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Tweet the Message? Religious Authority and Social Media Innovation

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Abstract

Religious believers have historically adapted Scripture into brief texts for wider dissemination through relatively inexpensive publications. The emergence of Twitter and other microblogging tools today afford clerics a platform for real time information sharing with its interface for short written texts, which includes providing links to graphics and sound recordings that can be forwarded and responded to by others. This paper discusses emergent practices in tweet authorship which embed and are inspired by sacred Scripture, in order to deepen understanding of the changing nature of sacred texts and of the constitution of religious authority as pastors engage microblogging and social media networks. Drawing upon a Twitter feed by a prominent Christian megachurch leader with global influence, this paper identifies multiple ways in which tweets have been encoded to quote, remix and interpret Scripture, and to serve as choice aphorisms that reflect or are inspired by Scripture. Implications for the changing nature of sacred digital texts and the reconstruction of religious authority are also discussed.

About the Author

Dr. Pauline Hope Cheong is Associate Professor at the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication, Arizona State University. She researches the socio-cultural implications of communication technologies, including digital media innovation at work in spiritual, non-profit organizations and the changing nature of authority and community. She has published more than 60 articles, chapters and books on communication technologies, covering transnational and international contexts in Asia, Europe, Middle East and North America. She served as the lead editor of *Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture: Perspectives, Practices, Futures* (2012) and as co-principal investigator of several grant funded, multi-method projects related to digital religion and culture. Her research has been recognized by multiple distinguished scholarship honors, including outstanding book and top paper awards from the International Communication Association and National Communication Association.

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1. Introduction

“Pastors tell me, Twitter is just made for the Bible.”

Ms Claire Diaz-Ortiz, Senior Executive, Twitter for Nonprofits program,
New York Times, 06/02/12

The emergence and proliferation of social media has facilitated changing informational flows as well as innovations in the presentation and sharing of updates and texts. In recent years, popular microblogging tools have enabled religious leaders to share, repurpose, and even remix sacred texts like the Holy Scripture in new and creative ways. Specifically, Twitter affords real time information sharing with its interface for short written texts of less than 140 characters, which includes providing links to photos, sound and video recordings. These short texts can be “favorited”, “replied to” (@replies), and retweeted (RT) by other users. Interestingly, this affordance has led many people in the “third sector” or non-profit and religious spheres to

profess that Twitter is a useful tool for their work. Among these proponents is Ms Claire Diaz-Ortiz, a Senior Executive at Twitter, author of *Twitter for Good: Change the World, One Tweet at a Time* (2011) and leader of Twitter's *Twitter for Nonprofits* program. Diaz-Ortiz believes, as the opening quotation of this article illustrates, that Twitter is particularly well suited to spreading Biblical texts (O' Leary, 2012).

This affordance therefore prompts fresh inquiry into the changing properties of digital sacred texts and the relationships between the authors and users which shape the creation and reception of these texts. Relevant research questions include: what are the norms guiding the construction and use of these micro sacred texts in the religious context? Given the many competing texts and alternative voices online, in what ways are emerging practices of religious authority facilitating the use and interpretation of spiritual tweets?

Accordingly, the thesis of this article concerns the ways in which microblogging may facilitate new (re)presentations of Scripture in brief forms, as religious leaders author and disseminate their teachings via microblogging platforms. Specifically, in this article, I discuss emergent practices in the creation and spread of spiritual tweets, i.e. tweets which embed and are inspired by sacred Scripture, in order to deepen understanding of the changing nature of sacred texts and of the evolving constitution of religious authority as pastors engage the Twitterverse alongside their other mediated performances and duties. Examination of these emergent norms is important because digital and social media use may have, to a certain degree, facilitated changes in the personal and organizational basis by which religious leaders operate. As I will illustrate, clergy are appropriating new patterns of interactions including social media communication to relegitimize and construct new practices of authority.

The spotlight here is on tweet authorship by a prominent leader from a class of "pastorpreneurs" (Twitchell, 2007) who lead megachurches, defined as large Protestant religious organizations with more than 2000 people in their worship services weekly (Thumma, Travis, & Bird, 2005). Leaders of megachurches worldwide have gained a great deal of media publicity, warranting their new label as religious celebrities (Cooke, 2008) and holy mavericks (Lee & Sinitiere, 2009). In many ways these leaders also serve as exemplars of digital media innovation as they are social media savvy. They lead wired organizations, including multi-sited campuses that are often on the cutting edge of digital media incorporation and the transmediated branding

of their mission across traditional broadcast, print, radio and digital and social media platforms (Cheong, 2011). It is thus instructive to examine how these influential religious leaders use and manage digital texts, including microblogging on rapidly expanding social media networks.

