

RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY ONLINE: Catholic Case Study in Poland

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ABSTRACT: Drawing on a popular Catholic online forum in Poland, this study examines the interaction between top-down (traditional institutional) and bottom-up (informal expert) forms of religious authority. In adapting Campbell's concept of online religious authority, this study shows how both forms of authority emerge in varying contexts and serve distinct yet mutually supplementary functions. Top-down authority occurs in relation to the general topic and background of discussions and appears mostly through references to religious doctrine. Informal experts, in turn, emerge through groups of the most active users and gain status through the recognition of fellow patrons due to their expertise, experience and interpretation skills. The aim of the latter is less to undermine or replace traditional religious authority, than to intervene in those areas where the institutional representation of the Church may fail or disappoint the expectations of fellow believers.

KEYWORDS: Catholic forums, religious authority, religion and the internet, online Christianity.

INTRODUCTION

Media continues to have an unquestionable impact on religion, religiosity, and religious communities around the world (Campbell 2010; 2012; Bunt 2009; Dawson and Cowan 2004; Hoover et al. 2004; Lövheim 2004; 2011; Knoblauch 2008). These studies have shown that the online and the offline worlds are strongly interconnected. Treating online processes as separate from the offline can lead to the creation of artificial social worlds, which operate within a different technocratic logic (Rheingold 1993). While attempts have been made to create "online religions" or "online churches" (Jenkins 2008), they remain a small fraction of online religious activity. Most online churches take the form of a website with no ambition of forming a Durkheimian moral community and, in contrast to earlier predictions, the motivations for going online for religious purposes remain limited and conservative (Hoover et al. 2004; CBOS 2014).

This is not to say that the internet has little influence on how religion is conceived and lived out in practice. It has played a vital part, not least in blurring the boundaries between

the sphere of religion and nonreligion, and further accentuating the individualization of religion and the development of “popular religion” (Knoblauch 2008). Moreover, the blurring of boundaries between producers and consumers of media content has allowed for the empowerment of marginalized groups and communities and for greater expression of contradictory interpretations in public, as well as adding to the continued challenges facing ossified, inflexible structures.

It is now clear that the connections between the online and offline shape online communities and are visible in the processes of authority building and the creation and maintenance of community. One of the key questions that has emerged, as a result, is how traditional religious authorities are being affected by the changing religious landscape. Important themes relate to how the traditional (i.e. institutional, hierarchical, nominated) authorities of established religions deal with emergent spiritualities and religious movements (Hamberg 2011); and how religious institutions are affected by bottom-up movements.

Naturally, the true scope of the power of the Church to influence, predict and control how followers behave; what part of the teachings they accept, adopt and apply; and which ones they dismiss altogether, remains significant but limited. No institutional religious hierarchy is capable of monitoring followers’ everyday activities completely. In the case of Poland, however, the Catholic Church has significant control over religious media broadcasting: through *imprimatur* (i.e., authorization of the form and content of broadcasts to be labelled as “Catholic” in both print and broadcast media), and as conducted through employing “Church assistants”. The internet, however, cannot be subjected to a similar monitoring processes. While several websites (including those of parish or diocesan and religious organizations) can be expected to follow the teachings of the Church, more private and independent channels, including Catholic chat rooms, blogs, and forums, cannot.

Bryan S. Turner (2007; 2011) argues that the proliferation of religious websites and communication channels results in the co-emergence of individualistic, commodified forms of religiosity as well as local, bottom-up religious authority beyond institutional control (Turner 2011, 221). Anyone can pose as a faith and moral expert online without preparation, experience or knowledge. Lack of institutional oversight can also create information overload and confusion among believers, who may not be able to filter through the content and determine whether what they read is in fact in line with their official religiosity. Turner’s predominantly negative view can be summarized with the observation that traditional religious authorities are mostly undermined, weakened and discredited through the growth of digital religious media. Reliability of religious content, once established through institutional oversight, has thus largely been lost, at the same time as emergent experts are unable to replace legitimate traditional authorities.

