Religious Authority and Social Media Branding in a Culture of Religious Celebrification

Pauline Hope Cheong

Follow me on Twitter! is an atticism favored by digitally connected contemporaries. In fact, "connect with us" and "follow me on . . ." are increasingly common appeals made on digital media. And yet, as social media marketing develops, how are clergy as spiritual role models and leaders of local congregations responding to such calls to develop an online following as they work and live in digitally mediated environments?

Over the years, American religious organizations have sought to increase their following by reaching out to external audiences and competing internally among their own faith traditions as members more frequently change spiritual affiliations (Wuthrow, 1994). Like their "secular" counterparts, religious organizations are subject to market forces and must access and manage their resources from the external environment to survive in the "religious marketplace" (Finke & Stark, 1988). Bereft of a state-sponsored religion, rivalry among churches can be intense given the largely unregulated religious sphere characterized by competing secularization, globalizations, pluralism, and privatization trends (Kale, 2004). As Twitchell (2004) observed in *Branded Nation*, "If you want to succeed in the American market, you better make church compelling" (p. 56). Today, in light of social media and personal branding, Twitchell's observation could be more fittingly updated to read, If churches want to succeed, they better make church *leaders* appealing.

Yet, despite of the burgeoning interest in social media and transformative buzzwords like "read-write," "user-generated content," and "participatory information sharing," little research has examined how spiritual leaders are engaging social media to build credibility, community, and ontological security to ensure consistency in practices that give meaning to people's everyday lives, where stable views of the world are constantly under siege (Giddens, 1991). Moreover, recent observations in computer-mediated-communication research, including the

"mediatization" of society, are associated with the pluralization of lifeworlds and loss of control over traditional beliefs and practices that affect the ability of institutional religion to define social realities (Hjarvard, 2008). Mediatization has been conceived as a meta-process that shapes contemporary society, along with individualism, globalization, and commercialization (Lundby, 2009). However, this perspective largely negates the agency of spiritual leaders to gain significance in the public sphere through the provision of moral guidance and symbolic content to maintain an active and secure presence in civil society (Lovheim, 2011). As I have noted elsewhere, few scholars have developed conceptual frameworks for studying mediated religious authority, let alone empirically investigated the accomplishment of their authority on digital and social media platforms (Cheong, 2011).

This essay discusses the discursive nature of religious authority and examines how pastors of megachurches construct their authority on Twitter, as part of their multimodal communication strategy to create a personal brand identity. Recently the rise of such "megachurches" has shone the spotlight on a market-savvy class of leaders called "pastor-preneurs" (Twitchell, 2007) who lead large Protestant religious organizations of more than two thousand people in their worship services weekly (Thumma, Travis, & Bird, 2005). These religious organizations have ascended in numbers and influence in the last decade, with currently more than 1,300 megachurches in the United States alone. Their distinctive size and burgeoning growth has stoked debate about the role of the "seeker-sensitive," "distributed" church in general and the commodified, corporatized "McChurch" in particular (White & Yeats, 2009).

Pastors of megachurches have gained so much media publicity that they have been labeled as celebrities (Cooke, 2008) and holy mavericks (Lee & Sinitiere, 2009). Under these circumstances, their leadership practices are an interesting window into the ways voluntary organizations face mounting entrepreneurial pressures to market themselves and reorganize their work by authoring and disseminating content across multiple print and electronic media.

To understand the ways that pastors are discursively branded as celebrities, this essay first draws on a multidisciplinary body of recent literature in marketing, organizational communication, and new media studies to highlight the pivotal role of communication in the construction of religious authority. To comprehend further the operations of these social media pastor-preneurs, this article presents examples of multiple ways these leaders engage in strategic communication via microblogging in order to establish their authority. Here, the empirical focus

is on Twitter, one of the most popular microblogging tools, whereby users compose brief multimedia updates and send them via cross-platform mobile messaging and web-based applications like text messaging, instant messaging, and e-mail, or on the web.

As the construction of a carefully crafted and necessarily condensed version of their brand identity is not without ambivalence and paradoxes, this essay will conclude by critically examining the tensions that are operant in strategic arbitration. These tensions include the dialectical interplay between autonomy-community, confession-constrain, and differences-similarities for priests working in mediated spheres.

Given developments in the "corporate colonialization" of everyday life (Deetz, 1992), this essay has significant implications for faith organizations and other civic institutions with regard to their internal organizational setup and external promotion, particularly as the unprecedented availability of religious resources online compete for the psyche and pocketbooks of seekers and believers (Serazio, 2009). Examining the microblogging practices of prominent religious leaders offers insights into new online cross-media publishing cultures and the cocreation of faith communities, in addition to illuminating how religious authority is built and maintained. Beyond spiritual organizations, this essay also has implications for authorities in other voluntary and corporate settings, at a time when people's spiritual needs are becoming more prominent than ever (Fogel, 2000), prompting leadership to communicate via motivational storytelling of vision and a higher purpose (Driscoll & McKee, 2007) to instill a sense of spiritual calling, membership, and loyalty (Fry, 2003).

The Communicative Constitution of Religious Authority

As I have reviewed elsewhere, the relationship between the Internet and religious authority may be characterized by the logics of disjuncture and displacement, and the logics of continuity and complementarity (Cheong, 2012a). The first is rooted in the earlier emphasis on the Internet as a decentralized and free space. A dominant conceptualization is that forms of religious authority are altered by digital technologies, which are perceived to disrupt and displace traditional faith doctrines and domains, often embedded in forms of hierarchical communication. More recent research studies have sought to situate religious authority among older media and faith infrastructures. The Internet may have, to some extent, facilitated changes in the personal and organizational structures by which religious leaders operate. But accommodative and mediated

practices by some clergy may enable them to regain the legitimacy and trust necessary to operate in the religious sphere.