2. Social Media and the Communicative Constitution of Religious Authority

For many, Twitter is synonymous with generating revolutionary change and the subversion of former regimes and hierarchies in the “spring” or uprisings of this generation. Indeed, historically the relationship/s between authority and electronic media has been profound and contentious. A thematic review of studies on religious authority and communication technologies pointed out how earlier and initial studies of internet research has tended to reflect dislocation and support “a logic of disjuncture”, in which digital media was understood to principally disrupt religious authority by posing a threat to the power of traditional institutions and leaders to instruct and interpret religious symbols (Cheong, 2012). In this light, the authority of traditional religious leaders has been depicted as tangential to or absent from virtual faith communities and forums (e.g. in Stephen O’ Leary’s (1996) earliest depiction of a new religious textual community online which functioned without a central leader or institution). Religious authority has also been conceived as being undermined by the plethora of alternative voices in cyberspace, including popular yet not officially trained or ordained clerics and gatekeepers (e.g. the observation by Anderson (1999) of “new interpreters” and alternative voices on Islam in emerging public spaces online).

A number of recent studies, however, has subscribed to the current prevalent logic of continuity and complementarity, which refer to digital media connections as being supportive of religious authority. The mutual flourishing of social media and religious authority is observed when leaders and their institutions’ evolving practices restructure the legitimacy of their symbols and work contexts, amidst creative and countervailing (re)presentations (Cheong & Ess, 2012). Growing scholarship momentum has gathered around investigating the synergetic relationships between online and offline faith beliefs and infrastructures, including how religious leaders shape, sustain and are being sustained by their latest digital and social media practices. For

instance, Campbell (2012) noted that the Catholic Church's adoption of YouTube videos proceeded alongside the dismantlement of interactive features like the ranking function and comment mode on the Vatican YouTube channel in order to preserve the Vatican's media control.

Prior research studies on Asian pastors and priests have also illustrated that many leaders view new competencies to connect interactively across a spectrum of media to reach congregational members in a generally positive manner. Clergy are proposed to be adjusting their social identity to become guides and mediators of knowledge and encounters both online and offline, an approach that Cheong, Huang & Poon (2011a) have termed "strategic arbitration." Such strategic arbitration facilitates normative regulation and the co-creation of information and expertise under conditions where laity cooperation is elicited by retaining leadership power to determine informational and interpersonal outcomes such that these outcomes do not destabilize the organization. Cheong, Huang and Poon also found that several Buddhist leaders enacted their authority by promoting communication influence through offline-online mediation and mentoring that restores trust and "karmic links" and in turn increases congregational epistemic dependence upon them (Cheong, Huang & Poon, 2011b).

In contemporary times, therefore, it is interesting to observe how Christian churches incorporate the use of Twitter and other micro-blogging practices into their daily institutional practices to create "ambient religious communication" or a sense of connected presence among their members (Cheong, 2010). Churches also use microblogging to circulate "faith memes", the viral messaging of religiously related ideas, symbols or practices to promote thought contagion, reinforce beliefs and spur network building (Cheong, 2012). In some cases in the United States, churches have even created special "Twitter Sundays" to prompt members to tweet their reflections and questions throughout the service. However, it is significant to note that these tweets are typically first reviewed by church staff before they are posted as scrolling visual messages on a screen behind the preaching pastor (Cheong, 2012).

In another example, Burroughs (2013) discussed how the presentation of the General Conference of the Church of the Latter-Day Saints, which is a forum to disseminate Mormon church teachings to the entire body, had been historically controlled. In recent years, a live feed had been posted on the "Mormon Messages" YouTube channel of the Church. Early live

tweeting of the event had included critiques of leaders' instructions but more recently, it seemed that the church had co-opted the microblogging of this conference by promoting the #ldsconf hashtag. Specifically, Burroughs argued that:

What started out within the lay congregation as faith tweeting has been turned into techno-faith as the centralized control of the church formalizes the tweeting by encouraging the use of the hashtag #ldsconf and posting it to their website. While the hashtag #ldsconf doesn't control the message, it does implicitly bring the cultural practice of live-tweeting during General Conference under the purview of the official church (2013 p.77).

