. This aspect of #Radtrad Twitter heavily overlaps with the adjacent “tradwife” or “trad girl” “Wojak” memes on social media. “Tradwife,” internet culture’s term for a traditional wife, usually denotes a woman who has a feminine appearance, stays at home to clean house and raise children, and (most important) submits to her husband. The memified version of this (in addition to the female variation of the Wojak cartoon with blond hair and a blue floral sundress) almost always features a 1950s white woman in a kitchen with an apron. Trad girl/tradwife is a much larger internet trend that extends well beyond Catholic Twitter, but these images loom large among some self-identified rad trads. There is much to unpack in this trend, from a disillusionment with modernity and longing for a past era of abundance to its explicit connection to a white nationalist project (for instance, the “white baby challenge”), but for present purposes it demonstrates just the centrality of the discourses of gender and sexuality in certain corners of #RadTrad Twitter.²⁶ Traditionalists online appeal to many moments from the past, including classical Greece and Rome, medieval and Renaissance Europe, and sometimes nineteenth-century Britain. But the most common images (at least in my dataset) were those of the 1950s United States, all featuring white women performing domestic labor. Machine learning reveals that, for many self-identified rad trads, gender and the roles of women are central topics that often fall off the radar of journalists, who focus more on issues of race and ethnicity (antisemitism, Islamophobia, and white supremacy). Of course, discourses on gender cannot be separated from discourses on race, and #RadTrad often makes these connections explicit, but the awkward relationship between mainstream ideas of gender equality and the Church’s teachings about gender and sexuality can

make the focus on gender feel more confrontational. Twitter users have no such qualms.

PERHAPS A TAD RAD?

The most common hashtag used in conjunction with #radtrad is #traditionalcatholic and #catholictwitter. Much of the conversation, then, revolves around the overlap of, and debate about the line between, radical traditionalist and traditional Catholic, and includes discussion of the Catholic Twitter subculture itself (who is part of it, what the main discussions are or ought to be, and so on). A majority of the conversations explicitly center on the identifications, classifications, and authenticity of the group itself.

Catholics who now consider themselves “mainstream traditionalists” (on Twitter they call themselves “trad not rad”) were indeed once considered radical or may still be considered radical by some. The distinction between the extreme Catholic reactionaries and mainstream “traditionalists” is contested among Twitter users. For example, I analyzed Twitter bios for “rad trad,” or “#radtrad” to see how people were using the term in their profiles. Of the eighty-five accounts that had the Catholic meaning of “rad trad” in their bio, seven were some version of “trad not rad,” drawing the line between themselves as “moderate” traditionalist and the radicals. Eight bios expressed uncertainty regarding the line between regular “trad” and “rad,” with bios like “Tad of a Trad, and a tiny bit rad”; “Trad, but trying not to be rad”; and “Mostly trad with shades of rad.” One user expressed their use of traditionalist devotional objects while also remaining loyal to Church leadership—for instance, they wore a scapular while also remaining loyal to the Magisterium. While the very term “rad trad” to some means sedevacantism (or, at the very least, an extreme dislike for Pope Francis), that is certainly not the only interpretation, as several bios and tweets expressed explicit support for Pope Francis and criticized those who seek to “tear him down.” A few bios highlighted the nonstatic nature of their identities by describing themselves as “Traddening” or “Trad, more Rad by the day.” One bio contained the joke “Socially Rad, Fiscally Trad,” a play on the “socially liberal, fiscally conservative” trope many moderate Republicans like to use to try to carve out a subgroup within a larger community. Just a quick glance at trads “rad” enough to include the moniker in their bio (a rather intentional act of identification) shows that the term is fluid and contested, even among core users.

