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Religious Leaders, Mediated Authority, and Social Change

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This essay discusses the relationships between mediated religious authority and social change, in terms of clergy's social media negotiation and multimodal communication competence, with implications for attracting attention and galvanizing active networks and resources for social initiatives.

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Religious authorities have been powerful and influential in social change, as they can galvanize active networks with great éclat to solve society's ills. Although social movements are embedded in complex historical processes, significant to many civic projects is the role that clergy play on the frontlines by garnering interest and support for charitable goals among church members and their communities through doctrine and practical leadership activities. With the growing adoption of digital communication technologies, renewed interest is cast upon the changing nature of authority, including how religious leaders appropriate new media to derive, enact, and extend their authority and social influence (Cheong, Huang, & Poon, in press).

In light of digital media's affordances to amplify the reach of the pastorate with their interpretations of God's will and facilitate greater interactivity with laity, there is a need to refine our appreciation of clergy authority and its mediation, with implications for social change. Growing scholarship in religion and new media has, for example, highlighted how some leaders seek to influence others via blogging, podcasting, and hyperlinking activities. In parallel, inscribed in recent expressively titled publications such as *The Reason Your Church Must Twitter, The Blogging*

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Church, and *The Wired Church 2.0* is religiously tinted discourse that strongly encourages priests to adopt social media to advance their outreach and missions.

Understanding how and why religious leaders negotiate multimodal communication to construct their authority will enable us to connect discussions in communication competence and influence with contemporary issues such as social activism, community cohesion, and networked politics. We are witnessing the rise of mediated "pastorpreneurs" and "holy mavericks" who do not eschew media or see religion as inimical to marketplace operations (Lee & Sinitiere, 2009). Rather, they are technologically savvy adaptors to the conditions of contemporary media convergence and corporate organizational branding, which bring about their mass appeal and prowess to inspire and lead social movements. Indeed, for evangelical pastors such as Rick Warren and Bill Hybels who are at the forefront of significant initiatives to tackle global warming, poverty, and illiteracy, their authority is in part built and sustained via coverage in prominent traditional media outlets as well as their active participation in social media networks, which in turn offers them opportunities to invite collaboration, augment compliance, and legitimate their social initiatives.

Consider the highly mediated and wide-ranging connections of Rick Warren, who has millions of bestselling books in print, and who has been extensively profiled in broadcast platforms. Besides media-derived authority, the mediation of his authority is also constructed via a weekly newsletter he composes, and a Facebook page and a Twitter account that he maintains with updates to more than 200,000 followers. It is not uncommon to see him send more than 10 tweets daily, promoting the good works of his ministry, the social causes that he supports, and the civic activities of his organization. His authority is reinforced when followers recycle his messages, as in when they microblogged about his interview with President George Bush on leadership and spread a picture of his newest book, and when more than 100 of his followers retweeted a catchy, provocative phrase he sent on November 15, 2010, 23:59, which said "There are 146 million orphans in the world. Are you OK with that?" What is putatively helpful for social movements in today's mediated age is this capacity of prominent religious leaders to circulate inspiring or religiously encoded communiqués, which may be popularly attended to and virally reconstituted to generate attention to prime social campaigns. But beyond attracting attention, it is critical to examine if and how mediated authority works to counter apathy and "slacktivism" online. In tandem, considerations of active reception and negotiation of these religious signifying practices at the grassroots level help to establish new homologies between patterns of religious identification, ecclesiastical belonging, and forms of media and civic engagement.

Furthermore, in deepening the explanatory power of religion for social change, there is merit in investigating mediated religious authority, particularly the enthusiastic embrace of corporate communication by some as a panacea for the declining influence of traditional authority in the public sphere. Contrary to the predictions of secularization in modernity, the meteoric growth of "mega" churches in the last decade has attracted attention to pastors of these "high growth organizations" of which many have become arenas for collective mobilization and ambitious civic projects.

Support for these religious authorities who typically have a personal brand presence online may be strong because they are generally believed to be able to harness active resources toward a duality of concern with the "other-worldliness" of spiritual life and the "this-worldliness" of public order and business strategy. Bill Hybels who leads a 23,000 member congregation for example, is self-described as "an exceptional communicator" on his website which hosts free downloads of his articles published in religious and mainstream media, and an electronic store for his books and DVDs. Since 1995, he has led an annual "Global leadership summit" by inviting "for–profit" consultants, executives and politicians to teach and network with leaders in the voluntary sector. Further research can map the functions of mediated authority in generating direct and spillover effects beyond church walls as recombinant sacred-secular principles are applied to organize large social projects, such as the "One Community, One Day, One Purpose: Feed Haiti" project involving 5,500 volunteers who prepared 1.7 million meals in 24 hours (Chu, 2010).

Arising from these observations, further cross-pollination of research in religion and communication must necessarily attend to the pivotal and challenging roles that religious leaders play in social activism and the evolving nature of their authority, which is increasingly media-derived and media-produced. In an era of global communications, it is also productive to consider the diffusion of their religious discourse to effect social change across local and transnational communities in need.

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