Specifically, I have proposed that key to understanding contemporary religious authority is the recognition of its discursive, relational, and emergent nature (Cheong, Huang & Poon, 2011b). As Bruce Lincoln (1994) notes, religious authority is actualized by the "perceived or institutionally ascribed asymmetry between speaker and audience that permits certain speakers to command not just the attention but the confidence, respect, and trust of their audience, or—an important proviso—to make audiences act as if this were so" (p. 4). In the same vein, communication scholars have argued that authority is co-created and maintained in dynamic interactions between leaders and followers that acknowledge and conversationally manifest the authority (Cheong, Huang, & Poon, 2011a; Taylor & Van Every, 2011). Accordingly, religious authority is approached as an order and quality of communication and, as such, can be analyzed as discursive exchanges embedded in everyday interactions.

In light of changing information architecture, religious authority today involves expansion of communicative competency or "strategic arbitration," which includes skills of managing and reconstructing knowledge norms from competing sources online. Digital and social media use may have, to a certain degree, facilitated changes in the personal and organizational basis by which religious leaders operate, but many priests are appropriating new patterns of interactions, including computer-mediated communication to relegitimize and construct new practices and patterns of authority. As I and my colleagues Huang and Poon (2011b) have noted:

>Despite their changing roles, many pastors are pragmatic and view communication technologies as a means to relegitimize authority. By acting as strategic arbiters of fragmented expertise, the epistemic authority of leaders is reinforced through the social production and reproduction of religious realities for their members. Moreover, while access to media resources may contract leaders' capacity to speak, they also valorize the character of authority as leaders secure their autonomy by revising their social identity to reflect more inclusive forms of authority relationships. This does not imply epistemic dilution but rather the reassertion of trust among members, and thereby epistemic standards through arbitration. Furthermore, to counter deprofessionalism, some leaders have been able to grow their media representation and influence through practices online

(e.g., sermon publication and webcast productions) that function as authority markers. In addition, because effective exercise of authority depends on clergy's management of a social division of communication relations, acquisition of new epistemic functions through strategic arbitration in social media strengthens normative regulation of power by aligning epistemic knowledge to members' understanding of religious norms. (p. 954)

Prior multi-year, multi-method research studies suggest that rather force a debate of who is an authority in an informational age, Christian pastors' and Buddhist priests' response has been to act in authority through the construction of norms of credibility in navigating online resources, blogs, or social networking sites. Leaders and laity are encouraged to enter into agreements characterized not solely by dogmatic pronouncements but also by clergy's competencies to connect interactively and encourage their members to adopt a more reflexive approach to learning (Cheong, Huang, & Poon, 2011a).

Other scholars have similarly recognized religious authority as being jointly performed by organizational leaders' and members' situated interactions in rites and rituals in material and digital spaces perceived to be sacred. Lee (2009), for instance, illustrated how Won Buddhist priests have created blogs on the South Korean social networking site Cyworld for self-cultivation, empowerment, and the development of leader-member relationships. These blogs were used to demystify the ideal image of a pure and pious priest, depict their accommodation and loyalty amid gendered organizational norms, and "indirectly deliver" sermons.

Furthermore, as we have pointed out in our anthology on *Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture*, several studies appear to highlight multiple changes in the modes of authorial performances as spiritual leaders renegotiate the authority they now seek on social media and offline networks, including new institutional practices (Cheong & Ess, 2012). Notably in our volume, Lomborg and Ess (2012) observed in their case study how the presence of a Danish church on Facebook was praised by its members in terms of the "brand value" for being "progressive," and Musa and Ibrahim (2012) called for deeper understanding of church "brandversations" and the interactions that shape the identity and perception of religious organizations as distinctive, cultural brand communities.

These studies, taken together, illustrate the importance of understanding the communicative constitution of religious authority, where authority is expressed through

discourse that not merely describes or reports but impels and establishes "precedence" or hierarchy, what Taylor (2011) calls a "performative" rather than "constative" view of communication where roles and status distinctions are contested and sustained in ongoing negotiations. Accordingly, the analytic focus shifts to the continuous process of *authoring* of persons and members of an organization, which enables organizational purpose and identity to be coherently composed. This conceptualization also implies that authority may be distributed or "spectral" in the sense that sources of authority need not be physically present in the same locale in order for authority to be established, since persuasive conversations work to enact their presence in their absence (Brummans, Hwang, & Cheong, 2013; Fairhurst & Cooren, 2009). In turn, within a mediated society, clergy have to manage new spaces of persuasion arising from multiple sources of issuances of authority online. Understanding the communicative constitution of religious authority thus prompts further research into the ways social media communication facilitates the branding of religious clergy.

Pastor.com: Branding in the Religious Marketplace

Competition and rivalry have historically existed in religious spheres or the marketplace, whose economy comprises current and potential followers (demand) and organizations (suppliers) seeking to serve it (Finke & Stark, 1988) with supernaturally based compensators generally bundled with temporal rewards (Stark & Bainbridge, 1987). The strategic management perspective to the study of religious organizations, for example, highlights the importance of optimum product offerings and target market segments to achieve competitive advantages relative to other organizations (Miller, 2002). Yet the corporate-inspired discourse of branding religious leaders for organizational growth, particularly in social media spaces, remains under-examined.

According to James Twitchell (2004), branding is at heart a communication process that involves strategic narratives. In particular, the marketing of megachurches involves a process of storytelling whereby successful churches self-consciously use commercial narrative techniques to make their ideological points and distribute their services to generate cultural capital (Twitchell, 2007).