A good portion of the tweets containing “#radtrad” or “rad trad” were actually evaluating the term itself, attempting to decide exactly what it means and whom to include (or exclude). One user noted that “rad trad” is overused

by people without proper understanding. Other tweets lamented the meaninglessness of the term, judging such labels as “leftcath,” “tradcath,” and “radtrad” to be obsolete. Another applied this to other imagined Twitter cultures, explaining that #RadTrad Twitter is like Atheist Twitter in that everyone pretends to have the same values, but actually do not. Several tweets (like those using the term “traddening”) recognized the fluid, changeable nature of the name; one user explained that receiving Communion on the tongue is enough for one to be a rad trad in 2020. The meme “You Keep Using That Word, I Do Not Think It Means What You Think It Means,” featuring the fictional character Inigo Montoya from the romantic comedy film *The Princess Bride* (1987), is very often employed in discussions about the definition and description of “#radtrad.” Who is rad enough to be a rad trad is an oft-debated topic, with users perceiving that standards had shifted even since Twitter (and other social media) had helped create the identity.

Along those same lines, Twitter users discussed the role of the algorithm, too, in the construction of “#radtrad.” One user complained that they watched a Latin Mass, and now “the machine” “thinks I’m a Republican.” Twitter users certainly noticed (to their chagrin) the ways in which the machine recommends accounts based on certain keywords used in a tweet, and how often users engage with tweets that use similar keywords. They expressed an upsetting awareness of how the algorithm connected them with right-wing figures, regardless of where they fell on the political, theological, or liturgical spectrum. For some leftcaths, it felt disjointed. One user explained that they are just a socialist who happens to think Vatican II was a mistake. They simply want to watch a Latin Mass, not donate money to current Senate minority leader Mitch McConnell. Still others commented on the “trending” topics Twitter recommends, noting how the more they seemed to follow Catholic Twitter personalities, the more right-wing political topics or personalities would show up in their “trending” section. Likewise, some on the right found that the figures considered “right wing” were not far-right enough, chuckling at the idea that someone would consider YouTube personality Taylor Marshall “radical.” This user recognized that repeatedly calling Marshall “radical” (and Marshall using the term “rad” self-referentially) constructed him as such, especially in the corners of #RadTrad Twitter that are particularly personality driven. The user mocked Twitter’s algorithm for continuously showing Marshall on his “Who to Follow” list. From the Explore tab to recommended accounts, this example provides an interesting look into how media shape conceptions of communities online, and it highlights the relationship between algorithmic targeting and identity formation. After all, it is not only algorithms and computation, but especially the way

people imagine and perceive them, that shape the way we think about ourselves and our communities.²⁷ In this way, many Twitter users point to how the machine learning continuously shapes and reshapes rad trads.

RAD TRAD RELIGIOUS STUDIES SCHOLARS

Twitter users often employ the same method as religious studies scholars when trying to describe “religion in America” (what groups exist, who are they, how many are there, and so on). Social media have provided language to theorize the relationships between and within groups, the relationship of online to in-person communities, and the relationships between the various identities people perform every day. Many users offer breakdowns and explanations of the groups within Catholic Twitter (“rad trad,” “leftcath,” “trad cath,” “normie”), each of which differs slightly from the next. This practice makes many Catholics feel like their larger community is more divided and polarized than it had previously been. One user notes that although there have long been divisions among American Catholics between the sociopolitical “left” and “right,” roughly corresponding to their theological worldviews, recent years have deeply fractured the group of “conservative” Catholics. Comparisons to other communities, such as the larger American political landscape or other “religious” traditions, usually follow. In response to lamentations about the fractured landscape of US Catholicism, one user noted that this analysis of the Catholic landscape could easily be applied to the Protestant context, regardless of denomination. Discussing the term “rad trad” specifically, Fr. Stephen Vrazel explained that “having returned to Twitter just a few months ago, I found [the term] thrown around by all sorts of people, always as a mix of joking but serious. That’s what it looks like from my outsider’s perspective, anyway.”²⁸ Several tweets highlighted the fluid nature between “joke” names and the terms being taken more seriously, indicating how this demarcation of groups really is a playful, layered story of exchange and circulation.

