

## Religion, popular culture and social media: the construction of a religious leader image on Facebook

Assistant Professor Ioana A. COMAN  
Communication Department / ICS  
University of Wisconsin - Green Bay  
USA  
comani@uwgb.edu

Professor Mihai COMAN  
College of Journalism and Communication  
University of Bucharest  
ROMANIA  
mcoman53@yahoo.com

**Abstract:** Despite the emergence of religions on Internet and the importance of social media, research dedicated to religious leaders' construction of symbolic image on social media, is hard to find. Starting from the 2013 Applebee's social media crisis, which was triggered by a pastor, the present study investigates the frames and themes Facebook users employed in order to give meaning to the crisis, attribute responsibility, and more importantly, define the role of a religious leader in daily life. This study shows the existence on social media of an active religious literate public, a public clearly troubled in their religious faith and convictions by the non-Christian behavior of the pastor. This shows that in a post-secular society the religious imaginary is not only a "canopy" inherited and kept because of convenience, but a cultural frame of signification the real and a vector of dialogue in a (online) micro and macro public sphere.

**Keywords:** religious leader, social media, crisis, emotions-as-frames, attribution of responsibility

\*\*\*

*Religion, culture populaire et médias sociaux: la construction d'un chef religieux  
Image sur Facebook*

**Résumé:** Malgré l'émergence des religions sur l'Internet et l'importance des médias sociaux, la recherche consacrée à la construction d'une image symbolique des leaders religieux est difficile à trouver. En prenant comme point de départ la crise d'Applebee en 2013, déclenchée par un geste malheureux d'un Pasteur notre étude explore les cadres et les thèmes utilisés par les utilisateurs de Facebook pour donner un sens à la crise, attribuer la responsabilité et, plus important encore, définir le rôle

d'un leader religieux dans la vie quotidienne. Cette étude montre l'existence sur les médias sociaux d'un public religieux instruit, actif, d'un public manifestement troublé dans sa foi et dans ses convictions par le comportement non chrétien du pasteur. Cela montre que, dans une société post-séculière, l'imaginaire religieux n'est pas seulement une « canopée » héritée et conservée pour des raisons de commodité, mais un cadre culturel bon à donner du sens au réel et un vecteur de dialogue dans une micro et macro sphère publique (en ligne).

**Mots-clés:** leader religieux, médias sociaux, crise, émotions-cadres, attribution de la responsabilité

\*\*\*

## 1. Background

*The case.* In 2013, a St-Louis Applebee's fired one of its waitresses, after she posted on the Reddit website, a picture of a note left on a receipt by a pastor refusing to pay gratuity. On the receipt, the Pastor has crossed out the automatic 18 percent tip charged for parties of more than eight, and wrote above her signature: "I give God 10% why do you get 18." Chelsea Welch, a colleague of the actual server, took a picture of the receipt and uploaded it to the online site Reddit. The Pastor incident happened on January 25, 2013. The firing happened a day or few later. The incident was presented briefly in mass media. The online publications *The Consumerist* and *The Smoking Gun* first wrote about the waitress' post and update with the information about her firing. Later, few news articles appeared about the firing and about Applebee's social media "meltdown" that followed. While it may or may not be a crisis for Applebee's from a financial standpoint, it certainly was a reputation crisis.

*The social media "meltdown."* The story became the subject of a viral angry mob. The social media users decided to voice their feelings on the Applebee's Facebook page (among other social media outlets). Moreover, numerous action groups like "Boycott Applebee's," "Hire Chelsea Back" or "Rehire Chelsea Welch" were created on Facebook. Despite the obvious and continuous attacks displayed on Applebee's social media page, the company had initially no reaction. On January 31, in the evening, Applebee's finally posted a status update about the controversy on their Facebook page, arguing: "We wish this situation didn't happen...Our franchisee has apologized to the Guest and has taken disciplinary action with the Team Member for violating their Guest's right to privacy." The message basically said that the franchise was supporting the guest (i.e. Pastor Bell) and decided to fire the "team member" (not mentioning the fired waitress by her name) for violating the "Guest's right to privacy." The message made things worse: thousands of comments not only were a showcase of the strong mainly negative feelings about Applebee's decision but also they were calling or describing boycott actions and making demands. In response to the thousands of comments, in the middle of the night Applebee's posted a lengthy statement, but as a comment on the status update, and not as a new status

update. They got called on it immediately, as people were accusing the company's social media managers of not knowing how to do their job. Eventually the next morning (February 1) that message was re-posted as an actual new status update. The reaction was still mainly negative, thousands of comments on this update, showing that people felt ignored, censored, frustrated, and were not going to stop 'boycotting' Applebee's. A third and last actual new status update was posted the same day, February 1, shortly after noon. That explanation, reiterating the same position in other words, was not taken positively either, generating thousands of more comments. Between the official status updates, Applebee's would comment more or less the same idea in between the other comments, without getting positive reactions. The February 1 afternoon status update was the last official statement coming from the franchise on their Facebook page. What Miller (2013) calls the "Ever Shifting Mob," continued to leave comments on the company's page but at a lesser intensity.