As such, it appears that Twitter can be effectively mobilized to reinforce religious authority and control within the church.

In light of the emerging literature on religious communication and new forms of social media, this article explores the ways in which tweets may function as small sacred texts. Despite the growing popularity of social media, there is little research examining the ways in which these micro texts can be strategically authored to achieve religious mission, with implications for the changing authority of clerics. Consequently, findings here will address the evolving nature and forms of sacred text as well as shed light on the potential of religious leadership to adopt new media to construct new texts and amplify their authority.

3. The Authorship of Sacred Tweets: Encoding and Remixing Scripture

This paper focuses on tweet authorship involving Scripture, drawing upon the case of Pastor Kong Hee. Kong Hee is the leader of one of Asia's largest megachurches, City Harvest Church in Singapore, with 50 affiliate churches in 2013 and more than 45,000 attendees in Asia, Australia and the United States (<http://www.chc.org.sg/>). Their extensive media operations include 4 cable TV networks and satellites, CityRadio online, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and mobile apps accessible on both Android devices and the iPhone. Kong Hee's global influence and organization makes for an interesting case for the study of religious authority and is particularly relevant for this paper given his prolific Twitter profile.

Reverend Kong Hee's Twitter handle (@konghee), "an ordinary guy serving an extraordinary God!", is somewhat self-deprecating and an ironic understatement considering the

exceptional reach of his ministry in Singapore and worldwide. His first tweet was posted on 10:59pm, on the 8th of February 2009: “Learning to use Twitter. I am going to South Africa tonight for 3 days! Going to be fun!” (retrieved on <https://discover.twitter.com/first-tweet>, 03/22/2014). In January 2014, his Twitter account had more than 93,000 followers – an asymmetric relational network as he is following 13,000 others. He tweets on a daily basis, often multiple times a day. He communicates mostly in English, although like some pastors of megachurches in the US (e.g. Rick Warren) he also tweets occasionally in other languages including Chinese, Japanese, and Malay.

In the following discussion, this paper discusses his tweet authorship related to the use of sacred Scripture culled from his publicly accessible profile. Tweets were retrieved systematically from January 01 to April 20 2013 (N= 927). In light of the understudied trends in religious microblogging, the intent here is not an exhaustive content analysis or detailed discourse and feature analyses of all his tweets. Rather, the goal in this modest article is to contribute to the building of grounded theory by highlighting key examples of social media “linguaging” related to Scripture as constitutive of spiritual organization when leaders and members enact their organization through communication (Cheong, Brummans & Hwang, 2014; Brummans, Hwang & Cheong, 2013; Fairhurst & Cooren, 2009) in order to shed light on this journal’s special issue topic on the changing nature of digital sacred texts. Accordingly, the thematic analysis here involved a cyclical process of familiarization of the data by individually reading the online English and Chinese data to categorize data in view of the research foci; open, axial and selective coding with returns to the data for reexamination and confirmation (Strauss and Corbin, 1990); selecting representative excerpts to illustrate key insights; and discussing the interpretations to ensure convergence and consistency (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

These analyses suggest at least four ways in which Pastor Kong Hee’s tweets have been encoded: a) to quote Scripture, b) to remix Scripture, c) to interpret Scripture, and d) to serve as choice aphorisms that reflect or are inspired by Scripture. The section below discusses varied types of tweet authorship and illustrates them with tweets from Pastor Kong Hee’s Twitter feed.

4. #Sacred Texts

First, below are several examples of tweets that have been authored to quote Scripture verbatim. The third in the list is an example of transmediation at work in the contemporary convergent culture, a process in which digital texts are manipulated, shared and migrated across different mediated platforms (Jenkins, 2006). Here, a verse read on YouVersion's "The Bible App" is subsequently shared word for word on Twitter.

Kong Hee @konghee 3 Mar

We love because He first loved us ~ 1 John 4:19

Kong Hee @konghee 27 Feb

Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me ~ Ps. 51:10

Kong Hee @konghee 29 Jan

Better is a poor man who walks in his integrity than a rich man who is crooked in his ways.

