



The Instagrammable Authority of Religious Leaders

Mattheus Christiaan (Theo) Zijderveld



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Colofon

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DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5463/thesis.393>

Cover design & layout: Bert van Santen

Final editing: Helen Pears

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VRIJE UNIVERSITEIT

THE INSTAGRAMMABLE AUTHORITY OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van de graad Doctor of Philosophy aan
de Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam,
op gezag van de rector magnificus
prof.dr. J.J.G. Geurts,
in het openbaar te verdedigen
ten overstaan van de promotiecommissie
van de Faculteit Religie en Theologie
op maandag 4 december 2023 om 15.45 uur
in een bijeenkomst van de universiteit,
De Boelelaan 1105

door

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geboren te Rotterdam



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Voor Willine



Table of contents

	<i>Preface</i>	11
	<i>Introduction</i>	18
1.	<i>The Authority of Religious Leaders</i>	25
	Introduction	25
	The Context of Religious Authority	25
	What Is Authority?	31
	Weber's Ideal Types of Authority	32
	Sources of Authority for Religious Leaders: Four Dimensions	35
	Religious Authority Is Mediated	38
	Religious Authority Is Performed	41
	Religious Authority Is Styled	43
	Conclusion	45
2.	<i>The Transformation of Religious Authority</i>	47
	Introduction	47
	Secularization	47
	Secularization as the Declining Scope of Religious Authority	49
	A Culture of Authenticity	50
	Secularization and the Privatization of Religion	54
	Mediatization	56
	The Personalization of Religious Authority	62
	The Celebrification of Religious Leaders	65
	The Branding of Religious leaders	67
	The Aestheticization of Religious Leaders	71



	Conclusion	74
3.	<i>Instagram</i>	76
	Introduction	76
	What Is Instagram?	76
	Instagram and Photography	78
	Celebrities, Influencers, and Brands	80
	Datafication and Surveillance	83
	Conclusion	85
4.	<i>Methodology I: Selection, Data Collection, Coding</i>	86
	Introduction	86
	Selection of the Religious Leaders	86
	Mixed Methods	91
	Data Collection and Software	94
	Categorizing and Coding	96
	1. Instagram Post Types	97
	2. The Visual Presence of the Religious Leader	98
	3. The Performance of the Religious Leader	98
	4. The Visibility of (Other) People	101
	5. Spaces and Places	101
	6. (Other) objects	103
	Conclusion	103
5.	<i>Methodology II:</i>	
	<i>Images – Semiotics, Interpretation, and Ethics</i>	104
	Introduction	104
	Semiotics	104
	Social Semiotics	112
	The Application of Second-Order Signification in the Research	114

	Interpretation and Positionality	115
	Research Ethics	117
	Conclusion	119
6.	<i>Deepak Chopra</i>	120
	Introduction	120
	Biography	120
	Holistic Spirituality and Authority	124
	Spirituality, Capitalism, and Consumerism	126
	Analysis	129
	Themes	131
	Sequence: Saudi Arabia and California	147
	Conclusion	154
7.	<i>Brian Houston</i>	157
	Introduction	157
	Biography	158
	Hillsong Church	159
	Leadership, Authority, and Transparency	162
	Analysis	164
	Themes	167
	Sequence: Hillsong Israel Tour	182
	Conclusion	190
	Epilogue	191
8.	<i>The 14th Dalai Lama</i>	193
	Introduction	193
	Biography	194
	The Historical Context of Tibet	198
	Contested Representations of Tibet	199



	The Transformation of the Authority of the Dalai Lama	203
	Analysis	205
	Themes	209
	Conclusion	228
9.	<i>Pope Francis</i>	230
	Introduction	230
	Biography	230
	Religious Authority, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Vatican	232
	The Vatican, the Pope, and the Media	235
	Analysis	240
	Themes	242
	Sequence: From Lent to Easter	257
	Conclusion	262
10.	<i>Comparison</i>	264
	Introduction	264
	Visual Signifiers	265
	The Mediation of Authority: Comparison	268
	The Dalai Lama and Pope Francis	268
	Brian Houston and Deepak Chopra	272
	Brian Houston and Pope Francis	273
	The Dalai Lama and Deepak Chopra	275
	Conclusion	277
	<i>Conclusion</i>	280
	The Future of Religious Leadership	286
	Instagram and Ethics	289

<i>Appendix A. Categories and Codes</i>	292
1. Instagram Post Genres	292
2. The Visual Presence of the Religious Leader	292
3. Performance of the Religious Leader	293
4. Other People Visible on the Post	294
5. Spaces and Places	295
6. Objects	296
 <i>Appendix B. Statistics Content Analysis</i>	 297
 <i>Appendix C. Analysis of Statistics</i>	 301
Statistics: Instagram Post Types	301
 <i>Appendix D. Visual Signifiers</i>	 304
The Visual Presence of Religious Leaders on Instagram	304
Performance	306
Clothes	311
Spaces, places, and objects	313
 <i>References</i>	 323
 <i>Summary</i>	 340
 <i>Samenvatting</i>	 349
 <i>About the Author</i>	 360



Preface

My motivation for this dissertation can be traced back to my earliest days at Utrecht University. Originally, I had planned to pursue Theology with the aspiration of becoming a pastor. However, I decided to do “something fun” first, believing it was essential to explore something else before I became a pastor who would perhaps be too detached from the ‘real world’. Consequently, I enrolled in Communication & Information Sciences (on the Open Day, they enticed me with the idea that students could also create videos instead of just writing papers). About six months in, I introduced theology courses to my academic mix, creating a rather challenging combination. I vividly remember studying Hebrew one minute and the next sitting in a movie theater, engrossed in post-apocalyptic films that explored the role of digital technology. It didn't take long for me to realize that I wanted to do something that combined theology and media.

A year of studying theology in Strasbourg provided a welcome respite after an academically demanding program. It was during this year there that I became acquainted with ‘student life’ and the parties and social life that came with it. I also met some intriguing PhD students, and the idea of pursuing a PhD started to appeal to me. When a Research Master Theology was introduced at Utrecht University, I didn't hesitate. After graduating, I spent a year in Boulder, Colorado studying at the Center for Media, Religion and Culture. It was an eye-opening experience, and I am indebted to Stewart Hoover, a remarkable professor who played a pivotal role at that time. However, because I felt deeply unhappy and homesick in the United States and could not imagine pursuing a PhD there, and I went back to the Netherlands in 2009, in the middle of the economic crisis.

The job market was exceptionally challenging, and it was a struggle to find employment. One day, my friend Reinout handed me a newspaper article (which I can't quite recall the specifics of), but on the back of that page I noticed an advertisement for a management traineeship. I decided to apply and was fortunate to be accepted.



This traineeship unexpectedly led me to a position within the federal government, for which I'm truly grateful, and it ultimately paved the way for my current job. Nevertheless, at the time, I assumed this marked the end of my academic adventure.

It wasn't until I reached the age of thirty that I seriously contemplated a return to a PhD, this time as an external candidate. But what would I choose as my topic? During my stay in Boulder I had written a paper on the game 'World of Warcraft' and religion and another one on online prayer, but I wanted to pursue something different. I was put on the track of my current topic during a content marketing course, when a lecturer made bold (and what I considered to be oversimplified) statements about the relationship between churches and marketing. These remarks convinced me to delve into the realm of marketing, branding, and religion. Since I myself was now conducting training sessions on personal branding, I ended up with the idea of investigating the role of social media for branding religious leaders. After several conversations with my supervisors Johan and Miranda, I finally hit upon the subject matter of this dissertation.

Along my journey to complete this thesis, a journey filled with many unexpected turns, my path was shaped by numerous experiences and encounters that led me to the research I present here. I would like to take a moment to express my heartfelt gratitude to the people who supported me along the way.

First, I would like to express my gratitude to Ruard Ganzevoort, who had the confidence to allow me to embark on the PhD program in 2015 and consistently offered valuable advice and encouragement. Johan Roeland and Miranda Klaver became my supervisors from the outset, and when Miranda was promoted to a full professor in 2021, she also took on the role of being my promotor. Without the both of you, this achievement would not have been possible. The journey to this point has been long, and during these years, I've gained a wealth of knowledge from you both. You've not only encouraged me to think critically but also to articulate ideas clearly, precisely, and without ambiguity. These skills are now invaluable to me as an educator. As we came to realize, the journey was quite the rollercoaster ride until the end.



Special thanks to the dedicated members of the reading committee—Heidi Campbell, Giulia Evolvi, Katja Rakow, Stefan Paas, and Pete Ward—for their thorough reviews.

I would also like to thank all the people at The Netherlands School for Advanced Studies in Theology and Religion (NOSTER). From 2016 to 2018, I participated monthly in the meetings of the Empirical Research in Religion group. It was incredibly fun and educational to study, comment on, and discuss the ups and downs of being a doctoral student with each other under the leadership of Marcel Barnard, Hans Alma, and later Carl Sterkens. The annual conferences at Kontakt der Kontinenten and De Horst were definitely highlights of the year. Thanks to NOSTER, doing a PhD is not just something to do on your own, in your attic.

A special thanks to Carol Simpson. You were the pastor in Strasbourg when I walked into the church with a group of students in 2005 because we were late for another service in the city center, so we just followed a man with a Bible under his arm on our way to the third floor of a school building. I had a wonderful time at the ICS in Strasbourg. I remember the warmth of this small international congregation where I felt tremendously at home. Later when I went to study in Boulder, I had the opportunity to meet you there as well. You read along with my first PhD proposal, and we were able to reconnect in Leiden as well. You are an example to me as a pastor and as a human being.

Further, I would like to thank Helen Pears for the final edit of my manuscript. Thank you for your meticulous proofreading and for enhancing the clarity of my thesis! Bert van Santen, thank you for the great layout and cover design.

Sorry, non-Dutch speaking audience! What follows is written in Dutch. Fortunately, there are great translation programs online if you want to read it.

Het schijnt dat er maar een paar mensen zijn die een manuscript voor een promotie daadwerkelijk lezen: de begeleiders, de leescommissie, en dan heb je het vaak wel gehad. Voor een traject waar ikzelf meer dan 8 jaar mee bezig ben geweest (en nog veel langer als je het hele voortraject meerekent) is dat natuurlijk niet erg veel. Het

voorwoord van een proefschrift wordt juist wel goed gelezen, en daar is een goede reden voor. Daarom richt ik me nu tot familie, vrienden, collega's en alle anderen die ik met dit hele proces vermoeid heb.

Ik vermoed dat ik de laatste vier jaar tegen veel te veel mensen heb gezegd dat ik bijna klaar was. Zoiets moet je, weet ik inmiddels, nooit doen. Je schept er valse verwachtingen mee, vooral richting jezelf. Maar ik ben rondom dit project altijd grenzeloos optimistisch geweest: ook parttime zou dit toch wel in vier, of vijf, dan wel hoogstens in zes jaar te doen moeten zijn. Dat bleek toch niet helemaal haalbaar. In die tussentijd heb ik natuurlijk wel meer gedaan dan promoveren. Toen ik begon was ik net getrouwd, woonden we in een flatje, hadden we geen kinderen, geen hypotheek, en heel veel vrije tijd. Inmiddels hebben we vier kinderen, zijn we in tussentijd verhuisd, heb ik geprobeerd om een groot bedrijf rondom Kerk & Communicatie op te zetten (wat niet helemaal gelukt is), switchte ik naar een bestaan als HBO-docent Bestuurskunde, heb ik vier jaar in de kerkenraad gezeten (toen ik begon dacht ik: ik ben toch bijna klaar met mijn onderzoek, dus dit moet vast te combineren zijn), en hebben we allemaal een interessante coronapandemie achter de rug. Achteraf moet ik zeggen dat ik geen idee had waar ik aan begon.

Tijdens het schrijfproces, en vooral toen ik dacht dat ik bijna klaar was (dat bleek nog niet helemaal zo te zijn...) heb ik heel veel gehad aan de feedback van Willem Jan, Trineke, Michael Magielse, Thomas, Jan, en Lydia. En Trineke, dank voor alle moral support!

Eliza, met jou heb ik het naast gesprekken over het leven regelmatig gehad over de wereld van yoga, spiritualiteit, spirituele leiders en branding. Het was ontzettend leuk om met een 'insider' te reflecteren op de rol van spiritualiteit en yoga, en de manier waarop leiders hier een rol in spelen.

Verder een speciaal woord van dank van Michael Magielse. Jouw Masterscriptie over Paus Franciscus was voor mij een grote bron van inspiratie. Maar het allermooist was de reis die ik met Willine en Boaz (die toen nog geen jaar was) naar Rome maakte, en waar we Paus Franciscus tijdens een *general audience* live konden zien. Dankzij jou heb ik ook allerlei nuances beter kunnen beschrijven die ik als protestant niet altijd even helder voor ogen had.



Sinds 2018 werk ik op de Haagse Hogeschool. Het werken op een hogeschool, de combinatie van onderzoek en onderwijs heeft mij heel veel geleerd over het toepassen en vertalen van kennis naar de wereld van studenten. Ook bedank ik alle collega's die me een hart onder de riem hebben gestoken toen het promotieproces niet vanzelf ging. Jullie zijn fantastische docenten en onderzoekers, die elke dag het verschil maken voor onze studenten. Het is elke dag een groot plezier om met jullie samen te werken.

Hoewel ik niet altijd even veel tijd heb, ben ik heel blij met goede vrienden, zoals Hilbert, David, Tjeerd, Eliza, Arie en Lydia, Myrtle en Reinout. Daarnaast noem ik graag onze burens Marcel, Karin, Amber en Bart, en onze overburen Ferry en Anouk! Verder heb ik een groot deel van het communicatievak geleerd van Indira en Annet, en ik ben blij leuk dat we nog steeds contact hebben. Verder is de Bijbelkring van de Jacobikerk een plek waar we lief en leed kunnen delen. En de Jacobikerk zelf is me erg dierbaar geworden en een uitstekend plek om religieus leiderschap te ervaren en er zelf vier jaar deel van te mogen uitmaken.

De mannenbroeders, Anne, Erik, Gerrit-Jan en Kees verdienen in dit dankwoord ook een grote plek. Als (ex-)gereformeerde zangers van hebben we elkaar allemaal leren kennen bij het Utrechts Studenten Koor en Orkest. De gereformeerde inborst bleek samenbindend te werken, en we kennen elkaar nu al heel lang. Jullie hebben de afgelopen jaren de perikelen van het promotieproces van nabij meegemaakt en me enorm gestimuleerd om door te gaan.

Mijn schoonfamilie, de familie Roest, verdient hier natuurlijk ook een prominente plek. Iets meer dan tien jaar geleden kwam ik, rare Randstedeling met Goois accent, in jullie leven. Ik heb me altijd ontzettend welkom gevoeld en ben blij dat ik onderdeel van de clan ben geworden. Ik laat jullie (klein)kinderen even uit het lijstje (anders wordt dit een heel lang dankwoord), maar ik noem jullie hier maar wel even om te laten zien wat voor mooie grote groep we samen vormen! Bart en Dicky, Anita en Corné, Diederik en Lydia, Evita en Leo, Riekelt en Caroline, Bertold en Lianne, Rudolf en Martijn, jullie zijn mooie mensen! We wonen dan wel in Gomorra aan de Vecht en niet in het landelijke Barneveld, maar gelukkig is dat nooit ver weg.

Mijn eigen broers en zussen, Elma, Daniel, Arjen en Suzanne, (samen vormen

we TEDAS), en natuurlijk Peter, Maartje en Judith wil ik hier ook bedanken. Jullie hebben de afgelopen jaren met het proces meegeleefd, en dat vind ik ontzettend waardevol. We hebben al meer dan dertig jaar lang en hebben vele hoogte- en dieptepunten met elkaar beleefd. Laten we als dit hele festijn weer achter de rug is snel weer een brussendag organiseren! Papa en mama, zonder jullie was ik er nooit geweest. Bedankt voor alles wat jullie voor me hebben gedaan en voor me betekenen. Jullie hebben me altijd gestimuleerd om te studeren, en ik heb goede herinneringen aan jullie bezoeken aan Straatsburg en Boulder. Ik ben dankbaar voor het geloof dat jullie aan me hebben doorgegeven. Ik ben blij dat ik dit met jullie mag meemaken.

Gerrit-Jan en Arjen, wat fijn dat jullie mijn paranimfen wilden worden. Jullie zijn allebei met zorg uitgekozen. Mocht ik zelf onderuitgaan tijdens de plechtigheid, dan heb ik het volste vertrouwen dat jullie de verdediging voortzetten.

Boaz, Yara, Abel en Isa, jullie zijn allemaal geboren tijdens het hele promotieproces. Zonder jullie was mijn proefschrift veel sneller klaar, maar mijn leven een stuk saaier. Jullie maken elke dag de moeite waard. Ik beloof jullie dat ik straks ook mentaal nog meer aanwezig zal zijn en dat we samen nog veel mooie LEGO bouwsels in elkaar gaan zetten en speeltuinen onveilig gaan maken.

Willine, jij bent de grote liefde van mijn leven. Toen ik begon met promoveren hadden we samen nog alle tijd van de wereld. In de afgelopen jaren heb je met me meegelezen, heb je me aangemoedigd, getroost, en mij verdragen als ik met mijn hoofd bij mijn proefschrift zat. Ook heb je me altijd voorgehouden dat succes of falen op het gebied van werk en wetenschap niet uitmaken voor de manier waarop je mij ziet. Daarom draag ik dit proefschrift aan jou op. Ik hou van je.

En tenslotte, Soli Deo Gloria!



*Blessed are the arrogant
For there's the kingdom of their own company
Blessed are the superstars
For the magnificence in their light
We understand better our own insignificance
Blessed are the filthy rich
For you can only truly own what you give away
Like your pain*

U2

If you gain something, you lose something.

Rob Bell



Introduction

In February 2016, Kevin Systrom, the CEO of Instagram met with Pope Francis at the Vatican. They discussed the power of images, and the importance of Instagram as a platform for visual communication. According to Systrom, Pope Francis said, “Well, my team will look at this and give me their decision. But they’re not in charge, because everyone has a boss.” He pointed at himself. He said, “Even I have a boss,” and he pointed up in the sky. A few weeks later, Systrom heard from the Vatican that they agreed that the Pope should have an Instagram account. They asked Systrom to come back to help the Pope to sign up. Systrom recounts,

We showed up, and he was finishing Mass. We had just flown in. We were bleary-eyed. He walked in, and he turned the corner, and he goes, ‘Kevin!’ It was like seeing an old friend from your basketball team or something. It was such a fun moment for me, just his humility and friendliness throughout the whole process was pretty awesome. We had an iPad, and it was all set up. The name was filled out. So, literally, all he had to do was click sign up. (Bugbee, 2019).

The first photo under the username @franciscus was posted in March 2016.

Pope Francis is certainly not the only religious leader who has decided to create an Instagram account. Religious leaders increasingly use this popular social platform to communicate with their audiences. Some of them have gathered hundreds of thousands, or even millions of followers. This is certainly the case for many religious leaders who operate on a global scale and those who have become religious celebrities. They employ sophisticated Instagram accounts, often supported by communication professionals and digital creatives (Campbell, 2020).

Digital media has penetrated into all facets of our lives (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Papacharissi, 2015). The word “instagrammable” has even reached the Cambridge English Dictionary, which describes it as “attractive or interesting enough to be



suitable for photographing and posting on the social media service Instagram” (Cambridge English Dictionary, n.d.). But to what extent has authority become instagrammable? The use of social media by religious leaders takes place in an era in which authority is no longer self-evident. According to some, religious authority is in crisis, whether or not as part of a wider movement of secularization (Chaves, 1994; Furedi, 2013). Others argue that, rather, the current situation could be described as a spiritual marketplace in which the laws of supply and demand and the culture of consumerism apply, and in which religious and spiritual leaders offer their spiritual goods (Roof, 1999; Finke & Stark, 2000). To be part of this spiritual marketplace, religious leaders must connect with their audiences and at the same time appear as authentic, charismatic people (Hope Cheong, 2016). They must present themselves as a brand, a personal brand that is appealing, recognizable, and distinctive. This presentation is largely mediated by digital communication platforms and devices. New technologies ensure that even within religious traditions, the construction of power and authority is no longer reserved for officially trained religious professionals and local interpreters of the tradition, such as priests, rabbis, and imams, but that believers themselves look for inspiring and appealing leaders. In response, leaders increasingly present and position themselves on the internet.

My interest in the mediation of authority of religious leaders has grown over the years. With a background in theology as well as in media studies, I have long been fascinated by the relationship between media, religion, and culture. This was further nourished by a stay in Boulder, Colorado at the Center for Media, Religion and Culture in 2008–2009. A course in content marketing and discussions with one of the trainers inspired me to pursue a PhD with a focus on the combination of religion, media, and branding.¹ My research started in 2015, and the search for a well-defined and interesting subject matter took a while. When I finally decided to focus on the role of Instagram for religious leaders, there were relatively few

1 A more detailed personal reflection on this research and my perspective can be found in Chapter 4.

sources on this subject matter. Moreover, there was no clear perspective on how to conduct research on the relationship between religious authority and visual posts on a social platform like Instagram. The construction of a theoretical framework and a workable methodology has been quite a journey. Fortunately, within the years of my research, a considerable number of sources have been published that have enabled me to improve the focus and the clarity of my research. A book edited by my former professor in Boulder, Stewart Hoover, entitled *The Media and Religious Authority* (2016) turned out to be particularly helpful. Though this book outlined the transformation of religious authority in a media age, it did not elaborate on how this precisely takes place in the world of audiovisual digital platforms. The study of religious authority in relationship to digital platforms has mostly focused on the discursive power of social media (Codone, 2014; Hope Cheong, 2014, 2016). As Birgit Meyer argues, the aesthetic dimension of religion has often been neglected in favor of a more institutional, doctrinal, or discursive emphasis (Meyer, 2006). The lack of a systematic study on the visual dimension of social media and its relationship with the authority of religious leaders further inspired me to explore how their perspectives and insights related to the world of Instagram. Recent literature on religious authority and digital religion (most notably Campbell & Evolvi, 2020; Hope Cheong, 2021), has served to deepen my understanding of the importance of digital media for the study of religious authority. Finally, the current subject is the result of many conversations, the reading of books and articles from both inside and outside the academic realm, and the realization that aesthetics are of primary importance for the construction of religious authority.

During the years of my research, Instagram as a platform has evolved. My empirical data consists of Instagram photos that were selected between November 2016 and October 2017. Though Instagram posts and photos are still a part of this platform, the importance of videos and Instagram stories has grown considerably. The platform itself is thus different in 2022 as compared to the time when I conducted my research. However, I believe that the results are still valuable within the larger context of the transformation of religious authority in a media age, especially from an aesthetic and visual point of view.



The empirical study of the online practices of religious leaders serves to add a new perspective on theories about the transformation of religious authority in a media age. Moreover, the analysis of multiple case studies can serve to refine those theories and apply them to the realm of visual social media platforms. The presence of religious leaders on this platform exemplifies the growing importance of visuals and aesthetics in digital religious communication. The comparison between leaders with different religious and spiritual backgrounds, who operate on a global scale, enables cross-cultural and cross-religious analysis. This research engages with contemporary academic debates about the transformation of religious authority, most notably within the context of mediatization and secularization. It specifically focuses on the role of aesthetics in relation to the mediation of religious authority. Moreover, in this research I investigate the way in which religion, authority, branding, lifestyle, and authenticity are related. Finally, the methodology offers new perspectives to the question how empirical research on digital platforms within the realm of media studies and religious studies can be conducted.

Besides the contribution to academic debates, this thesis also addresses the question of how religious leaders deal with the challenges and opportunities of digital devices and social platforms. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the speed at which religious communities have embraced these platforms to mediate religious practices when physical gatherings were not possible. At the same time, the dark sides of digital platforms, in terms of the power of large media conglomerates, social media addiction, the commercialization and surveillance on these platforms, polarization, and disinformation, raise questions about the position of digital technologies and how these technologies relate to the ethical values of religious traditions (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Schofield Clark, 2016; Zuboff, 2019).

The context of the transformation of religious authority in a media age and my focus on Instagram as a platform where authority can be constructed has led to the following research question:

How do globally operating religious leaders use Instagram to mediate their authority?

To answer this question, I investigate four religious leaders: Deepak Chopra, Brian Houston, the 14th Dalai Lama, and Pope Francis. They will be introduced more fully in the following chapters.

This question already implies that this thesis is only concerned with globally recognized religious leaders, leaders who, in some way, have become media celebrities. How do they use Instagram to mediate their authority? Further, I imply that authority is related to mediated communication. On a more fundamental level, my own work is informed by social-constructionist perspectives that assume that social reality is always a mediated construction (Couldry & Hepp, 2017).² We experience social reality through all kinds of media. Especially in the age of digital platforms, media are “much more than specific channels of centralized content, they comprise platforms which, for many humans, literally are the spaces where, through communication, they *enact* the social” (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 2). Instagram is, as I point out in Chapter 3, much more than just a communication channel, it is a platform with specific affordances that is part of popular media culture. Instagram is a space where social interaction and communication take place. In this thesis, I show how the platform Instagram and the Instagram posts of religious leaders can be used to mediate their authority.

To answer the research question, I formulated the following sub-questions, which will be covered in the nine chapters of this study.

1. What are the characteristics of the authority of religious leaders?
2. How has the authority of religious leaders been transformed within the context of a changing religious landscape and the digitalization of communication?
3. What are the most important affordances of Instagram?
4. How can we analyze the Instagram posts of religious leaders?
5. How do four distinct religious leaders use Instagram to mediate their authority?

2 This further aligns with Birgit Meyer’s conception of religion as practices of mediation (Meyer, 2020), an argument that I elaborate in Chapter 1.



6. What are the most important similarities and differences between the ways the four leaders mediate their authority through Instagram?

In the first chapter, “The Authority of Religious Leaders”, I address the first sub-question: How can we characterize the authority of religious leaders? In this chapter, I conceptualize authority, using the typology of Max Weber (Weber, 1946), as well as more recent literature on the authority of religious leaders (Carroll, 2011). Moreover, I argue that the authority of religious leaders is mediated, performed, and styled. In Chapter 2, “The Transformation of Religious Authority”, I address the second sub-question by presenting the debates that have centered around the processes of secularization and mediatization. I argue that nowadays, religious leaders must construct their authority within a context that can be compared to a marketplace (Roof, 1999). The context of consumer culture translates, among other things, into the practices of personalization, branding, and celebrification. In Chapter 3, “Instagram”, I answer sub-question three: “What are the most important affordances of Instagram?” In this chapter, I sketch the history of the platform Instagram, as well as the socio-technological affordances of the platform and its relationship with photography and contemporary popular culture (Frier, 2020; Serafinelli, 2018). I discuss how this platform is being used by media celebrities, institutions, and political leaders. In Chapters 4 and 5, the two methodological chapters, I answer the fourth sub-question: How can we analyze the Instagram posts of religious leaders? In these chapters, I explain the process of finding and constructing a methodology for analyzing the mediation of authority on Instagram. Further, I discuss the selection of four religious leaders for the case studies in this thesis. Moreover, I show how I employ content analysis and a semiotic analysis in order to deconstruct the myths and mediations of authority (Barthes, 1957; Leeuwen, 2005; Rose, 2016). Special attention will be paid to the use of software and the ethical and legal implications of conducting research on Instagram. In Chapters 6 to 9, I answer the question how each selected leader uses Instagram to mediate their authority. In Chapter 6, I analyze and discuss how Deepak Chopra uses Instagram within the context of the complicated relationship between holistic spirituality and authority, and the uneasy combination

of spirituality and consumerism. Chapter 7 presents the analysis of Brian Houston's Instagram use. Brian Houston is co-founder and former global pastor of Hillsong Church. In this, I discuss the performance of authenticity and its relationship with the culture and values of Pentecostalism and evangelicalism. Chapter 8 is devoted to the 14th Dalai Lama in which I describe the development of the Dalai Lama from the supreme leader of a relatively remote and secluded country to a globally popular Buddhist leader. I explore the context of the myths of "Eastern Spirituality" in more depth, as well as the political dimensions around the Tibetan population and the role of China. Chapter 9, "Pope Francis", describes the Instagram use of the Pope, the importance of his personal approach, his popularity, and its relationship with the Roman Catholic Church, which is riven by scandals and conflicts. In Chapter 10, "Comparison", I answer sub-question six: "What are the most important similarities and differences between the ways the four leaders mediate their authority through Instagram?" In this chapter, findings of the empirical chapters will be compared and discussed. What differences and similarities can be found in the mediation of authority, and how can they be explained and related to the theory? In the conclusion, I answer the research question, "How do globally recognized religious leaders use Instagram to mediate their authority?" Finally, I explore how these findings engage with debates around the visibility of religion, the position of religious leaders, and the future of mediatized religious leadership. The mediation of authority on Instagram exemplifies how the legitimization of religious leadership has radically transformed, as I demonstrate in the upcoming chapters.

The Appendices can be found at the end of this thesis. They contain (A) the code book, part of the content analysis, (B) the statistics of the content analysis, (C) additional statistics in which the dataset and the samples will be compared, and (D) an extensive analysis of visual signifiers in the Instagram posts of the four leaders.



1.

The Authority of Religious Leaders

Introduction

What constitutes the authority of religious leaders? That is the question that I address in the upcoming two chapters. These two chapters are the theoretical framework of this book. In this chapter, I discuss the most important characteristics of the authority of religious leadership. This includes the classic typology of Max Weber, as well as the distinction between personal and official authority. Further, I argue that religious authority is mediated, performed, and styled. These characteristics will be used in the analysis of religious leaders on Instagram, in which the personal performance and aesthetic forms are directly related to the affordances of this platform. In the second chapter, I situate the position of religious leaders within the context of contemporary discussions on the transformation of religious authority in a media age.

The Context of Religious Authority

In the upcoming sections, I make some preliminary remarks about the context of this study within the field of religious authority, media, and the study of digital religion. This includes the discussion of recent publications, as well as the setting of a clear focus of this study. The focus on the construction of authority of religious leaders on Instagram means that theories about religious authority, media, and digital technologies are centered around personalization, the affordances, and the visual and aesthetic character of Instagram. I discuss the contextual character of religious authority, the importance of the typology of Weber, and the positioning of this study within the field of media, religion, and culture.

The authority of religious leader is always contextual. It depends on the religious, social, and cultural context in which it is exercised. It is related to the way in which leaders construct personal authority, the way they are related to traditions and

institutions, the formation and validation of their expertise, and their representation of the sacred (Carroll, 2011). Moreover, the performance of authority by religious leaders is strongly related to material and aesthetic dimensions. The so-called “sensational forms” (Meyer 2006, 2010; De Witte et al., 2015) are related to what kinds of forms align with the cultural and religious traditions. In Western Christianity, this is visible in the difference in the approach to aesthetics and its relationship with the authority of protestant pastors and Roman Catholic priests. Moreover, several studies have addressed the cultural and religious context of religious authority in different cultural and religious backgrounds (De Witte et al., 2015; Meyer & Moors, 2006).

However, the emergence of a global media sphere and the global adoption of digital platforms has led religious institutions and religious leaders to adopt their performance to the visual consumer culture that has its origins for a large part in Western media institutions (Hoover, 2016; Zaid et al., 2022). The media sphere and the process of mediatization has led to the de-contextualization of traditional and local practices and a re-contextualization within a global context that is primarily shaped by corporations in the United States. This is also the case for the way in which religious leaders that draw upon “Eastern” religion and spirituality construct their authority in “Western” contexts. Carrette & King (2005), Colin Campbell (2007), Banet-Weiser (2012), and others, have demonstrated how “Eastern” religion has been incorporated within the framework of orientalism, and how holistic spiritual movements have used vague notions of the East to market and brand these notions into spiritual seminars, practices like yoga, and wellness products and services. Moreover, Tibetan Buddhist leaders have successfully adapted their religious practices and performances to the tastes and preferences of Western audiences (Lopez, 2018; Rakow, 2014).

This study is embedded in the broader field of media, religion, and culture, and knows a multi-disciplinary approach from the fields of marketing and branding, visual analysis and semiotics, media studies, as well as digital religion. This study considers the interconnectedness of offline and online and addresses the cultural, political, and ethical context of digital media. Further, the affordances of Instagram are an important dimension of the cultural and socio-technological environment in which the posts of religious leaders are being analyzed.



How does this study relate and contribute to the academic perspectives on digital religion? In the field of digital religion studies, the intersection between digital technologies, religious practices and contemporary culture is being explored, as well as how they impact understandings of spirituality and religion (Campbell & Evolvi, 2020). As Campbell and Evolvi (2020, pp. 2–3), argue, there are several waves of digital religion research. The first wave describes the first online religious communities and practices. The second wave considers the historical and social dimensions of digital religion. In the third wave, the interconnectedness of online and offline settings receives more attention. The fourth wave analyzes people’s media practices and also pays attention to the broader social, cultural, political, and ethical context of digital media in regard to digital religious studies. This fourth wave fits most closely to this study.

When it comes to the question of religious authority online, especially within the context of digital platforms, my research contributes to the field by focusing on the personalization of religious authority and by offering a systematic and comparative analysis of religious leaders from different religious and cultural backgrounds. As I delineate in my methodology, my focus on Instagram posts of religious leaders means that I do not study the statistics of likes, the content of comments, or the way in which these leaders have employed designers, strategists, marketers, and so forth. Moreover, since I study religious leaders who have been active for several decades, these leaders have established their authority before the emergence of the Internet and are also known for using “traditional” mass media, such as television, radio, newspapers, and magazines. Currently, the visual dimension of digital religion in regard to the authority of religious leaders has received relatively little attention. Notable exceptions are the study by Golan and Martini on the use of Instagram by Pope Francis (2019) and the study of Zaid et al. on digital Islam and social media influencers in the Gulf region (2022). As Hope Cheong states, visual analysis is one of the research methodologies to examine religious authority within the context of digital religion (2021, p. 89). Therefore, this study contributes to the methodological and theoretical exploration of religious authority within the context of digital platforms.

Recent academic literature shows how entrepreneurial religious leaders, established religious leaders, as well as religious influencers employ social media to construct their authority (Gauthier, 2021; Hope Cheong, 2021; Campbell & Evolvi, 2020). The use of these platforms and the adaptation to the aesthetics, the visual culture, and popular consumer culture has its own paradoxes and complexities. As Hope Cheong (2021) describes in her overview of the literature on the impact of the internet on religious authority from the last two decades, the use of (digital) media within the context of religious authority can be viewed from the point of view of three kinds of logics. The first logic is the one of disjuncture and displacement (Hope Cheong, 2021, p. 90), where new players enter the spiritual marketplace within the context of the free and decentralized space of the internet. The second is the logic of continuity and complementarity, where established institutions re-establish their authority by embracing the opportunities of the media sphere (Hope Cheong, 2021, p. 92) and the third is the logic of dialectics and paradox (Hope Cheong, 2021, p. 95). This perspective considers the ways in which religious authority can become stronger and weaker within the context of digitalization. As Hope Cheong writes, “the dialectical perspective on new media and culture recognizes the simultaneous presence of two relational forces of interaction of their seemingly opposite, independent and complementary aspects, akin to eastern philosophies (like yin and yang) on the completion of relative polarities” (Hope Cheong 2021, p. 95–96). On digital platforms, the authority of religious leaders and institutions can be challenged and questioned, but also be affirmed and strengthened. Social media can enable opposition, discussion, and the emergence of religious influencers (see. e.g., the study of Zaid et al., 2022). At the same time, successful use of social media can help religious leaders to connect or re-connect to existing and new audiences. On social media, religious leaders need to balance between connection and self-promotion when they try to mediate their authority within the context of a digitalized religious marketplace. In this study, I discuss the complexities, paradoxes, and dialectics of the four religious leaders who are analyzed and compared. In the conclusion, I reflect on how this study relates to the three logics of Hope Cheong.



In this study, I use the concepts mediation and mediatization. These concepts both incorporate the word “media”. As Heidi Campbell (2017) describes, these concepts relate to different approaches in the field of media, religion, and culture.³ I use the concept of mediation in the main question, “*How do globally operating religious leaders use Instagram to mediate their authority?*” In this context, I analyze how Instagram posts are being used to mediate the authority of religious leaders. The media environment of Instagram, its affordances, the visual culture of contemporary consumer culture, the religious context, they all inform the way in which the authority of religious leaders can be constructed, maintained, challenged, and so on. In Chapter 1, I describe how I conceptualize mediation in relation to the authority of religious leaders. Moreover, in the methodological chapters, I explain how I analyze this mediation by using content analysis and (social) semiotics.

I use the concept of mediatization in a different context when I analyze the ways in which religious authority has changed within the context of technological, cultural, and societal transformations, starting with the invention of the printing press, all the way to the current context of digital media, including the digital platform Instagram. I engage with Couldry and Hepp (2017) to distinguish different “waves” of mediatization. Couldry and Hepp argue that the relationship between media technology and societal change is dialectical, and that this process cannot be described in terms of linear progress. Moreover, they argue that the process of mediatization is dependent on the cultural context in which it occurs. In the last two decades, there has been a debate about the proper use of the concept mediatization versus the use of the concept mediation. Within the field of media, religion, and culture, these debates centered around the question to what extent the media context or logic informed or determined the beliefs and practices of religion. Several other

3 In her article, Campbell also outlines the approach “religious-social shaping of technology”, which is a tool for studying how distinct religious communities negotiate with new media. Since this is not the focus of this study, I do not use Campbell’s approach.

authors argue that this relationship is much more complicated, layered, and nuanced, and propose to use the concept of mediation instead. ⁴ As I explain in Chapter 2, I agree with Stewart Hoover (2016) that the concept of mediatization can be used to analyze how the media sphere has become a dominant factor in the way in which religious authority is being constructed and authenticated. Summarized, I employ the concepts of mediation and mediatization for distinct objectives. The concept of mediation comes into play when examining Instagram posts through empirical and semiotic analysis. I utilize the concept of mediatization to contextualize the transformation of religious authority.

In this study, I return repeatedly to the typology of Weber, who distinguishes traditional, bureaucratic-legal, and charismatic authority. Since Weber, a vast body

4 The concept of mediatization has caused much debate within the media sciences: do new media technologies cause social changes, is the socio-cultural context leading and is technology subordinate, or is it an interaction? The concept of mediatization has its proponents in Scandinavian academics, such as Knut Lundy and Stig Hjarvard, while the concept of mediation is more prevalent in Anglo-Saxon countries, such as the UK and the United States (Couldry, 2008; Hjarvard, 2008; Krotz, 2009; Lundby, 2009; Silverstone, 2005). The two positions do overlap, and the ongoing discussion has resulted in the refining of the concepts and mutual appreciation for the two approaches. Roger Silverstone defines mediation as “processes of communication change the social and cultural environments that support them as well as the relationships that participants, both individual and institutional, have to that environment and to each other” (Couldry, 2012, pp. 234–235; Silverstone, 2005, p. 189). Silverstone describes mediation as an open-ended dialectic, not a systemization of the relationship between media and culture. Mediation includes struggle and resistance. Media can be forms of emancipation, but tools of oppression and social control as well (Morgan, 2008b, p. 7). David Morgan nicely summarizes this view as “people build the world, and their worlds build them” (Morgan, 2008b, p. xiv). For a more recent perspective on these concepts, the overview of Campbell (2017) is particularly helpful.



of literature concerning religious authority has emerged. As I argue in this and the following chapter, his typology does need to be expanded and adapted. At the same time, however, his notion of charismatic authority in particular, has proved to be fruitful in the analysis of religious leaders in the media sphere (Hoover, 2016), of the entrepreneurial approach of religious leaders within the context of late-modern consumer capitalism (Gauthier, 2012), of celebrity culture (Hendriks, 2017) and the use of images on Instagram (Golan & Martini 2019). The use of digital platforms relates to the growing power of audiences, media institutions, and the importance of algorithms and big data. In Chapter 2, I discuss the relationship between algorithmic authority (Campbell, 2020a) and the typology of Weber. In this study, I primarily focus on the visual dimension of religious authority for religious leaders within the context of Instagram. In sum, the typology of Weber, remains a focal point for reflection and analysis, also within the context of religious leaders using Instagram.

In conclusion, I have argued in the previous sections that we need to analyze the authority of religious leaders from the perspective of the social, cultural, and religious context in which they operate. I have placed emphasis on the importance of considering the material and aesthetic dimensions of authority. Furthermore, I have stated that the emergence of a globalized media sphere has led to a re-contextualization of religious authority. I have positioned this study within the field of media, religion, and culture, and highlighted its relationship with the study of digital religion. The three logics of religious authority within the study of digital religion, as distinguished by Hope Cheong (2021), are particularly relevant for this study. Finally, the typology of Weber remains a focal point for reflection and analysis. I will describe this typology in the upcoming sections.

What Is Authority?

As mentioned before, the definition of authority employed within this study is strongly indebted to the sociological theories of Max Weber (1864–1920). Authority is always related to power. Power exercised without authority has the character of mere coercion: something is achieved through force. Weber argues that authority is

legitimate dominance (Horsfield, 2016, p. 39; Weber, 1946, pp. 245–252, 294–298). Dominance and legitimation are two dimensions of authority. The first dimension, dominance, is defined by Weber as “the probability that certain specific commands (or all commands) will be obeyed by given groups of persons” (Horsfield 2016, p. 39). The second dimension of authority is legitimacy. Authority involves an element of consent or acceptance of the coercion that is exercised because it is considered as legitimate. Authority therefore means that something or someone can lead, influence, or achieve something that others regard as legitimate or plausible. Somehow it is beneficial, logical, or important for those who submit to authority. They see the value of submitting to authority because, for example, it is in line with their values, or because they expect it to work out positively for them. Legitimacy is a common basis that is shared by leaders and their followers. Thus, authority is a situation where people give up part of their autonomy and follow the leadership of someone else based on what they have been asked to accept as legitimate expectation in certain circumstances.

The primary interest in authority in this research is how religious leaders construct their authority. According to Carroll, “The authority to lead is the right to do so in a particular group or institutions, based upon a combination of qualities, characteristics, or expertise that the leader has or that followers believe their leader has. To exercise authority involves influencing, coordinating, or otherwise guiding the thoughts and behavior of persons and groups in ways that they consider legitimate” (Carroll, 2011, pp. 1–2). If the group accepts that the leader can exercise their power, the leader is acting with authority. Authority of leaders is thus based on a relationship between them and their followers.

Weber’s Ideal Types of Authority

To further dissect this legitimacy, the three ideal types that Weber outlines need to be considered. Weber distinguishes three grounds on which a leader or a group of leaders can base themselves: traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal grounds.

Traditional religious authority is legitimized by a clear relationship with tradition. According to Weber, tradition is based on what presumably has always existed, and



where culture, systems, and standards are considered something sacred (Weber, 1946, p. 296).⁵ The tradition often refers to a “golden age”, a primeval age in which the tradition originated in its purest form. Religious structures and operations are linked to the way religions are organized, based on relatively stable patterns and rituals. A person can exercise power based on traditional authority if this person acts within the discretionary powers that a tradition offers which is recognized by both leaders and followers. Within a religious context, leaders are authorized by their ordination, after which they hold office. It is their job to pass on, preserve, and guard the religious traditions. Weber argues that patriarchalism is an important element of traditional authority. The patriarch possesses a realm of “free arbitrariness” in his judgement and actions. Within religious traditions, this is visible in the fact that it is most often men fulfilling the leading positions within religious hierarchies.

Weber defines charismatic authority as a form in which the followers attribute exceptional qualities to this leader (Weber, 1946, p. 295).⁶ Charisma, a “divinely inspired

5 In “The Social Psychology of World Religion”, Weber argues, “‘Traditionalism’ (...) shall refer to the psychic attitude-set for the habitual workday and to the belief in the everyday routine as an inviolable norm of conduct. Domination that rests upon this basis, that is, upon piety for what actually, allegedly, or presumably has always existed, will be called ‘traditionalist authority’” (Weber, 1946, p. 296). In his writings on traditionalism and traditional authority, patriarchalism is one of its main characteristics. This can overlap with “religious tradition”, but it can also be part of, for example, tribal, national, or regional traditions.

6 Weber borrowed the concept from the Strasbourg church historian and jurist Rudolf Sohm (1841–1917). He elaborates on charisma and charismatic authority in “Politics as a Vocation” (Weber, 1946, pp. 77–128), “The Sociology of Charismatic Authority” (Weber, 1946, pp. 245–252) and in “The Social Psychology of the World Religions” (Weber, 1946, pp. 267–301). In the last-mentioned work, he states, “‘Charismatic authority’, hence, shall refer to a rule over men, whether predominantly external or predominantly internal, to which the governed submit because of their belief in the

gift” is something special that the leader must radiate in a certain way. Charisma is strongly contrasted to the rational and instrumental conception of bureaucracy. Weber argues that charismatic figures often rise in times of chaos and crisis. Charismatic figures include Jesus Christ, Napoleon, but also more contemporary examples, such as Martin Luther King, Barack Obama, or Elon Musk. Charismatic authority is not externally validated by traditions or organizations but by those who recognize this authority as authentic and act on it. Charismatic authority can be a revolutionary force that can lead to a whole new world orientation for followers. At the same time, authority is only effective as long as it is recognized by the followers of the leader. It can disappear when it seems as if the leader is being abandoned by God in which case the leader is no longer able to prove themselves, or when following the leader no longer offers benefits for the followers. Thus, charismatic authority is powerful, but also unstable – unless, as it is often the case, charismatic authority is ultimately translated into traditional or legal structures. This is the case with religions such as mainline Christianity and traditional Islam, in which the charismatic leadership of its founder has been institutionalized.

To Weber, rational-legal authority is the dominant form of authority in modern society.⁷ The source of this authority lies in the perceived legality of rules and rights of those who hold a leading position to command and lead within this structure. Any statutory authority or person acting within this structure can only do so within the system of laws and regulations and will be held accountable to these laws and

extraordinary quality of the specific *person*” (Weber, 1946, p. 295).

7 In “The Social Psychology of World Religion”, Weber argues, “Our modern ‘associations’, above all the political ones, are of the type of ‘legal’ authority. That is, the legitimacy of the powerholder to give commands rests upon rules that are rationally established by enactment, by agreement, or by imposition. The legitimation for establishing rules rest, in turn, upon a rationally enacted or interpreted ‘constitution” (Weber, 1946, p. 294). In Weber’s writings, the rational-legal source of authority is closely related to the process of rationalization and bureaucratization.



regulations. Furedi (2013) argues that Weber was intensely involved with authority because he was concerned about the legitimacy of the societal order which, in his opinion, was also related to the so-called disenchantment of society. Weber believed that rationalization, scientific progress, and capitalist modernization had diminished the values of custom and habit. The erosion of tradition had affected the moral framework of authority. The impersonal, legal, and institutional grounds of legitimization had not led to the emergence of new “ultimate” values that could inspire and influence the public. Weber, therefore, placed his hope in the charismatic authority of strong and inspirational leaders, who are able to invoke trust and an emotional relation with their followers, and thus have the potential to legitimate social order (Furedi, 2013, p. 92). The question of the relevance of Weber’s ideal types and its application within contemporary Western society will be one of the recurrent themes throughout the next chapter.

Sources of Authority for Religious Leaders: Four Dimensions

In order to explore the ways in which religious leaders legitimize their authority, I elaborate on a model that has been designed by Carroll (2011). It is partly based on the three ideal types of Weber but has been refined for the context of religious leaders. According to Carroll, authority becomes religious when it is connected to the sacred as the primary source of authority. The sacred can be explicitly recognized in terms of a transcendent God, and/or it can be expressed in core beliefs and values. Religious leaders need to ground their authority in the shared convictions concerning the sacred.⁸ The model that I present here outlines the “penultimate” (secondary) bases

8 Carroll argues that charisma is an ultimate source of authority and a manifestation of what is considered to be sacred (Carroll, 2011, p. 33). My approach to charisma is more closely aligned to Weber’s conceptualization, especially the notion of extra-ordinary characteristics that followers ascribe to charismatic leaders. An important characteristic of charisma is that it induces a sense of the sublime. Charisma can not only be ascribed to leaders who claim a connection with the divine, but also to entrepreneurs and

of authority that are rooted in the ultimate source of authority, a connection with the sacred. It is especially this distinction between official authority and personal authority that makes this model valuable. From a Christian perspective, Carroll mainly focuses on the various ways Protestant, Evangelical, Pentecostal, and Roman Catholic leaders base their authority. Though Carroll does not take into consideration other religious traditions, I find this model useful in the exploration of sources of authority because the attention on personal authority ties in with the increasing personalization of religious authority in the contemporary media age.

Table 1.1:

Carroll's model of Religious Authority

	Official Authority	Personal Authority
Representing the Sacred	Sacramental/ Priestly	Personal Piety/Spirituality
Expertise	Certified Competence	Demonstrated Competence

Source: Carroll, 2011, p. 50

Carroll distinguishes two different ways the sacred can be represented by religious leaders: official authority and personal authority. This distinction is based on the two different sources of authority. The first one, official authority, relates to the sacramental/priestly version: the religious leader is a representative of the sacred based on his ordinance. This means that the “priestly” or sacramental role is expressed in the performance of rituals. The representation does not primarily depend on the person’s personality but on the function of the religious leader. Official authority then relates to Weber’s conceptualization of traditional authority. This is rooted in the “ministry as office”, which is anchored in the religious tradition. Carroll mentions the main

celebrities who operate in the media sphere. I discuss this notion in more detail in the next chapter.



character of Graham Greene's novel *The Power and the Glory* (1940) as an extreme example (Carroll, 2011, p. 46). This character is a "whisky priest", a priest working in Mexico during a time when the government was trying to suppress the Roman Catholic Church. Even though the priest was a staunch alcoholic and the father of an illegitimate child, people still consulted him and wanted him to perform Mass, because he was the only ordained priest in the area. A second mode of representing the sacred is a pietistic, or evangelical variant. Here, the emphasis is placed on the leader's personal relationship with the sacred, which is strongly related to the personality and the perceived authenticity of the leader. An example in the evangelical world is the late Billy Graham (1918–2018), who was able to gain global influence through his campaigns and media performances, in which his personalized approach was crucial.⁹

In addition to the representation of the sacred, expertise is another source of authority. In the case of official authority, expertise can be formalized in diplomas and academic training. It can be seen as part of a rational-legal authority. In the context of "religions of the book", such as Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, this expertise is also based on the ability of religious leaders to interpret, analyze, and apply holy scriptures. Expertise is an important characteristic of bureaucratic structures, norms and rules that have defined modernity. However, the academic or professional training and certification of religious leaders is by no means equally appreciated everywhere. For example, Carroll states that there is deep distrust among Christians in the United States against this type of professionalism (Carroll, 2011, p. 44). Personal authority expertise then lies in other, demonstrable skills that have to do with the effectiveness of religious leaders: for example, their roles as pioneers, evangelists, managers, inspirational coaches, or spiritual gurus.

The representation of authority by religious leaders can be invoked by references

9 I realize that there is much more to say about the role of media and celebrity culture in the case of Billy Graham. I discuss media and celebrity culture in relation to the authority of religious leaders in Chapter 2. For an overview of Evangelical leaders and the use of media, see Horsfield (2015, pp. 246–258).

to the religious tradition and to personal piety and authenticity. Expertise can be derived from official training that is represented in education and certificates. It is especially in the realm of personal authority that religious leaders need to perform. They need to convince their followers that their authority is not solely based on ordination, tradition, or official certificates, but that they are able to lead based on their personal qualities and characteristics.

Official authority can be seen as a combination of traditional and rational-legal authority within the typology of Weber. The representation of the sacred is, within the realm of official authority, sacramental and priestly. In the realm of personal authority, it is related to personal spirituality and authenticity. Expertise within the realm of official authority is related to the rational-legal forms of authority and is expressed in certified expertise that has been granted by educational and professional institutions. Demonstrated expertise as a form of personal authority can be translated into effectiveness and personal competence of the religious leader. I would maintain that Carroll's model needs to be supplemented with other characteristics of religious authority, which I will present in the following sections.

Religious Authority Is Mediated

The authority of religious leaders is also mediated. This dimension is central to the main research question of this thesis and my analysis of the mediation of religious authority on Instagram. The mediation of religious authority might be seen as something related to the contemporary media age, but this notion is intrinsically connected to a conceptualization of religion. Drawing upon the work of Meyer and several others, I aim to make the case that religious authority is always mediated through practices and not based on ideas and convictions only.¹⁰ Meyer, and several

10 Meyer touches upon the debates about the definition of religion. In the study of religion, there has been a strong bias to focus on the rational and intellectual dimension of religion (Meyer, 2006, 2012). Meyer calls this a Protestant bias, because Protestantism (especially the forms that are indebted to reformers like



other scholars, have forcefully argued that religion can be conceived as a mediated practice (Meyer, 2006, 2021).¹¹ She states that religion should be conceptualized “as a practice of mediation between humans and the professed transcendent that necessarily requires specific material media, that is, authorized forms through which the transcendent is being generated and becomes somehow tangible” (Meyer, 2013, p. 8). Thus, practices of mediation can bridge the gap between the immanent (the here and now) and the transcendent. Meyer underlines that media are not limited to the everyday notions of media such as books, radio, television, and the internet. A broader understanding is needed, which includes all kinds of objects including bodies. Media, as objects and signifiers in the here and now, the immanent, can invoke the “beyond”, the transcendent. These media also include religious buildings such as temples, churches, and sacred objects like crosses, icons, images, and figures. How the “beyond” is experienced depends on the historical and cultural dimensions of the religious tradition or movement in which these media are embedded. This implies that religious leaders operate in a mediated setting, and that their authority is mediated by religious symbols, objects, and practices. Moreover, media serve what Meyer terms authorized sensational forms that can be employed to make connections between the immanent and the transcendent.¹² In the study of religious leadership not only the discursive and cognitive dimensions

Luther and Calvin) place a strong emphasis on the word and explanation of the Bible and is very suspicious of everything that has to do with images and senses. She particularly sees this Protestant bias, the intellectual approach, in the work of Weber (Meyer, 2012, p. 11).

- 11 Other relevant scholars that make this point are Stewart Hoover and Peter Horsfield, who are discussed in this study as well.
- 12 Meyer writes, “this take on mediation entails a broad understanding of media as material means for religious communication among humans and as material harbingers of a professed beyond conventionally referred to as spirits, gods, demons, ghosts, or God” (Meyer, 2020, para. 6).

need attention but also the sensory, aesthetic, and embodied dimensions, as Meyer argues. To conceptualize the relationship between the authority of religious leaders and the role of mediation, I elaborate on two other concepts delineated by Meyer: “sensational forms” and “aesthetics of persuasion”.

What is acceptable for religious leaders in the mediation of their authority depends at least partly on the specific religious or spiritual tradition that they represent. What is acceptable for a pastor of a Pentecostal megachurch is different for a Tibetan Lama, a Roman Catholic bishop, or a teacher of holistic spirituality. The concept “sensational forms” is helpful here. Sensational forms are “relatively fixed, authorized modes of invoking and organizing access to the transcendental, thereby creating and sustaining links between believers in the context of particular religious regimes” (Verrips & Meyer, 2008, p. 27). The sensational forms that Meyer describes are embedded in what Carroll describes as the authority of office. The authorization of sensational forms depends on recognized and institutionalized traditions that inform which forms are appropriate and legitimate. Meyer’s focus on the regimes of religious traditions in authorizing some and rejecting other sensational forms might be too prescriptive within the current context of a media sphere. As I demonstrate in the next chapter, technological and cultural developments, as well as the importance of large media corporations, have influenced the role of audiovisual media in society at large, including the way religion functions (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Hoover, 2016). However, it makes clear that when religious leaders need to construct and establish their authority, they must use practices of mediation that are embedded in the religious and spiritual lives of the communities and networks that they represent. The construction of the authority of religious leaders is deeply connected with aesthetics: “Aesthetics, then, refers to sensorial and embodied modes of religious knowledge production and conveyance that operate not just cognitively but involve the whole range of bodily experiences at work in the relation between leaders and followers” (Witte et al., 2015, p. 119). Religious leaders can appeal to the senses of their audiences in their mediated performances. Their “multisensory appeal” plays an important role in persuading people of religious truths. Religious leaders themselves mediate



between the transcendent and the religious community when they perform rituals, explicate sacred scriptures, and in some way or the other, represent the sacred. This can be linked to what Carrol describes as official authority. Traditional and institutionalized forms of authority are often represented in religious dress, the architecture of religious buildings, and other sacred and ritual objects. This is especially visible in the Roman Catholic Church, where the authority of bishops and priests is visible in their habits, in the rituals they perform, and the richly decorated churches in which they operate. Sensational forms and experiences are crucial for the relationship between practitioners of religion and their leaders.

The persuasive element of sensational forms is not limited to oratory expressions only but includes all kinds of sensational forms that are employed to persuade (Meyer, 2010, p. 756). The embodied, aesthetic, and mediated performance of religious leaders is part of what Carroll describes as personal authority. The authority of religious leaders can be enhanced by body language, facial expressions, the use of voice, by all kinds of religious and ritual objects (statues, crosses, paintings, frescos, religious clothes, etc.), and by using audiovisual media. When religious leaders are effective in using aesthetics of persuasion in their performances, they will be able to convince their followers that their authority is legitimate. The authority of someone like Fetullah Gülen, who is described as the “crying imam”, is partly his theological discourse, but also the performance of his sermons and the expression of his emotions (Witte et al., 2015, p. 119). Thus, the mediation of the authority of religious leaders partly depends on the authorized sensational forms within the religious tradition or movement in which they operate, but also depends on their personal ability to perform.

Religious Authority Is Performed

To conceptualize the notion of performance of religious authority further I suggest that dramaturgical terms are helpful. Goffman (1969) uses the metaphor of theater performances to describe social interactions in everyday life. He argues that identity always depends on the social context. The performance of identity is related to a socially acceptable presentation of self. He argues therefore that self-representation presupposes a “performance” of the self, what he calls “impression

management”: the way people manage their behavior. People play different roles in their daily lives. Using this metaphor, the social world can be seen as a stage on which everyone “performs” a specific role and a “backstage” where people prepare their social presence and can behave without being observed by audiences. This performance contains language and speech, as well as facial and physical expressions, and everything related to appearances and manners. The credibility of the performance is validated and legitimized by the audiences with whom the performer interacts. It is not only the performance that audiences consider, the “character” of the actor is also important in terms of the spirit and strength that the performer evokes (Goffman, 1969, p. 244).

Religious leaders perform their authority when they are “at work”, for example when they lead meetings within their religious community, when they perform rituals in religious events, when they appear on television, or when they post on social media. Performances in everyday life require that individual persons, in this case religious leaders, know how to perform and manage the impressions they leave with others. This means that their personal skills are important. The evoked “character” of the performer refers to the attributed charisma or authenticity of a religious leader. As Bourdieu argues, a certain “habitus” can be developed in which people are able to act within social circles with a certain ease, based on experience and training (Bourdieu, 1983; Verter, 2003).¹³ Moreover, the kind of performance that is

13 The performances of religious leaders can be framed as the creation of symbolic capital. Symbolic capital is defined by Bourdieu (1986) as the representation of other kinds of capital, such as economic, cultural, and social capital. Within the religious context, one might use the concept of spiritual capital as a variant of cultural capital (Verter, 2003). Spiritual capital in its embodied form exists of knowledge and competences in the religious field. In its objectified form, it exists in the material and symbolic resources, such as religious texts, theologies, and other symbolic forms. The institutional form exists in the power of religious organizations that can legitimize the qualification of “religious goods”. For example, it authorizes religious professionals to operate in



deemed as acceptable depends on the authorized sensational forms within religious communities and traditions (Meyer, 2010). Further, the kind of performance that is required of religious leaders, depends on the context in which they operate. A ritual in a church, such as performing the mass, requires a different performance than a television interview, as does a speech in a football stadium or posting a message on social media like TikTok or Instagram. As I address in the following chapter, the development of new media has stimulated religious leaders to use digital media. This is particularly observed by those religious leaders who operate on a global scale. The question then is how the participation of religious leaders on social media affects their performances. This is even more relevant since performances in the media sphere depend on the specific affordances and the “media culture” of the media outlet platforms in which they operate (Hoover, 2016). The performance of religious authority can be further analyzed by using the notion of style.

Religious Authority Is Styled

The mediation and performance of religious authority are fundamentally linked to aesthetics, as I have argued in the previous paragraphs. An important dimension of aesthetics is the concept of style, which deserves more in-depth attention, especially in relation to digital and audiovisual media platforms. The three dimensions that Van Leeuwen (2005) distinguishes can serve to clarify this notion. Van Leeuwen distinguishes individual style, social style, and lifestyle. I consider the threefold distinction between individual style, social style, and personal lifestyle useful in exploring the mediated and aesthetic dimensions of religious authority.

Individual style emphasizes individual difference (Van Leeuwen, 2005, p.

religious services based on certain qualifications and certificates. Spiritual capital is a useful concept to describe how religious leaders can exercise power, both in the field of religion, but also in other fields, such as politics, for example.

140). It relates to the origin of the word “style” which comes from the Latin “stilus”, which means “pen”. The way in which people use the stilus to write, their handwriting, expresses their individual style. It has become important in the arts, for example in theater, literature, music, and visual arts. It can express the personality of the artist or the actor. Individual style can also include body language. It can be connected to the way in which religious leaders act and perform. Individual style can be seen as the way in which religious leaders express personal authority.

The idea of social style is related to identity markers, such as social position in terms of class, gender and age, social relations, and so forth. Hodge and Kress see style as a meta-sign that marks social allegiance in terms of solidarity, group identity, and ideology (Van Leeuwen, 2005 p. 143; Hodge & Kress 1988, p 82). Social style can be connected to language accents, such as the Australian accent, but also to appropriate ways of dressing, for example, wearing a suit to work. Social style relates to collective religious identity formation in terms of rituals, religious clothes, buildings, and other kinds of objects. Van Leeuwen states that social style is based on rules of tradition or on formal written rules (Van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 154). In terms of Weber, we can relate social style to traditional and rational-legal authority.

Van Leeuwen states that lifestyle is the combination of individual and social style. Lifestyles are signified by appearances. Lifestyle is a group style that is often based on shared consumer behavior, tastes, and patterns in terms of vacations, sports, fashion, interior decoration, and brand affiliation. He argues that lifestyles rest on the rule of role models and experts. Within the context of the current media sphere, lifestyle can be connected to celebrities and experts within the realm of beauty, psychology, fashion, and so on. Lifestyles are being produced by designers and advertisers through experts and role models featured in global media (Van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 145). Lifestyles are also individual: people feel that their style is individual and personal in the way that they use the resources that are available to them. “Unlike the signifiers of ‘individual style’, the signifiers of lifestyle rest primarily on connotation, on signs that are already loaded with



cultural meaning, yet not subject to prescription or tradition” (Van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 146).¹⁴ For example, the Apple laptops can signify values of creativity, non-conformity, as well as the fact that these are luxury products associated with economic privilege. For religious leaders, lifestyle can be composed of individual style elements as well as elements that are related to the way they position themselves within consumer culture and practices and products such as global travel, hotels, the way they dress, and so forth. The visualization of their lifestyle can be seen as a way in which they are positioned as leaders within the media sphere. As I show in the empirical chapters and in the chapter in which I compare the religious leaders, the presentation of the lifestyles of the Dalai Lama and Pope Francis on Instagram are totally different from the presentation of the lifestyle of Brian Houston and Deepak Chopra. These differences are related to the sensational forms of the religious traditions that they represent, as well as to their personal style and performance.

14 The cultural values of consumer culture promote the creation of a lifestyle in which aesthetics and the creation of an authentic personal identity are closely intertwined (Featherstone, 1991, 1995; Maffesoli, 1996). In line with Van Leeuwen, Featherstone argues that lifestyle is concerned with the stylization of life. It includes basically everything: “one’s body, clothes, speech, leisure pastimes, eating and drinking preferences, home, car, choice of holidays, etc. are to be regarded as indicators of the individuality of taste and sense of style of the owner/consumer” (Featherstone, 1991, p. 83). It contains elements in contemporary consumer culture that connote “individuality, self-expression and a stylistic self-consciousness” (Featherstone, 1991, p. 83). The emphasis on aesthetics was largely inspired by romanticism in the nineteenth century (Campbell, 1987). The aestheticization of life is related to the idea that life should be seen as a piece of art. It should be filled with aesthetic consumption and enjoyment, and life should be formed into an aesthetically pleasing whole. An aesthetic lifestyle became an important element in the countercultural movement of the sixties and has become part of consumer and brand culture (Banet-Weiser, 2012).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed the various ways religious leaders legitimize and construct their religious authority. Their authority is embedded within the social, cultural, and religious context in which they operate. The authority of religious leaders can be related to the three ideal types of Weber: traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal authority. The four dimensions that Carroll presents are useful in distinguishing the differences between official and personal authority. The base of religious authority is always related to the sacred. These dimensions are not just intellectual concepts that apply to word and scripture; they are mediated, performed, and styled. Religious leaders use aesthetics of persuasion to convince audiences of their authority. They can distinguish themselves from others by adopting a specific style that can contain elements of their personality, social conventions, and authorized sensational forms, as well as by presenting a distinct lifestyle in their performances.



2.

The Transformation of Religious Authority

Introduction

In the recent decades, the religious landscape and the media sphere in Western Europe and the United States have changed dramatically. What are the implications for religious authority? In this chapter, I first present debates about secularization and discuss how they relate to religious authority. Second, I use the concept of mediatization to show how religious authority has been transformed from a media perspective. Third, I show what these transformations mean for the authority of religious leaders. I argue that in the current media age, religious leaders have to relate to celebrity culture, the importance of (personal) branding, and the importance of aesthetics in media culture.

Secularization

How does the authority of religious leaders relate to debates about secularization? What is meant by secularization has been extensively debated and has led to considerable confusion.¹⁵ “Classical” theories about secularization discussed the

15 First, it is important to distinguish the terms “secularity” and “secularization” from “secularism”. Secularity is a state of being without references to religion (Taylor, 2007). Secularization is a sociological theory about the transformation of religion in modern society. Secularism is a political ideology (Asad, 2003). The confusion about the term “secularization” not only arises from debates between sociologists of religion, but also from the etymological origins of the word. The word “saeculum”, which means era, was used by Augustine to distinguish this era from the world to come. In the Middle

decline in religious involvement and beliefs under the influence of processes of modernization, such as urbanization, rationalization, industrialization, and the rise of capitalism. The concept of secularization has often been used by scholars, as well as by clergy members, politicians, and ordinary citizens, as a “grand narrative” to describe the process of religious change. The idea that religion is in decline has sometimes become interiorized in such a way that it can become a self-fulfilling prophecy (Paul, 2018).¹⁶ So, what is secularization? The concept of secularization is

Ages, secularization meant that a monk renounced the rules of his monastic order and returned to “the world”. In times of reformation, the word referred to the seizing of (Roman Catholic) church properties by worldly powers. In the nineteenth century, it referred to the “liberation” of social institutions from the control and influence of the church (Gorski & Altınordu, 2008, p. 60)..

- 16 Many authors state that theories of secularization could be used for secularist politics, wherein religion is associated with tradition, superstition and the supernatural, while secularism is being equated with modernity, rationality and science (Asad, 2003; Gorski & Altınordu, 2008, p. 61). Stolow argues that theories of secularization have worked to normalize dominant historical narratives (Stolow, 2010). Meyer argues that secularization is incapable of explaining the appeal and public presence of religion today and opts for a post-secular perspective (Meyer, 2006). A different approach that is worth mentioning here is that of Finke and Stark. They have proposed a “religious economies” model, based on rational choice (2000). They claim that the demand for religion is constant, but that the supply is not. A free religious market where people are free to choose leads to competition and to more supply and will thus lead to a higher (and more diversified) religious involvement. They even argue that the secularization thesis (which they conceptualize as the gradual disappearance of religion), is not valid. A decline in membership and diminished participation in churches in Western Europe might be explained by state religion that does not match with the religious demand (Gorski & Altınordu, 2008, p. 57). Though Finke and Stark offer a very valuable contribution to the debate about the transformation of religion in relation to processes



deeply connected with the transformation of Latin Christendom (Roman Catholicism and Protestantism) in “The West”, especially Western Europe.¹⁷ The concept of secularization has been approached from multiple angles and dimensions, and the debates about the nature and the process of secularization have not led to a definitive outcome (Paul, 2018).

