How the iPhone Became Divine: New Media, Religion and the Intertextual Circulation of Meaning
Heidi A. Campbell and Antonio C. La Pastina
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How the iPhone became divine: new media, religion and the intertextual circulation of meaning

Heidi A. Campbell
Texas A&M University, USA

Antonio C. La Pastina
Texas A&M University, USA

Abstract
This article explores the labeling of the iPhone as the ‘Jesus phone’ in order to demonstrate how religious metaphors and myth can be appropriated into popular discourse and shape the reception of a technology. We consider the intertextual nature of the relationship between religious language, imagery and technology and demonstrate how this creates a unique interaction between technology fans and bloggers, news media and even corporate advertising. Our analysis of the ‘Jesus phone’ clarifies how different groups may appropriate the language and imagery of another to communicate very different meanings and intentions. Intertextuality serves as a framework to unpack the deployment of religion to frame technology and meanings communicated. We also reflect on how religious language may communicate both positive and negative aspects of a technology and instigate an unintentional trajectory in popular discourse as it is employed by different audiences, both online and offline.

Keywords
blogs, fandom, intertextuality, iPhone, Jesus phone, religion, religious discourse, technology

Bloggers, religion and intertextuality
In the summer of 2007, Apple enthusiasts and technology trend watchers waited anxiously for the much anticipated public release of the Apple iPhone. Since Apple’s president
Steve Jobs’ unveiling of the new phone at the MacWorld conference in January 2007, much hype had circulated across the web and in the news about the device, which he promised would ‘work like magic’ by combining the power of an iPod, cellphone and PDA into what Jobs claimed would provide ‘your life in your pocket’ (Block, 2007). In the six months leading up to its official launch, bloggers had branded the forthcoming device not only as a revolutionary technology, but as a technological savior. Just hours after Jobs’ public demonstration, the iPhone was being referred to as the ‘Jesus phone’ online (Defamer, 2007). PVP comics online even published a strip featuring ‘Jade’ trying to comfort her Apple-fanatic boyfriend ‘Brent’ who became catatonic after seeing Apple’s iPhone announcement, finally explaining his shock as ‘Jesus has come back and now he’s a phone’ (http://www.pvponline.com/2007/01/09/he-has-risen/).

In the days that followed, tech bloggers described the ‘Jesus phone’ as ‘the holy grail of all gadgets’ (Danneskjold, 2007) and questioned how other cellphone companies might develop strategies for ‘dealing with the Second Coming’ or the coming iPhone launch in June 2007 (Buchanan, 2007). Other bloggers posted visual images of the ‘Jesus phone’ on their blogs. One blogger compared the costs and technological advantages of Playstation 3 to the ‘Jesus phone’ using a 1950s print of Jesus with an iPhone floating next to his ear. This complicated the idea of the ‘Jesus phone’, as it denoted the gadget being divine or at least the choice of the divine (My Indubitable Perspective, 2007). Much of the initial use of the term ‘Jesus phone’ came from the blogging staff at Gizmodo, a blog focused on technological gadgetry, and Brian Lam, who coined the term as a joke (Wilson, 2007). Yet, as the impending release date approached, more bloggers and news media adopted the term, using religious language and images to talk about the iPhone. Eventually Apple’s iPhone media campaign incorporated this mystical aura into its ads, subtly appropriating the divine imagery for its own benefit. The day the iPhone became available, public bloggers around the world posted images communicating the phone’s supposed divinity. A Brazilian blogger used a traditional orthodox icon of Mary, but substituted the image of baby Jesus with an iPhone, which Mary seemed to cradle lovingly (http://rafaelpay.typepad.com/rafa/2007/06/jesus-phone.html). An Asian blogger used an image of the ‘sacred heart of Jesus’, but added an iPhone in his left hand held next to his heart (http://www.techible.com/2007/06/news/apple/what-will-happen-on-iphoneday). By this time, the mainstream press had also picked up ‘Jesus phone’ imagery to describe the fan fervor surrounding the launch of this new technology.

The purpose of this article is to investigate the complexities surrounding the framing of technology in religious terms. The case of the iPhone as the ‘Jesus phone’ illustrates how new media objects can possess multiple layers of meaning, which can shape how they are perceived by the public. When mythical and religious symbolism is used in relation to technology, a variety of implicit and explicit messages can be evoked. We unpack these messages by exploring three layers of intertextuality surrounding the characterization of the iPhone as the ‘Jesus phone’ and what this reveals about the implications of using religion to frame and promote technology. This article also investigates how religious language and imagery function as a reservoir for communicating multiple meanings about technology, especially within contemporary American popular culture. By considering three common myths about the relationship between religion and technology, we argue that religious discourse can either affirm or critique technological enterprises by
juxtaposing the promised affordance of a technology against the fallible qualities of the technology or its creators.