<http://bible.us/59/pro.28.6.esv>

However, not all Scripture is shared in its literal or plain form, with accompanying Biblical citation of chapter and verse. The second way in which tweets are authored is by remixing scripture, for example by blending scriptural texts with tagged pictures for illustration. For instance, in the tweet below a twitpic which features a colorful photograph of a bird accompanies the verse:

Kong Hee @konghee 27 Mar

Under His wings you will find refuge; His faithfulness will be your shield & rampart ~ Ps 91:4 pic.twitter.com/YFABlqfmt4

It is not uncommon in religious communication to find the use of zoomorphic representations of a divine being or entities in animal form, for example the appearance of the Holy Spirit as a dove in the New Testament of the Bible. Here, the use of the bird graphic

appears to complement and metaphorically reinforce the zoomorphic language and meaning of a verse which addresses the providential care and protection of God.

Another, less straightforward example of scriptural blending is the combination of images and verses taken from different parts of the Bible. For example, on the 17th of April a tweet read “Be still & know that I am God... pic.twitter.com/Ai97a0wm3T”. Here we observe the strategic excerpting of a verse. The first part of the tweet is actually only the beginning part of a verse in Psalm 46:10. The full verse reads, ‘He says, “Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth”’ (New International Version or NIV). The second part of the tweet links to a twitpic referencing a popular story in another section of the Bible, the sixth chapter of the book of Daniel, in which Daniel the prophet is thrown into the lions’ den and then subsequently rescued by God. Here it is interesting to note again how Holy Scripture is presented in mixed mediums. In this instance the literal verse is actually condensed, but at the same time it is extended by cross referencing with an image inspired by another Biblical story. Pastor Kong has found that image using Glo, an interactive multimedia Bible.

A third type of Scriptural remix consists of linguistic blends, in this case pairing Chinese proverbs with English Holy Scripture. On the 10th of February, a series of eight tweets were sent that included a traditional Chinese 4 character proverb, coupled with a verse that referenced all or part of the connotative meaning of the proverb. For example, the proverb 步步高升, which can be transliterated as *bu bu kao sheng*, “every step you meet with a promotion” or “attaining a promotion with each step”, is paired with a verse from the book of Ephesians 2:6: “God has raised us up with Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenly realm in Christ Jesus”. The next proverb 岁岁平安, transliterated as *sui sui ping an* or “peace in every age”, is paired with a verse from Philippians 4:7: “The peace of God will guard our hearts and minds in Christ”.

These linguistic and scriptural mixes are timely because they were sent in the midst of the Lunar New Year celebrations, but they are also provocative because their side by side presentation in a tweet represents an attempt to shape the interpretation of both the traditional proverb and the Scripture verse by highlighting their isomorphism in form and meaning. Specifically, in these tweets, effort is expended to mirror the Chinese proverb with the scriptural verse thematically, evincing how new figurative connections can be made between these

traditional Chinese idiomatic expressions (called 成语 or *cheng yu*) and Biblical texts in tweets concerning mental and material prosperity and blessings.

The third major finding is that multiple tweets more directly illustrate Pastor Kong Hee's authority in Scriptural interpretation. For example, it is not uncommon to find the capitalization of some words within a spiritual tweet, so that followers are reminded exactly where their focus should be. Historically, writing in caps or CAPITAL LETTERS online may look (and sound) to one's recipients as if one is "shouting" with emphatic force. In this case, the capitalization of a word highlights that attention is drawn not to the subject (the afflictions of the righteous) but to the conjunction, to stress the point that there is relatively good news after one's trials:

Kong Hee @konghee 15 Jan

Many are the afflictions of the righteous BUT the Lord delivers him out of them all ~ Ps. 34:19

In another example, the first part of the tweet is the pastor's interpretation of spiritual unity, with a stress on the word "ONE" via capitalization, and the second part of the tweet is the actual Bible verse.

Kong Hee @konghee 25 Feb

We are ONE in Christ! How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity ~ Ps. 133:1.

In yet another example, actual Biblical texts appear to take a back seat to prescriptive messages like mini sermonettes, with only a reference and little incorporation of scripture. For example, in the next tweet, a verse from Isaiah 43:25 is referenced. The full verse reads, "I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more" (NIV). Here the verse is cited in an expository tweet, which instructs recipients to forget their sins since Christian believers have experienced spiritual rebirths and are therefore, made new beings in Christ:

Kong Hee @konghee 21 Jan

Since God has forgotten our past sins (Is. 43:25), so should we. We are new creatures IN CHRIST!