In addition to more generally perceived divisions, Twitter sometimes draws together some seemingly odd couples. For example, while it was thought to be common knowledge that traditionalist Catholics generally did not like the charismatic renewal in the Church, “#trentecostal” has shown the affinity between Tridentine (preconciliar or traditional) Catholicism and Catholics who practice forms of Pentecostalism.²⁹ In this way, Twitter users debate terms, create new groups, and provide humorous descriptions that constantly create, reflect, and rework the Catholic Twitter landscape. Their method actually mirrors that of religious studies scholars, who have attempted to draw “family resemblances” between a variety of traditions and have continuously argued that

each tradition was more militant and fractured than the period before it.³⁰

Twitter users recognize that “rad trad” is a brand invented online and not easily explained by the “the spirit of Vatican II” or Twitter users’ beefs with American bishops; just as one need not run an urban homestead to be “#cottagecore,” one need not attend a bunch of Latin Masses to be “#RadTrad.” Indeed, sometimes it is something they lament. One user bemoaned what they called the sad world of online trads who have (in the user’s estimation) never been to the Latin Mass and “preach literal heresies.” Another user explained their annoyance with current “trad types” for being authenticity fetishists; the user equated trad’s love of apocalyptic, sanguine Catholic imagery and embrace of the Latin Mass with the fetishization of vintage records and horror films. Catholic influencer Tommy Tighe explains it like this: “catholic twitter is seeing ‘wearing anything other than white briefs underwear to mass is a mortal sin’ and then being like ‘oh shit, really?!’ but I click their profile and it’s a 19 year old sedevacantist with a pinned tweet showing a woman in the kitchen wearing just an apron.”³¹ Packed into that tweet are assumptions about information, authority, and authenticity, implicitly highlighting the centrality of digital media and the relationship between multiple digital rhetorics and memes in shaping conceptions of rad trads. For Twitter, “#radtrad” is understood as a very online aesthetic. In fact, Twitter language offers several interesting terms that critique the idea of static identities and highlight continuous “acts of identification.”

Terms like “LARPing” (an acronym for “live action role playing”) provide a language to discuss the (more or less) self-conscious performance of identities. Oftentimes the term is used solely to police authenticity. For example, when someone accuses someone of being a “rad trad LARPer,” they mean that the person is not “real,” whether genuine or correct, in their traditionalist Catholicism. But other times the term is used ironically or is humorously applied to oneself. One user explained that their own take was too “sane” to be radtrad but too “LARPy” to be considered mainstream. Admitting that one is role playing, even if humorously or ironically, provides accessible language for the ways in which we perform fluid and varied acts of identification rather than embody a static identity. The idea of role playing, especially when it is not used to contrast the “really real,” allows people to discuss the ways in which we perform identity, play with ideas, and utilize rhetoric that does not directly result in in-person action. Users also discuss “e-trads” (or “e trads”) and “e-Catholics,” which uses the language of “e-person” (or the more commonly discussed “e-girl,” popularized on the video-sharing app TikTok) to discuss the way people live online. Like “LARP,” the term is often used to police

authenticity, but unlike “LARP,” this term emphasizes the idea that the e-trad does not necessarily practice traditionalist Catholicism in person but rather gravitates to the community online. Rather than questioning the “reality” of this type of trad, this can offer language to discuss what people do only online, which is where people spend a lot of “real” time, even more so during the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather than accuse users of not being real or genuine, this term emphasizes the fact that #RadTrad Twitter is not a mirror image of those attending Latin Mass or those arguing over Vatican II in church lobbies. It is also a recognition that much of the language, topics, and ideas largely live only on Twitter: “it’s a weird place to be in, having one foot in Catholic Twitter where this is all we can think/talk about and another foot in the real world at work where absolutely no one is talking about it or probably gives it as much as a thought.”³²