## **2. Literature review**

### *a. Religion, Media and Popular Culture*

The rich bibliography devoted to the relationship between religion and popular culture and mass media (Cobb, 2005; Hoover & Lundt, 1995; Lynch, 2007; Mazur & McCarthy, 2011; McDannell, 1995; Rojek, 2001; Stout & Buddenbaum, 2001; Ward, 2011), includes few investigations of the image of the religious leaders in mass media (Smith, 2010). If historians approached the image of the priest and monks in the Middle Age literature (Duby, 1988; Le Goff, 1985; Thibodeaux, 2010), investigations on the image of the ordinary priest in contemporary society are a rarity (Knott & Taira, 2015; Mitchell & Gowen, 2012). In this sense, the majority of the studies focused on the life and media activity of star-religious leaders, and even more so on televangelists (Bruce, 1990; Hoover, 1988; Horsfield, 1984; Schultze, 1991), with less or no interest in the construction of their image in media.

In recent years, more and more scholars approached the phenomenon of religion in the online space (Campbell, 2010; Campbell, 2012; Dawson & Cowan, 2004; Karaflogka, 2007; Possamai, 2012; Wagner, 2012). Here too the focus was the transformation suffered by the content of specific religions and rites when they are performed in the new media space. Religion is present online in the form of static informing websites (dominant situation), or in the form of interactive sites, on which a congregationist shares common religious capital and common religious experiences. Social media offer the advantage of a space where the interactions between and among believers, and between believers and non-believers can be easily observed in their spontaneous forms and un-mediated by other institutions (i.e. mass media, religious leaders, researcher environment and tools). In this almost natural lab the social construction of religious issues can be followed step by step. Despite these advantages offered by social media, research dedicated to the religious leader's construction of symbolic image on social media was hard to find.

In the extremely rich body of crisis communication literature, the research studies consecrated to the communication strategies used by religious leaders in crisis communication are also extremely rare (Benoit, 2011; Hearit, 2006; Legg, 2009; Maier, 2005; Swanson, 2012). These investigations follow the way that the image repair strategies were applied, but they do not approach the impact that the religious substance of the crisis has on the PR techniques and on the social construction of the crisis, responsibility and guilt attribution.

*b. Emotions as Frames*

In a crisis situation six negative emotions are dominant – anger; fright; anxiety; guilt; shame and sadness (Lazarus, 1991). These emotions are driven by different relational themes, and vary depending on how the crisis is appraised by the public. Therefore, it can be asserted that different emotions can promote different degrees of message processing (Nabi, 2003). According to Nabi (2003), the increased emotional intensity can actually narrow even more the attentional focus, making relevant events seem even more important and basically retaking the cycle. Thus, in practice, this greater affective reaction (causing more reduction in focus, and resulting in a more and more extreme view) triggers agitation. As, Coombs & Holladay (2002, p. 97) noted, a crisis is “an event for which people seek causes and make attributions.” Since the public’s opinion, perceptions and impressions about the crisis and the organization are influenced by those frames, it is essential to consider how media, organizations and the public frame a crisis event, its causes, and who is responsible for the crisis.

According to Nabi (2002; 2003) emotions can serve as frames for issues, as for example they make certain information more accessible and guide subsequent decision-making. Framing can be conceptualized as the means by which information is selected, excluded, and emphasized, in order to promote a particular definition, interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or solution of a problem (Entman, 1993; De Vreese, Peter & Semetko, 2001; Reese, 2001). Nabi’s “emotion-as-frame perspective” is based on the following argument: “repeated pairing of certain emotions with particular ideas or events eventually shapes the way in which one interprets and responds to those events that in turn affect one’s worldview” (Nabi, 2003, p.227). Kim & Cameron (2011) extended Nabi’s “emotion-as-frame” hypotheses to the context of corporate crisis situations. They found that those exposed to anger-inducing news tended to have more negative attitudes toward the responsible company than those exposed to the sadness-inducing news. Two other findings are even more relevant for the current study. First, it seems that regardless the type of emotion inducing news exposure people perceived the corporate responses more credible when focused on relief over punishment (Kim & Cameron, 2011, p. 843). Second, corporate response messages with emotional appeals seemed to influence the publics’ behavioral intentions. In other words, people tended to have more positive behavioral intentions when the corporate responses contained intensive emotional appeals than when they contained none (Kim & Cameron, 2011, p. 845).