Microblogging can also be used to condense and recombine different Biblical verses (or parts of a verse) into one tweet, creating a unique spiritual lesson or personal instruction for Pastor Kong's followers. This is illustrated in the following tweet, which first cites and then references verses from two different books, authored by two different apostles in the New Testament of the Bible:

Kong Hee @konghee 15 Jan

“Resist steadfast in the faith” (1 Peter 5:9), God will bring deliverance every time. (See also 2 Tim. 3:11.)

The full verse in 1 Peter 5:9 reads, “Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.” The second verse cited, 2 Timothy 3:11, refers to the Apostle Paul's experience of “persecutions, sufferings—what kinds of things happened to me [Paul] in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them.” This tweet serves as a useful example of Pastor Kong Hee's interpretation of scripture. The verse (1 Peter 5:9) in the first part of the tweet, a truncation of the actual verse from a book commonly attributed to Apostle Peter, is paired here with a general pronouncement that “God will bring deliverance every time”, despite the difference in context of the verses cited.

Last but not least, another major proportion of tweets on this pastor's Twitter feed consist of aphorisms, some of which quote other luminaries and sages, and some of which do not cite or reference Scripture but reflect theology and appear to be inspired by scriptural content. For example, the tweets below are aphoristic and the first in the list is another example that contains capitalization for pedagogical emphasis:

Kong Hee @konghee 10 Feb

He has given the COMMANDMENT to save you. He is your ROCK & your FORTRESS.
You have been UPHELD by Him since birth.

Kong Hee @konghee 3 Feb

We are more than just human flesh & human blood; we are a spirit, we have a soul & we live in a body.

Kong Hee @konghee 16 Mar

You have been reconciled to God through Jesus Christ. You have perfect fellowship with Him now.

5. Spiritual Tweets: Changing Sacred Texts and Authority Practices

The missional and evangelistic impulse of the Christian faith has historically prompted believers to spread the word or Holy Scripture in creative and abbreviated ways, for example the distribution of short publications or relatively low cost “tracts” to spur spiritual growth during the 19th century Evangelical revivalist movement (Gelfgren, 2012). If brevity was historically valued and is said to be the soul of wit, then contemporary tweets may serve to be soul-winning as they embed scripture in small sacred texts. Prior research has found that many early tweet entries resembled early accounting diaries (Humphreys, Gill, Krishnamurthy & Newbury, 2013). Although commentary and perfunctory accounting styles were found to be more popular than reflective and introspective narrative styles from content analyses of early random tweet samples, tweets like those in early religious diaries could serve as an opportunity for writers to reflect on their own consciousness and communicate beliefs related to moral and spiritual import.

This paper has found multiple examples to illustrate that tweets have been crafted in staccato style to quote, extract, remix and recontextualize Scripture, with implications for the role of pastoral authority in strategically shaping the (re)presentation and interpretation of Scripture via microblogging on social media. Although Twitter authorship has a unique structural constraint, the Twitter platform is not necessarily a liability for those who have been able to encode Scripture in these truncated microblogs. The findings of this paper contribute fresh insights into the changing nature of spiritual texts. The texts in this sample are composed in

light of the multi-mediated affordances and length limitations of microblogging formats, for broadcast and viral dissemination.

Religious authority is communicatively constituted and emergent. Rather than force a debate about who is an authority in an informational age, we have observed in this article that clergy's response has been to act in authority through the construction of new sacred texts and norms of credibility in social media sites. The dynamic and communicative constitution of religious authority is perhaps all the more pointed in this case, considering that Pastor Kong Hee has been charged with other church leaders in a corruption trial involving financial irregularities in the church of some S\$50 million dollars since 2012. He has expressed his confidence that he will be vindicated but is at the time of writing undergoing court hearings for misappropriation of church building funds and for the falsifying of church accounts (Lim, 2014. For summary of the case, see <http://www.straitstimes.com/chc>). In view of this controversy, his attempt to use authorship to maintain communicative influence on Twitter may also be understood as an attempt to restore trust and increase epistemic dependence on his scriptural expertise for spiritual instruction. This in turn, illustrates how clergy may re-circumscribe social networks online to become sacred spaces and craft specific practices to reinforce their epistemic authority.

