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Book Review
Christina Behler, Religion in der digitalen Gesellschaft

Wenn der Papst twittert …

Bielefeld: transcript 2024, 354 pages,
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One of the most abiding images of Pope Francis is likely to be of the pope wearing a bold white puffer coat. When the unusual but puzzlingly real picture proved to have been artificially generated, this launched a discussion about the rapid growth of AI and its potential for manipulation and fraud. It also caused disappointment among those fascinated by the pope's unusual fashion sense. "The Pope Francis Puffer Photo Was Real in Our Hearts", read a heading in the men's fashion magazine GQ.[1] Some people evidently wanted the pope to have "drip", as the creator of the AI image had put it.[2] Other deepfake images appeared, of Pope Francis kissing the pop singer Madonna, for example, or wrapped in a pride flag.[3] Francis had become, in Christina Behler's words, a viral "pop(e) icon"[4] (p. 20).

Pope Francis became an involuntary meme, but he was also an active religious influencer. On the social media platform X, formerly Twitter, the account @Pontifex shared statements by Francis with millions of followers in various languages. Sociologist and Catholic theologian Christina Behler

1 Cartter 2023.
2 Xavier 2023.
3 Milmo 2024.
4 "Pop(e)-Ikone". All translations of text from Behler's book are my own.

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made this account the focus of her dissertation, which was published in German with Transcript in 2024. The book, titled *Religion in der digitalen Gesellschaft. Wenn der Papst twittert …*, is a case study of what happens when a traditional authority figure becomes a social media influencer. Behler shows how the Catholic Church, or, more precisely, the Holy See, seeks to translate traditional authority into the digital sphere and how social media users interact with the papal online persona.

While the majority of works on digital religion focus on the characteristics of digital religious communication, Behler's research, which is rooted in Luhmannian systems theory and uses "functional analysis", is interested in digital religion's societal function. Her research question reads, "What problem does digital religious communication solve?" (p. 26).[5] In chapters two and three, Behler explores how systems theorists have explained the societal function of communication and religion, respectively. Following Luhmann, she sees communication, given its high contingency, as improbable (p. 31), but social media, such as Twitter, increase the chance of successful communication, as they transcend spatial and temporal distance (p. 86). In systems theory, religion is one of many societal systems and follows the defining binary code of transcendence and immanence (pp. 93–94). For Behler's functional analysis of @Pontifex's activities, two aspects of this systems-theoretical understanding of religion are particularly important. First, religion, according to Luhmann, works to "double reality" (p. 95). Anything that can be grasped as communication in the societal system of religion happens immanently, and the religious system then takes these immanent communications and gives them transcendental meaning. Second, in order for religious communication to be successful, it needs only to trigger some kind of reaction; it does not have to be believed (p. 113). From a systems theory perspective, religious communication is successful if it leads to more communication. For the Catholic Church, success depends on its ability to attract attention and reach an audience.

Behler conducted a qualitative content analysis of more than 2,000 @Pontifex tweets published over a four-year period and a sample of comments on the German-language account @Pontifex_de. The pope's online persona inhabits several accounts, each in a different language but all posting the same text at the same time. The tweets themselves are therefore identical across all accounts, but the comments are divided by account, and, as

5 "Für welches Problem ist digitale religiöse Kommunikation die Lösung?"

Behler shows, are regionally specific. Behler has sorted the tweets into five main categories: "spirituality", "ethical communication", "sympathy/expression of solidarity", "personal concern", and "(spiritual) aphorism" (p. 158).[6] She uses these categories for both qualitative and frequency analysis.

Behler's first observation is that the tweets often spiritually frame statements that could be interpreted as ethical or political. For example, when tweeting about the consequences of wars, forced migration, or the climate crisis, the @Pontifex account often adds the hashtag #praytogether, thus placing the response within a transcendental realm. In Behler's words, the tweets "verify, so to speak, expressions on things that are actually non-religious through their own, religious means"[7] (p. 251). @Pontifex's tweets are thus an example of reproduction by the system of religion, which takes non-religious content and integrates it into a religious framework. In framing global crises and current topics religiously, the pope's Twitter persona can bring religious meaning to these subjects, thereby securing the continued relevance of the Catholic Church (pp. 251–252, 262).

Behler finds that almost none of the tweets she analyzed were created solely for social media. Instead, @Pontifex tweeted excerpts of speeches, sermons, or prayers by Pope Francis (p. 224), creating a "digital duplication"[8] of his communication (p. 230). Behler finds here a strategy for gaining recognition in the digital sphere (p. 235) and argues that the Holy See's tweets vary little from traditional forms of communication (p. 232). While Behler recognizes that the excerpting of Pope Francis's speeches or prayers removes them from their original context, she fails to acknowledge that having to choose a suitable excerpt (short enough to fit Twitter's character limit, comprehensible when out of context, and relevant) is in and of itself profoundly different from traditional forms of communication. The nature of the platform ensures that the tweets cannot be merely a "duplication" of what Pope Francis has said elsewhere.