Heidi Campbell (2007; 2012), in turn, suggests a more positive outcome. While noting some of the problems mentioned above, Campbell sees greater potential for the empowerment of marginalized or hidden communities. Based on a study of several mailing lists of religious groups, Campbell (2010) thus finds that, in many cases, participants are able to receive online what they lack in offline religious communities (parishes, churches, etc.). Support, help and care are granted to everyone in need, regardless of age, gender or status differences. By the same token, Campbell argues that religious websites can help believers acquire more knowledge, becoming more connected with their co-believers and indeed with the wider religious institution itself. Traditional authority is, therefore, not simply challenged and undermined by digital religious media, but in many is cases affirmed and bolstered by the latter (Campbell 2007, 1049). Members of religious organizations can thus serve as institutional representatives

offering legitimate advice and reliable knowledge, while at the same time negotiating with and adapting to digital media (Cheong, et al. 2011).

Moreover, as a direct result of the proliferation of religious media, new forms of authority may emerge, as in the form of moderators of religious forums or chat rooms (Herring 2004). The extent to which such emergent authority structures undermine, substitute, or indeed support more traditional sources of authority, however, remains open to debate.

In this article, we argue that online Catholic forums, while creating environments for individualistic communication beyond institutional oversight, are spaces where bottom-up and top-down religious authorities can and often do coalesce in mutual support. The former are based on recognized forms of religious skill or expertise, while the latter make use of more direct references to religious texts, official documents, or the legitimized authority of the Church itself. The aim of bottom-up authority, however, is less to undermine or replace traditional religious authority than to supplement it and intervene in those areas where the institutional representation of the Church fails or disappoints the needs and expectations of believers. Before moving on to these findings in more detail, we begin by providing an overview of the Polish religious landscape.

POLISH CONTEXT

Poland represents one of the most religious nations in the world and is often labelled amongst the principal exceptions to the European trajectory of secularization. The Roman Catholic Church makes up the single largest religious institution in the country, whereby around 90 per cent claim to “believe in God” (CBOS 2012, 2). Despite the hegemony of Polish Catholicism, however, closer inspections of individual religious beliefs and practices have increasingly come to challenge clear-cut assessments of Polish religiosity. Whilst self-identifying as Catholic, most Poles do not in fact attend Mass; individual ties to local parishes are becoming weakened; and an increasing number of people consider the Church and its teachings as having a limited influence on questions of morality and guidance in their everyday lives (CBOS 2012, 22).

A number of studies have consequently come to conclude that Polish Catholic faith no longer signifies a universal form of religiosity. Reflecting such shifts, public perceptions amongst religious individuals, pertaining to such issues as abortion and euthanasia, remain ambiguous, and the vast majority of Poles now accept premarital sex, the use of contraception, and cohabitation prior to marriage (CBOS 2013, 5). Moreover, belief in heaven and hell has dropped to around 60 per cent in recent decades (CBOS 2012, 18). Yet, at the same time, the percentage of attendees receiving Communion has steadily increased to over 16 per cent (ISKK 2013), suggesting that while overall participation in Mass may have fallen, the levels of adherence to institutionalized practices of those remaining in churches have increased over time.

Given its established position in the Polish public sphere, the Roman Catholic Church continues to hold the highest concentration of religious media ownership in the country. The online presence of the Church, in particular, has seen considerable growth in recent years. This has come in the forms of increased enhancement of religious provision through official Catholic websites; a growing presence of clergy across online platforms; and the rise in the number of independent websites established by lay Catholics. Despite being recognized as legitimately Catholic, the majority of such websites do not operate under direct institutional oversight from

the Church. Though generally endorsing material in line with its official teachings, religious sites in Poland consequently represent a novel development in the public presence of religion.

Focusing on measures of religiosity in particular, levels of commitment and church attendance are found to be positively correlated with consumption of religious websites, confirming earlier research indicating that such websites are often of most use to those who are already more religious to begin with (Hoover et al. 2004; CBOS 2014, 3, CBOS 2015, 2-3, CBOS 2016, 3). Indeed, the most common motivation for religious website consumption is to find out about events held at the local parish or in the wider Church (CBOS 2014, 5, CBOS 2016, 6). For over 45% of respondents, using religious websites is a supplement to their offline religious activity (CBOS 2015, 3, CBOS 2016, 4). In comparison, in 2016 about 3% of respondents claimed that visiting religious websites is the only form of religious activity which they undertake (CBOS 2016, 4).