Still, for many #RadTrad Twitter users, online activity is not divorced from in-person practice, as many users report attending Latin Mass and engaging with traditionalist communities on the ground. Indeed, a large portion of the debates on Twitter try to deal with this question of how to think about the relationship between the “online” world and the “in-person” world, realizing that both are “real” and socially consequential, but expressing uncertainty about the relationship between them. Catholic journalist J. D. Flynn attempted to work this out: “I used to think this was just a phenomenon among the very online, but it’s not. I hear from a lot of practicing Catholic families who have been seriously fractured over Trump, [Bishop Carlo Maria] Viganò, and now vaccines, etc. I hear from campus ministers who say students are confused by that.”³³ Terms like “LARPer” and “e-trad” give users language to theorize with—to articulate the ways in which not all acts of identification are performed in person or with a body, and how an online aesthetic does not necessarily translate into “beliefs” or even “worldviews.” One can be, as some Twitter users put it, “just e-traddening,” while the in-person communities of others are reflected in their online content.

Similarly, rather than define rad trads by their affinity for the traditional Latin Mass (TLM), Twitter users analyze rad trads’ love for TLM as a claim made by social actors in particular social situations. Many Twitter users consider rad trad uses of Latin as an artifact—the *idea* of the language as a socially formative device. They group together rad trad devotion to the Latin language, Gothic architecture, and ornate vestments, alongside the images of knights and fivefold crosses that serve as profile pictures for many trads and call it out as white-Western-civilization fetish. The idea of Latin (rather than actually speaking, hearing, praying, or using the language itself), they notice, is part of

rad trad branding and marketing rather than merely a description of liturgical practices. Despite claims to universality and timelessness, the TLM, of course, has a particular history. One user notes that her SSPX (Society of Saint Pius X) parents used to call the Latin Mass “timeless” when it was and is a historical product. Twitter users explicitly recognize that rad trads draw upon different items from the archive of Catholicism’s past—different events and actors, often held together in tension with one another, some of which are authorized by the Magisterium and others marginalized. Their narratives of the medieval or early modern Church sometimes explicitly conflict with one another, given that they are in the service of contesting positions in the present, despite supposedly narrating the same past.

A good portion of #RadTrad Twitter, then, actually problematizes and criticizes the term as well as the idea of a coherent rad trad culture. The users recognize and articulate just how manufactured and malleable the term can be. From Groyper alt-right memes and men’s rights groups to debates over socialism, narrative, and memory, #RadTrad Twitter is extremely varied—which, as some users argue, renders the term rather meaningless. But by continuously using, debating, and comparing it, they reify the very communities they are calling into question.

CONCLUSION

Is this about Vatican II, or are rad trads just an angry Twitter mob? Is it a political movement, or merely “religious”? Do we include lefty trads and “church militants”? How seriously does one have to center TLM to be “rad” in their traditionalism? Figures that are often lumped together by journalists, academics, and clerics alike feel very differently about the liturgy as well as doctrine. While many rad trads identify as Republicans, or at least as Trump supporters, many reject those labels as well. Some go further into the world of the new right, where even former White House official Steve Bannon is too “neocon,” while others embrace socialist policies and figures. Many of these questions echo the very conversations that happen around other problematic terms in the study of religion in America, most recently “fundamentalist” and “evangelical.” It is not enough to simply recognize the diversity—to put an “s” on the end of each of these imagined identities; rather, we can read these descriptions and evaluations as an intersection of discursive practices that define these identities from a particular point of view, which leads us to a more interesting set of questions.