**A framework for understanding the intersection of religion and technology**

There is a long tradition of equating technology with spiritual qualities. This act both creates possibilities and tensions, as using religion to frame technology can simultaneously present the technology both as a threat and a tool of promise. Many scholars have made connections between communication technologies and religious language. From Peters’ (1999) reflection on ‘word-magic’ as an understanding of language within early human culture to Eisenstein’s study (1979) of the rise of the printing press and its interaction with religious discourse, there exists a tradition of scholarship that has identified technology with having religious significance. Debates over the nature and implications of technology have also been infused with religious language. Heidegger argued that attempts at human control over technology can be equated with being a spiritual act and technology as having a ‘saving power’ (1977: 28) to which even God may be at risk of becoming subordinate. Discussions within the philosophy of technology have often approached technology as a value-laden enterprise and evoke spiritual language to describe the power, control and efficiency seemingly promoted by technology (Ellul, 1964; Nye, 2004). Other scholars, such as Marx (1975) and Benjamin (1999), alluded to the promise and perils of technology with religious-like undertones when presenting technology as a powerful force that both controls and liberates people. Thus, the study of technology has been closely linked with the understanding that religious language and images offer an effective means of describing humanity’s relationship to technology.

With the rise of computers and the internet, the tendency to equate technological engagement with religious pursuits has been further strengthened. It has become common to use myths that link human-created technologies to some higher, transcendent purpose or outcome. Myths provide tools for interpreting the complex relationship of humans to their technological tools. Three of these myths highlighted by scholars investigating the rise of computers provide helpful insights into the spiritual framing of the human relationship to technology.

Noble, in his work on the history of the technological enterprise, presents the myth of the ‘religion of technology’, whereby human engagement with technology forms an attempt to regain some lost sense of divinity, meaning and control over the world (1999). Technology, he argues, has become identified with the idea of transcendence, whereby it serves as a gateway to salvation and redemption from the brokenness of the world and humanity’s limitations. This gives technology an eschatological component, or ‘the millenarian promise of restoring mankind to its God-like Perfection’ (1999: 201). Noble goes on to criticize this other-worldly pretence promoted by technology designers and even early religious leaders that encourages a false enchantment in the guise of a technological fix. This myth frames technology as a form of salvation possessing redemptive qualities, allowing humanity to return to some pure state in which it was divinely empowered. Religion, as Noble presents it, is critiqued as a false premise, deceiving humanity into thinking technology will provide lost powers that it never actually possessed.
Davis’ exploration of the link between magic and IT describes the myth of ‘techgnosis’ or the mystical impulses that spark the western world’s obsession with technology (1998). Techgnosis is an attempt to show how information communications technology (ICT) has been presented as a tool imbued with mythological and mystical qualities. Davis claims that from the age of hieroglyphics to our computer world, humanly created technologies have given humanity perceived godlike powers to create and communicate. Technology is presented as uncovering technomystical qualities ingrained within human existence. As Davis states, ‘The fact that technology has catalyzed so much soul-searching suggests how mischievous and spritely a role it plays in the mutual unfolding of ourselves in the world’ (1998: 335). Technology is anthropomorphized, so it is seen as a spiritual force guiding humanity. Techgnosis presents technology itself as a god to be worshipped.

Stahl, in his study of the development of the computer, argues that humanity is driven by the myth of ‘technological mysticism’ or ‘faith in the universal efficacy of technology’ (1999: 13). He claims that technological mysticism is a system of belief that has united divergent political, economic and social classes across history because it serves as implicit religion. Stahl sees that ‘our language about technology is implicitly religious’ (1999: 3). By implicit religion, he means symbols and rituals outside formal religious organizations that are often unrecognized or hidden, but possess what Geertz referred to as an ‘aura of facticity’ (1973: 90). Descriptions of technology have thus become imbued with religious-like qualities, so that technological use takes on an incarnational quality, promising a pathway to utopia. The myth of technological mysticism frames technology as magical. Stahl goes on to critique technological mysticism and calls for a redemptive view of technology that recognizes the limitation of both technology and its human users.

An overview of these myths highlights three distinctive framing narratives about the relationship between religion and technology: a) technology offers human redemption, and humanity becomes godlike by embracing technology; b) technology itself is a divine or spiritual force; and, c) engagement with technology offer humans a magical or religious experience. Yet, within the study of the iPhone as the ‘Jesus phone’, we see that the intersection between technology and the metaphysical often provokes angst, which can yield a variety of responses. So these myths also raise three potential areas of tension about: a) the nature of humanity; b) the nature of technology; and, c) humanity’s relationship to its technologies. These framing narratives and tensions become important when considering the meaning derived from the iPhone as the ‘Jesus phone’ for different groups.

These myths suggest that religious symbolism can easily be imported into discussions of technology within popular culture. Consequently, traditional religious images become malleable tools used to communicate a particular symbolic meaning about technology. A key example is the rhetoric of the ‘cult of Macintosh’, in which Apple has become a cult brand whose status is supported by religious-like stories and images. Belk and Tumblat (2005) studied Mac fandom as a religious-like cult whereby members buy into a meta-narrative of Apple computers as redeeming technologies able to liberate its users, and its co-founder and current CEO Steve Jobs as a Christ figure. This, they claim, is based on several myths including: a creation myth highlighting the counter-cultural origin and emergence of the Apple Mac as a transformative moment; a hero myth presenting the Mac and its founder Jobs as saving its users from the corporate domination of the PC world; a satanic myth that presents Bill Gates as the enemy of Mac loyalists; and, finally,
a resurrection myth of Jobs returning to save the failing company in the 1980s. This illustrates how technological artifacts and activities can be framed in religious terms in order to solidify users’ investment in the product and used in the development of a shared identity. Infusing a technology with religious metaphors creates a storyline that inserts the technology into a larger conversation about the relationship between humanity and its limitations. Due also to the differing interpretations of human relations to technology, it means that these religious framings can be employed by technological interpreters to either effectively promote and/or critique media devices.