At first sight, such findings may seem to refute the hypothesis that the internet is a major source of religious novelty and deviance. Closer inspection of the characteristics of such users, however, fails to allow for such conclusions to be drawn more confidently. The two most exhaustive studies of online religion in Poland illustrate this ambiguity in more detail. On the one hand, both PBI/Gemius and CBOS indicate that the majority of users come from rural as opposed to urban areas. This may be explained by the fact that the urban population remains less religious overall when compared with its rural counterpart, or that the relative lack of choice in religious offerings, in rural settings, effectively acts as an incentive for individuals to seek alternatives online. Furthermore, both findings identify the number of internet users visiting religious websites to be around 11-14 per cent, with women having a slightly greater showing than men in regularity of use.

However, while the former identifies the 15-24 age group as the principal cohort, the latter claims this position for the older cohorts instead (PBI/Gemius 2014; CBOS 2014, 1, CBOS 2015, 2, CBOS 2016, 2). In addition, while the former source claims a dominance of users with a higher education, the latter suggests that the most frequent users of religious websites are comprised of those with only secondary levels of educational attainment. More significantly, the second or third highest motivation expressed for religious internet use is found to be seeking closer engagement with religious texts and teachings (CBOS 2014, 5, CBOS 2016, 6).

CASE STUDY

To reiterate, this paper aims to offer further insights into the growing sub-field within the sociology of religion that focuses on the relationship between media and religion. In particular, it seeks to examine the ways in which bottom-up authority is constructed within the digital public sphere, and how it relates to more traditional forms of institutional authority. While Campbell (2007) and Turner's (2007) studies on the subject offer solid templates for such forms of analysis, empirical research on the subject remains limited, especially within the Polish context (see Mandes 2015; Kołodziejka and Neumaier forthcoming).

Despite the growing number of users of religious websites, systematic empirical research on the phenomenon of the "online faithful" who use the internet for religious purposes remains limited (Hoover et al., 2004). Within the Polish context in particular, the highly fragmented and private-interest driven nature of the data available means that existing measures of associated demographics and preferences lack a sufficient degree of statistical representativeness and are

unable to present more detailed insights into the nature of such forms of involvement (CBOS 2014, CBOS 2015; Kloch 2011; PBI/Gemius 2014).

The case study forum was created in 2003 and is hosted by the website *wiara.pl*. The portal, one of the most popular Catholic websites in Poland, is owned by *Gość Niedzielny*, which also publishes one of the most widely circulated weekly Catholic magazines in the country. The forum, however, is operated separately by ten moderators and two administrators, and therefore runs independently of the editorial board of its parent magazine. With over 12,000 registered users, the forum currently contains over 34,000 separate threads and a total of over 899,000 individual posts.

METHODS

This paper focuses on two of the most popular sections on the forum, namely “Faith” and “Church”, each comprising over 255,000 and 102,000 posts respectively¹. Individual threads under consideration (7 in total) were drawn between January 2012 and March 2015, and range from anywhere between 20 up to a maximum of 7500 posts each. The available material was examined through the use of critical discourse analysis. Rather than aiming to unveil the hidden power structures associated with the forum within wider offline settings, the present analysis focused instead on the following principal areas as set out in more detail by Norman Fairclough (1992, 232-238): 1) the level of control and means of dominance exercised by various groups and individuals throughout their interactions (interactional control); 2) the specific forms of discursive strategies deployed, such as irony, loaded questions, modality and strategies of evasion, etc.; 3) conversational modes of intertextuality and interdiscursivity; 4) and finally, coherence, which Fairclough defines as the potential of a text to receive ambivalent or resistant interpretations and reception (1992, 233).

Echoing standards pursued in more strictly ethnographic forms of study, Fairclough stresses the significance of what he terms “problematizations” in discourse that reflect moments of discursive change. Those can be traced in “moments of crisis”, i.e., those situations during interactions in which subjects disagree, misunderstand, or fail to comprehend one another. These situations reveal the true hidden dynamics of power and authority, whereby the course of exchange is disrupted and subjects are forced to deploy unique strategies to revert the discussion back onto their preferred track. Forums in which such moments of crisis dominated the discussions were, consequently, chosen as the main objects of study for the present analysis.

Furthermore, five individual in-depth interviews were conducted with the most active users (i.e., those with over 500 posts published) between June and September 2014. These were included in the study, serving as supplementary data (which Fairclough suggested as a means of enhancing data corpus, see: 1992, 227).