I will not attempt to set out the complexity of this debate in this chapter. I address three main approaches to the debate which I regard as important in discussing religious authority in the context of digital media. For current purposes, I distinguish secularization as a process that is related to (1) the declining scope of religious authority, (2) the rise of the culture of authenticity, (3) the privatization of religion. I elaborate on each of these dimensions. Finally, I synthesize these three approaches and apply them to the mediation of religious authority.

Secularization as the Declining Scope of Religious Authority

Secularization in terms of social differentiation means that the power of religious institutions has declined. This is partly because many of the functions that were traditionally part of these religious institutions, including education, politics, and justice, have become independent institutions. Secularization as institutional differentiation is a relatively undisputed characterization (Casanova, 2013; Chaves, 1994). Chaves contends that a more accurate interpretation of secularization is a

of modernity, the “rational choice” model has several flaws, as multiple authors have argued. More fundamentally, several authors stress that the reasons why people identify with a certain religion should not be reduced to calculations by individuals as to how to maximize happiness, wealth, or power. Instead, the shared common meanings and purposes, and the embodied, material, and liturgical dimensions of religion shape our desires and imaginations (Madsen, 2012; Smith, 2012, p. 161).

17 The US, in which Christian beliefs and practices are recorded at higher levels than in Western Europe, is sometimes seen as the exception, though others argue that it is Western Europe that is the exception.

decline in influence of religious authority structures in society (Chaves, 1994). He mentions the significant reduction of the influence of religious professionals in the current public sphere. Their ability to act as authority figures that affect the wider society has been diminished in Western Europe and the United States. He defines the concept of a religious authority structure as “a social structure that attempts to enforce its order and reach its ends by controlling the access of individuals to some desired goods, where the legitimation of that control includes some supernatural component, however weak” (Chaves, 1994, pp. 755–756).

When individuals feel free to believe and behave against religious authority structures because these structures lack a level of legitimation that they once had, then their choices concerning beliefs and practices will be characterized by autonomy and freedom of choice (Klaver et al., 2016; see also Yamane, 1997). Religious organizations and movements thus need to persuade and appeal to individuals in order to legitimize their authority (Horsfield, 2016).

A Culture of Authenticity

According to the philosopher Charles Taylor, we live in an “Age of Authenticity”.¹⁸

18 Taylor introduces what he calls “Weber-style ideal types” of religious forms at different stages in history: the ancient regime, the age of mobilization and the age of authenticity (Smith, 2014, p. 84). In the ancient regime, there is an *inextricable relationship between religious and political identity: church membership is part of a national and local community* (Taylor, 2007, p. 440). Rituals bind kingdoms and nations together as a community. The elites are able to restrict or put an end to central collective rituals, which happened in certain regions of Western Europe during the Protestant Reformation. In the Age of Mobilization, which Taylor roughly dates between 1800–1960, the ancient regime has been displaced (Smith, 2014, p. 85; Taylor, 2007, p. 471). The enchanted cosmos in which God resides is no longer taken for granted. A new moral order can be seen as established by God, but people must mobilize political, social, and ecclesial structures to build a new modern order. The



Characteristics for this are, he argues, what he calls expressive individualism (Smith, 2014, p. 85; Taylor, 2007, p. 486), an era in which “religious life must not only be part of my choice, but must speak to me, make sense in terms of my spiritual development” (Taylor, 2007, p. 486). It is part of cultural values that originate in Romanticism, but exploded in the 1960s, and which have deeply altered the conditions of belief.

The manifestation of individualization has been influenced by the consumer revolution, which is related to the rise of the income of the middle classes in Western Europe and the United States and the consumer industry that grew from the 1960s onwards (Campbell, 1987; Gauthier, 2021; Holt, 1995). This has led to a new concentration on private space, people living more on their own, independent of traditional communities or close-knit family relations. It has also led to a youth market and youth culture in which expression of one’s personality is one of the main characteristics. Taylor describes this trend as a “culture of authenticity”, meaning that “each of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one’s own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority” (Taylor, 2007, p. 475). The ethic of authenticity is characterized by the idea to find yourself, to realize yourself, and to release your true self. The importance of fashion and personal style are expressed in the display of the self and the observation of others in public spaces, such as malls, boulevards, and so on. Within youth culture, brands and admired celebrity figures have, at least partly, become more central to identification and belonging than religious or national institutions (Taylor, 2007, p. 484).

In his seminal work *A Secular Age*, Taylor describes secularity as (1) the retreat of religion in public life, (2) decline in belief and practice, and (3) change in conditions of belief. He argues that secularization primarily refers to the beliefs of the people. When

Age of Mobilization is characterized by denominations instead of all-encompassing religious communities that are intrinsically connected with the local and national community (Smith, 2014, p. 88).

society becomes more secular, it means that the lives of fewer people are influenced by religious beliefs (Taylor, 2007, p. 430). It is important to note that Taylor does not claim to develop a theory of secularization, but that he addresses the question of what it means to live in a secular age. How is it possible that around the year 1500, it was completely common sense to believe in God and have religious convictions and that this is no longer the case? The vision of the world, captured in the concept “social imaginary” has been radically transformed within the last five hundred years.¹⁹ Religious convictions have become less plausible, as there are alternatives for the belief in God. There is also a change in the conditions of belief. There is a humanist alternative which Taylor calls the immanent frame: the world around us can be understood without the idea of a transcendent reality.²⁰ It is important to note that Taylor’s arguments are mostly based on the development of Western thought. It is questionable whether his views on a secular age also apply to, for example, Southwest Asia or Russia.

The imagined place of the sacred in a society that is governed by expressive individualism has also changed.²¹ In the age of authenticity, religious practice is

19 Taylor describes three characteristics of “social imaginaries”: (1) it describes how “ordinary people” imagine their social surroundings. The imaginaries are no scientific theories, but they can be found in images, stories, and legends. (2) Contrary to theory that is developed by a small elite, imaginaries are informed by ideas that have found their way into more mainstream culture. (3) Social imaginaries make common practices possible and contribute to a widely shared sense of legitimacy (Taylor, 2007, p. 146). The imaginary is concerned with the moral order; a commonly shared moral conception of what an ideal society should look like.

20 This is similar to what Carroll calls “a crisis of belief that reflects radical doubts” (Carroll, 2011, p. 8). Carroll argues that in terms of this crisis, all knowledge, including basic beliefs about God, are considered to be relative.

21 In the Ancient Regime, the connection to the sacred belonged to the church and to the wider society. In the Age of Mobilization, the “denominational imaginary” put an



predominantly part of personal spiritual development, and the sacred is disengaged from political or institutional dimensions (Smith, 2014, p. 88; Taylor, 2007, p. 487). This does not mean that people do not want to be part of religious organizations, but that personal spirituality is the primary incentive for the connection with the sacred. The importance of feelings and experiences is the key to the personal path of spiritual inspiration.

Religion in the “Age of Authenticity” is characterized by the quest of the individual for identity and spirituality. Just as one has to discover one’s self, one has to discover one’s own faith. Best-selling works like *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho or Elizabeth Gilbert’s *Eat, Pray, Love* facilitate the quest for authentic living (Smith, 2014, p. 89). Although traditional religions might call into question the individuality of such a quest, it is important to distinguish between the framework and the content of the spirituality of this age. The framework has an individualist component, but the content can be embedded within a Christian community, of which the Taizé Community and the Roman Catholic World Youth Days are examples (Hervieu-Leger, 1999). Taylor argues that the quest-like shape is inescapable. Since the West has a Christian past, our secular age continues to be “haunted” by this past, especially during rites of passage or during times of disaster. Even when people do not consider themselves particularly religious, they do value religious ceremonies for baptism, marriage, or funerals. While this age can be called “secular”, active atheists and committed secularists in Western Europe and the United States are a relatively small minority (Smith, 2014, p. 91; Taylor, 2007, p. 513). The interest in “post-Christian” spirituality and the continuing presence of religion have challenged the master narrative of secularization as a linear process of the decline of religion.²²

The individuation of religious beliefs and practices has enormous consequences

emphasis on voluntary association, in which the sacred is still connected to the church of choice.

22 See the chapters about Deepak Chopra and the Dalai Lama for the elaboration on “new” forms of spirituality in the West.

for religious leaders. At the very least, it means that people who see belief in God as an option, will be less likely to accept religious authority. The culture of authenticity with its emphasis on expressive individualism, the importance of the personal quest, and on autonomous exploration, have resulted in a distrust of authority in general. These elements do certainly affect legitimation on the grounds of traditional authority. The declining authority of religious institutions and the distrust of institutions in general has resulted in a call for authentic and personalized leadership (Klaver, 2016). Religious leaders need to be able to persuade their followers that they can inspire the spiritual development of their followers.

Secularization and the Privatization of Religion

How are theories about secularization related to perspectives on the privatization of religion? This is an important question, especially for the discussion on how religious leaders position themselves on digital platforms. The privatization of religion is a highly contested dimension within the debates about secularization. Taylor argues that there has been a retreat of religion in public life, in the sense that it is possible to do politics and participate in public debates without references to God (Taylor, 2007, p. 532). Casanova claims that the privatization of religion is ideologically rooted in liberal categories (Casanova, 1994, 2013). The vision that religion is something that belongs to the private realm is a dominant script in Western Europe, and to a lesser extent, in the United States.

The privatization of religion is also an important dimension of Habermas's conceptualization of the public sphere. Understood as a place in which people discuss matters of public interest (Habermas, 1984),²³ the public sphere is often opposed to

23 Habermas situates the emergence of the (bourgeois) public sphere in the 18th century. The public spaces of salons and coffee houses were used by citizens to discuss matters of public interest such as politics and the economy (Habermas, 1984). Anderson uses the concept of “imagined communities” to describe how the nation became an imagined community through the emergence of printing press capitalism and the



a more “private” sphere, where religion is regularly considered to belong (Casanova, 1994; Meyer & Moors, 2006). An important dimension of the public sphere then, is the marginalization of God and the spiritual from the public debates in favor of a more secular and rationalistic approach (Taylor, 2007). As noted by several philosophers and sociologists, religion has certainly not disappeared from the public sphere (Hjarvard, 2016; Hoover, 2008; Meyer & Moors, 2006). The current visibility of religion, due, amongst other factors, to new forms of media, seems to contradict the marginalization and privatization of religion in the public sphere (Stolow, 2010). Habermas stated in October 2001, shortly after the attacks of September 11 in the United States, that the world had entered a “post-secular age”. He did not mean that societies would return to a “pre-secular age”, but was indicating a world in which religious and secular worldviews could live together and enter into dialogue with each other (Gorski & Altinordu, 2008, p. 56; Habermas, 2001). In any case, the presence of religion in the public sphere proved inescapable.

Religions do not comply with the script that religion should be privatized (Casanova, 1994, 2013). According to Casanova, the idea of privatizing religion is part of the ideology of secularism, but religions can also be de-privatized (Casanova, 1994; Paul, 2018). The presence of religion in the “mainstream” media such as television and newspapers, as well as their visibility on social media can be viewed from the angle of the active agency of religious organizations and leaders and their determination to be present and visible in the media and in public debates. Moreover, their presence needs to be analyzed from the perspective of the transformation of the media sphere.

As I show in the following sections, the notion on authenticity is especially relevant

increasing importance of stories and pamphlets, which enabled the formation of the nation as a community that is both real and imaginary. He applies the same term to describe imagined communities of religions, which are based on a common sacred language, sacred texts, stories, and rituals (Anderson, 2006, p. 12). The nature of the imagined community is thus defined by shared connections that can unite communities of people that do not have to know each other personally.

because it resonates with contemporary consumer culture, media celebrities, and the personalization and branding of religious leaders.

Mediatization

Religious authority has been affected by larger transformations in the media landscape. In Chapter 1, I briefly discussed the notion of mediatization and its relationship with the concept of mediation. In these sections, I look specifically at changes in the media in relation to broader cultural and social changes, which are reflected in the concept of mediatization. I use the definition of Couldry and Hepp, who argue that

mediatization is a concept that helps us to analyse critically the interrelation between changes in media and communications on the one hand, and changes in culture and society on the other. It is not a concept of ‘media effects’, but rather a dialectical – two way – concept for understanding how the transformations of culture are interwoven with specific changes in media and communications. (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 35)

Mediatization therefore describes transformation and change in society as a dialectical process where it is not only about changes in media and communication but also about changes in society and culture. Couldry and Hepp (2017) distinguish three waves of mediatization. These waves do not describe how different forms of media replace each other, but how the media landscape becomes richer and more complex and becomes increasingly intertwined with social and cultural processes.

The first wave of mediatization is the mechanization of communication (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 40). The invention of the printing press around 1440 made it much easier to circulate new ideas through printed books and pamphlets. The print industry has had a profound influence on the dissemination of ideas, the relationship between church and state, and the transformation of the religious landscape, as we will discuss in more detail in this chapter.

The second wave, electrification, once again radically changed the media environment. Couldry and Hepp define electrification as the transformation of



communication media into technology and infrastructure based on electronic transmission (2017, p. 44). Unlike mechanization, this wave was not limited to a specific medium, but contains a whole variety of media, such as the telegraph, the telephone, the gramophone, film, radio, and television, and to a certain extent, photography.²⁴

The third wave of mediatization is distinguished by Couldry and Hepp as digitalization (2017, p. 49). This is related to the rise of computers, digital networks, and the internet. The digital platforms are directly connected to the world of consumption and interaction. The rise of smartphones and social media has further contributed to a commercialized space where social life is increasingly taking place. The present exchange of data transmission is unparalleled compared to a few decades ago. Old print and electronic media have not disappeared but have been digitized to a large extent. Characteristics of digitization are the possibilities to achieve so-called “target audiences” as opposed to mass media, and the embedding of media in everyday activities (such as navigation, buying things, etc.). At the same time, media consumers increasingly become producers, blurring the boundaries between consumers and producers (Jenkins, 2006). Digital media make individualized patterns of access, monitoring, and responding increasingly possible. The digitization has resulted in an increasing dependence on digital infrastructure for connections between people. Moreover, the social platforms enable new kinds of networked publics in which people can gather around topics of common interest (Boyd, 2010; Papacharissi, 2015).²⁵

24 The technology of analogue photography does not require electricity, but analogue cameras have increasingly used electronics for lightening and for the adjustment of the lenses.

25 Couldry and Hepp also describe a coming fourth wave, datafication (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 52). Gathering of data for everything from search engines, social media, artificial intelligence, and the “internet of things” could be characterized as part of the datafication of everyday life, and its consequences are hard to grasp. The datafication also touches on the importance of followers and likes for the algorithms of Facebook and Instagram (owned by Facebook) and how, where, and how often they appear in the

Couldry and Hepp state that we are now living in an age of “deep mediatization”: everything we do depends on the media we use. For social processes we are increasingly dependent on communication infrastructure. Social, political, economic, and religious structures are gradually intertwined with technological means of communication. The emergence of the internet and dependence on social media are part of this process (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, pp. 37–38).

The distinct waves of mediatization have also resulted in the transformation of religious authority. The mechanization of communication in the first wave demonstrates a profound transformation of religious authority. Before the printing press, there was a link between Christianity, the power of the state, and a culture in which manuscripts were central to the exchange of knowledge. The Roman Catholic Church was able to maintain its authority because of its crucial role and control over knowledge, culture, and religion, including its strong power position in relation to the state. The rise of the print industry, the Reformation, and the increasing independence of states from the institution of the church put an end to this (Schofield Clark, 2016, p. 255). In Western Europe, the invention of the art of printing, in combination with the increasing literacy of the emerging bourgeoisie, was therefore an outright threat to the Roman Catholic Church, which for a long time had a monopoly on media, information, and the interpretation of the Bible (Thompson, 1995). Hoover states that before the invention of the art of printing the church had the symbolic and financial capital to legitimize its authority. The church dominated the media sphere because it could control the means of production and the circulation of information. With the invention of the printing press, publishers became relatively autonomous, and they were able to distribute information without the permission of the church (Hoover, 2016, p. 12). In summary, the first wave of mechanization of the media landscape meant that the production of printed text and illustrations on a large scale put the monopoly on information on the part of the traditional religious authorities at risk,

timeline of its users. Datafication affords the surveillance of the users of digital devices and the monetization of user data (Zuboff, 2019).



because they could no longer control this information. Religious authority became fragmented among a variety of religious groups that promoted different lifestyles and had alternative avenues of access to scriptural truth (Thompson, 1995, p. 51).

The fragmentation of religious authority and the diminished grip on political power is also related to the expansion of knowledge systems: the rise of the natural sciences and the emergence of more liberal universities independent of religious institutions. In addition, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a print industry emerged that was independent of the power of the state and of the church. This added to the provision of information and the emergence of newspapers that provided critical commentary on political and social issues. The freedom of the press is certainly related to the development of the modern constitutional state and the ability of citizens to freely discuss matters of public interest (Anderson, 2006; Habermas, 1984).

The electrification and digitalization of communication have further transformed the social, cultural, and religious landscape in the second wave of mediatization. Hoover states that the media sphere has become all-encompassing in practices of consumption, reception, “popular remediation”, and cultural circulation (Hoover, 2016, p. 18). The contemporary media sphere can be seen as the ecology of global media platforms, networks, and organizations. The concept of the media sphere is similar to Habermas’s concept of the public sphere, but it is much more comprehensive than that. The media sphere consists “of commodities, practices, resources, capacities, and affordances” (Hoover, 2016, p. 16). Technological developments and the emergence of global commercial media networks foster and shape this media sphere. As Hoover states, “The media sphere has become determinative of the outlines and boundaries of practice and action, and its capacities and affordances are increasingly defining what is possible for traditional religious institutions” (Hoover, 2016, p. 19). Concerning the relationship between the media sphere and religion, he argues that they can no longer be seen as two separate domains in society.

Religious authorities in the past have often conflicted with one of the important realities of the current Western era: that media are inevitable and are everywhere (Hoover, 2016, p. 24). In addition, Hoover argues that the ever-increasing emphasis on the idea of personal moral autonomy, self-identity, and meaning making (which he

argues have been reinforced by modern media) means that religious institutions and religious leaders can no longer rely on a self-evident authority (see also Giddens, 1991; Hoover, 2016, p. 25). With the rise of the culture of authenticity, religious leaders have to reckon with the (assumed) power and autonomy of their audiences. They must avoid conflicting with “common and tacit assumptions of media practices of their audiences” (Hoover, 2016, p. 26). He emphasizes the great power of audiences and sees the context of the cultural marketplace (facilitated by the media sphere), as determining how religious authority can be produced. This increasingly involves media culture (which is determined by practices) rather than structures. Developments in digital and social media show that new dimensions are emerging where religious meaning, affordances, possibilities, and action are generated (Hoover, 2016, p. 18). Heidi Campbell argues that the internet has become a domain of conflicts and shifts in power and authority (Campbell, 2012, pp. 74–76). The malleability of online spaces disrupts established authority structures and roles and presents opportunities for new sources of authority. She argues that even though the internet creates complexities and challenges for traditional religious authorities, it also presents new prospects for them to maintain or reclaim influence. The shift of religious authority online raises larger questions such as who has the true legitimate voice of a particular religious tradition or community. Campbell (2020a) states that algorithmic authority has become increasingly relevant. The concept of “algorithmic authority” can be used to show how algorithms, instead of human agency, can be a source of authority. Algorithmic authority is “the trust in algorithms to direct human action and to verify information, in place of trusting or preferring human authority” (Lustig & Nardi, 2015, p. 1). Heidi Campbell argues that algorithms, based on rankings in terms of followers, likes, and other kinds of interaction can provide authority (Campbell, 2020a, p. 31). Within the context of Instagram, this can mean, based on the algorithms, photos of religious leaders that are more visible than others. Greater visibility can contribute to the mediation of authority of these leaders. In this study, the visibility of religious leaders on Instagram is important for their ability to reach audiences online, and, as noted above, this visibility is dependent on the algorithms of Instagram that includes, among others, the number of followers, and the number of likes and comments of



individual posts (Frier, 2020). As I argue in my methodology, I do not analyze the role of algorithms of, but focus instead on the content of Instagram posts. However, the selection of religious leaders has been informed by number of followers, therefore, that their visibility on Instagram is at least partly informed by algorithmic authority should be acknowledged.

Campbell argues that the logic of algorithmic authority challenges the conceptualization of authority by Weber and other sociologists, because it is not based on the performance of institutions or individuals, or the expertise of institutions, but “on the numerical and quantifiable affirmation of the community members within the group” (Campbell, 2020a, p. 31). Although algorithmic authority can be seen as a distinct form of authority, it can also be related to Weber’s description of rational-legal authority (Lustig & Nardi, 2015, p. 3). While the way in which algorithms works is partly seen as a “black box” that is mostly invisible for the average user, these algorithms are part of institutional structures of large, globally operating, and commercial institutions. Algorithms themselves can be seen as laws and rules that have been programmed by humans, and that are based on assumptions and biases of these human programmers. The algorithms are by no means neutral, and are dependent on cultural assumptions and capitalist ideologies (Airoldi & Jokka, 2022; Gillespie, 2014). As authors like Castells (1996, 2007) and Zuboff (2019) argue, the rise of these large global corporations can be seen as the way in which corporations do at least partly replace the role of nation-states. The ability of traditional religious institutions and entrepreneurial religious enterprises to invest in digital strategy, marketing, and branding to use these digital platforms and the algorithms that govern them to their advantage can be seen as the institutional power of these organizations and as a continuity with the past (Hope Cheong, 2021, p. 92). As I show in Chapter 3, this institutional dimension is largely rendered invisible because the content on platforms like Instagram involves the personalization of religious authority and the focus on the construction of authenticity, while the institutional dimensions are being downplayed.

In sum, the waves of mediatization have resulted in a media sphere that is independent of religious institutions, which has enhanced the fragmentation of

religious authority. Religious leaders who operate in the media sphere have to reckon with the media culture, preferences of audiences, as well as with the increasing importance of algorithms in the digital realm.

The Personalization of Religious Authority

One of the current characteristics of the authority of religious leaders is personalization, which is related to secularization and mediatization. How does the personalization of religious authority relate to the ideal types of Weber, and how does this affect the authority of religious leaders? In the following sections I elaborate on how Gauthier (2021) and Hoover (2016) discuss the relevance of Weber's ideal types, and how this classification relates to official and personal authority.

Gauthier argues that Western societies have changed tremendously since the time of Weber. The “nationalist-state regimes” with a strong emphasis on the formation of national institutions including religious ones, stand in stark contrast to the more recent period in which societies are dominated by neoliberal capitalism and consumer culture (Gauthier, 2021, p. 44).

According to Gauthier, capitalism is a revolutionary force that erodes traditional expressions and institutions because it promotes progress and perpetual change. While Weber conceived capitalism primarily as rational, especially in relation to production, he failed to see how capitalism also had emotional dimensions and how it was connected to identity, belonging, and meaning (Gauthier, 2021, p. 38). This argument has forcefully been made by Colin Campbell, who argues that the consumption of goods and services is deeply based on hedonism, status, and the “invention of the self” (C. Campbell, 1987). Consumerism and expressive individualism are thus closely related.

The quest for authenticity is at the heart of consumer culture: products and services are presented as resources for authentic experiences (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Moreover, similar to the personal spiritual quest, consumer culture has favored choices as something existential (Gauthier, 2021, p. 32). The ethics of authenticity have, according to Gauthier, an in-built critique of institutions. He argues that the emergence of authenticity culture and the shift towards personal experiences as



“the measure of truth” align with the rise of new charismatic modes of authority (Gauthier, 2021, p. 35). In modern consumption, symbolism and hedonism are more prominent (Campbell, 1987). Marketing and branding are being used to build brands as personalities to enhance their charisma. According to Gauthier, at the core of its ideology are so-called counter-cultural romantic values that Taylor describes as well, such as autonomy, creativity, self-realization, and authenticity. Contrary to what Weber assumed, charismatic authority is not foreign to capitalist economies, but is ingrained within them (Gauthier, 2021, p. 38). Gauthier argues that Weber did not foresee how the vocational aspect of charismatic authority could represent the ideal model of the entrepreneur. Further, he relates the revolutionary character of capitalism to the rise of charismatic types of authority which are also inherently revolutionary and unstable. Steve Jobs of Apple and Elon Musk are examples of entrepreneurial and charismatic leaders who have proclaimed to have developed revolutionary products that, in turn, would transform the world. Thus, charismatic authority defines the most important contemporary religious phenomena. It is, according to Gauthier, a structural characteristic of globalized capitalist cultures. The “traditional religious expressions and formerly powerfully religious institutions are being contested by new sources of authority from the media and business world” (Gauthier, 2021, p. 35). Religious institutions that grow accommodate to the culture of authenticity. At the same time, established religious institutions try to be more “marketable”, as is the case with the presentation and the branding of the current pope. Other examples Gauthier mentions are famous religious and spiritual leaders, like Amr Khaled (Egypt) and Aah Gym (Indonesia) who have built multimedia empires, as well as personality-driven mega churches in the United States, and worldwide influential figures like the Oprah Winfrey, the Dalai Lama, Deepak Chopra, and Eckhart Tolle (Gauthier, 2021, p. 35). These gurus present Orientalized and holistic spiritualities, as well as coaching and self-help.

While Gauthier focuses on the inherent characteristics of capitalism and the market regime, Hoover also considers the context of the current media sphere and the affordances of media technology. In his approach of re-conceptualizing religious authority, Hoover evaluates Max Weber’s three sources of authority: tradition, law,

and charisma (Hoover, 2016, p. 20). Authority must be plausible for and accepted by communities in which authority figures operate. Weber argues that the role of consent deserves more attention when it comes to establishing and maintaining systems of authority. Invoking Habermas, Hoover argues that even in Weber's time there was an emergence of publics becoming more reflexive and autonomous, so none of these three sources could necessarily rely on consent.

Therefore, Hoover states that within the current media sphere, "legal authority" no longer fits the culture of personal autonomy in making moral choices. The question then is how traditional and charismatic authority function within the current media sphere.²⁶ For both forms, the preferences of the audiences and market mechanisms must be considered. He argues that traditional authority is only convincing for audiences if it is perceived as being authentic. This ties in with the current regimes of authenticity described by Taylor and Gauthier (Gauthier, 2021; Taylor, 2007). Hoover and Gauthier agree that charismatic authority is the most effective source of authority within contemporary western consumer culture. Gauthier relates this to the revolutionary character of capitalism, which requires charismatic and entrepreneurial authority figures. Hoover states that charisma as the perceived special qualities does not disappear, but that the power assigned to charismatic authority depends on the audiences in the marketplace. He refers to Meyer's concept of the sensational forms and argues that those performances that are acceptable to audiences within the media sphere are a key factor in understanding how charismatic authority is constructed and legitimized. Therefore, he departs from the understanding of charismatic authority as individuals with (perceived) special qualities (Hoover, 2016; Verrips & Meyer,

26 Further, Hoover pays little attention to more subtle forms of bureaucratic/legal authority that are central to marketing. Schofield Clark also states that more attention is needed to new forms of bureaucracy and less visible forms of control (Schofield Clark, 2016, p. 263). These take place through codes, algorithms, and protocols. This can be seen as new forms of rational-legal authority, and it also aligns with what Campbell refers to as "algorithmic authority" (Campbell, 2020, p. 29).



2008). According to Hoover, though tradition can still be a source of authority, religious institutions that always based their authority on tradition and hierarchy (the authority of office) now attempt to be more marketable and have emphasized the authentic power of religious tradition. What does this mean for the authority of religious leaders? It shows a shift from the authority of office to personal authority. In terms of the representation of the sacred, the personal authority of religious leaders is based on personal spirituality and authenticity. The expertise related to personal authority is based on demonstrated competence. As has been mentioned in the previous chapter, effectiveness is an important source for personal authority. The emphasis on personal authority means that the institutional, rational-legal dimensions of authority will most likely be downplayed in favor of a focus on strong, charismatic, and inspirational leaders. The personalization of authority can be seen within the context of celebrification and personal branding.

The Celebrification of Religious Leaders

Contemporary media culture is closely intertwined with celebrity culture. Globally known celebrities include people from the media and entertainment industry, athletes, royals, politicians, and religious leaders as well. In what has been described as a spiritual marketplace (Roof, 1999), many religious leaders position themselves as celebrities. They deliberately use media to gain recognition in the public sphere by offering moral guidance and symbolic content.

What is a celebrity? A celebrity, as an “ideal-type”, is a person who is able to attract media attention over an extended period of time (Hendriks, 2017). The celebrity industry emerged from the rise of media such as the radio, television, and cinema and can be considered as a modern type of fame that is essentially commercial. The emergence of digital platforms has caused a democratization of celebrity culture, since anyone who is able to use these platforms can generate media attention.

There are important similarities between celebrities and charismatic leaders. Most striking is that the public is interested in their persona and private lives, and that they are able to arouse the emotions of the public. To connect with their audiences, they have to appear “real” and authentic – even though this kind of authenticity is often

prepared, staged, and scripted (Reijnders et al., 2012). Charismatic authority should not be confused with celebrity status, although religious leaders who are considered charismatic can be celebrities as well (Hendriks, 2017). Where the charismatic leader is in a position of authority recognized by their followers, a celebrity is not. A charismatic leader is supposed to possess extraordinary qualities and/or a special access to higher truths or the divine. This is not necessarily the case for celebrities. Charismatic dynamics can occur in the periphery of the media, while celebrities are intrinsically tied to the media.

Celebrities inform lifestyle choices and are often used in the advertising and marketing industry. Thus, celebrities are an important part of consumer society. In the same way, religious celebrities inform lifestyle choices that relate to religion and spirituality. Ward shows how celebrity increasingly shapes how people make a connection to more formal religious traditions. This can happen through famous religious leaders such as the pope, the Dalai Lama, Desmond Tutu, and others, but also through people like Oprah Winfrey or Lady Gaga. Ward suggests that celebrities such as Oprah Winfrey represent a new kind authority that comes from media visibility: celebrity authority (Ward, 2020, p. 99).²⁷

As countless religious leaders have proven, charismatic authorities can obtain celebrity status when they draw media attention (Hendriks, 2017, p. 455; Jackson, 2003; Moore, 1995). Pastors of megachurches have particularly invested heavily here and are described by Lee and Sinitiere as “holy mavericks”, entrepreneurial pastors (Lee & Sinitiere, 2009). They use digital platforms to establish their authority on social media. To meet the spiritual needs, these leaders respond by means of motivating “storytelling” of a vision and a higher goal (Hope Cheong, 2016). The identities of the leaders are interwoven with organizational stories: by celebrating their heroes and heroines, by the performances of rituals and by the production of organizational symbols. The constructed identity and lifestyle of the leader enables audiences to

27 In the case of politics, the “celebrification” of political narratives shows how important the personal dimension of politics has become (Bennett, 2012; Sennett, 1978).



relate to the leader in the construction of their spiritual identity. Consequently, the celebrification of religious leaders has become part of the dynamics of the spiritual marketplace.

The Branding of Religious leaders

Another dimension, which is closely related to celebrification, is personal branding. In the context of a competitive and global spiritual arena, religious leaders need different strategies to attract and maintain followers. As comprehensive worldviews and practices have lost their appeal, religious leaders need to consider the fact that people construct their spirituality individually, resulting in heterogeneous ideas and practices (Jain, 2015, p. 45; Jameson, 1991, p. 96). The challenge for religious leaders and organizations is therefore to present themselves in such a way that they are perceived as relevant to their audience. One way to realize this is by tapping into cultural values and ideas that are important to the public (Hoover, 2016; Horsfield, 2016). In this context, religious leaders need to position and “brand” themselves to build their authority (Hope Cheong, 2016).

Brands have become part of the system by which we order the world (Rakow, 2015, p. 218).²⁸ It is not just big corporations like Nike, Apple, and Coca Cola that behave like brands; religious organizations apply branding strategies used in the corporate world to compete within the spiritual marketplace (Einstein, 2008; Moore, 1995). Branding is related to marketing. According to Einstein, marketing is an approach based on understanding consumer wants and effectively engaging them with the right channels. Marketers strive to uncover consumer needs and desires to shape narratives that align with what people want to identify with. Renowned marketing expert Ogilvy

28 Branding can be seen as the propagation of a certain ideology that connects both to enforcing the values of the ruling class and to the taste of popular culture (Holt, 2002). It can easily be argued that branding has always existed, but the emergence of consumer society and the media sphere in the 20th century and the sophistication of advertising and branding is the context in which I will conceptualize branding.

defines branding as “the intangible sum of product’s attributes: its name, packaging, and price, its history, its reputation, and the way it is advertised” (Einstein, 2008, p. 70). Brands have become part of a lifestyle that where products are more than just commodities. For products to become brands they need to be filled with meaning. Brands characterize contemporary culture; the way people understand themselves and the stories people tell themselves. (Rakow, 2015, p. 218). Brand relations define the cultural context of everyday life, identity, and affective relationships (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 4) and therefore part of the culture of authenticity. Within the context of consumer culture, brands are important for the construction of personal identity and affective relationships. As products with excessive meaning, brands are offered to help people shape their own “expressive individualism”. Ward suggests that brands operate as a personality that invites affective engagement from the public through processes of identification and the formation of group identities (Ward, 2020, p. 151).

Brands are strongly associated with aesthetics and style. It is not surprising that large companies spend considerable amounts of energy and money on the aesthetic dimension of their brand by creating appealing logos, graphics, and audiovisual content in a particular style that appeals to their audiences and resonates with the “personality” of their brand. It is also not surprising that brands connect with celebrities from the world of sports, entertainment, and music. Celebrities can be used to promote a product that is associated with a specific lifestyle that suits the audiences that companies want to reach.

The way people imagine their social surroundings is an important basis for the concept of branding. Toivettula argues that imaginaries can act as “technologies of governance”. Imaginaries produce conceptions of what is possible and can thus steer decision making (see also Arvidsson, 2006; Toivettula, 2021). When brands draw upon imaginaries of choice, freedom, and independence (which are part of the ethics of expressive individualism), they can persuade people to make choices that are favorable to their (corporate) aims, such as buying goods or services. This strategy can also be employed by religious organizations to encourage and persuade potential followers to affiliate with their organization, to attend religious events, or to use religious goods and services. When brands do successfully draw upon social imaginaries of their



audiences, they can serve to legitimate their authority and increase their influence, power, and following.

Personal branding, or self-branding, is the mediated presentation and promotion of the self which aims to show individual value and differentiate this value from others (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 147).²⁹ The “technology of the self” for self-improvement contains brand management strategies, self-promotion, and marketing (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 55; Brooks & Wee, 2010).³⁰ One of the paradoxes of personal branding is the pressure to present oneself as attractive and successful in such a way that it is perceived as being “authentic” at the same time. This means that with regard to personal branding, the boundaries between one’s professional and personal life have become porous. The performance of the authentic self therefore requires constantly

29 The concept of personal branding was popularized by the Peters (1997) and has become one of the key concepts in management literature. Branding expert Kaputa defines a personal brand as “a special promise of value that sets you apart” (Kaputa, 2012, p. 7). She argues that a brand is distinctive, different from others, and so a personal brand should be as well. The “packaging” includes everything: the visual image, the story, the words, hairstyle, and clothes. Moreover, personal brands are always on stage, no matter where they are, what they do, and what media they use. People should be able to translate who they are, what they want and what they do into sound bites and clear and appealing stories.

30 Couldry and Hepp distinguish several resources for personal branding: self-narration, self-presentation, and self-maintenance (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 157). In the context of social media, self-narration consists of the stories people tell through posts on several platforms that somehow form a coherent story. Self-presentation can refer to both actions and activities as well as to the visual representation of a certain lifestyle. The feedback that people receive on social media through likes, comments, and followers helps them to adapt their identities and practices. Self-evaluation and self-monitoring are indispensable parts of the process. By means of likes, comments, views and followers, people can evaluate their personal brand.

negotiating and making choices between one's private and public life. Banet-Weiser argues that self-branding is an expression of a moral framework in which the public gains access to authenticity. Building and maintaining a personal brand involves increasingly non-material labor: adapting to cultural and artistic standards, fashion, the public opinion (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 72). Thus, it involves creating and performing a certain lifestyle that supports certain goals within personal and professional life.

Because people have, for a considerable part, ceased to identify with institutions and denominations, attention is increasingly focused on charismatic and attractive leadership figures. This can be seen in media and entertainment as well as in politics, where celebrities and world leaders dominate the global stages (Castells, 2007; Lalancette & Raynauld, 2017; Rieser, 2013). The legitimacy of the leader therefore depends on the media capital they build, and here they depend on the consumers and the affordances of the platforms they are active on. At the same time, it is an illusion to think that the consumer is a free individual. By means of marketing and brand optimization, an attempt is made to connect as closely as possible to the wishes and desires, which are culturally determined. In addition, it is possible to use the data that likes, followers, and shares provide to program and refine the brand ever more carefully (Arvidsson, 2006, p. 127).

In the case of religious leaders, their personal identity is used to strategically position the leader's brand.³¹ Because constant media attention is essential, achieving celebrity status serves to generate and maintain audiences who are interested in the religious leader. With the rise of social media, many religious leaders use social media as a platform to create their personal brand. The "self" of religious leaders

31 The reformer Martin Luther (1483–1546) is an example of someone who knew how to use personal branding. According to historian Pettegree, he was so successful because he was able to spread his ideas in an unparalleled way by means of easy-to-read, professionally printed tracts that were distributed and sold in large numbers in Europe. In doing so, Luther also made heavy use of engravings by the famous painter Lucas Cranach to reinforce his message and his own public brand (Pettegree, 2016).



therefore becomes increasingly dependent on the digital infrastructure of websites and social media platforms. In order to reach interested audiences, leaders must create a connection that aligns with their audiences' values, convictions, and lifestyles. In order to become a successful brand, religious leaders need to be visible and differentiate themselves from others. In terms of Bourdieu, they need to amass social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). That is why religious leaders with a consistent public image, an appealing lifestyle, and an aura of charisma and authenticity can gain public influence and win the audiences.

The Aestheticization of Religious Leaders

The practices of celebrification and branding are closely related to the employment of appealing aesthetics. De Witte et al. (2015) argue that the competition for followers has resulted in the strategic use of aesthetics in the forms of convincing rhetoric, performance, and imagery. We can frame these interactions in terms of performances and impression management (Goffman, 1969). The importance of aesthetics further aligns with a culture of expressive individualism and consumer culture, which has resulted in the importance of creating a lifestyle of which aesthetics are an essential dimension (Bourdieu, 1983; Featherstone, 1991). Moreover, the context of deep mediatization means that aesthetics in terms of image and sound are often mediated through technological devices such as television, radio, and all kinds of digital devices like computers, tablets, and smartphones (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). The following elaborates on these developments by focusing on the aesthetic dimension of brands and celebrities, as well as on the affordances of audiovisual and digital media.

As I argued before, religious leaders who have been successful in using global media outlets have become global celebrities (Hope Cheong, 2016). Audiences are known to be particularly interested in the lifestyle of celebrities, including fashion, physical appearances and bodily regimes, manners, their personal relationships, their holidays, their houses, and so on. (Hendriks, 2017; Reijnders et al., 2012; Ward, 2020). From the perspective of the branding of organizations and corporations, and the personal branding of their leaders, aesthetics has always been an essential part of the “packaging”. Personal branding advisers emphasize the importance of impression

management in terms of the way people dress and how they appear on digital platforms by using strategically chosen profile images and social media posts (Brooks & Wee, 2010; Kaputa, 2012).

The affordances of social media platforms, as well as the improvements of smartphones for capturing photographs and videos have further strengthened the opportunities for digital identity construction in which the aesthetics of (moving) images have become available to users of platforms such as Facebook, Pinterest, YouTube, and Instagram. Social media platforms offer specific formats for posts by presenting an interface for the composing posts, viewing posts, and reacting to posts. Audiovisual content in the form of photographs, (short) videos, in combination with captions hashtags allow for the representation of the self by using cameras, photo and video editing tools and apps to modify and improve the aesthetic style and quality of the footage. This has led to the rise of social media influencers, who distinguish themselves by their personal style and lifestyle (Ward, 2020).

Depending on religious traditions and sensational forms, some sense perceptions are authorized, and others are downplayed. The differences between the Roman Catholic and Protestant approach to liturgy, buildings, and objects are a clear example of these distinctions (Horsfield, 2015; Verrips & Meyer, 2008). It depends on the nature and identity of a religious tradition as to how their organizations and authority figures accept, negotiate, or even reject the possibilities of audiovisual media and technologies. Within a tradition, we also encounter different media strategies. Within the context of Christianity, Pentecostal and evangelical churches and organizations have successfully used new media technologies in order to reach existing and new audiences (Bowler, 2013; Klaver, 2015; Meyer, 2010; Moore, 1995).³² It is revealing that evangelical and Pentecostal pastors are much more

32 Ward states, “The Christian Celebrity Worship leader is manufactured by a process of production that is based around the use of technology and an aesthetic that has been taken from the staging of large-scale rock concerts. Contemporary worship



likely to use the full range of media channels than mainline Protestant pastors, where the use of imagery and spectacle seems to conflict with the importance of scripture and reason. However, Gauthier argues that traditional institutions, such as the Roman Catholic Church (which has a more positive approach to many sensational forms) are catching up with practices of media and business to promote the figure of the pope (Gauthier, 2021, p. 35; Lanuza, 2017). Islamic leaders like Tariq Ramadan and Amr Khaled have become popular because of their fashionable, accessible, and “cool” performances and appearances in the media (Aishima, 2016; Van De Bovenkamp, 2015; Wise, 2003). Further, religious leaders representing “Eastern” religion and spirituality have been successful in marketing their traditions and movements to a “Western” audience (Carrette & King, 2005; Jain, 2015).

An attractive personal style together with the use of acceptable sensational forms that are aligned with the tradition can enhance an effective brand. When religious leaders are successfully branded as celebrities, the aesthetic dimension of their lifestyles can convince audiences to follow and connect to these leaders. In short, the use of aesthetic persuasion and the performance of a personal (life-) style in terms of religious leaders is relevant within the context of a spiritual marketplace and the contemporary media sphere. Audiovisual and digital media afford audiovisual communication. Social media platforms offer specific formats for digital posts in which images and videos need to be attractive and striking to capture the attention of audiences. When religious leaders tap into the dynamics of celebrity and brand culture, they have to negotiate to what extent and how they use aesthetic and sensational forms that both align with the media sphere as well as their tradition. The aesthetic dimensions in terms of their clothes, their physical appearance, their manners, and the way they interact can be represented

relies on sophisticated technology, not simply in terms of musical equipment and sound reproduction: technology extends to the sophisticated use of visual displays and staging” (Ward, 2020, pp. 149–150).

and performed in the media sphere. The construction of authority based aestheticized performances associated with personal brands and celebrity culture on multimedia and digital platforms might therefore strengthen their authority.³³

Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed theories about the transformation of religious authority. The authority of religious leaders is always connected to the social reality in which it is expressed. I elaborated two sociological perspectives: secularization and mediatization. How do these two developments relate to the transformation of religious authority? What can be said is that they have not led to the disappearance of religious authority within the public sphere. Rather, they seem to have resulted in an emphasis on personalized, authentic, and charismatic authority. Authority based on religious tradition or institutional grounds is clearly less self-evident than in the past. The culture of authenticity and self-expression that has become especially mainstream since the 1960s, has been part of this. This has resulted in a situation where religious leaders must construct their authority within a cultural context that resembles a marketplace.

There are many options, in which secular humanism and numerous religious traditions and spiritual movements offer possibilities for meaning. The context of consumer culture translates, among other things, into the practices of branding and celebrification. Brands and celebrities are inspirations for lifestyle and identity

33 Within the context of evangelical Christianity, Ward argues, “Adopting the forms of communication that different media platforms and technologies have made available has led to success in terms of numbers and economic benefit, but it has also reshaped how authority and leadership functions in these churches. Media profile has given individuals a platform and a position that arises from their abilities to perform to the camera and project themselves through social media. These processes sideline more traditional structures of authority and allow individuals to build their own Churches and organisations without reference to denominations.” (Ward, 2020, p. 152)



construction and offer resources for the personal spiritual quest. Important dimensions of branding and celebrity culture are the emphasis on aesthetic style that fits within the culture of self-expression and the context of the current media sphere. For Weber's typology, it means that bureaucratic-legal authority does not fit well with the current regimes of authenticity, and that traditional authority must be positioned as "authentic" and pure. For charismatic authority it is important to connect to values of entrepreneurship. For both traditional and charismatic authority the media sphere offers many opportunities to attract audiences by using the aesthetics while considering the confinement of their religious tradition. Social media offer countless opportunities for (would-be) celebrities, brands, and religious leaders as well. Users of Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram and countless other social networks invoke worlds of symbolic meaning using the textual, audiovisual, and interactive affordances of these platforms. When religious leaders brand themselves as charismatic and authentic media celebrities, they can attract audiences that recognize their religious authority.

3.

Instagram

Introduction

In this chapter, I introduce the platform Instagram. As my investigation concerns the ways religious leaders mediate their authority on Instagram, it is important to know what Instagram is, how it was developed, and who uses this platform. Therefore, I introduce the most important characteristics of Instagram, contextualize the emergence of this platform within larger developments in photography, as well as examining how it has been used by celebrities, brands, and organizations. Finally, I pay attention to practices of datafication and surveillance that are an essential part of the revenue model of Instagram. In terms of this chapter, it is important to note that I will not elaborate on how Instagram might be used to construct authority for religious leaders, since this will be covered in the methodological and empirical chapters. The insights from this chapter offer a better understanding of the context of Instagram and how it relates to the opportunities and challenges for religious leaders.

What Is Instagram?

Social networks like Facebook and Twitter offer opportunities for personal and professional communication and expression, but Instagram is unique in the sense that the presentation of the self is centered around the presence of photographs.³⁴ Instagram was founded and developed by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger in

34 Frier argues in her book *No filter: The Inside Story of Instagram*, “Facebook is for connecting with friends and family, YouTube is for watching videos, Twitter is for sharing what’s happening now, and Instagram is for sharing visual moments” (2020, p. 234).



2010. The app allowed users to post a square photograph within a framed space and to enhance photographs (often taken with the relatively low-quality cameras of smartphones) with several photographic filters. The app itself was to be an example of plain simplicity. From the beginning, the founders encouraged artists and photographers to share inspiring images and stories. At the time Instagram was launched, smartphone camera images were of mediocre quality, but Instagram's artistic filters (also a feature of the photo app Hipstamatic) were an important tool for creating interesting and inspiring photographs.³⁵ The entire experience of the app was geared towards allowing users to be fully involved with the content. Among other things, this meant that, unlike Facebook, the app was very simple, without countless notifications and extra options. Instagram did not allow posts to link to other web articles and did not have a "re-post" option, like Twitter (the re-tweet). The emphasis on images and the relatively simple interface were features that made Instagram different from Facebook and Twitter. On Instagram, the emphasis was not on posting as much as possible, but on posting quality images that were beautiful and inspiring.³⁶ In practice, the new platform encouraged people to take countless photographs in search of the perfect and "instagrammable" photograph for their Instagram account. The rise of Instagram and its ever-increasing popularity led to certain vacation destinations becoming more popular, with sometimes large groups of tourists gathering in one place to take the perfect photograph. With its emphasis on beauty, creativity, and authentic and personalized content, the app seamlessly aligned itself with contemporary values of expressive individualism (Gauthier, 2021; Taylor, 2007).³⁷

35 The app Hipstamatic works in a similar way to Instagram but has never gained the same level of popularity.

36 "An Instagram user's path to success was obvious, based on benchmarking against others. All you had to do was create the right kind of content: visually stimulating, with a reflective but optimistic caption, inspiring some level of admiration" (Frier, 2020, p. 233).

37 Frier states, "On Instagram, people wanted to post things that would attract the

In April 2012, the company was bought by Facebook for 1 billion dollars, which was, at that time, an astronomical amount of money for a startup that had not generated any revenues. The founders of Instagram were able to develop the app relatively independently from Facebook, although they could rely on the resources of the Facebook company. Instagram rapidly became popular among the younger generation, especially those in the 18–35 age group. The platform has grown quickly in popularity and in terms of the number of users, had 300 million users in December 2014, which grew to 500 million users in June 2016, and over a billion users in 2018 (Constine, 2018).

Throughout the years, several features have been added to Instagram, such as different ratios for photographs and videos. When the social media platform Snapchat became an important competitor, Instagram Stories (in 2016) was added, which allows people to post photographs in storylines that disappear after 24 hours. Because of its popularity with younger people and its visual character, Instagram has become increasingly important for the fashion, lifestyle, and entertainment industry. In 2018, the founders of Instagram stepped down from their position and left Facebook, which was partly due to conflicts between themselves and Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg over the future of Instagram (Frier, 2020). This has not hindered the growth of Instagram, which has become the fourth most popular social platform in the world with 1.3 billion active users in 2019.³⁸

Instagram and Photography

Historically, Instagram can be situated against the background of the history and the transformation of photography (Gunthert, 2018; Serafinelli, 2018). Since the development of photography in the early nineteenth century and with the development

adoration of an audience. If an image was beautiful, well designed, or inspirational, it would do well on the app” (Frier, 2020, p. 80).

38 The first is Facebook with almost 3 billion users, followed by YouTube and WhatsApp (Statistica, 2019).



of relatively cheap and simple cameras, photography became widely accessible for unskilled amateurs.³⁹ This allowed for so-called vernacular productions, which often consisted of snapshots of family, celebrations, and holidays. These photographs were shared among friends and family (Serafinelli, 2018, p. 50). With the development of digital cameras, photography digitalized as well. From the 1990s onwards, internet connections and digital platforms allowed the sharing of photographs, of which Google Picasa and Flickr were especially popular in the early 2000s (Serafinelli, 2018, p. 51). The development of the smartphone can be seen as the convergence of many functions and devices, such as photographic cameras, computers, radios, and so forth. The smartphone allows for taking, editing, and posting photographs, although the first cameras on smartphones did not have the high-quality cameras that are common today. Later, digital apps combined the sharing of photographs with social networking. Thus, Instagram can be seen as part of the wave of digitization as described the previous chapter. The platform takes advantage of the integrated cameras of smartphones and the possibilities of sharing images via the Internet (Couldry & Hepp, 2017).

The convergence of functions and the disappearing boundaries between producers and consumers of content on social media has resulted in what Jenkins calls “convergence culture”. People can share digital content across multiple channels, which changes the relationships between corporate media and a more bottom-up participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006, p. 243; see also Serafinelli, 2018, p. 48). Altogether, the affordances of Instagram can be characterized by an emphasis on visual content, the digital platform on which it runs, and the mobility of smartphones (Serafinelli, 2018, p. 1). The popularity of Instagram is part of a broader trend of what can be called the “hyperrepresentation of the world” (Serafinelli, 2018, p. 49). Instagram has facilitated and stimulated its users to see everyday life as a sequence of events that in

39 At the end of the 19th century, George Eastman and his company Kodak introduced snapshot photography to the masses with the slogan, “You push the button, we do the rest” (Serafinelli, 2018, p. 49).

parts can be captured, recorded, filmed, and shared by mobile devices. From its early beginnings, Instagram has been a smartphone application that is able to combine physical mobility with immediacy: photographs can be taken, edited, published, and shared in any location where a wireless network is available (Serafinelli, 2018, p. 161).

Celebrities, Influencers, and Brands

Though Instagram is a platform that is used by “ordinary” individuals, it is also strategically being used by organizations, brands, and celebrities for marketing and branding purposes. The active presence of people like Justin Bieber, Selena Gomez, the Kardashian family, Ariana Grande, and many others, underlines how the medium has become increasingly important for media celebrities. This has also led to an increasing number of people presenting themselves as micro-celebrities and influencers by using personal branding techniques to market themselves. Contemporary practices of posing for photographs, taking selfies, and sharing photographs resonate with Goffman’s theory of impression management (Bullock, 2018; Eckel, Ruchatz, & Wirth, 2018; Goffman, 1969; Serafinelli, 2018, p. 8).⁴⁰ The aesthetic and visual dimension of Instagram affords visual rhetoric: the images and photographs can be used in order to influence audiences for commercial, political, or religious purposes

40 Serafinelli contrasts the “natural process” of identity formation through using social media with the strategic use of “Instagram celebrities” who are being paid to endorse certain brands (Serafinelli, 2018, p. 176). She argues, “In this case, identity formation does not appear as a natural process; rather, it respects and follows marketing strategies putting the user in the position of clinging to the customised style. This phenomenon can be compared to Goffman’s interpretation of *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), where people share their behaviors in relation to the different circumstances, as if they perform a theatrical play. Through this reading, the cooperation with brands results in self-expression that is misleading and limitative, constricting users within a precise style and users’ experience.” (Serafinelli, 2018, p. 176)



(Lalancette & Raynauld, 2017; Ward, 2020).⁴¹ However, using Instagram does mean following unwritten rules: shameless self-promotion is not done, rather posts should come across as inspiring, creative and honest.⁴² On Instagram one needs to present oneself in such a way that followers perceive the posts as being authentic and real. This paradox is a condition for being a successful brand which ties in with what has been described earlier as the culture of authenticity and the exploitation of contemporary cultural values by businesses and institutions (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Instagram's huge popularity and global reach serves celebrities and influencers in their efforts to monetize their presence in the form of product sales, sponsorships, and so on. Some people are even able to build a complete business around Instagram (Smitshuijsen, 2020).⁴³ Instagram has also proved to be an increasingly important

41 Lalancette and Raynauld apply the three dimensions of rhetoric of Aristotle, ethos, pathos, and logos, to the way Justin Trudeau uses Instagram. They argue, "It should be noted that the logics of image-making rest on three broader rhetorical underpinnings: (1) the ethos, related to the image of the political leader; (2) the pathos, associated with mobilization of affect; and (3) the logos, connected to logic and cognitive strategies" (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2017, pp. 3–4). Their argument is similar to Meyer's theory on the aesthetics of persuasion (2010).

42 Frier writes, "Instagram was not supposed to be about obvious self-promotion, Systrom said. It was about creativity, design, and experiences. And honesty. 'I think what makes it so good is the honesty that comes with the photos,' Systrom said at Le Web, the French tech conference, in June 2012. 'The companies and brands that use Instagram – the best and most successful one – are the ones where it comes across as honest and genuine.' The word choice was telling: 'where it comes across as honest and genuine.' It's not that Systrom was against selling products on Instagram. He just wanted them to do it in a way that masked their financial incentives." (Frier, 2020, p. 83)

43 Within this context, the story of the former Australian model Essena O'Neill is interesting. She revealed how her posts were not spontaneous, but meticulously selected and edited photographs that often contained branded content (Speed, 2015).

medium for commercial brands, especially those in the beauty, fashion, and lifestyle industries, including interior design, wellness, and meditation, to reach audiences and potential consumers.

Government organizations and politicians have also acknowledged the value of Instagram for branding and reputation management. For example, the Israeli military is using Instagram and other social media for a charm offensive and for displaying and framing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Kuntsman & Stein, 2015). The use of Instagram by politicians fits within broader developments of mediatization and the personalization of politicians (Campus, 2010) which offers useful insights regarding religious leaders. Politicians have used the opportunities and the “logics” of media to profile themselves for media audiences in staged media events and become media celebrities.⁴⁴ The visual dimension of platforms like Facebook and Instagram enables politicians to brand themselves as relatable human beings by showing photographs that reveal the (staged) private and emotional dimensions of their lives (Ekman & Widholm, 2017; Metz et al., 2019). At the same time, the importance of political parties has diminished in favor of an emphasis on the character, style, and personal leadership qualities of the politician. Moreover, social media platforms enable politicians to campaign and profile themselves continually, and not just around elections. Since social media ignores the boundaries between the professional and

44 Campus (2010) argues that the emphasis on the personality of politicians has been an important characteristic of the American presidential elections, but that it is also visible in Europe, in the campaigns of Berlusconi and Sarkozy. In those campaigns, the focus lay clearly on the personalities and the presentation of leadership candidates, while the positions of the political parties were secondary. Moreover, both Berlusconi and Sarkozy used professional media marketing campaigns to profile and position themselves. As a more recent illustration, Emanuel Macron can be named as an example who presented himself as an independent candidate and who was able to generate media attention concerning both his professional ambitions as well as his personal life.



private sides of politicians, they support the suggestion of authentic forms of political communication. Mireille Lalancette and Vincent Raynauld argue that images play a critical role in evaluating political leaders. According to them, voters are looking for characteristics such as honesty, intelligence, kindness, sincerity, and reliability among politicians.⁴⁵ In order to meet voters' wishes, politicians use "political image-making" (Bennett, 2016): the strategic use of information that can be constructed with visual and verbal messages. The visual character of Instagram makes it not only a suitable medium for political image-making but for religious image-making as well. The messages inspire the identification of the public with certain characteristics of an individual, an organization, a phenomenon, or a certain matter. The broader goal is to generate, maintain, sharpen, and strengthen positive perceptions of the public. Just as the personalization of politics fostered by using Instagram has led to greater emphasis on the image over substance and personality over ideology, it can be expected that this will apply to religious leaders as well.

Datafication and Surveillance

Though Instagram appears to be a visual, friendly, and positive digital platform, one should not be naïve about its technological and commercial dimensions. When Instagram was bought by Facebook, the focus at first was not on selling advertisements, but on the numerical growth of the medium for advertising (Frier, 2020). Although Instagram for a long time still considered itself independent, even after it was bought by Facebook, the reins were increasingly tightened. This resulted in Instagram's data streams being increasingly shared and integrated with Facebook's data, against the background of Facebook being plagued by ongoing privacy scandals and misuse of user data, especially around Cambridge Analytica in 2016 (Cadwalladr & Graham-

45 Intelligence, reliability, and kindness might not always appeal to all kinds of voters, though, considering the social media messages of Donald Trump. Trump's rise could be seen as a combination of charismatic demagoguery and "controversy-infused celebrity status" (Hendriks, 2017, p. 363).

Harrison, 2018). The overall positive reputation of Instagram was severely damaged when it revealed that Instagram was also used by Russian troll-farms to spread fake news around the 2016 US elections, among others (Frier, 2020, p. 251). Just like other commercial digital platforms, such as Google and Twitter, Instagram has exploited their user behavior for datafication and monetization: every single act of scrolling, liking, posting, or commenting on the platform is being monitored and analyzed for targeted advertisements.⁴⁶ Gathering of data from search engines, social media, artificial intelligence, and the internet of things can be characterized as part of the datafication of everyday life. It has led to a situation where humans are all participating in what Zuboff has famously called “surveillance capitalism” (Zuboff, 2019). Zuboff and many others raise concerns because surveillance capitalism has serious implications for privacy, the functioning of democracy, and the power imbalance between big technology companies and individual citizens (Ess, 2020). This is also because the way the algorithms work and how they influence what users see in their timeline remains a secret (O’Neil, 2016). Since Instagram is part of Meta (the new name of Facebook since 2021), this data can be shared and connected to Facebook data and can be sold and used for commercial and also political purposes, including the spreading of fake news (Singer & Emerson, 2018). Furthermore, various studies, including studies by Meta itself, showed that Instagram can cause a negative self-image among teenagers, but that Meta has long preferred (large) profit over the well-being of its users.⁴⁷ Thus, Instagram is by no means a neutral platform for communication but

46 This development has been described by Couldry and Hepp as the fourth wave of mediatization: datafication (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 52). See Chapter 2 for the discussion of mediatization.

47 The Facebook whistleblower Frances Hagan has revealed more about the way Facebook and Instagram deal with issues around democracy and mental health: “Among the documents released are studies showing that Instagram, which Facebook bought in 2012, negatively affects young users’ mental health, particularly young girls. According to one Facebook study leaked by Haugen, 13.5% of U.K. teen girls said Instagram



is part of the larger commercial technological institutions that capitalize on human behavior. Using Instagram for marketing and branding purposes serves the business model of Meta. When religious organizations use these platforms, they expose their followers to digital surveillance and other negative side-effects. This raises ethical questions about the relationship between religion, media, and surveillance capitalism, which I discuss in the conclusion of this thesis.

Conclusion

Instagram has become one of the most popular and widely used social platforms. Since its appearance in 2010, its design and visual culture have favored beautiful, personal, and apparently authentic content suitable for the smartphone and other mobile devices. The emergence of Instagram can be contextualized in a broader development of the popularization and digitalization of photography. Besides ordinary users, Instagram is being used by influencers, people from the media and entertainment industries, commercial brands, and businesses, as well as governmental organizations and politicians. Various studies have shown that the personalization of politicians and the use of strategic image-making strengthen the authority of political leaders. As I demonstrate in the empirical chapters, religious leaders, churches, and religious organizations have embraced Instagram as well. The audiences on Instagram are important for the performance of all kinds of media celebrities and can be used for branding, reputation management, and the marketing of all kinds of goods and services. Finally, Instagram is not a neutral platform; the invisible technological dimensions in the form of the datafication and surveillance mean that user behavior is exploited and monetized in an unprecedented way. This does not prevent individuals, organizations, and brands from using it to their advantage.

worsens suicidal thoughts. Another leaked study found 17% of teen girls say their eating disorders got worse after Instagram use.” (Romo, 2021)

4.

Methodology I: Selection, Data Collection, Coding

Introduction

In this chapter, I explain the methodology employed to address the research question, *How do globally operating religious leaders use Instagram to mediate their authority?* Since the methodology of this research needs a detailed description, I have decided to split the methodology into two chapters. In this chapter, I set out how I selected the particular religious leaders as case studies, the use of content analysis, the data collection, and the employment of software. I further discuss the categorizing and coding of the collection of images that has been used for the empirical analysis. In the second methodological chapter, I elaborate on the semiotic analysis, interpretation, and positionality of the researcher, and relevant issues concerning research ethics.

Selection of the Religious Leaders

One of the questions that needs to be answered in the empirical chapters is how Instagram is used by religious leaders to construct their authority. This depends on their personality, their personal style, and the religious tradition they represent. Moreover, employing Instagram involves digital creatives, such as professional communication and social media specialists and strategists (Campbell, 2020). The photographs of Instagram are crucial in the communication with audiences on this specific platform. Religious traditions and movements that favor the use of images and other visual elements might be more apt to adopt Instagram. One can imagine that a religious tradition that suspects images and considers them to be inferior might be less inclined to use Instagram. In comparison, Twitter, which is much more text-based, could be preferred by more “intellectual” traditions that stress reading and



listening. For example, in mainstream Protestantism and the Reformed tradition, we encounter no clear examples of popular leaders who are active on Instagram and have amassed hundreds of thousands of followers. This may be due to a more cognitive mode of religion that characterizes these dominations (Horsfield, 2015, p. 245).⁴⁸ This contrasts greatly with the Instagram accounts of Roman Catholic bishops and priests who can draw on repositories of richly decorated churches, statues, icons, and other religious images that are integral to Roman Catholic “sensational forms”. Considering the affordances of Instagram, religious leaders must draw upon cultural values that are related to individuality, aesthetics, expressivism, and authenticity. Further, they need to address those elements that appeal to religious traditions and religious communities. Within the context of the media sphere, and more specifically, of social media platforms, we assume that different social actors draw upon different and sometimes conflicting cultural values. For example, followers of Pope Francis on Instagram consist of critical atheist journalists, devout Brazilian young Catholics, and “spiritual” non-affiliated teenagers in Germany. Though they all unconsciously could take modern cultural values for granted, they will have different perspectives on the authority of Pope Francis, or the role which those religious institutions should have in the public realm. Because of the emphasis on individual choice and the spiritual quest, the question of authority in relation to contemporary cultural values is complex.

I selected four globally recognized religious leaders as case studies for this research. The selection of religious leaders was influenced by the way religious

48 For example, in my initial search for religious leaders, I did not find many highly influential Reformed Protestant ministers on Instagram. Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer New York, and a highly influential Christian leader within the Reformed and evangelical world, has used Instagram since September 2016, and his posts mainly include images on which texts and photos of book sections are posted (@timkellernyc). The same argument might be applied to traditional Islamic leaders, although entrepreneurial Muslim leaders such as Amr Khaled use social media like Instagram extensively.

traditions and movements have embraced social media like Instagram. The fact that many religious and spiritual leaders are active on Instagram might not come as a surprise. The audience for Instagram is significant, and it can be seen as one of the multiple media outlets in the marketplace worthy of attention. Moreover, Instagram affords the presentation and performance of personal authority. Instagram could serve as a platform on which religious leaders can position and brand themselves by using appealing visual rhetoric in order to convince the audiences of their authority (Hoover, 2016; Lalancette & Raynauld, 2017; Witte et al., 2015).

I used several criteria in the selection of the four leaders. First, because this research investigates global religious leaders, I looked for religious leaders who could be said to have a global influence and a global audience. In the context of datafication and the power of algorithms, the number of followers is certainly relevant in assessing this (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Campbell, 2020a), so I decided to search for leaders with at least 100,000 followers.⁴⁹ Furthermore, each of the leaders should represent a distinct major religious tradition or movement. Another criterion used was language: the image descriptions on Instagram should be English.⁵⁰ Though the images are the primary focus of the analysis, the textual descriptions of the posts serve to contextualize the images. The selection of posts in English further means that the audiences of these accounts are most likely people who master this language or for whom it is their primary or secondary language. The criterion of English language implies a western bias in the selection of the religious leaders. Of course, this has consequences for the overall conclusions that can be drawn from the case studies as

49 Since 2016, the number of followers of all the leaders that I selected has grown significantly, which is probably partly due to the growing popularity of Instagram.

50 This last criterion meant that I could not find an Islamic leader who met these criteria. I considered analyzing Amr Khaled, an Egyptian television preacher. However, because his posts were in Arabic, it was too time-consuming to use his Instagram posts for this research. It would be very interesting as a follow-up of this research to analyze Islamic leaders on Instagram.



will be reflected upon. These considerations have led to the selection of the following four leaders: Deepak Chopra, Brian Houston, the 14th Dalai Lama, and Pope Francis. Interestingly, these leaders originate from four different continents.

First, I chose Deepak Chopra (born in India in 1946), one of the most prominent leaders within the “New Age” spirituality that draws its inspiration from the “East”. In New Age, or post-traditional spirituality, external authority is rejected in favor of the authority of the “Higher Self”. This does not mean that there are no authoritative figures. The rise of gurus and spiritual leaders correlates with the increasing popularity of New Age spiritualities since the 1960s. New Age perspectives have become commodified and commercialized through books, videos, and retreats, among other things. In the context of commercialization (Carrette & King, 2005; Jain, 2015), spiritual entrepreneurs have been actively present in all kinds of media and have also created their own online channels in order to promote their books and events. Therefore, it is relevant to explore how Deepak’s presence on Instagram, as a representative of post traditional spirituality, constructs his authority as a religious leader, and how this relates to his spiritual and commercial activities.

Senior pastor Brian Houston of Hillsong (born in New Zealand in 1954) was chosen as a representation of Pentecostal megachurch leaders, as founder and (former) global pastor of the Australian Hillsong Church. This church is renowned among evangelicals and Pentecostals because of its music and through the extensive use of new media (Klaver, 2015).⁵¹ As American evangelical leaders have already received considerable academic attention, I chose an evangelical church leader outside of the United States. Before starting the data collection, it was striking to notice how many evangelical and Pentecostal leaders were active on Instagram. This concurs with

51 During the finalization of this thesis, major events and changes have happened in Hillsong Church, including changes in leadership. The chapter on Brian Houston discusses some of these changes, but it is not unlikely that when this thesis is published, new developments and revelations will be able to add more accurate perspectives on the leadership of Brian Houston.

their strong missionary drive and their previous use of radio, television, websites, and other social media (Horsfield, 2015; Lee & Sinitiere, 2009). Moreover, Instagram aligns with an emphasis on visual aesthetics and the importance of emotion and authenticity. Many of the more prominent evangelical and Pentecostal leaders can be characterized as *pastorpreneurs*, religious entrepreneurs, who have founded a church, or who have contributed greatly to the growth of a church, and have gained a large audience worldwide (Jackson, 2003; Klaver, 2015). They have come to personalize the church that they represent. This is the case for megachurch pastors like Joel Osteen and Joseph Prince, as well as for Brian Houston.