**Intertextuality**

Intertextuality has been used in media studies to analyze the permutations of different texts (Gray, 2005; La Pastina, 2004; White, 1992). Ott and Walter (2000) argue that intertextuality is a conscious encoding device employed by authors and producers to invite particular audience responses and attract certain viewers. They propose three intertextual strategies: parodic allusion, creative appropriation and self-reflexive reference. Parodic allusion refers to the incorporation into one text of a caricature, through imitation or exaggeration, of another text. It ‘offers no commentary on the original text. Rather, it seeks to amuse through juxtaposition – a goal that is enhanced by the reader’s recognition of the parodic gesture’ (2000: 436). Creative appropriation or inclusion is a ‘device in which one text appropriates and integrates a fragment of another text’ (2000: 437). This strategy differs from parodic allusion because it comments on the appropriated text or its role in society at large. Here the fragment is integrated into another, altering the original visually, orally or textually. These two layers are clearly seen in ‘Jesus phone’ discourse in bloggers’ appropriation of religious imagery and news media appropriation of bloggers’ discourse in their news reports. While at first it may seem that these intertextual references are engaging in parody, we follow Ott and Walter’s view that intertextual parody does not provide a commentary on the original text, but rather relies primarily on juxtaposition.

Their last strategy, self-reflexive references, are often ‘subtle gestures that to be appreciated require specific knowledge of the text’s production history, the character’s previous credits, or popular reviews’ (2000: 439). Ott and Walter argue that this self-reflexivity fractures the audience’s suspension of disbelief, reminding them they are engaged with media representation, yet simultaneously reinforcing their connection with the story or characters they are viewing. This form of intertextuality was seen in an Apple advertising campaign that seemingly used religious imagery. It required that readers have a range of knowledge both of art and religious imagery as well as of contemporary bloggers and news coverage use of religious language to describe this new technology. Intertextuality helps illustrate the flexibility of new media messages to serve as metaphors that can easily be harvested and combined from various sources to highlight different aspects of technology and the technological enterprise.

**Context and diffusion of ‘Jesus phone’ terminology**

In order to discover the development of ‘Jesus phone’ terminology and the extent of its use, a LexisNexis search was performed for 25 December 2006 to 30 September 2007 to
locate news articles and blog posts mentioning the term. In addition, a Technorati web search was conducted for the same period, looking in blogs for references to ‘Jesus phone’. This time period was selected in order to cover the date of initial use of the term, 25 December 2006, through a three-month period following the official launch of the iPhone on 29 June 2007. The LexisNexis search generated 27 articles in 18 different newspapers referring to the ‘Jesus phone’ between 17 June to 10 September 2007, with seven being US-based publications and the remainder being international newspapers from Canada, Ireland, New Zealand and Britain. A LexisNexis blog search found 37 citations in a variety of blogs between 25 December 2006 to 28 August 2007, and the Technorati search revealed an additional 13 blog posts making reference to the ‘Jesus phone’ between 25 December 2006 and 17 June 2007. In total, 50 blog posts were located on 22 different blogs referencing the iPhone as the ‘Jesus phone’. It is important to note that 38 per cent of these references came from the technology and electronic gadget blog Gizmodo where the term first appeared. In addition, a Google image search was conducted in September 2007 to locate images uniquely created in association with discussions of the ‘Jesus phone’. Thirty-three images from 24 different blogs were found, with one-third appearing on the blog iPhone Savior (http://www.iphonesavior.com/) established solely to discuss the growing cult of the iPhone. Through this we see 100 ‘Jesus phone’ textual references and images embedded in 64 different blogs and news sources during this time period.

While this study focusses on the discourse surrounding the pre-launch and then release of the iPhone, it is important to note that the term continues to be used by bloggers and media alike. Indeed, it seems the term became more common after its initial use in 2007. For instance, while there is no ‘Jesus phone’ entry on Wikipedia, if one types the term into its search function, one is immediately redirected to the iPhone entry. Several online dictionaries now include entries for the ‘Jesus phone’ presenting it as a standard slang term for the iPhone and noting the religious-like hype surrounding the product (see Urban Dictionary: http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Jesus%20Phone; Your Dictionary: http://www.yourdictionary.com/computer/jesus-phone). ‘Jesus phone’ terminology hit another peak during the 3G iPhone release in summer 2008, as bloggers began to refer to it as the ‘Jesus phone’s second coming’ (see, for example, Poston, 2008). As Mac Life magazine reported in November 2008, the ‘Jesus phone’ was an extremely common nickname for the iPhone, with over 73,000 uses found via Google and employed by the New York Times, Chicago Tribune, CNN and NPR (Mac Life, 2008). In October 2009, Google reported over 47,000,000 hits for the term, indicating its further spread within popular vernacular.