It is important to acknowledge that resistance to clergy authority does exist on Twitter, although in this case these alternative messages are in the minority. For example, in a tweet in February Pastor Kong exhorted his followers to "Be brave. Be strong. Don't give up. Expect God to get here soon," referencing Psalm 31:24 to support this teaching. However, one follower tweeted back and said "Oh, Where is he?" – questioning the presence and power of God and, by association, the legitimacy of Kong's clerical authority. In another example that is related to his criminal charge, in February 2013 Pastor Kong tweeted a link to a document explaining his church's response to the upcoming trial. There were five responses to this tweet. Two responses were clearly supportive of him: for instance, the first reply was "standing with you and praying for you PK [Pastor Kong Hee]. Strong faith for tough times! We love you!" Two other replies were retweets, but there was one critical response that read: "so your life ends in a month? I'll mark my calendars!"

However, overall my analysis has found that followers tend to validate the positive and asymmetrical relationship they have with their leader on Twitter. This finding echoes some of

the previous research done on digital religion. For example, Timothy Hutchings's study in a Christian chatroom found that the pastor's authority is usually reinforced by exhortative and encouraging discourse manifesting spiritual support (Hutchings, 2011). Another study recently highlighted a similar operational closure in a global Buddhist organization, where comparatively few critical or contentious comments were observed within the discursive domain of its Facebook posts and social media (Cheong, Hwang & Brummans, 2014).

Steven Knowles' (2013) latest study illustrates that online interactivity, a key feature of contemporary social media networks, may actually help affirm, not assault religious authority. His analysis of a popular Christian fundamentalist website highlighted how the Internet is utilized to strengthen religious authority and bolster the position of gatekeepers. Site interaction included censorship and little tolerance toward online participants who voiced dissent or did not abide by the numerous rules in the site's forum board. In his study on the Mormon Church, Benjamin Burroughs (2013) noted that a tweet about an atypically loud "Amen" audible on the worldwide broadcast of the April 2013 General Conference after a leader's talk became a meme among members of Facebook and other social media, and was then later incorporated into collective faith expressions to enthusiastically affirm church ideology.

This is not to assert that resistance to clergy authority does not surface elsewhere on other online texts and in face to face contexts or to obviate the possibility that contentious online content may have already been removed prior to analysis. Nonetheless it is significant to underscore the emerging evidence, here and elsewhere. While social media texts certainly allow for contestation and debate, there appears to be an online "echo chamber" (Sunstein, 2009) of praise and exhortation expressed by loyal ranks of like-minded followers to repeatedly sustain religious authority. Indeed, in current times of media convergence and participatory culture, spiritual tweets may represent another means of power for megachurch leaders and those with the resources and reason to promote their own translation and interpretation of religious messages. As such, although the New York Times piece (O'Leary, 2012) referenced in the introduction of this article has suggested that religious leaders are "powerhouses" on Twitter with more engaged followers than most celebrities, this claim discounts the reality that some pastors are (and are responded to like) celebrities, in light of their growing local and worldwide followings and transmedia performances on digital and social media (see also Cheong, in press,

for other microblogging examples with regard to social media branding of pastors of American megachurches in “a culture of religious celebrification”).

Future research may elaborate this paper’s findings by comparing Pastor Hong Kee’s tweets with those of other prominent religious leaders worldwide, including attention to ways in which clerical identity is explicitly and/or implicitly expressed in their tweet authorship and in instances where tweets may not be written directly or composed constantly by the cleric per se but also by a team of media specialists working in the church. For example, more detailed linguistic analysis could be undertaken in the future to examine the use of certain key words, like the pronouns “we” and “you”, and the use of URLs and retweets, which are employed differently by religious leaders to accomplish their institutional identity, as in the cases of American pastors Mark Driscoll and Rick Warren (Long, 2012). In addition, authority relations can also be further illustrated by looking at the interactions and responses of followers to religious leaders on Twitter.

In sum, my research has shown multiple examples to illustrate how tweets have been crafted to embed, blend and cite Scripture, with implications for the role of pastoral authority in enacting innovative ways to present and interpret Scripture on Twitter. This implies a strategy that maintains clergy communicative influence through teaching via discursive norms of online instruction and (re)presentation of Scripture that in turn may reinforce their credibility and increase epistemic dependence of their church and Twitter followers on their authority.

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