The 14th Dalai Lama (born in Tibet, 1935) was an evident choice, because he has become the most popular representative of Buddhism in the Western world. He is present on several social media channels, including Instagram. Since his exile in 1959, the Dalai Lama has been lobbying for the case of Tibet, and has promoted Buddhism and compassion, an exposure that marks a pronounced shift from the isolated life of Tibet prior to his exile. (Goldstein, 1999). His popularity has increased as a result of receiving the Nobel Peace Prize (1989) and due to the movie *Seven Years in Tibet* (1997). In using Instagram, the Dalai Lama has to represent his authority in such a way that it supports his popularity as a public figure, as well as the prominence of Eastern spirituality in contemporary Western culture.

A final and obvious person to analyze was Pope Francis (born in Argentina, 1936), who has quickly become one of the most notable religious leaders in the media after his election in 2013. The position of the Pope as the official head of the largest church in the world has been supported by the Vatican's media channels, including Instagram. The missionary drive that is present within the evangelical and Pentecostal movement can also be found in the Roman Catholic Church (Magielse, 2017). Moreover, in the Roman Catholic tradition, images have been very important in the form of icons, paintings, and statues (Horsfield, 2015, pp. 141–159). The use of appealing photographs and videos on Instagram supports the authority of Pope Francis as the representative of the continuation of tradition and as a charismatic leader who can revive the Roman Catholic Church.

The choice for these four leaders on Instagram allows for a new approach in terms of



making a comparison between long existing and new religious and spiritual traditions and movements. It enhances the understanding of the construction of religious authority within the context of visual social media. However, the case selection also has limitations: all four leaders are male and the youngest was born in 1954. Moreover, as will be clear from the analysis, these four leaders are each considered to be “charismatic” leaders and celebrities who are able to draw large audiences, which concurs with the affordances of Instagram. However, the similarities in gender and age will serve to focus on the differences of the religious contexts and help to limit the complexity of comparing the four. Future research should include more diversity in gender, age, and religious backgrounds.

Mixed Methods

I collected my data from November 1, 2016, until October 31, 2017. The one-year period enabled me to cover religious festivals on the annual calendar. The analysis of four leaders during the period of one year resulted in a large dataset with hundreds of images. For practical reasons, it was not possible to study each of the images in depth. Therefore, it was necessary to find methods that would allow me to both make sense of large amounts of data and to study individual images thoroughly. Moreover, when I started this project in 2015, my empirical research was an explorative endeavor. At that time, there were relatively few publications that detailed how to conduct research on Instagram within the context of media, religion, and culture.⁵² The empirical cases in the literature concerning digital media and the construction of authority of religious leaders were mainly focused on the discursive dimension of social media.⁵³

52 An interesting exception is a study of 2015, which presents findings of the use of the hashtag #funeral on Instagram as a commemorative and memorialization practice (Gibbs et al., 2015).

53 Important methodological overviews in the relatively young discipline of digital religion are Sariya, Cheruvallil-Contractor and Shakkour, 2016; Helland, 2005; Krüger, 2005. A study called *Digital Methodologies in the Sociology of Religion* (Sariya, Cheruvallil-

Moreover, most studies that have targeted religious leaders have analyzed Twitter posts (Campbell, 2007; Codone, 2014; Guzek, 2015; Hope Cheong, 2014, 2016).

To analyze how religious leaders construct and mediate their authority on Instagram, several aspects of the communication process needed to be considered. I had to choose whether I should focus on the producers, the (media) text, and/or the audiences involved. Constitutive studies concerning advertising and persuasive imagery focus on the semiotic analysis of media texts (Dyer, 1982; Rose, 2016; Williamson, 1978). I decided to study the Instagram posts as semiotic texts by deconstructing the ways performance and representation of authority have been visualized. This means that several other useful approaches have not been included. These include audience research, which could be studied by interacting with the audience, either by focusing on the online interaction in the form of likes and comments or by focus groups research. Both methods might enhance the understanding of the interpretation of Instagram posts by audiences. Moreover, network analysis could provide more insights focusing on important hashtags, or the behavior of specific users of Instagram. Research on the producers of the content of the Instagram posts, both in the form of communication teams or the actual religious leaders, might help to understand what strategic choices are made in the selection and production of images. However, besides expected practical issues like access and the cooperation of producers, the question remains whether those outcomes might lead to reliable results. This is related to interests the producers have in the positioning of the religious leaders. The above-mentioned methods could be employed in future research.

When I started my research, videos were already a part of Instagram and used by the four leaders as well. However, I excluded videos from the analysis for several

Contractor & Shakkour, 2016), for example contained no systematic approach towards studying large amounts of visual data on social media. Research in the field of religion and online media concerned mostly discourse analysis, virtual ethnography, and the study of computer games.



reasons. First, in order to store the empirical material, I needed to take screenshots on Instagram, but downloading videos from Instagram is, unfortunately, not possible. Certainly, most social media posts (including videos) remain available, but that cannot be guaranteed as people might delete older posts, Instagram might change its policy, or the URLs of its posts, for example. Furthermore, videos consist of moving images, sound, music, and sometimes text as well. Video analysis demands a very careful and time-consuming analysis of the frames in a video, which makes it hard to analyze a considerable number of videos. It requires another methodological approach compared to the study of photographs and images. Therefore, the empirical research is limited to static images and photographs on Instagram.

This resulted in a “mixed methods” approach that combines interpretative coding of a sample of 100 images of the dataset for each leader with in-depth semiotic analysis of individual images. The mixed methods that I employed allow for comparisons of large numbers of social media posts as well as in-depth interpretation. Interpretative coding, in which trends, patterns, and absences are investigated, adds to the bigger picture (Deacon et al., 1999; Rose, 2016, p. 85). In the coding process, visual elements have been labeled and quantified. The goal of this quantification has not been to arrive at positivistic “facts” but to arrive at a clearer understanding of the context and content of the dataset. Semiotic analysis is the second step in the analysis, which I discuss in the next chapter.

Moreover, because of the richness of each individual image and the importance of a careful and in-depth analysis, I included a sample of 100 images for each leader. The Instagram account of the Dalai Lama is an exception, since the number of Instagram posts on his account between November 1, 2016 and October 31, 2017 was 57. As I explain in the chapter on the Dalai Lama, I analyzed all Instagram posts and have not selected a specific sequence. The images were selected by systematic sampling, which means that from the dataset, I selected every n th post (with a regular interval between the posts) in the list of files, depending on the size of the dataset. For example, in a dataset of 400 photos, the 1st, 5th, 9th, 13th photos would be included in the sample. The number of 100 images should not be seen as a quantitatively representative sample but a sample of sufficient size to analyze recurrent patterns and themes in the

Instagram posts of each religious leader.⁵⁴ Consequently, comparisons between the use of Instagram by the four leaders is made possible. In addition to the systematic sample, I also analyzed a longer series of 15 images to see whether new insights might come from a chronological sequence. Where the sample provided insight into the various themes and types of messages, a sequence provides insight into the possible chronological relationship between messages that follow each other. A sequence can contain storylines that could enhance the construction of authority. For each leader I choose a sequence from the complete data set that seemed to be socially and culturally significant within the context of the construction of authority. For example, for Brian Houston, the (former) leader of the evangelical/Pentecostal Hillsong Church, I choose a sequence that included a concert tour in Israel, since the land of Israel is of major symbolic and theological importance in the evangelical and Pentecostal world. The justification of these choices is discussed in the empirical chapters.

Data Collection and Software

The data collection for the analysis of the four religious leaders during the period of one year resulted in a large digital dataset with hundreds of images files. The Instagram posts were captured by making screenshots on my computer. There was no software available that was completely suitable for the goals I had for my analysis. ATLAS.ti and other coding programs allow for the analysis of images but are not able to show an overview of large numbers of images. Therefore, I used two programs: Adobe Bridge and ATLAS.ti.

The file organization tool Adobe Bridge (Figure 4.1) enables an overview of the total dataset by showing thumbnails of the images and by offering basic categorizing

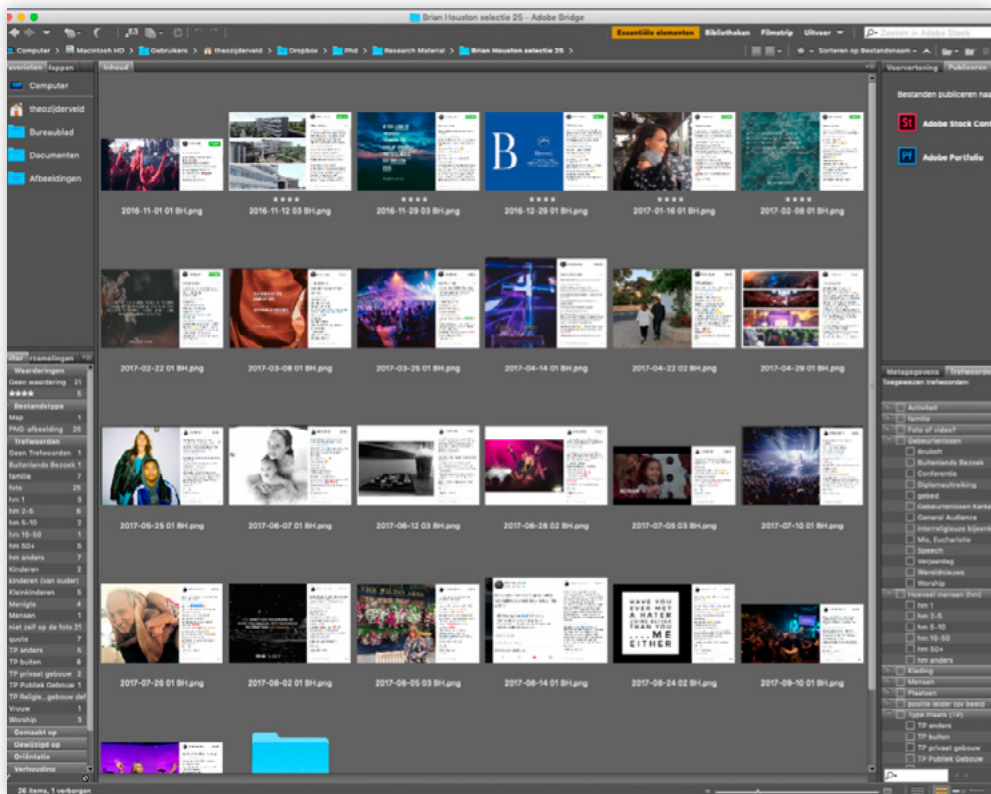
54 I initially decided to take a sample of 25 Instagram posts for each leader, which I subsequently widened to 50, and finally to 100 images. To find patterns, similarities and differences, a larger sample proved to be necessary. Moreover, the insights during the coding and the theoretical reflection enabled me to enlarge the sample and analyze more images more efficiently than in the initial phases of the empirical research.



options. This program, part of the Adobe suite that also includes Photoshop, is a program for organizing digital media files and providing them with metadata. I used Adobe Bridge to code the entire dataset of screenshots to filter them, based on criteria such as the type of activity, the number of people in the photograph, clothing, locations, and other criteria. However, it appeared that Adobe Bridge is a good program for categorizing large amounts of files but is less suitable for detailed analysis.

Figure 4.1

Adobe Bridge showing the dataset of Brian Houston



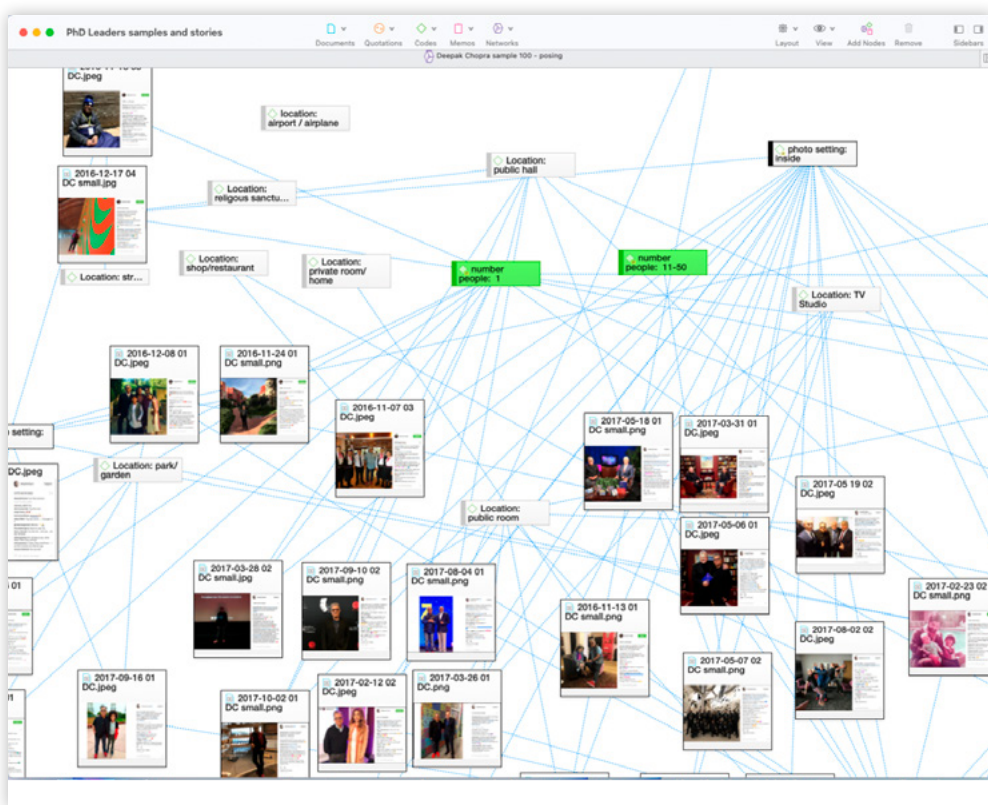
For more advanced coding, dedicated academic coding software was necessary. Based on the recommendations of other researchers, I chose ATLAS.ti (Figure 4.2) for the sample and the sequence of each leader. ATLAS.ti is designed for the qualitative



analysis of digital datasets. I optimized those images for this program so that the file size would not pose performance problems for my computer. Finally, I imported these screenshots into ATLAS.ti for further analysis. The use of Adobe Bridge meant that it was always possible to consult the initial dataset without being drowned in the large number of images. ATLAS.ti enabled coding, analysis and interpretation, and the comparison of the results on a more systematic and advanced level.

Figure 4.2

ATLAS.ti – this screenshot shows a network analysis of Instagram posts of Deepak Chopra



Categorizing and Coding

Since the visualization of religious leaders is especially important in this research, the properties and behaviors of each leader have been translated into several codes. They



were refined by several “coding cycles” (Saldana, 2009).⁵⁵ The process of creating these codes has been a mix of deductive and inductive approaches. The theory on authority, materiality, performance, and mediation (as described in Chapters 1 and 2) is the foundation for the initial coding process, but my observations of the Instagram posts and the reflection on those observations influenced the codes as well. Further, the process of looking, observing, analyzing, writing, reflecting, discussion is a cyclical and a “messy” process in which theory and acts of observations are intertwined. The coding process was refined during the writing and re-writing of this thesis, and the results of the final codes were completed in the summer of 2022. Based on the theoretical framework and observations, as well as on insights from visual semiotic analysis (on which I elaborate in the next chapter), the following categories were chosen for the content analysis of the Instagram posts of the four religious leaders: (1) Instagram post type, (2) the visual presence and (3) performance of the religious leader, (4) other people visible in the post, (5) the spaces and places, and (6) objects that are visible in the post. Categories are the “umbrella” of the codes that I used in ATLAS.ti. For example, the category “buildings” could include “church”, “house”, or “train station”. The categories were translated into several codes that can be found in Appendix A. I explain each of the six categories below.

1. Instagram Post Types

The categorization of the Instagram post types does not relate directly to the construction of authority but serves as a basic categorization of the visual content. The posts on Instagram were categorized in the software program ATLAS.ti in different types: photographs, collages, inspirational quotations, and announcements. This categorization was made based on the exploration of the dataset of the four religious leaders. From the images, photographs form most of the Instagram posts.

55 In the process of coding, the codes themselves have been refined based on the analysis of the material, the theory, discussions, and new insights that arise from writing and discussing the work with others.

In addition to photographs, other kinds of images that are presented in the timeline of religious leaders are photo collages, in which multiple photographs in one post are visible, though this occurs quite rarely. Further, other important posts are composed of inspirational texts with a photograph or a designed image in the background. Finally, religious leaders also use images and texts for announcements of events, products, or services.

2. The Visual Presence of the Religious Leader

Not all Instagram posts portray a physical, embodied representation of the religious leaders. The visibility of the religious leader (and his interaction with others) is therefore not self-evident. However, for the analysis of the construction of authority of the religious leaders, the posts in which the leader is physically present are the most relevant ones because these posts reveal how leaders (re-)present themselves in a visual, embodied way. Thus, the visibility of the leader as a binary category (yes/no) has been used. Furthermore, if the religious leader is visible, I describe how much space their appearance covers in the frame of the Instagram posts. Sometimes the religious leader has been photographed from a large distance, resulting in the fact that he is hardly visible, sometimes he appears in a close-up, which often results in the fact that his physical appearance fills a large part of the image. This resulted in codes that cover the visibility of the religious leaders, the amount of space that his appearance covers within the frame of the photograph, and the distance between the camera and the religious leader.

3. The Performance of the Religious Leader

I conceptualized the performance of the religious leader on Instagram as the way in which he is visually present on Instagram. The performance of the religious leader includes his clothes, his facial expressions, his actions, and his interactions with other people. Drawing on the framework of Goffman, performances include the way in which people perform certain roles in a social setting (Goffman, 1969). As has been discussed in Chapter 1, performance is key in the construction of the authority of religious leaders. When social performances are visible on Instagram, I suggest that



they have been deliberately photographed, selected, and posted. This means that the performance of the religious leader has not only taken place during a certain moment at a certain place, but that this performance is always a mediated performance, deliberately shared with hundreds of thousands of followers. Politicians use Instagram in order to appear spontaneous, kind, honest, and trustworthy (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2017). This kind of image-making is also relevant for religious leaders, since staged authenticity (even though this authenticity can be the result of a careful selection of many photographs) is part of the Instagram image culture (Frier, 2020; Serafinelli, 2018). Moreover, the actions and interactions of the leaders, such as performing mass or reading from sacred texts, can represent religious rituals or religious performances. This resulted in codes that cover the gaze of the religious leader, (possible) physical contact with other people, actions such as blessing, praying, posing, or speaking, and (if visible and recognizable) his facial expression. Part of the category “performance” are the clothes and the interaction of the leader, on which I elaborate below.

Clothes

Clothes are relevant signifiers for religious leaders. Especially in photographs, clothes are important to distinguish oneself from others. Instagram itself is a medium that is being used heavily by fashion bloggers, models, and celebrities in the realms of acting, music, and so on. In modern society, clothes are an important part of the expression of personal identity. Moreover, clothes are associated with style and fashion. Barthes argues that fashion is a signification system in which objects or clothes can signify social, cultural, and political structures (Barthes, 1983; Bruggeman, 2014). Within the realm of religion and spirituality, clothes often have religious connotations. In most religious traditions, religious leaders and professionals distinguish themselves from lay believers by the way they dress. Clothes can also signify religious values, such as poverty or sanctity, but also authority. Just as in the military, where certain symbols represent a position in the hierarchy, in the Roman Catholic Church clothes represent the position within the hierarchy of the church or the religious order. Dress can be related to certain rituals or moments or to specific religious ceremonies. Liturgical clothes are connected to both traditional and bureaucratic

authority, which is connected to authority of office (Carroll, 2011).⁵⁶ Thus, clothes are important signifiers for the position of a religious leader within a traditional hierarchical religious organization.

Yet, the use of “contemporary” clothes by some religious leaders signifies certain values as well. Those who align with fashion trends express individuality, freedom of choice, uniqueness, and authenticity. Of course, these mentioned concepts are constructs, and often are part of the marketing and branding of the fashion industry. It is clear, however, that within processes of modernization, fashion has become increasingly important in the construction of personal style and personal identity (Featherstone, 1991, p. 86). Clothes are more than commodities; just like brands, they open a symbolic realm of stories, associations, and imaginaries. Especially in churches where there are no specific rules about clothes, or where there could be aversion against certain traditions or rules, the way leaders dress can be seen as a way of representing their “authentic” or nonconformist style. This resulted in codes that distinguish “traditional” and “modern” clothes, as well as the distinction between simple traditional and richly decorated traditional clothes, and the distinction between modern informal and modern formal clothes.

Interaction

The actions and interactions of the leader on Instagram affirm the personal authority of the religious leader, which aligns with the personalization of leadership and authority. Moreover, the emphasis on personal profiles, celebrity and influencer culture, and personal branding on social media has resulted in a focus on personal experiences and emotions (Ward, 2020). To operationalize this theme, I coded the facial expressions of the religious leader: is he smiling, is he looking serious, are his eyes closed, and so forth. I also paid attention to his gaze: who or what is he looking at? Further, I

56 “Traditional authority is reflected in the view of ministry as an *office, entered through ordination by either a denomination or a congregation*” (Carroll, 2011, p. 31). See the theoretical framework for the discussion on this concept.



coded his actions, such as having a conversation, giving a speech, praying, performing a religious ritual, waving to the crowds, or touching or embracing someone. The actions and performances of religious leaders are often part of interactions with other people. In the categorization of the themes, I focused here on the attention afforded to the religious leader, while the theme “the visibility of (other) people” covers who the other people are, how many people are visible and what they are doing.

4. The Visibility of (Other) People

In the photographs that I analyzed, the religious leader is, most of the time, not the only person who is visible. The category “the visibility of other people” describes the characteristics of other people in the photograph. The theme has overlap with the interaction of religious leaders because the interaction of these leaders in a photograph often involves other human actors. I counted how many (other) people are visible in Instagram posts and how they can be characterized. The number of people may indicate whether the post portrays an intimate setting with a small number of people contrasted to events with large crowds. Moreover, the appearance of people helps to indicate what their role in the post is: are they followers, clergy members, family members, or perhaps celebrities or state officials? I also considered what the actions of these people are: what are they doing? Their actions, which were translated into codes, include greeting, taking photographs, or participating in a religious ritual, to name a few.

5. Spaces and Places

Religious leaders on Instagram do often appear in visibly recognizable locations and places. The visible spaces and places in the Instagram posts shape the setting in which they perform. As Knott argues, “attention to the location and movement of religion in space, the impact of geography on religion, and the interaction of religious and spatial issues is vital for making sense of historical as well as contemporary religions” (Knott, 2013, p. 1113). How do certain places and places relate to the construction of authority? Instagram posts portray spaces and places, of which some are very recognizable because of iconic buildings or other objects. Often, the caption of a post

mentions the specific location where a photograph has been taken. Besides the visual representation of places, there is the opportunity to use geo-tags to locate Instagram posts. Places refer to geographical locations. Some places have a strong symbolic meaning, such as Jerusalem, Lhasa, Mecca, or Rome, which are considered centers of religious traditions. These places are shaped by religious institutions, discourses, and practices (Knott, 2013, p. 1103).

Spaces contain three dimensions in which objects have a certain position or direction and in which events can take place.⁵⁷ Spaces can represent the sacred. Spaces like church buildings or temples are religious spaces in which forms, objects, symbols, and rituals that take place can be part of sensational forms. These spaces are said to have, more than other spaces, the ability to invoke the transcendent. Religious spaces can be centers of religious activities and religious power. Churches, temples, cathedrals, or squares often relate to specific religious traditions, such as St. Peter's Square in Rome. These spaces can be representations of traditional religious authority. Moreover, "natural" scenery such as mountains, sunsets, oceans, or forests can signify transcendence and the power of the divine. However, it is too simple to make distinctions between sacred and profane or religious and secular spaces based on their architecture, scenery, or religious symbols (Knott, 2013, p. 1107). For example, charismatic churches like Hillsong use multi-purpose buildings and turn them into spaces of worship using audiovisual technology. The signification of spaces and places for the representation and performance of religious authority depends on the overall setting of the Instagram posts and the religious tradition or movement

57 Lena Rose uses the term "religious place-making" as the way in which religious actors make place meaningful (Rose, 2019, p. 87). She argues that the ideas of the "local" and "global" are related to imaginaries of places that include dimensions of power that are unevenly distributed. She analyzes the friction of evangelical Palestinian Christians who are part of the "global" faith family of the evangelical Christian community, and the representation of Israel/Palestine of the Hillsong United band. This example will be further elaborated upon in the chapter about Brian Houston.



of the religious leaders, which will be addressed in the semiotic analysis. The codes cover inside spaces and places such as churches, concert halls, conferences rooms, and outside spaces such as squares, natural scenery, or stadiums.

6. (Other) objects

The last category is devoted to coding other objects and artefacts that are visible in the Instagram post. These objects are mostly visible in the places and spaces in which religious leaders operate, so this category certainly relates to the previous category. Not all objects have been coded, but only those that are frequently occurring and that can be related to the construction of the authority of religious leaders. Objects can represent religious traditions, rituals, and power. Objects that are related to the media industry, such as cameras and microphones, can refer to the celebrity status of religious leaders. Visible religious objects that have been coded are, among others, statues, crosses, paintings and icons, or religious books.

Conclusion

In the first part of the methodology, I discussed the selection of the religious leaders, the data collection, the use of software, and the coding of the samples and sequences. The main research objects of this research are Instagram images; mainly photographs, but also photo collages, announcements, and inspirational quotations where words and images are combined. I explained how I selected four leaders: Deepak Chopra, Brian Houston, the 14th Dalai Lama, and Pope Francis. These four leaders have in common that they operate globally, are considered to be charismatic, and have become celebrities within the media sphere. The analysis and categorization of the posts has been conducted with software programs such as Adobe Bridge and ATLAS.ti. The second part of the methodology is devoted to the social semiotic analysis of individual images within their context, as well as to the positionality of the researcher and research ethics.

5.

Methodology II: Images – Semiotics, Interpretation, and Ethics

Introduction

In this second methodological chapter, the analysis of individual Instagram images is the central focus. In the first part of the methodology, I focused on the selection, data collection, and coding of the images. This was all related to the collection of images. The analysis of individual images within this collection was conducted using a (social) semiotic analysis. In this chapter, I discuss semiotics, especially the approach of Roland Barthes, and the more recent perspective of social semiotics. To illustrate my approach, I apply the central concepts to a photograph of the Instagram account of Pope Francis. Further, I show how I employed these insights for the analysis of the Instagram posts of all the religious leaders. Moreover, I discuss the notions of interpretation, positionality, and the importance of research ethics.

Semiotics

For the in-depth analysis, I conducted semiotic analyses predominantly based on the insights of Roland Barthes (1972, 1977a, 1982) which have been supplemented by insights from what is known as “social semiotics” (Hodge & Kress, 1988; Leeuwen, 2005). Within the context of images, semiotics enables the researcher to study the signification or meanings of an image, whereas social semiotics enables the researcher to study the social contexts of these images by paying attention to the specific characteristics of digital photography and the social practice of posting and sharing on digital social platforms. In other words, a semiotic approach focuses on the image as such, while a social semiotic approach focuses on the particular – in this case, digital – context of the image.



The discipline of semiotics was developed more or less simultaneously by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the American philosopher Charles Peirce at the onset of the twentieth century (Deacon et al., 1999; Rose, 2016). De Saussure used the term “semiology”, while Charles Peirce, another pioneer in the field of semiotics, used the term “semiotics”.⁵⁸ In this thesis, I use the word “semiotics”. The notion of “sign” is the most important part of semiotics. A sign stands for something other than itself; it refers to something else. A sign consists of two interrelated parts that can only be distinguished on an analytical level. The “first part is the signifier: a word, sound, or image that refers to a concept. The second part is the “signified”: the concept or object that the sign refers to. The word “tree”, “arbre” (in French) or Baum (in German) refers to the concept of a tree; a perennial plant that usually consists of a trunk supporting branches and leaves. An image of a car refers to what we conceptualize as a car; a motorized vehicle on four wheels. The sound “Nee-naw! Nee-naw!” refers to the siren of an ambulance; a medically equipped vehicle which transports patients to hospitals.

Signs can have “higher level” meanings that refer to cultural and social values. In his influential book *Mythologies* (1972), Barthes draws upon the work of Saussure, where he calls these higher-level meanings “myths”. Danesi highlights that the term “myth” comes from the Greek word “mythos” and means “word”, “speech”, or “tale of the gods”. In various cultures, myths have served as narratives of the world (Danesi, 2019, p. 63). Barthes argues that in modern times, we still live with many contemporary myths.⁵⁹ In his book, Barthes analyzes seemingly banal phenomena, such as car

58 Though De Saussure and Peirce developed their theories about the same time, there are significant differences between their approaches. I will not elaborate on these differences in this thesis, but the theory of De Saussure has been developed further by Roland Barthes, as I show in the following sections.

59 Barthes argues, “On retrouve dans le mythe e le schéma tridimensionnel dont je viens de parler: le signifiant, le signifié et le signe. Mais le mythe est un système particulier en ceci qu’il s’édifie à partir d’une chaîne sémiologique qui existe avant lui : c’est un

commercials and magazines, to deconstruct ideological layers of signification. Barthes distinguishes two levels of signification. The first level of signification is what Barthes conceptualizes as “language”, while the second level of signification is the level of the myth.⁶⁰ In the example of the photograph that I use in this chapter (Figure 5.1), this means that I first identify and describe what I see. Above, I described the examples of the word “tree”, the image of a car, or the sound “Nee-naw!” on the first level of signification.

The level of the analysis of first-order signification is what Barthes calls “denotation”. The level of the analysis of second-order signification is what Barthes calls “connotation”.

I illustrate what denotation (first order) and connotation (second order) are with the example of Pope Francis who meets a father and his baby (Figure 5.1). In the photograph of the Instagram post by Pope Francis on January 16, 2017, I can describe that I see Pope Francis, the baby, and the man who is most probably the father of the baby. I can describe the facial expressions, the color of the clothes, the background, and so on. Signs at the level of denotation are easy to decode. They describe the visual elements that are presented. The caption of this Instagram post is, “The experience of being son or daughter allows us to discover the most gratuitous dimensions of love, which never ceases to astonish us.” This caption can provide “anchorage”: it guides the

système sémiologique second” (Barthes, 1957, p. 218). Baudrillard, who has a close affinity with Barthes in his approach to media, went even further in his criticism of visual media, especially television, by stating that the “signifiers” no longer refer to reality, but to a so-called hyperreality (Baudrillard, 2008). The media were creating their own reality that was no longer related to the world outside the media. This could in some cases also be said about certain social media phenomena, but I do not want to make those claims in the analysis of the four religious leaders on Instagram.

60 The use of the French word *langue* refers to de Saussure’s approach to semiotics. The language is the system of signification, while actual expressions of those language are the *parole* (Bal & Bryson, 1991, p. 177).



Figure 5.1

Instagram post of Pope Francis, January 16, 2017



perception of the one viewing the post. The fact that “son or daughter” is mentioned convinces me that the man holding the baby must be the father of the baby. The caption also hints to the preferred reading of this post from the perspective of the producer of the Instagram post, as I discuss below. The description of an image is not an “objective” act. Depending on the perspective of the viewer/reader, the description can be different. By describing the observations, a researcher makes his/her observations explicit.

The sign of the first level, the language, becomes the signifier for a second order of meaning, which Barthes describes as the myth. The relationship between this signifier and signified is explained through reference to an ideology. The analysis of the second level of meaning is the level of connotation. Myths possess ideological connotation: this means that the things presented are depicted as unavoidable and natural, but they might distort, conceal, or alter the meaning of certain key concepts (Deacon et al., 1999, p. 138).

Figure 5.2

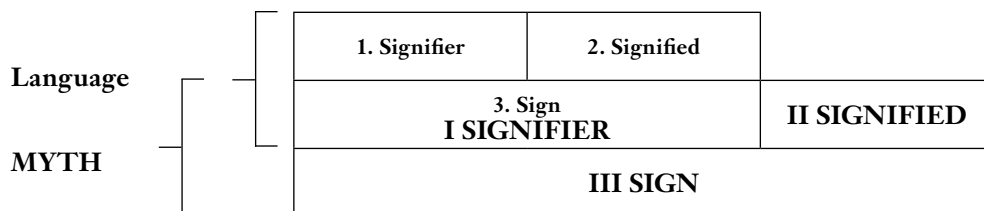
Paris-Match, ed. 326, July 1955



According to Barthes, myths are imposed on us. He illustrates this with the example of a copy of the Paris Match of the edition no. 326, July 1955 (Figure 5.2). On the cover, a young black boy in a French uniform is saluting, probably with his eyes fixed on the French flag. The signifier is the cover of the Paris Match, the signified is the mental concept: the black boy in the French uniform who is saluting. The analysis on this level is the denotation. At the same time, it is the signifier in the system

of the myth, and it signifies, at least to Barthes, that France is a great empire, and that all male citizens, dutifully serve this empire. The analysis on this second-order level is the connotation. It appears a natural, innocent, and indisputable image. However, the reality is much more complex. Since the photograph seems to represent a “natural” phenomenon, the ideology of the myth is hidden (Barthes, 1957). Though Barthes is convincingly arguing for this interpretation of the myth, this interpretation, of course, depends on the position and the perspective of the researcher and the circumstances in which the researcher analyzes such an image. It is up to the researcher to justify the deconstruction of this photograph by explaining the cultural and historical context, as well as the power relations that are at play.



Figure 5.3
The Scheme of first and second-order signification


Source: Barthes, 1972, p. 100

The analysis of images as carriers of myths is especially relevant in the case of photographs, which are, in contrast to words, are viewed as inherently natural and as a direct representation of reality.⁶¹ It looks as if the sign and the object are the same (Barthes, 1977b). The special characteristic of the photographic image is, as Barthes states, that it appears to be an image without codes (Barthes, 1982). It seems as if the photograph transfers the literal reality to us. Photography appears as the reproduction of reality. Since the image at the level of denotation seems so natural, the ideological level is naturalized as well.⁶² At the same time, the photographic image is ambiguous.

61 As Barthes states, “pictures (...) are more imperative than writing, they impose meaning at one stroke, without analyzing or diluting it” (Barthes, 1972, p. 95).

62 One of the commentators on Barthes works argues, “The thrust of Barthes’ discussion of denotation in these early essays is to demystify the notion of a ‘pure image’ divorced from signification by showing that denotation is always imbricated with connotation. The denoted level of the image not only naturalizes the connoted level but is itself always connoted (precisely as the truth, objectivity, or ‘naturalness’ of the message)” (Oxman, 2010, p. 74). In her article, she discusses the complexity of Barthes’ interpretation of photographs and the differences between connotation and denotation. Barthes’ perspective evolved over the course of his life, which is reflected in his writing.

While the object seems to present reality, it represents a certain version of reality. As “frozen” moments in time, images can be staged and carefully selected. With photographs, the denotive properties are in the foreground and the connotation is, as it were, suppressed. An iconic image evokes “hereness” (this is the reality) but is very silent about how this came about.

I describe the analysis of second-order signification using the same Instagram post of Pope Francis. On the level of *denotation*, the actors and the environment that are presented in the photograph can be described as follows: “I see Pope Francis from the back. In front of him is a man in black clothes with a beard carrying a baby. The man smiles towards the baby that he is carrying. Pope Francis looks at the baby and holds its soother.” The visual information is enriched and contextualized by the earlier mentioned caption – “The experience of being son or daughter allows us to discover the most gratuitous dimension of love, which never ceases to astonish us” – and the hashtag #tenderness. The description points towards the child and makes it very likely that the man is the father of the baby. We could summarize this image as “Pope Francis meets a father with his baby and interacts with the baby by holding its soother”. The *connotative* level, the level of myth, can be analyzed by understanding the ideological context of the Roman Catholic Church and the struggles over power and authority. Myths try to naturalize meaning on a higher level of signification. First, in the context of Western Europe and the influence of Romanticism, images of babies signify innocence.⁶³ Pope Francis is the highest representation of the Roman Catholic Church and is often seen as the “father” of the Church. The description points towards being a son or daughter to discover love. This can be parental love, but

For this thesis, I limited myself to using some of his key concepts, especially from his *Mythologies* (1957).

63 The idea of the innocent child is deeply rooted in Romanticism. One of the most significant books that has popularized this idea is Rousseau’s *Émile ou de l’éducation* (1762). *The idea of the innocent child has become mainstream in Western society* (A. Meyer, 2007).



in this case, also the love of the “Father of the Church”, Pope Francis, and ultimately, the love of God. Moreover, the hashtag #tenderness points towards the mission of Pope Francis to promote compassion and to emphasize the human dimension of the Church above the discussions about dogma. The whole situation also shows something of the tenderness of Pope Francis towards the baby. Further, the innocence of the child can point towards the innocence of Jesus Christ who came into the world as a baby while being the son of God. The myth naturalizes the situation when the tenderness of Pope Francis stands for a caring, loving relationship between the Church and its members. Yet, from a more critical point of view, when we deconstruct the myth, we encounter a counternarrative (Bamberg, 2004; 2021). This counternarrative serves as a form of damage control considering the church’s history of child abuse on the part of priests and the covering up of abuses by bishops, cardinals, and popes. In this sense, the created myth serves as a narrative to legitimize the authority of Pope Francis by portraying him as an authentic and loving father of the Church. The use of a counternarrative can be used to improve the reputation and the brand of a religious leader by providing alternative perspectives to dominant news coverage in case of scandals – which, as we will see, is also the case with Brian Houston. Moreover, it is used in situations of conflicting political interests, which is clear in the representation of Tibet and its occupation by China, as I explain in the chapter on the Dalai Lama.

When the meanings on the first-order system (for example, the baby in the photograph of Pope Francis) become part of the second-order signification, the specific historical significance of what happens at a specific moment under certain circumstances evaporates and becomes distant. The second-order signification inserts itself as a non-historical truth (Barthes, 1972). It is then no longer about what happens in this photograph, but about the meanings at a higher level of signification. It causes us to overlook the fact that things and situations are constructed, effectively neutralizing their true nature. The myth is credible because the form does not completely replace the meaning. Of course, a critical reading of these “myths” can help to uncover them (which I attempt in this thesis), but the intention of myths is to appear natural and neutral.

In the case of Pope Francis, this photograph can help to establish the authority of

the Pope and the credibility of the Roman Catholic Church. I therefore propose to analyze the photographs of religious leaders on Instagram on two levels of signification: denotation and connotation. The coding cycles serve to describe signs on the first-order level of signification, the language, which is, in the context of Instagram, a visual language. I suggest that the myths being produced legitimize the authority of the religious leader by imposing it as natural and indisputable.

Social Semiotics

The semiotic discipline has developed further since Barthes, and the most important development that I consider relevant for this research is social semiotics (Hodge & Kress, 1988; Leeuwen, 2005). In the social semiotics approach, the focus shifts from the sign itself to the way people use semiotic resources.⁶⁴ A first step in this direction is visible in the writings of Barthes, but proponents of social semiotics have worked this out more systematically. Social semioticians give special attention to the social context, the different modalities, the production and interpretation, and the way in which semiotic resources are shaped by established practices. Moreover, in social semiotics, special attention is paid to the modalities and affordances of the media context. The phenomenon of multimodality is important within social semiotics, which means that different modes are used. The “mode” is related to the medium. That must be seen in a broader sense than just a technical medium. Examples of modes are image, text, speech, the moving image, among others. The mode is especially relevant when image and text are combined, which happens on Instagram.

64 Hodge & Kress argue, “Social semiotics treats all semiotic acts and processes as social acts and processes. What is at issue always in social processes is the definition of social participants, relations, structures, processes, in terms of solidarity or in terms of power. Semiotic processes are means whereby these can be tested, reaffirmed, altered. Hence questions of power are always at issue whether in the affirmation of solidarity or in the assertion of power; whether in the reproduction of a semiotic system or in a challenge to that system.” (Hodge & Kress, 1988, p. 122)



Moreover, on social media, elements such as hashtags, likes, and comments are part of a multimodal environment. Within the context of social media and the possibilities of users for participation, interaction, and creation have strongly increased. Examples of this are the opportunities for posting, liking, and commenting.

The importance of social semiotics can be made explicit by analyzing the example of Pope Francis. From the perspective of social semiotics, we are drawn towards this Instagram post as a semiotic resource within a specific social, cultural, and technological context. The fact that this post appears on Instagram means that it can be liked and commented upon. Moreover, the hashtag points us towards Instagram posts that show other examples of tenderness, maybe ones that have also been produced by the Vatican. The mention of the location of the photograph (Guidonia) points toward a specific event where Pope Francis visited this village in the vicinity of Rome. The combination of photograph, description, hashtag, likes, comments, and location forms the multimodality of the Instagram post. The photograph itself can be deemed to be a professional one (which is true for all the photographs on the Pope Francis's Instagram account). The lighting, the clarity of the people who are visible, the composition, and the color contrast between the white clothes of Pope Francis and the black clothes of the man and the baby present an aesthetic image. Next to the importance of the quality of the photograph, the producers must also consider the affordances of Instagram. If a post is not striking enough, people will scroll to the next photograph without paying attention, liking, or commenting. However, the number of likes and reactions show that this post has received a considerable audience. This example shows the importance of considering the affordances of Instagram and the socio-cultural context in which a leader, in this case Pope Francis, operates.

Further, analysis of the individual elements of each Instagram post is a necessary first step to deconstruct the posts on the level of denotation, which, in turn, fosters the analysis of the second-order signification: how do visual elements inspire the construction of a seemingly natural authority of religious leaders? For example, the photograph of Pope Francis with the father and the baby can be compared to other photographs of Pope Francis with children, to those in which he touches people, or other close-up photographs of him. Moreover, we can compare this photograph to

photographs of other leaders in which children are visible. How frequent do these elements occur, and how do they relate to the representation and performance of authority? In this way, the content analysis can complement the semiotic analysis by showing networks of signification in the samples that have been analyzed and coded.

The Application of Second-Order Signification in the Research

Based on the insights of (social) semiotics, I uncovered the second-order signification for the Instagram posts of the four religious leaders in the following way. The theoretical framework that I outlined in the first two chapters form the basis of the empirical research on the leaders. Further, for each of the four leaders, I researched and described their biographies, especially the elements that are relevant for their positions and the legitimacy of their leadership. Moreover, I used relevant and recent academic sources that address the social and religious context in which the leader operates, especially those elements that are directly related to religious authority. The context of the Roman Catholic Church, for example, is very different from the context of Tibetan Buddhism, which has become a global phenomenon after the Chinese invasion and the exile of the 14th Dalai Lama. Finally, I addressed contemporary issues that coincide with the timeframe of the empirical research (November 1, 2016–October 31, 2017) or that have taken place after the empirical research. This has proven especially necessary in the case of Brian Houston because he and Hillsong Church have been involved in scandals, which has resulted in major changes for Brian Houston's own position as well as for the reputation, organization, and credibility of Hillsong Church. The biography, the social and religious context, as well as the address of contemporary issues shaped the in-depth analysis of the signification of the Instagram posts. The structure of the empirical chapters thus starts with a short biography of each leader, followed by the discussion of the social and religious context. These two elements incorporate relevant contemporary issues. Moreover, the analysis of the Instagram posts includes references to the biography, references to relevant academic sources, and references to relevant news articles and internet sources that address contemporary issues. This all serves to investigate how religious leaders mediate their authority on Instagram.



Interpretation and Positionality

No matter how comprehensive the method might be, the analysis of an image is open to multiple interpretations. As poststructuralists like Derrida have already stated, the exact meaning of a text cannot be determined (Danesi, 2019, p. 259). But within the specific context, certain meanings are more likely than others. Therefore, it is important to justify one's own interpretation as a researcher by explaining how it comes about.⁶⁵ The content analysis serves to indicate how often certain elements occur in the Instagram posts of the religious leader, and a means to observe patterns and repetitions in the way religious leaders present themselves. The discussion of the operationalization of theory into codes is a way in which I justify which choices I made in the analysis of the sample. From a (social) semiotic perspective, the technological affordances, cultural significance, social practices, and power relationships are included in the analysis. In addition, how I, as a researcher, look at Instagram posts plays a role. The fact that I study them critically with a specific academic focus guides my interpretation. When studying images, I attempt to deconstruct the second order signification of these posts. That is a different approach than a quick look at the Instagram timeline for fun and distraction.

How researchers interpret the social world is impacted by their position in society (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019). I need to consider that I study the Instagram posts as a white middle-class heterosexual male with a protestant-Christian background

65 Hall (1997) argues, "It is worth emphasising that there is no single or 'correct' answer to the question, 'What does this image mean?' (...) Since there is no law which can guarantee that things will have 'one, true meaning', or that meanings won't change over time, work in this area is bound to be interpretative – a debate between (...) equally plausible, though sometimes competing and contesting, meaning and interpretations. The best way to 'settle' such contested readings is to look again at the concrete example and try to justify one's 'reading' in detail in relation to the actual practices and forms of signification used, and what meanings they seem to you to be producing." Cited in Rose (2016, p. xxi).

in the Netherlands. It means that it is easier for me to interpret visual clues in the analysis of Christian leaders like Brian Houston and Pope Francis, and that it requires more study when I analyze the Dalai Lama who is rooted in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. However, this does not imply that the analyses are completely dependent on my gender, orientation, religious background, or socio-economic status. A critical awareness of one's position, the use of academic literature and methodology, as well as feedback from others means that the analyses and interpretations will be subjected to more than one perspective. The critical questions, suggestions, and discussions about the meanings and implications for the construction of authority, especially from my supervisors, other researchers, people from different religious and cultural backgrounds, have shaped and improved the quality of this research. The writing of a thesis is (fortunately) not a completely solitary and individual process but comes into being by collaborative processes in which feedback and discussion are essential.

Though the selection and the description of visual elements (the denotation) always involves a basic level of interpretation, this level of interpretation is quite straightforward. The description of visible elements in a photograph is for the most part relatively unambiguous, as is apparent from the description of Pope Francis with the father and a baby. At the level of connotation, the interpretation is more complex. Meanings can be multiple, or “polysemic”. That is not the same as pluralism. There is always a social, cultural, and political classification that forms the dominant order. In the case of religious leaders, it is important to ask which meanings in the image seem to be the most natural. How does this fit in with the cultural and ideological context from which the leader operates? The issue of the interpretation of image is related to the persuasive rhetoric of images (Barthes, 1977a; Meyer, 2010; Morgan, 2008). The culturally formatted message of the image imposes certain meaning more than others. Images can have multiple meanings, but in the context in which they appear they are often anchored so that viewers are guided to the intended message of the sender. The anchorage is, as I explained earlier in this chapter, guided by the captions and hashtags on Instagram, and by the context of other messages on the account of Pope Francis. Culture can be interpreted in semiotic terms as a “signifying order” (Danesi, 2019, p. 53). It can be interpreted as a complex system of different signs that



together produce meaning and that is shared by a group of people. Since Instagram is a platform with a global reach and audience, the meaning of Instagram posts can differ depending on the social, cultural, and religious background of the audiences. It is up to the researcher to defend their interpretation of this “signifying order” as precisely and comprehensively as possible.⁶⁶

Research Ethics

Researching social media also raises new ethical questions. Due to the speed of developments of technology, the answers to these issues have often not been fully clarified. The ethical dimension of social research online has received considerable attention (Hooley & Weller, 2016, p. 16). According to the British National Centre for Research Methods, there are a number of general guidelines for the people visible in photographs, such as protecting their rights, privacy, dignity, and well-being (Rose, 2016, p. 358; Wiles et al., 2008). In this case, I collected and analyzed the posts on Instagram of four well-known religious leaders. The researched religious leaders participate in social and religious debates and are willing to present themselves in the media. All the visual material is available online and has found its way into the audiences of hundreds of thousands and sometimes millions of people. Unlike ethnographic research, I am convinced that permission to analyze the Instagram posts is not necessary. I am not dealing with research participants who may have shared confidential information and images with me personally. The social media activities of the leaders are part of the public domain. They have become media celebrities themselves; it is not about leaders with a very limited number of followers who may need to be protected against themselves. All four leaders depend on communication and media professionals.

66 Not all interpretations are possible. A photograph of Pope Francis is not very likely to be interpreted as Micky Mouse, to use an extreme comparison. There are limits to interpretation, related to the context in which signs are produced and interpreted (Eco, 1990).

Besides the religious leaders, other people are also visible in the posts: there are photographs from a distance with crowds of people whose individual features are not always distinguishable, but there are also medium shots and close ups of adults and children, and some involve those who are sick and vulnerable. These people do not have the agency to select and remove the posts in which they do appear. I used some of these posts in the analysis as well, such as the photograph of the father and his son who meet Pope Francis. One could argue that it is unethical to publish photographs

Table 5.1

A simplified model of the different “phases” of the data collection and analysis of the Instagram posts of the four religious leaders.

Phase	Description
Image Collection	Four religious leaders November 1, 2016– October 31, 2017 Screenshots of the Instagram posts
Dataset (Adobe Bridge)	All Instagram screenshots Basic Statistics
Coding (ATLAS.ti) Sample (100 images) Sequence (15 images)	Coding Categories: - Instagram post type - The visual presence of the religious leader - The performance of the religious leader - Visibility of (other) people - Spaces and places - (Other) objects
Denotation (First order signification)	Description of the Instagram post Based on the image, the codes, and the caption
Connotation (Second order signification)	Informed by: - Theory on the mediation of authority of religious leaders - The context and affordances of Instagram - Biography - The social and religious context - Contemporary issues - Positionality of the researcher



of, for example, young children. However, these posts are already part of the public domain because they have been published and seen by hundreds of thousands of people on Instagram. Since the presence of these groups in the photographs reveals much about the way religious leaders present themselves online, I chose to use these posts. Not including them would mean that it would seriously compromise the quality of the analysis. I was careful in the descriptions of these posts to maintain the dignity of the people who have been depicted.

Conclusion

In this chapter, which forms the second part of the methodology, I have outlined how I operationalized the semiotic analysis. The combination of content analysis and semiotic analysis provides a useful approach to analyzing the Instagram posts of the four leaders. The focus in the analysis is on the representation of authority through visual rhetoric and the performance of authority of religious leaders by their visibility, actions, and interactions in the Instagram posts. In the semiotics analysis, the signification on the level of connotation (second-order analysis) is central to understanding the rhetoric and ideology of the different leaders. Moreover, the specific affordances and modalities of Instagram were considered. Further, I addressed the question of interpretation and positionality. Finally, I discussed the ethical dimensions and the importance of academic integrity when using visual material on Instagram for analysis and publication. In the next four chapters, I present the results of the empirical research for each of the four religious leaders.

6.

Deepak Chopra

Introduction

Deepak Chopra is an Indian American author and public speaker and one of the most prominent figures in the New Age Movement (Baer, 2003; Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 192; Jain, 2015, p. 145).⁶⁷ In this chapter, I analyze how Chopra uses Instagram to mediate his authority. One of the main characteristics of the New Age Movement is the rejection of any kind of authority, except for the authority of the Higher Self. How can spiritual leaders construct their authority when authority itself is so problematic? Is it possible to be a spiritual leader and at the same time embrace the opportunities of marketing, branding, and commodification? And how can Instagram add to this construction? In the following sections, I sketch the biography of Chopra and show how his life and work are related to major themes of a holistic spirituality. Those themes include the focus on the individual, the relation with Eastern religion and philosophy, and the complicated relationship with materialism and capitalism. In the analysis of the Instagram posts, I focus on the aesthetics of persuasion, the importance of style, and celebrification, assessing how these aspects relate to the mediation of his authority.

Biography

Deepak Chopra was born in India in 1946 as the son of a cardiologist. He studied medicine in India before migrating to the United States of America in the 1970s where

67 Other figures are Dr. Andrew Weil, Ken Wilber, Eckhart Tolle, to name a few, but Chopra has been one of the most well-known names, as well as one of the most prosperous ones.



he specialized in endocrinology. He started working in the New England Memorial Hospital. During his practice, he became disillusioned with biomedicine and turned to Ayurveda medicine and Transcendental Meditation. After reading a book and attending a lecture on Transcendental Meditation, he underwent a transformation in his lifestyle, which reportedly helped him to stop drinking and smoking (Baer, 2003, p. 238). In 1985, he met Maharishi Mahes Yogi, one of the most popular figures of New Age spirituality at the time. Following the guru's instructions, Chopra started the Maharishi Ayurveda Health Center. Later, he moved to California and became involved in alternative, holistic healthcare, and spirituality. During the 1990s, he befriended celebrities like George Harrison, Elizabeth Taylor, and, most famously, Michael Jackson. In 1993, he wrote the book *Ageless Body, Timeless Mind: The Quantum Alternative to Growing Old*, in which he argues that each individual can defeat their own aging process (Rindfleish, 2005, p. 351). This book, and his friendship with Michael Jackson resulted in an interview with Oprah Winfrey on the Oprah Winfrey Show in 1993. This interview stimulated his prominence as a public figure in the United States. He has appeared countless times on television and many of his books made New York Times bestsellers lists. Currently, he has written more than 80 books about subjects such as spiritual health, affluence, and personal transcendence. In his works, he draws upon science, encompassing fields such as astronomy, quantum physics and medicine, as well as on a variety of religious and spiritual traditions, ranging from Buddhism and Hinduism, Islamic mysticism, Judaism and Christianity.⁶⁸

More recently, he has his own YouTube channel,⁶⁹ a radio program, and even has developed smartphone apps. On his website deepakchopra.com, he sells books, meditation retreats, and online courses. In 1996, he founded the Chopra Center

68 In his books and videos, Chopra mentions among other things passages of the Bible, Christian saints, the poet Rumi, and Buddha. See, for example a video on You are the Universe (Jiyo4life, 2017).

69 The link to his YouTube Channel, *The Chopra Well* is <https://www.youtube.com/ChopraWell>

for Wellbeing, whose mission it is “to empower personal transformation for our collective well-being by providing tools, guidance and community anchored in wisdom traditions and cutting-edge science for mind, body, & spirit”.⁷⁰ Furthermore, he is adjunct professor at several universities and business schools (*Deepak Chopra – Extended Bio*, n.d.). He is a spiritual entrepreneur, a multi-millionaire, and global guru with followers all over the world. Chopra lives in New York and Los Angeles. He is married and has two adult children: Mallika Chopra, who is involved in the meditation and wellness industry, and Gotham Chopra, who is a filmmaker and entrepreneur.⁷¹ Deepak Chopra and both of his children are involved in the productions of *The Chopra Well* on YouTube.

He has turned his perspectives on and insights into holistic spirituality into a very profitable business. Some estimate that his net worth is 80 million dollars (Norton, 2022).⁷² Banet-Weiser has argued that he has very strategically used his brand to promote books, products, and services in talk shows, through the use of digital media and even

70 According to the LinkedIn page, in 2022, the Chopra Center had 146 employees, see <https://www.linkedin.com/company/chopra-center/> (Chopra Center for Wellbeing, n.d.). Chopra Global (the mother concern) has 269 employees, see <https://www.linkedin.com/company/chopraglobal/> (Chopra Global, n.d.).

71 In 2012, Deepak Chopra figured in the documentary *Decoding Deepak* that was produced by his son Gotham Chopra. In this documentary, his son discusses the contradictions of his father, who has become a spiritual guru, is proclaiming detachment, but has a very wealthy lifestyle, and is, according to his son, a smartphone addict. Moreover, Deepak Chopra is shown in unflattering situations, such as scratching his backside and snoring during meditation. The documentary by his son and Deepak’s willingness to participate shows that he might not be too concerned about his public images as a spiritual guru. It might even be possible that the documentary *Decoding Deepak* affirms an image of authenticity.

72 Through his businesses he sells books, conferences, and even products like meditation glasses, the cost of which is \$350 (Ehrenkranz, 2017).



through iPhone apps (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 192). The entrepreneurial approach of Chopra and his use of media is similar to that of other spiritual leaders like Andrew Weil, Eckhart Tolle, and Ken Wilber (Rindfleish, 2005). Moreover, his involvement with celebrities is also one of the characteristics of many proponents of holistic spirituality.⁷³

Chopra has received a fair amount of criticism. According to Banet-Weiser, he uses Eastern sources as remedies for the illnesses of the West. She states that Chopra's philosophy depends on brand logic for its validation, which, in his case is organized around Orientalism, the exoticism of the East and vague notions of the "essence" of Eastern spirituality (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 192).⁷⁴ Chopra has been criticized by scholars such as Richard Dawkins for his use of scientific terminology – "Ayurvedic mumbo jumbo" according to Dawkins – such as that of quantum physics in relation to spirituality and health (Baer, 2003, p. 244).⁷⁵ This has led Chopra to address his critics in books and on social media.⁷⁶ Another critique, which addresses holistic spirituality in general and the role of spiritual entrepreneurs like Chopra in particular, is that the perspective on holism is rather limited: the focus is largely on individual aspects, rather than considering societal, institutional, and social-economic circumstances. According to Baer, spiritual entrepreneurs downplay the importance of community service, social or institutional reform, or other collective goals (Baer, 2003, p. 242). By emphasizing the responsibility of the individual for health, he argues, people like Chopra reinforce individualizing patterns in American society and the capitalist world-system (Baer, 2003, p. 246). Similar criticisms are made by Banet-Weiser, who

73 The Maharishi attracted the Beatles, and the Dalai Lama, who will be covered in another chapter, and is popular with movie stars like Richard Gere and musicians such as Lady Gaga. Movies like "Eat Pray Love" have further popularized Eastern spirituality.

74 The notion of Eastern spirituality is discussed in more detail further in this chapter.

75 The interview can be accessed on YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U95e0DCmS-w> (Dawkins, 2011).

76 This is especially the case in his book *The Future of God* (2014).

points out that the focus on the individual and away from the social is a way of refusing to confront material, social, race and gender divisions (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 192). In sum, the criticisms of Chopra are focused on his use of science, the marketization of Eastern spirituality, and his focus on the individual.

The way Chopra's career from a medical doctor to a celebrity spiritual leader has evolved is closely related to larger themes in holistic spirituality. He has been able to blend Eastern and Western thought into a distinct brand in which spirituality and commodification are seamlessly integrated.

Holistic Spirituality and Authority

To understand how the work of Chopra is embedded in broader social and cultural developments, we need to understand how holistic spirituality has become such an important dimension in late-capitalistic Western societies. Moreover, as I stated in the introduction, the relationship between holistic spirituality and authority is complicated. In the following, I show how holistic spirituality can be conceptualized, what its origins are, and why authority is suspect.

Holistic spirituality is just one of the concepts of what has previously been called the "New Age" Movement. The name New Age refers to the "age of Aquarius", a whole new configuration of the world in which – according to New Age ideology – Western capitalism and materialism need to be transformed (Heelas, 1996, p. 54). Western capitalism and materialism are seen as causes for spiritual alienation and a disconnection with nature, spirituality, and authenticity. New Age perspectives were popularized and expanded during the 1960s and used to be tightly connected to counter-cultural movements. Its origins can be traced in earlier movements, most notably Gnosticism, romanticism, esotericism, and Eastern religions. It was partly the disillusioned upper class who turned away from traditional, institutionalized religion and became interested in these movements (Featherstone, 1991, p. 67; Heelas, 1996, p. 42). Much of what comes out of the New Age counterculture in the sixties has become mainstream today, affecting how people imagine religion and spirituality. Yet, it has fostered a distrust of (religious) authority as well. New Age culture is related to expressive individualism and the personal quest for authentic living. Spirituality is



nowadays seen by many as the opposite of religion (Flanagan, 2007; Roof, 1999).

The concept of the New Age has more recently lost its popularity in the media sphere and use in academic literature. In the discussion of contemporary spirituality, alternative concepts are being used to describe the kind of spirituality that formerly was coined as New Age culture: post-traditional spirituality, post-Christian spirituality, Eastern spirituality, self-spirituality, or holistic spirituality. Each of those terms is problematic in what it includes and excludes. Aupers and Houtman argue that post-traditionalism can be applied to both post-Christian spirituality and to nonreligious secularism (Houtman & Aupers, 2007). Post-Christian spirituality refers to apparent declining beliefs and practices associated with the position of Christianity in Western Europe, and to a lesser extent, the United States. The concept post-Christian spirituality implies that spirituality is less concerned with religious communities or congregations, and is more individualized, and using a plurality of sources. Eastern spirituality underlines the inspiration from Eastern religions and practices. Self-spirituality emphasizes the focus on the individual (Heelas, 1996). Holistic spirituality, a concept used by Heelas and Woodhead, underlines the mind-body connection (Heelas, 2007; Heelas & Woodhead, 2005). In this chapter, I use the term “holistic spirituality”, because it resonates with the spiritual teachings and practices of Chopra in which he emphasizes the relationship between body and mind, consciousness, health, and wellbeing.⁷⁷

A common theme of Chopra’s books is the development and transformation of the self (Baer, 2003; Rindfleisch, 2005). This corresponds with one of the central themes of holistic spirituality. Though holistic spirituality is very broad, and not very organized, the common denominator is self-spirituality. The Self (the higher self), as opposed to the “lower” self that is affected by contemporary culture and external influences,

77 In his book *Metabuman*, Chopra argues, “You have awakened to who you really are, the user of the brain but not the brain, the traveler in a body but not the body, the thinker of thoughts who is far, far more than any thought. As I will show in the following pages, your true self is beyond time and space” (Chopra, 2019, p. 5).

is considered to be sacred (Aupers & Houtman, 2008; Hanegraaff, 1996). The Self is the natural and authentic self, the “true” identity of a person: “The inner realm is held to serve as the source of authentic vitality, creativity, wisdom, power, authority, and all qualities which are held to comprise the perfect life” (Heelas, 1996, p. 19). Ultimately, the Self is the highest form of authority, instead of institutions, teachers, experts, and so on (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005). Ultimately, personal experience is the highest authority. Truths from dogmas of traditions, parents and institutions might be erroneous. Religion is associated with tradition, deception, and exclusivism. However, this does not mean that religion is completely rejected. Holistic spirituality assumes that there is a hidden wisdom and truth in all religious traditions, but this wisdom has been obscured by authority figures, dogmas, and institutions.

Moreover, while the authority of traditional and formal Western authority figures is distrusted, many inspirational gurus and other inspirers have emerged. According to Gauthier, who was discussed in the theoretical framework, entrepreneurial spiritual leaders like Chopra can be conceptualized as charismatic authority figures (Gauthier, 2021, p. 35). From a different angle Steve Ward argues that the authority of media celebrities like Oprah Winfrey (who promoted Chopra) can be described as celebrity authority. Their presence as public figures, their charismatic appeal, and their entrepreneurial approach, including the sophisticated use of media, are important ingredients in establishing their authority (Ward, 2020, p. 99). I therefore suggest that the authority of religious entrepreneurs like Chopra can be seen as a form of celebrity authority. Just like celebrities, religious entrepreneurs consciously construct their authenticity in such a way that it builds trust within their audiences, which in turn legitimizes their authority. Moreover, like celebrities, in order to connect to their audiences, they need to present an authentic and attractive lifestyle. How this can be visualized on Instagram will be discussed in the semiotic analysis.

Spirituality, Capitalism, and Consumerism

To understand the context of the spiritual entrepreneurship of Chopra, it is important to address the attractiveness of Eastern spirituality, the commodification and branding of holistic spirituality, the role of spiritual entrepreneurs within the context of the



media sphere, as well as the apparent contradiction between Eastern spirituality and capitalism. It is to these topics that this section now turns.

Eastern spirituality is seen as the medicine against the evils of Western rationalism, capitalism, and everything that is supposedly wrong with modernity. Proponents of holistic spirituality and Romanticism saw capitalism as the opposite of self-fulfillment. . The notion of the “Mystic East” is a prominent idea within the Western understanding of the “Far East”, including India and Tibet, for example, as “the other”. According to King, the mystical element is often seen as otherworldly, private, and detached from politics. Orientalist essentialism has led to stereotypes about the West as well as the East (King, 1999, p. 3). As King argues, the Enlightenment project has subordinated characteristics like the poetic, the mystical, the irrational, the uncivilized, and the feminine. Yet, as King and others argue, these characteristics have been “discovered” in the imaginary realm associated with the Orient (see also Campbell, 2007; Jain, 2015, p. 148; Said, 1978). This is observed in the ways the 1960s counterculture embraced Eastern beliefs such as reincarnation and karma, and practices such as meditation and yoga, and has selectively incorporated elements of Hinduism and Buddhism.⁷⁸ Through meditation and yoga, people could reconnect with their higher self, with the spirit. That spirit is said to have suffered under the capitalism and materialism of the Western world.

Although holistic spirituality and its Eastern influences are deemed to be opposed to Western capitalism, it has nonetheless turned into a business, and is intrinsically connected with consumer culture (Banet-Weiser, 2012). The spiritual market, especially around yoga, and more recently mindfulness, represents a market that is worth billions of dollars (Jain, 2015). How is this possible? The commercialization of the spiritual market raises the question of how this corresponds with the anti-materialist perspective of holistic spirituality. Clearly there is no unified view towards capitalism in holistic spirituality. Heelas, for example, distinguishes the “purist” and the “empowerer”. Both suppose that capitalistic modernity is not working. The purist

78 I elaborate on the role of the “Mystic East” in the chapter on the Dalai Lama.

sees modernity as irredeemably flawed, while the empowerer supposes that it can be made to work properly (Heelas, 1996, p. 32). They believe that holistic spirituality can be beneficial to the market economy by providing “enlightened” insights that will improve the way in which the capitalist system works. Today, some spiritual leaders even praise capitalism and connect “true” capitalism to spirituality, which leads to a kind of “New Age Capitalism” (Carrette & King, 2005). This is visible in all kinds of seminars and books that provide all kinds of business spirituality and opportunities for businesses, entrepreneurs, and employees to find their authentic selves which will enable them to be happier and more effective in their work.

The brand culture of holistic spirituality is closely intertwined with values of neoliberal capitalism (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 187). It stimulates individual choice, self-development, and personal growth at the expense of social issues. In holistic spirituality, a key concept is prosperity. This has a broad meaning: by emphasizing self-development, individuals not only prosper financially, but may expect to prosper in all aspects of life including health. This outlook fosters a positive attitude towards individual entrepreneurship. Paradoxically, holistic spirituality presents itself based on and inspired by authentic Eastern religions and a medicine against the moral decay of capitalism, while it has become an enormously profitable industry (Carrette & King, 2005; Jain, 2015). To claim authenticity, capitalism is being rejected while capitalist strategies like marketing and branding are being used. Thus, the cultural concept of Eastern spirituality is commodified and branded. The Eastern elements of holistic spirituality are said to contribute to the relief from a material culture and the pressure of capitalism. The products and services are luxury items (yoga, organic food, retreats) that are necessary to “escape” from materialism. The Western conceptions of Eastern religions, most importantly Hinduism and Buddhism, are highly shaped by an orientalist discourse that is rooted in colonial depictions of a mystical east, and these conceptions still inform the way people imagine the East (King, 1999). From the late 1960s onwards, spiritual leaders became well known to a broader audience. Chopra and many others have combined Eastern philosophy with the values and elements of holistic spirituality in their books, seminars, and other services and products (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 169). The digitalization of media has



enabled spiritual leaders to publish and share their ideas through websites and social media.