Christening the iPhone: Mac fans’ creative appropriation and the creation myth

The story of the ‘Jesus phone’ highlights the creative appropriation of religious language and imagery by technology fans, especially bloggers, to communicate particular ideas, not only about this new technology, but also about religion. The origination of the phrase ‘Jesus phone’ can be attributed to Gizmodo editor Brian Lam, who coined it in a blog post on 25 December 2006 in response to the press coverage of Pope Benedict XVI’s
Christmas Day speech. Lam’s first reference to the ‘Jesus phone’ was in a blog entry entitled, ‘The Pope Says Worship Not False Idols: Save Us, Oh True Jesus Phone’:

The Pope warned all Gizmodo readers this past Christmas morning with a rhetorical line of questioning.

Is a Savior needed by a humanity which has invented interactive communication, which navigates in the virtual ocean of the Internet and, thanks to the most advanced modern communications technologies, has now made the Earth, our great common home, a global village?

Of course we still need a Savior. Hopefully, our shepherd, Steve Jobs, will unveil Apple-Cellphone-Thingy, the true Jesus Phone – or jPhone – in two weeks, at the Macworld Keynote. It shall lift the hunger and disease you speak of from the land, as it will cure the rabid state of mind infecting Mac fanboys like yours truly. (Lam, 2006)

Lam’s sarcastic post referred to a CNN headline summarizing the Pope’s speech as ‘Worship God Not Technology’, singling out one of the questions the Pope posed in his speech’s introduction, ‘Is a Savior needed … ?’ Lam’s response was a resounding yes, but suggested to his audience of technology watchers (tongue-in-cheek) that the iPhone is the new savior of society (or at least the savior of Mac fans), based on the promises of Steve Jobs. While several press accounts also noted the Pope’s reference to the internet and interpreted it as a condemnation of technology (see Reuters, 2006), the central focus of the Pope’s ‘Urbi et Orbi’ message (to the City [of Rome] and to the World) was not the challenging of technology, but rather questioning if society is still able to recognize that the Church offers a symbol of hope in the world (Pope Benedict XVI, 2006).

The language and imagery of the ‘Jesus phone’ was catchy and easily appropriated by Mac fans and critics alike within the blogosphere. Because Jesus is such a highly recognizable and easily decodable icon in American culture, this association became effective, assessable and prone to generate intertextual references among different texts and narratives. Mac fan bloggers seemed to see in this representation of the iPhone a divine opportunity to reinforce the superiority of Apple technology and design. Many blogging posts echoed the creation myth described by Belk and Tumblat (2005), where out of humble means a transforming technology emerges to save the world. Equating the iPhone to Jesus created, for some Mac fan bloggers, the potential for immediate canonization of the machine. This notion is echoed, for example, by the blogger from iPhone Savior who stated, ‘Jobs preached the gospel of Apple and confirmed the rumors that his iPhone is indeed a savior’ (Basile, 2007). This complements Prothero’s (2004) assertion that Jesus performs an iconic role of folk hero and commercial cult figure within American Christianity and culture, and simply evoking the name brings with it a distinctive cultural understanding of revolutionary, world-changing power. For critical Mac bloggers, on the other hand, the ‘Jesus phone’ became a symbol of what is wrong with Apple fans: a fanatical religious-like devotion to the brand. As the blogger at Non-Prophet stated, ‘Cultists are camping out in front of Apple stores; bloggers call it the “Jesus phone.” All of this before a single consumer has even touched the thing’ (Non-Prophet, 2007). Viewing fans as fanatics allows for a reading of religious imagery as symbols of naïve beliefs.
Bloggers trying to describe iPhone fever used religious language to capture growing iPhone frenzy. A blogger reporting from Apple’s World Wide Developer’s Conference in San Francisco, where Steve Jobs was the keynote speaker, used images of evangelical Christians doing street witnessing alongside photos of people milling around at the convention, posing the question, ‘What do these people have in common?’ His answer was, ‘They are all desperately waiting. They have been waiting over 2000 years. Now, on June 29th 2007, the Jesus Phone will set them free’ (Magnus, 2007). Using a discourse of religious fanaticism to satirize the growing cult of Apple users, linked to the trend of cloaking Mac products and fans in terms of religious devotion, frames technophiles as being converts.