How is rad trad culture actually brought into existence, managed, and transformed? The act of cultural defining and describing creates the space for

identities to be constructed around and in service to various forms of ideology.³⁴ In other words, the more people speak it into existence, the more the “identity” is differentiated. This, in turn, leads to efforts by some to reconcile these differences—to moderate these “othering” strategies by drawing a wider center and a smaller periphery. In this way, the journalists, academics, and Twitter users who discuss these groups become more like composers than prophets. Radtradism, like identity in general, operates along a fluid and changing spectrum and will continue to be measured against other “others.”³⁵ Indeed, all of these discourses represent rad trades as reacting against modernity (however construed). In other words, their descriptions depend on their different conceptions of modernity. For those who see Vatican II and the work that is currently being carried out by Pope Francis as “progress,” these are positive aspects of the modern Church. For others in the United States, modernity is nothing but political polarization, economic uncertainty, and a failing state. Still others see modernity as interreligious dialogue, toleration, and friendship. Some Twitter users see the antifeminist message behind some rad trad content as antimodern, but still enjoy liturgical traditionalism. In constructing #RadTrad identity (as in constructions of fundamentalism and evangelicalism before it), modernity itself is manufactured in its reverse image. The digital rhetoric shaping #RadTrad thus reveals the variety of ways in which people construct themselves as premodern, modern, or postmodern subjects.

This essay expresses skepticism around questions of culture and identity through the example of #RadTrad, which offers up a bundle of contradictions. There is no simple narrative to explain #RadTrad or the larger history of radical traditionalism in the American Catholic Church. Its meaning has shifted, even over the last few years, and it changes depending on whom you ask. The perceived rise of the rad trades is not an objective measure of their number or their political power, but rather a production of the imagination of those manufacturing the culture.³⁶ In examining the conversations about these questions, I have highlighted variations in theology, liturgy, views on gender, political affiliation, and political ideology. This case study on various discourses surrounding rad trades shows how shifts in media technology have shaped the concept of “culture” to become shorthand for a number of more complex political, social, and cultural configurations.³⁷ Just as Harding suggested of fundamentalist Protestants, we can conjure more situated, complex, and local accounts of traditionalist groups or individuals, which would make evaluations and even condemnations of certain positions espoused therein more effective.³⁸ Moreover, this case study serves as a specific instance of how internet technologies (particularly social media) have transformed how we

communicate and how we imagine our communities. From its inception, “rad trad” has served as a flexible and dynamic term that communicates a relative authenticity. In some usages, the term does indeed communicate a strong restorationist impulse for the pre-Vatican II Church, but by and large this essay highlights the contested nature of the term, particularly in the last few years as “trad” rhetoric online has become more recognizable. By demonstrating the ways in which #RadTrad is constituted through digital rhetoric and algorithmic culture, I argue that while a particular Catholic’s adherence to an imagined tradition is not an invention of these discourses, a RadTrad identity is.

The point, then, is not that “rad trad” cannot be defined or used (it is used, as I have shown, in many different ways). I am interested, rather, in how “trad” and “rad trad” are quickly becoming scholarly and media images that attempt to explain (and thus construct) a singular right-wing Catholic culture, especially for those interested in what they have termed white Christian nationalism and the politics of the new right. “Rad trad” is as much (if not more) a product of internet culture, mediatization, and late capitalism as it is of Catholic tradition—not to mention the ways in which discourses on Catholicism are inseparable from discourses on gender, race, and class. As I have shown, some people use “rad trad” (and even the less fraught “trad”) to wrap a variety of social phenomena into one neat package, while for others the term functions to separate “religion” and treat it as an independent variable or agent itself.

A quick glance at the uses and discussions of “trad” and “rad trad” on Twitter highlight how, though not unconnected to the traditionalist reaction to Vatican II, this is not a simple story of a singular movement over time. Taking Twitter data seriously will lead scholars to look beyond Vatican II as the catalyzing event, helping us recognize how “rad trad” is in many ways an invention of internet culture. Born of the blogs and forums of early Web 2.0 and developed as #RadTrad on social media, the media image continues to morph and expand. There are no *rad trads*, in this sense, without the internet. This is not to say that there is no relationship between, say, priests like Marcel Lefebvre who were excommunicated after Vatican II and someone who has #RadTrad in their Twitter bio—indeed, many *trads* explicitly invoke these figures. However, if we want to understand what is going on with the wide variety of folks who attract the label, as well as those who use the term self-referentially, we will not figure it out by attempting to draw a straight line from some priests in the 1960s to a teenager in 2022 who has a fivefold cross as his Twitter avatar and has never attended a Latin Mass. We cannot understand the latter without understanding (of course) the socio-political realities and material conditions of the United States in the twenty-first century—but we must also understand

key aspects of digital media and algorithmic culture. If religious studies scholars want to contribute to explaining the new right, we must think in terms of media processes as opposed to fixed categories in which religion operates as an unmediated, irreducible agent.