### **3. Method**

Starting from the concept of emotions-as-frames, emotions as influencing publics' reactions, attitudes and intended behaviors in a crisis, and the framing literature, the current study explored the emotions as well as the main frames and themes emerging on Applebee's Facebook page, through a qualitative content analysis of the public's comments.

Semetko and Valkenberg (2007, p.7-8) proposed two ways to identify frames: (a) the deductive method, which assumes predefining certain frames as analytical variables in order to verify to which extent these frames exist in the analyzed news materials; and (b) the inductive method, which involves an overall in-depth analysis of a story in order to enunciate the possible frames. For the current study the inductive method was employed. Indicators of emotion (words and syntagms) led to first order concepts (themes) and second order concepts (frames) (Punch, 2005, p. 213). The emotions expressed by commenters fell into two categories: direct emotions expressed in raw forms (frequently associated with intended behavior, call to action and demands), and embedded emotions, revealed by elaborated expressions of emotions through confessions, micro-narrations, or argumentative constructions. Lastly, emotions-as-frames (as revealed by the publics' comments to the company's three official posts) were described.

Qualitative content analysis is a five-step process (Baxter & Babbie, 2004; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 2013; Priest, 2010; Silverman, 2005) and the authors went through this process in the current research. First came the immersion in text, through the full reading of the corpus, in order for the researchers to become familiarized with the texts under examination. Then came the "break down" (Baxter & Babbie, 2004, p. 366) of the text by identifying basic textual units (or "concepts" - Punch, 2005), serving as entities with which the researchers would work. Afterwards the researchers began coding – identifying categories that organize units based on their similarities and differences by identifying the first categories that seem to answer the research questions, identifying other categories through reading another text segment, comparing the two groups of categories to identify similarities and differences among the units that compose them. In this process we found units that better matched another category and moved them from a category into another. We have created category labels and analytical descriptions for each category and we have identified quotes from the analyzed corpus that eloquently exemplify these categories. During each stage we also included what the aforementioned scholars label "memoing" - writing down notes with observations, difficulties, possible directions of interpretation and theorization. By doing this, we tried to attain one of the main goals of the qualitative content analysis: "to use consistent categories in a systematic way, but at the same time allow them to emerge from data" (Priest, 2010, p. 170). The fourth step of this process involved coding the emergent categories to establish main frames. The themes and frames were identified through progressive theoretical sampling. According to Altheide (1996, p. 33-34) this method supposes selecting materials "based on emerging understanding of the topic of investigation"

and selecting those materials “for conceptual or theoretical relevant reasons.” In the current study, selection criteria stemmed from the emotion-as-frames concept and the theoretical model describing the connection between negative emotions, processing information and behavioral intent (Nabi, 2003; Jin et al., 2012; Kim & Cameron 2011).

The final step ensured qualitative research quality (Silverman, 2005, p. 209). The researchers utilized techniques such as the constant comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 73; Punch, 2005, p. 204; Silverman, 2005, p. 213-214). The research process stopped when the text analysis did not bring any new categories, and saturation was reached (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 197).

Applebee’s had three official updates. Each generated thousands of comments (21,571; 14,707 and 28,407 – until February 15, 2013). Due to the high number of comments, and because this was an exploratory qualitative study, only the first twenty-four hours of comments for each official post were analyzed. The dominant emotions were identified from the comments. Then at a second lecture the frames embedded in the emotions were identified, and lastly the themes. The process was repeated until redundancy was reached. Moreover, due to page restriction only a limited number of quotes are provided for each frame or theme in the current study.

Although, the comments showcased clear emotions and frames directed towards the Applebee’s crisis, the current study was focused on the pastor involved in the case and towards the fired waitress. Therefore, the findings and discussion reflect only the emotions and themes connected directly to them.

Facebook is public, and any data gathered from there is also considered to be public. However, in an attempt to protect consumers/commenters in the employed quotes and following the procedures in other similar research papers, their names, and the hour of their postings have been deleted.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. *Positive emotion: sympathy*

An analysis of the Facebook comments revealed only one major positive emotion as frame: *poor waitress*. This is embedded in sympathy, or compassion (Lazarus, 1991) for the waitress. This positive emotion is born from our capacity of identifying with the plight of another, and is correlated with an action tendency “to reach out to mitigate the other’s plight, to help the other person, to express sympathy” (Lazarus, 1991, p. 290).