TechCrunch.com, a blog that reviews internet products and companies, created a playful promo in response to the iPhone launch hype (Riley, 2007). Using the song ‘Hallelujah’ by Leonard Cohen and images of the iPhone with clips from different Jesus films and televangelists, they created a video that proclaimed: ‘It’s coming, you’ve waited 2000 years, and listened to all the hype, June 29 all will be forgiven, Jesus phone from Apple, Not the Messiah but a very hyped phone.’ Other bloggers adopted the term with more than a hint of sarcasm, critiquing Apple’s iPhone hype and voicing their own skepticism about the infallibility of the ‘Jesus phone’. As one blogger asked, ‘will it end up actually being ‘The Satan Phone’” (Daryl, 2007). And so the term ‘Jesus phone’ became both an iconic image of the revolutionary ‘now’ and a symbol of the technological ‘not yet’, as bloggers highlighted potential limitations. At this stage of intertextuality, some bloggers take up the framing of the iPhone as a divine technology in order to affirm its importance as a technology promising its users the potential to become godlike through its use. Yet when the technology was shown to be fallible, bloggers interested in critiquing the iPhone highlighted the fact that the phone had fallen from divine status in the eyes of many. We see here that different bloggers can use the same religious imagery to signify divergent meanings simultaneously. With the increasing number of blogs and virtual forums for opinion and discussion, creative use of extratextual material becomes a strategy that allows for new cultural producers and critics to engage with broader cultural discourses while creating layered texts. Bloggers are able to sample from an increasingly available plethora of digital images and texts online. The ease of re-presentation of such resources means bloggers have the potential to extend the ways in which intertextuality functions in contemporary society. In an increasingly internet-dependent society, intertextual references are readily available, easily decoded and cross-referenced. References that might have been missed in the past by unaware viewers (La Pastina, 2004) are now easily searchable online. This means that images or ideas created by a blogger to promote one understanding of a particular artifact can be easily transformed by another into a very different message. So religious framings of technology, even when they draw upon traditional symbols, are not static, but rather produce dynamic discourses.

**The ‘Jesus phone’ in the news: media’s creative appropriation and the hero myth**

The second layer of intertextuality occurred between blogging discourse and news media, as bloggers’ descriptions of the ‘Jesus phone’ were appropriated by press accounts. As this occurred, the terminology and its original meaning began to change within these news stories. Interestingly, the first appearance of ‘Jesus phone’ terminology was not
domestic, but came in the *Irish Times*, which used a cynical tone as they reported, ‘the “Jesus Phone” – as the iPhone is now witheringly called given its overblown reception’ (Butcher, 2007). Other international press references inferred this religious framing might be as much about where the phone came from – a religious USA – as the technology itself. As the London *Sunday Times* highlighted, ‘In America, they are calling it the Jesus phone’ (Ringshaw, 2007: 16) and the Canadian *National Post*, which critically noted:

A sampling of the scrupulously-objective reportage now making the rounds, a week or so before the iPhone alights (briefly) on shelves in the continental U.S.: ‘The iPhone cometh … the day the mute will talk, the deaf will hear and the lame will walk. It will be Christmas in June, New Year’s in summer and Valentine’s Day all rolled into one. (Kinsella, 2007: A23)

These responses highlight that the international press saw the ‘Jesus phone’ imagery and framing as primarily an American phenomenon, one steeped in the visible presence of Christianity in everyday life. Indeed, the tendency within the USA to draw on religion within popular culture discourse as a ‘cultural toolbox’ or shorthand to communicate ideas of transcendence in relation to individuals and institutions has been noted by other scholars (Alabanese, 1996; Clark, 1999).

Interestingly, when the ‘Jesus phone’ terminology was picked up by the American mainstream press, it moved from primarily referencing the technology, to drawing attention to the phone’s creator. The first mention of the ‘Jesus phone’ in the American press was in a *New York Magazine* feature on Jobs, stating: ‘The panting over the Jesus Phone must have satisfied Jobs no end: Every product he crafts he regards as a sacred object, the primary aspiration of which is to incite naked lust’ (Heilemann, 2007). That same week, ‘Jesus phone’ imagery appeared pictorially in a *Washington Post* cartoon (see http://www.ipoddailynews.com/index.php/ipoddailynews/comments/14014/), days before the official iPhone launch. The cartoon pictured Jobs as Moses coming down from Mount Sinai after a meeting with God, but instead of being gifted with the Ten Commandments, he proudly carries two giant iPhones, seemingly given by the Almighty. He is greeted from below by an adoring crowd shouting, ‘It’s almost here.’ Here, the idea being communicated is that technology as a gift from God through the hands of Steve Jobs is poignantly expressed and greeted with anticipation by his devout followers.

It is here that the ‘Jesus phone’ story becomes more complex, leading to a greater level of intertextuality between bloggers and the news media. Gizmodo bloggers responded to the *Post’s* editorial cartoon with amusement about the widespread adoption of the religious imagery and the new direction it was taking:

Even the mainstream, non-tech media is getting into this. But seriously, you guys know we’re kidding when we call it the Jesus Phone right? We mean, it’s just a phone, even if we’re covering the crap out of it this week. (Chen, 2007)

The concern among Gizmodo bloggers points to the complexity of intertextual practices. As the image moved through different iterations in different media, it morphed into a critique of the brand, the technology and its users. Its initial reference was based in ironic sarcasm regarding the iPhone as possibly being a technological savior, to referencing the cult-like status of the iPhone and its guru Jobs, to finally news media embracing the
technology itself as sacred. They became increasingly concerned, especially when Heilemann used ‘Jesus phone’ terminology in the New Yorker, to confer Jobs with divine powers. As Lam (2007a) noted, ‘He’s written in our Jesus Phone nomenclature, but misses the Court Jester’s implicit joke.’ Eventually Lam said he regretted having coined the term, due to the way it was appropriated. ‘I never would have made the “Jesus Phone” joke if I knew that pasty anchor folks on CNBC would start using it. “Can the iPhone live up to the hype?”’ (Lam, 2007b).