One form of cultural capital is the social construction of leaders' very identities. Organizational communication scholars argue that an increasingly important product of

organizing is a particular self. Organizational discourses work to create, regulate, and control identities through communicative practices, including defining the person directly, providing a vocabulary of motives, explicating moral values, and articulating group categorization and affiliation (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). The process of "making" these selves occurs through everyday, face-to-face, and mediated organizational cultural practices. The sharing of organizational stories, the celebrating of heroes and heroines, the performance of rituals, and the production and consumption of organizational symbols all work in concert to articulate a preferred organizational self (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005), a "personal brand" (Lair, Sullivan, & Cheney, 2005). This is true for corporations and, increasingly, for the leaders of religious organizations.

Strikingly, strong, and persuasive discourse that is religiously tinted has recently surfaced to endorse the adoption of interactive social media for church marketing and the advancement of its outreach and missions, as evinced in expressively titled publications like *The Reason Your Church Must Twitter*, *The Blogging Church*, *and The Wired Church 2.0.* In particular, much attention is cast on Christian pastors to use social media to enact and extend their authority, which brings about attendant responsibilities to perform a crafted and condensed version of themselves online.

According to the prominent faith and nonprofit organization consultant Phil Cooke (2008), religious branding involves the expression of multiple "tenets of brand faith" including the creation story of the church, its creed, icons, rituals with the usage of sacred words via multiple media forms (pp. 71–81). Specifically, key to successful (read large and growing) ministries is the "personal branding" of the pastor for prominent media outreach. He writes, "In many cases, we choose to focus our branding on the pastor or ministry leader, not just the church or ministry itself. . . . Especially when it comes to preaching and teaching ministries, in most cases we've discovered that people tune in to hear that pastor's teaching; so in branding a national media ministry, we usually focus on the personality that leads that ministry. There's no question that we live in a culture of Christian celebrity" (p. 92).

It is pertinent to note in the above extract how ministry success is directly attributed to the pastor, or more specifically to the pastor's projected "personality" in a mediated culture of the "Christian celebrity." The construction of the branded pastor-preneur is perceived to be essential for the development of "fundraising, partnership or resource relationships," given the

public pressures that are deemed to place considerable demands on the spiritual head who must, in turn, maintain a charismatic and appealing persona. Cooke (2008) also stresses that, "in the media, people ultimately want a relationship with a person, not a program, a building or a ministry" (p. 95). So it follows that irrespective of product attributes, church brandversations should elicit an audience response to and promote consumer identification with a persona and lifestyle that differentiates a pastor's products from a competitor's offerings.

In this discourse, the responsibility of a contemporary religious leader is, therefore, to engage vigorously in self-branding. This form of branding is presented as the creation of a new, innovative, and memorable identity because, "in a media-driven culture, bring different is everything" (Cooke, 2008, p. 101). As Cooke states, "God gave you unique DNA, so your job is to discover how your unique gifts and talents can differentiate your ministry from everyone else's" (p. 102). In other words, successful product differentiation in the case of religious leaders is proposed to encompass a significant cross-media identity marketing campaign, showcasing "an overarching theme in their life and ministry." (p.17)

In short, the brand for religious leaders is their strategic narrative, "the story that surrounds who you are—a story that creates focus for your ministry" (Cooke, 2008, p. 19). Furthermore, prominent ministry leaders are listed as brand examples and model representatives of what it means to lead a booming, life-changing organization; for instance, "Billy Graham is the *salvation* guy. Robert Schuller is the *motivation* guy . . . James Dobson is the *family* guy . . . Joel Osteen is the *inspiration* guy" (p. 18). In this way, as explicated below, for megachurches seeking to expand their missionary charge the building of a distinctive pastor-preneur bio is positioned to be crucial for the strengthening of loyalty and devotion to the church.

Similarly, the branding of religious clergy is promoted in Anthony Coppedge's (2009) e-book *The Reason Your Church Must Twitter: Making Your Ministry Contagious*. In the chapter "Twitter for Pastors," clergy are exhorted to regularly microblog to "help people to better to relate to them as a person. . . . Simply post a Tweet and, in the process, give people a view into your life and your world."

Here, regular social media updates by pastors are encouraged to facilitate the "humanizing" of their leadership, a component which is seen to be the "missing element in the connection between church leadership and its congregants." Although Coppedge writes that the adoption of microblogging is "far from creating a pop-culture personality," a number of

recurring statements in his book, which has been endorsed by prominent megachurch pastors, advocate brand leadership as the strategic management of media, attuned to our image-conscious times. The purported effect of the microblogging, electronically savvy pastor is to build his or her authority via an enhanced public image, as "the connection people want to feel with their pastor and pastoral staff cannot be overstated."

For example, lunch invitation tweets to staff by a senior pastor are recommended to "reinforce *the public perception* that [a pastor] *really does pour* into the team of leaders at the church" (emphasis added). Hence, microblogging works to help clergy achieve a preferred organizational self whereby they communicate their identities to fit prevailing laity and market expectations and demands. As such, as we shall see below, clergy branding entails continuous updates and self-monitoring, even adherence to a strict regime of authoring updates and posts of multimedia materials, accomplished on Twitter by deadlines indicated by a planned "content calendar"; a tool recommended on churchmarketingsucks.com.

In sum, organization communication research and church media marketing discourse has recently focused on occupational self-branding, accomplished in part via strategic narratives on social media. For faith brands involving the creation and performance of leaders' identity, this raises the question of how these clergy perform their authority on Twitter.

@godvertiser: Microblogging Clergy Practices

Research for this essay is drawn from an examination of branding practices on Twitter by looking at the profiles of top twittering clergy, and an analysis of tweets from clergy of the largest megachurches in the United States.[1] In what follows, I will discuss how microblogging clergy practices encompass at least five of the following forms of communication as strategic arbitration by pastors to shape informational and interpersonal outcomes such that they sustain personal legitimacy and/or organizational practices and hierarchy.