It can be asserted that the anger people felt and expressed about the company and the pastor immediately transformed into sympathy, compassion and pity for the waitress. So, in antithesis, the waitress appeared as the victim here: “(...) *the waitress has the right to that tab as the note was her tip...I’m sure she is swimming with calls*

*from lawyers to take on her case...."* And even if the waitress would have violated the client's privacy rights she would still have been entitled to do so: *"Gee, don't care about your employees' rights so much... I'll admit the name/anything dealing with the credit card info should NEVER be posted, but this is how waitresses get treated- like scum."*

#### 4.2. *Negative emotions: anger and disgust*

Two emotions were most visible in the publics' comments: anger and disgust. An analysis of the Facebook comments revealed two negative frames rooted in these emotions: 'Responsible Applebee's' and 'Shameful Pastor.' Using Semetko & Valkenburg's (2000) frequently quoted model, the first found frame fits in the responsibility frame category, and the other fit in the human interest and morality frames. The basic emotions-as-frames about the pastor's actions were developed in the numerous comments expressing publics' discontent with the pastors' behavior. In all these comments the emphasis falls on the non-religious behavior of the pastor: users' anger is amplified by the fact that a religious leader abandoned the Christian values and norms of behavior. Several themes revealed and are described below.

#### 4.3. *The cheap pastor*

The disgust and anger were expressed through harsh words incriminating the pastor's behavior. Comments include: *"Hypocritical pastor. You can't throw stones and then complain when they are thrown back at you;"* *"This idiot "pastor" wanted EVERYONE not just the waitress, to see how ignorant, greedy, and daft she was;"* *"You are rewarding that "pastor" for being rude and nasty by firing the waitress;"* or *"That pastor should feel real great...getting someone fired because they are cheap."*

Commenters attributed to the pastor not only the guilt of a "rude" gesture, but also the blame for triggering the excessive action taken by Applebee's to fire the waitress who posted the photo: *"Your company and Pastor Bell both should be ashamed;"* or *"You fired the waitress but I also think the pastor should be fired as well. Very arrogant what she wrote on the ticket. It's Applebee's fault that the 18 percent was added but sadly the waitress takes the blame."* Additionally, Facebook commenters voiced that their anger is also related to the fact that the pastor used God and her religious leader status to justify her greediness. The following comments are an example: *"The so called pastor is nothing but a hypocrite. How dare she use God to try to justify her bring cheap;"* *"The pastor used god as an excuse not to tip....she should be embarrassed;"* and *"Reading this, the patron "Pastor" (using that term loosely) was wrong, because she is "with God" she can blatantly ignore the policies of gratuity? Nah thanks; we won't be spending our money at 'Crapplebees'."*

Frequently, labeling the pastor is associated with intended behavior – boycotting Applebee's. The publics' messages are clear, and express that they are decided to stop eating at Applebee's because of the pastor's immoral gesture, and the company's excessive reaction: *"Your greed and the greed and pride of "Pastor" Bell*

*caused your current troubles. I'll never eat at your establishment again," or "I think if Pastor Alois Bell does not believe in tipping, she should be going to Taco Bell. Hypocrite!"*

The commenters argue that what revolts them is not only the pastor's greediness and rude note, but also the pastor's obstinacy demanding the punishment of the waitress, her revengeful behavior, and as explained below, her overall non-Christian behavior.

#### 4.4. *The non-Christian pastor*

Numerous Facebook users stressed the contrast between the religious leader's expected behavior and actual actions of Pastor Bell. First, by appealing to their believers' experience, or their knowledge about Christian culture, people highlight the discrepancy between the Christian life model and the pastor's actions, through comments like: "A pastor is a servant and should recognize that all people deserve respect not condemnation;" "The "pastor" should turn the other cheek and forgive the employee's lack in judgment and ask them to rehire her. After all, SHE started it with her unchristian-like note;" or "SHE should be ashamed being a pastor who preaches about loving everyone and she couldn't even give a tip to a hardworking waitress." These and multiple other voices revealed the gap between Christian moral values that should be exemplified and imposed by a religious leader, through her/his actions, and the pastor's actual gestures, opposite to humility, love, respect, or forgiveness.