Religious imagery proved an evocative tool for journalists to characterize Apple devotees both in critical and cohesive ways. Reports early on, such as one appearing in the British Telegraph Online, proclaimed that the prophetic potential of the iPhone would garner even more converts to Apple: ‘Judging by how excited people have gotten over a product they have never seen in the flesh, the Messiah phone should find itself rich in disciples’ (Lim, 2007). Yet diehard Mac fans seemed unfazed by critical reports and still embraced the ‘Jesus phone’ iconography. In Wired Online’s feature column ‘Cult of Macintosh’, Leander Kahney regularly comments on Mac, Mac developments and all things Apple. For his July review (2007) of his own new iPhone, he used a picture of his three kids sitting transfixed around a charging iPhone with hands folded in prayer, and the photo cutline read: ‘The Kahney kids worship the “Jesus phone”’.

Kahney (2004), in his book on Mac fandom, describes this hyperbrand loyalty as bordering on an ideology supported by the rhetoric of ‘othering’ PC users, such as is seen in the ‘Mac vs PC’ ad campaigns, portraying PC users as out of touch with the latest technology trends. Here, the cult of Macintosh’s hero myth is strongly evoked, as the focus shifts from the iPhone to Jobs as exalted leader and Christ-like figure. The idea of Jobs as a savior is supported by reports that he appeared at Apple’s first Christmas party in 1977 dressed as Jesus Christ (see Belk and Tumblat, 2005: 211) and in a biography entitled The Second Coming of Steve Jobs (Deutschman, 2000). This creates a platform presenting the cult of Macintosh as more than brand loyalty; it is about religious metaphors sacralizing both Mac devotion and its CEO, as well as vilifying opposing brands.

Despite heavy criticism about iPhone overpricing, its AT&T-only affiliation, and battery and screen problems, the ‘Jesus phone’ terminology lived on for months, even years, after its launch. For instance, in September 2007, the New York Times used and criticized the ‘Jesus phone’ in reference to Jobs’ supposed divinity and infallibility, especially as it related to iPhone pricing: ‘After Mr Jobs was crucified for playing it too cute on the so-called “Jesus phone,” he issued a non-apology apology and a $100 store credit to help those early buyers salvage some dignity’ (Carr, 2007). Again, we see that news media drew on previous popular discourse to critique Jobs, not the iPhone itself, showing the continued evolution of the term as the focus shifted from technology to creator and from praise to criticism. Highlighting Jobs as the hero of the ‘cult of Macintosh’ created a platform for casting Apple and its boss as a religious savior, further supported by the hero and resurrection myths found in the cult of Mac.

In using ‘Jesus phone’ terminology, news writers co-opted subcultural terminology from the blogosphere and incorporated it into its mainstream vernacular. But this layer of intertextual appropriation also created a dialogue between bloggers and news media, who questioned each other’s use of the terminology. This move is meaningful because it suggests two things. First, that blogosphere discourse informs mass media perceptions of technology
and, thus, how media frame new technologies publicly. Second, it highlights that religious metaphors are porous and offer flexibility of interpretation, so they can be stretched beyond their initial meanings in ways that can be conflicting for different audiences.

**Apple’s embrace of the ‘Jesus phone’: self-reflexive references through the resurrection myth**

Eventually a third layer of intertextuality emerged from the news media’s use of religious discourse around the iPhone, as it was seemingly embraced by Apple in an effort to sell their technology. While it is hard to verify, one could assume that Apple did not oppose the religious associations circulating around the iPhone as being the ‘Jesus phone’, as they utilized the divine image for their own ends. In mid-July, a few weeks after iPhone’s release, Apple launched an advertising campaign using the slogan ‘Touching Is Believing’, with an iPhone floating against a black background next to a disembodied right hand with blurred index finger, as if in movement touching the iPhone screen.

Several bloggers noted that the image had a strong resemblance to Michelangelo’s ‘Creation of Adam’ and interpreted the ad as sending the message that there was a mystical bond between the creator Apple and iPhone users. As *Mac Daily News* (2007) observed: ‘If we follow Michelangelo’s positioning of Adam on the left and God on the right, the iPhone was created directly by and/or is God’s phone (as if He needed a phone).’ They inferred that Apple was reinforcing the idea that the iPhone was indeed divinely inspired, given through God’s divine liaison, Steve Jobs.

Another blogger compared the print ad to Caravaggio’s ‘The Doubting of St Thomas’, wherein the disciple Thomas fingers the open side wound of Jesus while two other disciples look on (Barreto, 2007), further suggesting that Apple was trying to communicate that all doubt about the iPhone will be erased and faith in Apple restored with just one touch. And believing was important for Apple, as it sought to stir up brand loyalty among its customers in the face of media criticism of the iPhone’s limitations. These observations highlight Apple’s use of religious imagery to sacralize a secular technology. This ad emphasized that through touching, one would gain – or regain – faith in Apple products. This evoked the cult of Macintosh resurrection myth, whereby Jobs’ intervention in the past was noted for restoring glory to the product and company.