The first practice concerns the naming of Twitter accounts and the creation of personal bios. When opening a Twitter account, all users are asked to pick a handle username and accompanying URL (http://twitter.com/*username*) as well as compose a bio (a short personal descriptor of 160 characters or fewer to define who they are on Twitter). Among the twittering clergy from the top fifty megachurches, their handles and bios appear to reinforce their brand identity across media, and/or to rouse interest as part of creating a memorable identity.

For instance, several of these accounts have usernames that are a shorthand for the actual names of their creators, who are prominent authors, broadcasters, speakers, and performers like @MarcosWitt (the four-time Latin Grammy award–winning Christian singer and pastor), @MarkBatterson (author of multiple books and well-known blogger), and @robertfurrow (Christian television and radio host). It demonstrates how these pastors are acutely cognizant of multimedia platforms to build distinctive brands, which in turn strengthens their reputation and authority by allowing them to tell a consistent story. In this way, microblogging handles serve to raise the profile of these pastors and consolidate their brand identity.

Another popular form of Twitter handle for top clergy are portmanteaus, which are catchy words formed from combining two (or more) words (typically combining sounds and meanings) into one new word. These neologisms include @godvertiser (a handle for Kenny Jahng, the media and innovation pastor of Liquid Church, which combines the words "God" and "advertiser") and @Leadershipfreak (the username for pastor Dan Rockwell, a linguistic play on the term "Jesus freak"), which serve as attention-grabbing, unusual hooks to contribute to the creation of a unique identity.

Moreover, an examination of the Twitter bios accompanying the handles reveals how many of these are constituted to be deliberately engaging, thought provoking, and memorable. Table 1 illustrates some of these arresting bios (emphasis added). It is interesting to note how some of these condensed descriptors are composed to seem amusing or facetious, even to the point of self-deprecation.

In many of these leadership bios, clergy label themselves as persons of no importance, influence, or power (e.g., a "nobody," "pilgrim," "Sinner," and "gardener") and/or playing ordinary relational roles like "loving husband," "Father of 5," and "happily married." Several of these bios also include peculiar and whimsical information, like "I dont wear socks," "Massive Consumer of Breakfast Cereal," and even include information of a belittling nature ("UBER-HORRIBLE GOLFER"). Given the national, even international renown of some of these pastors, it is not difficult to note the irony of these abbreviated self-descriptors, which try to portray them as the proverbial "little guy." In fact, humor is achieved by way of contrast, as most of these bios do not contain the traditional occupational titles of "preacher," "senior pastor," or "spiritual director." In this sense, a connection to the ordinary helps to "humanize" these leading

authorities and render them more accessible and appealing online, despite their large, often impersonal, globetrotting, multimedia ministry.

Table 4.1: Exemplars of pastor Twitter usernames and bios

Username	Clergy	Bio
@RickWarren	Rick Warren	*I dont wear socks.* I mentor young leaders & lead the PEACE Plan serving the poor&sick globally. I love Saddleback, serve pastors & write DAILY HOPE. *I like you.*
@PastorMark	Mark Driscoll	*A nobody trying to tell everybody about Somebody.*
@ScottWilliams	Scott Williams	Husband, Father, Pastor, Speaker, Author, CEO of @_NxtLevel. *Al Gore invented the internet & I invented the #FistBump on Twitter!* || #OKC
@Leadershipfreak	Dan Rockwell	*My dream is when people see me they think that guy made my life better.* Blogger, *learner*, MBA, *happily married.*
@aheartforgod	Mike	*A pilgrim journeying to the Celestial City. Won't you join me?* Pastor Mike is making the most of web technologies to encourage disciples. (Matt 28:19)
@kurtwvs	Kurt von Schleicher	Speaker | Vertical Motivator | Connector | *Been called an UBER-HORRIBLE GOLFER, a 1 on 1 people-fishin-coach of sorts, HEY U!* www.gplus.to/BeReal
@churckbalsamo	Chuck Balsamo	DAILY blogger, *runner, gardener*, loving husband, father, *friend, encourager*, innovative pastor, conference speaker, & best selling author TO BE!
@scottythom	Scott Thomas	Pastor of Ministry Development, The Journey Church. Founder of Gospel Coach. Husband. Father. Friend. Author. Teacher. *Disciple. Redeemed Sinner.*
@chaseathompson	Chase A. Thompson	Husband, Father of 5, Pastor, Adjunct Professor, Broadcaster, *Massive Consumer of Breakfast Cereal.* Check out our show Faith Today below or visit us at Agape!

In a related manner, another way that clergy are branded on Twitter is through strategic promotions, whereby microblogging is used to help advertise or inadvertently disclose specifics about their products and face-to-face appearances. Consider for example the following tweets:

Keith Butler (@KeithaButler) on 3 Jun 2010 at 4:10 PM: Start your day w/Fresh Water Daily Devotional. Prepare to reign as a champion EVERYDAY w/the Word. Order you copy NOW!

Jud Wilhite (@JudWilhite) on 5 Jun 2010 at 9:04 AM: Central's [church] new iPhone, iPod touch & iPad app is available for download at the iTunes App Store! Experience services, videos, music & more.

Greg Laurie (@greglaurie) on 1 Jun 2010 at 10:17 AM: New blog post: Do not be afraid! http://bit.ly/bb0kzr

Joel Osteen (@JoelOsteen) on 15 Jul 2010 at 1:21 PM: Are there things in your heart that you're not pursuing because you're afraid? Read Joel's blog, Now is the Time: http://ow.ly/2c4C4

Craig Groeschel (@craiggroeschel) on 23 Aug 2010 at 5:23 PM: Just found out Walmart picked up my book "The Christian Atheist" (in 868 stores). Praying it impacts many people!