NOTES

1. See Mark Noll, George Marsden, and David Bebbington, eds., *Evangelicals: Who They Have Been, Are Now, and Could Be* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2019).
2. See, for example, Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2020).
3. See, for example, Michael J. Altman, "'Religion, Religions, Religious' in America: Toward a Smithian Account of 'Evangelicalism,'" *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 31, no. 1 (2019): 71–82.
4. See, for example, Tish Durkin, "The Catholics Who Hate Joe Biden—and Pope Francis," *The Atlantic*, October 21, 2020.
5. Tom Gjelten, "For Trump, Conservative Catholics Are the New Evangelicals," NPR, October 26, 2020.
6. The term "radical traditionalism" is also used to refer to a school of traditionalist ideology that includes thinkers like Julius Evola and René Guénon, and it is also sometimes used to refer to traditional conservatism as a political philosophy. These are not necessarily unrelated to some of those who self-identify as traditionalist and radical traditionalist Catholics, but for the purposes of this essay I focus on the idea that traditionalist and radical traditionalist Catholics are most often talked about in terms of their reaction to or full rejection of the liturgical and social outcomes of the Second Vatican Council.
7. "Radical Traditional Catholicism," Southern Poverty Law Center.
8. Carl E. Olson, "Father Dwight Longenecker Let's 'Er Rip!" blog post, Insight Scoop, The Ignatius Press Blog, April 16, 2008.
9. Jean Francios Bayart, *The Illusion of Cultural Identity*, trans. Steven Rendall, Janet Roitman, Cynthia Schoch, and Jonathan Derrick (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
10. Susan Harding, "Representing Fundamentalism: The Problem of the Repugnant Cultural Other," *Social Research* 58, no. 2 (1991): 373–93.
11. Many recent studies set out to explain "white Christian nationalism," for example, Sam Perry and Andrew Whitehead, *Taking America Back for God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).
12. Tara Isabella Burton, "Christianity Gets Weird: Modern Life Is Ugly, Brutal and Barren, Maybe You Should Try a Latin Mass," *New York Times*, May 8, 2020.
13. "Radtrad" also describes a Brooklyn-based rock band as well as a genre of tattoos, so those usages were filtered out and not included in this number. Additionally, I am not using deleted tweets or tweets from accounts that have been deactivated; the removal of many accounts following the invasion of the US Capitol building on January 6, 2021, resulted in a small but noted loss of data.
14. Following the guidelines laid out by Amber M. Buck and Devon F. Ralston in "I

Didn't Sign Up for Your Research Study: The Ethics of Using "Public" Data," *Computers and Composition* 61 (2020), I do not cite or directly quote tweets from unverified users. Instead, I have paraphrased those tweets in this essay in order to protect the users.

15. See Ted Striphas, "Algorithmic Culture," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 18, nos. 4–5 (2015): 395–412.

16. See Michael Buckland, *Information and Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017). Though there are heated discussions, particularly in sociology, about how to characterize contemporary society and what balance of continuity and change one should strike in creating concepts and definitions, the role of technologies, information, and communication in shaping current society is central.

17. "Kpoppers" are fans of Korean pop music; "e-girls" refers to a TikTok subculture that draws on emo, goth, and anime images; "ancap" is a shortened term for the libertarian philosophy of anarcho-capitalism; and "MGTOW" stands for "Men Going Their Own Way."