Compared with its rivals, this forum offers an especially suitable case study for the analysis in question, due to the fact that moderators do not delete inactive or closed posts, allowing for a fuller and more accurate examination of the true historical trajectory of individual exchanges. Permission for data collection was successfully obtained from the chief editor of the portal. However, given the membership barrier for placing posts, and the fact that the threads often reflect private opinions and personal information, some individual users called for anonymity in the final presentation of the findings. To ensure the protection of their privacy, the following nomenclature has been implemented to hide original nicknames and the dates of specific posts: W (forum.wiara.pl), n (ordinal number of quote), e.g., W1. A similar procedure was deployed

¹ A large portion of the material presented in this study (i.e., all interviews and the five forum threads) was collected during research for the doctoral dissertation of Kolodziejska.

for identifying the interviewees. Their nicknames were assigned based on forum and ordinal number, and took the form of I (interview), n (ordinal number), i.e. I1. All original forum posts and interview transcripts in Polish were translated into English by Kołodziejska.

DATA

There are two main sources of authority that operate on religious forums: bottom-up and top-down. Bottom-up authority arises out of the forum itself and is based on the recognition of expert knowledge in a particular area, such as religion, science, or life wisdom that applies to more quotidian affairs. Top-down authority, in turn, represents the external institutional authority of religious texts, hierarchies, structures, and ideologies that typically make up the foundation of forum discussions (Campbell 2007, 1044).

BOTTOM-UP EXPERTS

Bottom-up authority is not assigned by forum administrators or moderators, but is instead founded on the ability to display a combination of expert knowledge and skills of interpretation throughout forum discussions. In other words, they reflect informal experts, vis-a-vis the formal experts of the institutional Church. Forum regulations discourage users from posting information or biblical quotes that are unsupported by sources and/or sufficient commentary. This requires bottom-up experts to express themselves within the clearly defined parameters of the forum.

The following two excerpts depict the above-mentioned mechanism. In a thread entitled “Hell for the unbaptized?” user W1, in answering one of W2’s questions, draws from his own knowledge but does so by referring to the Bible. In another discussion, focused on a biblical interpretation, the same user reaches for theological works analyzing the problem in question. In both instances, the goal is to provide information whose reliability is confirmed objectively, and can thus be verified and checked by anyone interested:

“W1: What is the ‘fire of hell’? Mt 25,41-46- when depicting the suffering of the condemned, Christ speaks of ‘eternal fire, of the ‘worm that does not die’ (Mark 9, 48), prison, eternal darkness (Mt 25,30). What is the punishment of hell all about?”

W2: I see [W1] that you’re knowledgeable in theology, so I’d like to use this opportunity and ask two questions: Why would punishments in hell be unequal? 2. What do you think about fr. Hryniewicz’s concepts?”

“W1: Since you do not seem to have done any browsing through the sources on the web, I have found some texts related to your query: The ‘faithful servant’ (πιστὸς) and ‘wise’ (φρόνιμος) takes advantage of his prerogatives as best he can (...) compare: P. Geoltrain, Dans l’ignorance du jour, veillez, Mt 24, 37-44, AssSeign 5 (1969) 17-28; H. Gollinger, „Ihr wisst nicht, an welchen Tag euer Herr kommt“. Auslegung von Mt 24, 37-51, BuL 11 (1970) 238-247; (...)”

W3: Thank you [W1]! I usually don’t ‘confess’ resorting to the internet to look for texts, because they’re ‘bare’, and here on the forum, there’s usually an interesting discussion”.

W1, a member with over 8000 posts, a declared atheist, and a recognized expert within the domains of Catholic Church law and the structure of the forum website, draws upon various types of knowledge in his posts, including the Bible, French and German theological writings, as well as Greek translations to support his argument and further the discussion. W1 not only exhibits a familiarity with Catholic dogmas and teachings but also accepts Catholic interpretations of the bible and other Church documents as valid sources of religious

knowledge. This helps to illustrate the fact that discursive alliances within the forums are not necessarily formed within religious orientations alone but can, and often do, transcend both theistic and atheistic dispositions.