From a different perspective, people commenting on Facebook, also doubt the importance and solidity of the church in which Alois Bell is a pastor, and also her capacity to be a real, truthful pastor: "You have to see this "pastor" talk in her church with 15 total worshippers. I hope it was worth millions of dollars to Applebee's." The same idea is showcased by messages such as:

*Wait wait wait. The pastor has a 15 member church that she runs out of a store front. So, that is tax free. She then gives 10% of her income to her church, which is still her own business (really, lets be serious here). So she is just another piece of scum working the system.*

These comments stressed the contrast between the benefits obtained by the person belonging to church, and her immoral behavior: "My question is, what kind of pastor only gives God 10%? If he truly is a man of God, should he not be giving 100%, so to speak?" The public suggested that like the Pharisees scolded by Jesus, the pastor occupies a religious leader position only for its material benefits, and not for a spiritual call. More so, a religious leader is a sacred power's embodiment, and eventually God's messenger. Therefore, a religious leader's actions should embody the divine word, and should be exemplifying what God, or Jesus would do: "A pastor that is full if the Holy Spirit would've never been tacky by writing on the receipt...much less demanded her dismissal" or "The Pastor was in the wrong and needs a lesson in humility. As a Christian I am ashamed that the Pastor claims to be

representing Christ and then does this.” The same idea was reiterated in messages like: “I just sent the company an email. The pastor is an idiot. Is that what Jesus would do? Stiff a hard working waitress;” or “Thou shall not use thy Lord's name in vain... Is that exactly what this pastor did???”

#### 4.5. From moral punishment to damnation

The public demands for a harsh punishment because the religious leader behavior model is so high, and the pastor's gesture was so far from this model. As in the case of perceptions in Applebee's case, in which people demanded managers and PR team to be fired, multiple voices requested the church where the pastor preaches to fire her. Examples include: “That church should fire the pastor for not doing what Jesus would do!” or “This un-Christian pastor was a jerk and deserved to be called out.”

In a more in-depth sense, users' prescriptions indicate their wish for the punishment to become public. The pastor's humiliation is done on Facebook, so the whole world (literally) can find out what she did, condemn and taunt her. In sort of a *charivari* sense, the Facebook exposition, the violent-caricatured presentation of the pastor, and the excess of offensive epithets lead to a permanent violent humiliation: “She *DESERVES* public humiliation” or “Welcome to the digital world where your cheap nature is going to be exposed.”

Not even the public humiliation lesson seemed sufficient, as other voices demanded the supreme punishment: “I hope the pastor that likes to stiff waitress's dies and burns in hell;” “That pastor should rot in damnation!” or “You and the pastor must be in kahoots with the Devil.” In other words, as in a curse, and as if exposing it on Facebook for thousands viewers to see it would amplify the power of the verb, some users directly address the divinity and ask the “ad aeternitas” punishment of the one guilty of such an outrage.

Several comments place the pastor's deed in a broader perspective: the destiny of the Christian Church in contemporaneity. The commenters seem to point out an awareness that in modernity the Church and religion was confronted with a prestige loss and therefore any inadequate behavior of a religious leader worsens the situation: “Ignorance from a pastor makes people stop going to church and thite;” “And i am a Christian, i don't necessarily believe in this woman's actions, but don't blame an entire religion for one persons actions;” “Not only did you embarrass yourself, you brought shame on God and are helping to contribute to giving other Christians a bad name;” or “She gives Christianity a bad name.”

## 5. Discussion

Pastor Bell did not commit a major sin (like sexual abuses) and she does not represent a specific and important Church or congregation. Her gesture is not a violation of liturgical obligations; it does not take place in the space or time of the reli-

religious acts (so it's not a sacrilege). Ultimately, it is an accident, a minimal violation of some norms, not really religious, but moral. Why then thousands of people reacted so vehemently (on social media) and condemned her gesture in such radical religious terms? One reason is that everywhere, despite all historical, religious, cultural differences:

religious leaders are expected to avoid dual relationships and conflicts of interest, maintain confidentiality, and avoid religiously incongruent behaviors in their personal life. Religious leaders are most likely to find themselves in difficulties when they abuse or seek to nullify the power differential that exists between them and their congregants (Kane & Jacobs, 2013, p. 229).