Creflo Dollar (@Creflo_Dollar) on 20 Aug 2010 at 10:36 AM: #Free Friday! WIN a copy of the NEW book! Post Your #IMWinning testimony. 5 will be RT'ed & post on Creflo's FB fan page. 1 winner an HR!

Clergy tweets serve cross-marketing purposes when microblogging is used to publicize their latest products, including books, newsletters, blogs, and other media. In the same way, tweets are also published to promote related book tours, television appearances, and radio interviews, as evident in the following:

Kerry Shook (@KerryShook) on 23 Aug 2010 at 7:14 PM: Tonight on NBC local 2 news Chris and I talk about Woodlands Church leadings National Facebook Fast on Aug 25

Kerry Shook (@KerryShook) on 19 Aug 2010 at 8:01 PM: Just informed LOVE AT LAST SIGHT is #3 USA Today and Wallstreet Journal bestseller list nonfiction.

Creflo Dollar (@Creflo_Dollar) on 27 Sept 2010 at 12:30 PM: Come join us 4 the New York Book Signing Event for Creflo's new book Winning in Troubled Times this Thursday! 9/30 7pm

Publicity for the clergy brand is further amplified through the visible practice of mentioning or tagging, where highly followed clergy reference the tweets and products of other prominent clergy. This practice maintains the power differential between priest and laity, and it further establishes clergy authority by publicly demonstrating their relationship with, endorsement of, and inspired affiliation to other clergy celebrities, for instance:

Jonathan Falwell (@jonathanfalwell) on 7 Jun 2010 at 10:17 PM: Working my way through "Surprised by Grace" by @PastorTullian and finding it a great read!

Ronnie Floyd (@ronniefloyd) on 10 Jul 2010 at 12:26 PM: All Pastors and Church leaders: read "Transformational Church" by Thom Rainer & Ed Stetzer, I just finished it & it is a super read

Jud Wilhite (@JudWilhite) on 12 Jul 2010 at 12:35 PM: Just sent an endorsement for @kayWarren1 upcoming release "Say Yes to God." Very. Powerful. Love her heart and passion!

Craig Groeschel (@craiggroeschel) on 29 Sept 2010 at 6:41 AM: Congrats to @AndyStanley on his new book, "The Grace of God!" Life changing book! http://tinyurl.com/2ed15fr

In a related vein, pastors who spend time with other highly followed pastors, famous business leaders, and sports stars also mention it in their tweets, including posting personal pictures and videos of the event. For example:

Chris Hodges (@Chris_Hodges) on 3 Jun 2010 at 7:23 AM: At a roundtable at the Chick-fil-a headquarters in Atlanta. Ed Bastian, Pres. of Delta speaking. http://tweetphoto.com/25248862

Jack Graham (@jackngraham) on 12 Jul 2010 at 7:38 PM: Watching Homerun Derby and remembering Josh Hamiltons awesome display of power at Yankee stadium 08 and the way Josh honored Jesus.

Jack Graham (@jackngraham) on 25 Sept 2010 at 1:16 PM: Been a great week with a highlight being hearing and interviewing NFL Hall of Famer Jim Kelly & wife Jill re their faith at PowerLunch

Besides copresence in physical networks, the practice of name-dropping may also work for other pseudo, imaginary, or inspirational affiliations, as in this tweet by pastor Andy Stanley: "Steve Jobs [CEO of Apple] forgot to announce the launch of my June Leadership Podcast! I guess he ran out of time." In this way, tweets serve to facilitate a celebrification of these clergy, akin to the interest and attention paid to celebrities in other occupational profiles.

Third, microblogging is performed to encourage "tweetups" and religious services in church or church-affiliated events. Tweets help to promote interactions in physical sacred spaces of ceremonies (e.g., sermons, workshops, regular study group meetings) that amplify social roles in order to legitimize the epistemic status of clergy. These include:

James MacDonald (@jamesmacdonald) on 4 Jun 2010 at 7:18 AM: Final sermon prep for Revelation 17. Read it before you come to Harvest [Church] this weekend.

Chris Hodges (@Chris_Hodges) on 4 Jun 2010 at 7:04 PM: Message for Sunday finished. Excited about the new #OnePrayer series and the launch of our summer small groups.

Ron Carpenter (@roncarpenter) on 5 Jun 2010 at 9:16 AM: Got something for you tomorrow..... I can't wait to preach this one! If you [are]ready for some WORD, give me a holla!

Ronnie Floyd (@ronniefloyd) on 5 Jun 2010 at 9:41 AM: Looking forward to preaching Sunday from Galatians 5, hope you are with us.

Charles Blake (@BishopCEBlake) on 30 May 2010 at 9:18 AM: We are live! Don't Miss the Dynamic Praise & Worship of West Angeles Church! Login & FELLOWSHIP LIVE!!

Tommy Barnett (@tommybarnett) on 11 Jul 2010 at 4:14 PM: I am hoping to see you tonight @phoenixfirst when @lwbarrnett gives a powerful dramatic sermon called MADE ALIVE @7pm

Here, strategic narratives that weave online and offline religious practices counter a sense of deterritorialization by offering a display of clergy's authoritative performances online. Trust in the epistemic authority of church leaders, in turn, is reinforced through the social production and reproduction of religious realities for their members. This creates a sense of epistemic coherence among seekers and followers in highly mediated societies.

Fourth, microblogging allows pastors to perform their authority visibly by strategically reporting "backstage" (Goffman, 1959) and more intimate aspects of their daily work and family life to support the creation of their branded identity. Clergy tweets, for instance, may be crafted to mention or emphasize the spirited, compassionate, and arduous nature of their ministry. These communiqués serve not to only describe and inform but also to impel and perform religious authority. Clergy describe their daily governance and range of leadership activities, within organizational practices to promote social solidarity and recognition of the hectic and challenging dimensions of their work. This practice may be observed, for example, through the following tweets from Jud Wilhite (@JudWilhite; emphasis added):

On 22 Aug 2010 at 3:41 PM: *Talked to hundreds this wkend.* So many stories of God's grace. 1 word most defines the heart of Central [church] people--gratitude to God & church.