Analysis

In the following paragraphs, I present the content analysis and semiotic analysis of Chopra's Instagram account.⁷⁹ I present the most important statistics of the dataset, as well as relevant themes that have emerged out of the sample of 100 images. These themes are illustrated by the description and analysis of individual Instagram posts. Subsequently, I analyze a sequence of 15 Instagram posts. The semiotic analysis consists of the discussion of individual Instagram posts. These posts will be described on the first level of denotation, the description of what is visible, as well as on the second level of "connotation". The second-order signification is the level of the myth, where the things that are being presented are shown as inevitable and natural. In the deconstruction of the second-order signification, I relate my analysis to the context of the position of Deepak Chopra, the branding of holistic spirituality, and to the affordances and visual context of Instagram. It should come as no surprise that Chopra has attracted many followers on Instagram. Instagram is a medium that has embraced many of the values that correspond with holistic spirituality, such as expressive individualism, authenticity, and creativity. Moreover, influencers on Instagram combine a personal style in marketing and branding themselves and the products they promote (Frier, 2020; Smitshuijsen, 2020). Instagram is therefore a very suitable platform for spiritual entrepreneurs like Chopra.

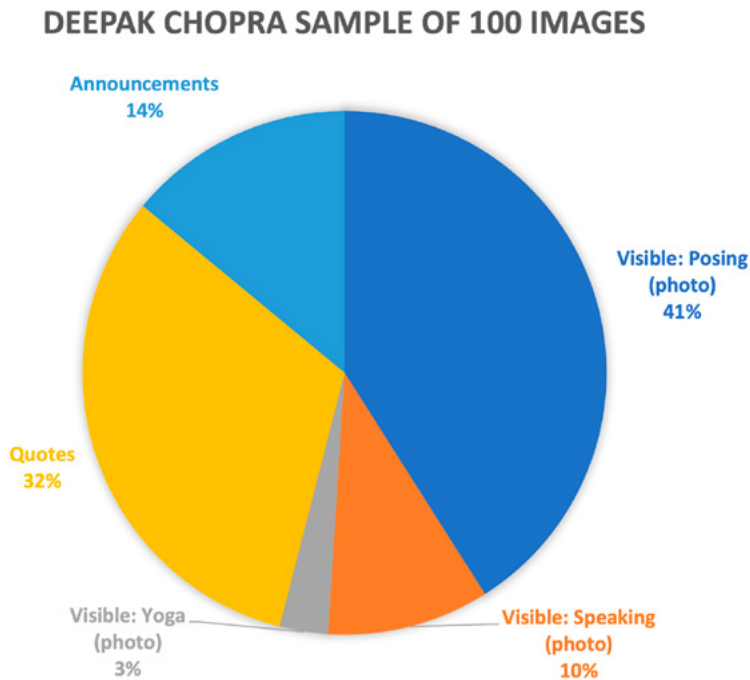
The statistical analysis shows that from the four leaders on Instagram, Chopra is by far the most active from November 1, 2016 until October 31, 2017, during which time he posted 499 messages, of which 240 are videos and boomerang pictures (short pictures that repeat themselves) and 259 image posts. The 259 image posts are relevant for the analysis, since moving images and videos have been excluded from the analysis.

79 The name of this account is @deepakchopra. His account had 794,000 followers in 2017, which has grown to 2.2 million followers in 2022.

Chopra is visible on 150 of these images, which counts for 58%. From these 259 image posts, there are 66 images (25%) that contain a (proverbial) quotation. Thirty-eight of these Instagram posts (15%) contain announcements for the promotion of books and events. His messages are a mix of personal pictures of travels, promotions of books and seminars, short meditation videos, quotations, professional performances, and yoga exercises. His Instagram account shows what could be considered “backstage” material of the life of Chopra. In the context of his business and media channels, one expects that he is being supported by communication professionals, though he also gives the impression that he is personally managing his Instagram account by writing in the “I” form and by apparently posting non-professional images and videos. These amateurish posts could, of course, be part a strategy to appear authentic and transparent.

Figure 6.1

Graph showing the sample of Deepak Chopra



The sample of Deepak Chopra (100 images posts) contains 54 regular photographs (including six photo collages) in which he is posing in 41 photographs, speaking in 10 photographs, and practicing yoga in three photographs. Further, the sample contains 32 inspirational quotations and 14 announcements and promotions (see Figure 6.1).

Themes

From this statistical analysis, several elements in the Instagram posts occurred quite frequently and deserve closer attention: posts (1) in which Chopra is posing, (2) in which he is speaking, (3) in which he is practicing yoga, (4) with inspirational quotations and (5) with announcements. These five themes are briefly discussed in the following sections, and each theme is illustrated by one or two examples. A report of the coding of the visual elements in the Instagram posts, as well as how this relates to the categories described in the methodology, can be found in Appendix B.

1. Chopra Posing for the Photo

As the statistics reveal, Chopra poses very often for photographs on his Instagram account (41 posts in the sample and 76 % of the posts in which he is visible). He mostly looks straight into the camera. He poses alone (16 posts), or with others (40 posts), such as television presenters, celebrities, family members, and acquaintances. They are “casual” photographs, where Chopra is visible in the center of the picture. The locations where he poses are often the places that he visits for conferences or media appearances, such as theaters, hotels, and universities.

Figure 6.2

Deepak Chopra July 15, 2017



Figure 6.2 depicts Chopra, surrounded by a television crew, posing for the camera. The caption reads as follows

I'm discussing 'You are the Universe' and #cosmicconsciousness tonight at 9/8c pm on the @history channel show 'Ancient Aliens.' Check your local listings and tune in! #ancientaliens #cosmicconsciousness #consciousness #thechakachicrecord

On the level of denotation, the following description can be made. Chopra is dressed in a black suit, black t-shirt, dark trousers, and with his characteristic red sneakers. He often wears these shoes during performances (see also figure 6.10). The people in the picture are most likely working for the History channel, an American commercial television channel, on which he appeared. The people around him appear to be in their twenties, thirties, and forties. The man on the left is the presenter of the show. The people seem to be at ease while posing with Chopra for this photograph. Since



he is standing in the middle, he is clearly the most important person in the room.

The promotion of his book and the television show presents the entrepreneurial approach of Chopra; the post itself encourages people to watch the show and/or buy his book *You are the Universe*. The promotion of his book is a constant pattern in the Instagram posts of 2016 and 2017, as is discussed in the other Instagram posts in this chapter. On the level of connotation, the visual association between a media crew and Chopra further enhances a symbolic association with the media industry and confirms his celebrity authority (Horsfield, 2016; Ward, 2020). The photograph looks very casual (neither the lighting nor the background are particularly beautiful) and supports the idea that this is a spontaneous action. Moreover, it suggests that followers of Instagram get a “behind the scenes” view into his life. The casual character of the photograph amplifies the myth of Chopra’s transparency, even though the event itself could be part of a broader media strategy. His shoes are striking. They contrast with his dark clothes and visualize his personal and non-conformist style. It appeals to audiences who appreciate non-conformity and the “breaking” of the rules: who dares to wear red sneakers during television interviews and staged performances? The non-conformist style symbolized by the red shoes worn by the religious leader demonstrates the interrelation between holistic spirituality, authenticity, and expressive individualism. As such, the shoes are iconic for the making of Chopra’s authenticity. Moreover, these dark clothes and sneakers are part of his personal brand because it makes him stand out and be highly recognizable (Kaputa, 2012). His clothes can be seen as part of his “impression management” (Goffman, 1969) that affirms his image as a “cool” spiritual leader. This post strengthens his authority, not just by staging Chopra as a celebrity and an authentic person with a distinct personal style, but also by staging him as a writer and a leader whose authority is legitimized by his media performances. However, this kind of authority is implicit: it invites and persuades the audiences to perceive him as charismatic, authentic, and famous. It does not stress institutional authority, but it naturalizes his authority by connecting to the contemporary cultural values of expressive individualism and celebrity culture.

Figure 6.3

Deepak Chopra February 23, 2017



Figure 6.3 is another photograph in which Chopra is posing. It shows glimpses of his private life, a family picture made forty years ago with his two children Mallika and Gotham. The caption reads,

Happy birthday to my son @gchopra (emoji's) Here he is 40 years ago with his sister @malikachopra I'm proud of them both!

It shows him sitting with his children in front of a swimming pool. Deepak Chopra wears jeans, a shirt, and a jacket. He holds his son Gotham, who is still a baby. Next to them, his daughter Mallika, a toddler, smiles at the camera as well. The photograph is old as the colors have faded.

The scenery invokes the sphere of a family holiday. Further, it is a presentation of Deepak Chopra as a father, and the caption text shows pride. The photo displays fatherhood, Deepak as a happy family man who enjoys harmonious family relations. The images support his teachings about wellbeing and harmony that are practiced



and performed by himself. By presenting these private details about his family, he enables audiences to engage with his personal brand. This can be seen as part of his branding strategy (Arvidsson, 2006; Ward, 2020). Moreover, a characteristic that unites celebrities and charismatic leaders is the interest of others in their personal lives and the fact that they are able to arouse the emotions of the public (Hendriks, 2017). This photograph is part of strategic communication in which the interest of the public in the private life of Chopra is nourished, and which adds positively to his reputation. Furthermore, he uses his account to promote the Instagram accounts of his children, who will benefit from the celebrity status of their father.⁸⁰

2. Chopra Speaking

A significant number of posts show Chopra while he speaks to others (10 posts in the sample, 19% of the posts in which he is visible). This is observed in television studios, in halls, or in the open air, for example during a meditation session. Below, two examples are analyzed: a photograph of a lecture in a conference room (Figure 6.4) and a photograph of a conversation with Doctor Phil, a well-known psychologist and talk show host (Figure 6.5).

80 The fact that they also partner in *The Chopra Well* YouTube Channel is also worth noting in this context.

Figure 6.4

Deepak Chopra March 3, 2017

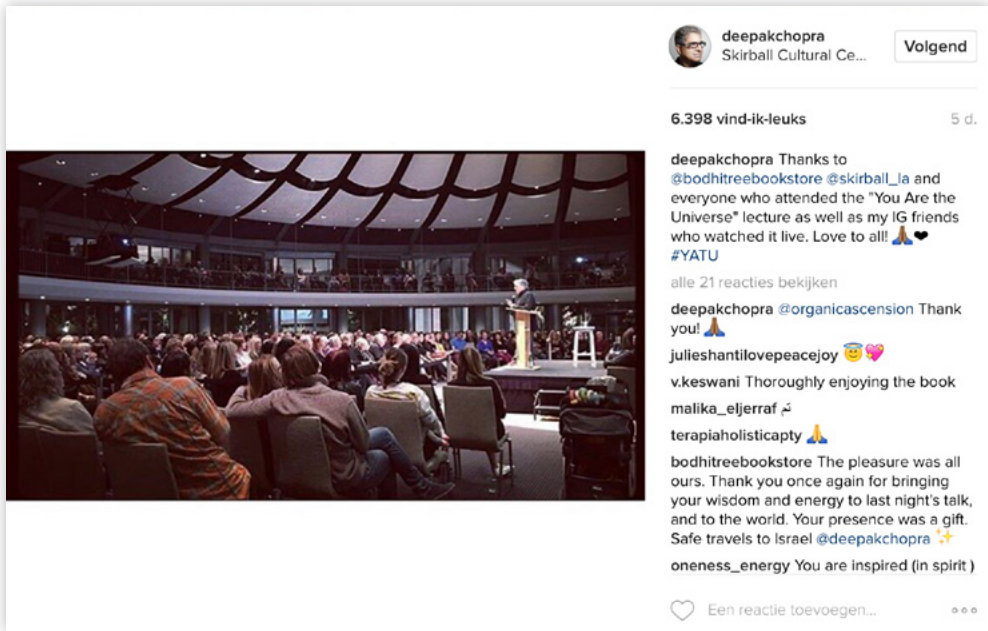


Figure 6.4 shows Chopra on stage in a lecture hall. The photograph is taken from the back of the room. He can be seen from a distance, and because of the lighting, he is clearly visible. The room is packed; all the chairs on the floor and on the balcony seem to be taken. The caption is as follows:

Thanks to @bodhitreebookstore @skirball_la and everyone who attended the 'You Are the Universe' lecture as well as my IG friends who watched it live. Love to all! (Emoji praying hands, emoji of a heart) #YATU

The bookstore and the audience are thanked for attending the lecture, including "my IG (Instagram) friends". This text shows how Deepak actively addresses his followers as "friends", an effort to create an ambience of intimacy with his social media followers. The hashtag #YATU (You are the Universe) is a deliberate way to label this Instagram post for people who are searching for Instagram posts relating



to his book. The aim of the lecture was to promote his latest book, since the title of the lecture is the same as the book title (*You are the Universe*). The mention of the bookstore that organized the meeting shows the interrelation between holistic spirituality and commerce. The spiritual marketplace within the holistic context is not just a metaphor, but the way holistic spirituality works (Redden, 2005). Within this context, consumers and audiences legitimate the authority by buying books and other products of the gurus and spiritual leaders whom they find inspirational and attractive. The large crowd in the room represents Chopra's popularity as a writer and speaker and his ability to attract large audiences. Although the idea of authority figures is suspect in the world of holistic spirituality, the logics of marketing, business, and the book industry that has emerged around spirituality creates its authority figures based on the success of their products and their popularity.

Figure 6.5

Deepak Chopra April 14, 2017



Figure 6.5 shows Chopra with Dr. Phil. The caption reads as follows:

Thanks @drphil for having me as on as the “surprise guest” today.
If you would like to tune in check your local listings! 3pm PST on
@cbstv #YATU

The photograph shows Chopra, wearing a black suit, in a lively conversation with Dr. Phil. Chopra uses his hands to support what he is saying. Dr. Phil stands next to him, wearing a suit, a tie, on which a microphone is attached. Next to him stands Dr. Phil's wife, wearing a white skirt and a dark shirt covered by white hearts. In the background, a banner is visible showing the logo of the Dr. Phil show printed multiple times.

At first sight, this photograph appears as a spontaneous picture in which Chopra was unaware that he was being photographed. But at a closer look, the photograph is most likely staged, as it was being taken in the studio. He seems at ease with important media figures, an acquired “habitus” that has become part of his cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1983; Verter, 2003). The visibility of Dr. Phil confirms the importance of the symbolic association with other famous media persons in the self-help industry. The fact that Chopra was a “surprise guest” refers indirectly to his apparent popularity with the Dr. Phil audiences. As discussed in the theoretical framework, the relationship between authority and celebrity culture is complex (Hendriks, 2017). Within the context of mediatization, celebrity status ensures continuous media attention. While being a celebrity does not necessarily mean that one is recognized as an authority figure, a celebrity status can enhance the authority of religious and spiritual leaders. The ability to connect to large audiences can add to the legitimation of religious leadership. This post strengthens the authority of Chopra because by being in the presence of Dr. Phil, and in being invited onto the show, he gains public recognition as a spiritual leader and public speaker. Therefore, being in this photograph with Dr. Phil supports the celebrity status of Chopra and his religious authority. The naturalization of the connections between celebrity culture and holistic spirituality, demonstrated in this post, obscures any conflicts between the values of authenticity and the staged world of the media industry. The “brand” of Chopra is partly based on his celebrity status, which also means that a critical perspective on celebrity culture is hard to find on his Instagram account.



3. Chopra Practicing Yoga

Though clear references to Eastern spirituality, Buddhism, or Hinduism are rare, they are not absent on his account. In the sample, they are (at least partially) represented by three photographs showing Chopra practicing yoga with his yoga partner Sarah Platt-Finger. The three photographs are relevant because yoga is one of the most prominent phenomena linked to the marketization of Eastern spirituality (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 192). Yoga is, as Andrea Jain argues in her book *Selling Yoga* (2015), a billion-dollar industry. Yet at the same time, yoga is in general associated with Eastern spirituality and well-being, though its origins are more complex than that. Moreover, in the following example, there are also references to politics. The example is therefore significant because it refers to different elements that add to the presentation of the brand of Chopra and possible conflicting values within American society.

Figure 6.6

Deepak Chopra November 11, 2016



Figure 6.6 was posted on November 11, 2016, three days after the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States. The caption is,

Spiritual warriors we need your light in these times @splattfinger
@isthayoga

On the left, Chopra is portrayed barefoot, one foot on a yoga mat, dressed in khaki shorts and a red t-shirt, in a so-called yoga “warrior pose”. His right leg is stretched, his left leg bent, and his arms are stretched, one to the front, and the other to the back. Opposite, on the right, his yoga partner Sarah Platt Finger is visible, also barefoot, dressed in yoga pants and a sleeveless shirt. Sarah Platt-Finger is a yoga teacher and the director of Chopra Yoga (The Chopra Center, n.d.). She stretches one arm towards Chopra, she touches Chopra’s hands, and her other arm is stretched to hold her leg that is raised, while she is standing on the other one. At the back, several objects are visible: a statue of a Hindu goddess, a tissue box, a chair, and in the background a striking blue-green flower-ornamented door that evokes an association with the “East”. The floor is black and polished, similar to that of gyms or fitness rooms.

In this photograph, Chopra presents himself as a fit man, in which yoga exercises are part of his physical and spiritual practices.⁸¹ But there is more meaning in this photograph than might be the “preferred reading” of the author. I see an aging male practicing yoga with a young woman in tight clothes, touching hands. There is clearly a difference in positions. He is a famous spiritual figure who attends her yoga studio, and her person and studio are mentioned by Chopra. By mentioning

81 Chopra has written about yoga as well, for example in the book *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Yoga* (2004), co-authored with David Simon. On his website, he states, “My late colleague and friend Dr. David Simon and I developed the Seven Spiritual Laws of Yoga as a practice for integrating and balancing all the layers of our life so that our body, mind, heart, intellect and spirit flow in harmony” (Chopra, 2014).

her, he gives her exposure, which adds to her success as a yoga teacher.⁸²

The context of this post, right after the election of Trump, is of particular interest here.⁸³ Spiritual entrepreneurs and leaders have tried to make Eastern spirituality compatible with a Western lifestyle, offering all kinds of products and services for emotional and spiritual well-being. However, a characteristic of capitalist spirituality is “Political Myopia”, “a claim to political neutrality – the refusal to see the political dimensions of ‘spirituality’” (Carrette & King, 2005, p. 22). However, this photograph displays a political statement. The caption text referring to spiritual warriors whose light we need in “these times” cannot be separated from the results of the election.⁸⁴ Chopra had been very critical of Trump during appearances on television, such as on CNN. He has called Trump “America’s Shadow” and has stated that Trump “thinks with his penis” and is emotionally retarded.⁸⁵ The political position of Chopra and his criticism

82 The power relations between Deepak Chopra and Sarah Platt Finger are certainly not equal. The photograph itself might even have sexual connotations, where the “male gaze” may linger over the curves of the female body.

83 The election is also invoked by one of the comments on this post “why couldn’t you run for president #imagine”.

84 The fact that Chopra is of Indian origin and is a proponent of Eastern spirituality probably plays a role here. Andrea Jain shows that evangelical leaders have argued that yoga is dangerous, occult, and not compatible with a Christian way of life (Jain, 2015, p. 140). The election of Trump has been associated with xenophobia, the emphasis on “America” versus the rest of the world, and the propagation of a Western, capitalist, and conservative Christian lifestyle in which foreign elements do not belong. Interestingly, Chopra has also been involved a project called *Home: where everyone is welcome: Poems and songs inspired by American immigrants* (2017), drawing from figures such as Audrey Hepburn, Yo-Yo Ma, and Albert Einstein. This project has been promoted on his Instagram account as well. It shows that he presents himself not just as a global citizen, but as an immigrant as well.

85 See the articles and broadcasts of CBS (“Dr. Deepak Chopra: Donald Trump Is

of Trump will most likely resonate with his audiences (and customers), who identify with the counterculture of the 1960s, alternative spirituality, and mostly identify with more progressive political points of view.⁸⁶ The photographs of yoga practices enhance his authority because they emphasize how Chopra embodies the Eastern practices that are so important to holistic spirituality. His references to spiritual warriors will certainly align with the political preferences of much of his audience and help them to identify with his values and teachings.

4. Inspirational Quotations

Quotations are a recurring phenomenon on Chopra's timeline (32 posts in the sample). They are often images with a colored surface in the background, a starry sky, or another matching illustration. The foreground shows a short proverbial phrase or question such as, "The most intimate experience of existing is our being. To know oneself is to know the world",⁸⁷ or "Does the brain create the mind?"⁸⁸ The quotations refer to his ideas and usually to his book *You are the Universe* (2017). The use of images containing proverbial quotations by religious or spiritual leaders, philosophers, or business leaders is a common phenomenon on the internet. Chopra uses proverbial quotations very regularly and they display a form of proverbial wisdom which supports his authority as an inspirational spiritual teacher and guru where his followers on Instagram can use these sayings for inspiration in their own personal spiritual journey. Horsfield speaks of proverbial wisdom as one of the multitude of contenders for authority (Horsfield, 2016, pp. 43–46). He argues that

'America's Shadow,'" 2016) and CNN (Zaru, 2016).

86 The demographics of the Republican Party consist largely of white conservative Americans (Gramlich, 2020). They favor "traditional" Christian values and practices, and distrust "exotic" forms of spirituality. In Jain's book *Selling Yoga*, for example, she has written a chapter on "Yogophobia and Hindu Origins" (Jain, 2015, p. 131).

87 Instagram post of Deepak Chopra, November 28, 2016.

88 Instagram post of Deepak Chopra, February 3, 2017.

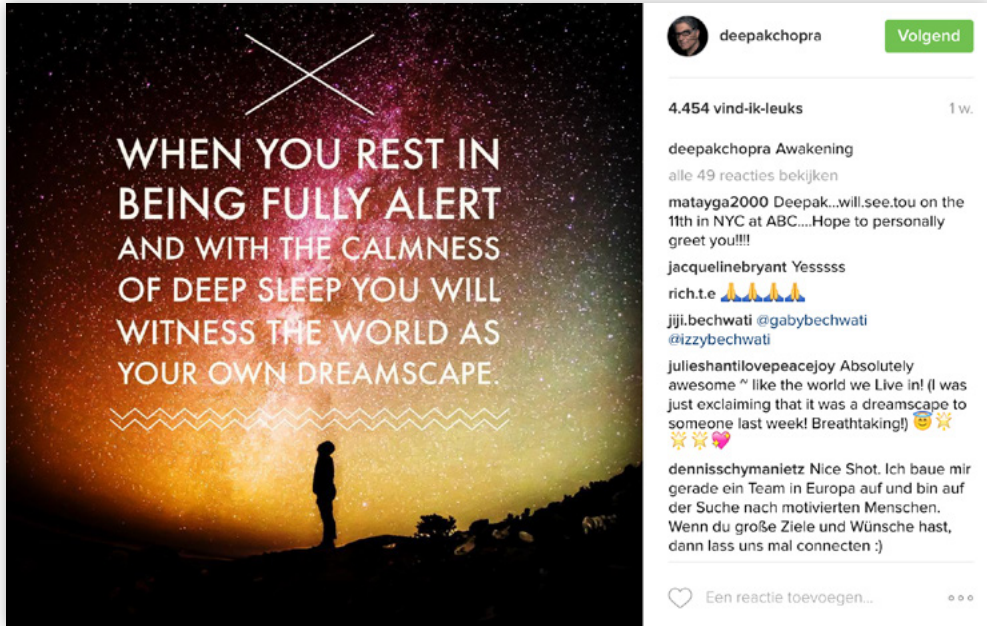


proverbial wisdom is particularly strong in oral communities in which experience is preserved in adages and proverbs (Horsfield, 2016, p. 45). The world of audiovisual social media is often associated with “secondary orality” (Ong, 1982; Zijderveld, 2010), and the use of visuals in order to enhance the quotations is a relevant way in which text and visual aesthetics are combined.⁸⁹ Since the quotations also reference his books and publications, they are being used to “brand” his goods and services too.

89 I have discussed this topic elsewhere, drawing the distinction between what is generally meant by primary and secondary orality: “Orality, the act of speech, is outward, where the senses (hearing, listening, and seeing the speaker) are being used. Primary orality can be described as the pre-literacy period, where communication could not be registered or fixed. According to Ong, when speech is fixed in text, it opens up to the psyche both reflection and interior awareness of the self. The emergence of reading and writing, especially after the invention of the printing press, thus changed the way people communicated. Writing divorces the production of a communicative act from its reception. Ong describes the emergence of audiovisual media as secondary orality, where the senses of sight and hearing receive more attention.” (Zijderveld, 2010, p, 138)

Figure 6.7

Figure 6.7: Deepak Chopra January 2, 2017



The caption of Figure 6.7 is “Awakening”. The image shows a silhouette of a person against the backdrop of a natural landscape in the dark, with above it a sky illuminated by countless stars. This person looks up, and above them is the text “when you rest in being fully alert and with the calmness of deep sleep you will witness the world as your own dreamscape”. The same image, but with a different quotation, is also used in two other messages of the sample.

The image of the galaxy adds to a “cosmic image” that reinforces the idea of the “world as your own dreamscape”. It is probably a photograph that has been edited or digitally constructed by the use of filters in order to create the starry sky, the colors, and the person in silhouette.⁹⁰ The use of a single person and a powerful natural

90 This particular image has been published multiple times on the Instagram account of Deepak Chopra. In the sample, at least two other posts contain the same image, but with a different text: the post of November 11, 2016 contains the text, “That which was



phenomenon evokes the images of romantic paintings of the nineteenth century, and bears resemblances with *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* of Caspar David Friedrich (1818). This post visualizes the teachings of Chopra. It suggests a holistic approach to spirituality in which humans, nature, and the cosmos are united and sacred. The use of a single person refers to one's personal spiritual quest, which is an important theme for people of the Baby Boom generation and younger generations (Roof, 1999; Taylor, 2007). The design of the quotation, the use of fonts, colors, and the image are all part of the "aesthetics of persuasion" (Meyer, 2010) in which the lessons of Chopra are connected to imaginaries of the sacred. It shows how spiritual discourse and visuals can be combined into aesthetically pleasing images that will resonate with his audience and thus enhance his authority.

5. Announcements

Chopra's account regularly displays announcements of books (by himself or others) or events (14 posts in the sample). The announcements are to promote his products and services, or those of befriended others on his own Instagram account, intended for his followers. These messages are similar to advertisements, which are also frequently found in newspapers, on television, and on the internet. These posts affirm his success: he publishes books, can promote them himself, and performs all over the world.

never born. The excitations of which are mind body universe. I am that you are. That Tat Tvam Asi." The other one is from November 28, 2016 and contains the text, "The most intimate experience of existence is our own being. To know oneself is to know the world."

Figure 6.8

Deepak Chopra April 4, 2017



The caption of Figure 6.8 reads,

An evening with Deepak Chopra. You are the universe. Yoga Journal Live New York. Friday, April 21 @ 7.30 PM. yj events

The caption text further explains the event: “Meet me at the @yogajournal event for a ‘You are the Universe’ Talk and Book Signing on April 21st! For more info and tickets go to the link in my bio. #YATU #yogajournal #yoga.” His figure fills the image: his head and back part of his upper body are visible. He smiles and looks into the camera and wears a black jacket with a black shirt underneath. His face looks clean and serene, and not a single wrinkle is to be seen. The text of the announcement is white and is placed on the black clothes of the torso of Deepak Chopra. The background is blue-green, and in the bottom-right corner the logo of “yj events” (Yoga Journal Events) is depicted. The announcement looks clean and professional, and contrasts with the more casual posts. Most probably, his photograph has been thoroughly



edited; his face looks too young compared to other more casual photographs. It is a stylized version of himself that can be compared to photoshopped cover pictures of models on magazines to present the most favorable version of themselves. In this case, it could be argued that this optimized image of Chopra hides his age and presents a mythical representation of someone who is the embodiment of the success of healthy living and meditation. His serene gaze with which he looks into the camera suggests his inner balance and wisdom. This highly stylized post invites his followers to click on the link in his Instagram biography and register for the event. It is a clear example of the marketing and commodification of spiritual goods and services, in this case his book and the event connected to it, that Chopra has proved to be a master of. Again, just like the inspirational quotation, the style post is part of the persuasive aesthetics that Chopra uses to construct and establish his authority on Instagram.

Sequence: Saudi Arabia and California

In addition to the analysis of the sample of 100 Instagram posts, I now present the findings of the analysis of a sample of 15 Instagram posts. As explained in the methodology, for each of the leaders a sequence has been selected which presents socially significant posts that can further serve to understand what cultural values are being evoked. Also, I explain how the sequence reinforces the construction of authority and the personal brand of the religious leader, and what tensions and possible conflicts could lie beneath the myth of naturalized leadership. The fragment that has been chosen for the Instagram account of Chopra dates from May 5 to 14, 2017. It presents, among others, a visit to Saudi Arabia as well as a keynote speech at the University of Southern California (USC). Both events are socially significant. The visit to Saudi Arabia is interesting because the values of holistic spirituality seem to be at odds with the strict Islamic laws of Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the image of Saudi Arabia is, from a Western point of view, certainly influenced by orientalist notions (Said, 1978), in which Islamic countries are not always favorably perceived, especially after the attacks of 9/11. The keynote speech at the University of Southern California is relevant within the context of academic

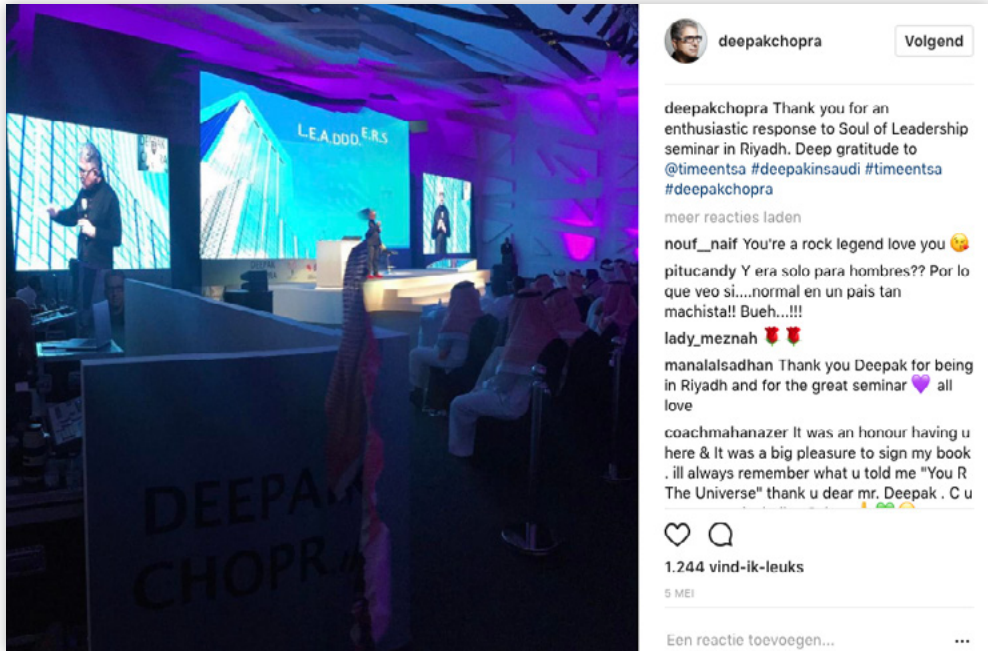
controversies around the work and the use of scientific concepts by Chopra. I discuss two of the photographs of his visit to Saudi Arabia, as well as the photograph of his keynote speech at the university.

In Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, Chopra gives workshops on the “Soul of Leadership and The Future of Well-Being” on May 5–6, 2017, as we learn from his message on May 5, where a poster on Instagram with the announcement of the event in Arabic is visible. On his website, the event is presented in the following way: “As one of the world’s most popular speakers on issues of leadership and self-reflection, the Saudi General Entertainment Authority and Time Entertainment are excited to partner with him to present two completely unique, inspiring and uplifting lectures in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia” (The Chopra Center, 2017). The messages from May 5–7 are devoted to this event. They consist of photographs at the conference itself, photographs in which Chopra poses with his (often) female hostesses, pictures of the luxury hotel where he is staying, and the large male “crew” of no fewer than 15 men who accompany him. The photographs give the impression that Chopra is a popular public speaker, who is even welcomed in Saudi Arabia. This is surprising given the strict orthodox Islamic laws of the country, the lack of religious freedom, and its track record concerning human rights. The title of the conference on “The Soul of Leadership and The Future of Well-Being” is apparently sufficiently acceptable to the authorities of Saudi Arabia.



Figure 6.9

Deepak Chopra May 5, 2017



The caption of Figure 6.9 reads as follows:

Thank you for an enthusiastic response to Soul of Leadership Seminar in Riyadh. Deep gratitude to @timeentsa #deepakinsaudi #timeentsa #deepakchopra

It shows a conference room from the perspective of the back of the room. On a wooden panel the name “Deepak Chopra” is visible. Chopra stands on a white stage, and his figure is projected on three big screens. Against the background, the façade of a large skyscraper is shown, alongside the word “LEADERS”. The room itself looks futuristic with decorated ceilings and walls, and pink light that is reflected by the ceilings. The room itself is occupied by men, all dressed uniformly in white traditional dress and white and red ghutra scarfs. The topic of Chopra’s lecture is on “The Soul of Leadership”. The picture of the skyscraper suggests that the theme of leadership is related to progress and modernity. The men in traditional clothes sharply contrast

with the futuristic conference room and are a very different audience than Chopra normally lectures to. What these men learn about leadership, and how much room there is to deviate from the laws and the customs of their country is hidden.⁹¹ But the photograph itself presents Chopra as an internationally recognized speaker who is even able to connect to audiences in a strict Islamic country. On the one hand this image supports his international recognition as a spiritual leader and authority. However, on the other, the lecture also displays his business interests which are more important than larger societal problems and unjust power structures (Baer, 2003; Banet-Weiser, 2012).

Figure 6.10

Deepak Chopra May 7, 2017



91 It is hard not to notice one of the comments in Spanish: “Y era solo para hombres?? Por lo que veo si...normal en un pais tan machista!! Bueh...!!!” (And it was only for men? As far as I can see... normal in such a macho country! Well...!!!).



The caption of Figure 6.10 states,

Lobby for empowerment of women in Jeddah Saudi Arabia #abkc
Powerful women change agents

Chopra poses in front a banner alongside a man and five women, all dressed in traditional dresses and scarfs. He is dressed in black, and his red sneakers stand out, especially in contrast with the traditional dress of the others. They all smile happily in front of the camera. The text of the banner is formulated in English and Arabic and reads, “We believe in: Love, Honesty & Integrity, Due Diligence, Humility, Simplicity, Confidentiality.” Given the context, the words and concepts will have been carefully selected as being acceptable in Saudi Arabia. They sound rather traditional and detached from the concepts and themes of holistic spirituality, such as a turn away from traditionalism and a focus on individualism and personal freedom. How does this align with Chopra’s role in enabling and lobbying for the empowerment of women and powerful women as change agents? In Saudi Arabia, women were not allowed to drive a car until 2018 (Specia, 2019). One could argue that the fact that Chopra is invited might indicate the fostering of small baby steps in the direction of the empowerment of women and maybe even a more open and inclusive culture, in which leadership plays an important role. In such a context, diplomacy and tact are indispensable. The posts and their signifiers are ambivalent, especially within the context of holistic spirituality. What is totally absent in these posts are references to politically sensitive or religiously sensitive issues. Banet-Weiser accuses Chopra of capitalizing on “essentialist notions” of Eastern spirituality (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 169). In the public perception of the East, the Middle East is often seen as barbaric and cruel, while the Mystic East (India, Tibet) is seen as a source of purity and wisdom (King, 1999; Lopez Jr., 2018, p. 11).

In this case, it is striking that the Instagram posts about his visit to Saudi Arabia emphasize leadership and change, topics that seem to align with notions of modernization and progress. Orientalist notions about Saudi Arabia are not verbally addressed in the captions, but the traditional clothes of the men and women point towards values of traditionalism and a strict interpretation of Islamic rules. It is ironic

that a spiritual leader who traces his teachings at least partly to the wisdom of “the East” advocates “Western” notions of progress in a country that evokes notions of the “Islamic” orient, and which is notorious for the lack of religious freedom and rights of women. These posts are clear examples of the construction of a “myth” (Barthes, 1957) in which the position of Chopra and the application of his teachings and business interests are being naturalized, even in the context of autocratic and oppressive regimes, such as in Saudi Arabia. Further, the values of holistic spirituality and Islamic fundamentalism are completely different. Especially in the case of this visit, one wonders how he combines business with the spiritual values that he represents and promotes.⁹²

92 In a column of the website of *Arab News*, Chopra writes, “Thanks to such an open-minded and informative visit, I returned home feeling that the US media needs to update its second-hand and sometimes biased opinions about Saudi culture and policies. When you check out the facts, pay a visit, and meet the country’s citizens and leaders, you can’t help but feel that Saudi Arabia is going to be a significant global force for peace and prosperity. I, for one, will play whatever role I can in this period of chaos and unsettled transition in the world.” (Chopra, 2017)



Figure 6.11

Deepak Chopra May 12, 2017



The caption of Figure 6.11 is as follows:

Baccalaureate at @uscedu Thanks for the honor (emoji of praying hands) #USCgrads #uscgrad #fighton (emoji of a photo camera) by: @gchopra #rp⁹³

It depicts Chopra while giving a speech during the baccalaureate ceremony at the University of Southern California.⁹⁴ On the left and right, professors in their robes sitting and listening to the speech are visible. In the middle, Chopra is portrayed, also wearing a robe. Above, university banners are hanging from the ceiling. It looks

93 The picture has been taken by his son Gotham Chopra: “[icon of a photograph] by @gchopra #rp”.

94 A photograph preceding this one is a picture in which Dr. Nikias poses next to Deepak Chopra in a university room that is decorated with the pictures of professors.

like the picture has been taken in an auditorium and from a distance; Chopra is barely recognizable. It is a tradition at graduation ceremonies that important people, like scholars, politicians, or celebrities, give a speech. Sometimes these people have studied themselves at a given college or university, sometimes they have not, or have no degree at all. Chopra had been asked to give a speech at this event and has a degree as a medical doctor. He has written books with doctors and academics such as Dr. Rudi Tanzi, a neurology professor at Harvard University and Dr. Menas Katafos, an American physicist. However, as already stated in this chapter, his ideas about alternative medicine, spirituality and quantum physics are highly controversial and have been labeled as pseudoscience by prominent scholars, most famously by Richard Dawkins. These images where Chopra is wearing a robe and is surrounded by professors displays a counternarrative by visualizing his scientific authority and his professional expertise (Carroll, 2011). The photographs enhance the image that he is not just an authority figure in holistic spirituality but also in the academic world.

Conclusion

How does Deepak Chopra use Instagram to mediate his authority? On Instagram, he presents himself in countless photographs where he appears “authentic”. This impression of authenticity is related to the sharing of his daily life with his followers. At the same time, he is presented as special, because of the locations he visits, and his contact with celebrities and presenters. The emphasis on promoting his book *You are the Universe* is part of his marketing strategy. Further, this book (and other books that he has written) allows Chopra to present himself as an expert in the field of spirituality and as a best-selling author. In addition, his charisma and inspirational leadership are reflected in the audiences he attracts when he speaks at events and conferences. On the level of connotation, the visibility of audiences on Instagram further strengthens his status as a spiritual celebrity. His personal style is expressed in red sneakers, black clothing, as well as casual t-shirts, and through photographs of his yoga practice. The aesthetics of messages that contain inspirational quotations connect seamlessly with the culture of holistic spirituality, especially those with images representing the connection between the individual, nature, and the cosmos. His position as a



spiritual leader is supported by well-designed proverbial wisdom using quotations and through the promotion of his philosophy in his books and seminars. Thus, his impression management on Instagram is well-supported by his visual presence and the design of his Instagram posts. In terms of Carroll (2011), his authority is both legitimated by the performance of his personal authority in terms of authenticity and demonstrated competence, as well as by his official authority that is legitimated by universities and media corporations. However, in balance, the personal dimension is much more important.

How does this align with the distrust of authority and institutions in the world of holistic spirituality? Chopra is the embodiment of many of the paradoxes of holistic spirituality. On his Instagram account, he is presented as a spiritual media celebrity who enjoys the luxuries of a cosmopolitan lifestyle. References to “the East” are present, but scarce. Moreover, he is a public speaker and entrepreneur who employs Instagram for the promotion of his books and seminars. Though holistic spirituality originates in the New Age movement of the 1960s, in which Western capitalism and authority were inherently suspect, the movement has become fully mainstream. This includes the commodification, marketing, and branding of spirituality. In the world of holistic spirituality, Chopra is just one of the many spiritual leaders who knows how to be successful in the spiritual marketplace. Holistic spirituality centers on the Higher Self in which the authority of each individual is embedded. While the authority of traditional and bureaucratic institutions is seen as that which prevents people from living their individual and authentic lifestyles, new authority figures have emerged. Though they do not seem to impose their authority, they have successfully branded themselves as persuasive and trustworthy spiritual teachers who are able to connect with the lifestyles, cultural values and the fears and desires of their followers. Further, Chopra has branded himself as a leader who is able to bridge the gap between the East and the West by combining spiritual and religious traditions with his medical background and by invoking scientific ideas and concepts on consciousness and quantum physics.

The combination of glamor and spirituality is very much in line with the aesthetics and affordances of the platform of Instagram but leaves little room for



reflection on the dark sides of capitalism or criticism of social abuse and social inequality (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Chopra's brand seems to suit the higher middle classes who have the time and money to get involved in yoga, conferences, and buy spiritual books. The myth that his spirituality and business are somehow applicable everywhere, even in Saudi Arabia, shows how possible conflicts between spiritual values and oppressing power structures are smoothed and rendered invisible.

Summarizing, Chopra's authority is linked to presenting a personal brand that his audience can identify with. It could be argued that, especially on Instagram, he is the personification of the goals he promotes, such as emotional wellbeing, prosperity, and success. He knows exactly how to use the paradoxes of holistic spirituality to promote his business and construct his authority as a credible and authentic spiritual leader.



7.

Brian Houston

Introduction

Brian Houston is the founder of the influential Hillsong Church, one of the most successful networks of contemporary Pentecostal churches in the world.⁹⁵ In this chapter, I explore how Houston used his Instagram posts to affirm and mediate his religious authority. I first situate his leadership within the context of Hillsong Church and how religious authority is created and implemented within a mediated environment. Therefore, I discuss how the legitimacy of his authority is related to the evangelical and Pentecostal roots of Hillsong Church. Second, I present the content analysis of the sample of Instagram posts that were categorized and coded. This analysis consists of the discussion of the sample of 100 Instagram posts, as well as a series of 15 Instagram posts. I discuss how these posts relate to the construction of religious authority. As I argued in Chapters 1 and 2, the authority of religious leaders is based on the understanding of the sacred and its relation to the religious tradition, but it is also mediated, performed, and styled. Moreover, mediatization and the transformation of the religious landscape have led to practices of personalization, branding, celebrification, and the aestheticization of religious authority. I explore how these dimensions are reflected Houston's Instagram posts. Finally, I reflect in the epilogue of this chapter on how recent events have affected his authority and leadership.

95 In 2022, Brian Houston resigned as senior pastor during a very tumultuous year in Hillsong Church, which I describe in the epilogue of this chapter.

Biography

The biography of Brian Houston and the history of Hillsong Church are deeply interconnected. Brian Houston (1954) was born in New Zealand as the son of pastor Frank Houston and his wife Hazel, who were both involved in the Salvation Army. When he was 3 years old, his parents joined the Pentecostal denomination the Assemblies of God. He went to Bible college and met his future wife Bobbie shortly afterwards. They got married in 1977 and went to have three children: Joel (1979), Benjamin (1982) and Laura (1987). The Houston family moved to Australia in 1978, where Brian became assistant pastor to his father at the Sydney Life Centre. In 1983, he and Bobbie started a new church in Sydney's north-western suburbs, which was called the Hills Christian Life Centre. This church became well known for its worship music. Worship pastors such as Geoff Bullock and Darlene Zschech created music and worship songs that gained popularity, first mainly in Australia, but later abroad as well (Ward, 2020, p. 151). Hills Christian Life Centre and Sydney Life Centre merged in 2001 and were renamed as "Hillsong Church". In the 1990s, London Christian Life Centre and Kiev Christian Centre were initiated which were later renamed as Hillsong London and Hillsong Kiev. More locations followed, including New York, Moscow, Stockholm, Amsterdam, and Cape Town. The growth of Hillsong Church and its popularity made Brian Houston a celebrity figure in the evangelical and Pentecostal world. This has also resulted in the scandals and controversies that have surrounded Hillsong becoming media events (Klaver, 2021). The largest scandal is related to the sexual abuse by Frank Houston of several boys during his ministry as a pastor, both in New Zealand and in Australia. In the news media, Brian's name is often connected to the way he handled the allegations of sexual child abuse against his father Frank Houston, on which I elaborate in the analysis of one of the Instagram posts.

Hillsong Church and the Houston family have, until 2022, been inseparable. Alongside global pastor Brian Houston, his wife Bobbie Houston (1957) was senior pastor and ran the women's ministry of Hillsong called "Sisterhood". She has written



several books and is a highly prominent figure within Hillsong.⁹⁶ Moreover, the children of Brian and Bobbie all have leadership positions in the global branches of the church. Joel is a musician, songwriter, and was co-pastor of Hillsong New York between 2001 and 2017. He current function is worship leader of the Hillsong band Hillsong United. Joel married the Brazilian model Esther Lima in 2012. The couple have received media attention, as with a piece in *The Daily Mail*, who have pictured their “glamour lifestyle”, focusing on Joel’s image as a rock star, Esther’s activities as a model and designer, and the context of Hillsong as a multi-million-dollar church (Haslett, 2016). Benjamin, the second son, was the pastor of Hillsong Los Angeles. He is married to Lucille. He was subsequently appointed as senior online pastor. Currently, it is unclear if he still holds that position.

Laura Toggs, the Houston’s daughter, is involved in youth ministry and the music of Hillsong United. She is married to Peter Toganivalu (abbreviated as Toggs). They are responsible for the youth ministry of Hillsong Church. Joel, Benjamin, and Laura’s children figure regularly on their social media accounts. With Brian Houston succeeding his father Frank, and Brian’s children in leadership positions, it is striking how the Houston family and leadership are intertwined in Hillsong Church.

Hillsong Church

Over time, Hillsong Church has developed into one of the world’s most influential network of megachurches in metropolitan cities all around the world. It has become a worldwide Christian enterprise,⁹⁷ and has become one of the most prolific Christian brands (Wagner, 2017; Ward, 2020).⁹⁸ The different locations are presented as a

96 See Klaver (2021) Chapter 6 “Pentecostal Popular Feminism” for an in-depth analysis of the role of women, feminism, and leadership in Hillsong Church.

97 See Goh (2008) for a detailed analysis of the phenomenon “megachurch” and Hillsong Church.

98 Wagner argues that “Hillsong’s brand is a media environment that leverages the

“house with many rooms” over which Brian and Bobbie preside as the “mom and dad of the house”. Each church has the sign “welcome home” (Klaver, 2016, p. 3). The church is presented as a home for everybody, a place of family, intimacy, and connection. Hillsong United, the music branch, has become as distinct brand within the contemporary Christian music scene. The Hillsong logo, the visual design, and the format of worship are used in every single Hillsong location in the world. The sophistication of the visual design, videos, and the music are similar to brands like Nike and Apple and are clearly targeted towards millennials.⁹⁹ The sophisticated use of media and the ability to establish churches around the globe shows how Hillsong Church has thrived within the context of the broader developments of globalization and mediatization (Klaver, 2021, p. 223).

Besides the earlier mentioned issues and scandals, Hillsong Church has been controversial within and outside the Christian sub-culture. Hillsong is followed by websites like Hillsong Church Watch, a website moderated by “concerned Christians” who follow every step of Hillsong and its pastors (Hillsong Church Watch, n.d.).¹⁰⁰ The anonymous group behind this website claims to be Bible-believing Christians. Hillsong is criticized for its prosperity gospel, lifestyle, simplification of Christianity, and for heretical teachings (Klaver, 2021, p. 141). Another significant issue is money, which is addressed by Australian press as well. Hillsong United, the music branch, has been financially very successful, but since Hillsong is a church, it has benefited

familiar communicative practices and logics of consumer culture to afford participants ways to actively engage in the immediate experience of God. In doing so, the brand becomes a necessary precondition for that experience” (Wagner, 2017, p. 264).

99 Hillsong Church has been named by Harper’s Bazaar as the most fashionable church ever, where fashion designers, musicians, athletes, celebrities, and people in designer clothes come together to worship (Marcus, 2015). However, after the recent scandals, celebrities like Justin Bieber have left Hillsong Church ((Kirkpatrick, 2021).

100 This website is still online, but more recent articles have moved to the website Church Watch Central, <https://churchwatchcentral.com>.



from tax exemptions. Church members are encouraged to donate 10% of their salary to Hillsong, a practice known as tithing. The financial structure of Hillsong and the salaries of its pastors have never been fully published, leading to criticism over lack of transparency about leadership and finances (Snow, 2015). The senior pastors are living a cosmopolitan lifestyle, they travel all over the world, and are notable for their use of hotels, retreats, and designer clothes.¹⁰¹ Further, when it comes to sexuality and purity, Hillsong Church follows the policy of conservative evangelical churches. Hillsong Church has been very ambivalent about gays and homosexuality, which is one of the most fiercely debated topics within global evangelical Christianity. The church states that Hillsong is for everyone, while at the same time, and often less openly, condemning homosexual practices and relations.¹⁰² Whenever controversies,

101 The same *Cosmopolitan* article states it in the following words: “Still, the worldly prosperity of Hillsong can’t be denied: it is estimated that the Church has made \$100 million in capital in a single year as a result of record and book sales and the standard ask of a 10% tithe. Pastor salaries are not disclosed, and no ‘vow of poverty’ is taken. Also a hot topic: how much the international pastors take home in ‘love offerings’ for speaking appearances (reported to be \$30-40,000 a pop). Salvation might be free, but YSL (Yves Saint Laurent, red.) sure isn’t.” (Tallarico, 2018) The conservative values and the financial dimension have been criticized by ex-members such as Tanya Levin, who wrote a critical book about the development of Hillsong and her personal experience (Levin, 2015). The New York city based journalist Lea Ceasrine left Hillsong because, “Ultimately, my problem with Hillsong wasn’t its size, its cultish atmosphere, or its reliance on celebrity relationships. It was the aspirational wealth and classism that ran rampant in the church’s community — to me, it was Evangelical elitism. Under a veneer of coolness and progressivism, the church is a retrograde institution, pushing traditional values on its wide-eyed, and often deep-pocketed, members.” (Ceasrine, 2018)

102 In 2015, there was a controversy about homosexual worship leaders in Hillsong New York, and the question whether they were allowed to have leadership roles (Merritt, 2015). See Brian Houston’s statement on homosexuality and marriage

scandals, or critical documentaries about Hillsong Church gain extensive media attention, the church normally responds with a formal written statement on its website, which can be seen as part of its reputation management.¹⁰³

Leadership, Authority, and Transparency

Houston's leadership style can be characterized as entrepreneurial charismatic leadership (Klaver, 2021). In contrast to traditional denominations, authority within Pentecostal mega-churches is not located within a religious hierarchy or within the bureaucratic structures of the church but is personalized and embodied by the pastor (Klaver, 2021, p. 13). This is certainly the case with Hillsong. Houston can be described as a *pastorpreneur*, a pastor and an entrepreneur united in one person incorporating business principles to build and expand a church (Jackson, 2003; Klaver, 2015; Lee & Sinitiere, 2009).

Since the nineteenth century, evangelical leaders have started new churches with the use of advertising, especially in the United States (Moore, 1995). In the twentieth century, radio pastors and televangelists have risen to fame. Though mainline protestant pastors and Roman Catholic clergy members have been using radio and television, the evangelical and Pentecostal churches have fully embraced the opportunities of audiovisual media (Horsfield, 2015, p. 250). Their missionary drive and emphasis on the sensational dimensions of embodied worship have led them to use these media to connect to new audiences. They have made successful use of marketing and branding strategies to position and differentiate their church within the spiritual marketplace, in which a strong and visible leader plays the main part (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 182; Einstein, 2008; Rakow, 2015).

(Houston, 2015a, 2015b).

103 Examples of Hillsong Church statements include one on homosexuality referenced in the previous footnote. Another example is the one responding to the documentary "Hillsong Hell" by the television program "60 minutes" in which two women spoke about sexual abuse while being involved in Hillsong Church (Church, 2021).



As is common in evangelical and Pentecostal circles, the authority of the pastor is largely based on a personal connection with the sacred, which is emphasized in their personal experiences of God; calling and a special “anointing” of the Holy Spirit are visible in the biography of the leader (Carroll, 2011). Moreover, especially for megachurches preaching the prosperity gospel, the success of a church in numbers of attendees is a source of authority as well, as it reflects the God’s blessing over the church (Horsfield, 2016). In the context of the current media age, charismatic authority is related to the ability to attract audiences through the use of sensational forms, such as the use of audiovisual media, contemporary music, and large, impressive buildings for mass events (Hoover, 2016, p. 29; Meyer, 2010). This authority is in constant need of authentication: charismatic leaders need to prove their ability to be attractive, successful, and inspiring (Klaver, 2016). Moreover, as Pete Ward argues, “The members of the Church legitimize the position of the pastor by buying his books, sharing his podcasts, liking his Facebook status and re-tweeting his tweets” (Ward, 2020, p. 145). Ward states that the performance and positioning of celebrity pastors through social media sideline more traditional structures of authority and allow them to build churches without reference to denominations. Like many other evangelical leaders of megachurches, Houston has been present on Christian television networks such as Trinity Broadcasting Networks (TBN), has written books, is a frequent guest at Christian conferences. He has an active Twitter account (@BrianCHouston), a webpage (<https://brianhouston.com>) which includes blogs, links to his performances, books, and so on, and he even has his own YouTube Channel, which was part of the Hillsong TV Channel. Media performances are essential, because the attraction and retention of audiences is crucial for the visibility of the success Hillsong Church and its leaders.

Klaver argues that Brian and Bobbie Houston belong to a new generation of megachurch pastors who recognize the skepticism their audience holds towards institutions. As a result, they prioritize building emotional relationships with their audience (Bowler, 2013; Klaver, 2021, p. 140). Leaders like Brian Houston use a performance of transparency to validate their leadership (Klaver, 2021, p. 158). Transparency is then understood as the effect of a practice of self-disclosure, giving

others a glimpse into what is perceived as their inner self. As in many Pentecostal churches, the relationship between leaders and the church is based on trust and performance, which is characteristic for charismatic leadership. The importance of social media for establishing trust and performing transparency for Brian Houston can be seen as a manifestation of the mediatization of religious authority.

How can the Instagram posts of Houston be used to mediate his authority? According to Klaver, public visual media are crucial in establishing emotional and affective connections between leaders and followers, and aesthetics are important to legitimize religious authority and personalized charismatic leadership (Klaver, 2021).¹⁰⁴ The culture of Instagram values positivity, beauty, performed authenticity, and personal visual stories. Moreover, the need for transparency and the establishment of an emotional connection with audiences aligns very well with the culture and affordances of Instagram. Because of the influence and visibility of Hillsong Church, Houston is followed by a global audience that also includes critics and journalists. Scandals and controversies, especially the one around his handling of the abuse perpetrated by his father, remain sensitive issues that can harm his personal reputation and the reputation of Hillsong Church. Does he address any of these controversies and scandals on Instagram? And what role do family relations play in his Instagram posts? These questions will be addressed in the subsequent analysis.

Analysis

In the following paragraphs, I present the content analysis and the semiotic analysis of the Instagram account of Brian Houston. I discuss the most important statistics of the dataset, as well as relevant themes that have emerged out of the sample of 100

104 As an article in the *Cosmopolitan* states, ““For those without a Hillsong in their ‘hood, there’s an app, as well as a 24/7 digital channel with access to Sunday services around the world, acoustic recording sessions with Hillsong UNITED, BTS footage from Hillsong’s conferences, and even coffee time with a pastor via the online Café Theology”” (Tallarico, 2018).



images. These themes are illustrated by the description and analysis of individual Instagram posts. Subsequently, I analyze a sequence of 15 Instagram posts. The semiotic analysis consists of the discussion of individual Instagram posts. These posts will be described on the first level of denotation, the description of what is visible, as well as on the second level of connotation. In the deconstruction of the second-order signification, I relate my analysis to the visual culture of Instagram, the position of Brian Houston, the branding, and the reputation of Hillsong Church.

Within the timeframe of one year, between November 1, 2016 and October 31, 2017, the account of Brian Houston posted 287 images, of which 235 (81%) were regular photographs, 33 were quotations (12%) and 19 (7%) were announcements. The systematic sample of 100 images represents a little more than one third of the total number of images and shows similar statistics. Of the 100 Instagram posts of the sample, 75 are regular photographs,¹⁰⁵ 18 are inspirational quotations and 7 are announcements.¹⁰⁶

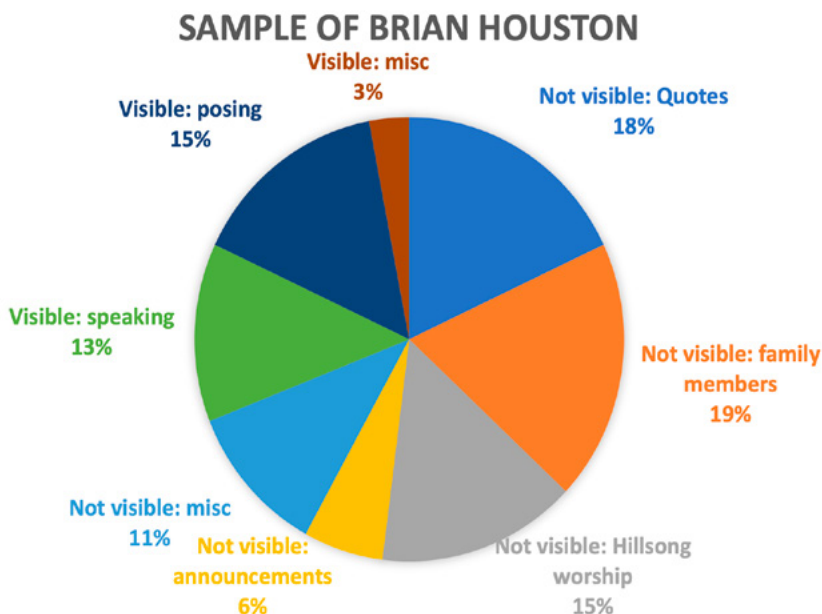
105 The regular photographs include two photo collages in which multiple photographs are presented in one post.

106 From the 7 announcements in the sample, there are three in which speakers and a singer can be seen (photograph in black and white) as announcements for the Hillsong conference 2017 with the theme “closer” (the Hillsong logo and the text “Closer”) can be seen below the photographs. Also included are two images of books: one promoting his wife Bobbie’s book *Stay the path* and one *Goliath Must Fall* by his friend and pastor Louie Giglio. There is also an announcement of Hillsong Israel: a photo of Tel Aviv with Hillsong’s logo in front of it with “Israel” underneath and an announcement of a devotional titled “Blessed”.

Figure 7.1

The Sample of Brian Houston.

Note: Misc. refers to remaining posts that do not fit in the most frequently occurring categories.



In the sample of 100 posts, Houston is visible in 31 of them (see Figure 7.1). Compared to the other four leaders, this number is relatively low.¹⁰⁷ It is therefore relevant to note what the other 69 Instagram posts consist of. Many of these images contain photographs of worship services and family members. Of the 31 posts in which he is visible, he is posing in 15 and speaking in 13 of them. Speaking happens mostly in the context of Hillsong worship services, where he appears on stage. In three other photographs, he is praying and/or laying hands on people during a worship service. Other people visible in these posts are part of audiences attending the

¹⁰⁷ This issue will be further addressed in the comparative chapter. Leaders such as Pope Francis and the 14th Dalai Lama are visible in (almost) 100% of the posts, while Deepak Chopra is visible in 56% of the posts in the sample.



Hillsong services. Another group of people are Houston's family members. There are 28 photographs in which his family members are visible. In 11 of them, Brian Houston is visible. The spaces and places in the post are large halls for worship (31), stadiums (10), and a variety of photographs of locations such as beaches, shopping centers, restaurants, and gardens. Interestingly "Christian" symbols seem absent. In the sample, the symbol of the cross is visible only twice and only one photograph clearly shows a Bible. The objects that are very often visible are related to media productions, such as microphones and stages.

Themes

From this statistical analysis, several elements in the Instagram posts occurred quite frequently and deserve closer attention: posts (1) in which Brian Houston is speaking, (2) in which he is posing, (3) family, (4) worship, (5) inspirational quotations. In this section, I briefly describe these five themes and each theme will be illustrated by an example that will also be analyzed.¹⁰⁸

1. Brian Houston Speaking

In the sample, there are 13 posts where Houston can be seen speaking: usually in front of a large audience, but sometimes for film shoots. Some of these posts are medium shots where his facial expressions are clearly visible. In most of these photographs, he is holding a microphone, is dressed in a suit (without a tie) and looks towards the crowd with a smile. In other photographs, he is shown from a distance but visible amidst large crowds. These photographs are usually taken in large halls of Hillsong Church locations around the world. The description of these photographs informs followers where they were taken, some in Australia, others in Rome, Amsterdam, or London. The posts in which he is featured fall largely into the "photograph" category, but also include photographs in which a quotation has been added, and there is one

108 In the analysis of the sample, announcements will not be discussed, but a promotional announcement will be analyzed in the sequence.

where his image was used for a digital poster as an announcement for an event. Below, I discuss one example of an Instagram post in which he is speaking.

Figure 7.2

Brian Houston November 6, 2016



Figure 7.2 is a post from November 6, 2016. On the level of denotation, the following description can be made. The photograph shows Houston on stage. In it, his figure is centered in the middle of the canvas. He is visibly smiling while he speaks to the audience. He wears a checkered blue and gray jacket and a white shirt. In his left hand he is holding a microphone. Behind him are the contours of what appears to be a video projector screen. In front of him is a standard lectern. On the left, a person on stage is barely visible, this could be someone from the band or the video/audio technician. In addition, two heads of people in the audience are partly visible.

This post is a clear example of mediated performance: the performance of speaking on stage is mediated by this Instagram post and thus distributed to his audiences.



Houston refers to his relationship with God in the caption,

Lord – may I never lose sight of the privilege of sharing your Word
with your people

In the Christian tradition, the decision to become a pastor is often seen as a personal calling from God. This call, and the supposed relationship between the pastor and the divine is, as Carroll describes it, the ultimate base of religious authority (Carroll, 2011). As discussed before, in evangelical and Pentecostal movements, religious authority is personalized, and, in contrast to, for example, Roman Catholic and Reformed Churches, not primarily embedded within the institutional structures of the church (Klaver, 2016). Moreover, the popularity and attraction of churches like Hillsong Church is partly based on encouraging and uplifting sermons in conversational style. His relaxed style of talking and smiling, the style of clothing, the stage, the use of light and sound, all add to a particular experience that is radically different from a traditional church service. On the level of connotation, this post strengthens the naturalization of his authority by emphasizing his self-confidence and his relationship with God, and by presenting a styled performance that connects with contemporary popular culture. In combination with posts in which Brian Houston is presented when speaking to thousands of people, these “speaking” posts can also enhance the performance of charisma: Brian Houston’s way of speaking is able to attract thousands of people, which may imply that he is inspired by the Holy Spirit (one of the key elements of Pentecostalism) and that his apparent extra-ordinary gifts as a speaker have resulted in large audiences and thriving churches (Goh, 2008).

2. Brian Houston Posing

Houston poses for the camera in 15 posts. The posing partially overlaps with family photographs that I discuss below. In eight posts he poses with his family, but there are also photographs in which he poses with Hillsong pastors, with the former leaders of the Australian Christian Churches, and with the media team in Los Angeles. The posed photographs include pictures from numerous places like a photograph with his grandson in New York Central Park, or on vacation in Italy. Some, such as the one with

the Prime Minister of New South Wales, appear official, in which Houston is dressed in a suit and in which the Hillsong logo hangs in the middle behind them. Houston is well known for his relationships with politicians, most notoriously former Prime Minister Scott Morrison.¹⁰⁹ There are also many photographs in which Houston is dressed informally, in t-shirt, shorts, and sometimes wearing a baseball cap. Below, I analyze a photograph in which Brian Houston is posing on stage.

Figure 7.3

Brian Houston May 3, 2017



Figure 7.3 is a photograph from May 3, 2017. It shows four men posing for a picture. Houston is the third man from the left. They are all smiling towards the camera.

109 Brian Houston's friendship with the former prime minister of Australia, Scott Morrison, who considers Brian as one of his mentors, has led to controversies about the role of governmental leaders and the position of Hillsong, especially around the investigation of the sexual abuse case (Wilson, 2018).

The caption reads as follows:

This was a great moment I was proud to be part of. Th 4 living leaders of Australian Christian Churches – a family of about 1100 churches that is 80yrs old. Between the 4 of us we have led for 53 of those 80yrs. Ralph Reed 1964-1977 (96yrs old) Andrew Evans 1977-1997 Me 1997-2009 Wayne Alcorn 2009-2017

The caption guides the viewer in recognizing the four men as leaders of the Australian Christian Churches. The four men have put their arms over each other's shoulders. The first two are holding a bag, most probably a gift bag. The first man looks very elderly and is wearing "old-fashioned" clothes, trousers and a jacket that seem far too large for him and a grey shirt. The other three wear shirts, all of which are untucked. Brian wears a checkered blue shirt and denim jeans. He is the only one without glasses. The background is black, which seems to point to a setting in which they are standing on a stage. Houston's jeans and checkered shirt reveal the contemporary and casual style of Hillsong, which is also similar to the way in which the man on the left and the right of Houston are dressed. Since the oldest man of 96 years looks old and frail, and his predecessor is smaller and looks older, Brian Houston appears to be tall and healthy.

This post is significant for several reasons. The Australian Christian Churches (ACC) is a network of Pentecostal churches and is affiliated with the Assemblies of God (Klaver, 2021). The photograph shows how four men, who have led this network, appear on stage. It is no coincidence that there are no women on stage; female leadership is still a contested issue in Pentecostal and evangelical circles (Bowler, 2019). It seems like a celebratory event in which the leaders are being honored. Brian Houston mentions that he is proud of this moment; the photograph shows him as one of the four leaders, which emphasizes his affiliation with a greater network of churches that have found him suitable to lead this association from 1997 to 2009. Being the former president of the ACC adds to the recognition of his leadership. This photograph can thus be interpreted within as the presentation of legitimation through official authority (Carroll, 2011). While Brian Houston stands next to Wayne Alcorn,

his successor, Hillsong Church actually left the ACC in 2018 (Houston, 2018).

Strikingly, it is during Houston's presidency of the ACC 1997–2007, that he handled the case of child abuse by his father and forced him to quietly resign without handing his father over to the police. According to Brian Houston's own account, when he discovered the abuse, he confronted his father – who confessed – and he suspended his father from the church and called for a meeting of the senior members of the Assemblies of God (Houston, 2015c; Klaver, 2016). There the decision was made that Frank Houston should retire. However, Brian did not refer his father to the police. In 2004 Frank Houston died, but the story haunted Brian Houston as it later became public. In 2014, Brian Houston was compelled to testify before the Australian “Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse”.¹¹⁰ The hearings were public and gained extensive international media coverage. In November 2015, the Royal Commission published its conclusions and highlighted that Brian Houston and the Australian Assemblies of God (AAG) had failed to refer the allegations against Frank Houston to the police. The commission noted that the AAG failed to adhere to their own protocol regarding sexual abuse claims and did not adequately support the victims. Furthermore, the committee emphasized that Brian Houston had a conflict of interest in the allegations against his father because he was the AAG president and the son of Frank Houston during that period. The response of Hillsong Church and Brian Houston to these conclusions was that he had done what according to him was the best thing to do (Klaver, 2016).¹¹¹ The handling of

110 This committee was tasked with investigating and reporting on institutional responses to cases and allegations of child sexual abuse in Australia, see <https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au>.

111 Klaver argues that Brian Houston has framed his actions not in terms of institutional responsibility, but in terms of his personal feelings as a suffering, and finally, triumphant leader. She describes this case extensively in her book in chapter 5 “Authenticity and Transparency” (2021).



the sexual abuse of his father continued to follow Houston and Hillsong Church in 2022.