In daily life, in normal situations, the believers as well as the public opinion expect religious leaders to be the models of moral behavior. The Christian imaginary has many exemplary figures through which it embodies and exemplifies the supreme Christian values: devotion, humility, self-sacrifice for the others' well being. From saints, substance of hagiographic literature richness, to priests sacrificing themselves to protect noble causes (from Thomas Beckett to Martin Luther King or Cardinal Romero) popular culture consecrates numerous icons of religious excellence. Moreover, the religious imaginary is a powerful catalyst in popular movements of sacralization of those who appear like embodiments of ideal behavior models, be it political leaders or celebrities. On the other hand, studies showed that sexual scandals associated to Catholic Priests shocked the public opinion exactly because of the incongruences between social expectations regarding a religious leader's behavior and the incriminatory facts (D'Antonio, 2013; Frawley-O'Dea, 2007; Kane & Jacobs, 2013; Sperry, 2003).

Pastor Bell's behavior disappointed because it canceled "the power differential" that gives the identity to a religious leader (Kane & Jacobs, 2013, p.229). However, the pastor's reaction can be an ego crisis or a bad joke, without implying a profanation of some religious symbols and acts. In these conditions, we would expect that the symbolic capital produced by a long religious tradition to protect the image of any religious leader, and in the case of Pastor Bell to only trigger some critical reactions, not a wave of anger and blame (in the end her deed was infinitely less grave than the actions of the pedophile priests). This means that in the symbolical equation another factor interfered, factor that changed the relationship between the breadth of the violated norm and the breadth of the public reaction. The negative emotions, anger and blame, surrounding the pastor's figure, were associated with another emotion, a positive one, the compassion for the "poor" waitress. The theoretical model of emotions-as-frames would imply that Facebook users signified the conflict between Applebee's and the waitress through a positive emotion (compassion), associated with a negative emotion (anger). Negative emotions trigger attribution of blame (Kim & Cameron, 2011; Nabi, 2003) and Facebook users identified two consecutive events as the cause of the waitress' sufferance: the pastor's actions and Applebee's reaction. Both sanctioned the free expression of an attitude on social media:

the pastor demanded the person publishing her note to be punished, and Applebee's applied the punishment. In this situation, a *network solidarity*, more than a simple human solidarity with someone's misfortune occurred. The Facebook users' anger was triggered by the information according to which a cyberspace "compatriot" who as them was only sharing experiences, emotions, usual or unusual events, was punished for socializing on social media. This explains why the theme of freedom of expression was embedded in multiple comments. People were discontented because Applebee's accepts the pastor's freedom of expression while rejecting the waitress' one (some comments were also related to Applebee's denying publics' freedom of expression by deleting their posts). The simple fact of a company firing an employee is a common reality and does not usually trigger public reactions and blame, unless the fired person is a celebrity (Benoit, 2011; Hearit, 2006). Therefore, it is less the discontent of a fired employee that generated the thousands comments on Facebook, and more the anger that someone can be sanctioned so harshly only for doing what millions of people do on social media: making public what happens in his/her life. The users' appeals to social mobilization proved that they wanted the "guilty" ones to be sanctioned for attacking the sacred value of social media: freedom to communicate anything, beyond any political, social, organizational, religious, or moral restrictions.

In this configuration of collective representations, the pastor's image is full of ambiguities: she is a religious leader, but has a behavior lacking morality; she is a religious leader, but it is not clear for which religion form or church; she is a religious leader but SHE is a SHE; she is a religious leader that partied with a big number of invited guests and who justified the refusal to pay the tip by referring to God; and the worst, she deleted her Facebook page when the social media disaster started: and this was a "sacrilege" in relation to the values specific to the Internet communication culture (Kavada, 2013). By blocking dialogue, she denied the Facebook publics to directly communicate with her and express their anger, or demand explanations; and this violent refusal of dialogue is in antithesis with Jesus' fundamental values. In this sense, and for the aforementioned reasons, pastor Bell appears simultaneously as an Anti-Christian and an Anti-Social Media hero.

In blaming pastor Bell, Facebook users do not use a jargon belonging to the web culture, but a religious language and references from the Christian canopy. The hundreds of comments referring to pastor Bell show a religious literate public, a public touched in their religious faith and convictions by the non-Christian behavior of the pastor. The blame in her case comes from belief and embodies religious language. If in Applebee's case the boycott sanctioned the business landscape, in her case, the intended action was profoundly religious: the appeal for public humiliation and curse. Facebook became more than a public space where the discontent is expressed, it became the medium of communication with divinity, through which the solicitation of divine sanction of the sinful person is transmitted.