On 1 Jun 2010 at 12:02 AM: Bedside bk "Lessons from San Quentin" by friend Bill Dallas Grt stuff! *Need a clone to get everything done tomorrow.*

On 27 Sept 2010 at 11:33 AM: *Long great weekend + late night* with @theideacamp speakers = @Lori_Wilhite [wife] bringing me coffee in bed at 9:30 to gently wake me up!

On 23 Aug 2010 at 11:09 AM: It's been a while since I had the *weekend hangover after speaking 5 times. Feels strangely good to be wiped out from ministry!*

Here, regular updates of physical and emotional demands of ministry work, including international and cross-country travels for missionary trips, late-night hospital visitations, and frequent sermon deliveries to multiple groups, help portray the pastor as a devoted spiritual leader, compatible perhaps in many aspects to a preferred religious organizational self. Consider another example, of how the following tweet by pastor Jack Schaap is both informative of his overseas mission and performative as it establishes his leadership role in both equipping and teaching the church: "Took 150 'God pods' with me to Ghana. Terrific device: 160 hours of Bible teaching on a solar-powered, waterproof iPod. For use in villages."

Moreover, clergy who post their prayers and intercessions as a form of public communication, as opposed to a more private and personal petition to God, use microblogging to provide another glimpse to their everyday organizing and persona. Examples include tweets like "praying for your family," "Thanks for covering for me. Praying for you," "I will be praying for a mighty move of God's peace in your life!" "So sorry for ur loss. U r in our prayers. Thinking of u in this season." Tweeting prayers like the ones below also reveal clergy attempts to model a prayerful lifestyle in response to personal struggles, as seen in the following examples:

Eddie L. Long (@BishopEddieLong) on 1 Jun 2010 at 11:07 PM: Dear God, you instill in all your children to forgive. But the pain is in trying to forget. Please heal my memory! Thanks in advance!

Ronnie Floyd (@ronniefloyd) on 15 Jul 2010 at 7:25 PM: Praying.. RT@MattChandler74: There'll b a day when there is no cancer, hurt, fear or death...until then we have 1 place of refuge & hope...

Here, the articulation of their prayers and praises, and intercession on behalf of their church members and followers, affirms their authority, as it situates their guidance and management response in relation to favorable or unfavorable circumstances.

Lastly, clergy appropriate microblogging for pedagogical purposes, to directly instruct or indirectly impart a lesson, oftentimes quoting famous past Christian thinkers (e.g., Martin Luther and C. S. Lewis) and scripture to increase the legitimacy of their epistemic authority. For example, Rick Warren (@RickWarren) frequently tweets what might be construed as mini-sermons or brief spiritual lessons by accompanying a precept with a Bible reference:

On 5 Jun 2010 at 4:38 PM: God WORKS when u WAIT. "The vision awaits its appointed time.If it SEEMS slow, WAIT for it! It will SURELY come" Hab 2:3

On 12 Jul 2010 at 8:14 PM: "What I tell you in the dark, tell others when light comes" Mt10:27 If U are in darkness now -LISTEN for God's whisper!

On 11 Jul 2010 at 9:54 PM: Integrity is like virginity.Once you give it up it's gone for good."The dishonest are ruined by their own duplicity"Pr11:3

As observed above, using all caps for emphasis to capture the audience's attention helps clergy to communicate religious knowledge claims and impose their point of view. In addition, clergy may also engage in individual instruction by using scripture to inspire or boost their teaching, which helps reproduce a communicative framework that facilitates andstrengthens, expectations of authorization. Legitimation is achieved through the alignment with scriptural

authority, often drawing on clergy's skills to apply scripture to new circumstances and to reinforce traditions. Using the DM (direct message) function, clergy can also send messages in the form of prayers and Bible verses to their individual followers to affirm and encourage them.

Furthermore, tweets help clergy to build a notable brand identity by allowing them to preach indirectly. For example, many post rhetorical questions, startling statistics or facts, and catchy, open-ended statements:

Keith A. Butler (@KeithaButler) on 3 Jun 2010 at 3:00 PM: Examine yourself. Are you obeying God w/your body, finances, relationships? Do you pray for your enemies? Your children?

Rick Warren (@RickWarren) on 4 Jun 2010 at 4:26 PM: SERVANT LEADERS constantly ask:How do my actions&words hinder or frustrate those working with me? What's it like for them?

Ed Young (@EdYoung) on 16 Aug 2010 at 8:39 AM: Life is a sum total of our yeses and no's. What are you saying yes and no to?

Equally significant is how some of these confrontational and provocative tweets serve as "faith memes" (Cheong, 2012b), or replications that spread and enlarge informational networks. By eliciting followers' retweets with a viral-like dissemination across social media platforms, these tweets help clergy gain an even larger following. Such tweets, which appear to be broad and less dogmatic, may help evoke a more reflexive response, in recognition of the need to appeal to followers who may no longer easily submit to ministers as experts with epistemic warrant. Thus, to be of epistemic value, some tweets are phrased as questions with no fixed answer, to increase the probability of their acceptance. This, in turn, enables microblogging clergy to maintain a productive authority role by expanding the scope of their expertise to serve as guides and hosts on the proverbial spiritual journey.

Conclusion

The ascendency of digital and social media has profound implications for processes of power, reconfiguring institutional structures and relationships between leaders and members. Communication scholars have, for some time, been discussing the effects of new authorial influence and branding dynamics in corporate enterprises, yet the debate deserves wider consideration in voluntary and religious settings as well.