As this exchange further illustrates, forum posts often contain a high level of intertextuality. This stems both from the above-mentioned forum regulations and the discursive strategies involved in gaining credibility throughout interactions. Users are therefore expected to provide source references in their quotes, rather than merely express matters of personal opinion. This tendency leads to a push away from solely subjective viewpoints towards more abstract and substantiated levels of discussion.

As a further sign of the inherent logic that underlies such forums, the knowledge and skills of interpretation of various users are often explicitly praised within the community as a whole. These signs of appreciation often occur despite any personal differences and generally transcend both religious affiliation and political orientation. The following accounts by two users illustrate this in more explicit terms:

"I've even seen discussions which went like that: someone creates a thread and then asks 'I'd like x, y, z, to reply', so addresses them directly, saying 'listen, your opinion matters to me'. Or sometimes I'd see that someone joined a discussion and someone would say 'Oh, we've been waiting for your opinion' or 'we've waited for you to speak out'. There have definitely been users who were more knowledgeable in something, or were of some confession, or from a faction [of the forum- MK]. I'm not saying that their opinion would preordain the course of discussion, but was expected by others (...). Those people are usually very open-minded". (I1, female, atheist)

"I think that several people on the forums actually specialize in particular domains of life. After thousands of discussions, I can say who specializes in what (...). Specializing in particular religions plays an important role because you cannot compare Catholicism to say the Muslim perspective on Jesus. For example, we have an Orthodox who knows a great deal about the nuances between Catholicism and Protestantism, as well as Orthodoxy. He describes everything nicely and can fish out any incoherencies. We also have Catholics who are experts on the Catechism". (I2, male, "deist").

The first interviewee mentions the respect that many experts enjoyed within the forum community, regardless of their beliefs. Since their status depends upon their specific knowledge and skills, they are often called out to participate in a discussion. While their role is not to provide conclusions or conciliatory arguments, their opinion may render the debate more fruitful, informative and substantiated.

In the latter account, I2 mentions expert specialization: he uses the phrase "we have" to indicate ownership and familiarity, where "we" refers to the forum and "have" draws attention to the value of experts as assets, including their attention to detail and engagement in discussions ("describes everything nicely", "fishing out incoherence"). Both quotes indicate that experts are considered to be especially valuable members whose participation is desired and expected.

Taking a step back from the public recognitions of bottom-up authorities on the forum, it needs to be stressed further that their emergence represents the culmination of a prolonged process of activity and exchange, as opposed to a clearly demarcated turning point in their online status. The following features of this process stand out as being typical.

First, they emerge from the group of most active users or "insiders" (Unruh 1980, 280; Arat 2016). This is typically reflected by the total number of published posts, with most experts having at least 500 posts. Second, the recognition of bottom-up authority rests on the approval of other active users. This recognition is often reflected in their direct engagement with their

posts, asking for their opinion, or indeed recommending other users to various specific experts. Finally, approval of experts does not have to emerge unanimously in order to be deemed valid. Given the fact that forum experts specialize in a particular theme or field, their authority is contextual and thread-specific. Since forum users represent a heterogeneous community of users comprising of Catholics, non-Catholics, and atheists, several factional groups can be found in the forums which differ in their preferences. An expert in the history of papacy, for instance, is not necessarily considered an expert on Islam. This leads users to form flexible and contextual alliances within specific threads, whereby allies in one thread may be opponents in another. This naturally leads to a situation whereby each individual group has their own experts whose knowledge and skills can be considered as superior to those found in other groups, as illustrated in more detail in the following set of discussions:

“W3: Faith isn’t about thinking with your brain but about praying, which results in constantly experiencing God’s presence and sensing His Will.

W5: Faith isn’t about thinking at all. To the contrary, thinking is a hindrance to faith. Let’s assume you wish to believe the Earth is flat. Will thinking about the results of space flights, seagoing, etc., help or hinder augmenting your faith?

W4: We can call him differently, but the true name of God is a mystery.

W5: [W4], can you answer the actual question? I’m not interested in this nomenclatural logic.

W6: [W5] is right about one thing: the existence of God surely isn’t certain. Choosing atheism isn’t illogical. Everyone has the right to do that”.