This demonstrates intertextuality on several different levels, including that of religious iconography, mythical popular culture and mystical interpretation. The not-so-subtle religious imagery of Michelangelo’s ‘Creation of Adam’ denotes strong links to faith and creation. The ad also communicates a mystical message of technology endowed by divinity and brought to life at just one touch. Yet Apple also evokes another narrative, one that promises iPhone users an experience with the divine, whereby iPhone use itself becomes a religious experience. This intertextuality moves the ‘Jesus phone’ from terminology of critique to imagery seeking to generate belief and reverence in the technology. Thus, evoking what had become a familiar metaphysical metaphor surrounding the technology served not only as a tool of discourse, but also as a public relations and marketing strategy. This self-reflexive reference brings with it a call to faith in technology, with religion providing the grounding for contextualizing this faith in the iPhone. The application of religious myth to the iPhone by Apple presented it as a cultural object.
endowed with powers validated by this discourse. This suggests that applying religious imagery to new media products can open up new marketing options for creative discourse about, and empowering of, technology.

The iPhone’s Jesus factor

Let’s begin this journey this morning by addressing the issue that has a lot of people in an absolute tizzy; Gizmodo’s ‘Jesus-Phone’ pronouncement. Yep, an undoubtedly secular web site has invoked the name of Jesus and assigned that very name to a cell phone. Jesus Phone, has a ring to it, no? Hopefully most Mac users are intelligent enough not to be too terribly offended by this playful naming by Gizmodo. After all, we’re not fundamentalists, are we? … Personally, I figured that the name implied that the iPhone would, by its truly revolutionary nature, forever change the cell phone landscape, that it would ‘inspire’ other companies to break out of their old, best practices, mold and create new and better products. Jesus was all about inspiring, after all. (Seller, 2007)

The online musings of this blogger highlight tensions created in using religious language to frame technology. Seller questions how employing religious discourse to describe technology might create meanings that may be problematic for some or evoke unintended responses by others. This is especially true when traditional religious symbols get reinterpreted in popular culture. For Seller, the ‘Jesus phone’ captures the optimism surrounding breakthrough technologies, serving as an inspirational and revolutionary symbol, a notion associated with the character of Jesus Christ. Yet, what about the other side of Jesus dominant within Christian discourse, not as savior, but as broken, rejected and eventually crucified? These narratives are not picked up in the meaning of the ‘Jesus phone’, although one might argue that Jobs carried a similar burden in the strong public criticism he received. We suggest that framing the iPhone as the ‘Jesus phone’ is in line with previous myths found within the cult of Macintosh narrative. Highlighting Jesus as a savior matches the cult of Mac’s hero myth, whereby Jobs serves as a redeemer figure. Presenting the revolutionary character of the ‘Jesus phone’, alluding to Jesus as cultural transformer, also complements the counter-cultural nature of Mac products in a seemingly PC-dominated world.

The intertextual discourse surrounding the iPhone as the ‘Jesus phone’ highlights a very interesting relationship between technology fans, news media and corporate advertising, and how different groups may appropriate the language and imagery of another to communicate very different intentions. It also offers a unique example of how religion was employed as a helpmate to frame and promote technology within popular culture. It suggests that trends towards lived or implicit religion within popular culture are making the deployment of religious symbolism easier, as it frees them from the constraints of boundaries placed by traditional or official understandings of religious meaning (Ammerman, 2007). With the iPhone, as with the ‘Jesus phone’, we see that framing a technology as divine did not make it immune from criticism. This is because religious images are employed in popular culture discourse in ways that are flexible rather than proscriptive. So while religious narratives used within the online context can become templates that suggest a certain meaning, they can just as easily morph, as they are appropriated by new sources, both online and offline.
The iPhone as the ‘Jesus phone’ also highlights some common narratives used to present the relationship of religion to technology. The ‘Jesus phone’ was initially presented as a godlike, all-powerful technology, but it also created the possibility for critique of its infallibility once limitations to the technology were identified. Setting up a technology as godlike gives it both a rhetorical power and encourages its unmasking as a false god, as it were. Over time, as attention shifted from the technology itself to its creator, divine status was also transferred from machine to man. Jobs’ godlike status was supported by the existing rhetoric of the cult of Macintosh. Much like Jesus in the Christian tradition is understood as the one who points to the divine truth, Jobs was seen as a prophet who points to the truth of the purported superiority of Apple technology. This created a further uneasiness, as the divinity of the ‘Jesus phone’ extended past the technology itself to a certain class of people. The concern generated by widening the metaphor and its meaning was expressed notably by Lam, who coined the term. Finally, Apple itself evoked yet another narrative, technology use offering an encounter with the divine or a magical experience. By embracing the iPhone, users were being promised a spiritual encounter. While this is still an obviously controversial claim, in many respects it proved an interesting move, making the religious quality of the iPhone less contentious. Apple’s shifting emphasis from the divinity of the technology to the technology simply providing a spiritual experience lessens the loftiness of its claims and therefore possibly the severity of the critique it might receive. Thus, it seems that using religious metaphors and sacred symbols to describe new communication technology can both set it up for failure and create a tool to silence criticism.