This post affirms Houston's authority by emphasizing his former institutional leadership role and the recognition he received during this event, but it does not address the controversies in which he was involved during his presidency. Although most Instagram posts emphasize his personal authority, this one also underlines his official authority. Personal authority is unstable, and Instagram posts like this can strengthen the reputation of a religious leaders like Houston by portraying him as a church "president", at least of the Australian Christian Churches. Moreover, the visibility of the other three leaders can also serve as symbolic association, in this case not with media celebrities but with leadership figures who have played a significant role in the Australian family of around 1100 churches, as the caption of the Instagram post highlights.

3. Hillsong Church Worship

The style of worship of Hillsong Church is one of its attractions (Martí, 2017). Photographs of worship figure regularly on the Instagram account of Houston. There are 15 photographs in the sample where large crowds can be seen during Sunday Services and worship events of Hillsong Church (in which Brian Houston is not visible). In some cases, the facial expressions and actions of the crowd are clearly observable (often with hands raised), while other photographs display a light show with hundreds or sometimes thousands of heads of the crowd. Below, I discuss one of the photographs that shows a crowd during a Hillsong Church service.

Figure 7.4

Brian Houston March 25, 2017



Figure 7.4 is a post from March 25, 2017. It depicts a Hillsong worship service in a packed auditorium. The caption is,

CHURCH: Where God's presence is evident in the worship & His anointing is strong on the Word, as people encounter Jesus.

The hall or stadium where this photograph is taken is full of young people. The atmosphere is similar to a pop concert, especially because of the visible light effects.

In the background, the stage is barely visible and most probably includes a worship band that is playing. Since the photograph shows people with raised hands, it suggests that this is an evangelical/Pentecostal worship service.

On the level of connotation, these kinds of posts reveal important characteristics of the mediation of the authority of entrepreneurial Christian



leaders like Brian Houston. The large number of people, their participation in worship, the space, and the use of live music and sound and light effects are all part of the sensational forms of evangelical and Pentecostal megachurches (Meyer, 2010; Wagner, 2017). These “mega” churches are, according to Goh, not only characterized by the number of attendants, but also by the way in which the presence and power of God is invoked. The crowd signifies the body of Christ in which individual believers are able to sense and feel the presence of God. (Goh, 2008, p. 288) The dark space helps to make the physical church structure disappear to facilitate the aesthetic and spiritual experience of the individual worshipper, even within a large mass of people. The use of music, sound, and light (facilitated by media technology), and the space in which this takes place enhance the overall experience (Klaver, 2021, p. 89; Rakow, 2015, p. 222). This image signifies the strong presence of God that can be felt by individual participants who are part of this larger mass of worshipping people. The visualization of “CHURCH”, as Brian Houston writes, stands in sharp contrast with churches that are less successful in attracting young people, and which do not offer the same kind of experience during a church service to invoke the presence of God. Interestingly, Brian Houston himself is invisible, but by posting the image of a huge stadium filled with worshippers, he claims his authority being the founder of a church that is exceedingly blessed by God. He thereby positions himself among global evangelical and Pentecostal leaders, but also in the wider Christian marketplace.

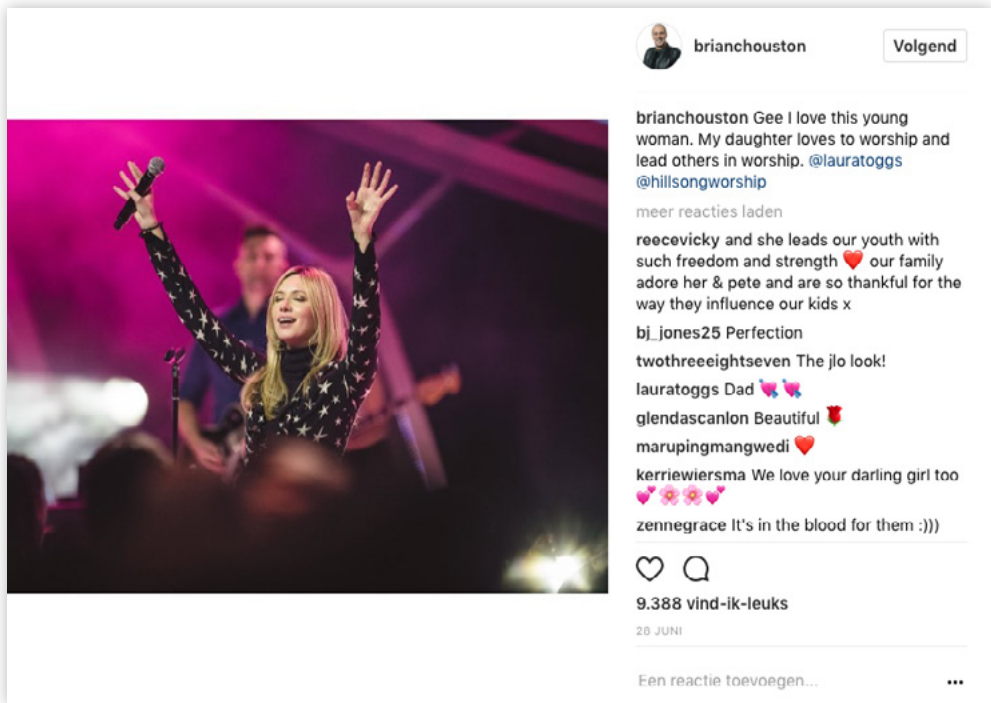
4. Family: (1) Laura Toggs Performing on Stage

The sample of Brian Houston contains 27 family photographs, more than a quarter of the total. In eight photographs Brian Houston poses with his wife, daughter, or grandchildren, but in 19, he is not physically visible. These are photographs in which grandchildren can be seen playing, shopping, sitting on the couch, or taking a bath. Some show his children with the grandchildren, such as a posed photograph of his son-in-law and granddaughter, or a photograph in which his daughter-in-law Lucille and granddaughter are walking through

a shopping mall. There are also photographs of his daughter Laura as she sings on stage, his son Joel on stage with a guitar, his son Ben as he prays for people in a large auditorium (on stage), and a photograph showing one of his granddaughters being interviewed “backstage” at a Hillsong conference. There are also photographs in which Brian is on stage with his wife Bobbie praying for another preaching couple, and one in which he poses with Bobbie and the prime minister of New South Wales and his wife. Below, I discuss two photographs in which family members are visible.

Figure 7.5

Brian Houston June 28, 2017



The caption of Figure 7.5 reads as follows:

Gee I love this young woman. My daughter loves to worship and lead others in worship. @lauratoggs @hillsongworship



The post shows a young woman, Brian's daughter Laura, who stands on stage, in front of people. She has long blond hair, is slim, and wears a black and white dress that is decorated with stars. Her eyes are closed, and her hands are raised. In her right hand she holds a microphone. Laura is positioned in the center of the photograph, and the people in front of her and a guitarist behind her are blurred, while the focus is on her.

The Instagram post of Laura Toggs, the daughter of Brian, is one of the several posts in which his children perform on stage. Laura can, according to Western standards be described as a handsome woman: a symmetrical face, slim body, and long blond hair. The setting is typical for Hillsong worship: people standing in front, a band on stage, a visually attractive singer, stage lights (pink, in this case). This post connotes many meanings that are related to Brian's relationship to his daughter, the role of family, and the success of Hillsong. First, in the text, Brian declares his love for his daughter. This could be seen as an act of showing his authentic feelings towards his followers. Moreover, in saying "My daughter loves to worship and lead others in worship", he contributes to naturalizing her position as one of the youth pastors of Hillsong.¹¹² Because of his position as senior pastor, Brian Houston is not only the father of Laura, but they are also part of the hierarchy of Hillsong. This post plays well into the affective narrative of Hillsong, where the Houston family is intertwined with the idea of the church as a home and a family. The post underlines the close relationship of the Houston family with Hillsong Church. It does not question, but rather obscures, whether it is healthy to have family

112 The position of women and leadership positions within the evangelical and Pentecostal world is complex (Bowler, 2019). In her book, Klaver argues in chapter 7 "Pentecostal Popular Feminism" how the perspective on women in Hillsong is connected to traditional family values as well as popular feminism. Klaver's chapter discusses the presentation of several of the Hillsong women: Bobbie Houston, Laura Toggs, Esther Houston, and Lucille Houston. The authorization of female leadership is also connected to empowerment and fit and beautiful bodies and a cosmopolitan lifestyle as signs of prosperity and spiritual wellbeing (Klaver, 2021, p. 203).

members in leadership positions within the same church. Moreover, it adds to images of a church where beautiful, healthy, and well-dressed people lead the worship. These images are key to building the brand of Hillsong. This post reinforces the authority of Brian Houston because the beauty and performance of his daughter are reflected onto his role as a father, and strengthen his role as the “father” of Hillsong Church.

4. Family (2) and posing: Brian Houston and his granddaughter

Figure 7.6

Brian Houston July 26, 2017



Figure 7.6 depicts Brian Houston with one his granddaughters. The caption is,

Poppa loves Lexi and Lexi loves Poppa #familia

It is taken in a harbor, which is visible by the yachts and buildings in the background.



Most likely, they are on a yacht themselves. Brian Houston by not wearing a shirt, shows his muscled and bronzed body. His granddaughter rests with her arms on his shoulders. Brian and his granddaughter Lexi smile at the camera. What is striking is that this photograph depicts Brian Houston with his bared upper body, which is very different from the photographs on stage. Of the four leaders, he is the only one who shows his uncovered body. He is (relatively) muscular and in shape, which represents an image of a physically strong leader. This photograph supports Hillsong's focus on healthy and fit people (Klaver, 2021, p. 112) which is embodied in its senior pastor.

This photograph is clearly a depiction of the family life of Brian Houston; the picture of the harbor resembles a holiday photograph. This post of Houston as a family man (which the caption emphasizes) has different meanings: first, it signifies intimacy and his celebrity status. Second, the notion of the family man has a political meaning and refers to family values in evangelicalism. Thirdly, it serves as a counternarrative to the story of the abuse carried out by his father. As is the case with politicians, photos of a more intimate setting add to a performance of transparency and depict the leader as an approachable and relatable person (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2017). Moreover, with his overall media presence which is reflected in hundreds of thousands of followers on Instagram, Brian Houston could be regarded as a religious celebrity. One of the characteristics of celebrities is the public's interest in their private lives and lifestyle (Hendriks, 2017; Reijnders et al., 2012). This picture radiates family happiness, and good relations between Brian Houston as grandfather and his granddaughter. Moreover, their presence on a yacht reflects their upper-class cosmopolitan lifestyle. Brian's smile and the posture of his granddaughter represent intimacy and an overall feeling of wellbeing and relaxation. The use of the word "Poppa" and "Pops" in the caption underlines the warm relationship between him and his granddaughter. The presentation of Brian Houston as a family man focuses on the personal and the private dimensions of his life. It also fits within the larger focus of Brian Houston to build an emotional relationship with his audience (Klaver, 2016). But the emphasis on Houston as a family man is also significant in a second way. The concept of family within the evangelical context invokes imaginaries of belonging, community, unity, and security. In the evangelical narrative, the family is considered be a "safe haven",

a private institution, in opposition to the outside and public world (Gallagher, 2003; Hoover et al., 2004). By presenting a “godly” and blessed family, Brian Houston can show how he was able to raise children who have kept the faith, and even have become active in church ministry. Moreover, it perfectly fits into the image of the church as a family in which his family plays an important role, both in terms of visibility and of leadership. The importance of family values also plays a role in politics, especially for conservative political parties. Within Hillsong, traditional gender divisions are to a large extent reinforced, and homosexual relations are rejected (Klaver, 2021, pp. 67, 204).

The positivity of these family images also serves as a counternarrative. It contrasts to the scandals of the sexual abuse case concerning Brian Houston’s father and can also be seen as ways in which Brian Houston is working on maintaining a positive and friendly image to counter negative and critical news coverage. This photo affirms the legitimation of the authority of Brian Houston by the performance of transparency and the representation of a “blessed” family and prosperous lifestyle that reflects the values and branding of Hillsong Church.

6. Quotes

Houston’s account also contains 18 “inspirational quotations” from himself (his name is mentioned underneath). These quotations not only appear on Instagram, but they are also used within the context of Hillsong worship (Goh, 2008, p. 294). For the most part, the quotations are shown against the background of a photograph. Most of them are “nature photographs”: of mountains, the sea, trees, the setting sun. There is also a quotation with a white background, one with a photograph of a large crowd of people (probably during a Hillsong service), and one in which Houston can be seen on stage. Examples of the quotations are “Sustained by the hand of God anything is possible”; “If you believe it, do it. If you preach it – live it. If you want it – go for it. If you need it – pray for it. If you don’t like it – change it!”; “Live every day according to what you believe, not according to what you experience”. One of these quotations (Figure 7.7) is analyzed below.

Figure 7.7

Brian Houston November 29, 2016



Figure 7.7 is a post from November 29, 2016. It shows the quotation, “If you look at yourself through the eyes of others, you will never see who sees God – Brian Houston.” The caption is,

No one can see what God can see.

This is one of the quotations where Brian Houston uses a background that shows a scene from nature. In this case, the background is one of a mountainous landscape and a sunrise.

In evangelical imagery, books, posters, and so forth, these natural backgrounds are often used for biblical quotations. The combination of images of nature and references to the transcendent are commonly found in the Bible, most notably in the

Psalms.¹¹³ But in these posts it is not the Bible being cited, but Brian Houston himself. The relation between the background and the quotation supports his authority as a spiritual leader who is connected to God and has the authority to speak words from and of God. This quotation promotes the Brian Houston vision, and his perspective on the relationship between God and humans. Indirectly, it is a sophisticated way of promoting his sermons, books, and performances. This quotation enhances the authority of Brian Houston by using his words as divinely inspired knowledge, described by Horsfield as “proverbial wisdom” (2016, p. 45).

Sequence: Hillsong Israel Tour

The sequence of 15 images that has been selected for further investigation in this chapter focuses on the Hillsong tour in Israel held in April 2017. I chose this sequence because of the significant meaning Israel has in the imaginaries and discourse within evangelical and Christian subcultures (Rose, 2019). Israel is an important place for Biblical pilgrimages undertaken by diverse groups of Christians including Catholics, Protestants, and certainly evangelical Christians and Pentecostal believers. Many of them visit Israel to see with their own eyes places that are central to the Bible. But for evangelicals, the nation state of Israel is also related to their theological perspectives and beliefs. Especially in Christian Zionism, the foundation of the state of Israel is seen as the fulfillment of countless prophecies (Rose, 2019, p. 92).¹¹⁴ Further, the sequence offers the opportunity to take a closer look at the way Brian Houston is represented on his Instagram account.

The sequence of 15 posts dates from Wednesday 19 to Wednesday 26 April, 2017,

113 For example: “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge” (ESV,

114 Christian Zionism is related to “the belief that the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 and the possibility of ‘return’ of the Jews to its territory is a fulfillment of a biblical prophecy and a sign of the impending end of time” (Rose, 2019, p. 92).



a period of eight days with an average of two messages per day. The series in Israel consists of three episodes: (1) the Sea of Galilee (April 21), (2) Jerusalem (April 22 and 23) and (3) Caesarea (April 25 and 26). Apart from Houston himself, who is visible in six photographs, the following elements are visible on Instagram: an open-air service in an amphitheater on the Sea of Galilee, a service with a concert in Jerusalem, and a service with a concert at Caesarea, which comprises most of the photographs. In addition, there are also two messages dedicated to the promotion of the new book by Bobbie Houston, *Stay the Path* (2017). This series is for the most part a photographic report, consisting of several backstage photographs, and many photographs of worship (a total of seven out of 15). In two of the Instagram posts, Brian is promoting his wife's book. Bobbie is visible in three of the 15 photographs, including one book promotion poster. His son Joel is also shown on one of the photographs while performing during one of the concerts in Israel. In the subsequent paragraphs, three photographs will be analyzed: two photographs from the tour in Israel, and one in which Bobbie's book is being promoted.

Figure 7.8

Brian Houston April 23, 2017



Figure 7.8 is a post from April 23, 2017. It depicts Bobbie and Brian sitting on chairs in the open air. The background looks dry, Mediterranean, with several trees. From the caption it can be deduced that this setting is part of a television recording in Jerusalem:

Making television with @tbn @mattandlauriecrouch #Jerusalem
#Hillsongisraeltour

TBN, Trinity Broadcasting Network, is one of the largest Christian broadcasting networks worldwide, and features many prominent evangelical and Pentecostal Christian leaders. In this Instagram post, Brian smiles at his wife Bobbie. Bobbie smiles towards what is probably a television camera and holds a microphone in her hand. Brian is dressed casually with jeans and a lumberjack shirt; Bobbie looks more formally dressed, wearing an elegant white top.

This photograph displays the close relationship between Brian and Bobbie. Brian's gaze is on Bobbie and the hand Bobbie seems to put on Brian's back underline intimacy and affection. This photograph represents Brian and Bobby as a happily married couple, which ties in with the evangelical importance of family values. This is crucial for the legitimization of their position as a senior pastors couple, the "mom and dad" of Hillsong Church. Also, this photograph supports the idea of transparency, as they share this moment "behind the scenes" with their followers. It is a photograph of a recording in progress.¹¹⁵ The microphones, the informal clothes, and the caption show the ease with which they "make television", and how they are used to presenting

115 Both the preceding photograph and the one that follows (also from April 23), show Brian Houston as he preaches in the open air against the skyline of Jerusalem. Another photograph from April 23 shows Brian and Bobbie (in the same clothing as in Figure 7.9) walking arm in arm in the street, where the connection between the two also seems to be emphasized. The photographs were all taken relatively quickly one after the other (the previous one, this one, and the next one was taken on the same day), so that the viewer has the feeling that they are following events closely.

themselves in a media environment. Lastly, the background of Jerusalem shows a “natural” relationship between the Houston family and the Holy Land. This visual connection between the leadership of Hillsong and The Holy Land reinforces the legitimacy of their leadership within the evangelical and Pentecostal world.

Figure 7.9

Brian Houston April 25, 2017

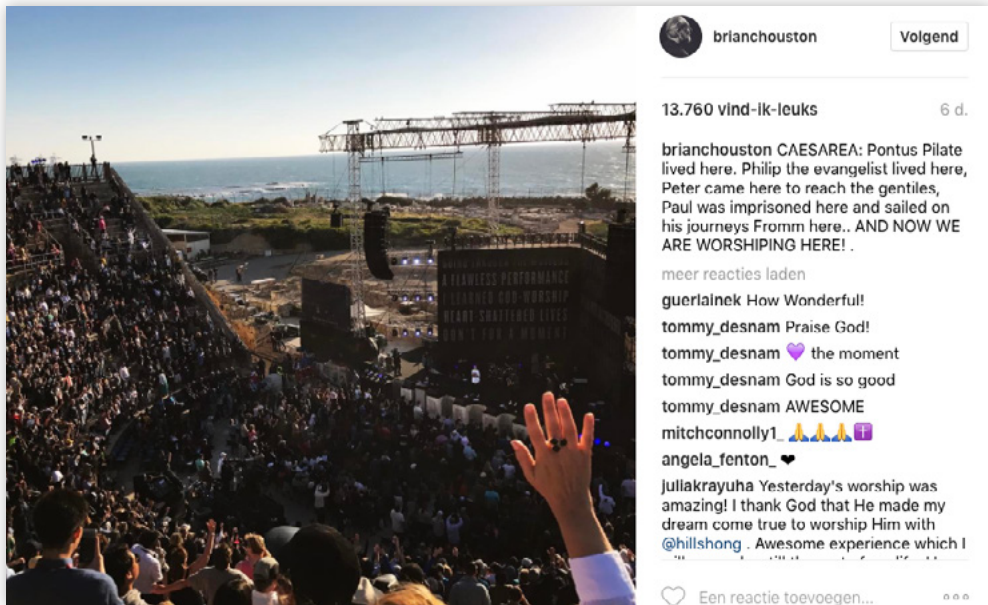


Figure 7.9 is a post from April 25, 2017. The photo of this post was taken from the top of the amphitheater, which is completely full of people. At the bottom right someone is raising their arm, probably as a gesture of praise during the service that is taking place there. On the right, the stage can be seen in the shade. In the background the Mediterranean Sea is visible. The caption explains the context and meaning that Houston gives to what is happening here:

CAESAREA: Pontius Pilate lived here. Philip the evangelist lived here, Peter came here to reach the gentiles, Paul was imprisoned here and sailed on his journeys from here ... AND NOW WE ARE

WORSHIPPING HERE!¹¹⁶

The seats crowded with people in the amphitheater and the fact that Hillsong is performing here radiate a certain success, and the text suggests that there is a direct connection between the apostles and Hillsong Church.

The captions demonstrate that Brian Houston inscribes himself into a lineage of illustrious biblical predecessors, even though he is not visible in this post. The historical and symbolic significance of the places is of great importance here, as is also apparent from this caption on a photograph in which Brian Houston preaches in the open air in Jerusalem:

Not a bad spot to preach. Last week my backdrop was Rome's Coliseum
- This week, Jerusalem's old city! God is good.¹¹⁷

These references, in the images as well as in the captions, refer to the connection between the Hillsong tour and biblical events in the Old and New Testament. And, not unimportantly, Hillsong announced earlier in 2017 that they were starting a church in Tel Aviv. This post displays that Hillsong church is fulfilling a Biblical mission by building the Christian church in Israel, with Brian Houston as one of the twenty-first century apostles. On the one hand, this post presents the image of Brian Houston as a charismatic leader (in the Weberian sense) who attracts crowds just like Jesus and Paul. Strikingly, there are no references to, for example, other churches in Israel that have been here for centuries. It suggests a direct connection between the time Jesus lived in Palestine 2000 years ago and the current present of Hillsong Church. Moreover, the message of this post is political as well, since evangelicals have been avid supporters of the state of Israel, while ignoring or downplaying the role of the

116 The previous photograph from the same date showed how the stage was set up, followed by two more photographs of the event. None of these photographs depict Brian Houston.

117 This is another Instagram post of Brian Houston on April 23, 2017.



original Palestinian population or the Palestinian Christians.¹¹⁸ The global character of Hillsong includes mythologized imaginaries of the local within the context of Israel and its complex religious and political situation. While these representations serve to mediate the authority of Hillsong and its senior pastor within the evangelical world, it does so at the expense of other groups with historical or spiritual ties to Israel, that lack the financial, symbolical, and media resources of Hillsong Church.

118 In the article “Geometries of ‘Global’ Evangelicalism”, Lena Rose describes how a Palestinian evangelical Christian visited the exact same concert as is being depicted here (Rose, 2019, p. 86). Before the concert, several VIP’s were welcomed, like Mike Huckabee, a Southern Baptist Pastor and Republican politician, who had recently participated in a ceremony to lay a cornerstone for a disputed expansion of a Jewish settlement in the West Bank. Jewish Christians were greeted as ‘the locals’. Rose argues that the organizers embraced Christian Zionism, while refusing to acknowledge the presence of local Palestinian believers. Thus, she states, “dominant evangelical actors create an imaginary (and contribute to the material reality) of the ‘local’ (...) that enters the imaginary of global evangelicalism at the expense of alternative imaginaries and materializations” (Rose, 2019, p. 87). Hillsong thus solidifies the prevailing evangelical narrative on the representation of Israel. Palestinian Christians have criticized Hillsong for these actions, because they felt that they excluded them from their evangelical brothers and sisters. Therefore, Rose argues, “Unless Hillsong United openly addresses the differential imaginary of the ‘local’ between itself and the Palestinian evangelical community and provides a platform for the contribution of Palestinian evangelicals residing in Israel-Palestine in shaping this imaginary, its own narrative, (...) will continue to dominate the global imagination of Israel” (Rose, 2019, p. 97).

Figure 7.10

Brian Houston April 26, 2017



Figure 7.10 is a post from April 26, 2017. In this post, Brian Houston is traveling by plane holding the book *Stay the Path* (2017) in sight. This photograph could be a selfie or have been taken by someone else. It is the book that was previously promoted with a message showing an image of the book in a poster format (April 19). It is clear from the caption that the journey to Israel is over. The Houstons are on their way to London:

I just read Bobbie’s book from start to finish on the 5hr flight from Israel to London... and I found it totally impacting. And then I gave it to the flight attendant who was fascinated I was reading a book written by my wife. I hope you can read it! #staythepathbook

The caption also tells a short story: Brian loved Bobbie’s book and gave it to someone from the crew of the plane. It is a clear promotional message, a so-called “endorsement” for Bobbie’s book. It also shows how the family, Hillsong Church, and business are intertwined. Just like many other mega churches, the commodification of religious



messages and stories into books, seminars, DVDs, and such like is a prominent characteristic of the “business model” of the church (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Einstein, 2008). The snapshot appearance of the photograph makes it look more authentic than slick and smooth advertisements. Brian Houston’s assertion that he found the book “totally impacting” strengthens the idea that this is not a commercial endorsement.¹¹⁹ Brian himself has published 13 books between 1996 and 2015, of which the last one is the aforementioned book *Live Love Lead* (2015). *Stay the Path* is the fourth book written by Bobbie. The promotion of his wife’s book just after the trip to Israel, further underlines the blend between the senior leadership positions of Brian and Bobbie and their roles as ambassadors and salespersons of Hillsong products.

Overall, the sequence establishes a strong connection between the land of Israel, the worship of God through music, and the role of Brian Houston as the senior pastor from Hillsong and as a loving husband and supporter of his wife. The informal tone of the messages, and the “behind the scenes” images enhance a sense of transparency and authenticity. The series of images from Israel suggest an interrelationship between the presence of God, the holy places, and the worship services. The activities of Brian Houston and Hillsong show an almost self-evident appropriation of the land of Israel as part of their global network and a reinforcement of the evangelical imaginaries that are related to Christian Zionism. With his promotional post, Brian Houston endorses the leadership role of his wife through her book. In doing so, he encourages his followers to invest in Hillsong Church products. Moreover, as Pete Ward suggests, the sales of books of celebrity pastors affirms the legitimation of their leadership positions (2020, p. 145).

119 One wonders whether this was really the first time he had read his wife’s book or if he was involved in the writing and editing process. Moreover, one might wonder and if the other books that have appeared have been “totally impacting” as well.

Conclusion

In this chapter I investigated how the Instagram posts of Brian Houston are used to support and strengthen his authority as a religious leader. In the selected posts, both the sample and the sequence, I explored how frequently occurring themes, such as speaking in public, posing, the visibility of family members, as well as inspirational quotations and announcements are related to the construction and authentication of religious authority.

On the level of connotation, the photographs of large churches across the globe align with the theology of Hillsong Church on blessing, prosperity, growth, and success as signs of God's immediate presence that transforms the lives of Christians. Houston embodies the values of this theology when he speaks in front of these crowds or shares images of these crowds. Moreover, the "private" photographs with family members present him as a likeable and approachable Christian celebrity who is authentic and transparent towards his Instagram audience. The significant presence of family members on his Instagram account can not only be interpreted from the perspective of the ideal of a happy marriage and a blessed family. Rather, as visual representation of family values, their presence legitimizes and naturalizes the powerful positions of his wife and his children in central leadership roles in Hillsong Church. But the emphasis on family also has political significance as it underscores the importance of conservative family values. Additionally, the posts with "wisdom" quotations promote him as an inspirational leader.

The Instagram posts strengthen the mediation of the authority of Houston using visual aesthetics and a distinct style that reflects the Hillsong Church brand. Moreover, the leadership of Brian Houston is not built on traditional or institutional structures but on charismatic, personalized, and embodied leadership. Within the model of Carroll, the authority of Houston leans towards the personal dimensions of leadership where personal authenticity and demonstrated competence are important dimensions of legitimation (Carroll, 2011). This kind of leadership needs constant re-authentication, both by the performance of (selective) transparency and by the demonstration of success. The posts on Instagram are therefore also part of a counternarrative, since they do not address to the scandals, internal conflicts, and the



lack of transparency on issues like power and money. The posts are used to impose the myth of the naturalness of the leadership of Brian Houston. The use of Instagram by Houston should not be seen as only a means of marketing and branding, but also in terms of reputation management. As Klaver argues, “Active engagement through social media on the part of pastors and churches is therefore more than promoting oneself or branding the church: it is continuous hard work to safeguard and retain the reputation and credibility of the religious authority of leaders and institutions” (Klaver, 2021, p. 2018).

Epilogue

The authority of Brian Houston as the leader of Hillsong seemed firmly established. However, certain events happened that have greatly damaged his reputation as the natural religious leader of Hillsong and have led to his resignation. The analysis of the posts in this chapter covers the period between November 2016 and October 2017, but since then, Hillsong Church has been involved in many scandals and controversies, such as the firing of celebrity pastor Carl Lentz because of sexual misconduct, and allegations of financial misconduct by pastors of a Dallas church plant (Hardy, 2021). Since 2020, a rollercoaster of events has happened to Hillsong Church, as well as to Houston personally. In September 2021, the documentary *Hillsong Hell* appeared on the television program “60 minutes Australia”, reporting the scandals in Hillsong Church. Another very critical documentary, *Hillsong Church, God Goes Viral* appeared on BBC 4. In the meantime, the New South Wales Police issued a court summons for Houston appear to the Court in Sydney accusing him of concealing child abuse perpetrated by his father (Hunter et al., 2021). In January 2022, Houston announced that he would step aside from his role as global senior pastor because he wanted to focus fully on the court case (Rachwani, 2022). Phil and Lucinda Dooley, pastors of Hillsong South Africa were appointed as interim pastors. However, in March 2022, Phil Dooley announced that Houston had to resign due to breaching the moral code of his church because of inappropriate behavior with two women in 2008 and 2019 (Davies, 2022). To make things even worse for Hillsong Church, in the same month, the documentary *Hillsong, a Mega Church Exposed*, was published on Discovery Plus,

focusing, among other issues, on the abuse case of t Brian Houston's father. These documentaries prompted the deconstruction of the myth of Hillsong Church and the Houston family and revealed power relations and ways of covering up scandals.

Currently, the pages of Brian and Bobbie Houston are no longer on the website of Hillsong Church. Further, his website, brianchouston.com, is offline. However, they are still active on Instagram. Brian and Bobbie have used Instagram to express their anger about the proceedings of Hillsong Church. Brian Houston's posts on Instagram show his happy family, his travels in Europe and the people he meets, including Hillsong pastors and influential megachurch pastors who still support him. Clearly, Instagram has become an important personal medium to position himself as an anointed preacher even after his resignation from Hillsong Church. Without the authority of office, the leadership position of Brian Houston is clearly vulnerable. How his personal authority will play out now he is no longer the global pastor of Hillsong Church, and what this means for the future of the church, as well as for the positions of his children, is something that the future will tell.



8.

The 14th Dalai Lama

Introduction

The 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, is one of the world's most popular and influential spiritual leaders. Besides being considered as a spiritual teacher and leader, he is the most visible representation of the people of Tibet, being the Last Dalai Lama who officially governed the country before the invasion of China in 1959. Despite, or maybe because of his exile, he has become a worldwide celebrity, revered by Hollywood stars, a friend of political leaders, and a spiritual guru whose books are sold everywhere. He has become one of the most well-known religious leaders in the West who has been able to modernize and popularize Buddhism for Western audiences.¹²⁰ How do his Instagram posts mediate his authority? And how does his “brand” as a global spiritual leader relate to political issues around Tibet? In this chapter, I present the biography of the 14th Dalai Lama, before elaborating on the historic context of Tibet and popular myths of Eastern spirituality. Further, I discuss how the authority of the Dalai Lama has been transformed since his exile from Tibet. This context provides the background for the analysis of the Instagram posts of the Dalai Lama.

120 For audiences in Western Europe or Northern America without too much background knowledge, the Dalai Lama could be considered as the “Pope” of Buddhism. Next to the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh has also been able to popularize elements of Buddhism, especially in relationship to trauma and the practice of meditation and mindfulness. Rakow states that “many people in the West even see him not only as a leader in Tibetan Buddhism, specifically of the Gelugpa sect, but as the leader of a worldwide Buddhism” (Rakow, 2012, p. 427).

Biography

The Dalai Lama has been the supreme religious and political leader of Tibet since 1950.¹²¹ The belief in the reincarnation of lamas supported the establishment of lineages of lamas, which ensured legal authority and also the owning of property and peasants (Goldstein, 1999, p. 7). According to Stephen John Hartnett, “Free of any notion of separation of church and state, or state and press, the Dalai Lama ruled over these ‘manorial estates’ as king, court, pope, and public voice, he was a centralized leader of immense power” (Hartnett, 2013, p. 289). For Tibetans, the Dalai Lama is more than just a human being; he is not just their leader, but an enlightened being who is perceived as the embodiment of the *dharma* (Rakow, 2014, p. 121).¹²² The Dalai Lama is believed to be a *Bodhisattva*: someone who does not enter the state of Nirvana, because out of compassion and altruism, he is compelled to remain a guide for people who are still struggling to achieve a state of “perfect detachment and happiness” (Halafoff & Rajkopal, 2014, p. 22). By forgoing nirvana, he is a transcendent being, a living Buddha. Moreover, the belief in the reincarnation of the lamas ensures the

121 Lamas are spiritual masters or heads of monasteries in Tibetan Buddhism. The name “lama” has the same meaning as the Sanskrit “guru” (“Lama | Tibetan Buddhism,” 2019). The institution of the Dalai Lama can be traced back to the fourteenth century (Schaik, 2011). In the book *Sacred Mandates*, the authors argue that “the symbiosis of the spiritual and the temporal domains informs the nature of politics in the Tibetan Buddhist world and of their interactions with others (...) It would be nice to be able to present a clean theory and a consistent model of the relationship between the two domains and forms of authority to explain the many expressions of the principle, but in reality its invocations and applications varied and shifted depending on the time and place, the power relations between specific holders of authority, and the context in which it was used and explained, so much so that a leading scholar of the subject describes it as ‘kaleidoscopic.’” (Brook et al., 2018, p. 94)

122 Dharma can be translated as doctrine or rule, and refers to the principles of Buddhism (Rakow, 2014, n. 4).



Dalai Lama's authority and institutionalized charisma (Rakow, 2014, p. 123).¹²³

The 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, was born on July 6, 1935, to a peasant family in the east of Tibet on the border with China. When the thirteenth Dalai Lama had passed away, several expeditions traveled from the capital Lhasa throughout the country to search for his successor, and finally became convinced that Tenzin Gyatso was the reincarnation of the deceased Dalai Lama. In 1937, he was formally recognized as the 14th Dalai Lama and taken to the capital Lhasa to be educated in Tibetan religion and culture. In 1946, he met the German mountain explorer Heinrich Harrer, who became one of his mentors, and who wrote the novel *Seven Years in Tibet* (1952). In 1950, at the age of 15, he took on full political and religious duties. In 1951, China took control of Tibet. Mao decided not to invade Tibet immediately by force because he wanted the legitimation of the Dalai Lama for the annexation of Tibet (Goldstein, 1999, p. 45). The 14th Dalai Lama negotiated with the Chinese government and met with Mao in 1954. However, tensions grew, and in 1959 this resulted in the Tibetan uprising. Since it was not safe in Tibet anymore, he escaped to India. Tens of thousands of Tibetans subsequently followed the Dalai Lama into India.

The Indian government of Nehru granted permission to the Tibetan government in exile to establish themselves in Dharamsala, a town in the northwest of India, close to the Himalayan mountains.¹²⁴ In Dharamsala, the Tibetan government in

123 This is related to the institution of the reincarnated *Tülku*, of which the line of the Dalai Lamas is most well-known. Rakow argues, “Das Konzept der Tülku stellt ein Mittel dar, um Autorität und Charisma von einer Generation auf die nächste zu transferieren. Autorität und Prestige werden also nicht mehr über ein meritokratisches System von Gelehrten geregelt, sondern durch eine Abfolge von Inkarnationen. Den Status beziehen die Träger des nicht mehr vorrangig oder ausschließlich durch persönliche Leistungen, sondern durch das Prestige der Inkarnationsgenealogie, zu der sie gehören.” (Rakow, 2014, p. 123).

124 The Dalai Lama was permitted to settle in a suburb of Dharamsala, which is called

exile was formed, consisting of many ministers who used to govern Tibet, but that had escaped the country as well (Schaik, 2011, p. 239). Since then, the Dalai Lama has resided in Dharamsala, along with numerous Tibetans who escaped Tibet. India supported the Tibetans with the construction of refugee camps, and the provision of food, and medical support, risking their relationship with China. International support came from, among others, Switzerland, the United States, and the United Nations. International media attention for the case of Tibet enabled the Dalai Lama to give press conferences and meet foreign ambassadors. He became the leader of the government in exile. In this function, he negotiated with state leaders, politicians, and diplomats, and became the prominent spokesperson of his government.¹²⁵

In Tibet, traditional authority was replaced by a new government that was controlled by China. Monasteries were closed. The situation in Tibet became worse in 1975, when, during the cultural revolution in the whole of China and Tibet as well, most of the temples, monasteries, and palaces were systematically destroyed. Around that time, the Dalai Lama started traveling extensively to Europe and the United States. These journeys were the start of a new campaign for Tibet because the Dalai Lama performed more as a religious and spiritual leader by teaching lessons of Buddhism, than as a political leader (Schaik, 2011, p. 254). However, through his performance, he drew attention to the situation in Tibet. The Dalai Lama did realize that the theocratic notions of the Tibetan government and the political legitimacy could prove a drawback when appealing for international recognition from Western societies and the United Nations. Therefore, he worked, together with his government in exile, as well as with scholars from India, on the democratization of the Tibetan administration in exile. Moreover, he was committed to preserving the Tibetan Buddhist culture, which he presented as a culture of peace and non-

McLeod Ganj, an old British hill station.

125 The Tibetan government in exile was not recognized internationally, but Tibetan rebels received clandestine support from the CIA in the form of money and weapons until 1972, when Nixon sought rapprochement with Mao.



violence.¹²⁶ The death of Mao in 1976 and the succession of Deng Xiaoping resulted in an easing of the relations between Dharamsala and Beijing. In 1982, there were talks and negotiations, and a delegation of the Dalai Lama was able to visit Tibet. But these negotiations did not lead to results. In 1987, the Dalai Lama visited Washington DC and gave a political speech about the future of Tibet, calling the occupation of China “illegal” and called it a “holocaust” (Hartnett, 2013; Sautman, 2006; Schaik, 2011).¹²⁷ Later, in Strasbourg, he outlined his proposal for the future of Tibet as a demilitarized, autonomous zone within the People’s Republic of China (Goldstein, 1999, p. 77). In 1989, after the protests of Tiananmen Square, the Dalai Lama received the Nobel Peace Prize. In these years, Tibet received international support and attention in Hollywood films, and endorsements and support of celebrities. On March 14, 2011, the Dalai Lama officially requested the Tibetan Assembly to remove him from his political duties. This ended the period in which the Dalai Lama had both political and spiritual authority (Halafoff & Rajkopal, 2014, p. 26).¹²⁸ However, the Dalai Lama continued to travel and teach. In 2013, the Dalai Lama was rated as having the highest popularity as an international leader, a place he shared with Barack Obama (Poll, 2013). The 14th Dalai Lama has been ambivalent about the succession of the line of Dalai Lama’s, suggesting that it

126 The notion of *ahimsa* (non-violence) is not a concept that is particularly common to Tibetan Buddhism. The Dalai Lama has been influenced by Mahātmā Gāndhī’s concept of *ahimsā* in his presentation of Tibetan Buddhism in exile (Rakow, 2012, n. 58).

Though notions of non-violence are important in Buddhism, violence can be justified in some situations (for example, in defending Buddhism), and these notions have not prevented Buddhists from participating in violent conflicts (Rakow, 2019).

127 Sautman argues that, though many might have died during the uprisings and repression, compared with what is defined as genocide, Tibetans have never experienced systematic genocide (Sautman, 2006, pp. 244–246).

128 The responsibilities for the Tibetan community in exile are in the hands of Lobsang Sangay, the first elected prime minister.

might be possible that he would be the last Dalai Lama (Eigendorf, 2014).

The Dalai Lama's contact with the world outside Tibet provoked his interest in modern science, as well as in interreligious dialogue. The Dalai Lama became successful in promoting a "modernized" version of Buddhism (Lopez Jr., 2018; Rakow, 2012).¹²⁹ Features of this are the aligning of Buddhist cosmology with a scientific worldview, a de-emphasis on ritual, and a focus on more "western" values, such as social and political engagement, individualism, democracy, and egalitarianism (Halafoff & Rajkopal, 2014, p. 31). Moreover, the Dalai Lama has committed himself to promote what he calls "secular ethics", such as compassion and tolerance. These efforts have accordingly made Tibetan Buddhism highly attractive to Western as well as Asian audiences and led to a revival of global Buddhism.

The Historical Context of Tibet

The current "Tibet Autonomous Region" is located on the Tibetan Plateau of the Himalayas, which is the highest region on earth. In his book *Tibet: a history* (2011), Sam van Schaik states that Tibet can be described as the autonomous region of Tibet that is nowadays part of China, but that the larger notion of Tibet includes several Chinese provinces and the kingdoms of Bhutan, Nepal, Sikkim and Ladakh. This is all connected to the history of Tibet which started with the foundation of a Tibetan empire in the seventh century and was at the peak of its power in the ninth century. Tibet evolved into a sophisticated civilization, developing its own written language based on Indian script, and adopted Buddhism from India.¹³⁰

129 Lopez states, "Having learned that they have something called a 'culture', the leaders of the Tibetans in exile have selected one of the many elements that together are considered to constitute the changing composition of culture, namely, religion, and have universalized it into an eternal essence, compassion" (Lopez Jr., 2018, p. 198).

130 Before the introduction of Buddhism, Tibet knew a traditional shamanistic Bon religion, which still exists. In the history of Tibet, adherents of the Bon religion and of various branches of Buddhism have clashed regularly (Goldstein, 1999, p. 1).



Several monasteries were founded in Tibet. However, religious and political conflicts resulted in the fragmentation of the empire. Later, Tibet became part of the larger Mongol empire in the thirteenth century, which also included modern-day China. Goldstein describes that in the fourteenth century, a charismatic monk named Tsongkapa traveled to Tibet to seek teachings from the great lamas. Upon his arrival, he observed a decline in moral standards in central Tibet and began preaching a doctrine that emphasized monastic vows of celibacy and scholastic study as the path to enlightenment (Goldstein, 1999, p. 5). This was the start of the Geluk school of Buddhism. In the sixteenth century, one of the lamas of the Geluk school met the Mongol ruler and impressed him so much with his spirituality and religious power that the ruler gave him the title *dalai*, which means “ocean” in Mongolian. This has the implication that his knowledge and spirituality was as vast as the ocean. This was the beginning of the age of the Dalai Lamas. From the seventeenth century, the Dalai Lamas ruled over Central and Western Tibet, supported by the Mongol Empire. In the eighteenth century, the Chinese Qing dynasty came to power, and Chinese governmental officials, so-called *ambans*, took partial control over the government of Tibet. At the end of the nineteenth century, the British colonial government tried to negotiate with the Tibetan government in order to establish trade relations. When the Tibetan government refused, the British army invaded Tibet in 1903, and forced Tibet to sign trade agreements. This led to the increased involvement of China, which tried to re-establish control over Tibet. However, the collapse of the Chinese imperial dynasty in 1911 led to a new, de facto independence of Tibet. This lasted until 1949, when Mao Zedong came to power.

Contested Representations of Tibet

An important question in the current debates around the Dalai Lama and Tibet concerns how life was in Tibet before the Chinese communist invasion. This question relates to dominant narratives and counternarratives that have emerged in the media sphere. Was Tibet a paradise, untouched by technology and modern developments where people strived for the highest Buddhist ideals? Or was it a place of suffering, where slaves were oppressed by their masters, the aristocracy, and the monasteries?

The Chinese government has called traditional Tibet before the annexation by Mao “hell on earth”, and the Dalai Lama has called Tibet after the invasion the same. The Chinese claim to have freed Tibet from Buddhist feudalism and to have modernized the country. Many Tibetans claim that they have become the victims of a genocide or Holocaust caused by Chinese Communism (Hartnett, 2013). In current discourse, the understanding of the year 1959 serves as the dividing line between good and evil, depending on the position people take in the debate.

Lopez demonstrates in his book *Prisoners of Shangri-La* (2018) how myths of Tibet have been created. Because of the inability of Europeans to colonize Tibet in the late nineteenth century, they have constructed myths of Tibet as the “land of snow” as an ideal country outside time and culture in which people lived happily and peacefully, devoting themselves to a pure form of Buddhism, ruled over by a wise and benevolent Dalai Lama. This image contained Oriental fantasies in which Tibetans were seen as “good” and “pure” Orientals, possessing everything that the materialized and disenchanting Westerners were missing.¹³¹ Like other scholars, Lopez argues these phantasies stereotype the reality: Tibet had great social inequalities, various religious sects, and a complex and violent history. Moreover, while Tibet may have been closed to Europeans in the nineteenth century, Tibet was certainly not an isolated country. The conquest and annexation of Tibet by China is being presented as the invasion of forces of evil that have destroyed a utopia. Lopez shows that many of the myths and fantasies around Tibet do persist and circulate often unchallenged. Moreover, he argues that the Tibetan government in exile and the Dalai Lama have played upon those myths by presenting an essence of Tibet which is connected to the preservation of the environment, world peace, and the rights of women (Lopez Jr., 2018, p. 199). Lopez states that the idealization of Tibet, in which the spiritual, the political and exile are blended, may ultimately harm the cause of Tibetan independence. To allow a particular perception of Tibet to circulate as a myth is to deny Tibet its history and to exclude it from the real

131 See Chapter 6 (Deepak Chopra) for a delineation of orientalism.



world in which Tibetans have agency to be part of a contested and complex reality.

Images of Tibet have been nourished by the Theosophy movement of Madame Blavatsky, the novel *Lost Horizon* (1937)¹³² and its movie adaptation in 1937, and, more recently, the famous movie *Seven Years in Tibet* (1997), starring Brad Pitt (Lopez Jr., 2018, p. ix). These novels and movies have shaped a myth of the hidden kingdom Shangri-La, a utopian country untouched by the evils of modernity and capitalism, governed by wise and benevolent Lamas. The subsequent invasion of China has been perceived as a way in which Tibet has become a paradise lost. The escape of Tibetans to India resulted in a growing interest in Tibetan culture and Tibetan Buddhism from international scholars, who suddenly had access to the elite of Tibetan Lamas who had fled Tibet. Moreover, the counterculture of the 1960s resulted in interest in Tibetan Buddhism. In Western Europe and the United States, lamas were seen as the ‘hippies of the past’ (Schaik, 2011, p. 253). Some lamas went to Europe and the United States and started small centers where they taught Buddhism and practiced meditation (Rakow, 2014).

132 The story narrates the fate of a British diplomat whose plane crashes in the Himalayas, where he discovers the hidden kingdom Shangri-La, a paradise on earth in an idyllic valley, governed by an old and wise Lama. The Shangri-La described by Hilton, the writer of *Lost Horizon* is probably inspired by the mythical kingdom of Shambhala, which is described in the Tibetan writings of the *Kālacakra* Tantra, that is said to be located north of the Himalayas. “Shambala is shaped like a giant lotus and is filled with sandalwood forests and lotus lakes, all encircled by a great range of snowy peaks. In the center of the kingdom is the capital of Kalapa, where the luster of the palaces, made from gold, silver, and jewels, outshines the moon; the walls of the palaces are plated with mirrors that reflect a light so bright that night is like day. (...) The laypeople are all beautiful and wealthy, free of sickness and poverty; the monks maintain their vows without the slightest infraction. (...) The majority of those reborn there attain the Buddhahood during their lifetime in Shambala.” (Lopez Jr., 2018, p. 182) See Rakow (2012) for an elaborate description of the *Kālacakra Tantra*.

The images and perspectives that surround current the discussions about Tibet can be categorized in terms of three different types of rhetoric (Hartnett, 2013, p. 287). First, there is the “testimonial rhetoric of catastrophic witnessing”, in which activists emphasize the torture, destruction and humiliation of China. From 2009 to 2017, around 140 Tibetans have committed self-immolation to protest about the situation of Tibetans in and outside of Tibet. The images and recordings of these self-immolations have been extensively covered by international media (Watts, 2012). The people who burn themselves are young people who worship the Dalai Lama, but they no longer share the approach to non-violent communication and are not prepared to wait. The self-immolations of Tibetans in Tibet, and in countries where many Tibetans in exile live, could be seen as criticizing China, but also the position of the Dalai Lama. Hartnett states that the younger generation of Tibetans do not believe in the approach of the Dalai Lama. Second, China applies the rhetoric of the liberation of Tibet: China has liberated Tibet from medieval conditions and oppression from traditional authorities. Finally, according to Hartnett, the Dalai Lama uses the “conflicted rhetoric of Buddhist care”, emphasizing patience and peaceful actions (Hartnett, 2013, p. 302). The Dalai Lama is holding to a proposal that Tibet should be given cultural autonomy within China in a completely demilitarized zone, including the protection of the environment. According to Hartnett, in the West, the approach of the Dalai Lama is viewed with much sympathy. He has acquired an aura of authentic and unspoiled spirituality and has been compared to Nelson Mandela and Mother Theresa. But Harnett argues that his approach is totally unrealistic, and rather utopian. Hartnett argues that both China and the Tibetan elite have an interest in sustaining their rhetoric (Hartnett, 2013, p. 286). The Chinese have been involved in Tibet for 60 years and have invested in modernization while establishing an extensive military presence. According to Hartnett, for Beijing it would be nearly impossible to nullify all these developments to meet the wishes of the Dalai Lama. In addition, he argues the Tibetan exiled elite has benefited tremendously from the global focus on the Dalai Lama and has been given a global platform for the worldwide promotion of Buddhism. Ultimately, these positions have yielded nothing for Tibetans in and around Tibet and have fueled a hardened political climate and



repression from China. And because of China's trade relations and economic power, other countries have done little to make a political difference to the situation in Tibet. Further, somewhat similar to Lopez (2018), Hartnett argues that the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government in exile have benefited immensely from a post-national rhetoric of global solidarity (Hartnett, 2013, p. 306). Since his forced exile, the Dalai Lama has become an international celebrity and a promotor of Buddhism, and he and his government in exile have gained global support and attention from international groups and governments. The Dalai Lama might have lost Tibet politically to China, but communism has lost ground to the globalization of Buddhism, also in China. The Dalai Lama has been hugely successful in spreading a so-called de-localized version of post-modern Buddhism (Hartnett, 2013, p. 302). But he has failed to reach an agreement with China on Tibet. He has lost Tibet politically but has won the symbolic battle for the spirituality of Buddhism, including in China, where around 10 percent of people now consider themselves Buddhists. What does this mean for his authority? That will be covered in the subsequent section.

The Transformation of the Authority of the Dalai Lama

The image of the Dalai Lama and his authority as ascribed by Western audiences did not start in a vacuum in 1959. As I demonstrated in the previous discussion, the public perception of the Dalai Lama and of Tibet had already been informed by myths and stories about him. One can argue, however, that the authority of the 14th Dalai Lama has become "mediatized", especially after his exile to India. In Tibet, his authority was based on his position as the reincarnated spiritual and worldly leader of Tibet. We might describe this authority as traditional, and partly institutionalized authority, or, in Carroll's terms, authority of office (Carroll, 2011). His leadership came under pressure upon China's annexation. After the flight from Tibet to India, his position was no longer connected to Tibet, he no longer owned his palace, and most of his people lived elsewhere. It is therefore important to observe that not only was he able to remain the leader of the fleeing Tibetans in exile, but also to become a global celebrity. This transformation was partly facilitated by contacts with dignitaries and celebrities from the film and entertainment industry. Moreover,

through his international travels and his presentation of Buddhism as a religion of happiness, peace, and compassion, he grew into an icon of spiritual leadership and an advocate for world peace (Lopez Jr., 2018; Rakow, 2012). His authority within the media context has been constructed through the writing of books and appearances on television, the attention of journalists, and by the Tibetan government-in-exile's own communication channels.

The media presence of the Dalai Lama has several dimensions. It consists of his global performances, which usually receive attention from journalists and media channels, and which are promoted by the Office of the Dalai Lama.¹³³ Further, there are the books (co-)written by him, books and movies that have been made about him. He started writing countless books that cover subjects such as Tibet, Buddhism, wisdom, happiness, compassion, meditation, interreligious dialogue, and the relation between Buddhism and science.¹³⁴ His books have been translated into several languages and are available in most bookstores in the Western world. In his media performances, he must take Western audiences (including journalists, politicians, sympathizers, critics, and practitioners of Buddhism) as well as the Tibetan community in exile into account.

Official information about the Dalai Lama is published on the website dalailama.com, which is maintained by “the Office of His Holiness the Dalai Lama”, and in August 2018, a Dalai Lama smartphone app has been released. Further, the Dalai Lama is present on social media such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram. As I stated before, he is also the subject of many books, films, and documentaries that have been written

133 According to the website, “The Office of His Holiness the Dalai Lama (OHHDL), known in Tibetan as Gaden Phodrang, is the personal office of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. It provides secretarial assistance to His Holiness and broadly speaking, is responsible for all matters related to His Holiness and acts on his behalf” (The Office of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, n.d.).

134 His first book that appeared in English was *My Land and My People: The Autobiography of His Holiness the Dalai Lama* (1962).



about him, Tibet, and Tibetan Buddhism. Besides, he has figured in documentaries, news and magazine articles, and television shows. In June 2016, Lady Gaga interviewed the Dalai Lama. In March 2017, he appeared in an episode of the HBO late-night talk show *Last Week Tonight* where host John Oliver conducted an interview with him. The Dalai Lama has long been supported by Hollywood celebrities, most notably Richard Gere, who has advocated for Tibet since the 1970s, and who has provided funding for the publishing and translation of publications of the Dalai Lama.

Thus, the mythical stories around Tibet and the media attention on the Dalai Lama have made him one of the most popular and most recognized spiritual leaders in the world. The leadership of the Dalai Lama can be said to have been transformed from being the political and religious leader of a relatively isolated country to a media celebrity and the global promotor of global Buddhism, with a more inclusive and general take on spirituality that connects to a worldwide audience.

Analysis

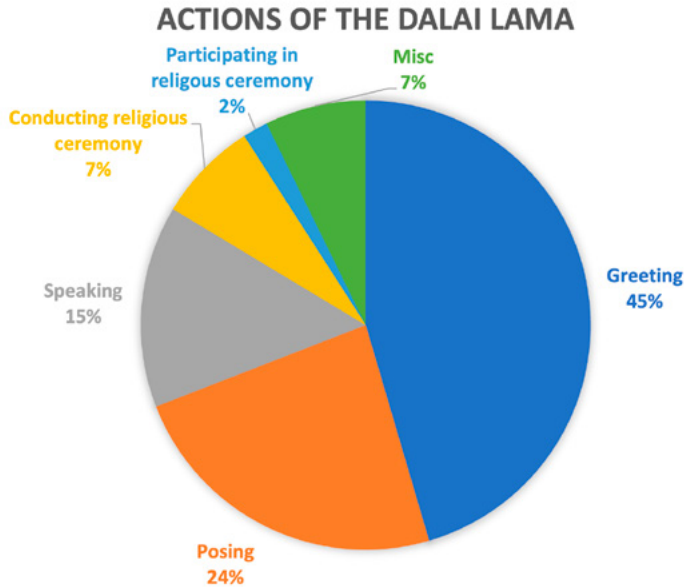
In the following section, I discuss the content analysis and semiotic analysis of the Instagram posts of the Dalai Lama. On his account @dalailama, 56 photographs and 1 video were posted, which makes 57 posts in total. The number of posts of the Dalai Lama is much lower than that of other leaders. Since the total number of photographs does not exceed the number of 100 photographs for the sample, all photographs of this period have been analyzed. This makes the analysis of the Dalai Lama different from the other three leaders, because in this case we can consider all the images. Because of this, it has appeared more fruitful to focus on several themes than to include a sequence of posts.¹³⁵ The examples of Instagram posts are described

135 As I argued in the methodological chapters, the frequency of the post is much lower than on other Instagram accounts, and since all posts have been analyzed, I believe that focusing on a sequence does not add much to the overall analysis. Therefore, I chose to focus on seven themes and to include references to similar posts that relate to the examples that I selected.

on the first level of denotation, the description of what is visible, as well as on the second level of connotation. The second-order signification is the level of the myth, where the things that are being presented are shown as inevitable and natural. In the deconstruction of the second-order signification, I relate my analysis to the context of the position of Dalai Lama, the historical context of the occupation of Tibet, and to the affordances and visual context of Instagram.

It is quite clear that the Dalai Lama is not personally involved in taking photographs or writing the descriptions of the posts. The posts about him are written in the third person, referring to him as HHDL (His Holiness the Dalai Lama). Moreover, the name of the photographer is always mentioned. In most cases, this is Tenzin Choejor, who is part of the Office of the Dalai Lama. The format of the Instagram posts is quite formal. Each professional photograph of the Dalai Lama is accompanied by a description of the event, the place, date, and name of the photographer. Though the photographs on Instagram are of a high quality, the low frequency of posts and the formal description of the captions remains striking. Contrary to the Twitter account of the Dalai Lama, no inspirational quotations are used. Overall, the general impression of the Instagram account is a rather static and formal depiction of the activities of the Dalai Lama. In comparison to other Instagram accounts of religious leaders or political leaders, which often use captions in the first person that directly address the followers, this one lacks the spontaneity that is so often constructed on social media. This might reflect a rather formal approach of the Office of the Dalai Lama in which the presentation of their most popular spokesman is carefully constructed and leaves nothing to chance.



Figure 8.1*Graph of the actions of the Dalai Lama*

The Dalai Lama is visible in 55 of the 56 image posts.¹³⁶ The pie chart in *Graph 1* shows the most important actions of the Dalai Lama which are visible in the 55 photographs in which he is visible. The activities “greeting” (25 photographs), “posing” (13 photographs), “speaking” (11 photographs), conducting a religious ceremony (four photographs) are the most frequent ones. The activities “greeting” and “posing” all relate to meetings the Dalai Lama has, both in his residency in Dharamshala and during his travels in India and abroad.

The Dalai Lama’s clothing is something that stands out in all photographs. In almost every image, he wears a saffron red monk’s outfit characteristic of Buddhist monks. This outfit evokes a simple, humble, and celibatarian life, and a detachment

136 The one photograph in which he is not visible depicts a large crowd in the countryside that has gathered in the countryside of Northern India to watch the Dalai Lama on July 30, 2017.

from materialism, which underscores his position as a religious leader. The reference to a simple lifestyle is reminiscent of the message of Gandhi's outfits. Like Gandhi, the Dalai Lama appears with a shaved head, and wears round glasses. Consequently, in photographs, he stands out when surrounded by men in suits and ties. The clothing fits his role as a religious leader from a specific tradition led by monks: Buddhism. The style of clothing and dress is a powerful signifier and has a strong ideological and religious connotation (Barthes, 1983; Bruggeman, 2014). One could argue that through the aesthetics, the Dalai Lama performs a traditional and authentic mode of religious authority and embodies a pure spirituality, unaffected by modernity. This Buddhist simple lifestyle with the promise of bringing peace of mind has been considered a key element of the brand "Eastern Spirituality". The visual depiction of the clothes of the Dalai Lama appeal to and support these imaginaries and myths. Further, because of the celebrity status of the Dalai Lama, his personal style has become immediately recognizable, especially in a Western context. What is also striking is that the Dalai Lama laughs or smiles in most of the photographs, which affirms his image as a friendly and sympathetic leader. Moreover, the smiling face and laughter of the Dalai Lama are associated with joy, enlightenment, and "living in the present".¹³⁷ The spaces and places in which the Dalai Lama is visible vary, but in general, they can be considered to be "public spaces", such as the streets of

137 The Dalai Lama said in an interview, "I have been confronted with many difficulties throughout the course of my life (...) but I laugh often, and my laughter is contagious. When people ask me how I find the strength to laugh now, I reply that I am a professional laugher. And my religion is kindness." (The Dalai Lama, 2010) In 2016, *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World* was published, in which conversations with the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu center around questions of joy and happiness. However, one should be cautious comparing the smiles and laughter of the Dalai Lama with the "smiling Buddha", since this is not something that is characteristic of Tibetan Buddhism. Moreover, the context of the "smiling Buddha" is highly complex, see (Fiordalis, 2018).



Dharmasala, his official residency, the temple of Dharmasala, and public squares and audience halls. As will be elaborated upon in the themes below, a large proportion of the places are outside of his residency. He travels throughout India, but also abroad.

Themes

Based on the theory and the content analysis, we can distinguish several themes that partly overlap. The first is the Dalai Lama amidst crowds of people. Second, there are several photographs in which the Dalai Lama interacts with children: babies, toddlers, young children, and teenagers. Third, there are posts that do refer to the conflict between Tibet and China. Fourth, several posts include meetings within the context of interreligious dialogues. Fifth, the Dalai Lama is frequently photographed with influential and/or famous people, such as politicians, media celebrities, and sports teams. Six, there are posts in which the Dalai Lama is photographed within the context of academia and higher education. Finally, I pay attention to posts in which the Dalai Lama is participating in or presiding over religious ceremonies.

1. The Dalai Lama Greeting Crowds of People

The Instagram posts do very often show the Dalai Lama surrounded by crowds of people.¹³⁸ Photos of crowds include several posts from a teaching retreat in Northern India, such as a photo of 20,000 people in a large open space. Further, there are photographs of crowds during his visits abroad. Moreover, there are several photographs that portray a crowd in his home base, Dharmasala. The photograph in Figure 8.2 is an example of this.

138 There are 9 photographs showing crowds larger than 50 people, while seven photographs show 11–50 people surrounding the Dalai Lama. Further, there are photographs, like figure 8,2 in which the caption indicates that the Dalai Lama is greeting crowds, even though they are not visible in the photograph.

Figure 8.2

Dalai Lama October 6, 2017



Figure 8.2 shows the Dalai Lama who has apparently just stepped out of a car and is waving to hundreds of people who have gathered around him. The caption reads as follows:

HHDL waving to the crowd at the conclusion of his four-day teaching at the main Tibetan temple in Dharamsala, HP, India, on 6 October 2017. Photo by Tenzin Choejor #dalailama

On the level of denotation, I describe the posts in the following way. The place where the Dalai Lama stands is part of the temple complex and looks like a public square part of which is covered by a roof. In several places, loudspeakers are visible which can probably be used to amplify official events. The building on the right includes a balcony, which is also packed with people. The people are waving, taking photographs, and making the “namaste” gesture. The Dalai Lama is shown from the back. He is instantly recognizable by his clothes, his glasses, and his shaven head.



Around him are four men, one of whom is probably the driver, and the others might be Tibetan monks.

On the level of connotation, this photograph reveals the reverence of the people in Dharamsala for the Dalai Lama and his popularity among these people. Most of them seem to be non-western (probably Tibetans in exile). The photograph shows how much the people in Dharamsala seem to value his presence and how happy they are to see him. The reference in the caption to his four days of teaching clearly marks his activities as a religious leader. The post of figure one is a blend in which the official and the personal authority (Carroll, 2011) of the Dalai Lama are represented. The official authority is visible in the setting of the outside of the main Temple, the clothes of the Dalai Lama, and the reference in the caption to his teaching and his title (HHDL). The personal authority of the Dalai Lama is visible in his interaction with the crowds, the size of the crowds he is able to draw, and the enthusiastic reactions he receives by waving to the crowds. In this photograph, and many others, the Dalai Lama embodies the religious leadership of the Tibetan community in exile. The Dalai Lama is the representative of their traditions, their homeland, their hope, but also a beloved person, leader, and teacher. Moreover, because in the function of the Dalai Lama, the temporal and the spiritual are combined (Brook et al., 2018), we can argue that this post presents a blend of religious and political authority. The people in the photograph are not just there because the Dalai Lama represents their religious community, but also the community of the Tibetan people, both in Dharamsala and elsewhere. The powerful aesthetics of the photograph, in which the visibility of the Dalai Lama, the crowds, and the outside of the temple complex are combined, strengthen the naturalization of this “myth” (Barthes, 1972).

2. The Dalai Lama Greeting Children

The Instagram account of the Dalai Lama shows 12 posts that include children, from babies to young students. The photograph in Figure 8.3 shows an example of the encounter of the Dalai Lama with a baby.

Figure 8.3

Dalai Lama September 14, 2017



The caption of Figure 8.3 is,

A baby exploring HHDL's face in the lobby of his hotel, Germany on September 13, 2017. Photo by Tenzin Choejor/OHHDL #dalailama

On the right, a white man with longish blond hair, most likely the father, is holding a baby, dressed in white, in his arms. On the left, the Dalai Lama is pictured. In the background, wooden panels are visible along with stairs covered with a red carpet. Behind the Dalai Lama, an (Asian-looking) man in a suit is visible, who might be part of the official entourage of the Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama is bent forward, so his face is on the same level as the baby. The baby is touching the lips of the Dalai Lama, while the Dalai Lama touches the hand of the father. Both the Dalai Lama and the father are smiling. The scene looks like a spontaneous encounter. What is striking in this photograph is the interaction between the Dalai Lama and the baby. The baby is



allowed to touch the face of the Dalai Lama, which the Dalai Lama himself seems to enjoy, as does the baby's father.

This image clearly signifies the interest of the Dalai Lama in children, and his willingness to approach children and take the time for such as visit. Images of babies signify innocence while the care of adults for babies signifies love and tenderness (A. Meyer, 2007). Moreover, the action of the Dalai Lama can be seen as “authentic” and spontaneous, because here he is not involved with official visits, but takes his time to meet someone “backstage” in the lobby of his hotel (Goffman, 1969). This image affirms the image of the Dalai Lama as someone who is associated with kindness, tenderness, and compassion. As has been discussed in the methodology, photographs with children can be very effective in portraying leaders (both political and religious) as human, approachable, and kind. This aligns with the brand of the Dalai Lama and strengthens his authority by emphasizing and staging apparently “authentic” and spontaneous behavior as part of his performance management and his personal style (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2017).

3. The Dalai Lama Conducting a Religious Ceremony

There are several photographs that do clearly portray the Dalai Lama as a Tibetan Buddhist leader. The Dalai Lama is often portrayed outside the context of Tibetan Temples or ritual practices that appear to be “traditional”, so these posts are significant because they refer to the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, the role of the Dalai Lama as the most important teacher of the Tibetan community in exile, but also to myths and fantasies of Tibet that have been created in the West (Lopez Jr., 2018).

In discussing this theme, I focus on the setting in which the Dalai Lama is performing rituals or speaking and/or teaching in the Tibetan Temple in Dharamsala, which is reflected in 8 Instagram posts.¹³⁹ I present an example in Figure 8.4.

139 Another striking example is a series of photographs in the North of India in July 2017 in which the Dalai Lama is teaching outside in front of a crowd of thousands of people.

Figure 8.4

The Dalai Lama August 30, 2017



Figure 8.4 shows the Dalai Lama while he is teaching with the following caption:

HHDL reading the text on the second day of his four-day teaching for groups from SE Asia at the main Tibetan temple in Dharamsala, HP, India on August 30, 2017. Photo by Ven. Lobsang Kungga/OHHDL #dalailama

The Dalai Lama is most probably reading a text that is part of the Tibetan Buddhist teachings, sitting on a richly decorated chair. He is recognized by his attire and wears a headset microphone. On the right, a mug is visible, which he probably uses to drink tea. His appearance fills a great part of the actual photograph, and because the background is vague, the focus of the photograph is automatically directed towards the Dalai Lama. He looks very serious and concentrated. In the background, a painting is visible, probably a religious painting that is part of Buddhist imagery.