Here users discuss the nature of God. W5 is an atheist biologist with over 3,700 posts and an expert in the theory of evolution. He discusses the connection between faith and knowledge by using statements of facts of normative force (“thinking is a hindrance...”) with two other recognized experts - W3 (960 posts) and W4 (6,500 posts). The latter are both Catholics who challenge W5’s remarks on the role and nature of faith. This leads to W5 being defended by another expert, W6 (1,019 posts), who despite being a Catholic and consenting to the former two users’ argument, stresses that W5 nevertheless makes an important point. In supporting the claims made by his fellow Catholics he also defends the right of others to choose non-religious points of view.

This fragment also illustrates that the authority of experts is negotiated, and thus is not assumed permanently nor sealed with a winning argument. Similar dynamics can be observed below:

“W7: [W8] and [W5] think, I presume, that only those facts exist which are discussed in the media. The more they are, the more facts’ emerge. If something isn’t in the media, it doesn’t exist.

W8: [W7] you must admit that it’s easy for the Church to receive restitutions, because the State has written a special system of law enabling that.

W5: And now a simple test to check if [W7] knows what she’s writing about. Or if she reads what she is commenting on. Quote one of my claims on the invalidity of the restitution of Church’s assets.

W7: I asked this question after [W5]’s claims about the Church Fund, some of which I will quote below and will show those claims which are his erroneous projections of what the Fund actually is”.

Here, another Catholic user W7 (6,000 posts) steps in to highlight a number of falsehoods in W5’s posts in an effort to prove the latter’s lack of knowledge within this particular field. She dismisses claims made by W8 and W5 with the use of irony (“If something isn’t...”), and in her last post she attempts to reveal what she considers to be faulty argumentation. W8 (over 10,000

posts) indirectly supports W5 by emphasizing some legal aspects of the problem of retribution of the Church's assets following the fall of Communism. Consequently, as both of these cases clearly illustrate, it is not a particular person or affiliation as such that is being challenged, but rather the logic of argumentation and quality of knowledge being put forward.

TOP-DOWN AUTHORITY

Throughout the quotes discussed above, references to the top-down authority of texts, hierarchies, and ideologies are used either to support particular claims or arguments, or to mark the topic of dispute in itself. It is therefore important to stress that top-down authority is referred to by all types of users, regardless of their religious affiliation or indeed the types of discourse they engage in. This then brings us to the second type of authority that operates within such forums.

Top-down authority is usually deployed in an indirect manner, such as when it is used in quotes or other references to substantiate users' points of view. Moreover, it is equally necessary to point out that, throughout the course of this research, only two users were able to be identified as members of clergy, although it is fair to assume that the number of clergy who participate incognito may indeed be higher. Unlike bottom-up authority however, traditional authority is typically criticized, mocked, and denounced in a much more direct and explicit manner.

As already set out previously, the characteristic feature of forum exchanges is that they are based on knowledge that undergoes instant processes of verification by users. Informal experts are especially active in conducting this process, which can take the form of correcting misquoted sources or faulty interpretations, providing alternative sources, or juxtaposing opposing interpretations and sources. The following excerpt illustrates this process in more detail:

“W9: Catholics should consider the Bible as the exclusive authority on matters of faith.

W4: The Fathers of the Church aren't by themselves an infallible authority for a Catholic, so I don't know why you've decided to choose that line of thinking in a section for Catholics (or people who can set some premises and stick to them). Maybe on an Orthodox forum your strategy would be better.

W10: [Authority is] by no means exclusive. Catholics respect tradition as well. By the way, you also quote from the Fathers of the Church, although selectively”.

Here we find users debating the true source of authority for Catholics. W4, a Catholic quoted previously, while not opposing institutional authority, remarks that the Fathers of the Church cannot be considered infallible or the sole sources of authority in Catholicism. W10 (over 2,300 posts) supports this position, highlighting the shortcomings in W9's argument with the use of statements of facts. Working together, W4 and W10 thus aim to clarify how the line of thinking advocated by W9 (who used open persuasion by saying “Catholics should...”) is in fact inaccurate. Similarly:

“W1: In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. οὕτως οφείλουσιν οἱ ἄνδρες ἀγαπᾶν τὰς ἑαυτῶν γυναῖκας ὡς τὰ ἑαυτῶν σῶματα ὁ ἀγαπῶν τὴν ἑαυτοῦ γυναῖκα ἑαυτόν ἀγαπᾷ (Ephesians 5:28). So, in

practice the word "gunaika" means a woman bound by love (wife) or erotic ties (concubine, lover), but the aforementioned excerpts show that a woman is treated like a wife (...).