This essay discussed how religious authority is discursively constructed, illustrating this performative communication approach with microblogging practices by clergy of megachurches. An examination of pastor tweets revealed at least five methods of strategic arbitration whereby social media is appropriated to gain a following and reinforce a distinctive and memorable brand identity. It is observed that tweets work in concert with the larger communication and digital media landscape to sustain pastoral legitimacy and organizational hierarchy. Within a culture of celebrification, clergy tweeting help in the continuous authoring of clergy authority, to articulate a preferred self and personal brand.

Yet the construction of a carefully crafted and necessarily condensed version of their brand identity is not without ambivalence and tensions. Potential dialectics operant in the strategic arbitration of microblogging clergy include confession-constraint, differences-similarities, and privilege-disadvantage. Specifically, recognition of the dialectical interplay of confession-constraint highlights the tension of how much clergy can and should be sharing on social media. On the one hand, clergy branding involves frequent updates and a dynamic public sharing of their activities, whereabouts, even personal petitions and prayers. On the other hand, the accomplishment of their authority through the creation of a preferred organizational self necessitates reflective responses that may take time to post and carefully edit (or even censor).

Moreover, it is arguable that scripture dictates that some acts of piety and generosity should be kept private, to glorify God and not to elicit attention to self or public commendation. Matthew 6:1–4 (NIV) reads:

> Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.

But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

The above scriptural excerpt employs hyperbole to highlight how secretive charitable giving should be (i.e., in giving we should not even let our left hand know what our right hand is doing) and seems to suggest that clergy should eschew public parade or expression for social approval. Yet it is interesting to note the differing ways to which some clergy tweet about their actions, engage in self-promotions, and broadcast their good deeds (though it is difficult to ascertain from their tweets alone the extent to which their public declarations are an accurate reflection of their works). Consider these two tweets by Rick Warren (@RickWarren), which reflect this dialectic:

On 21 Aug 2010 at 2:24 PM: Caution for tweeters&bloggers:"You will give an account on judgment day of every careless word you've spoken"-Jesus Mt12:36

On 27 Sept 2010 at 9:50 PM: Al, we did! Kay [wife] & I personally paid to print 500,000 MILITARY edition of Purpose Driven Life [clergy's book] to give to our troops overseas

Thus, contrary to the marketing discourse that advises pastors to "simply post a Tweet," it may be tricky for clergy to discern the appropriateness of their confession, and public shout-outs, in light of scripture-inspired injunctions, to maintain a humble profile, even secretive service. Therefore, both the confession and constraint aspects of clergy branding emphasize the need for clergy to strategically arbitrate online and offline texts amid competing needs for disclosure and privacy, as they decide if, when, and how to tweet about themselves and their work.

Moreover, although marketing discourse advocates the creation of a unique brand, clergy identity is characterized by both similarities and differences, in that religious leaders are simultaneously similar to and different from one another and their followers. Recognition of the differences-similarities dialectic highlights that it is challenging for clergy to emphasize only their differences and distinctions while trying to appear accessible and relate to everyday human experiences and struggles. Indeed, for some clergy, interspersed among tweets about their work are quotidian updates on their spouses and children that appear to "humanize" them. In addition,

marketing discourse advocates the use of microblogging to communicate a unique persona, but it is ironic how by following the prescriptions of this literature clergy social media use may result in similar content—for example, in the manner of how many of them use tweets to elicit retweets, and to pose open-ended statements and provocative questions.

Finally, recognition of the privilege-disadvantage dialectic points to how microblogging clergy may be simultaneously privileged and disadvantaged because of their age, race, gender, and other identities that influence the construction of their authority. It is notable that many of the top twittering clergy in the United States tend to be male, white, educated, and middle class. The intersection of their privileged identities allows them, in turn, to compose brands that are aligned with elite or aspirational lifestyles including globetrotting adventures and hobbies that include golfing, live football game attendance, and family vacations). Future research should consider this dialectic in greater detail, to enhance critical understanding about for whom, and under what conditions, clergy authority is performed on social media, as well as to broaden the examination of the discursive construction of religious authority from the viewpoint of spiritual followers and the extent to which they recognize and respond to microblogging clergy practices.

Note

1. To determine which pastors Twitter feeds would be utilized for analysis, the Hartford Institute for Religion Research was consulted (see http://hirr.hartsem.edu/). This site contains a list of the largest churches (megachurches) in the United States based on average worship attendance. The pastors of the top fifty churches were selected, and of these pastors, twenty-six maintained Twitter accounts. Each pastor's Twitter profiles were publicly accessible and tweets were retrieved systematically from June through September 2010. To provide a diverse sample of tweets, the following rotation was used to select tweets for analysis. For June, tweets from the first week (June 1–7, 2010) were selected; for July, tweets from the second week (July 8–15, 2010) were used; for August, tweets from the third week (August 16–23, 2010) were selected; and for September, tweets from the fourth week (September 23–30, 2010) were used. This provided a sample of 1,368 tweets. A thematic analysis of the tweets was then conducted using constant comparative methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Acknowledgement is made to Jimmy Sanderson for his research assistance.

References

Alvesson, M., & Willmott, H. (2002). Producing the appropriate individual: Identity regulation as organizational control. *Journal of Management Studies, 39*(5), 619–644.

Brummans, H.J.M., Hwang, J.M. & Cheong, P.H. (2013). Mindful authoring through invocation: Leaders' constitution of a spiritual organization. *Management Communication Quarterly, 27*(3), 346-372.

Cheong, P. H. (2011). Religious leaders, mediated authority, and social change. *Journal of Applied Communication Research, 39*(4), 452–454.