This is one of the photographs that clearly shows the Dalai Lama as a Tibetan



Buddhist leader, sitting on the throne in the main Tibetan temple of the Tibetan community in exile, where he is reading a classic text that is part of the Tibetan Buddhist scriptures. This photograph shows an example of a classic way of teaching in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition in which the teacher reads several pages of a sacred text and gives explanations afterwards. The Dalai Lama performs this kind of teaching in many places across the world, but it is very different from his more popularized teachings on, for example, Buddhism and happiness (Rakow, 2012).¹⁴⁰ This photograph clearly indicates his official authority as someone who has received the authority of office as the 14th Dalai Lama, the highest religious authority within the tradition of the Geluk school of Tibetan Buddhism (Schaik, 2011, 2016). The objects in the photograph, including his richly decorated chair and the paintings behind him, present the aesthetics of Tibetan Buddhism which can invoke the “exotic” and “oriental” dimension of this tradition that appeals to Western audiences (King, 1999). The Dalai Lama is depicted as an important and revered teacher, while the scenery around him can be considered as part of the aesthetics of Tibetan Buddhism.

There is a certain tension between the Dalai Lama as a traditional religious teacher, and the Dalai Lama as a universal spiritual leader who shares his wisdom in faulty English when meeting all kinds of delegations, celebrities, and admirers. But even here, he is not teaching Tibetans, but groups from Southeast Asia who are visiting the Dalai Lama. That is notable, since Buddhism is certainly present in Southeast Asia. The Dalai Lama has been able to institute himself not just as a

140 Rakow writes, “While the Dalai Lama is presenting specifically Buddhist teachings and initiations for a primarily Western Buddhist or Buddhist-interested audience, most of the time he also holds public lectures aiming at a much wider audience in the supporting program of the event. These public lectures are orientated towards more general topics such as the very basics of Buddhism, the pursuit of happiness, the importance of an interreligious dialogue, tolerance, and nonviolence” (Rakow, 2012, p. 427).

well-known Buddhist leader in The West, but also in regions where Buddhism is already established.¹⁴¹

The temple, the religious text, and the practices of the Dalai Lama are clear signifiers of Tibetan Buddhism. They represent the traditional authority of the Dalai Lama. They enhance the support for the Dalai Lama as representation of “traditional” Tibetan Buddhism, which needs to be protected and supported. The image will certainly appeal to practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism. However, the relative absence of other kinds of ritual Buddhist practices on Instagram (in favor of public performances) shows that references to tradition do not seem to be an important focus of his Instagram account. Moreover, the captions do not provide any content that could explain the ritual practices or the content of the teachings. Instagram favors aesthetics but is also a medium in which personal expression and interaction are highly valued. Further, the low frequency of these posts aligns with the global and modernist approach to Buddhism in which the importance of religious rituals is downplayed (Halafoff & Rajkopal, 2014; Schaik, 2011).¹⁴²

141 The global popularity of the 14th Dalai Lama has been reaffirmed by numerous polls (see, for example, https://yougov.co.uk/topics/international/explore/public_figure/Dalai_Lama). The popularity of the Dalai Lama in Southeast Asia, also among other Buddhists, might very well be inspired by his global popularity and the transformation of Tibetan Buddhism into a more global phenomenon. However, even after consulting an expert on this topic, this is something that I cannot completely explain.

142 Though the comment section is usually not included in this analysis, it is hard to ignore the comments “Stop killing Rohingya Muslims”. These kinds of comments are also visible in other posts. This points towards the fact that the Dalai Lama is globally the most visible religious teacher with a Buddhist background. For many people, Buddhism is considered more spiritual than religious, connecting it rather with philosophical insights, with meditation than with organized religious groups, with hierarchy and tradition, and, even worse, with violence. However, in 2017, the conflict in Burma where Rohingya Muslims were expelled, raped, and murdered, caught the headlines of the



3. The Dalai Lama and the Political Dimension of Tibet

Though the Instagram posts never actively mention China, there are several posts that address the conflict between the Tibetan government in exile and China. These posts are often indirectly invoking the conflict. One example is a post on September 25 where the Dalai Lama poses next to a pop singer while holding a t-shirt with the text “stop the war”. Meetings with US officials, such as Nancy Pelosi on May 9, 2017, show foreign interest in the conflict. Two photographs presented in Figures 8.5 and 8.6 refer to the escape of the Dalai Lama from Tibet and the sorrow of older Tibetans who have fled Tibet.

global news channels. Probably unwillingly, the Dalai Lama was targeted as the one who should ‘do something’ to stop this violence, since Burma is considered to be a Buddhist country. This puts the Dalai Lama in a rather awkward position. He has always propagated the cause of the Tibetan community in exile and the situation of Tibetans in Tibet, in which the Chinese government has been considered as the evil power. The Tibetan community in exile is greatly dependent on the hospitality of India, which of course, has its own religious struggles. And in this case, one might wonder if and how the Dalai Lama, receiver of the Nobel Peace Prize, should get involved in criticizing the country of Aung San Suu Kyi, who had received the same prize in 1991, two years after the Dalai Lama. Should he use his authority as a Buddhist leader to firmly condemn the actions of the Burmese government and the involvement of Buddhists in the conflict? *The Independent* newspaper reports on September 11, 2017 that “the Tibetan Buddhist spiritual leader said those who are harassing Muslims ‘should remember Buddha’. ‘I think such circumstances Buddha would definitely help to those poor Muslims,’ he added. The Dalai Lama said he had also delivered this message to Myanmar’s leader Aung San Suu Kyi several years ago at a meeting of Nobel Peace Prize laureates (cited in Worley, 2011). Though the Dalai Lama certainly condemned the violence itself, it has not been part of the messages of his Instagram posts. This example shows that the interactivity of Instagram does not only reflect the likes and comments of admirers, but can also become a place of heated conflict, discussion, and activism that reaches beyond the intended goal of the administrators of the account.

Figure 8.5

The Dalai Lama April 3, 2017



The caption of Figure 8.5 reads as follows:

HHDL (His Holiness' the Dalai Lama, red.) embracing retired Assam Rifles guard Naren Chandra Das who is the sole survivor of seven soldiers who escorted him after entering into India during his escape from Tibet into exile in 1959 in Guwahati, Assam, India on April 20, 2017. Photo by Tenzin Choejor #dalailama

This is an Indian soldier, which indicates that India supported the flight of the Dalai Lama. This photograph provides a powerful image: a very old, fragile man in his uniform embracing the Dalai Lama. Behind this soldier, the hand of another soldier in uniform who may have supported him is visible.

On the level of connotation, the understanding of the history of Tibet is crucial for the deconstruction of the second-order signification. This post indicates that



the Dalai Lama pays tribute to a pivotal moment in his life when he had to flee in response to conflicts with the Chinese government in Tibet. Although China is nowhere mentioned here, it is also an obvious reference to the geopolitical conflict, and the implicit claim that the Dalai Lama was the legitimate leader who had to flee. The photograph plays upon the emotions of the audience by presenting the fragility of this old soldier who seems even more elderly than the Dalai Lama. Such representation points to a continuity with historical events. The Dalai Lama is shown here as a tender and caring statesman. Thus, it is a highly symbolic and political post. It invokes the history of India's protection of Tibetan refugees since the 1960s, when Nehru allowed the Dalai Lama and tens of thousands of refugees to enter India and supported the Tibetan government in exile, even against the will of China. It also shows that, even though the Dalai Lama presents a non-violent approach to the conflict, he needed military support. The beauty of the image is part of the aesthetic of persuasion. It represents the story of his exile in which the Dalai Lama and the soldier are part of the "good" side compared to the Chinese invaders (Hartnett, 2013; Lopez Jr., 2018). For Western audiences, it will certainly evoke scenes of the movie *Seven Years in Tibet* (1997), and the idea of Tibet as a paradise lost. Thus, this image enhances the construction of the authority of the Dalai Lama as the legitimate leader of a country in exile.

Figure 8.6

The Dalai Lama August 25, 2017



Figure 8.6 depicts the Dalai Lama comforting older Tibetans. It relates to the same history that is evoked by the previous photograph discussed. The caption here is,

HHDL comforting elderly and infirm Tibetans who have come to see him at his office in Dharamsala, HP, India on August 25, 2017. Photo by Tenzin Choejor / OHHDL #dalailama

The woman seems very old and is probably in a wheelchair. This photograph resembles Figure 8.5 where the Dalai Lama meets the old Indian soldier. The Dalai Lama towers above her, is slightly bent, looks at her, and has his hands on her head in the manner of a blessing. On the left is an old man who has raised his hands in a 'namaste' greeting, on the right next to the old woman is a younger man who makes the same gesture. The old woman and the two men all wear a white scarf.

This photograph portrays the compassion of the Dalai Lama towards his people and the comfort that he is able to give, both as their leader and as a compassionate human being. The photograph reinforces the notion that compassion is one of



the essences of Tibetan Buddhism and the teachings of the Dalai Lama (Lopez Jr., 2018, p. 199). It also appeals to the fact that the Dalai Lama has been the beacon of the Tibetan exile community for decades, and that these old people have come to him specifically to meet him. This photograph likewise emphasizes the great importance that Tibetans attach to the Dalai Lama. They revere him as a *bodhisattva*, and still consider him as the traditional and ultimate leader of the Tibetan people. It also implicitly refers to the fact that these people are still in exile. The comforting of elderly, infirm Tibetans evokes the sorrow and grief that they feel because of their exile. The fact that it is the Dalai Lama who comforts them signifies his pastoral and spiritual role as a “father” of the nation in exile, therefore, this photograph certainly has a political dimension. The photograph refers to his official authority as the Tibetan leader, and to the charisma he has acquired from Tibetan followers. Moreover, this image further aligns with the approach of the Dalai Lama towards the conflict with China, in which he emphasizes peaceful actions and patience (Hartnett, 2013). Though this might comfort older generations, this has not prevented others from acts of self-immolation, both in Tibet and elsewhere. These images, or references to these practices, remain absent in the posts of the Dalai Lama. The “impression management” of the Instagram account of the Dalai Lama means that images of conflict or shocking photographs are avoided in favor of photos of compassion and intimacy.

6. The Dalai Lama and Celebrities

The number of images in which the Dalai Lama is photographed with people in positions of power, or media celebrities, is striking. Posing and greeting people are the main activities on the Instagram account (greeting: 25 photographs, posing: 13 photographs). The Dalai Lama poses with policemen and women in India (twice), a sports team from New Zealand, Muslim leaders, Nobel Prize Laureates, a pop star, Tibetan monks, and an Italian professor. The importance of celebrities and people of power on Instagram shows how authority is partly legitimized by processes of celebrification. The photograph of Figure 8.7 shows the Dalai Lama with a famous CNN presenter.

Figure 8.7

The Dalai Lama December 23, 2016



The caption of Figure 8.7 is as follows:

Dr Sanjay Gupta taking a selfie with HHDL after their interview for CNN at Drepung Loseling Monastery in Mundgod, Karnataka, India on December 19, 2016. Photo by Tenzin Choejor #dalailama

The Dalai Lama is standing next to Sanjay Gupta, placing an arm around his neck. Sanjay Gupta, wearing a smart blue jacket and a scarf, is taking a selfie with his iPhone. The focus of the photograph is on both persons, the background is vague. The two persons dominate the image almost completely. Sanjay Gupta is smiling, and the Dalai Lama is looking towards the phone's screen. The fact that they are standing closely together suggests friendship and intimacy. Sanjay Gupta is an American of Indian descent. He is a neurosurgeon, medical reporter, actor, and writer, and is the chief medical correspondent for CNN. According to Forbes Magazine in 2011, Gupta was one of the 10 most influential celebrities (Pomerantz, 2011). This image is



an example of the association of the Dalai Lama with a celebrity presenter, who is a doctor as well, which gives Sanjay Gupta also academic and medical credentials. On the level of connotation, this image represents the Dalai Lama's effort to combine Buddhism and science and supports his guru-like reputation when speaking about peace and non-violence (Halafoff & Rajkopal, 2014). The fact of Gupta's Indian descent enhances the Eastern dimension of their connection and promotes the idea that Eastern religion and philosophy and western science and media can be connected. Moreover, the photograph itself presents the Dalai Lama as a person of significance and influence, having close relations with American celebrities and media companies such as CNN. It is a typical example of symbolic association with the media power of celebrities and the power of television channels which contribute to displaying a certain perspective on the world to a global audience (Hendriks, 2017; Ward, 2020). The gesture of the selfie implies an authentic act in which people share moments with their followers online, even though selfies themselves might be staged.¹⁴³ This post is significant because it is a professional photograph of two people taking a selfie, which gives this image an extra layer. Apparently, a "real" selfie made by the Dalai Lama is not good enough to share with the Dalai Lama's followers worldwide. It also would not fit in the series of professional photographs on the Instagram account. The high aesthetic quality of the photographs of his account can be seen as a way of using "instagrammable" images (Frier, 2020; Manovich, 2017) that align with the construction of the visual brand of the Dalai Lama.

5. The Dalai Lama Traveling

The Instagram posts portray many of the travels of the Dalai Lama. Though he

143 Regarding the selfie, Andre Gunthert states, "Playing on the uncertainty of framing, manipulating of the camera, or the amateurism of shooting, the selfie presents a set of visible flaws that have rapidly become the signature of the genre. These flaws, which distance the selfie from stiff rules of portraiture and give it freshness and originality, have been interpreted as signs of authenticity" (Gunthert, 2018, p. 34).

resides in Dharamsala, he often travels in India and abroad to gain support for the Tibetan cause and to meet with politicians, scientists, Tibetans in diaspora, and Western admirers (Lopez Jr., 2018; Schaik, 2011). In the Instagram posts, the Dalai Lama is depicted while traveling in India (several travels throughout the year), Japan (November 2016), the United States (June 2017) and Germany and Italy (September 2017). These journeys can be seen as part of his mission to raise awareness and solidarity for Tibet and as a way of connecting with global audiences that see the Dalai Lama as an inspiring spiritual leader. The post illustrated in Figure 8.8 is an example of his journey to the United States.

Figure 8.8

The Dalai Lama June 18, 2017



The caption of Figure 8.8 reads thus:

HHDL waves to the crowd before delivering the Keynote Address at the University of California's San Diego's Commencement ceremony



in San Diego, CA, USA on June 17, 2017. Photo by Erik Jepson/UCSD
#dalailama

The photo shows the Dalai Lama dressed in a university robe, with a floral wreath around his neck and wearing a university cap, a headset microphone visible next to his mouth. He smiles and raises his hand to wave to the crowd. His posture fills the photograph against a blue background. The crowd itself is barely visible, but the blurred surfaces at the bottom of the picture suggest that the photograph is taken from amidst the crowd. On the right of the Dalai Lama, a grey-haired smiling man who wears sunglasses is visible. Delivering keynote speeches at special occasions in the United States is something that is often the privilege of those who are considered as inspiring celebrities, seen too on the Instagram account of Deepak Chopra. The fact that the Dalai Lama will deliver a keynote address for a large and well-known academic institution represents his celebrity status. The gown strengthens his credibility as someone who is at home in academic circles.¹⁴⁴ This is also demonstrated by the honorary doctorates that he has received throughout the years. This particular post has several layers. The image shows his access to academia, which enables him also to lobby for political support. His audience consists of students, and maybe parents, the majority of whom are probably American. This image demonstrates the conscious effort of Dalai Lama to invest in a positive relationship with the United States. With regard to the Tibetan Government in exile, this is necessary to gain the continuing support of the American people for the cause of the political legitimization of the status of Tibet. The photo reinforces the image of the Dalai Lama as an inspiring spiritual leader who enjoys worldwide popularity. It further strengthens the friendly face of the representation of Tibetans and Tibetan Buddhism and increases his media exposure.

144 Similar dynamics can be observed in one of the posts of Deepak Chopra, though in that case, his academic credibility adds to the marketing branding of his products.

6. The Dalai Lama and the interreligious dialogue

The Instagram account of the Dalai Lama shows several photographs that depict an interreligious dialogue or encounters with leaders from several religious and spiritual backgrounds. These photographs include pictures of the Dalai Lama posing with Muslim leaders, embracing a Roman Catholic Cardinal, and in dialogue with representatives of different religions. These encounters align with the emphasis the Dalai Lama places on dialogue, both in his books (such as *The Book of Joy* [2016] with Desmond Tutu) as in his speeches and interviews.¹⁴⁵ The photograph in Figure 8.9 shows the Dalai Lama posing for a picture with three female students in Kashmir.

Figure 8.9

The Dalai Lama July 27, 2017



Figure 8.9 shows the Dalai Lama posing with three young Muslim girls who are wearing a headscarf, with the following caption:

145 See, for example, his speech “Inter-religious Dialogue and Public Talk on the Art of Happiness in Zacatecas” (The Office of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, 2013).



Three young students from Kashmir happy to meet HHDL after the conference on communal harmony in Leh, Ladakh, J&K on July 27, 2017. Photo by Tenzin Choejor/OHHDL

The three students wear a badge, which indicates that they are participants in a conference. The Dalai Lama smiles, has put his arm around one of the girls and has draped part of his monk's robe around his head, so that his head is covered. The three girls are smiling as well. It seems to indicate the good humor of the Dalai Lama, who is prepared to cover his head, just like the three Muslim students. The physical contact between the Dalai Lama and one of the girls adds to the informality and intimacy of the setting. The photograph shows how apparently unproblematic it is for the Dalai Lama to interact with adherents of other religions. It reinforces his emphasis on non-violence and interreligious dialogue. (Lopez Jr., 2018, p. 186) His pose, and the gesture with his robe, signifies his spontaneity. This post reinforces the impression of management by staging "behind the scenes" photographs of the Dalai Lama.

At the same time, the girls seem to indicate that they are pleased to pose with the Dalai Lama. Apart from the theme of interfaith dialogue, the photograph also enhances the aura of celebrity and popularity of the Dalai Lama. The addition that these girls are from Kashmir raises the issue of the conflict regarding the Kashmir region: it is an area that is claimed by both India and Pakistan. This conflict often has a religious dimension, whereby Islam is identified with Pakistan and Hinduism or Buddhism with India. The gesture of the Dalai Lama shows that he is taking a position against polarization and promoting dialogue and community. However, at the same time, the Dalai Lama and the Tibetans in exile are dependent on the support of India, which has become more nationalistic in recent years, and has also resulted in the discrimination of Muslims in India. Thus, while the photograph presents a seemingly unproblematic setting, the actual meaning might be more political than it appears. The positivity of this photograph reinforces a coherent brand of the Dalai Lama as someone who can transcend religious boundaries and promote dialogue and harmony.

Conclusion

This chapter started with the question of how the Instagram posts mediate the authority of the Dalai Lama, with the further aim of investigating how his “brand” as a global spiritual leader relates to the political issues around Tibet. As we have seen, the authority of the Dalai Lama has been transformed from a local religious and temporal leader to a global spiritual leader and the most prominent figure to raise awareness for the case of Tibet.

The authority of the Dalai Lama can be said to be partially based on his official authority as a leader of the Tibetan people, of whom many have joined him in exile in India. Instagram photographs of his official visits, as well as the delegations who visit him, show how important he still is, even though he has retired from his official duties. Especially within the context of rituals and religious events, his role can be seen as one who represents the “authentic” Tibetan Buddhist tradition and customs, which is underscored by the belief that he is the fourteenth reincarnation of the Dalai Lama. On the level of connotation, the aesthetics of his clothes, the photographs of temples, religious objects, and rituals on Instagram are persuasive ways in which his official authority is constructed and maintained. His traditional authority, the myth of Tibet as an unspoiled and otherworldly Shangri-La, and his worldwide celebrity status as an inspiring spiritual leader have nourished his personal authority. On Instagram, the spontaneous encounters and gestures of the Dalai Lama point to the naturalness of the leadership of the Dalai Lama. These posts portray him as a warm, loving, authentic, humble spiritual leader. The interpersonal relations, and the “touching” encounters between the Dalai Lama and others are emphasized. The Dalai Lama is not being presented as a *bodhisattva*, but first and foremost as an approachable human being.

On the other hand, the ritual dimensions of Tibetan Buddhism are hardly visible. For many audiences, especially Western audiences, the Dalai Lama can be seen as the personification of Tibet and its unspoiled and universally applicable spiritual traditions. With his humble and simple clothes and his informal behavior, he embodies Tibetan Buddhism. The concurrent Tibetan Buddhist lifestyle is presented through his performances, in his speeches, and his books. The media attention he generates, and the carefully curated images on Instagram, show how his authority has become



adjusted, constructed, and modified for the affordances of social media and its global audiences. Altogether, the Instagram photos of the Dalai Lama provide many signifiers that all enhance a coherent brand of the Dalai Lama, in which his traditional authority, charisma, celebrity status, and authority as the leader of the Tibetan community are promoted and celebrated.

The photographs emphasize positivity and harmony but avoid conflicts and tensions or the articulation of power relations. While the diplomatic sensitivity of the Dalai Lama's visits abroad always evokes reactions from China, references to China seem to be absent on Instagram. Also, topics like self-immolation or the difficult situation of Tibetans in Tibet are not mentioned on the Instagram account of the Dalai Lama. Ultimately, a conflict plays out in the background, responding to conflicting myths and narratives about Tibet. On a global scale, the Dalai Lama has constructed a tremendous amount of symbolic and spiritual capital that has resulted in worldwide solidarity and attention to the form of Buddhism he propagates. His presence and visibility have strengthened a powerful (counter-)narrative, especially compared to the way China presents the conflict.

Politically and locally, it has yielded little for the Tibetans in and around Tibet. On Instagram, the peaceful image of the Dalai Lama as an authentic spiritual leader is strengthened, and the reality of conflicting visions and the powerlessness of young Tibetans is not shown. Due to the strong focus on the personality of the Dalai Lama and the emotional bond with his followers worldwide, the Dalai Lama is presented as the ideal friendly and spiritual face of Tibet. He is the encouraging leader of a nation in exile, who comforts those who are hurting, and who empowers the younger generations for interreligious dialogue. By making clear that his message is primarily spiritual, and not political, he has become an international spiritual authority who is consulted by celebrities and presidents. At the same time, his presence in the media ensures constant attention for Tibet, even if it is not explicitly mentioned. In the war of visions about the history, the present, and the future, the Dalai Lama has remained a powerful figure who is able to influence the public opinion by promoting a construction of Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism that appeals to global audiences.

9.

Pope Francis

Introduction

Of all the religious leaders featured in this study, Pope Francis is the most popular on Instagram in terms of followers. He is the first pope to embrace Instagram, and unlike other social media accounts referring to his title (@pontifex), has chosen a personal account linked to @franciscus. Portrayed by journalists as “out-of-the-box”, unconventional, and pragmatic, he emphasizes the preference for the poor, inspired by St. Francis of Assisi. At the same time, he represents the tradition and the institution of the Roman Catholic Church (Valley, 2015). What happens when the world’s most famous and influential religious leader presents himself on Instagram? What does it say about religious leadership in a globalized and mediatized world? In this chapter, I start with a short biography of Jorge Bergoglio, the man who took the name “Pope Francis”. Afterwards, I discuss the issue of authority and its relation to the Roman Catholic Church and its structure, sketching the origin and relevant elements of the history of the papacy, and the relationship with the media. Further, I elaborate on the issue of the “branding” of the Pope and the importance of social media for the papacy. The discussion of the Instagram post will cover the main themes that have emerged out of the analysis, before turning to the analysis of a sequence of Instagram posts around the time of Easter. The conclusion of this chapter specifically addresses the question as to how the Instagram posts of Pope Francis mediate his authority.

Biography

Pope Francis (December 17, 1936) was born as Jorge Bergoglio in Buenos Aires, in a family of Italian descent (Valley, 2015).¹⁴⁶ He attended a technical school and graduated

146 The biography of Pope Francis, Jorge Bergoglio, is well-documented, especially by Paul



with a Chemical Technician's Diploma. Before working as a chemical technician, he worked as a bar bouncer and a janitor. He was ordained a priest in 1969 and had a leading position within the order of the Jesuits during the seven-year period of what was termed Argentina's dirty war (1979-1984). Though he opposed the junta regime and secretly helped many dissidents of the government to find shelter within the religious order, he was also involved in an event in which former Jesuit priests were arrested and tortured after they had to resign from the order (because of their political views) and thus lost the protection from the Catholic Church. He actively tried to free those men, who were finally released after six months (Valley, 2015, p. 70). However, this episode left a stain on his reputation and was probably one of the reasons why he was not elected pope in 2005 after the death of John Paul II (Valley, 2015, p. 1). Moreover, during the time when he held the position of a superior, he became known for his austerity and conservativeness. In 1986 he was removed from this position and redeployed to one of the outskirts of the country to positions without administrative responsibilities. By his own account, this became a moment for reflection and change. Later, in 1998, he was appointed archbishop of Buenos Aires, where he became known for his unconventional style, humble lifestyle, and his compassion for the poor and the marginalized. He was created a cardinal in 2001 by Pope John Paul II. On March 13, 2013, he became the first non-European pope in a millennium and the first Jesuit pope at the age of 76 (Duffy, 2014, p. 415). Moreover, he was the first to take Francis as his pontifical name, after St. Francis of Assisi.

At the time when Jorge Bergoglio became Pope Francis, the Roman Catholic Church was plagued by scandals. There were scandals of corruption and money laundering, priests who had enriched themselves and led luxurious lifestyles. Countless cases of sexual abuse by clergy members had emerged all around the globe, along with the fact that these scandals had been covered up by the bishops and cardinals who held responsibility. Moreover, although the Catholic Church

Valley in his 2015 book *Pope Francis, the struggle for the soul of Catholicism*.

forbids homosexual relationships, many clergy members were secretly involved in relationships with other men (Martel, 2019). In many countries, the Roman Catholic Church had seen the number of active church members plummet, which had led to the closure of many parishes. Moreover, even in countries where the Roman Catholic Church was still very powerful, such as in South America, it encountered fierce competition from newly established evangelical and Pentecostal churches. Finally, the governing organization of the Vatican proved to be a very strong force that blocked and frustrated many attempts to reform. His predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI, seemed to be unable to deal with all these problems and had, as the first pope in history, abdicated (Duffy, 2014, p. 412). It was up to Francis to take up the challenge.

Though many of the issues of the Roman Catholic Church have not been resolved, the popularity of the papacy under Pope Francis has soared. His acts of refusing to live in the papal palace or to wear richly decorated liturgical vestments, as well as his informal and accessible style and appearance made him almost instantly very popular, even, and maybe especially, outside the Roman Catholic Church. In 2013, nine months after his election, Pope Francis was named Time Person of the Year (Chuafo-Eoan & Dias, 2013). During his papacy, he became known for his criticism of unbridled capitalism, consumerism, and the refugee crisis. Moreover, he is known for supporting action on climate change and other environmental issues, which has been formulated in his second encyclical *Laudato Si* (Pope Francis, 2015b). In 2019, a movie was made about the abdication of Pope Benedict XVI and the election of Pope Francis and released on the streaming service Netflix. The movie *The Two Popes* further popularized the image of Pope Francis as an authentic and humble pope.

Religious Authority, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Vatican

The richness and the complexity of the history of the popes and the Roman Catholic Church can never be fully addressed in a chapter like this, but an important dimension that needs to be covered is the relationship between the institution, media, and authority, especially within the context of mediatization. In the following section I limit myself to the significant changes brought by the Reformation and the invention



of the printing press, the growing influence of the Vatican in spiritual matters, and the cover-up of sexual scandals in the twentieth century. I then focus on the way the Roman Catholic Church has adopted audiovisual mass media and social media.

The authority of the pope is traditionally connected with the office (Carroll, 2011) as the supreme Pontiff of the Roman Catholic Church, which is legitimated by the succession of popes who trace their origin back to Saint Peter. According to the Roman Catholic doctrine, the pope is the successor of Saint Peter, who was given the keys of heaven by Jesus himself (Matthew 16:18-19).¹⁴⁷ Moreover, the city of Rome became one of the key centers of Christianity, not only because it was the capital of the Roman Empire, but also because, according to tradition, the two most important apostles Saint Peter and Saint Paul had contributed to the founding of the early church in Rome, and even more importantly, had become martyrs in this city during the persecution of Nero in AD 60 (Duffy, 2014, p. 7).

The institution of the bishop of Rome dates from the first century and is thus an institution that has existed for almost 2000 years (Duffy, 2014).¹⁴⁸ In the history of Western Europe, the popes have played a crucial role in religious as well as political matters. With the colonization of the Americas, the Roman Catholic Church has become especially influential in Latin and South America, as well as in many other

147 Matthew 16:18-19 says, “And I say also unto thee, that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. 19. And I will give unto thee the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. And whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in Heaven, and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in Heaven” (21st Century King James Version). The interpretation of this text in relation to church authority has been heavily debated, especially since many churches, such as the Eastern Orthodox and Protestant Churches do not accept the primacy of the pope.

148 The Roman Catholic Church and the institution of the papacy has, of course, a very turbulent history, countless conflicts, and scandals, and has been transformed over those 2000 years, as the book *Saints and Sinners: A History of the Popes* (Duffy, 2014) clearly shows.

parts of the world. Though the political power of the papacy has declined, the pope is deemed very powerful because of his diplomatic, cultural, and spiritual influence. Moreover, he heads a church of 1.3 billion Catholics that is also a global provider of education, healthcare, and charities.

Throughout the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic Church was able to represent the institutional authority structure of Christianity, at least in Western Europe. Church dogmas and theological writings were conducted in Latin, while folk religiosity was supported by religious festivals and spectacles, relics, pilgrimages, paintings, icons and glass-stained windows in churches and cathedrals (Horsfield, 2015, pp. 141–159). Criticism of the Catholic Church, its decadence, abuse of power, and more fundamentally, its theological foundations, persisted, especially in the late Middle Ages, but the Church was always able to manage its dominant position. This changed in the wake of the Reformation. The theoretical framework (Chapter 2) has partly addressed the way that the printing press and the Reformation have impacted the relationship between church, media, and power. The first wave of mediatization, the invention of the printing press by Gutenberg resulted in an explosion of printing of books and pamphlets. The commercial printing agencies played an important role in the spreading of the beliefs of the Reformation, especially from Martin Luther. Luther was able to link oral communication and vernacular language with print and was able to start a mass propaganda campaign. The Roman Catholic Church was, especially in the beginning, not able to prevent its circulation. The Gutenberg revolution also meant significant changes in the sensory landscape. The paintings and spectacles, folk stories and festivals which connected folk culture and Roman Catholic devotion were, in protestant environments, replaced by a culture of preaching, reading, and signing (Horsfield, 2015, p. 203). The Counter-Reformation, starting with the council of Trent in 1545, was able to challenge the influence of the Reformation by the sophisticated use of print as well. This was greatly promoted by the Jesuits, the order of the current Pope Francis. Their movement, the Society of Jesus, was founded by Ignatius of Loyola and authorized by Pope Paul III in 1540. It stressed the importance of religious discipline, scripture, and study. According to Horsfield, “Ignatius saw Catholic-grounded education the



best measure and bulwark of orthodoxy” (Horsfield, 2015, p. 210).

The Roman Catholic Church was not just challenged by competing theological claims, it also lost much of its political power. In the nineteenth century, the Papal States, which comprised large parts of what is currently Italy, were, in 1870, gradually being conquered by Italian troops. Only Vatican City, a very small part of the city of Rome, remained. The declining political and national power of the Roman Catholic Church was accompanied by the traditional clerical political movement of *ultramontanism*,¹⁴⁹ which attributed supreme authority to the papacy. These ideas paved the way for the First Vatican Council in 1870 and the centralization of power. This first council resulted in the declaration of the papal infallibility of *ex cathedra* decrees. The movement of ultramontanism was accompanied by popular devotion to the person of the pope. This was especially visible during the reign of Pope Pius XI (Pio Nono) from 1846 to 1878:

“And indeed in the age of cheap popular print and the emergence of the mass media, the pope himself became, quite literally, a popular icon. Catholic households from africa to the americas were as likely to display a picture of the pope as a crucifix or a statue of the virgin, and the face of pio nono was better known than of any pope in history.” (Duffy, 2014, p. 293)

The Vatican, the Pope, and the Media

In the twentieth century, the popes themselves have generated considerable media attention. With new opportunities for traveling, especially by airplane, they visited countless countries to reinforce the ties between the papacy and the worldwide church. Pope John Paul II was especially known for his travels, even when his

149 Ultramontanism literally means “beyond the mountains” and refers to the fact that the pope resides beyond the mountains in Rome (from the perspective of Northern Europe). This movement gained popularity at “the other side of the Alps”, especially in France, Germany, and the Netherlands as a reaction to the French Revolution.

health was deteriorating. Moreover, he founded the World Youth Days in 1986, on which millions of young people from all over the world gathered. The World Youth Days and the pastoral journeys became media events in themselves that were highly orchestrated. These events were excellent opportunities for the branding and the popularity of the pope (Hepp & Krönert, 2008; Knott, 2013; Lanuza, 2017). John Paul II made more than 100 international trips and was seen by more people than anyone else in history, which was even further enhanced by television broadcasts of his performances (Duffy, 2014, p. 376). These travels were continued by his successors, Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis. Several popes have also addressed the relationship with modern communication media such as film, radio, and television, and at the end of the twentieth century, the opportunities of the internet (Feijter, 2006, p. 145). In several documents, the opportunities for spreading the gospel and addressing audiences have been acknowledged. The church documents from Vatican II onwards emphasize communications media as a means of evangelization, and secondly, a need for responsible use of social media in the context of human relationships (Campbell, 2020, p. 3; Magielse, 2017, p. 30).¹⁵⁰ The internet, according to Pope Francis in 2014, “offers immense possibilities for encounter and solidarity” (Francis, 2014). Since 1967, the Roman Catholic Church has organized the World Communication Day, a yearly event accompanied by a message from the pope which focuses on themes such as “New Technologies, New Relationships: Promoting a Culture of Respect, Dialogue and Friendship” (2009) or “Communication at the Service of an Authentic Culture of Encounter” (2014). These titles alone show how the Roman Catholic Church has tried to employ (digital) communication platforms in media for missionary activities, for communication within the global church, and the presence of the Catholic Church in the world.

While the Catholic Church has been keen to use all kinds of media for mission,

150 For an excellent overview of the Roman Catholic Church’s views on communication, see the master thesis of Michael Magielse (2017) who provides detailed analyses of the most important documents.



pastoral communication, and interaction with contemporary culture, it has notably failed regarding the communication about sexual abuse. The biggest scandals of the twentieth and twenty-first century in the Roman Catholic Church are the countless cases of sexual abuse, often of young children, everywhere in the world. The scandals themselves, and the way the Church has handled them, have caused outrage and resentment. As Horsfield shows, the Roman Catholic Church was focused on maintaining tight control on the communication about scandals in which Roman Catholic clergy were involved. Many scandals had been covered up, but due to media pressures and journalistic investigations, the scandals came out into the open anyway and have greatly damaged the position, reputation, and the authority of the Roman Catholic Church (Horsfield, 2015, pp. 276–279). Research on these scandals and the procedures of the Vatican have shown how the institution on every level has failed to address, investigate, and render justice. This includes the papacy as well, especially John Paul II. Due to pressures of international governments as well as global media outlets, significant steps have been taken by Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis. However, many court cases and investigations continue until today. The cases of abuse continue to cast a shadow upon the ethical and moral authority of the Church.

The Vatican has embraced the opportunities of digitalization by starting and maintaining several social media accounts. Pope Francis's predecessor Benedict XVI started using Twitter on December 12, 2012 (Guzek, 2015; Johnston, 2012). Following his inauguration on March 13, 2013, Pope Francis continued this practice, and these Twitter accounts have garnered over 10 million followers. Additionally, @franciscus is not the Vatican's initial account; three years prior, the news portal news.va established the Instagram account @newsva. Intriguingly, the name of the Instagram account is not linked to the office of the pope (like @pontifex on Twitter) but instead corresponds to the name of the person (@franciscus). As I argue elsewhere, this enhances personalization of the Instagram account compared to the Twitter accounts (Zijderveld, 2017). The organization of communication has been assigned to the Pontifical Council for Social Communications. Later, in 2015, Pope Francis instituted the *Segretaria per la Comunicazione*, which

includes the Press Office, social media, and L'Osservatore Romano (Pope Francis, 2015a). L'Osservatore Romano is a newspaper, but also the photographic service of the Vatican and provides the photographs for Pope Francis's Instagram account.

Though the organization of social media accounts by the communications teams of the pope are not transparent, insights about this have been provided by Michael Magielse OP, who was able to conduct an interview in 2017 for his master's thesis.¹⁵¹ Instagram has been chosen as a new social media channel for the pope because of its popularity among young people (Frier, 2020; Magielse, 2017, p. 32).¹⁵² The goal, according to the social media team, is to allow the audience to follow the pope during his pastoral activities. The Instagram account is more personal than the Twitter accounts, that focus more on statements of Pope Francis. The biography of @franciscus states "I want to walk with you along the way of God's mercy and tenderness". The account itself does not follow any other accounts. In an interview in 2018, Nataša Govekar (Director "Teologico Pastorale" of Segretaria per la Comunicazione) stated that the largest group of followers is from Brazil, followed by the United States. Most followers fall into the 25–34 age group, which is in line with the demographics of Instagram users in general (Wooden, 2018). After his first message on March 21, 2013, the number of followers increased to 1 million within 12 hours. In this post, Pope Francis is seen kneeling and praying. The caption of this post is the simple "Pray for me" in nine languages. At the time of my data collection in 2016 and 2017, the number of followers grew from 4.2 million to 5 million followers, which has now increased to 7.9 million followers in 2021. This growth undoubtedly has to do with the popularity of Pope Francis, but certainly also with the number of Instagram users that has grown considerably over the years.

151 In April 2017 I was able to travel to Rome to see the weekly "General Audience" myself and to be shown around by Michael Magielse. Pope Francis is the only religious leader that I have been able to see in person.

152 Facebook was considered too complicated to manage, probably because of its more complex infrastructure when compared to Instagram.



The pictures of the Instagram account of Pope Francis are selected by a team of fifteen people (Magielse, 2017, p. 38). Before a message is posted, it needs approval on a higher level. The social media team has monitored the interaction on Instagram and discovered that professional photographs were more popular than more “casual” images. Moreover, posts that include photographs of Pope Francis surrounded by other people have proved to be very effective. What also appears from this interview is that photographs where Pope Francis embraces other people are appreciated, because people comment that, in viewing such images, they feel like they are also being embraced. The messages do not always have to be very serious, sometimes they can be funny as well. Magielse shows in his thesis that Francis emphasizes neighborliness and a preferential option for the poor, which should be the focus of a missionary church. Christian witness should be a respectful dialogue (Magielse, 2017, p. 29). However, on Instagram, things are more complicated. There is no dialogue because comments do not get an official reply. Moreover, the focus here is on images instead of words. Though mission and the vision of Pope Francis can certainly be translated into images, as the subsequent analysis will show, there is no doubt that the (social) media activities of Francis have been very beneficial for the overall reputation of the papacy, the Vatican, and the Roman Catholic Church. Because of his position and visibility, the Pope is often seen as the personification of the Roman Catholic Church. Especially around events such as the World Youth Days and international visits, the Pope has been promoted and celebrated as a religious celebrity (Hepp & Krönert, 2008; Lanuza, 2017). For the visit of Pope Francis to the United States in September 2015, a special emoji, the so-called “Popemoji” was created to celebrate his trip.¹⁵³ The Philippine Professor of Sociology Gerry Lanuza argues that Pope Francis was presented as a “rock star” during his visit to the Philippines

153 The Catholic website “Aleteia” was behind the organization of the Popemoji (Tayag, 2015).

in January 2015.¹⁵⁴ Because of his ascribed celebrity status, and his popularity, also within the more “secular” press, Lanuza argues, the pontiff offers an opportunity for marketing and re-branding the Church. The dedicated and personalized @franciscus Instagram account could be an excellent channel to add to this goal.

Though the previous paragraphs have only sketched some of the significant events and changes in the relationship between the Roman Catholic Church in the media, they clearly show that the Church has been affected by waves of mediatization, as well as by historical and political events. The institution of the church has always been able to use its cultural and symbolic capital in the employment of media. The emergence of powerful global media institutions has decreased the power of the Catholic Church to control communication and cover up struggles and scandals. The emergence of social media has offered new opportunities for the branding of the Church and by positioning the pope as the personalization of this institution.

Analysis

In the following sections, I discuss the content analysis and semiotic analysis of the Instagram posts of Pope Francis.¹⁵⁵ The Instagram account of Pope Francis is updated quite regularly. Between November 1, 2016, and October 31, 2017, 252 messages were posted on @franciscus, which amounts to an average of five messages per week. During this period, 174 photographs and 78 videos were posted. These photographs can, as stated before, all be characterized as professional photographs of high quality, provided by L'Osservatore Romano. Most of the images reveal events in and around

154 During this event, in which news media and social media followed every moment of the visit, all kinds of possible trivia around the personal life of the pope, whether the president would kiss the ring, the popemobile, etc. were discussed.

155 Golan and Martini's study (2019) also provides an analysis of the Instagram account of Pope Francis but uses a different categorization of the Instagram posts, which includes “hierarchical positioning; geographical locales; haptic engagement; and the leader's visual focus” (Golan & Martini, 2019, p. 9).

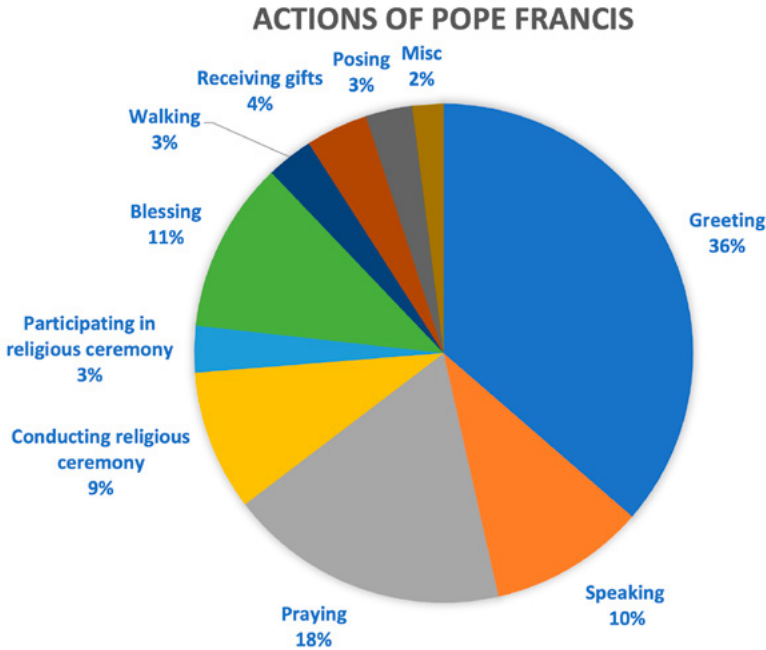


the Vatican, but they cover his travels as well. It will come as no surprise that Pope Francis's posts on Instagram leave nothing to chance. Each message contains a motivational text or admonition attributed to Pope Francis. This text is displayed in multiple languages: English, Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, French, and German. What image do these 174 photos of Pope Francis show? Based on the analysis of the sample of 100 images, six themes will be explored further in this chapter. Further, the sequence of 15 posts that has been selected portrays the period from Lent to Easter, a period of great significance for the Roman Catholic Church. The examples of Instagram posts are described on the first level of denotation, the description of what is visible, as well as on the second level of connotation. The second-order signification is the level of the myth, where the things that are being presented are shown as inevitable and natural. In the deconstruction of the second-order signification, I relate my analysis to the context of the position of Pope Francis, the historical context the papacy, and to the affordances and visual context of Instagram. Pope Francis is visible on 99 of 100 posts in the sample.¹⁵⁶ In most of the posts, he wears a modest, simple white vestment. In celebrations and while executing liturgical acts, he wears modest liturgical habits (see also Kollárová & Ungerová, 2019).¹⁵⁷ Only when he is presiding at the Mass, does the Pope wear liturgical vestments, but these photographs are a minority. The white cassock makes the Pope immediately recognizable. His liturgical clothes contrast with the vestments of other popes, notably his predecessor Benedict XVI, who loved to wear sophisticated and richly decorated liturgical attire (Kollárová & Ungerová, 2019). Moreover, they often contrast with the splendor of the Vatican, its buildings, and richly decorated religious objects.

156 The only photograph on which he is not physically visible is one of a Christmas manger on St. Peter's Square. This Christmas manger is also depicted in another post in which Pope Francis is visible.

157 The tradition of the white cassock as the "dress code" for the pope has a long tradition (Santomero, 2015; Switzer, 2015).

Figure 9.1



Graph of the actions of Pope Francis

Themes

The pie chart in Figure 9.1 shows the most important actions of Pope Francis that are visible in the sample of 100 Instagram posts. The activities “greeting” (37 photographs), “praying” (18 photographs), “blessing” (11 photographs) and conducting a religious ceremony (nine photographs) are the most frequent ones.¹⁵⁸ These actions are discussed in themes that relate to overall patterns on his Instagram account. From the content analysis, six main themes will be investigated for closer examination: (1) Pope Francis meeting crowds of people, (2) Pope Francis meeting

158 Because the sample consists of 100 images, one image consists of 1% of the total sample. In this chapter I chose to specify the number of images, not the percentage.



children, (3) Pope Francis meeting vulnerable people, (4) Pope Francis praying, (5) Pope Francis traveling, (6) Pope Francis conducting a religious ceremony. This last theme is discussed in the analysis of the sequence.

1. Pope Francis meeting crowds of people

One of the main themes on the Instagram account of Pope Francis is meeting and greeting crowds of people. The moments with crowds are often taking place during his “general audience” when thousands of people gather on St. Peter’s Square (36 photographs), and in the Paul VI Audience Hall (seven photographs).¹⁵⁹ The perspective of the photographs ranges from close-ups of interactions of Pope Francis with individual people to showing the large crowds that surround him. The meeting of crowds and people within those crowds is also partly reflected in other themes that I discuss, such as meeting with children and meeting with vulnerable people.

The presentation of the popularity of Pope Francis is connected to the presentation of crowds on his Instagram account. His popularity is not just visualized in the form of crowds of people gathering around him, but also in close-ups of the expressions of excitement on their faces as he passes by, the smartphones that are all being used to capture the moment when he came close, and the interaction that he has with his followers, when they touch him, or when he seems to have a conversation with one of them. When Pope Francis comes close, every moment is filmed and photographed. After the general audience, a short religious service is held, often with representatives of groups from all over the world who can sit in front, such as football teams, church groups, children, and so forth.

Photographs of the Pope surrounded by people are by no means exceptional or special, because, as a religious celebrity and leader of the largest religious organization in the world, it is unsurprising that he attracts crowds. What is interesting, however, is that these photographs are a recurrent phenomenon on his personalized Instagram

159 This is an event that I was able to attend as well (in April 2017) and is the only example where I came close to one of the four leaders I have been analyzing and studying.

account. The Instagram account @franciscus is a channel that is more or less “owned” by the Holy See,¹⁶⁰ which means that the communication team of Pope Francis has full control over the visual and textual content that is being placed. The motivational, inspirational, and religious messages might serve as a kind of “anchorage” to contextualize the photograph, but they should not distract from the fact that using representations of popularity certainly serves a purpose. The enormous popularity of Pope Francis, both within and beyond the Roman Catholic Church, is seen by many as a relief from the negative media attention that the Church had received, because of all the scandals, and the sometimes not always very successful media appearances of his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI. The depictions of crowds serve several purposes. It functions as a counternarrative against the background of secularization in Western Europe and shows how popular and loved the Pope is. Moreover, it affirms the celebrity status of Pope Francis. The enthusiasm, the large crowds, and the fact that they record everything with their smartphones indicates the celebrity status of Pope Francis. Of course, because of his position, any pope might immediately become a celebrity figure, but Pope Francis has become exceptionally popular. This might raise questions as to what extent people are interested in his messages, his preaching, in the Church, or whether they are mainly interested in a leader that they admire and are attracted to. Hendriks has shown that, both for celebrities and charismatic figures, people are deeply interested in their personal lives, thoughts, and beliefs (Hendriks, 2017, p. 355). Whatever their intentions, the photographs with crowds serve their purpose of focusing the attention on the person the crowds are waiting for: Pope Francis himself. The use of these photographs on his personalized account strengthens his personal brand as a religious leader who is considered a charismatic celebrity (Lanuza, 2017). The photograph of Figure 9.2 illustrates Pope Francis meeting with crowds.

160 The Holy See (or Santa Sede in Latin) is the jurisdiction of the Pope in his role as the bishop of Rome.



Figure 9.2

Pope Francis November 26, 2016

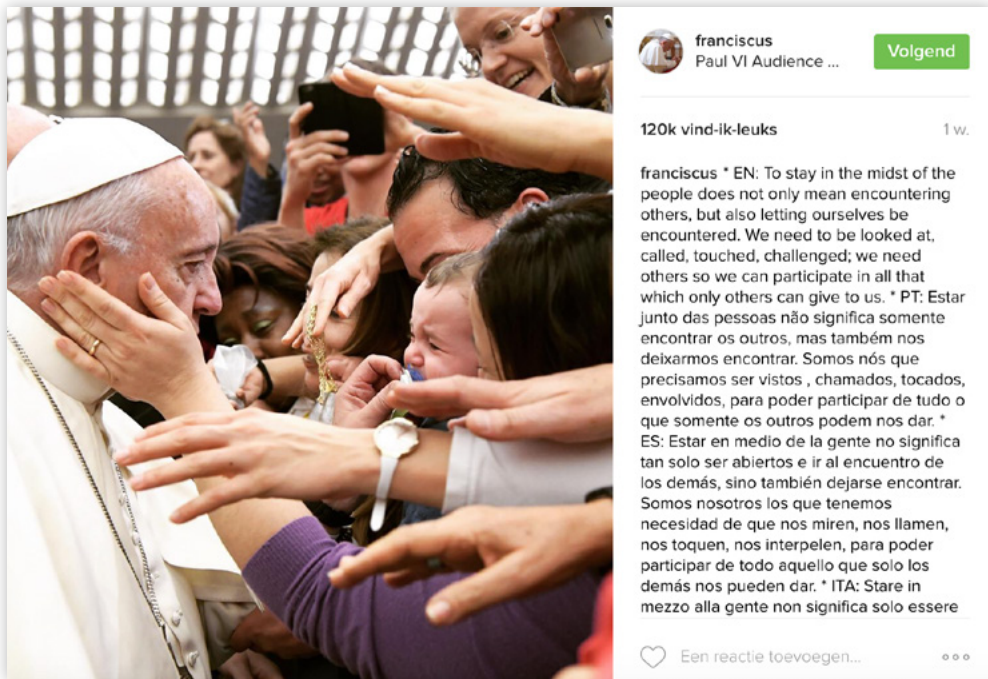


Figure 9.2 depicts Pope Francis as he is encountering a great number of people, most probably during the general audience. On the level of denotation, the Instagram post can be described in the following way. The event takes place in the Vatican in the Paul VI Audience Hall, which is indicated by the location tag on Instagram. He seems to be putting a soother back into the mouth of a baby who is being carried by its mother. Behind him, a man in a suit, probably security, is partly visible. In front of him is an ecstatic crowd that tries to touch him and photograph him with their smartphones, and the mother of the baby has succeeded in caressing his face. The photograph is a close-up: the image of Pope Francis fills almost one-third of the photograph, and the people in front of him are very close. Pope Francis is probably separated from them by a security fence, but apart from that, the distance between him and the other people is negligible. The photograph clearly shows the enormous popularity of Pope Francis. The caption of Figure 1 reads as follows:

To stay in the midst of the people does not only mean encountering others, but also letting ourselves be encountered. We need to be looked at, called, touched, challenged; we need others so we can participate in all that which only others can give to us.

On the level of connotation, that Pope Francis comes so close, and his attention to the baby, affirms his image of being an authentic, friendly, and tender leader who cares for even the smallest members of his church. Contrary to his predecessor, Pope Francis is known for his aversion to protocol, and the time he spends with “ordinary” believers. The crowd refers to the charisma that they clearly ascribe to him. Moreover, the smartphones refer to his religious “celebrity” status that has come with being the religious leader of 1.5 billion people. The caption in which Pope Francis talks about being amid people to be looked at, called, touched, and challenged, is very paradoxical in combination with the photograph. The caption can be read as an exhortation for his audience on Instagram to participate in society and church, because people need other people to flourish. However, the photograph shows not just any human being, but the leader of the Roman Catholic Church. The caption might also be read as a statement that Pope Francis needs the contact and participation of others as much as any human being. But, of course, the kind of attention he receives, especially during a general audience in the Vatican, is not comparable with people who do not have his position. Without the caption, the image is first and foremost a representation of the popularity of Pope Francis and his attention to children. The caption adds an extra layer of complexity because the act of touching and participation is being related to the human need to be a part of a community. It almost seems like the caption downplays the display of popularity of the image. The post is an example of the very subtle and ingenious work of Pope Francis’s media team that plays upon the image of a pope who is both extremely popular, but at the same time identifies with the needs and desires of “normal” people. This is what makes him both extraordinary and identifiable to his followers.



2. Pope Francis meeting children

The sample of Pope Francis portrays 25 photographs in which children are visible. There are photographs in which children are shown alongside their parents, but also pictures where Pope Francis is the only adult visible. The visibility of children in the photographs of Pope Francis is relevant for several reasons. Children can represent innocence, naivety, spontaneity, and vulnerability (Higonnet, 1998).¹⁶¹

It is not by coincidence that children play a role in official visits of heads of state, dictators, sportspeople, and such like. It is often children who present flowers, or who are photographed together with officials. Further, the importance of children for the Christian faith is also reflected in the Bible and the Christian tradition. “Let the children come to me” is one of the sayings of Jesus (Mark 10:14). Jesus surrounded by children is a well-known image in Christian paintings and books. Pope Francis is depicted embracing children, touching babies, laying hands on others, giving a high five to a boy in a wheelchair, and letting himself to be touched by a blind girl. The children are often part of the crowd that Pope Francis encounters during his general audience or his visits abroad. The emphasis on children fits perfectly with the focus of Pope Francis on the small, the vulnerable, and the weak (Cardoso & Barraco, 2019). Moreover, for the Roman Catholic Church, the children are the future as well. Without the religious education and formation of children, the Church would cease to exist in the future. Moreover, the photographs with children enable Pope Francis to show spontaneous, authentic behavior, tenderness, and care. In his role as father of the Church, what could be more suitable than being surrounded by children? Although the photographs are beautiful and the interaction looks natural with happy children, there is, of course, another dimension to these images. They cannot be separated from the problematic and abusive relationship between the Church, clergy, and children that has caused enormous damage. The fact that allegations of child abuse have been covered up by the Roman Catholic Church for a very long time is

161 See also the example used in the methodology where Pope Francis is meeting a father and a child.

one of the main reasons why the institution itself has lost a great deal of credibility (Hoover, 2016, p. 18; Horsfield, 2015; Valley, 2015, chapter 14).

The ideal of a stable family has been important for the Church, and for Pope Francis as well. At the same time, the traditional family of a husband, wife, and children has been challenged by cohabitation, divorces, gay couples with children, and so forth. However, all these conflicts, scandals, and tension seem to be far away in these happy and beautiful images. The images display the Pope with children and are therefore part of the myth of innocence and naturalness that displaces, at least partially, the stories and court cases about sexual abuse, the changing configuration of families, and, not to be forgotten, the absence of children in many churches in western Europe. The photograph in Figure 9.3 illustrates one of the Instagram posts in which Pope Francis is meeting with children.

Figure 9.3

Pope Francis October 9, 2017



In Figure 9.3, which is taken in St. Peter's Square, Pope Francis is depicted touching the head of a girl in a wheelchair. The girl is looking at him with a broad smile and is partially covered by a sheet. She is dressed in a pink t-shirt, a pink headscarf, and wears glasses. On one of her covered legs, a picture of Pope Francis is visible. Behind her is an older gray-haired man pushing her wheelchair. He has a mask over his mouth and wears a white coat with a colorful blue and white tie. His white coat is decorated with flowers, bees, and kites. In the background there are stacked chairs, and behind them a crowd of people, and behind them the columns of St. Peter's Square.

The caption reads,

As missionaries of hope, may we rejoice in God's saving power, never lose heart, and help others to look to the future with confidence.

The girl appears seriously ill and probably has a form of cancer. The headscarf suggests that her hair has fallen out due to the treatments. The man behind her is probably a nurse or attendant who has taken her to St. Peter's Square. The Pope greets or blesses her and seems to be giving her all his attention at the moment of the photograph. The photograph of the girl evokes tenderness and compassion: she is so young and already so seriously ill that she is in a wheelchair.

This photograph shows the importance Pope Francis places on meeting and encouraging weak and vulnerable children. In doing so, the Pope visually communicates his mission and theology. At the same time, the meeting between the girl and the Pope is a public event and is observed by a large crowd of people, including his followers on Instagram which affirms and strengthens his popularity. The photograph shows how happy the girl is to meet the Pope which affirms the Pope as a compassionate, human, and committed religious leader. The accompanying text frames Pope Francis as a "missionary of hope" who helps others, in this case this girl, to face the future with confidence because of "God's saving power". This mediatized and staged performance enhances the personal authority of Pope Francis by portraying him as an authentic and approachable leader worthy of being followed.

3. Pope Francis meeting vulnerable people

Another significant theme, that is already partly addressed in Figure 9.3, is Pope Francis meeting vulnerable people. Several posts show Pope Francis meeting people in need: old and infirm people, children in a wheelchair,¹⁶² a blind girl, or a group of African refugees. This theme slightly overlaps with the meeting of (sick or disabled) children. Within this theme, there are meetings with elderly people who appear very old but not to be visibly ill or disabled (three photographs), and adults with visible diseases or disabilities (five photographs). The encounters sometimes take place during the General Audience at St. Peter's Square; others show that Pope Francis is visiting these people in the hospital or possibly their homes. What is also notable is that in all these images, Pope Francis is touching or embracing them, or laying his hands on their heads as a blessing. These photographs are representations of highly symbolic acts by Pope Francis, who has emphasized time and again that the Church needs to take care of the poor, the sick and the vulnerable. In 2013, a photograph in which Pope Francis hugged a severely disfigured man with neurofibromatosis (the "elephants' disease") went viral. In an article in USA Today, the reporter commented, "Many say the pope is following in the footsteps of his namesake St. Francis of Assisi, who was known for his devotion to humility and to the poor" (DiBlasio, 2013). The use of these images for his Instagram do not only emphasize the mission of Pope Francis, but they also reinforce the image that Pope Francis himself is an example that should be followed. By showing these images, these acts can refer both to St. Francis of Assisi as well as Jesus, and thus, they invoke imaginaries that speak to Christians, and not just Roman Catholics, and beyond. Moreover, the depiction of the humility of Pope Francis has greatly inspired his popularity, and his image as an authentic and humble Pope who does not care about the splendor of the Vatican. Figure 9.4 is an example of an Instagram post in which Pope Francis meets a vulnerable person, this time someone of advanced age.

162 In the sample, there are two other posts that portray children in a wheelchair.



Figure 9.4

Pope Francis January 25, 2017



Figure 9.4 shows how Pope Francis embraces an old woman and touches her face with his hands. In the background some other people can be seen, but the focus is on the Pope (who fills more than half of the image with his upper body) and the old woman. The text accompanying this message is as follows:

How often grandmothers know the right word of hope, because they have life experience and entrusted themselves to God!

The Pope's gesture and touch are in keeping with the image of Francis as a warm, authentic man who comes close to both the old and the young. The gesture radiates tenderness and compassion. The text refers to grandmothers. Pope Francis himself is of the age to be a grandfather; he may be younger than the grandmother in the photo. His embrace and the text shows that Pope Francis has an eye for the elderly and the weak, but he shows that they certainly belong.

In this sense, the old woman also symbolizes the older generation who can pass on the message of hope to the younger generation. In this way, the photograph also represents the continuity of generations of believers who are part of the Church. The central position of Pope Francis could be seen as the presentation of the connecting link between these generations. This photograph is therefore an example of how images can represent the ideals of the Roman Catholic Church where tradition and faith go hand in hand. In this context, the Pope's traditional dress also radiates continuity with tradition, whether he meets old grandmothers or young children. The photograph reinforces the construction of his authority because it refers to traditional authority as well his personal authority by the performance of compassion and tenderness.

4. Pope Francis Praying

There are 18 photographs in the sample that portray Pope Francis while he is praying. These pictures include prayer in church or during a religious ceremony outside in which other people are visible, but nine photographs show him praying alone. References to personal spirituality or personal devotion are frequent on his Instagram account. This immediately started with the first Instagram post on March 19, 2016, in which he was portrayed while praying, and this theme is recurrent in the dataset of this research as well. Acts of prayer and personal spirituality could be seen as personal, but here, these acts have been translated into a public representation of spiritual intimacy and of the witnessing of faith that are shared with the millions of followers on Instagram. These images fit very well into the narrative of a humble and deeply religious pope. They are part of a broader and much older pattern of religious paintings of Roman Catholic saints, priests, bishops, and popes who are praying and contemplating. Though it might not be surprising that a pope is praying or meditating regularly, it is a deliberate act of witnessing to capture these moments and share many of them on social media. I therefore consider these images as performances of spirituality. They do not just capture personal prayer acts, but they symbolize and represent the heart of the Christian life within the church he represents. Personal acts of (staged) spirituality strengthen the construction of authenticity, such as an authentic relationship with God. The



representation of personal devotion is important to support the authority of a religious leader because it does not refer to official authority but to personal authority that is based on a relationship with the sacred (Carroll, 2011, p. 47). Moreover, within a context of a church that is plagued by scandals around power, sex, and money, these images are important to move the attention away from scandals by pointing the attention to the “pure” and sacred dimension of the practices of the church. The images of Pope Francis’s actions of prayer and contemplation demonstrate the kind of pope Francis wants to be: not a man who enjoys the power, richness, and splendor of the church, but like Francis of Assisi, someone who is first and foremost deeply spiritual and a devoted follower of Christ.

Figure 9.5

Pope Francis April 23, 2017



The caption of Figure 9.5 reads as follows:

O Lord, pour out your mercy upon humanity, renew our Church, protect persecuted Christians, grant peace to the whole world, soon.

The photograph shows Pope Francis, probably in a kneeling position, before a large icon. In front of him, several flowers lie on the floor. On the right, a large silver cross is visible. The location feature shows that this photograph was taken in the San Bartolomeo all l'Isola Church in Rome. The richly decorated silver cross, the large icon, and the flowers indicate that this is a traditional Roman Catholic Church filled with ornaments and Christian symbols. The setting of this post refers to the tradition of the Roman Catholic Church, which, especially in Rome, is visible in large and imposing religious buildings and religious art. The elements in the photograph are referents to a rich and powerful history in which the Church was a central part of society, and where artists and craftsmen constructed beautiful religious art that is still visible today. This religious art is part of the aesthetic repertoire of the Roman Catholic Church. Besides its beauty, the symbols refer to Christian narratives, dogmas, and imaginaries that are part of the culture and tradition of Roman Catholicism. At the same time, the religious splendor symbolizes the decadence and the moral decay of the institution. The fact that Pope Francis almost always wears white (as is the case here) signifies his emphasis on simplicity.

The scene in which Pope Francis is praying alone underlines his personal piety and rich spiritual life. The photograph contrasts with those where he is surrounded by large groups of enthusiastic followers.

Though the visual elements in the photograph are clearly part of Roman Catholic medieval and baroque art, in his prayer Pope Francis addresses different audiences: the church, persecuted Christians, but also the whole of humanity and specifically in terms of world peace. In doing so, he not only positions himself as the representative of Christ for the church. By including the world and all of humanity in his prayer he also takes on the task to represent the world to God. It shows that Pope Francis is not just a leader who sees it as a mission to lead the Roman Catholic Church, but who can represent all (Christian) believers and even the whole of humanity. Therefore, by presenting himself in this way, he can appeal to a diverse group of followers with a wide range of religious and spiritual backgrounds through Instagram.



5. Pope Francis Traveling

Though most of the photographs in the sample are located in or around the Vatican, there are nine photos that portray Pope Francis traveling or going abroad. These photographs include one taken at the airport, on an airplane with journalists, of his visits to Egypt (two photographs; see also Zijdeveld, 2017), Sweden (one photograph), Auschwitz, Poland (one photograph), Colombia (two photographs) and Fatima, Portugal (one photograph).¹⁶³ During these travels abroad, he meets with (religious) officials, visits churches, or meets with gathered crowds on the streets or on public squares. On these journeys, the Pope is represented as a globally recognized and an important and popular religious leader.

163 Fatima in Portugal is a popular place of Pilgrimage for the Roman Catholic Church, attracting millions of visitors each year. The site is associations with apparitions of St. Mary in 2017.

Figure 9.6

Pope Francis September 6, 2017



Figure 9.6 shows Pope Francis climbing the stairs of an airplane at Fiumicino airport near Rome, with the following caption:

Dear Friends, please pray for me and all of Colombia, where I will be traveling for a journey dedicated to reconciliation and peace.

The beginning of the text, “dear friends, pray for me”, adds to the connection Instagram followers might feel with Pope Francis.¹⁶⁴ They are approached as his friends, whom he can ask to pray for him and for Colombia. What is notable in

164 The words “pray for me” were also used by Pope Francis during his speech after his election as pope from the Balcony of St. Peter’s.



this case is that the first text is written in Spanish, followed by English. Clearly the Pope is taking account that Spanish is the primary language for the Southern American audience he is about to encounter. At the top of the stairs, the flight crew welcoming the Pope are visible. Francis is photographed from behind in his characteristic white clothing.

What is striking in this photograph is that he carries his own bag. This detail is no coincidence I suggest, since almost immediately after his election, Pope Francis became known for his humility and simplicity, symbolized by actions such as paying his hotel bill, driving in a simple car, carrying his own suitcase, and, most visibly, (almost) always wearing a white cassock and simple black shoes. As Paul Valley recounts in his book *Pope Francis: The Struggle for the Soul of Catholicism* (2015), these acts are intentional and highly symbolic, and form part of Pope Francis's agenda for a "poor church for the poor". Before entering the airplane to Brazil to attend the Catholic World Youth Days, the Pope insisted on carrying his own suitcase, even though his suitcase had already been taken on board, according to Valley. This action was picked up by media outlets all over the world and contributed greatly to his popularity and his image as someone who would reform the Church and its decadence (Valley, 2015, p. xvii). The elements of the suitcase, his shoes, and his white cassock also strengthen a distinct and recognizable style of his leadership which supports his authority. Also striking is that Pope Francis walks alone on the stairs. This adds a heroic dimension to this photograph, as if the elderly Pope travels by himself and even carries his own suitcase, although this image hides the fact that the Pope is fully supported by the Vatican staff on his journeys. This photograph is therefore important as it creates and supports the myth of the simple, humble Pope. Small acts like carrying his suitcase are thus meaningful signifiers for the construction and legitimation of the authority of Pope Francis: they symbolize his humble and simple style of leadership that makes him a popular and accessible pope for his followers.

Sequence: From Lent to Easter

The sequence that I selected for the analysis is a series of posts before Easter. Easter is arguably the most important feast of the church. In Lent, the period

of 40 days before Easter, and specifically on Easter Sunday, the events of the arrest, crucifixion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ are commemorated. During this period, the Instagram posts of Pope Francis covered Lent and Easter extensively. Moreover, the presence of liturgical photographs in the sequence connects to the sixth theme that I extracted from the sample. In the sample of 100 images, there are 19 photographs that refer to the context of a religious ceremony. In nine photographs, Pope Francis is conducting a mass, which is visible by the setting: the church interior, the liturgical habits, and/or the presence of bread and wine. In 10 other photographs, he is speaking in front of crowds, often conducting a sermon as part of the mass, or addressing people during the general audience. This theme of religious ceremony will be further elaborated upon in this sequence. The combination of the importance of the season with the theme of authority as expressed in relation to religious ceremony gave the selection of this sequence particular relevance.