### **Conclusions and limitations**

In the public relations' bibliography there are numerous analyses that show the social media's role (among other media) in crisis communication. Few studies were consecrated to the crises of the religious institutions or leaders and none to religious crises that are consumed only in social media. Applebee's social media crisis offers a unique case in which a crisis is consumed only in the social media space and that involves as a main actor a religious leader and that generates a public reaction expressed in a religious language. It can be expected that in the future other studies would approach similar cases. The analyzed case can seem an isolated accident, but this is due to the lack of other studies focusing on the social construction of the religious leader image in cyberspace. We are certain that future research will show how comments in online media, Facebook, even Twitter, reveal a wide social debate of the role and public image of religious leaders. But, if indeed it is true that small deeds reveal profound social structures, this case shows the persistence and power of the symbolic religious universe in a post-modernity era. The Christian model - sacrifice for others, humility, kindness, and altruism represent a major cultural frame for evaluating certain situations, for attributing the blame and imposing behavior norms. Applebee's Facebook pages are the last place where we would expect discussions to be marked by a religious frame. The crisis analyzed here brought to light religious beliefs and representations that gave meaning to the event and instituted a platform of common symbols that assured the convergence of opinions. This shows that the religious imaginary is not only a "canopy" inherited and kept because it is convenient, but that it is a cultural frame of signifying the real and a vector of dialogue and convergence of interpretations. From another theoretical perspective, the study showcased the value of emotion-as-frames concept and its potential to explain the process through which public perception around an event or social actor is built; as well as the reason for which, in some cases the attribution of blame and responsibility is done so rapidly and violently.

In practical terms, this case study reveals the fact that social media is for religious institutions another world, with radically different communication mechanisms. When it comes to the opinions formed on social media, mass media lost their traditionally privileged place as the main actor in the process of constituting public opinion, during the mass communication era - see the efficiency of traditional image repair strategies in the cases of Hauser (Maier, 2005) or Jim Swaggart (Legg, 2009). On social media there is room for dialog and debate, but these are done less through argumentative techniques specific to classical public sphere, and more through confessions, calls to action, and bits of arguments. On social media emotion is viral, and leaders should learn and understand that emotions can be responded only with emotions. When negative emotions related to a certain action are amplified by the emotional horizon of religious beliefs, the attribution of guilt and blame disseminate with an unbelievable speed: the religious leaders should reflect on these modern phenomena and should understand that social media are not just a medium / platform on which messages with religious content can be spread, but social media

are a social body which judges their daily behavior and manufactures and constantly renegotiates their public image.

### References

- Altheide, D.L. (1996). *Qualitative media analysis*. Thousand Oaks CA: Sage.
- Baxter, L.A. & Babbie, E. (2004). *The basics of communication research*. Belmont CA: Wadsworth/Thompson.
- Benoit, W.L. (2011). NPR's image repair discourse on firing Juan Williams. *Journal of Radio & Audio Media*, 18(1), 84-91.
- Bruce, S. (1990). *Pray-TV: Televangelism in America*. London: Routledge.
- Campbell, H. (2010). *When religion meets new media*. New York: Routledge.
- Campbell, H. (2012). *Digital religion: Understanding religious practice in new media worlds*. New York: Routledge.
- Cobb, K. (2005). *The Blackwell guide to theology and popular culture*. Malden MA: Blackwell.
- Coombs, W. T. & Holladay, S. J. (2002). Helping crisis managers protect reputational assets: Initial tests of the situational crisis communication theory. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 16, 65-186.
- Corbin, J. & Strauss, A. (2008). *Qualitative research*. (Third edition). Thousand Oaks CA: Sage.
- Creswell, J.W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry & and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Los Angeles: Sage.
- D'Antonio, M. (2013). *Mortal sins: Sex, crime and the era of Catholic scandals*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Dawson, L. L. & Cowan D. E (Ed.). 2004. *Religion online: Finding faith on the Internet*. New York: Routledge.
- De Vreese, C.H., Peter, J., & Semetko, H.A. (2001). Framing politics at the launch of the euro: A cross-national comparative study of frames in the news. *Political Communication*, 18(2), 107-122.
- Dolan, F. E. (2007). Why are nuns funny? *Huntington Library Quarterly*. 70(4), 509-535.
- Dubby, G. (1988). *Mâle Moyen Age*. Paris: Flammarion.
- Entman, R. (1993). Framing: Toward a clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), 51-58.
- Frawley-O'Dea & M.G., 2007, *Sexual abuse in the Catholic Church*. Nashville, Vanderbilt University Press.