Cheong, P. H. (2012a). Authority. In H. A. Campbell (Ed.), *Digital religion: Understanding religious practice in new media worlds* (pp. 72–87). New York, NY: Routledge.

Cheong, P. H. (2012b). Twitter of faith: Understanding social media networking and microblogging rituals as religious practices. In P. H. Cheong, P. Fischer-Nielsen, P. S.

Gelfgren, & C. Ess (Eds.), *Digital religion, social media and culture: Perspectives, practices, futures* (pp. 191–206). New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Cheong, P. H., & Ess, C. (2012). Religion 2.0? Relational and hybridizing pathways in religion, social media and culture. In P. H. Cheong, P. Fischer-Nielsen, P., S. Gelfgren, & C. Ess (Eds.), *Digital religion, social media and culture: Perspectives, practices, futures* (pp. 1–24). New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Cheong, P. H., Huang, S. H., & Poon, J. P. H. (2011a). Cultivating online and offline pathways to enlightenment: Religious authority in wired Buddhist organizations. *Information, Communication and Society, 14*(8), 1160–1180.

Cheong, P. H., Huang, S. H., & Poon, J .P. H. (2011b). Religious communication and epistemic authority of leaders in wired faith organizations. *Journal of Communication, 61*(5), 938–958.

Cooke, P. (2008). *Branding faith: Why some churches and nonprofits impact culture and others don't.* Ventura, CA: Regal.

Coppedge, A. (2009). *The Reason Your Church Must Twitter: Making Your Ministry Contagious.* http://www.twitterforchurches.com/

Deetz, S. (1992). *Democracy in an age of corporate colonization: Developments in communication and the politics of everyday life.* Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Driscoll, C., & McKee, M. (2007). Restorying a culture of ethical and spiritual values: A role for leader storytelling. *Journal of Business Ethics, 73*(2), 205–217.

Fairhurst, G. T., & Cooren, F. (2009). Charismatic leadership and the hybrid production of presence(s). *Leadership, 5*(4), 1–22.

Finke, R., & Stark, R. (1988). Religious economies and sacred canopies: Religious mobilization in American cities, 1906. *American Sociological Review, 53*(1), 41–49.

Fogel, R. W. (2000). *The fourth great awakening and the future of egalitarianism.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Fry, L. W. (2003). Toward a theory of spiritual leadership. *The leadership quarterly*, *14*(6), 693-727.

Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age.* Cambridge, UK: Polity.

Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research.* Chicago, IL: Aldine.

Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life.* Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor.

Hjarvard, S. (2008). The mediatization of society: A theory of the media as agents of social and cultural change. *Nordicom Review, 29*(2), 105–134.

Kale, S. H. (2004). Spirituality, religion, and globalization. *Journal of Macromarketing, 24*(2), 92–107.

Lair, D. J., Sullivan K., & Cheney, G. (2005). Marketization and the recasting of the professional self: The rhetoric and ethics of personal branding. *Management Communication Quarterly, 18*(3), 307–343.

Lee, J. (2009). Cultivating the self in cyberspace: The use of personal blogs among Buddhist priests. *Journal of Media and Religion, 8*(2), 97–114.

Lee, S. & Sinitiere, P.H. (2009). *Holy mavericks: evangelical innovators and the spiritual marketplace.* New York: New York University Press.Lincoln, B. (1994). *Authority: Construction and corrosion.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lomborg, S., & Ess, C. (2012). "Keeping the line open and warm": An activist Danish church and its presence on Facebook. In P. H. Cheong, P. Fischer-Nielsen, S. Gelfgren, & C. Ess (Eds.), *Digital religion, social media and culture: Perspectives, practices, futures* (pp. 169–190). New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Lovheim, M. (2011). Mediatisation of religion: A critical appraisal. *Culture and Religion, 12*(2), 153–166.

Lundby, K. (2009). Introduction: "Mediatization" as key. In K. Lundby (Ed.), *Mediatization: Concept, changes, consequences* (pp. 1–18). New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Miller, K. D. (2002). Competitive strategies of religious organizations. *Strategic Management Journal, 23*(5), 435–456.

Musa, B. A., & Ibrahim, M. A. (2012). New media, Wikifaith, and church brandversation: A media ecology perspective. In P. H. Cheong, P. Fischer-Nielsen, S. Gelfgren, & C. Ess (Eds.), *Digital religion, social media and culture: Perspectives, practices, futures* (pp. 63–80). New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Serazio, M. (2009). Geopolitical proselytizing in the marketplace for loyalties: Rethinking the global gospel of American Christian broadcasting. *Journal of Media and Religion, 8*(1), 40–54.

Stark, R., & Bainbridge, W. S. (1987). *A theory of religion.* New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Taylor, J. R. (2011). Organization as an (imbricated) configuring of transactions. *Organization Studies, 32*(9), 1–22.

Taylor, J. R., & Van Every, E. J. (2011). *The situated organization: Case studies in the pragmatics of communication research.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Thumma, S., Travis, D., & Bird, W. (2005). Megachurches today, 2005. *Hartford Institute for Religion Research*. Retrieved from http://hirr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/megastoday2005_summaryreport.html.

Tracy, S. J., & Trethewey, A. (2005). Fracturing the real-self↔fake-self dichotomy: Moving toward crystallized organizational identities. *Communication Theory, 15*(2), 168–195.

Twitchell, J. B. (2004). *Branded nation: The marketing of megachurch, college inc., and museumworld.* New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.

Twitchell, J. B. (2007). *Shopping for God: How Christianity went from in your heart to in your face.* New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

White, T., & Yeats, J. M. (2009). *Franchising McChurch: Feeding our obsession with easy Christianity.* Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook.

Wuthrow, R. (1994). *God and mammon in America.* New York, NY: Free Press.