18. The international movement called TFP (Tradition, Family, and Property, or Tradição, Família e Propriedade in Portuguese), founded by the Brazilian Plínio Corrêa de Oliveira, figures very prominently in the Portuguese "rad trad" tweets, but not at all in the tweets in English.

19. The sentiment analysis was conducted by means of VADER (Valence Aware Dictionary and Sentiment Reasoner), a lexicon and rule-based tool.

20. SSPX refers to the Society of Saint Pius X, a fraternity of traditionalist Catholic priests who offer Latin Mass. Knights of the Republic is a traditionalist Catholic men's group (it refers to itself as a "Sacred Military Order"). Steven Bannon is a former White House official who worked closely with President Trump.

21. See Kathryn Joyce, "Deep State, Deep Church: How Qanon and Trumpism Have Infected the Catholic Church," *Vanity Fair*, October 30, 2020; and Jason Horowitz, "Steve Bannon Carries Battles to Another Influential Hub: The Vatican," *New York Times*, February 7, 2017.

22. See, for example, James Martin, "Steve Bannon vs. the Pope," *AM Joy*, MSNBC, February 12, 2017.

23. "Sedevacantists" are separatists who deny the validity of the current pope and view the papal seat as empty (i.e., the "vacant seat" of the Holy See).

24. Michael Barkun. "Conspiracy Theories as Stigmatized Knowledge," *Diogenes* 62, nos. 3–4 (2015): 114–20.

25. Donovan Schaefer, *Wild Experiment: Feeling Science and Secularism after Darwin* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022).

26. For more on the "tradwife" social media trend, see Alexandra Minna Stern, *Proud Boys and the White Ethnostate: How the Alt-Right is Warping the American Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2019); and Annie Kelly, "The Housewives of White Supremacy," *New York Times*, June 1, 2018.

27. William Uricchio, "Recommended for You: Prediction, Creation and the Cultural Work of Algorithms," *Berlin Journal* 28 (2015): 6–9; and Blake Hallinan and Ted Striphas, "Recommended for You: The Netflix Prize and the Production of Algorithmic Culture," *New Media and Society* (2014).

28. Fr. Steven Vrazel, Twitter post, December 2, 2020.

29. The “Trent” in “#trentecostal” refers to the Council of Trent (1545–63), which authorized the Tridentine form of the Latin Mass that was practiced up until Vatican II. The traditional Latin Mass is often called the Tridentine Mass. For more on the conflict between traditionalist and charismatic Catholics, see Stephen Hunt, *Christian Millenarianism: From the Early Church to Waco* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 164.

30. For example, see R. Scott Appleby and Martin E. Marty, *Fundamentalisms Observed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). For a critique of the “family resemblance” method in religious studies, see Tim Fitzgerald, “Religion, Philosophy, and Family Resemblances,” *Religion* 26 (1996):215–36.

31. Tommy Tighe, Twitter post, September 1, 2022.

32. Tommy Tighe, Twitter post, August 27, 2019.

33. J. D. Flynn, Twitter post, February 13, 2021.

34. See Bayart, *The Illusion of Cultural Identity*.

35. On the role of comparison, specifically on how scholars’ positioning of their objects of study actually constructs them by predetermining how they relate to each other, see Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

36. Burton, in her *New York Times* article, mentions that Weird Catholic Twitter only contains a few hundred people. I assume this estimate comes from a look at the influential accounts and the amounts of likes or retweets or replies. But of course, the vast majority of social media users are lurkers, or people who don’t create or often engage with the content. While we might question whether the old 90–9–1 rule (90 percent lurk, 9 percent contribute, and 1 percent create most of the content) is accurate for current social media communities, it is safe to say that a majority of social media users mostly lurk. The point is that many more people consume the content and might consider themselves “insiders” in a particular imagined subculture without actively creating any content or even interacting (i.e., liking, replying, or retweeting) at all. There is no way to measure this on Twitter.

37. See Bayart, *The Illusion of Cultural Identity*.

38. Harding, *Representing Fundamentalism*, 393.