- Hearit, K.M. (2006). *Crisis management by apology: Corporate response to allegations of wrongdoing*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Hoover, S. M. (1988). *Mass media religion: The social sources of electronic church*, London: Sage.
- Hoover, S. M. & Lundt, K. (eds). (1995). *Rethinking media, religion and culture*, London: Sage.
- Horsfield, P. (1984). *Religious television: The American experience*. New York: Longman.
- Jenkins, P. (1996). *Pedophiles and priests: Anatomy of a contemporary crisis*. Bridgewater, NJ: Replica Books.
- Jin, Y., Pang, A. & Cameron, G.T. (2012). Toward a publics-driven, emotion-based conceptualization in crisis communication: Unearthing dominant emotions in multistaged testing of the integrated crisis mapping (ICM) model. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 24: 266-298.
- Kavada, A. (2013). Internet cultures and protest movements: the cultural links between synergy, organizing and online communication. In B. Cammaerts, A. Mattoni & P. McCurdy (Eds.). *Mediation and protest movements*. (75-94). Bristol: Intellect.
- Kane, M.N. & Jacobs, R.J. (2013). Perceptions of religious leaders' culpability in the United States. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*. 16(3), 225-253.
- Karaflogka, A. (2007). *E-religion: A critical appraisal of religious discourse on the World Wide Web*, London: Equinox.
- Kim, H.J. & Cameron, G.T. (2011). Emotions matter in crisis: The role of anger and sadness in the publics' response to crisis news framing and corporate crisis response. *Communication Research*, 38: 826-855.
- Knott, K. & Taira, T. (2013). *Media portrayals of religion and the secular sacred: Representation and change*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Lazarus, R. (1991). *Emotion and adaptation*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Le Goff, J. (1985). *L'imaginaire medieval*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Legg, K.L. (2009). Religious Celebrity: An analysis of image repair discourse. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 21:2, 240-250.
- Lynch, G. (2007). *Between sacred and profane: Researching religion and popular culture* London: I.B. Tauris.
- Maier, C.T. (2005). Weathering the storm: Hauser's *Vernacular Voices*, public relations and the Roman Catholic Church's sexual abuse scandal. *Public Relations Review* 31:219-227.
- Mazur, E. & MCCarthy, K. (Eds.). (2011). *God in details: American religion in popular culture*. New York: Routledge.
- McDannell, C. (1995). *Material christianity: Religion and popular culture in America*. New-Haven CT: Yale University Press.

- Miller, D. (2013). *A tip for Applebee's*. Huffington Post. Retrieved from <http://www.huffingtonpost.com>.
- Mitchell, J. & Gowen, O. (2012). *Religion and the News*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Nabi, R.L. (2002). Anger, fear, uncertainty, and attitudes: A test of the cognitive-functional model. *Communication Monographs*, 69: 204-216.
- Nabi, R.L. (2003). Exploring the framing effects of emotion: Do discrete emotions differentially influence information accessibility, information seeking, and policy preference? *Communication Research*, 30: 224-247.
- Priest, S.H. (2010) *Doing media research: An introduction*. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Punch, K.F. (2005). *Introduction to social research: Quantitative and qualitative approaches*. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Possamai, A (Ed). (2012). *Brill handbooks on contemporary religion: Handbook of Hyper-real religions*. Leiden: Brill.
- Reese, S. D. (2001). Prologue. framing public life: A bridging model for media research. In S.D.
- Reese, O. H. Gandly Jr. & A.E. Grant. (Eds.). *Framing public life: Perspective on media and our understanding of social world* (3-28). Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Rojek, C. (2001). *Celebrity*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Schultze, Q.J. (1991). *Televangelism in American culture*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.
- Semetko, H.A., & Valkenburg, P.M. (2007). Framing European politics: A content analysis of press and television news. *Journal of Communication* 50 (2), 93-100.
- Silverman, D. (2005). *Qualitative social research*. London: Sage.
- Smith, A.B. (2010). *The look of Catholics. Portrayals in popular culture from the Great Depression to the Cold War*. Lawrence, KS: The University Press of Kansas.
- Sperry, L. (2003). *Sex, priestly ministry and the church*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press.
- Stout, D.A & Buddenbaum, J. M. (Eds). (2001). *Religion and popular culture. Studies on the interaction of worldviews*. Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press.
- Swanson, D.J. (2012). The beginning of the end of Robert H. Schuller's Crystal Cathedral Ministry: A towering failure in crisis management as reflected through media narratives of financial crisis, family conflict, and follower dissent. *The Social Science Journal*. 49:485-493.
- Thibodeaux, J. D. (Ed.). (2010). *Negotiating clerical identities: priests, monks and masculinity in the Middle Ages*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Wagner, R. (2012). *Godwired: Religion, ritual and virtual reality*. New York: Routledge.
- Ward, P. (2011). *Gods behaving badly: Media, religion and celebrity culture*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press.