This case study further indicates how intertextuality works broadly to expose the relationships between fandom, news media and advertising. Intertextuality demonstrates the way in which religious metaphor becomes a flexible tool to communicate positive aspects and weaknesses of technologies and their creators simultaneously. Religion becomes an effective means for framing technology when it employs easily recognizable religious imagery from the dominant religious culture in which it emerges. In this case, it draws on the iconography of Jesus as Savior within American Christianity to convey the idea that the iPhone offers deliverance and transformation for cellphone users. This is because the integration of religious language with technology provides a cultural shorthand and a rich platform for communicating multiple meanings.

It is important to note that a number of instances of religious language being employed to describe new media exist, especially around the rise of the internet. For instance, Sherry Turkle claimed in *Time* magazine’s 1996 cover story ‘Jesus Online’ that, ‘people see the net as a new metaphor for God’ because it emulates a divine trait, being a distributed, decentralized, self-organizing system (Chama, 1996). The religious-like dedication and enthusiasm of key computer and internet developers earned some the title of ‘internet evangelists’ within the press, such as David S. Wetherell (Judge, 1999), Bill Gates (Verhovek, 2000) and Vinton Cerf (AP, 2005). These examples show that melding descriptions of new media technology with religious metaphors is not new. Identifying and studying the use of sacred symbols and metaphors in popular discourse about technology may help predict how those technologies will be perceived and critiqued in the social sphere. Religious language can create a trajectory of meaning when playfully employed to popularize or laud a technology, due to the fact that it is often easily decoded.

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and evocative in American popular culture. Yet, framing a technology as divine may also set it up eventually to be critiqued through counter-narratives of fanaticism or technological weaknesses being exploited as signs of fallibility.

At each layer of intertextuality, we see users of the ‘Jesus phone’ iconography draw not only on the meanings of the previous group of users, but a broader interpretation of Christian culture to contribute to the evolution of the discourse. Thus, the iPhone as the ‘Jesus phone’ demonstrates how religion provides a broad cultural pallet that can be drawn on in discourses about new media. This study raises several issues worthy of further inquiry. Follow-up research is needed on the intentions of key actors who frame technology religiously. Interviews with bloggers and journalist on their motivations for appropriating religious metaphors, such as the ‘Jesus phone’, could elucidate how and why religious symbols are decoded in popular culture in specific ways. This could reveal cultural motivations regarding the language used and why this becomes permeated by media discourse. We suggest, however, that the success of ‘Jesus phone’ discourse was a result of the accessibility of Christian religious iconography within American market-oriented culture.

There is also a need to test the extent to which religious metaphors have sticking power. This research suggests that when individuals draw on religious symbols reflective of the dominant religion and culture in which they emerged, they are more likely to have longevity and influence. Symbols from other religions may not be as easily decodable and could be more problematic. For instance, describing the iPhone as the Buddha phone might not have had the same effect, even if done in an Asian culture, as Buddha has not been constructed as a savior-like figure that can easily coalesce with the cult of Macintosh. Also, western cultures are often more permissive towards the appropriation of sacred icons into everyday practice, including humor, in ways that would not be seen as acceptable in other cultural contexts (compare, for example, the Mohammed cartoon controversy in 2006).

This study calls for an examination of how other groups engaged in technology development use religious language or purposes in their strategies; such ultra-orthodox negotiation with Israeli cellphone companies in 2005 resulted in what the media branded as the ‘kosher phone’ (Campbell, 2007). Different cultures may use unique employments of religion in relation to technology, suggesting that a culturally specific understanding exists for such interactions. Finally, this study shows the relevance of intertextuality for examining the relationship between media, technology and religion; yet it becomes necessary to explore whether this is a unique case or if other examples of this circulation of meaning exist. A comparative historical study of the religious framing of media technologies could help reveal if there are standard rhetorical strategies used by media audiences and producers and whether similar trajectories of meaning are created when religion is employed to discuss technology. While other examples of communication technologies being described with religious language exist (Katz, 2006), there are no empirical studies of whether or not media appropriated these framings or what impact this may have had on public reception of these technologies. It could be that intertextuality would not be as relevant in historical studies, as new media culture creates new unique conditions, such as immediate access to a variety of texts, which audiences can draw from, refer to and utilize in new ways within the current media cultural landscape.
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Heidi A. Campbell is Assistant Professor of Communication at Texas A&M University, where she teaches in media studies. Her research focusses on issues related to the intersection of new media, religion and culture. She is author of Exploring Religious Community Online (Peter Lang, 2005) and When Religion Meets New Media (Routledge, 2010).

Antonio C. La Pastina is Associate Professor of Communication at Texas A&M University, where he teaches in media studies. His research explores issues of media reception, the representation of otherness in mainstream media and its role in diasporic cultures as well as the implications of the digital divide for peripheral communities. He is author of numerous articles, with work appearing in Critical Studies in Media Communication, Journal of Broadcast and Electronic Media, International Journal of Cultural Studies and Communication Research. Address: Department of Communication, Texas A&M University, 4234 TAMU, College Station, TX 77843, USA. [email: alapastina@tamu.edu]