The 15 images that have been analyzed cover the period from Friday March 31 until Monday April 17, 2017, the Monday after Easter. During this period, there are a surprising number of photographs where the Pope Francis interacts with sick and vulnerable people. On April 1, a post shows him visiting a center for the blind where he interacts with a blind girl, and two posts on April 4–5 show him blessing old and sick people during the general audience on St. Peter's Square. On Maundy Thursday, he is portrayed washing the feet of prisoners (Figure 9.7). Pope Francis is very visible in the liturgy, performing rituals, such as lighting candles, praying, celebrating mass. Many of the photographs reveal religious symbols, liturgical vestments, and the interior of Saint Peter's Cathedral. Moreover, especially in the weekend of Easter, the photos show a shift from photos in the dark to photos in plain daylight on the Sunday of Easter (Figure 9.8).



Figure 9.7

Pope Francis April 13, 2017



In Figure 9.7, Pope Francis is visible, kneeling while washing the feet of those who are prisoners. The caption here is sober and descriptive:

Mass of the Lord's Supper: Paliano Prison (Frossinone, Italy).

This prison is close to the city of Rome. Pope Francis uses a gold-colored basin and a gold-colored jug to wash the feet of the prisoners. The prisoners are dressed in black and white, but their heads are not visible, most likely for privacy reasons. In this ritual, the Pope refers to the gospel story of the foot washing of Jesus, who washed the feet of his disciples a few days before his crucifixion. With the photograph of this ritual act, the Pope visibly follows in the footsteps of Jesus. Furthermore, this act of humility concurs with his attention to the weak and marginalized. However, there are more layers to this Instagram post. The ritual of washing the feet of others was also a practice of the previous popes as they would wash the feet of several men

in the Lateran Basilica. But in 2013, Pope Francis broke with this tradition when he decided to wash the feet of prisoners in prison: not in a church, and not only men (Duffy, 2014, p. 424). This action provoked fierce reactions from several conservative Roman Catholics who felt that these modifications were inappropriate. But according to Valley, “Francis, Bishop of Rome, broke tradition after tradition in his attempt to strip away accretions to return to authenticity” (Valley, 2015, p. 178). In this Instagram post, the clear focus on Pope Francis, his attitude, his behavior, shows him in an exemplary function for his fellow believers and followers. He demonstrates how he wants to fulfill his role and function as the father of the church, namely by following the example of Jesus.¹⁶⁵ Therefore, this photograph of washing the feet of prisoners can be seen as a representation of authenticity, because it goes back to one of the most significant stories of the Christian tradition and relates his role as leader of the church directly to the example of Jesus as the servant leader. The fact that Pope Francis is the key figure in the image invokes imaginaries of authentic religion and humility, which are precisely the images that have made Pope Francis so popular.

165 John 13:8: “Jesus answered, ‘Unless I wash you, you have no part with me’” (NIV).



Figure 9.8

Pope Francis April 15, 2017



Figure 9.8 shows Pope Francis during the Easter Vigil in which he lights the Easter Candle. The caption is as follows:

Let us go back to proclaim, share, to reveal that it is true: The Lord is alive!

Pope Francis is visible in the shadow, positioned at the center of the photograph. In this picture he wears a mitre, which contrasts with his usual headwear but matches his position as a bishop performing the liturgy. His gaze is focused on the light of the candle. In the background, other priests are visible. This is one of the few photographs in which Pope Francis is dressed in liturgical vestments which is in sharp contrast with his usual simple white clothes. These clothes symbolize his liturgical role and his authority of office in a ceremony that is at the heart of the Christian story of death and resurrection. Here in Rome, Pope Francis celebrates the moment that

the light comes through the darkness. The darkness symbolizes death and defeat, which has been incarnated by the death of Jesus on the cross. The light of the candle signifies the light of new life and the resurrection of Jesus Christ as Lord of the Church. The message in which his audience on Instagram is exhorted to proclaim that “the Lord is alive” refers to the mission of the Church to share the gospel. The central and visible role of Pope Francis as successor of Saint Peter shows how the Pope has become the key figure in the line of apostles and bishops who have contributed to the spread of Christianity across the globe. Thus, this image does not only refer to the proclamation of the fact that “the Lord is alive”, but also to the central position of the Pope in this proclamation. Overall, the photographs in the sequence present Pope Francis as a father of the church, paying attention to people in need, as well as the representative of all believers, who in his role as the leader of the church presides over the crucial rituals at the geographical, sacred, and political heart of the Roman Catholic Church.

Conclusion

The Instagram account @franciscus strengthens mediation of the authority of Pope Francis by promoting a coherent brand “The Pope”. The images address themes that resonate with his audiences on social media, who are not limited to the vast global community of Roman Catholics. His audiences include people who have come to see Pope Francis as an inspiring religious leader and one of the most prominent religious media celebrities of this current time. The performances of humility and authenticity, personal devotion, as well as representations his popularity are emphasized, as well as his attention to the poor, the sick, the marginalized, and the weak (Cardoso & Barraco, 2019). Moreover, the themes are interwoven with clear references to biblical narratives, acts of Jesus, and allusions to St. Francis of Assisi. Thus, the Instagram posts draw upon themes that appeal to Roman Catholic believers, Christians who are attracted to his lifestyle and his message, as well as to many others who are drawn to this unconventional Pope who addresses values such as compassion and care. His recognizable style, expressed in his clothes, appearances, and interactions enhances this brand. The



construction of the brand of Pope Francis is supported by the persuasive power of beautiful and highly professional photographs.

In terms of authority, these images refer to tradition, not only by showing rituals, symbols, and references to the authority of office, but also by the emphasis on the origins of the religious tradition and reference to the “pure” and authentic values, which appeal to religious seekers who are looking for the essence of religious traditions (Hoover, 2016, p. 28). Moreover, the images clearly refer to the ascribed charisma of Pope Francis, which, especially in this media age, is determined by the size and behavior of the audiences. In the person of Jorge Bergoglio, the personal authority of a pope who has achieved a celebrity status is combined with the authority of the office of the centuries-old papacy. The Vatican has successfully used the affordances of Instagram to its advantage.

However, there is a tension between the missionary dimension of the proclamation of the gospel and the promotion of the pastoral values of the Catholic Church, which are addressed in official documents and at events like the World Communication Day, and the re-marketing and re-branding of the Roman Catholic Church. The Instagram account @franciscus is part of the personalization of the Roman Catholic Church in which Pope Francis is put forward as the face and the identity of the Church. The careful construction of photographs and captions on Instagram helps to promote the agenda of Pope Francis, enhances a more positive reputation of the Roman Catholic Church, and can be seen as part of a counter-narrative against the negative images and reports that dominated the news, especially in the period before the election of Pope Francis. The construction of the brand of Pope Francis adds to naturalizing and mythologizing a certain image of the Church and its highest representative. By doing so, it obscures other dimensions that do not align with this carefully constructed myth. The absence of references to the internal organizational struggles within the Vatican, hot topics such as abuse, and sensitive topics related to possible clashes, such as abortion or contraception, shows that this Instagram account is especially used to promote a very specific, positive, and highly selective image of the Roman Catholic Church and Pope Francis.

10.

Comparison

Introduction

The previous chapters presented the analyses of four leaders, Brian Houston, Deepak Chopra, the Dalai Lama, and Pope Francis who each have employed Instagram in a different way.¹⁶⁶ They address different audiences and construct distinct personal

166 If the number of followers on Instagram is an indication of popularity, Pope Francis is the absolute winner with more than 5 million followers in 2017, five times as many as number two, the Dalai Lama, who counts 930,000 followers. Both the Dalai Lama and Pope Francis can be regarded as religious celebrities, the Dalai Lama because of his presence in media since his exile, and Pope Francis, not just as head of the Roman Catholic Church, but because of his overall popularity as an ‘out-of-the-box’ Pope. However, compared to other celebrities, such as Selena Gomez (the most Instagram followers in 2017) with over 130 million followers and the Soccer Player Cristiano Ronaldo, who had achieved 114 million followers in 2017, they are not the most popular celebrities on this medium. Number three is Deepak Chopra, who has achieved popularity especially within the circles of alternative spirituality with almost 800,000 followers. Number four is Brian Houston with 481,000 followers. This number may appear small, but it is much larger than the number of adherents of Hillsong Churches. Pope Francis may be the leader of 1.5 billion Catholics, but only a fraction of these Catholics follow him on Instagram. The number of followers of Brian Houston displays the popularity of Hillsong Church and its contemporary Christian music among evangelicals and Pentecostals around the world. The numbers themselves might at least partly help to legitimate the authority of these four leaders, because, as Hoover has argued, part of what is considered to be charismatic authority is related to the ability to amass media audiences (Hoover, 2016).



brands in which the persuasive power of images has been used. Based on the analyses of the four leaders, in this chapter I compare their distinct mediated performances and address the question: *What are the most important similarities and differences between the four leaders and their mediation of authority on Instagram?*

As discussed in Chapter 2, the authority of religious leaders can be related to the three ideal types of Max Weber: traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal authority (Weber, 1946). But as Carroll suggests, another important and useful distinction is the difference between the official and personal authority of religious leaders (Carroll, 2011). In the current media age, religious leaders need to base their authority not (just) on the office or institution, but also on authenticity, a personal connection with the sacred and/or personal competence. Further, as has been argued, the authority of religious leaders is embodied, mediated, performed, and styled. Their physical appearance, performance, gestures, the use of their voice, their clothes, and other objects and symbols are all part of the complex process of constructing their authority. The aesthetic dimension and the quality of their performance are important aspects to convince audiences of their authority. Further, religious leaders need to connect to the affordances and visual culture of Instagram when they try to reach audiences on this platform. With the help of the content analysis and a semiotic analysis, it is possible to recognize patterns, differences, and similarities between the four leaders on Instagram. In the methodology, I described how, from a semiotic perspective, signifiers can produce meaning on a higher, ideological level. In this chapter, I compare “signifiers of authority”. I discuss how the four religious leaders present themselves on Instagram and what differences and similarities can be found in the mediation of authority and the construction of their brands. Then, I discuss the significant similarities and differences between mediation of authority of the four religious leaders and relate these to the dimensions of authority that I presented in the first two chapters of this thesis.

Visual Signifiers

The visual signifiers on Instagram are part of the visual language on Instagram and are grouped in the categories “visibility”, “performance”, “other people visible”,

“spaces, places, and objects” and “quotes and announcements”. In Appendix D, I describe the comparison between visual signifiers in detail.¹⁶⁷ In this chapter, I limit myself to the most relevant findings. I present which visual signifiers occur frequently and what they signify. What language do these signs create, and how do they contribute to second-order significations? How do these visual signifiers connote the personal and official authority of the religious leaders?

The visibility of Pope Francis and the Dalai Lama in their Instagram posts is almost 100 percent, but much lower for Brian Houston and Deepak Chopra. The Instagram posts of Pope Francis and the Dalai Lama consist of professional photographs that largely focus on the interaction between the leader and the people around them. Chopra and Houston also use quotations and announcements and make Instagram posts that suggest that they have taken the photograph themselves (which explains why they are not visible). In terms of performance, I focused on clothes and interaction. The clothes of the Dalai Lama and Pope Francis can be described as traditional and simple, which signifies their authority of office as well as a humble and simple lifestyle. Houston and Chopra, though, are dressed in contemporary clothes, which ranges from very informal to formal suits. Their clothes reflect their seemingly unproblematic relation with contemporary fashion and consumer culture. The interaction visible on the Instagram posts of Pope Francis and the Dalai Lama portrays the visibility of the emotions of the leaders and their audiences. This includes close-up shots of encounters with individuals or small groups as well as shots of large crowds. Moreover, both accounts also portray encounters with vulnerable groups, such as children, elderly, and infirm people. These photographs signify the authenticity and compassion of these leaders. Houston, in particular, portrays family members in his Instagram posts. These photographs affirm a performance of transparency and authenticity, reflect traditional “family values”, and also serve

167 Appendix D contains statistics, analyses, examples of relevant Instagram posts, and reflections on the theory.



as a counternarrative within the context of the scandals of handling the sexual abuse of his father.

The “other people” visible on the Instagram posts consist very often of audiences and crowds that have come to see the religious leader. This reinforces the signification of popularity and charisma. In case of Houston, these crowds are often portrayed without him being visible, where the crowds are an important signifier of the success of Hillsong Church, which then reflects on its founder, Houston himself. Media celebrities, who are especially visible in the posts of the Dalai Lama and Chopra, strengthen their own celebrity status and their connection with media power and legitimacy.

The spaces, place, and objects are part of the setting of the Instagram posts. Traditional religious buildings, such as cathedrals, churches, and temples, as well as religious symbols and objects underline the official authority of the Dalai Lama and Pope Francis. In case of Pope Francis, the many photographs in and around the Vatican also reflect the locus of religious power. The spaces, places, and objects that refer to media production and television are frequently visible in the posts of Deepak Chopra. These elements add to his personal authority as a media celebrity. The large multifunctional halls full of young people, stages including microphones, and screens reflect the ability of Hillsong Church to attract large audiences and reinforces the successful performance of Brian Houston as an entrepreneurial religious leader. The photographs that portray the traveling and journeys of the leaders signify the global influence of their religious leadership.

Houston and Chopra use inspirational quotations and announcement in the images of the Instagram posts. The aesthetic style of these quotations enhances the persuasive dimension of the words. Both leaders often use natural scenery, such as mountains, sunsets, or a starry sky. These visual elements signify the natural and/or cosmic dimension of their inspirational quotations, which strengthens their image as wise and inspirational leaders who are connected to the transcendent. The announcements are part of the marketing of their goods and services and signify their entrepreneurial approach to religion and spirituality, as well as their ability to position themselves in the spiritual marketplace.

The Mediation of Authority: Comparison

In the following sections, I further compare the four leaders with each other and distinguish similarities and differences. First, The Dalai Lama and Pope Francis are compared, in which I explain the role and the visual representation of tradition and authenticity. Second, Brian Houston and Deepak Chopra, who are religious and spiritual entrepreneurs. Third, Brian Houston and Pope Francis, and the analysis of their approaches to visualizing the way they relate to different theological themes in their ministry. Fourth, the Dalai Lama and Deepak Chopra, the two leaders who are connected to constructions of Eastern spirituality.¹⁶⁸

The Dalai Lama and Pope Francis

There are many similarities between the Instagram accounts of the 14th Dalai Lama and Pope Francis in terms of visual signifiers. Both use professional photographers, they are visible in almost all the Instagram posts, they do not use visual quotes or announcements. The themes on Instagram are also very similar: meeting and greeting crowds, interactions with children and vulnerable people, conducting religious ceremonies, and traveling. Both leaders are presented as humble and spontaneous leaders, which is reflected in their clothes and interactions. The Dalai Lama and Pope Francis represent old religious institutions in which they have become the supreme leader. They both fulfill a “priestly” role of leadership that is based on the authority of office, and which include their celibatarian status. Moreover, their orchestrated visibility and recognizability in the media have caused them to become iconic

168 Comparisons on which I do not elaborate are Deepak Chopra and Pope Francis, and the Dalai Lama and Brian Houston. The previous sections have revealed that these leaders do not have much in common. The Dalai Lama and Houston contrast in the way they use Instagram, in the way they dress, perform, and interact. The official authority of the Dalai Lama strongly contrasts with the entrepreneurial characteristics of Houston. Further, they represent very different religious traditions. The same can be said when I compare Pope Francis and Deepak Chopra.



leaders in popular culture (Rieser, 2013). Furthermore, both leaders are presented on Instagram as the personalization of the institutions they represent, both as leaders of a state (the Vatican and the Tibetan government in exile) and of the religious tradition (Roman Catholicism and Tibetan Buddhism). Both leaders seem to have found a way in which they have negotiated a visual style that connects to the image culture and the affordances of Instagram and to the context of their religious tradition.

The Instagram account of Pope Francis reveals a rich, very professional, and multilingual approach to the presentation of the authority and agenda of Pope Francis. It addresses his humility, authenticity, personal devotion, his compassion for others, especially the marginalized, and his enormous popularity. On this account, the combination of his celebrity status is combined with his position as the leader of the oldest and largest religious institution in history. The references to biblical narratives, acts of Jesus, and allusions to St. Francis of Assisi can be seen as visual rhetoric in which the proclamation of the gospel is combined with the remarketing and the rebranding of the Roman Catholic Church against the backdrop of scandals of fraud and abuse. On Instagram, Pope Francis has become the personalization of this church. Not surprisingly, the internal conflicts of the church, power struggles, and scandals are not addressed on Instagram.

The Dalai Lama is presented on Instagram as a friendly, funny, charismatic, and very popular religious leader, an international spiritual authority who is consulted by Tibetan refugees as well as international celebrities and politicians. His Instagram posts show professional photographs in which the Dalai Lama meets and interacts with his audiences and guests. Photographs of crowds and enthusiastic audiences strengthen the mediation of charismatic authority, while those with celebrities reinforces symbolic association with media power. Photographs of humor, informal interactions, and laughter strengthen a staged authenticity. Moreover, his teachings about Buddhism, compassion, and happiness have resulted in the fact that he is not just seen as a representative of Tibetan Buddhism, but as one of the most popular teachers of Eastern spirituality.

Signifiers of tradition, or authority of office, are especially relevant for the Dalai Lama and Pope Francis. These signifiers consist of objects and practices such as

recognizable religious symbols, buildings, paintings, statues, clothes, and rituals that appear to have existed for hundreds, or maybe even thousands of years. The aesthetic dimension of these objects and practices enhances the persuasive power and the styling of the Instagram posts. In the Instagram photographs, the Pope and the Dalai Lama are regularly standing or moving in front of old and/or religious buildings, conducting religious rituals, and, of course, their clothes signify tradition as well.¹⁶⁹ The presence of these signifiers connects people who are familiar with, or identify with, a certain religious tradition. However, as many authors argue, the presence of this tradition alone is not sufficient for the construction of authority (Carroll, 2011; Hoover, 2016; Hope Cheong, 2016). Religious and spiritual seekers are interested in the pure and unspoiled essence of religion, which they see as authentic. Performed unselfish acts expressing compassion, friendliness, and interactions that are devoid of impersonal formality can be seen as signifiers of authenticity and the personal style of the Dalai Lama and Pope Francis. The “regime of authenticity” (Gauthier, 2021) that they have employed fits within the boundaries of their religious tradition and is very different from the expressive individualism and lifestyle of Deepak Chopra, and, to a lesser extent, Brian Houston.

The Dalai Lama and Pope Francis use Instagram in a very similar way which demonstrates the interrelations between their social media practices and the religious traditions they represent. Both traditions consist of a rich inventory of symbols, rituals, and texts. Moreover, both their positions are related to a geographic territory: the Dalai Lama represents Tibet, and Pope Francis represents Vatican City. The institutional character of their traditions and the professional communication teams who use professional images contribute to a similar visual approach (Campbell, 2020). However, Pope Francis’s account rarely shows photographs of powerful celebrities or

169 Traditional religious buildings are visible (in the sample) in 14 posts of the Dalai Lama and 20 posts of Pope Francis. Three posts show the Dalai Lama conducting a religious ceremony, while five posts show Pope Francis conducting a religious ceremony. Further, 12 posts show Pope Francis while he is praying.



politicians, contrary to the Dalai Lama. In case of the Dalai Lama, the association with “important” people serves to legitimize and promote attention for his spiritual leadership and support for the Tibetan government in exile. Another difference is the visualization of personal piety of Pope Francis in the form of prayer and contemplation, which is an element that is virtually absent in the posts of the Dalai Lama.

Further, Pope Francis’s account shows a richer variety of themes, while the captions of the posts are more inspirational than informative. The Instagram account of the Dalai Lama only informs the audience about the occasion and gives a factual description of what is depicted, while that of Pope Francis offers inspirational or encouraging texts in multiple languages, often referring to biblical or Christian themes. Compared to the account of Pope Francis, the Instagram account of the Dalai Lama seems less interesting, and probably also not as effective in visualizing authority. Overall, while the Dalai Lama’s visibility is necessary to remind audiences of the (political) case of Tibet, Pope Francis’s status as the leader of the largest religious institution in the world, who still resides in the center of Roman Catholicism is very different from a leader in exile who depends on the goodwill of celebrities and politicians to support the position of the Tibetan people and government in exile. The differences in the approach to Instagram can only partly be explained in the differences of traditions since inspirational quotations by the Dalai Lama are abundantly available. It could be that the political sensitivities that surround the Dalai Lama have led to a more cautious approach towards the visual and textual content. Further, while the speeches and books of the Dalai Lama on topics such as joy, happiness, and compassion easily connect with Western audiences and those interested in Eastern, post-Christian and holistic spirituality, more sophisticated and traditional teachings and rituals of Tibetan Buddhism might receive less enthusiasm from Western audiences (Rakow, 2012).

Moreover, the differences between the two leaders could relate to different resources in terms of communications professionals, where Pope Francis could be better equipped than the Dalai Lama. Further, the papacy has a rich and long tradition of international diplomacy, mission, and communication, which contrasts with the relatively isolated position of the Dalai Lama and Tibetan Buddhism before 1959. In

sum, though Pope Francis can be seen as a representative of Western religion, and the 14th Dalai Lama as a representative of Eastern spirituality, the similarities in their approach to Instagram are remarkable.

Brian Houston and Deepak Chopra

Two leaders that also employ a similar style while representing a very different religious framework are Brian Houston and Deepak Chopra. As Banet-Weiser and several others have argued, the connection between religion, prosperity, and wellbeing is very similar within both the prosperity gospel and in what can be coined as “alternative” or post-traditional spirituality. Moreover, they both share an entrepreneurial and neoliberal approach, using marketing and branding to build their respective evangelical and spiritual business empires. Their use of Instagram is similar in terms of the use of quotations, announcements, and promotional messages. Further, they both seem to personalize the success and wellbeing of the movement that they represent. They are both presented as inspirational leaders. However, while authority within the context of evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity is rooted in personal authority, personal piety and demonstrated competence, within alternative spirituality, the highest source of authority is the higher self. The focus on the self as source of authority might fit better within the moral framework of Western culture (Campbell, 2007; Taylor, 2007). However, although the source of authority might be different, the presentation of authority is very similar, because they are both branded as the personalization of prosperity and wellbeing. The clothes and travels of Houston and Chopra represent an upper-class cosmopolitan lifestyle that can signify a measure of self-realization. For Houston, this implies a connection with a mode of prosperity gospel, while for Chopra, it relates to New Age capitalism. Compared to Pope Francis and the Dalai Lama, they have fully embraced the opportunities for self-expression in a way that presents an authenticity that is in line with the regimes of authenticity of late-modern consumer capitalism (Aupers et al., 2010; Campbell, 1987; Gauthier, 2021; Taylor, 2007). This all reinforces the construction of their personal brands, in which they combine the religious and spiritual dimension with the world of media and business.



Houston, just like Chopra, does not emphasize his authority, but uses the power of aesthetics to naturalize his authority. His family pictures represent the staged transparency of the Houston family, pointing towards a happy family life, while naturalizing the leadership positions of his wife and children. The main differences between Houston and Chopra on Instagram, besides their different religious traditions, lie in the presentation of the collective of the church and the family in the case of Brian Houston versus the emphasis on the individual in the case of Chopra. Moreover, compared to Houston, Chopra portrays more photographs in which he poses with media celebrities, which further inspires the celebrification of his authority.

Their use of different kind of posts, from personal “behind the scenes” to announcements, photographs and quotations, and their personal touch in composing these posts show how they use Instagram in a more informal way. The apparent incoherence of their posts and the personal style strengthens an aura of staged and performed authenticity. Their use of the affordances of Instagram, including the employment of other kinds of visual content such as inspirational quotations show a savviness concerning the medium. This suggests to their audiences that they are personally using the Instagram account, which provides an impression of closeness and proximity to their followers. As I argued before, this demonstrates an excellent social media strategy (and most likely points to communication professionals within their organizations), and it is most suitable in connecting with Instagram users who like a more informal and contemporary approach to religion and spirituality.

Brian Houston and Pope Francis

Brian Houston and Pope Francis are both representatives of Christianity but differ greatly in the presentation of their lifestyles. Though there are obviously considerable differences in their beliefs and approaches, they share some of the core beliefs about salvation, reconciliation with the divine, the importance of Jesus Christ, and the importance of the Bible. They can both use resources, symbols, and narratives of Christianity. Another similarity is that both institutions that they lead, or have led, are involved in scandals of fraud and the cover-up of sexual abuse and inappropriate power.

The role of tradition, however, is very different. Whereas Pope Francis represents the continuation of the Christian tradition from its beginnings, Houston represents a particular strand within Protestantism that is much more aligned with contemporary consumer culture.¹⁷⁰ The focus on contemporary culture, the use of popular imaginary contrasts greatly with the paintings, statues, and icons of the Roman Catholic tradition. Further, the focus on charismatic leadership and an entrepreneurial style contrast with the authority of office. It is striking that, although both leaders are named Christian leaders, they have a completely different focus. This is partly demonstrated in the visualization of tradition and the authority of office by the Pope, elements which are completely absent on the Instagram account of Brian Houston. On the account of Houston, visual references to the cross or other Christian symbols are rare, while they are abundant on the account of Pope Francis.¹⁷¹

One of the largest ideological differences are that the posts of Pope Francis present and perform compassion and identification with the vulnerable and the poor, instead of references to success and prosperity. Moreover, though Pope Francis might be branded as the personification of the Roman Catholic Church, the photographs clearly show the importance of the tradition and institution of the Church, while in

170 It could be argued that the abundance of visuals and the importance of the sensory in the devotions of Pentecostals is very different from a traditional protestant perspective, in which these elements are inherently suspect. Therefore, while the style and content of Hillsong might be very different from the Roman Catholic Church, their use of visual persuasion is essential for both (Klaver, 2021; Meyer, 2020).

171 The cross or a crucifix is visible in 2 posts in the sample of the Brian Houston, while it occurs in 13 posts of Pope Francis. Further, in the posts of Brian Houston, no religious statues or paintings are visible, while in the posts of Pope Francis, 14 posts include statues and paintings of religious figures, such as the Apostles, Mary, Jesus, etc. The setting of the Vatican or Roman Catholic churches greatly enhances the visibility of objects that refer to Christian symbols, while the more neutral spaces of Hillsong worship scarcely portray Christian symbols.



case of Houston, church is presented as an informal family and a home.

The presentation of material wealth, a cosmopolitan lifestyle, and the central role of family on the account of Houston can be seen as a representation of traditional family values and masculinity, as well as of divine blessing and success (Bowler, 2013; Klaver, 2021; Kobes Du Mez, 2020). Those elements are key features of the Hillsong theology. Moreover, photographs of family help to legitimize the central leadership roles of Houston's wife and children. The myth of a blessed leader blessed family, and blessed church mask the more controversial issues relating to the conservative theology of Hillsong Church and scandals, most notably about Houston's handling of the sexual abuse perpetrated by his father. The Instagram posts of Brian Houston align with mainstream contemporary culture in terms of lifestyle, dress codes, travel, success, and wellbeing. They are connected to an entrepreneurial perspective on building churches, and to a theology of vitality that emphasizes blessing and victory that can be translated into prosperity and happiness.

The church of Brian Houston has been expanded by his family into a large global enterprise that welcomes visitors "home" and encourages empowerment and victory, while the church of Pope Francis is a church that emphasizes the continuation with tradition and the rediscovery of humility and compassion. The Roman Catholic Church is an institution that is large and wealthy but is also a church in crisis and decline. It must deal with the realities of a spiritual marketplace in which it does not have a monopoly anymore. Hillsong Church, on the other hand, is a church that seems to have benefited from its positioning, marketing, and branding within this same marketplace.

The Dalai Lama and Deepak Chopra

The Dalai Lama and Deepak Chopra both share an Eastern connection in the sense that they are both seen as leaders of Eastern spirituality.¹⁷² However, just like Brian

172 Deepak Chopra has stated that he is an admirer of the Dalai Lama. They have met, which is also visible on an Instagram post of February 11, 2019 (The Office of His

Houston and Pope Francis, the representation of their lifestyles is very different. Where the Dalai Lama is intrinsically connected to Tibetan Buddhism, even though the presentation is very much connected to Western audiences, Chopra draws on many more sources in the presentation of his post-traditional spirituality. Compared to the way Chopra uses Instagram, including the use of quotations and announcements, the Instagram account of the Dalai Lama is much more institutional, and focuses on the creation of a coherent and positive image of the Dalai Lama instead of the promotion of goods and services.

Where the Dalai Lama is famous for his monk's habit and humble and simple lifestyle, Chopra has embraced the comforts of modern capitalism and has adopted a cosmopolitan lifestyle. He has become a spiritual entrepreneur who connects to modern culture and shows how his teachings can enable his audiences to enhance their happiness and wellbeing (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Carrette & King, 2005). Thus, he is the personalization of someone who has been able to "easternize" and commodify Western spirituality (Campbell, 2007). The Eastern dimension in the account of the Dalai Lama is visible in terms of clothes, images, temples, and landscapes of India, while this Eastern dimension is almost invisible in the case of Chopra.

While the authority of Chopra is mostly presented as the personal authority of a spiritual leader that is partly legitimized by his media presence, the authority of the 14th Dalai Lama is strongly related to his official authority and the traditions and myths of Tibetan Buddhism. The aesthetics of his clothes, religious objects, and the visualization of religious ceremonies and teachings affirm his official authority.

There is similarity between the leaders in their uses of selfies and their depiction of celebrities and politicians, which invokes symbolic associations with media power. Moreover, both leaders use photographs of university ceremonies in which they participate, which affirms the academic legitimacy of their teachings. Both leaders

Holiness the Dalai Lama, 2019b) and by the YouTube video of a visit of a group of people to the Dalai Lama led by Chopra (The Office of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, 2019a).



can be said to have become media celebrities, although the Dalai Lama has become much more popular, iconic, and well-known than Chopra. In his personal style, the use of aesthetics and the approach to Instagram, the Dalai Lama has more similarities with Pope Francis, and Brian Houston with Deepak Chopra.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented a comparison of the mediation of authority between Brian Houston, Deepak Chopra, the 14th Dalai Lama, and Pope Francis. Based on the analysis of the posts and their context, several similarities can be found. All religious leaders are presented as charismatic and authentic, although the “regimes of authenticity” differ. Moreover, their posts show how these four leaders use Instagram to mediate the personalization, stylization, celebrification, and branding of their authority. The charisma of the religious leaders is a mediatized charisma which does not only refer to a divine connection and/or exceptional characteristics that followers ascribe to leaders, but also to the way in which they are able to attract audiences through visual persuasion (Hoover, 2016). On Instagram, they are portrayed as spontaneous, warm, caring, and interested in the people around them. All religious leaders are branded as celebrities, which is visualized by large crowds, public performances, and performances in the media, as well as by international journeys that are portrayed in their posts. The embodied performance of the leaders is visualized by their clothes and by interactions with others. This adds to the construction of a personal visual style. The aesthetic power of the Instagram posts strengthens coherent personal brands and performances of transparency, positivity, and the (positive) characteristics of the religious leaders. Institutional structures, conflicts, and scandals are rendered invisible. Moreover, the religious leader is presented as the personalization of the brand, movement, or institution that he represents. On Instagram, the performances of the religious leaders enhance personal authority, though each of the leaders also refers to official authority by representing traditions, other institutions, or symbolic association with academics, politicians, or celebrities.

In the comparison, the largest differences are visible between the leaders who represent a traditional religious institution and entrepreneurial leaders. Time and

again, the similarities between the style of the Dalai Lama and Pope Francis on the one hand, and Brian Houston and Deepak Chopra on the other hand, have appeared. The accounts of the Dalai Lama and Pope Francis use professional photographs and carefully composed messages to create an image of a charismatic leader who can connect tradition with a personal, humble, and authentic style of leadership. The Dalai Lama and Pope Francis are similar in the sense that they both represent traditions, the successions of celibatary priestly leadership positions, and a hierarchical religious organization.

The style of their Instagram accounts contrasts with the more informal and diverse ways in which Houston and Chopra are presented. Houston and Chopra's entrepreneurial style combines an apparent transparent and personal account with inspirational quotations and announcements. Their accounts present personal entrepreneurial authority that is characterized by success, prosperity, and wellbeing that perfectly aligns with consumer culture. The entrepreneurial style of Houston is similar to Chopra, who has also been a master in connecting Eastern spirituality with the needs and desires of contemporary seekers of post-spirituality and wellbeing. In terms of religious traditions, Chopra is closer to the Dalai Lama in the sense that they are both using the resources and the traditions that have been associated with Eastern religion and spirituality. Though the Dalai Lama represents the tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, both figures have played a role in popularizing Eastern spirituality and connecting it to Western needs.

It is striking that similarities in religious backgrounds and sources do not necessarily have to translate to similar approaches in the visualization of authority. What seems at stake here is a negotiation on the part of leaders of traditions and institutions to preserve and connect these traditions to contemporary audiences. The way in which these traditions are presented on Instagram are "mediatized" and attractive visualizations of this tradition, in which beauty and purity are emphasized, while elements of traditions that might conflict with Instagram audiences are invisible. Religious and spiritual entrepreneurs are actively seeking to establish and expand their religious and spiritual businesses by showing how their personal authority is strengthened by performance and charisma, through the



embodiment of the values and propositions of success and wellbeing. The current cultural values, which are reflected on Instagram, do highly value a visualization of authentic emotions, a personal style, and the ability to connect to large numbers of followers. Each of the four leaders has been able to establish this connection with their audiences.

Conclusion

To what extent has religious authority become instagrammable? Can the authority of globally recognized religious leaders be visualized on Instagram in such a way that it is appealing to their audiences? The analysis of the cases of Brian Houston, Deepak Chopra, the 14th Dalai Lama, and Pope Francis has shown how these leaders have used Instagram to enhance their authority. Religious leaders use Instagram to mediate their authority by using a highly personalized approach and by presenting themselves as charismatic celebrity figures. This serves to connect with their audiences, while the institutional dimensions, power structures, and possible conflicts and scandals remain hidden.

My study of religious authority in a changing media landscape connects to contemporary debates about the transformation of religion and the consequences for religious leadership. In the quest for the signification of religious authority in a media age, the typology of Max Weber (1946) proved still to be relevant. However, his typology does need to be actualized and rethought, since this typology did not address the importance of the (mass) media of the twentieth and digital media of the twenty-first century for the construction and maintenance of religious authority. I will return to this issue later in this chapter. In terms of more recent notions, the insights of Carroll (2010) on the authority of religious leaders were particularly helpful, especially regarding the differences between personal and official authority. Since digital platforms such as Instagram focus on the personal, this distinction has proved to be very constructive. Moreover, I argue that the authority of religious leaders is mediated, performed, and styled. Religious leaders operate within religious communities by performing rituals, by speaking, praying, and so forth. They can use their physical appearance, performance, gestures, their voice, their clothes, and other objects and symbols to mediate their authority. This underlines the importance of the aesthetics and the quality of their performance in order to convince audiences of their authority. But aesthetic regimes are rooted within specific traditions and cultures. For



example, in a Protestant or Islamic setting, the voice and the rhetoric of the preacher are defining elements, while in the Roman Catholic setting, the ornaments in church, liturgical vestments and rituals are part of the sensational dimensions that appeal to the religious community.

One of the most important cultural transformations in relation to religious authority is the emergence of what Charles Taylor (2007) calls the Age of Authenticity. Religious leaders need to be able to connect to a culture in which self-expression and a personal spiritual quest are seen as crucial values in the construction of personal identity. Authority based on religious tradition or institutional grounds is less self-evident than in the past. The context of consumer culture translates, among other things, into the practices of personalization, branding, and celebrification. This means that leaders must construct their authority within a context that can be compared to a marketplace (Roof, 1999). Religious leaders, including Deepak Chopra, Brian Houston, the Dalai Lama, and Pope Francis, have become celebrities and distinct personal brands. Brands and media celebrities are inspirations for the lifestyle and identity construction of their followers and can provide resources for their personal spiritual quest. The aesthetic style needs to align with the culture of self-expression and the context of the contemporary media sphere. Social media offer countless opportunities for celebrities, brands, and religious leaders. Users of Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and countless other social networks can invoke worlds of symbolic meaning using the textual, audiovisual, and interactive affordances of these platforms. When religious leaders brand themselves as charismatic and authentic media celebrities, they are able to sustain and affirm their authority for distinct audiences.

Instagram has become one of the most popular and widely used social platforms. The design and visual culture of Instagram favors aesthetically appealing, personal, and apparently authentic content suitable for the smartphone and other mobile devices (Frier, 2020; Serafinelli, 2018). The emergence of Instagram is part of a broader development of the popularization and digitalization of photography. Besides ordinary users, Instagram is used by celebrities, influencers, people from the media and entertainment industries, commercial brands, and businesses, as well as governmental organizations and politicians. The audiences on Instagram

are important for the performance of all kinds of media celebrities and can be used for branding, reputation management, and the marketing of all kinds of goods and services. Finally, Instagram is not a neutral platform; the invisible technological dimensions in the form of datafication and surveillance mean that user behavior is exploited and monetized in an unprecedented way. However, this does not prevent religious leaders from using this platform.

As this thesis has demonstrated, the study of religious authority in a changing media landscape is also a methodological challenge. Therefore, a methodology has been developed to deal with a large number of social media posts, alongside an in-depth analysis and comparison between several religious leaders. The combination of content analysis and semiotic analysis provides a useful approach to analyzing the Instagram posts of the four leaders (Barthes, 1957; Leeuwen, 2005; Rose, 2016). The focus in the analysis is on the representation of authority through persuasive visual aesthetics and the performance of authority of religious leaders by their visibility, actions, and interactions in the Instagram posts. Samples of Instagram posts were coded to find and analyze patterns, and similarities and differences between the leaders. The semiotic analysis of photographs in which religious leaders interact with their followers, pose with celebrities, and or use visual inspirational quotations, demonstrates the importance of second-order signification in relation to the mediation of authority.

On Instagram, the performances of the religious leaders affirm their personal authority, although each of the leaders also refers to official authority by representing traditions, other institutions such as media corporations, or symbolic association with academics, politicians, or celebrities. From the typology of Max Weber, traditional and charismatic authority turned out to be especially relevant categories in this research. According to Gauthier (2021), charismatic authority within the context of a capitalist culture is connected to the figure of the entrepreneur. Also, as Hoover (2016) points out, traditional and charismatic authority function within the media sphere when these types of authority are presented in an aesthetically attractive way in order to connect with audiences. As I discussed in the comparative chapter, the aesthetics of tradition and charisma can



be applied in a visually persuasive style that connects to the followers on Instagram.

It is striking that similarities in religious traditions and their sources do not necessarily translate into similar approaches to the visualization of authority. The most significant differences are visible between leaders who represent a traditional religious institution (the Dalai Lama and Pope Francis) and entrepreneurial leaders (Brian Houston and Deepak Chopra). Pope Francis and the Dalai Lama creatively use the resources of their tradition to represent it in an authentic way. They use Instagram by negotiating the values and aesthetics of their tradition with the visual culture of Instagram. The official and polished style of the Dalai Lama and Pope Francis's Instagram accounts contrasts with the more informal and diverse ways in which Houston and Chopra present themselves. Their entrepreneurial style combines an apparent transparent and personal account with inspirational quotations and announcements. Religious and spiritual entrepreneurs like Houston and Chopra are actively seeking to establish and expand their religious and spiritual businesses. They do also (but less obviously and frequently) refer to elements of the traditions that they link with but use these consciously to promote themselves as religious leaders. The current cultural values, which are reflected on Instagram, highly value a visualization of authentic emotions, a personal style, and the ability to connect to large numbers of followers. Their accounts present personal entrepreneurial authority that is characterized by success, prosperity, and wellbeing that aligns well with consumer culture.

The presentation of the religious leaders on Instagram displays a paradox. At first sight, they do not present themselves as authority figures but rather as authentic, inspirational religious figures to audiences who seek resources to construct their identity and their religious or spiritual selves. By downplaying their institutional and religious tradition they act more as religious lifestyle coaches than representatives of a particular religious tradition. The presentation of these leaders on Instagram supports Gauthier's analysis that traditional forms of religion are being contested by new sources of authority from the realms of media and business (Gauthier, 2021, p. 35). Instagram is used to create and sustain their celebrity status and their brands. Drawing upon cultural values of choice, freedom, and independence, religious leaders

use the characteristics of brands to foster affective engagement through processes of identification (Arvidsson, 2006). While authenticity in the form of expressive individualism is being stressed, power relations and the interests of business and organizations are rendered invisible. As observed among the four religious leaders, their “brand identity” is carefully maintained to attract and retain audiences.

What do these religious leaders gain from this construction? The careful performance on Instagram adds to a positive image of their institution, which serves to legitimize institutional power, political positions, social and cultural popularity, and commercial profit. Further, conflicts, scandals, and institutional issues are made invisible. Instead, the friendly, approachable, and charismatic performance of a leader makes the institution personal, relatable, and compatible with the lifestyle of their audiences.

How does this study contribute to the field of digital religion? First, the context of Instagram confirms the power of digital platforms, algorithms, and audiences. The focus on the content analysis and the semiotic analysis of visual performance contributes to the field of digital religion because it systematically addresses the role of visual culture and its relationship with the construction of authority in a digital age. This study connects to the “fourth wave” of digital religion studies (Campbell & Evolvi, 2020), because it considers the social, cultural, political, and ethical dimensions of digital media and religious authority.

When I relate my findings to the three logics that Hope Cheong (2021) outlines, this research confirms the paradoxes and dialectics of religious authority regarding digital religion. The analysis of my empirical research shows that established religious leaders who represent traditional authority structures as well as entrepreneurial religious and spiritual leaders, have successfully embraced Instagram to mediate their authority. At the same time, I demonstrate that performances of authority and authenticity, as well as adaptations to the globalized world of consumer culture are problematic. The negotiation between religious values, traditional structures, and the imperatives of constructed authenticity and an attractive lifestyle causes paradoxes and tensions that cannot be easily resolved. Thus, although I certainly see a continuity in the construction of religious authority in terms of adaptation to the



affordances of media technology, I have encountered the dialectics and paradoxes in the study of each of the four leaders. Moreover, the power of algorithms is significant, and informs the visibility and the mediation of authority of religious leaders within the context of digital platforms, not least the problematic nature of the dependence on the commercial and institutional power of corporations like Meta that is implicit in any platform usage. Further, the construction of charisma and the performance of authenticity is a deliberate visual construction based on sophisticated mechanisms of marketing and branding. These practices and mechanisms may very well be counter to the core values and religious beliefs that leaders represent.

The typology of Weber has proved to travel well into the context of consumer culture, a globalized media sphere, and the mediation of authority of religious leaders. Although Weber developed his theory within the context of industrialization, the formation of the modern nation state, and in a context where the media were radically different from today, his notions of traditional, bureaucratic-legal, and charismatic authority are still relevant as a starting point. As I have shown, several authors have revisited and applied his typology to the context of mediatization and consumer culture. In this study, the notion of charisma has proven to be most applicable to the visualized and personalized mediation of authority on Instagram (see also Golan & Martini, 2019). Bureaucratic-legal authority is less visible but has been translated into the invisible but powerful mechanisms of digital software, algorithms, and big data. The importance of tradition is visible in the visualization and construction of authentic, pure, and humble leadership by leaders like the Dalai Lama and Pope Francis. To fully conceptualize the mediation of authority in this current era, it is important to supplement the theory of Weber with notions of performance, aesthetics, branding, mediatization, and celebrity culture, among others.

To summarize, this research on the instagrammable authority of religious leaders, engages with debates about the transformation of the authority of religious leaders in a media age, and more broadly, with debates about the transformation of religion. The transformation of the social, cultural, and technological landscape has radically altered the way in which religious leaders can construct and maintain authority. In the age of authenticity, religious leaders need to present themselves

as persuasive, authentic personalizations of the institutions or organizations they represent. Therefore, the construction of the authority of religious leaders within the current media sphere includes performance, persuasive aesthetics, celebrification, branding, and the sophisticated use of digital technology. The transformation of religion includes the mediatization, but also the lifestylization of religion. This translates into the branding and commodification of religious practices into products and services, which is particularly visible in the entrepreneurial approaches of Brian Houston of Hillsong Church and the businesses of Deepak Chopra. At the same time, the case studies have shown that religious traditions with a long history, such as Tibetan Buddhism and Roman Catholicism, can retain their recognizable identity as they have a certain resilience to changes. While traditions are not static and always influenced by broader cultural and societal elements, continuity prevails. These traditions show a robustness and resistance against the forces of commodification and marketization of their beliefs and practices. In the end, I both hope and have confidence that emphasizing core religious principles such as compassion, humility, and care, will remain more powerful and authentic than entrepreneurial approaches in molding religious traditions and movements to the fashions of the marketplace.

The Future of Religious Leadership

What implications does the use of social platforms have for the future of religious leadership? There are many elements that could be discussed here, but from the perspective of Instagram, three dimensions are especially relevant: audiences, aesthetics, and algorithms.

Religious leaders need to think beyond the face-to-face contact they have with believers in local religious communities. The configurations of people who relate to each other through digital technology creates a different dynamic than that of people who are members of the same community and/or locally connected (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). Those days are long gone, but it became even more apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic that communication is increasingly mediated, with digital devices playing an important role (Campbell, 2020b). This is why it is important to think in terms of “audiences”, the users, and consumers of digital platforms, who



themselves, incidentally, have possibilities for response and production (Jenkins, 2006). Audiences can consist of people within the bounds of a religious community, but certainly also outside of it. When religious leaders use social media accounts, their potential reach is much greater and can transcend local and national boundaries, especially if the language is one that is widely spoken worldwide, such as English, Spanish, or French. The audience may consist of people who share the same religious/spiritual beliefs as the leader (broadly speaking) and accept the authority of the religious leader. But the audience may also include critical minds, journalists, and possibly opponents. This means that leaders must also consider the empowerment of their audiences. The question regarding audiences is also to what extent religious leaders are willing to accommodate the cultural preferences and values of their (potential) audiences. In doing so, leaders must also increasingly consider the affordances demographics of the platforms they want to use. Success on digital platforms can lead to greater legitimacy of religious leadership. Part of this success depends on employing aesthetics that resonate with their audiences.

Aesthetics have always played a crucial role in the experience of religion, and also in the construction of religious authority (Meyer, 2020). In religions where sacred scriptures play an important role, the authority of explanation and the knowledge and expertise of religious leaders is important (Turner, 2007). A strongly Protestant view of authority can lead to a great emphasis on the verbal and discursive dimension of authority. This is partly translatable to text-driven social platforms like Twitter. But recent years have shown a trend in which the (audio-)visual dimension of digital platforms is becoming increasingly important. When religious leaders engage in digital platforms, they must consider that their audiences place great value on aesthetics and the visual presentation of their messages. As Meyer writes, the “aesthetics of persuasion” are an important way to influence and engage audiences (Meyer, 2010). This means that clothing, facial expressions, the use of visuals, spaces, places, and objects, all matter. Especially when using photographs or videos, nonverbal communication proves to be many times more important than verbal communication. This does not have to mean that religious leaders must surround themselves with the most advanced digital techniques. In fact, a more “amateurish” way can come across as authentic.

Leaders who can successfully use digital cameras (whether on smartphones or more sophisticated devices) and photo-editing software, who understand the affordances of the medium, and who can respond to the conventions that are common on these platforms have a large advantage.

Global businesses, such as Meta (Facebook), Apple, Amazon, and Google have amassed an enormous base of power, based on the gathering of big data and the use of algorithms that can predict, influence, and manipulate the behavior of their users (Zuboff, 2019). The power of algorithms lies in the fact that the preferences and behaviors of individual users and aggregated collectivities can be translated into patterns of data. The datafication of preferences and practices has provided enormous benefits for digital platforms and marketers, who are able to target people based on very specific characteristics. For example, followers of Deepak Chopra on Instagram might encounter advertisements for wellness products, but their preferences might also be used to connect it to political messages. Instagram is part of Meta, which has been involved in scandals concerning the abuse of privacy, the manipulation of elections and referenda like Brexit, and around religious and ethnic violence in Southeast Asia that started on its platform. In the age of surveillance capitalism, corporations like Meta capitalize on the “free” use of digital services, data from which are sold to whoever pays the most, whatever their motives (Zuboff, 2019). Everything is monitored: what people view most, which accounts they follow, what they like, what they comment upon, which posts they do not pay attention to, and so forth.

There should not be any naivety about the myth that power is the random outcome of individual choices or that the agency of audiences is the crucial factor for legitimizing authority (Campbell, 2020a; Couldry & Hepp, 2017, pp. 164–166; Schofield Clark, 2016, p. 246). As Schofield Clark argues, institutions tend to benefit if people believe they hold voluntary control. There is a power balance in which wealthy and influential religious organizations can employ marketing and communication professionals. Through the subtle and sophisticated use of marketing and branding, these professionals can persuade and influence their audiences on social media like Instagram. The idea that people are free to choose their own lifestyle and make their own choices to become authentic and autonomous individuals has been exploited



by advertisers and marketers and has been one of the powerful myths in popular culture, which is highly indebted to a blend of neoliberalism and romantic ideas of the 1960s that have found their way into mainstream morals and values.

When religious leaders, communities, and institutions use commercial digital platforms, they structure the members of their communities and their audiences into consumers who are subjected to the mechanisms of surveillance capitalism. This is several steps further than using marketing and branding for selling books or events. Everything that happens on digital platforms, every interaction, however genuine, authentic, or spiritual, is subject to datafication and monetization. This has direct implications for the way in which religion is being practiced, because by using digital commercial platforms, a large part of the structure is being “outsourced” to these businesses.

Instagram and Ethics

The use of digital platforms such as Instagram means agreeing to the terms and conditions of these platforms, which leads to the datafication and monetization of user behavior (Ess, 2020). Should religious leaders and their media teams take the conditions of the big technology platforms for granted, or should they protest or challenge the datafication and monetization of the interaction they generate on social media? Whatever position that people take, it is almost impossible in an age of deep mediatization (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 52) to completely abstain from what happens on platforms that billions of people use to communicate and maintain relationships.

The question whether religious leaders and organizations should use marketing and branding to be more influential has been asked for a longer period, but in this age of deep mediatization, it raises questions about the actual platforms that religious leaders are active on. The large populations that are active on social media make it almost impossible to ignore platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. But to what extent do religious leaders question, criticize, or challenge the power of these platforms that they use for their own benefit? How does it relate to the ethics of their religious traditions? This question addresses paradoxes and dialectics involved in the construction of religious authority (Hope Cheong, 2021). Leaders like Pope

Francis, who represents hundreds of millions of Roman Catholics, could use their authority to challenge the power of these global and commercial media institutions. A growing number of publications and reports shows that the datafication and commercialization of digital traces endangers democratic political systems, the privacy and the autonomy of groups and individuals, polarizes society, and where institutions benefit from the surveillance and manipulation of its apparently free and autonomous users.

Religious traditions and movements often contain a critique or a prophetic voice against the abuse of power and money, insincerity, and unhealthy forms of fusion between religious values and the values of the powerful. Religious leaders, especially charismatic ones, have always been able to attract popular support and mobilize people for their causes. And history has shown that the spread of religious movements and reforms, especially in Western Europe, have been accompanied by the sophisticated use of available media technology (Horsfield, 2015). Banet-Weiser states that religion has often been defined by its beliefs rather than its social or commercial purposes. The values of religious beliefs contrast with the often banal practices of consumerism. Religion is frequently the place people turn to in order to escape from materialist practices (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 166). She argues that, to claim authenticity, religious brands use the strategies of marketing and branding while they denounce the ethos of capitalism. This paradox is at the heart of many of the mediated practices that occur on Instagram, including for “anti-materialistic” leaders such as Pope Francis and the Dalai Lama. In the afterword of the book *The Media and Religious Authority* (2016), Schofield Clark argues that the perspective on datafication is often missing in the analysis of authority. She raises the question, if systems of power consistently prioritize the interests of the commercial and the powerful, what actions should religious communities take to ensure the protections of human rights of the less privileged? She states, “There are many human rights issues at stake, from the silencing of certain religions to the lack of accountability of leadership, that could warrant attention in relation to many religious traditions” (Schofield Clark, 2016, pp. 264–265). As I explained in Chapter 1, Meyer conceptualizes religion as practices of mediation (Meyer, 2020). What happens when



religious practices, including the mediation of authority, increasingly take place on digital commercial platforms? The datafication on these platforms is not visible for the producers and consumers of content on social media. The interfaces of Instagram and other platforms do not show what happens with each digital interaction. When companies like Meta, Twitter, and Alphabet (Google, YouTube) are being used by religious communities and their leaders, religion may be conceptualized as *datafied* practices of mediation. It would be wise for religious and spiritual leaders to see digital devices and platforms not just as neutral instrumentalist devices, but as platforms that are deeply embedded in questionable configurations of wealth and power. They should be knowledgeable about these configurations and be aware that their religious traditions might inform the way they practice and preach. Future research should certainly investigate the questions about the relationship between religion, the way they employ digital platforms, and systematic ethical reflection on what this means for power relations, authenticity, freedom, and capitalism.

The importance for religious leaders to perform on digital platforms has its costs. The authority of religious leaders is, first and foremost, related to the sacred and the core values of their religious traditions. That digital platforms violate many of these core values and use intimate data of religious believers and spiritual seekers to increase their profits is an inconvenient truth that current and future leaders must address.

Appendix A.

Categories and Codes

The following categories have been chosen for the content analysis of the Instagram posts of the four religious leaders: (1) Instagram post type, (2) the visual presence and (3) performance of the religious leader, (4) other people visible in the post, (5) the spaces and places, and (6) objects that are visible in the post. The categories have been translated into several codes.

1. Instagram Post Genres

Codes	Description
Type of Post	
Regular Photograph	Regular photo post, no text or special editing (both professional and non-professional photography)
Photo Collage	Multiple photographs in one post
Announcement	Post in which an event/product/service is being announced and/or promoted
Quotation	Post contains a quotation, often illustrated by an image

2. The Visual Presence of the Religious Leader

Codes	Description
Visibility of the leader	Is the leader (visually) visible on the Instagram post?
Yes	Visible in the Instagram post
No	Not visible in the post
Size of the leader in the post	N.B. This category only applies if the leader is visible. Size of the leader (the amount of space the body and/or face of the leader relative to the size of the Instagram post)
Big	Fills at least 1/3 of the post



Medium	Between 1/3 and 1/5 of the post
Small	Less than 1/5 of the post

3. Performance of the Religious Leader

Codes	Description
Clothes	
Traditional simple	e.g., simple monk's dress or habit, (almost) no decorations
Traditional rich	Clothes of leader are traditional and include rich ornaments / jewelry, rich colors, etc.
Modern informal	Clothes leader are modern informal, e.g., jeans, shorts, etc.
Modern formal	Clothes leader are modern and formal, e.g., suit, tie, etc.
Gaze	The direction of the gaze of the religious leader. Only applicable if it is clearly visible.
Camera	The leader looks straight into the camera
Child/children	
Crowd	
Other person	Particular person, excluding "persons in need" and "children"
Person in need	Very old, poor, sick, in tears, etc.
Religious object	Statue, painting, religious book, etc.
Physical contact of the leader	
Embracing	
Laying on of hands	
Shaking hands	
Touching	Does not include laying on of hands, shaking hands, embracing. For example: the leader touches the face of the person in front of him.
Actions of the leader	
Blessing	
Conducting religious ceremony	Performing rituals, reading sacred texts, etc.
Greeting	Other people/ the audience
Posing	For a photograph

Praying	
Speaking	
Facial expression	The facial expression of the religious leaders is not always visible, for instance, when the religious leader is photographed from a distance, from the back etc. This category has only been coded when the facial expression was visible.
Neutral	
Sad	
Serious	
Happy/smiling	

4. Other People Visible on the Post

Codes	Description
Number of people visible in the post	The number of other people visible in the photograph depends on the framing. It is possible that the photographer zooms in on a crowd of people, only showing a small part of the crowd. The number of people includes the religious leader (if visible). So, if the religious leader is the only visible person, the number of people is 1.
0	
1	
2–5	
6–10	
11–50	Small crowd
>50	Big crowd
Activities of the people	This category only applies if more people than just the religious leader are visible. In some cases, multiple codes have been used for a single post.
Greeting	Greeting the religious leader
Casual	Interacting with each other casually (apparently unaware of the camera)
Listening	Listening to/watching the religious leader (not in a context of religious or spiritual ritual or practice)



Passive	Passive posture, apparently unaware that a photograph has been taken
Performing music	
Posing	
Religious practice	Religious/worship/spiritual ritual /practice: this is quite a broad category. Participating in a religious ceremony or ritual or spiritual practice (including yoga or meditation).
Speaking	Speaking to the religious leader or to other people
Taking photographs	Mostly taking photographs/filming the religious leader
Relationship	
Family	The visibility of family in case of Brian Houston is striking, therefore, this category has been added to show the frequency in the sample (Deepak Chopra uses family photographs, but far less often).

5. Spaces and Places

Codes	Description
Airport/airplane	
Nature	Natural scenery
Near religious building	Outside, religious building in the vicinity is visible
Outside undefined/ unclear	
Park/garden	
Private room/home	
Public hall	
Public room	
Religious sanctuary	Church/temple, etc.
Shop/restaurant	
Square	Public square, mostly in downtown areas of big cities
Stadium	
Street	
TV Studio	

6. Objects

Codes	Description
Buildings	
Traditional religious	e.g., traditional, and historic churches and temples
Traditional general	Buildings that are at least 100 years old, usually much older, often official buildings such as town halls, governmental buildings, etc.
Modern general	Buildings <100 years old). Since modern buildings in the photographs are often multi-functional, no difference has been made between “secular” and “religious” buildings.
Other objects	This category focuses mainly on religious objects (excluding clothes and buildings). Further, the code “microphone” has been added since this often points to a media event.
A statue or painting of a religious figure	
Religious book	
Cross	Christian cross
Microphone	
Other, misc.	silk scarf, decorated chair, etc.



Appendix B.

Statistics Content Analysis

The table below shows the statistics of the content analysis of the samples of the four leaders. It is worth noting that, since the account of the Dalai Lama contained only 56 image posts between November 1, 2016, and October 31, 2017, all image posts have been included here.

	Deepak Chopra Sample	Brian Houston Sample	Dalai Lama Sample	Pope Francis Sample
1. Instagram Post genres				
Type of Post				
Regular Photograph	48	68	55	89
Photo Collage	6	4	0	0
Announcement	16	7	0	0
Quotation	32	17	0	0
2. The visual presence of the religious leader				
Visibility of the leader				
Yes	54	31	55	99
No	46	69	1	1
Size of the leader				
Big	6	7	19	50
Medium	28	10	25	31
Small	14	9	4	14
3. Performance of the religious leader				
Clothes				
Traditional simple	0	0	39	64
Traditional rich	1	0	5	9

	Deepak Chopra Sample	Brian Houston Sample	Dalai Lama Sample	Pope Francis Sample
Modern informal	18	10	0	0
Modern formal	19	7	0	0
Gaze				
Camera	27	11	13	3
Child/children	1	0	7	18
Crowd	6	9	16	17
Person in need	0	0	1	11
Other person	5	2	9	10
Religious object	0	0	1	15
Physical contact of the leader				
Embracing	0	0	2	3
Laying on of hands	0	1	1	9
Shaking hands	0	0	3	2
Touching	1	2	9	4
Actions of the leader				
Blessing	0	2	0	11
Conducting religious ceremony	0	0	4	9
Greeting	0	0	25	36
Misc.	0	0	4	2
Participating in a religious ceremony	0	0	1	3
Posing	41	14	13	3
Praying	0	1	0	18
Speaking	10	13	8	10
Facial expression				
Neutral	6	1	7	8
Sad	0	0	0	0
Serious	4	1	2	14
Smiling	34	16	35	31



	Deepak Chopra Sample	Brian Houston Sample	Dalai Lama Sample	Pope Francis Sample
4. Other people visible in the post				
Number of people visible in the post				
0	25	23	0	1
1	28	9	8	22
2 to 5	29	25	20	33
6 to 10	5	7	9	13
11 to 50	2	7	7	19
> 50	6	24	9	12
Activities of the people				
Greeting	0	0	19	23
Interacting with each other (casually)	0	3	0	0
Listening/watching	8	10	12	24
Performing music	0	4	0	0
Posing	25	19	12	2
Religious/worship/ritual/ spiritual practice	6	24	4	17
Speaking	1	3	0	1
Taking photographs/filming	0	0	4	15
Relationship				
Family	4	28	0	0
5. Spaces and places				
Airport / airplane	0	2	0	2
Nature	14	15	2	0
Near religious building (outside)	0	1	3	0
Outside undefined	1	0	2	3
Park/garden	6	7	2	4
Private room/home	1	7	0	0
Public hall	12	34	13	24
Public room	12	2	8	7



	Deepak Chopra Sample	Brian Houston Sample	Dalai Lama Sample	Pope Francis Sample
Religious sanctuary	1	0	10	19
Shop/restaurant	2	3	1	0
Square	2	1	6	36
Stadium	0	10	0	0
Street	5	7	8	5
TV Studio	9	1	0	0
6. Objects				
Buildings				
Traditional general	0	6	2	3
Traditional religious	1	1	14	29
Modern general	14	29	6	5
Other Objects				
Cross or crucifix	0	2	0	27
Microphone	5	21	9	5
Religious book/scroll	0	1	1	4
Statues/ paintings/ religious figures	4	1	11	17
Other, (misc.)	3	0	15	3



Appendix C.

Analysis of Statistics

Additions to Chapter 9

Statistics: Instagram Post Types

The Instagram posts that I analyzed have been divided into “still” images and videos. The videos have been excluded from the sample. The images have been categorized as photographs, inspirational quotations, and announcements. The dataset contains 1138 screenshots, which consists of 779 “still” images and 359 videos.

Table C.1

Videos and Images in the Dataset

Leader	Images	Videos	Total
Brian Houston	287 (87%)	40 (13%)	327
Dalai Lama	56 (98%)	1 (2%)	57
Deepak Chopra	262 (52%)	240 (48 %)	502
Pope Francis	174 (69%)	78 (31%)	252
Total	779	359	1138

Table 1 immediately shows major differences in the frequency of the posts (reflected in the number of posts during the period of one year), photographs and videos. Brian Houston has made 327 posts of which 87% consists of images. The Dalai Lama’s account has posted only 57 messages, of whom all but one consists of images. Deepak Chopra has made 502 posts, of which the images make up 52% of the posts. Pope

Francis has posted 252, of which 69% are images. Thus, the frequency of posting is the highest for Deepak Chopra, and the lowest for the Dalai Lama. The percentage of videos is, again, the highest for Deepak Chopra and the lowest for the Dalai Lama. Though I refer regularly in the text to statistics of the coding that have been derived from the sample of 100 images, some of the most basic categories, such as the number of photographs, quotations and announcements have also been categorized in the whole dataset, which allows for comparison to see how accurate the analysis of the sample is. The statistics below are derived from the whole dataset in which the photo posts have been selected and the video posts have been excluded in Adobe Bridge.

From each leader (except for the Dalai Lama), a sample of 100 images has been thoroughly coded in ATLAS.ti. The subsequent statistics show the same categories as the one in Adobe Bridge, which allows a comparison to see if the sample corresponds to the findings of the whole dataset.

Table C.2

Dataset – Images, Photographs, Quotations, Announcements

Leader	Images	Photographs	Quotations	Announcements
Brian Houston	287	235 (81%)	33 (12%)	19 (7%)
Dalai Lama	56	56 (100%)	0	0
Deepak Chopra	262	158 (60%)	66 (25%)	38 (15%)
Pope Francis	174	174 (100%)	0	0
Total	779	623	99	57



Table C.3

Sample – Images: Photographs, Quotations, Announcements

Leader	Images	Photographs	Quotations	Announcements
Brian Houston	100	76	17	7
Dalai Lama ¹⁷³	56	56	0	0
Deepak Chopra	100	52	32	16
Pope Francis	100	100	0	0
Total	356	284	49	23

The two tables do show some differences between the dataset and the sample. The Dalai Lama and Pope Francis do not present any quotations or announcements in the images. Therefore, the only differences between the dataset and the sample are presented in the statistics of Brian Houston and Deepak Chopra. The differences for Brian Houston are related to the ratio of photographs and quotations: dataset (81% photographs, 12% quotations, 7% announcements) and sample (76% photographs, 17% quotations, 7% announcements). The same goes for Deepak Chopra: dataset (60% photographs, 25% quotations, 15% announcements) and sample (52% photographs, 32% quotations and 16% announcements). In any case, both tables show that Brian Houston and Deepak Chopra have posted a considerable number of inspirational quotations and announcements, of which Deepak Chopra has used more than Brian Houston.

173 Because of the number of posts of the Dalai Lama, they all have been analyzed in the sample as well.

Appendix D.

Visual Signifiers

Additions to Chapter 9

In this appendix, I examine visual signifiers on Instagram and relate this to the personalization, stylization, celebrification, and branding of religious leaders. Brands and celebrities are inspirations for lifestyle and identity construction and offer resources for one's personal spiritual quest. An important dimension of branding and celebrity culture is the emphasis on aesthetic style that fits within the culture of self-expression on Instagram. The following visual signifiers will be discussed: the visual presence of religious leaders in their Instagram posts, their performance and interaction with others, other people that are visually present in the Instagram posts, the clothing style of the religious leaders, places, spaces, and objects, and finally, the use of inspirational quotations and announcements. The code book that I used, as well as the statistics of the content analysis, can be found in Appendices A, B, and C.

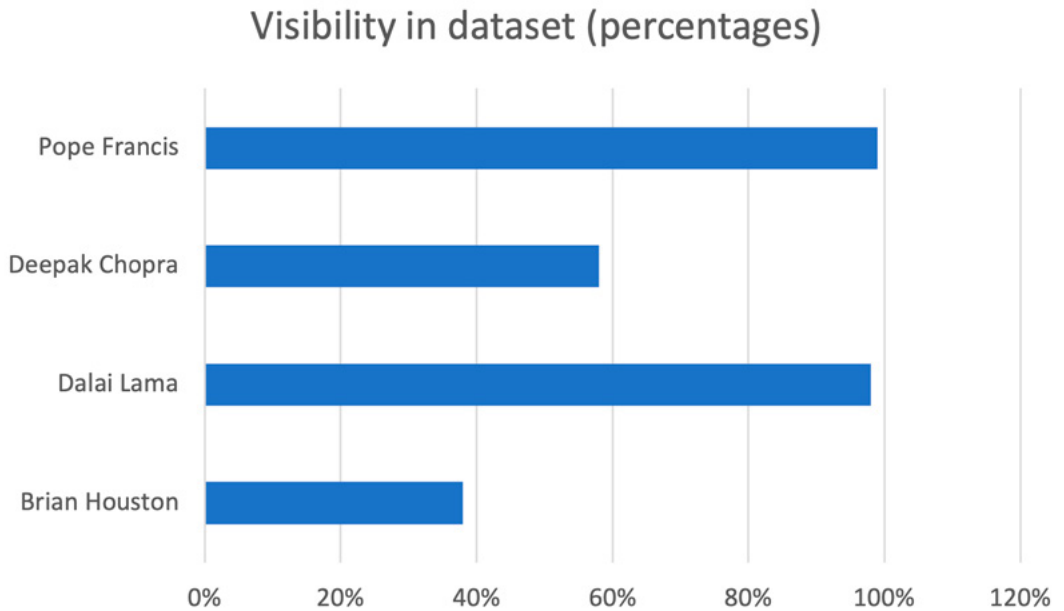
The Visual Presence of Religious Leaders on Instagram

The visual presence of the leaders on Instagram is, alongside the type of post (regular photograph, quotation, or announcement), one of the clearest examples of differences between the four leaders. In the table below, I present the number of images and the visibility of each of the four leaders in the total dataset (all the images in the period between November 1, 2017, and October 31, 2017) and the sample. Overall, the results of the sample are practically the same compared to the dataset. What is clear from the data is that Pope Francis and the Dalai Lama use Instagram in a similar way; their accounts only use photographs, and their visibility rate on these photos is 98%.