The most interesting part of *Religion in der digitalen Gesellschaft* is Behler's exploration of the comment section. Using a Twitter account means exposing oneself to a critical public, and Twitter users are indeed critical of the pope and what he stands for. Commenters thematize child abuse in

6 "Spiritualität", "ethische Kommunikation", "persönliche Anteilnahme / Solidaritätsbekundung", "persönliches Anliegen", "(spiritueller) Aphorismus".

7 „Die Tweets des Papstes verifizieren sozusagen Aussagen über eigentlich nicht-religiöse Dinge mit Hilfe eigener, religiöser Mittel."

8 "digitale Verdopplung".

Catholic churches, gender and diversity issues, and the finances of the Holy See, among other "trigger topics" (p. 288).[9] On Twitter, Behler observes, "not only does the pope turn his moralizing gaze on the world, but society also morally judges the pope" (p. 287).[10] @Pontifex thus indirectly tackles the problem of papal accessibility. Everyone with a Twitter account can praise, criticize, or share their thoughts with the pope. They will, however, not receive a reply. The papal Twitter persona does not react at all, leaving rude and insulting comments undeleted. This non-response is, according to Behler, a "familiar and long-rehearsed pattern of communication", as a "pluralism of interpretations is generally not intended" by the Holy See (p. 243).[11] Behler argues that the lack of any consequences for critical or even offensive responses incentivizes users to comment. @Pontifex's unresponsiveness leads to even more interaction, as users respond to other users' questions or speculations, turning the comment section into a discussion space (p. 281). As in systems theory, successful communication is defined by the elicitation of more communication, the Twitter account can be judged successful. By exposing the pope to criticism, it gains visibility and makes the Catholic Church relevant (p. 300).

Behler's book is interesting as a thorough case study of the @Pontifex account and as an exploration of Catholic media practices. She expands in depth on the history and specifics of media use by Catholic authorities and shows that while the papal Twitter communication can be seen as continuing traditional forms of communication, it also departs from them in telling ways. Scholars of religion or media who are unfamiliar with systems theory might, however, struggle with Behler's approach and desire a more critical examination of existing concepts. For example, following systems theory's binary codes, Behler differentiates between religious issues, on the one hand, and political or societal issues, on the other, without allowing for overlap (p. 252). For scholars whose approach to the "religious" or "political" is more nuanced, this absolute distinction might be unsatisfactory. Similarly, Behler sorts commenters into "religious and non-religious people" (p. 278)[12] rather than taking account of the diverse ways in which people

9 "Reizthemen".

10 "[…] dass nicht nur der Papst mit einem moralisierenden Blick die Welt beobachtet, sondern dass auch die Gesellschaft den Papst moralisch bewertet."

11 "ein gewohntes und lange eingeübtes Kommunikationsmuster", "Ein Pluralismus von Lesarten ist in der katholischen Tradition grundsätzlich nicht vorgesehen."

12 "religiöse und nicht religiöse Personen".

relate to and engage with the pope. Bar those hesitations, Behler's unusual theoretical approach to digital religion provides a new perspective within digital religion research and builds an innovative bridge between sociology and theology.

One further concern, though: Behler hardly engages with the vast body of literature on religious authority in the digital realm and misses opportunities for further examination of the topic of authority. The subtitle of the book, *When the Pope Tweets …*, suggests that it was Pope Francis himself who drafted the @Pontifex tweets. Throughout the book, Behler repeats this personification and often writes that "the pope" posted a particular tweet. The "tweeting pope" (p. 26), however, did not actually tweet. Indeed, he stated that he was not only unfamiliar with but critical of social media (p. 218). Behler notes that commenters ascribe the tweets to Pope Francis and hold him responsible for anything that happens on the account, including an accidental "like" given to a bikini model in 2020 (p. 219). Yet Behler herself seems to have fallen into the same trap. Even though her research is focused on the societal consequences of the @Pontifex account, not the inner workings of how tweets are generated, her analysis would have benefited from grasping @Pontifex as an artificial persona and exploring how this digital personification relates to the Catholic Church's communication strategy.

At the time of writing this review, shortly after the death of Pope Francis, his name and photos had already been removed from the @Pontifex account. The Holy See will likely soon delete all tweets to make space for a new pope, as it did in 2013 after Benedict XVI's resignation. Behler's book is therefore not only a timely case study and an innovative theoretical take on digital religious communication, but it will also serve as a valuable archive of tweets during the pontificate of Pope Francis that can be compared with the digital communication of his successors.

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