Table D.1*Visibility of Religious leaders*

Leader	Dataset		Sample	
	Images	Visible	Images	Visible
Brian Houston	287	108 (38%)	100	31 (31%)
Dalai Lama	56	55 (98%)	56	55 (98%)
Deepak Chopra	262	153 (58%)	100	54 (54%)
Pope Francis	174	173 (99%)	100	99 (99%)

Figure D.1*Graph to Show the Visibility of the Religious Leaders in the Dataset*

In the sample of 100 photographs for each leader, the Dalai Lama and Pope Francis are visible on almost every photograph. In contrast, Brian Houston is in the sample only visible on 31% of the posts, and Deepak Chopra on 54% of the posts. The photographs of Pope Francis and the Dalai Lama cover their performances and their

appearances. These photographs, taken by professional photographers and curated by a team of communication specialists, focus almost entirely on the person of the Dalai Lama and Pope Francis. As the previous chapters have shown, the Instagram accounts reinforce their visibility. Their accounts present an image that supports their personal brand. This is achieved by publishing social media posts in which they are visible and recognizable. The Dalai Lama presents himself as a spiritual leader as well as an advocate for the Tibetan people, in whom political and religious leadership converge. Pope Francis promotes the cause for neighborliness and compassion. Both leaders are not using their smartphones (if they possess one) to communicate with their audiences, but they rely on teams of photographers and communication specialists.

Clearly this is different for Brian Houston and Deepak Chopra. Many of Brian Houston's posts are related to Hillsong Church, family, and personal and "behind the scenes" photographs. The lack of his own visibility is compensated by his apparent personal involvement on his Instagram account, which is characterized by personal and informal descriptions and jokes. Deepak Chopra is visible on half of the photographs and uses other photographs for quotations (mostly from himself), announcements of events and the promotion of products. The differences between these two leaders and Pope Francis and the Dalai Lama can in part be explained by the entrepreneurial approach of Brian Houston and Deepak Chopra. They show how social media can be used strategically to promote and create awareness for their religious and spiritual products: events, conferences, books, retreats, merchandise, and so forth (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Einstein, 2008). Also, the display of entrepreneurship promotes the personal competence of the leaders, which is an important aspect of the construction of their (personal) religious authority (Carroll, 2011; Horsfield, 2016).

Performance

The performance of the religious leaders in their Instagram posts can be seen as a form of impression management (Goffman, 1969). The representation of the performance of the leader on Instagram is based on his visual appearance, his acts, and interactions with other people. In the analysis, I first present the analysis of interactions with people



that are visible in the Instagram posts. Moreover, in the following paragraphs, I also analyze which “other people” are visible in the post. Finally, I discuss the clothing style of the religious leaders, which is an important dimension of their performance.

Interaction

One of the most significant ways in which the representation of authority on Instagram differs between the four leaders is observed in the various ways they visibly interact with other people. A central aspect of these “interaction” posts is the representation of the body of the religious leader. Interaction involves many elements that have been analyzed using codes that distinguish facial expression, the gaze, physical contact, and all kinds of other interactions that a leader performs. Since they are all interrelated, I chose to connect them by analyzing how interaction is performed and presented in the Instagram photographs of the leaders. In the following sections, I focus on the interaction with “important” people, such as media personalities, celebrities, and politicians, with crowds, with old and needy people, with family members, and finally, the interaction with God and/or the transcendence.

The association with celebrities, media personalities, and political leaders enhances the celebrification of religious leaders. This is most frequently observed in the posts of the Dalai Lama and Deepak Chopra, and to a lesser extent in those of Brian Houston and Pope Francis. Legitimization through symbolic construction is possible through exclusive association with powerful objects and people, such as politicians and celebrities (Horsfield, 2016, p. 51). Photographs in which they take selfies together, for example taken during a ceremony or television recordings, or by embracing each other, show how well-connected the religious leaders are. On the Instagram account of Deepak Chopra, the interaction with other people is often related to interaction with “media people”, such as presenters and talk show hosts, like Dr. Phil. The Instagram account of Dalai Lama shows him posing with governmental officials, media celebrities, a sports team, and Nobel prize laureates. Brian Houston is presented with other media pastors, such as John Gray, and with the prime minister of New South Wales and his wife. Pope Francis is visible on photographs with other religious leaders, such as the leader of the Coptic Church in Egypt, and in one

photograph with the president of Italy. The association with these people underlines the importance of the religious leaders, which supports their significance, recognition and therefore their authority within the media sphere; it shows that they have access to the famous and the powerful. The signifiers, in this case, point to the visual presence of significant others: a performed familiarity between the leader and an important person. Also, the context is part of the implicit message of being important, as in the setting of a television studio, or in the case of the Dalai Lama, a celebrity visiting the leader in his hometown. In terms of Bourdieu, this symbolic association contributes to the symbolic capital of the religious leader, which serves to legitimate his authority (Bourdieu, 1986; Horsfield, 2016; Verter, 2003).

Other People Visible

In the Instagram posts of the leader, other people visible in the posts contextualize the interactions between them and the religious leader. Even when the religious leader is not always visible, this context reinforces the brand of the religious leader. In the Instagram posts of Pope Francis, and to a lesser extent in the posts of the Dalai Lama, vulnerable, old, and sick people are visible. Pope Francis blesses old and infirm people, washes the feet of prisoners, visits refugees, and smiles at a little baby. These photographs are clear references to the agenda of Pope Francis, who acts as an advocate for compassion, especially for the vulnerable and the poor. It further aligns with his emphasis to return to the “pure” tradition of the church and Christianity, by referring to the deeds of St. Francis of Assisi. With these performances, Pope Francis certainly renders a positive image of the church and therefore of his position. This is an indispensable way of legitimizing his authority, especially against the background of the scandals of the Roman Catholic Church. One might expect that as a Christian leader, Brian Houston would incorporate visual references to vulnerable people as well, but this is not the case. This can be explained by the dominant Hillsong theology of vitality, success, and wellbeing. The visible rhetoric of Houston represents a world of pleasure, consumption, and the good life embodied by Houston himself (Klaver, 2021). When the Dalai Lama interacts with older people, it is often Tibetans in exile, for whom he is the supreme leader of a country that they have fled. These



photographs implicitly support the claims of the Dalai Lama and his government in exile that they do still possess legitimate authority over Tibet. Moreover, just like Pope Francis, these images reinforce the image of the Dalai Lama as a humble and compassionate leader. Overall, the other people visible in the posts contribute to the process of positioning and branding of the religious leaders within the marketplace of Instagram.

One of the most obvious signifiers of authority is the presence of (smaller or larger) crowds of followers and/or fans in the Instagram photographs. For religious leaders, crowds signify their ability to attract audiences, which relates to their ascribed charisma (Hoover, 2016, p. 29). Photographs of crowds serve to construct the celebrification of religious leaders (Hope Cheong, 2016). These audiences visible on the photographs have direct, unmediated contact with the religious leader. The representation of the crowds, and the (suggested) interaction between the leader and the crowd comes closest to the idea of “traditional” charisma in which a leader attracts audiences without the mediation of technological devices. This suggests real presence, the possibility of having a personal encounter with the leader, and to be “in touch” with him. The visualization of a crowd of people shows that the leader communicates directly with his followers, who may consist of religious followers of the same tradition, fans, or people who are somehow attracted by the leader. The visualization of crowds is a regular occurrence for all the religious leaders.¹⁷⁴

On Instagram, there are different kinds of visualizations of crowds: large groups of people in which individual persons and/or facial expressions are hardly visible, and photographs that show part of the crowd in which the facial expressions, cameras, and gestures are clearly visible (*see figures D2-D5*). In the case of the Dalai Lama and Pope Francis, the expression of joy and excitement is often very visible on the faces of

174 In the coding, I distinguished between 11–50 people and larger crowds consisting of more than 50 people. The number of people that are visible in the frame of the photograph often depends on the short distance. Long shots can show larger numbers of people while medium shots can show less people but more details.

their audiences. Moreover, in photographs of the Pope during his general audience, countless people use their smartphone to take a photograph of the Pope. The crowds are mostly visible around staged events, such as official visits and audiences in which the religious leader is the main guest or the keynote speaker. In the case of Deepak Chopra, the crowds mainly consist of people who visit his conferences and retreats. The photographs of crowds in Rome communicate that the church is still able to gather followers and believers from all ages, despite signals of people leaving the church. The crowds around the Dalai Lama show his importance as one of the most popular spiritual leaders in the world, as well as the implicit support for the case of the Tibetan population in exile. Photographs of crowds in Dharamsala, showing this population, also show the vitality of this community in exile and their emotional attachment to the Dalai Lama. The case of Brian Houston is slightly different because his Instagram account does often not portray himself but worshipping crowds in the context of Hillsong events. In this case, they represent the success and the emotional connection the audiences feel with Hillsong Church. Overall, the fact that each account shows several photographs in which large crowds have come to meet the religious leader, or, in Brian Houston's case to worship in the church that he has established, signifies how important it is to represent and visualize popular support on Instagram.

Thus, the visual presence of crowds signifies the ascribed charisma of a religious leader because it can be implied that these people are attracted by his personality. Further, it connotes their celebrity status. Finally, it refers the vitality of the religious institution or the spiritual or religious community because the visual presence of these crowds implies that they are connected to the institution or community of the religious leader.

Family members are only visible in the photographs of Brian Houston and Deepak Chopra (*see figures D6-D9*). In the sample of Deepak Chopra, there are several photographs of family members, including photographs from the past. In the posts of Brian Houston where he is visible himself, he interacts mainly with family members, especially his wife and grandchildren. For example, he can be seen with his wife or walking with his son in law, carrying his granddaughter on his shoulders. The



importance of family is closely related to the support for conservative family values that are important identity markers within the evangelical and Pentecostal world. Further, the interaction with family and the presentation of happiness, wellbeing, and harmonious relations helps to legitimize the leadership positions of his wife and children in Hillsong Church. The portrayal of these family members is one of the ways in which the presentation of their leadership is personalized. Family members of the Dalai Lama and Pope Francis do not figure at all in the photographs on their accounts. Because of their celibatary life, they do not have children or grandchildren. However, the offices they represent can be seen as patriarchal offices in which they figure as patriarchal figures for the communities that they represent.

Clothes

As I argued before, clothes are relevant signifiers for the construction and mediation of authority (*see figures D10-D13*). They contribute to the stylization of religious leadership and are related to the promotion of a specific lifestyle and identity. Clothes are associated with style and fashion. Fashion is a signification system in which clothes display social, cultural, and political values which has is an important aspect in the construction of personal style and personal identity. Therefore, clothes are more than commodities; just like brands, they open a symbolic realm of stories, associations, and cultural values.

In the analysis of the leaders, there is a clear distinction between the “traditional” clothes of the Dalai Lama and Pope Francis and the “modern” or “contemporary” clothes of Brian Houston and Deepak Chopra. The clothes of the Dalai Lama and Pope Francis contrast strongly with the clothes of their audiences and other people visible in the Instagram posts. The way they dress is firmly rooted in their distinct religious traditions and the ordering of religious authority expressed in a religious office. Moreover, because of their consistent way of dressing, and the visual representations that circulate in the media, their clothes have become an iconic part of their identity (Rieser, 2013). Because of their clothes, they are immediately recognizable, as the clothes invoke larger patterns of signification that is connected to their brands. But their clothes do not just refer to tradition: they invoke a kind of (staged) authenticity

as well. Both Pope Francis and the Dalai Lama symbolize with their attire a simple, humble, and other-worldly and celibate lifestyle. The Dalai Lama is dressed in an orange garment as a simple monk, and Pope Francis wears white clothes as is common for the position of a pope, but he refrains from rich and luxury items that his predecessors have worn. Moreover, because they are (almost) always dressed in their recognizable color and clothes, they clearly represent their office. The “otherworldly” clothes of the Dalai Lama and Pope Francis render a critique of consumer culture, materialism, and a luxurious lifestyle, which strengthens their message on a simple and humble way of life. In the case of Pope Francis, while he does dress traditionally, the details, such as relatively simple clothes, simple shoes, and a cheap watch are symbolic acts by which he distinguishes himself from his predecessors and poses a critique on the decadence of parts of the Roman Catholic clergy.

This contrasts greatly with the contemporary clothes of Brian Houston and Deepak Chopra. They seem to dress for the occasion, meaning that they wear modern formal or informal clothes depending on the occasion. The clothes of Brian Houston and the absence of any “liturgical” clothes fit into the larger culture of evangelical and Pentecostal churches. Moreover, Hillsong Church is very much embedded in the cosmopolitan culture, and the clothes people wear, especially on stage, are part of the current fashion. In the case of Deepak Chopra, his clothes vary from a t-shirt that shows “spiritual gangster” to a suit. His recognizable items are red sneakers, very luxuriously looking glasses, which, in combination with a suit, present him as a (post-)modern intellectual. In the case of Deepak Chopra, he seems to connect both to popular culture and a certain kind of informality that is common in holistic spirituality, while his more formal clothes signal his aspirations to connect spirituality with modern science. Both leaders clearly use clothes to express their own individual style, using the inventories of modern fashion brands and commodities. Their choices of clothes reflect the alignment with today’s consumer culture and the use of commodities for individual expression. It shows the apparent unproblematic connection between religion, spirituality, and consumer capitalism (Banet-Weiser, 2012). The clothes of Brian Houston and Deepak Chopra contribute to the connection between the subculture of their audiences and their individuality



and personal style as fashionable, contemporary, and authentic religious and spiritual leaders.

Spaces, places, and objects

In the following sections, I pay attention to the setting of the Instagram posts. This includes the spaces and places and the objects that are visible in the Instagram posts (*see figures D14-D17*). The setting of the Instagram posts enhances the aesthetic quality of the images of the four leaders, and thus to the stylization of their religious authority. In the descriptions below, I do not try to be complete, but I sketch some of the frequently occurring patterns in the Instagram posts, which I also addressed in the empirical chapters devoted to each of the four leaders in my analysis. Religious leaders on Instagram often appear in visibly recognizable locations and places. The visible spaces and places in the Instagram posts shape the setting in which they perform. The spaces and places visible are by no means neutral (Knott, 2013). Though all leaders operate globally, some places are more important than others, due to the historical, religious, and/or symbolic dimension of those places. The objects that are visible in the Instagram posts are closely related to the spaces and places.¹⁷⁵ Photographs on Instagram portray many objects, but I limited myself to buildings, interiors and exteriors, “religious” objects such as religious books, paintings and statues, and objects relating to media production, such as microphones.¹⁷⁶

The places in the Instagram posts of Deepak Chopra reflect his travels and speaking events. Most of the photographs are taken in the United States, where he lives, particularly in California and New York. Other photographs are taken in Israel, Saudi Arabia, Mexico, and India. Most of the photographs (36 out of 100) have been taken inside, 23 have been taken outside. The inside photographs include many pictures in or around television studios (nine photographs), as well as large speaking

175 The clothes of the religious leader are also objects. However, in this category, I focus on objects excluding clothes, because I discussed them in the previous paragraphs.

176 See the methodology chapter for the justification of the choices.

halls, conference rooms, restaurants, and a yoga studio. Photographs taken outside include parks and gardens. Besides, the inspirational quotations are mostly illustrated by natural scenery. The posts hardly contain any objects that can refer to religious symbols.¹⁷⁷ The media objects that are visible are microphones, the book *You are the Universe* (often in “posing” photographs with media celebrities) and the tables and chairs of television studios. The spaces, places, and objects reflect the cosmopolitan lifestyle of Deepak Chopra and his engagements and speaking events around the globe. Contrary to what one might expect, there are hardly any references to Eastern religion and/or spirituality. The “spiritual” spaces of the inspirational quotations portray natural scenery, which reflects a holistic perspective on spirituality inspired by Romanticism. In general, the Instagram posts portray the ability of Deepak Chopra to perform in public venues and media outlets to reach audiences for his speeches, workshops, and books.

The Instagram account of Brian Houston portrays him in, and his family members at, various locations around the globe. It is not always clear where the photographs are being taken, but he is constantly on the move: photographs include locations like Sydney, Rome, some location in Italy where he spends his vacation, London, Paris, California, and various locations in Israel. The spaces and places on Brian Houston’s account include inside (47) and outside (37) locations. Many of the inside locations include large halls in which Hillsong worship takes place. These halls are modern buildings that do not portray special characteristics: these are functional buildings in which the focus is on the stage and the crowds of people in these halls. Other inside photographs portray his children and/or grandchildren in a “private” setting. Outside locations include photographs of leisure time in the streets or the park. The inspirational quotations contain many photographs that portray natural scenery.

The inside locations on Brian Houston’s Instagram account include modern

177 Except for a photograph in a garden in which a painting of a Hindu goddess is visible, and one with a little Hindu statue in a yoga studio, and one photograph in Riverside Church New York, where he launched his *You are the Universe event*.



lighting and band equipment, microphones, and so forth. Interestingly, most of these images do not show religious symbols, such as the cross. The cross is not absent on the Instagram account, but it is hard to find traditional Christian symbols or imagery. What is visible, especially in announcements, is the logo of Hillsong. The spaces and places emphasize the global character of Hillsong and the contemporary style of the church and the worship services. The photographs of the Hillsong tour through Israel, expressed in terms of the “holy land” evoke the strong interest of Evangelical and Pentecostal believers, who connect the Jewish people and the state of Israel with the End Times and God’s presence in history. Images of old buildings, the skyline of Jerusalem together with that of Hillsong Church results in a powerful imaginary that is connected to their position within the evangelical world. As Hillsong contrasts greatly with more “traditional” churches, the brand of Hillsong and its logo are more prominent than religious symbols. The portrayal of Brian Houston in these settings reflects his ability to perform in cosmopolitan cities around the globe. The “private” spaces contribute to the construction of staged authenticity of his personal life and his relationship with his family. The natural scenery of inspirational quotations reinforces the “sacred” wisdom of Brian Houston and the connection with the transcendent, visualized through nature. Overall, the many photographs of the spaces in which worship takes places underlines the ability of Brian Houston and Hillsong Church to draw large crowds of young people.

Most of the photographs of the Dalai Lama are taken in Dharamsala. Other photographs portray his travels in India, as well as his international journeys. These places include Japan, the United States, and several countries in Europe. The outside photographs of the Dalai Lama (half of the photographs) portray him on the streets and in public squares, where he is frequently surrounded by crowds of people. Photographs that have been taken inside portray him in conference rooms or hotel lobbies, but most often in his offices and the main Tibetan Temple in Dharamsala. Especially the photographs inside the main Tibetan Temple in Dharamsala depict richly decorated rooms full of Buddhist statues and paintings. The places, spaces, and objects portray the Dalai Lama as the official political and religious leader (even although he is retired) of the Tibetan people, as well as a globally recognized celebrity

figure. Especially the objects in the Temple in Dharamsala visualize the context of Tibetan Buddhism. In a different way, the absence of images of Tibet and the global visits of the Dalai Lama indirectly invoke the exile and the inaccessibility of the holy places of Tibetan Buddhism (Hartnett, 2013). The temples and buildings of Dharamsala are clearly not the capital of what was once the Tibetan Empire in which religion and governance were intertwined.

Most of the Instagram posts of Pope Francis are situated in and around the Vatican. Further, his Instagram account contains photographs of his travels to countries like Poland, Egypt, and Colombia. In his account, half of the photographs are taken inside buildings, the other half are photographs in the open air. Many of the photographs outside are of St. Peter's Square during the general audience, and many of the inside photographs are in the Aula Paulo VI where he also meets with audiences. Other photographs are taken in churches, most notably St. Peter's Cathedral, and rooms in the Vatican where he meets with people. The exteriors and interiors of the Vatican and other places, such as churches, do unsurprisingly show many religious objects, such as crucifixes, icons, paintings of the saints and/or biblical figures, as well as Bibles and other religious scriptures that are being used during religious services. For example, the photographs in and around the Vatican, which include the majestic buildings of St. Peter's Cathedral and the squares, not to mention the thousands of visitors, evoke the rich history and the relation between the Vatican and the city of Rome as the geographic center for the tradition of the Roman Catholic Church. Rome symbolizes the power because it is the seat of the supreme bishop of Rome. Moreover, the Vatican, though it is very small, is a country as well. As humble and different as Pope Francis might be compared to his predecessors, the location of the Vatican refers to a powerful religious institution. Thus, the spaces, places, and religious objects underline his official authority and the tradition in which he is embedded. His international travels emphasize that he presides over a global religious community.

Summarizing, the spaces, places, and objects inform the setting and the visual style of the religious leaders. Places that are considered sacred, such as Rome and Jerusalem, evoke the connection between the religious leader and his connection with the religious tradition. The spaces, places, and objects of the Dalai Lama and



Pope Francis contribute to the construction of their official authority, especially the ones that portray cathedrals, temples, and religious statues and symbols. The media settings of Deepak Chopra emphasize his access to the media sphere, while the places of his travel emphasize his cosmopolitan lifestyle. The portrayal of the private spaces of Deepak Chopra and Brian Houston promote the performance of authenticity, however staged those Instagram posts might be. The spaces and places on Brian Houston's account emphasize the global dimension of Hillsong Church and his position as a globally operating pastor. The use of the audiovisual equipment, the frequent use of the Hillsong logo and the absence of traditional religious symbols emphasize the compatibility of Hillsong and its leadership with contemporary consumer culture. The setting of the inspirational quotations is also relevant to the style of religious leaders. I discuss this in the subsequent paragraphs.

Quotations and Announcements

Instagram can be used for inspirational quotations, announcements, and the addition of text to images as well. Deepak Chopra and Brian Houston do frequently use inspirational quotations and announcements on their Instagram accounts (*see figures D18-D23*). As the statistics show, this is a practice that is absent on the accounts of the Dalai Lama and Pope Francis. Inspirational quotations can certainly be found at Pope Francis as well, but on his account, the caption that accompanies the photograph is being used for that purpose. Moreover, as I mentioned in the previous chapters, both Pope Francis and the Dalai Lama have used Twitter almost exclusively for inspirational quotations. On Instagram, the quotations of Brian Houston and Deepak Chopra are used against the background of photographs, or with the use of different kinds of fonts and colors. These images, fonts, and colors enhances the “aesthetics of persuasion” (Meyer, 2010). It is striking that Deepak Chopra and Brian Houston often use images that represent nature, such as mountains, sunrises, starry nights, to illustrate their quotations, invoking the “naturalness” of the Instagram quotations. They can imply that leaders have a connection with the authentic and/or divine powers that manifest themselves in nature. The emphasis on nature is very prevalent in alternative spirituality as an

antidote to the evils of modernity and has become part of modern contemporary imaginaries as well (Campbell, 2007; Heelas, 1996). Moreover, as I discussed in the chapter on Brian Houston, in the Bible, many Psalms state that nature reveals the power of God. God can reveal himself through scripture, but also through “the book of nature”. Images of nature on Instagram can relate to biblical notions of the glory of nature combined with imaginaries originating in Romanticism, especially the ones in which nature refers to pureness, goodness, and beauty (Taylor, 1989). The combination of text and the aesthetic power of the images naturalizes, and thus mythologizes, the wisdom of the leaders as exceptional and wise human beings. The stylized inspirational quotations further contribute to presentation of Deepak Chopra and Brian Houston as inspirational leaders.

In the sample, Brian Houston and Deepak Chopra have posted several images containing promotional announcements of products and services. Though these numbers are relatively small in comparison to other categories, the mere existence of these kinds of posts are significant compared to the absence of these posts on the accounts of the Dalai Lama and Pope Francis. The announcements and promotional posts on Instagram can be seen as an expression of direct forms of marketing and branding. They are targeted towards creating awareness of audiences, and leading them towards websites where they can register, listen, or buy certain religious and/or spiritual commodities or services. The use of marketing and branding for the commodification of religion, however, shows how a neoliberal spirit of entrepreneurship is visible both in alternative spirituality as well as in evangelical and Pentecostal churches (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Gauthier, 2021). If the marketing is successful, which is both the case for Hillsong Church and for Deepak Chopra, the success of it means that they have reached a large audience, which can be seen as successful performance. Successful performances in terms of attracting audiences can further legitimize the authority of religious leaders (Hoover, 2016; Horsfield, 2016).



Figure D.2

Brian Houston August 3, 2017



Figure D.3

Deepak Chopra February 17, 2017



Figure D.4

The Dalai Lama September 21, 2017



Figure D.5

Pope Francis June 21, 2017



Figure D.6

Brian Houston July 7, 2017



Figure D.7

Brian Houston August 19, 2017



Figure D.8

Deepak Chopra December 8, 2016



Figure D.9

Deepak Chopra May 14, 2017

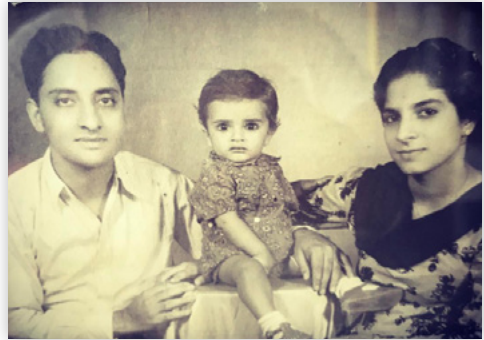


Figure D.10

Brian Houston August 10, 2017



Figure D.11

Deepak Chopra April 24, 2017



Figure D.12

Dalai Lama September 14, 2017



Figure D.13

Pope Francis March 17, 2017



Figure D.14

Brian Houston April 25, 2016



Figure D.15

Deepak Chopra November 24, 2016



Figure D.16

The Dalai Lama June 6, 2017



Figure D.17

Pope Francis April 6, 2017



Figure D.18

Brian Houston March 17, 2017



Figure D.19

Brian Houston February 22, 2017



Figure D.20

Deepak Chopra December 20, 2016

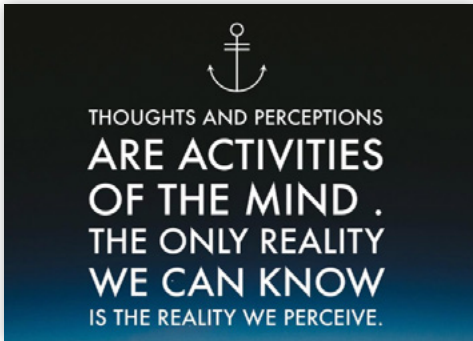


Figure D.21

Deepak Chopra November 28, 2016



Figure D.22

Brian Houston June 9, 2017



Figure D.23

Deepak Chopra March 21, 2017



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Summary

The Instagrammable Authority of Religious Leaders

Can religious authority become instagrammable? Social media platforms, such as Instagram, on which users can share images and short videos, and communicate with their followers, have become part of our daily lives. Is it possible for religious leaders to use Instagram in such a way that it contributes to the legitimization of their authority? This is the question that is the foundation for this thesis. Four globally operating religious leaders that appear regularly in the media sphere were analyzed: Deepak Chopra, who is a writer of spiritual books, the evangelical pastor Brian Houston, the 14th Dalai Lama, and Pope Francis. Based on the analyses, it becomes clear that the Instagram posts they share contribute to the representation of authentic and charismatic authority, which is part of their *personal brand*. Below, the most important insights of each chapter are summarized.

The **introduction**, discusses the motivation for this research, positions this thesis within relevant academic debates, and defines the main research question and the key sub questions. Authority in general, and religious authority in particular, is no longer self-evident. The rise of the Internet has caused many religious leaders to work on the construction of their personal brand. When this research started in 2015, there was almost no empirical research on the visual dimension, such as Instagram for the positioning of religious leaders. This led to a focus on the visual and aesthetic dimension of the construction of authority in the media sphere. Therefore, the way in which the persuasive power of Instagram posts can mediate the authority of religious leaders was analyzed. This research contributes to academic debates about the construction of religious authority and its relationship with authenticity, branding, celebrity culture, and the transformation of religion in a (digital) media age. The main research question is:



How do globally operating religious leaders use Instagram to mediate their authority?

1. What are the characteristics of the authority of religious leaders?
2. How has the authority of religious leaders been transformed within the context of a changing religious landscape and the digitalization of communication?
3. What are the most important affordances of Instagram?
4. How can we analyze the Instagram posts of religious leaders?
5. What are the most important similarities and differences between the ways the four leaders mediate their authority through Instagram?
6. How do four distinct religious leaders use Instagram to mediate their authority?

Chapter 1 is part of the religious framework and covers the dimensions of authority of religious leaders. Authority is closely related to the legitimization of power. Religious leaders can only exercise their authority if it is legitimized and acknowledged by people they aim to lead. An important point of departure is the typology of the German sociologist Max Weber, who distinguishes traditional, charismatic, and bureaucratic-legal authority. A refinement of this theory is a distinction between official and personal authority. The typology is so dominant that it continues to recur in contemporary debates about authority. This typology is applied to religious leaders that were analyzed to explore to what extent they relate to authority on Instagram. Religious leaders cannot base their authority solely on the basis of their office or institution. They do also need to base it on their personal relationship with the sacred, on authenticity, and their personal competences. Moreover, authority is based on their performances, the media they use, their personal style, and their embodiment of authority as people of flesh and blood. Further, the esthetic and stylistic dimension of their authority are partly rooted in religious traditions and cultures they represent. For example, this is visible on the Instagram account of Pope Francis. In his posts, Roman Catholic rituals, garments, icons, paintings, and statues are frequently visible.

Chapter 2 delves into the transformation of the authority of religious leaders. How has this authority been changed in the last centuries? This question is answered from the perspectives of secularization and mediatization. The approach of the Canadian

philosopher Charles Taylor is relevant. He argues that the role of religion and religious faith has diminished significantly in the last five hundred years. Authority is increasingly less based on religious grounds. In what Charles Taylor conceptualizes as the “Age of Authenticity”, personalized, authentic, and charismatic authority have become key dimensions for legitimization. This is visible for Deepak Chopra, who has developed a very personalized leadership style, and who presents himself as an independent and charismatic spiritual leader. Leaders need to construct their authority within a spiritual marketplace that is dependent on supply and demand. Mediatization is concerned with the exchange between new forms of communication technology and the development of society. For this study, the wave of digitalization is especially relevant. Without digitalization, there is no internet, smartphone, or Instagram. The context of mediatization culture translates into personalization, branding, and celebrity culture. Successful religious leaders have become celebrities and personal brands. Brian Houston, for example, presented himself as a personal brand, which included a personal website, social media channels, and products like books and podcasts. For individuals, brands and celebrities are a source of inspiration for their personal spiritual quest. Aesthetics are a key dimension for this quest. These need to align by a culture of personal expression and the context of the current media sphere. Platforms like X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, TikTok and countless other offer opportunities to use text, images, and sound for the branding of religious leaders and for interacting with their followers. If these leaders know how to position themselves on these platforms as charismatic, authentic, and inspiring media personalities, it can contribute to the legitimization of their authority with their followers. The Dalai Lama, for example, is able connect to millions of people through his Instagram account.

Chapter 3 discusses the relevance of Instagram for religious leaders. It has become one of the most popular and most used social media platforms. Instagram and the visual culture that has emerged around the platform favors beautiful, personal, and apparently authentic content. The rise of Instagram can be explained from the perspective of the popularization and digitalization of photography. The rise of smartphones, increasingly better performing cameras and fast mobile internet



have contributed to this development. Instagram is not just being used by the general public, but also by celebrities, influencers, people from the media and entertainment industry, commercial brand, companies, governmental organizations, and politicians. They use Instagram for branding, reputation management and the marketing of goods and services. Additionally, it is important to note that Instagram is not a neutral platform. Invisible for the user, algorithms monitor users constantly. The behavior of users is being translated in a profit model. This does not discourage religious leaders from employing this platform.

Chapter 4 and **5** describe the methodology that was applied. The combination of content analysis and semiotic analysis appeared to be the most useful approach to analyzing the Instagram posts of the four religious leaders. For the period between November 1, 2016, and October 31, 2017, a selection of Instagram posts was coded as part of the content analysis. Images were categorized on the basis of, for example, the visual presence of the leader, the number of people that were visible, or on the basis of the type of objects that were portrayed. The focus of the semiotic analysis lies on the representation of religious authority by using persuasive visual aesthetics, as well as by the presence, the performances, and interactions of the leaders in the messages they share. Inspired by the model of the French philosopher Roland Barthes, among others, the “myth” underlying the images was deconstructed. For Barthes, myth points to a form of communication that replaces reality by imposing an ideological construct. He distinguishes first- and second order signification. First-order signification describes what is visible on an Instagram post. One of the Instagram posts of Pope Francis portrays him with a father and his baby son. The description of the visible elements is part of the first-order signification. On the level of second-order signification, the ideological constructs are explored, and the way in which possible conflicts, scandals, or power structures are rendered invisible. The image of Pope Francis can contribute to an image of the pope as the “father of the church”, and it can reduce the negative reputation of the church based on reports about the abuse of children by clergy members. This model of Barthes is applied to analyze the way religious leaders apply Instagram to mediate their authority.

Chapters 6, 7, 8, and 9 contain analyses of the four religious leaders’ Instagram



use and how they construct their authority on Instagram. For each of the leaders, the biographical, social, cultural, and religious context in which they operate are discussed.

Chapter 6 analyzes the Instagram use of Deepak Chopra, a well-known spiritual entrepreneur and celebrity, who has been famous for decades, partly because of his association with tv-stars like Oprah Winfrey. Chopra combines insights from “Eastern” spirituality with the New Age Movement, which is today mostly referred to as alternative or holistic spirituality. This form of spirituality aligns with what Taylor conceptualizes as the age of authenticity, and which centers around a personal spiritual quest. The paradox of this form of spirituality lies in the fact that while Western capitalism is being considered as something harmful, contemporary forms of spirituality have been completely commodified. On Instagram, he is portrayed as the personification of prosperity, wellbeing, and success. He is visible during his media performances, in luxury hotels, and in the presence of other celebrities. Further, he promotes his insights by using inspirational quotes and by selling spiritual goods and services online. The combination of glamor and spirituality he presents aligns seamlessly with the visual culture of Instagram. However, it leaves little room for societal critique. For example, Chopra gave a series of lectures in Saudi Arabia about leadership. In Saudi Arabia, openly professing expressions of holistic spirituality would be unthinkable because of the strict Islamic regime that is in place. But Chopra manages to package his message in such a way that his hosts take no offense to his performance. The idea that spirituality and business are applicable everywhere, even in a country like Saudi Arabia, shows how possible conflicts between spiritual values and suppressing power structures are being smoothed out.

Chapter 7 discusses how Brian Houston, the (former) leader of Hillsong Church, and how he uses Instagram to establish and maintain his authority. In 2022, he resigned after allegations of inappropriate behavior towards several women. However, in 2016 and 2017, the period of the empirical research, he was still the undisputed leader of the church. Houston presents himself as the informal and inspiring “father” of Hillsong Church, an institution that has appealed to young adults in cities worldwide. Behind this façade, there are questions about the abuse of power and money, and, most notably, a sexual abuse case perpetrated by the father



of Brian Houston. Because Brian Houston had a leadership role during the time that this scandal came out, it also has affected his own position. On Instagram, Houston uses the visual style of Hillsong Church. His account contains photos of Hillsong worship, his own performances, and, not coincidentally, photos of his children and grandchildren. His children had, until recently, leading positions within the church. The leadership of Brian Houston is based on charismatic and personalized authority that needs continuous authentication. Houston does this by presenting the success of his church, his family, and by positioning himself as a transparent, charismatic, and authentic leader. In his Instagram posts, nothing is visible that could refer to conflicts, scandals, and the lack of transparency about money and power. Thus, Instagram is being used to create a myth of the unquestionable leadership of Brian Houston by emphasizing positive elements and by rendering shadows invisible.

Chapter 8 discusses the 14th Dalai Lama. Until 1959, he was the spiritual as well as the worldly leader of Tibet. Due to the annexation by China, he fled Tibet and found refuge in India. Ever since, he has become a global spiritual leader who interacts with governmental leaders and celebrities. On Instagram, he is portrayed as the friendly and authentic face of Tibetan Buddhism and the Tibetan community in exile. His Instagram account contains countless meetings with his followers and fans across the globe. In the background, however, there are complex political issues around the position of Tibet and the position of the Dalai Lama. This is related to conflicts about the perspective on the history, the present, and the future of Tibet and its relationship with China. These elements are not mentioned on Instagram. At the same time, however, the presence of the Dalai Lama in the media, including Instagram, causes unceasing attention for Tibet. The personification of the leadership of the Dalai Lama and the emphasis on his spiritual leadership enable him to influence public opinion and to promote a representation of Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism that appeals to a global audience.

Chapter 9 analyzes the use of Instagram by Pope Francis. Pope Francis is being portrayed as the popular, charismatic, and humble leader who has brought positive changes in a church burdened with conflicts and scandals. His Instagram account is part of the strategy to position him as the personalization of the Roman Catholic

Church. Pope Francis is visible on every photo, often in personal encounters with his followers and fans, but also during prayer or when visiting poor and vulnerable people like the sick and the refugees. The meticulous selection of photos and captions on Instagram contributes to foster the agenda of Pope Francis and it contributes to a more positive reputation of the Church. Thus, it can also be seen as part of a counter narrative against negative images and messages that dominated the news, especially before his election as pope. The construction of the brand of Pope Francis adds to the naturalization of a very particular images of the church and its supreme leader. The Roman Catholic church is presented as a warm and inclusive church for all believers. It leaves dimensions that do not align with this carefully constructed myth invisible. The absence of references to internal organizational conflicts within the Vatican and hot issues such as sexual abuse, abortion or contraception means that this Instagram-account is mostly being used to promote a very specific and positive image of the Roman Catholic Church and its supreme leader.

Chapter 10 contains the comparison between the four leaders. The analyses show that all leaders are being presented as charismatic and authentic, although they use different styles and aesthetics to visualize their authority. They all position themselves as celebrities, which is being visualized by large crowds of people, public performances, media performances and international journeys. Their self-presentation is visualized by their garments and by interactions with others. Pope Francis and the Dalai Lama, for example, are dressed in official garments and are frequently seen with large enthusiastic crowds in the background. Those elements both contribute to a distinct and personal style. Additionally, the aesthetic persuasion of the photos on Instagram contributes to a performance of transparency and the emphasis on the positive characteristics of the religious leaders. A photo of Brian Houston in his swim trunks with his granddaughter on his neck shows how physically fit he is, that he is not afraid to show things from his personal life, and that he has a good relationship with his grandchildren. This reinforces to his image as a warm, authentic, and approachable father of Hillsong Church.

Further, the leaders represent themselves as the personalization of the movement, institute, or tradition that they represent. Thus, their performances on Instagram



contribute both to their personal authority as well as to their official authority. The latter is visualized through traditional rituals or by the association with academics, politicians, or other celebrities that represent the media sphere.

The comparison shows that, on the one hand, the Instagram approach of the Dalai Lama is most similar to the one of Pope Francis, and, on the other hand, that the approach of Brian Houston is most similar to the one of Deepak Chopra. Pope Francis and the Dalai Lama are both representatives of century-old religious traditions and have to navigate between the values and imaginaries of their tradition and the values of visual culture on Instagram. This is translated into images of these leaders in which traditional garments, buildings and rituals are visible, as well as large crowds and intimate encounters with their followers. Deepak Chopra and Brian Houston represent success, prosperity, and wellbeing on their Instagram accounts. These are values that align perfectly with contemporary consumer culture. Both share photos from their private lives, such as their partner and children, grandchildren, as well as photos from their holidays. Further, they share inspirational quotes and promotional announcements. It is striking that similarities in religious backgrounds, for example, between Brian Houston and Pope Francis, do not necessarily translate into a similar visualization of authority. At stake here is a struggle of leaders of religious traditions, such as the Dalai Lama and Pope Francis, to connect their religious traditions and authority with contemporary audiences. Religious and spiritual entrepreneurs like Deepak Chopra and Brian Houston aim to expand their spiritual and religious businesses, for which they employ their personal authority as well.

In the **conclusion** the main question is answered: how do globally operating religious leaders use Instagram to mediate their authority? Following academic debates on this topic, the findings also offer new light on the future of religious leadership from the perspective of the increasing influence of social platforms.

On Instagram, the four leaders carefully construct a positive and coherent image to legitimize their authority. Their approach is very personalized, and they present themselves as charismatic celebrities. At face value, they do not position themselves as persons of authority, but rather as authentic, inspiring individuals. Religious authority seems no longer connected to institutions and traditions, since these leaders present

themselves primarily as religious lifestyle coaches. Thus, they align with cultural values such as choice, freedom, and independence. Just like brands, they try to engage people by enabling people to identify with that they present. The institutional dimensions relating to power structures, possible conflicts, and scandals, remain invisible.

The typology of Weber; traditional, bureaucratic-legal, and charismatic authority travels ell into the context of consumer culture. Especially Weber's notion of charisma fits well with the personalized authority of Instagram and the ideal type of the independent and unconventional entrepreneur. Since Weber could not envision the mediatization and digitization (he lived in the second part of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century) that characterizes the contemporary media landscape, it is important to consider notions of branding and celebrity culture as well.

The context of Instagram means that digital platforms hold significant power over users and employ algorithms for surveillance and monetization. These findings are in line with what media scholar Pauline Hope Cheong conceptualizes as the paradoxes and dialectics of religious authority within the context of digital religion. She argues that digitalization can both strengthen and weaken religious authority. The use of Instagram can be very successful for the positioning of religious leaders. However, at the same time, the connection with consumer culture and the dark sides of platforms such as Instagram is problematic. The negotiation between religious values and traditional structures on the one hand, and the culture of (constructed) authenticity and an attractive lifestyle on the other hand causes tensions that cannot be easily resolved.

Thus, for the ethical questions, it is important to pay more attention to the datafication of social media platforms. Religious traditions often contain a prophetic voice against the abuse of money and power and turn against unhealthy relations between religion and the interests of the powerful. However, the religious leaders in this study seem to care little that platforms like Instagram are rooted in unhealthy configurations of power and money. This means that religious values such as compassion, humility, justice, and concern for others are overshadowed by the values of marketing and branding. Without critical reflection on religious leaders' use of social media, religious traditions become part of today's consumer culture.



Samenvatting

De “instagrammable” autoriteit van religieuze leiders

Kan religieuze autoriteit “Instagrammable” zijn? Sociale media zoals Instagram, waarop gebruikers afbeeldingen, filmpjes en teksten plaatsen en direct contact hebben met hun volgers, zijn onderdeel geworden van ons dagelijkse leven. Kunnen religieuze leiders Instagram zo gebruiken dat het bijdraagt aan de constructie van hun autoriteit? Dat is de vraag die aan dit proefschrift ten grondslag ligt. Daarvoor zijn vier religieuze leiders geanalyseerd die wereldwijd bekend zijn, autoriteit hebben bij hun volgelingen en regelmatig in de media verschijnen: de schrijver van spirituele boeken Deepak Chopra, de evangelische voorganger Brian Houston, de 14^e Dalai Lama en Paus Franciscus. Uit de analyses blijkt dat de Instagramberichten die zij plaatsen bijdragen aan de representatie van hun autoriteit door de nadruk op authenticiteit en charisma. Daarnaast maken deze berichten deel uit van hun *personal brand*. Hieronder wordt per hoofdstuk de belangrijkste inzichten weergegeven.

De **introdunctie** bespreekt de aanleiding van het onderzoek, positioneert het onderzoek in bredere academische debatten, en introduceert de onderzoeksvraag en de belangrijkste deelvragen. Autoriteit in het algemeen en religieuze autoriteit in het bijzonder zijn niet langer vanzelfsprekend. Met de opkomst van het internet wordt het steeds belangrijker voor religieuze leiders om te werken aan personal brand. Tijdens de aanvang van het onderzoek in 2015 was er nog weinig empirisch onderzoek gedaan over de manier religieuze leiders gebruik maken van visuele media zoals Instagram om zichzelf op internet te positioneren. De focus van dit onderzoek richt zich daarom op de visuele dimensies van religieus leiderschap en in bijzonder op de constructie van religieuze autoriteit binnen de context van Instagram. Het gaat in dit onderzoek naar de visuele overtuigingskracht van afbeeldingen op

Instagram en hoe deze kunnen bijdragen aan de constructie van autoriteit van de religieuze leiders. Dit onderzoek draagt bij aan academische debatten over de constructie van religieuze autoriteit en de relatie met authenticiteit, branding, *celebrity culture*, en de transformatie van religie in een (digitaal) mediatijdperk. De centrale vraag is:

How do globally operating religious leaders use Instagram to mediate their authority? (Hoe construeren wereldwijd opererende religieuze leiders hun autoriteit met behulp van Instagram?)

Om deze vraag te beantwoorden zijn zes sub-vragen geformuleerd die worden beantwoord in de hoofdstukken die hierop volgen:

1. Wat zijn de kenmerken van het gezag van religieuze leiders?
2. Hoe is het gezag van religieuze leiders getransformeerd binnen de context van een veranderend religieus landschap en de digitalisering van communicatie?
3. Wat zijn de belangrijkste eigenschappen van Instagram?
4. Hoe kunnen we de Instagram-berichten van religieuze leiders analyseren?
5. Hoe gebruiken vier verschillende religieuze leiders Instagram om hun autoriteit te bemiddelen?
6. Wat zijn de belangrijkste overeenkomsten en verschillen tussen de manieren waarop de vier leiders hun autoriteit bemiddelen via Instagram?

Hoofdstuk 1 is onderdeel van het theoretisch raamwerk en gaat over de verschillende dimensies van de autoriteit van religieuze leiders. Autoriteit heeft te maken met de legitimatie van macht. Dat impliceert dat religieuze leiders hun autoriteit alleen kunnen laten gelden als hun volgelingen die erkennen. Dan pas beschouwen de aanhangers de autoriteit van de religieuze leiders als legitiem en heeft de leider ook daadwerkelijk macht en gezag. Een belangrijk vertrekpunt in de discussie over religieuze autoriteit is de typologie van de Duitse socioloog



Max Weber. Hij onderscheidt de zogeheten traditionele, charismatische, en bureaucratische autoriteit. De typologie is zo dominant dat deze nog altijd terugkomt in hedendaagse debatten over autoriteit. Een verfijning van deze theorie wordt gepresenteerd door het onderscheid tussen officiële en persoonlijke autoriteit. Religieuze leiders kunnen hun autoriteit niet alleen legitimeren op basis van hun ambt of instituut, maar ook op basis van hun persoonlijke band met ‘het heilige’, authenticiteit, en persoonlijke competenties. Bovendien is hun autoriteit gebaseerd op hun optredens, de media die ze gebruiken, de stijl die ze aanwenden, en het feit dat ze hun autoriteit ook belichamen als mensen van vlees en bloed. Hun fysieke verschijning, optreden, stemgebruik, gebaren, kleding, en het gebruik van objecten en rituelen zijn betekenisvol in het construeren van hun autoriteit. Verder is de esthetische en stilistische dimensie van hun autoriteit deels geworteld in religieuze tradities en culturen die ze vertegenwoordigen. Dat zien we bijvoorbeeld terug bij Paus Franciscus, die ook op Instagram veel terug laat komen van de rituelen, gewaden, iconen, schilderijen en beelden van de Rooms-Katholieke Kerk.

Hoofdstuk 2 gaat in op de transformatie van de autoriteit van religieuze leiders. Hoe is hun autoriteit de afgelopen eeuwen veranderd? Deze vraag wordt beantwoord aan de hand van de perspectieven van secularisatie en mediatisering. De benadering van secularisatie door de Canadese filosoof Charles Taylor is in dit onderzoek relevant. Hij stelt dat de rol van religie en geloof de afgelopen vijfhonderd jaar significant is veranderd. Autoriteit is steeds minder gebaseerd op basis van religieuze of traditionele gronden. In wat Taylor het “tijdperk van authenticiteit” noemt ligt de nadruk steeds meer op gepersonaliseerd, authentiek en charismatisch gezag. Dat zien we bijvoorbeeld terug bij Deepak Chopra, die een volledig eigen stijl heeft ontwikkeld en zich presenteert als een onafhankelijke charismatische spirituele leider. Leiders moeten hun autoriteit construeren binnen een religieuze markt die afhankelijk is van vraag en aanbod. Mediatisering gaat over de wisselwerking tussen nieuwe vormen van communicatietechnologie en de manier waarop de maatschappij zich ontwikkelt. Voor dit onderzoek is de digitaliseringsgolf uiterst relevant. Zonder digitalisering was er geen internet, smartphone of Instagram. De

context van mediatisering vertaalt zich onder andere in personalisering, branding, en de cultuur die rondom celebrities is ontstaan. Succesvolle religieuze leiders zijn celebrities en *personal brands* geworden. Zo presenteerde Brian Houston zichzelf lange tijd als een persoonlijk merk, met eigen website, social mediakanalen, en eigen producten zoals boeken en podcasts. Merken en celebrities vormen voor veel mensen een inspiratie voor hun persoonlijke spirituele zoektocht. Daarbij speelt esthetiek een belangrijke rol. Deze moet passen bij een cultuur van zelfexpressie en de context van het huidige medialandschap. Sociale media bieden hier talloze mogelijkheden voor. Gebruikers van X (voorheen Twitter), Instagram, TikTok en talloze andere netwerken bieden mogelijkheden om met behulp van tekst, beeld en geluid leiders te positioneren en de interactie aan te gaan met hun volgers. Als deze leiders zich weten te presenteren positioneren als charismatische, authentieke en inspirerende mediapersoonlijkheden, kan dat bijdragen aan hun autoriteit bij hun volgers en geloofsgenoten. Een leider als de Dalai Lama bereikt met zijn Instagramfoto's miljoenen mensen die vervolgens weer zijn berichten kunnen *liken* en erop kunnen reageren.

Hoofdstuk 3 gaat over de relevantie van Instagram voor religieuze leiders. Instagram is in de afgelopen jaren een van de populairste en meest gebruikte sociale mediaplatforms geworden. Door het ontwerp van de mobiele app en de beeldcultuur die rondom dit medium is ontstaan blijkt dat gestileerde, persoonlijke, en ogenschijnlijk authentieke inhoud het beste past bij dit medium. De Instagramfoto's van Paus Franciscus zijn vaak van zeer hoge kwaliteit en bevatten ook 'authentieke' ontmoetingen, bijvoorbeeld tussen de Paus en jonge kinderen. De opkomst van Instagram kan worden verklaard vanuit de popularisering en digitalisering van fotografie. De opkomst van smartphones met steeds betere camera's en snel mobiel internet heeft hieraan sterk bijgedragen. Instagram wordt naast 'gewone' gebruikers ook ingezet door celebrities, influencers, mensen uit de media- en entertainmentindustrie, commerciële merken, bedrijven, maar ook door overheidsorganisaties en politici. Zij gebruiken Instagram voor branding, reputatie-management en de marketing van allerlei goederen en diensten. Tenslotte is Instagram geen neutraal platform. Onzichtbaar voor de gebruiker wordt met



behulp van algoritmes de gebruiker continu in de gaten gehouden en gemonitord. Gebruikersgedrag wordt door Meta, het moederbedrijf van Instagram, omgezet in een verdienmodel. Dit weerhoudt religieuze leiders er niet van om dit platform te gebruiken.

Hoofdstuk 4 en 5 beschrijven de methodologie die ontwikkeld is voor dit onderzoek. De combinatie van contentanalyse en een semiotische analyse bleek de meest bruikbare aanpak voor de analyse van Instagramberichten van de vier religieuze leiders. Bij contentanalyse zijn de Instagramberichten gecodeerd en gecategoriseerd, bijvoorbeeld op de visuele zichtbaarheid of afwezigheid van een religieuze leider in een specifiek bericht, de hoeveelheid mensen, of wat voor type objecten er te zien zijn op de foto. De contentanalysis is zo toegepast dat op basis van de Instagram-berichten tussen 1 november 2016 en 31 oktober 2017 een selectie berichten zijn gecodeerd. Voor de semiotische analyse is onder andere gebruikt gemaakt van het model van de Franse filosoof Roland Barthes die wijst op de ‘mythe’ achter het beeld. Voor Barthes is een mythe een vorm van communicatie die de werkelijkheid vervangt door een constructie die ideologisch gefundeerd is. Hij maakt hierbij onderscheid tussen eerste- en tweede orde betekenisgeving. De eerste orde gaat over de beschrijving wat er op een Instagram te zien is, bijvoorbeeld Paus Franciscus die een vader met zijn baby ontmoet in het Vaticaan. Het niveau van de tweede orde richt zich op ideologische constructies, en de manier waarop mogelijke conflicten, schandalen, of machtsstructuren onzichtbaar of verhuld worden. De afbeelding van Paus Franciscus die de vader met de baby ontmoet kan bijdragen aan het beeld van de paus als de ‘vader van de kerk’, en de foto kan verder het negatieve beeld rondom kindermisbruik ombuigen naar een positieve framing van de kerk.

Hoofdstuk 6, 7, 8 en 9 bevatten de analyses van het Instagramgebruik van de vier religieuze leiders en de vraag hoe zij hun autoriteit op Instagram construeren. Daarbij is voor iedere religieuze leider aandacht voor hun biografische, sociale, culturele, en religieuze context.

Hoofdstuk 6 analyseert het Instagramgebruik van Deepak Chopra, een bekende spirituele ondernemer en celebrity die al tientallen jaren wereldwijde

bekendheid geniet, onder meer vanwege zijn connectie met de Amerikaanse tv-ster Oprah Winfrey. Chopra combineert inzichten uit “Oosterse” spiritualiteit en de New Age-beweging, die tegenwoordig meestal alternatieve of holistische spiritualiteit wordt genoemd. Deze vorm van spiritualiteit past goed bij wat Taylor het tijdperk van authenticiteit noemt, en draait om een eigen persoonlijke zoektocht naar zingeving. De paradox van deze vorm van spiritualiteit ligt in het feit dat westers kapitalisme voor een groot deel wordt gezien als iets schadelijks, maar dat huidige vormen van spiritualiteit volledig zijn vercommercialiseerd. Op Instagram presenteert Chopra zich als de personificatie van welvaart, welzijn en succes. Hij is te zien tijdens zijn mediaoptredens, in luxe hotels, en in aanwezigheid van andere celebrities. Ook promoot hij zijn inzichten door middel van inspirerend bedoelde citaten en verkoopt hij spirituele producten en diensten. De combinatie van glamour en spiritualiteit die hij presenteert, sluit goed aan bij de visuele cultuur van het platform. Het laat echter weinig ruimte voor maatschappijkritiek. Het idee dat zijn spiritualiteit en zaken overal toepasbaar zijn, zelfs in een land als Saoedi-Arabië waar hij lezingen geeft, laat zien hoe mogelijke conflicten tussen spirituele waarden en onderdrukkende machtsstructuren worden gladgestreken. In Saoedi-Arabië geeft Chopra bijvoorbeeld een presentatie over leiderschap, maar nergens wordt duidelijk dat het in Saoedi-Arabië niet toegestaan is om andere vormen van zingeving publiekelijk te beoefenen. Maar Chopra weet zijn boodschap zo te verpakken dat zijn gastheren geen aanstoot nemen aan zijn optreden. Chopra weet precies hoe hij de paradoxen van hedendaagse spiritualiteit moet gebruiken om zijn bedrijf te promoten en zijn autoriteit op te bouwen als een voor zijn volgers geloofwaardige en authentieke spirituele leider.

In **hoofdstuk 7** richt zich op de (voormalige) leider van Hillsong Church, Brian Houston, en hoe hij Instagram inzet om zijn autoriteit te vestigen en onderhouden. In 2022 nam hij ontslag na beschuldigingen van vrouwen over grensoverschrijdend gedrag. In uit 2016 en 2017, de periode van het empirisch onderzoek, was hij nog de onbetwiste leider. Brian Houston presenteert zich op Instagram als, inspirerende “vader” van Hillsong Church, een van oorsprong Australische kerk die in staat is om jongvolwassenen aan te trekken in steden over de hele wereld. Op de achtergrond



spelen vragen over geld en macht en een kindermisbruikschandaal waar zijn vader voor verantwoordelijk was. Omdat Brian Houston rond de tijd dat dit speelde een leidinggevende positie had, had dit schandaal ook invloed op zijn eigen positie. Op Instagram maakt Houston gebruik van de visuele stijl van Hillsong. Op zijn account toont hij foto's van Hillsong *worship* (massale diensten met veel ruimte voor muziek), zijn eigen optredens, en zijn de kinderen en kleinkinderen. Dat is niet voor niets, zijn kinderen hadden tot voor kort leidinggevende posities in Hillsong Church. Het leiderschap van Houston is sterk gepersonifieerd wat betekent dat hij zichzelf voortdurend moet bewijzen. Brian Houston doet dat door het succes van de kerk en zijn familie te presenteren en zichzelf neer te zetten als een transparante, charismatische en authentieke leider. Op Instagram is niets zichtbaar van interne conflicten, schandalen, en gebrek aan transparantie over macht en geld. Zo wordt Instagram gebruikt om de mythe te creëren van de vanzelfsprekendheid van het leiderschap van Brian Houston door positieve elementen te benadrukken en schaduwzijden onzichtbaar te maken.

In **hoofdstuk 8** staat de 14^{de} Dalai Lama centraal. Hij was tot 1959 zowel de spirituele als de wereldlijke leider van Tibet. Vanwege de bezetting door China van dit land ontvluchtte hij Tibet en vond onderdak in India. Sindsdien is hij een wereldwijde spirituele leider geworden die contact houdt met regeringsleiders en beroemdheden over de hele wereld. Hij presenteert zich op Instagram als het vriendelijke en authentieke gezicht van het Tibetaans boeddhisme en de Tibetaanse gemeenschap in ballingschap. Op Instagram staan vooral veel foto's van ontmoetingen met zijn volgelingen en fans wereldwijd. Op de achtergrond spelen uiterst complexe politieke kwesties rondom de positie van Tibet en de relatie met China. Dat hangt samen met conflicten over de visie op de geschiedenis, het heden en de toekomst van Tibet en de positie van de Dalai Lama. Deze elementen worden op Instagram niet expliciet genoemd. Tegelijkertijd zorgt zijn aanwezigheid in de media, dus ook op Instagram, voor constante aandacht voor Tibet. De personificatie van het leiderschap van de Dalai Lama en de nadruk op zijn spirituele leiderschap zorgen ervoor dat hij in staat is de publieke opinie te beïnvloeden door een voorstelling van Tibet en het Tibetaanse boeddhisme te

promoten die een wereldwijd publiek aanspreekt.

In **hoofdstuk 9** staat Paus Franciscus en zijn Instagramgebruik centraal. Paus Franciscus wordt gepositioneerd als populaire, charismatische, maar ook nederige leider die een positieve verandering teweeg heeft gebracht in een wereldwijde kerk die gebukt gaat onder conflicten en schandalen. Het Instagram-account van Paus Franciscus maakt deel uit van de strategie om hem neer te zetten als de personificatie van de Rooms-Katholieke Kerk. Paus Franciscus is op elke foto zichtbaar, vaak in persoonlijke ontmoetingen met gelovigen, maar ook tijdens gebed of als hij arme en kwetsbare mensen, zoals zieken en vluchtelingen bezoekt. De zorgvuldige constructie van foto's en bijschriften op Instagram versterkt een positieve reputatie van de Rooms-Katholieke Kerk en kan worden gezien als onderdeel van een tegengeluid tegen de negatieve beelden en berichten die het nieuws domineerden, vooral in de periode voor de verkiezing van paus Franciscus. De constructie van 'het merk paus Franciscus' draagt bij aan het naturaliseren en mythologiseren van een bepaald beeld van de kerk en haar hoogste vertegenwoordiger. De Rooms-Katholieke Kerk wordt gepresenteerd als een warme en inclusieve kerk voor alle gelovigen. Hierdoor verdoezelt het andere dimensies die niet overeenkomen met deze zorgvuldig opgebouwde mythe. De afwezigheid van verwijzingen naar de interne organisatorische strubbelingen binnen het Vaticaan, hete hangijzers zoals misbruik, en gevoelige onderwerpen met betrekking tot mogelijke botsingen, zoals abortus of anticonceptie, laat zien dat dit Instagram-account vooral wordt gebruikt om een positief en zeer selectief beeld van de Rooms-Katholieke Kerk te promoten.

In **hoofdstuk 10** worden de vier leiders met elkaar vergeleken. Uit de analyses blijkt dat alle vier de leiders zich presenteren als charismatisch en authentiek, hoewel ze gebruik maken van verschillende stijlen en esthetische vormen om dat te visualiseren. Ze positioneren zich alle vier als celebrities, wat wordt gevisualiseerd door grote mensenmassa's, publieke optredens, media optredens, maar ook door de internationale reizen die ze maken. Hun zelfpresentatie wordt gevisualiseerd door hun kleding en interacties met anderen. Zo zijn Paus Franciscus en de Dalai Lama gekleed in ambtelijke gewaden en zijn ze regelmatig te zien met grote



enthousiaste menigten op de achtergrond. Dat draagt voor een groot deel bij aan een onderscheidende en persoonlijke visuele stijl. De esthetische overtuigingskracht van de foto's op Instagram draagt verder bij aan een presentatie van transparantie en het belichten van de positieve eigenschappen van de religieuze leiders. Een foto van Brian Houston in zijn zwembroek met zijn kleindochter op zijn nek laat zien hoe lichamelijk fit hij is, dat hij niet bang is om zaken uit zijn privéleven te laten zien, en dat hij een goede band heeft met zijn kleinkinderen. Dat versterkt zijn imago van een warme, authentieke, en benaderbare vader van Hillsong Church.

Bovendien representeren de leiders zichzelf als de verpersoonlijking van de beweging of het instituut die zij vertegenwoordigen. Zo dragen hun optredens op Instagram bij aan hun persoonlijke autoriteit, hoewel elk van de leiders ook verwijst naar de officiële autoriteit die ze krijgen door de tradities, of door de associatie met academici, politici, of andere celebrities.

Uit de vergelijking blijkt dat de aanpak van de Dalai Lama het meest lijkt op die van Paus Franciscus enerzijds, en dat de aanpak van Deepak Chopra het meest lijkt op die van Brian Houston. Paus Franciscus en de Dalai Lama zijn allebei vertegenwoordigers van eeuwenoude religieuze tradities, en laveren tussen de waarden en verbeelding van hun traditie en de aansluiting met de visuele cultuur van Instagram. Dat vertaalt zich in beelden van deze leiders waarin traditionele kleding, gebouwen, en rituelen te zien, maar ook beelden van grote mensenmenigten en intieme ontmoetingen tussen de leider en zijn volgelingen.

Deepak Chopra en Brian Houston verbeelden op hun beurt op hun Instagramaccount succes, welvaart en gezondheid. Dit zijn waarden die naadloos aansluiten bij de huidige consumptiecultuur. Bij beiden zien we foto's uit hun privéleven, vakanties, partner, kinderen en kleinkinderen, maar ook inspirerende citaten en aankondigingen van evenementen en promoties van boeken. Het is opvallend dat overeenkomsten in religieuze achtergronden (bijv. tussen Brian Houston en Paus Franciscus) zich niet noodzakelijkerwijs vertalen in de visualisering van autoriteit. De stijl van Brian Houston lijkt veel meer op die van Deepak Chopra, terwijl ze allebei een hele andere religieuze en spirituele bron aanboren. We zien hier de poging van leiders van religieuze tradities als de Dalai Lama en

Paus Franciscus om hun autoriteit en de traditie die ze te vertegenwoordigen te verbinden met een hedendaags publiek, terwijl religieuze en spirituele ondernemers als Deepak Chopra en Brian Houston actief hun spirituele en religieuze imperia willen uitbreiden, en hun persoonlijke autoriteit daarvoor inzetten.

In de **conclusie** wordt de hoofdvraag: hoe religieuze leiders Instagram gebruiken om hun autoriteit te construeren, beantwoord. In aansluiting op academische debatten over deze thematiek bieden de bevindingen in het licht van de toenemende invloed van sociale platforms nieuw licht op de toekomst van religieus leiderschap.

Op Instagram construeren de vier religieuze leiders een zorgvuldig beeld om hun autoriteit te legitimeren. Dat doen ze door een zeer gepersonaliseerde aanpak waarbij ze zichzelf presenteren als charismatische celebrities. Op het eerste gezicht presenteren ze zich niet als autoriteitsfiguren, maar eerder als authentieke, inspirerende figuren. Religieus gezag lijkt niet langer verbonden met institutionele en religieuze tradities aangezien de leiders zich vooral presenteren als religieuze lifestylecoaches. Ze baseren zich op culturele waarden van keuze, vrijheid en onafhankelijkheid. Net als bij merken proberen ze mensen actief te betrekken door ervoor te zorgen dat hun volgers zich kunnen identificeren met dat wat ze presenteren. De institutionele dimensie, machtsstructuren, mogelijke conflicten en schandalen blijven buiten beeld.

De typologie van Weber (traditionele, bureaucratische en charismatische autoriteit) is nog altijd goed toepasbaar in de context van consumptiecultuur. Vooral Weber's notie van charisma blijkt goed te passen bij de visuele en gepersonaliseerde autoriteit op Instagram, en bij de figuur van de onafhankelijke en eigenzinnige ondernemer. Maar omdat Weber in zijn theorie de mediatisering en digitalisering niet kon meenemen (hij leefde in de tweede helft van de negentiende en aan het begin van de twintigste eeuw) is het belangrijk om in dit mediatijsperk ook aandacht te besteden aan zaken als branding, mediatisering en celebrity culture.

De context van Instagram laat het belang zien van digitale platformen en doelgroepen op social media. Religieuze leiders moeten bij het plaatsen van content rekening houden met de algoritmes van Instagram en de voorkeuren van hun publiek. Mijn bevindingen sluiten aan bij wat de mediawetenschapper Pauline



Hope Cheong benoemt als de paradoxen en dialectiek van religieuze autoriteit binnen de context van digitale religie. Ze stelt dat religieuze autoriteit zowel sterker als zwakker kan worden door digitalisering. Aan de ene kant kan de inzet van Instagram heel succesvol zijn voor de positionering van religieuze leiders. Aan de andere kant is de aansluiting met consumptiecultuur en de schaduwkanten van platformen als Instagram problematisch. Het laveren tussen religieuze waarden, traditionele structuren aan de ene kant, en de cultuur van (geconstrueerde) authenticiteit en een aantrekkelijke lifestyle zorgt voor paradoxen waar geen pasklare oplossing voor is.

Voor de ethische dimensie is het belangrijk om meer oog te hebben voor de dataficatie van social media platforms. Religieuze tradities hebben vaak een profetische stem tegen het misbruik van macht en geld, en keren zich tegen ongezonde relaties van religie en de waarden en belangen van de machtigen op aarde. Echter, de religieuze leiders in dit onderzoek lijken zich er weinig aan gelegen dat platforms als Instagram geworteld zijn in ongezonde configuraties van macht en geld. Dit betekent dat religieuze waarden zoals compassie, nederigheid, rechtvaardigheid en zorg voor de ander overschaduw worden door de waarden van marketing en branding. Zonder kritische reflectie op het gebruik van sociale media door religieuze leiders worden religieuze tradities onderdeel van de hedendaagse consumptiecultuur.

About the Author



Mattheus Christiaan (Theo) Zijderveld was born in 1983 in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. After obtaining his Gymnasium diploma in 2003, he pursued studies in Theology and Communication and Information Sciences at Utrecht University. In 2005, he went abroad to study Theology at Université Marc Bloch in Strasbourg. After graduating cum laude from the faculty of Theology at Utrecht University, he continued his studies in Boulder, Colorado at the Center for Media, Religion, and Culture, supported by the Fulbright Scholarship. Following his studies, he became a management trainee for Het Expertise Centrum in The Hague, where he also earned a master's degree in Public Information Management. Subsequently, he worked for the federal government as the coordinator of Het Rijksbreed Kennisnetwerk Social Media and as a freelance communications advisor for churches, public organizations, and small businesses. In 2015, he began his PhD trajectory at the faculty of Religion and Theology at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Since 2018, he has been teaching Public Administration and Communication at The Hague University of Applied Sciences. Theo lives with his wife and four children in the beautiful city of Utrecht. He enjoys playing games, although unfortunately he usually loses to his wife. In his free time, he visits numerous playgrounds with his children, and after they are in bed, he loves to play the piano.