W11: [W1], it seems no one has arguments to oppose you.

W12: Not true. If that was the case, "their" wouldn't be added to "gunaika". Or, to discern a wife from a concubine – "legal" would be added to "gunaika". This word means "woman" in general. It is translated into "wife", because a translation into "your woman" would be highly dubious. So you paste a text in Greek, but you analyse the translation anyway. And the Greek text is supposed to add splendour to your analysis."

The second discussion focuses on the subject of translation. W1, an expert on Church law, proposes a translation of a line from the Bible and infers on the meaning of the term 'gunaika', supporting his claim with an appropriate quote in Greek. At the same time, he proposes his interpretation in a form of objective knowledge. His interpretation, however, is dismissed as misleading by W12 (5,000 posts), who is widely recognized as an expert in translations from classical languages. By deploying a strategy of posting statements of facts ("It is translated...") W12 points out that his interlocutor does not make a cogent claim because his reference is based on a Polish text as opposed to the original.

These exchanges illustrate once again the extent of the value being placed on levels of knowledge about and skills of interpretation of traditional religious sources. Informal experts cannot enforce their opinions onto others, nor can they expect users to agree or adhere to their advice. Instead, the general ethos in which exchanges take place throughout forum discussions are better represented as openly encouraging personal independent thinking. The following exchange illustrates this final point in more detail:

"W15: This is my first post and I'd like to mention I'm an atheist. From this line of reasoning I can conclude that everyone can have their own God. Why is your own God worse than the one in whom the Catholics believe?"

W16: [Y]ou can experience God only personally. You cannot experience Him through religion, Church, your peers or the internet, or by reading books, watching movies, etc.

W17: First of all, you need to find your 'own' God who will 'speak' to you, meaning one you will accept. We're not identical and everyone needs a different vision of God, and you also need one. Most religions try to squeeze their followers into Chinese spiritual uniforms, because they think they have the whole truth and everything else is 'heresy'".

User W15, a newcomer and declared atheist, poses several questions in his lengthy post. Some answers are plain statements of facts or references to the teachings of the Church, while others, like those of W16 and W17, are encouraging W15 to actually begin a spiritual inquiry of his/her own by deploying strategies of tacit ("you can...") and open ("you need to...") persuasion. W17 is an expert in what he calls 'everyday religion', and is eager to comment on moral dilemmas of Catholics based on his own experiences. In his post, the emphasis on independence ('find your own God'), while not meant as an opposition to institutionalized forms of religion, stipulates that individual religious endeavours are superior to uncritically following the teachings of the Church. Similarly, W16 argues that one needs to find a private image of God in order to become a believer, and that this seeking should precede all other forms of religious engagement. Once again, it is worth noting that W16 and W17 do not enforce their opinions but rather encourage W15 to begin his own search for religiosity independently of the institutional Church. Taken as a whole, references to top-down authority are meant to serve as a point of departure and basis for individual religious endeavour and moral judgement, as

opposed to depicting infallible and undisputed answers to questions raised throughout forum discussions.

This latter process was also mentioned by interviewees, some of whom explicitly stated that they have learned a lot about their religion by engaging in discussions:

"(...) I haven't read the Bible and I learn a lot from other users. I engage in discussions and it's easier for me to get some biblical knowledge when I learn it from someone than, say, when I just read the text (...). So when I'm engaged, this is a commitment and I care more (...)." (I3, male, Catholic)

"And you gain knowledge by talking to people you disagree with (...). Through questions and discussions my personal growth takes place. I get acquainted with content which I wouldn't have found if it hadn't been for the forum (...). I like to know and ask questions like "why?" (...) That's why I'm on the forum". (I6, male, atheist)

"This growth of mine happened because I was inspired by discussions. I collected data for the purpose of conversation, and often wrote articles for a paper or something. Those discussions gave me lots of inspiration to write and publish various texts". (I4, male, Catholic)

Regardless of their religious affiliation, users thus emphasize the need for engagement in discussions in order to gain personal growth, which they associate with gaining knowledge. The disputes and disagreements were found by I6 to be more fruitful than debating within a circle of like-minded individuals, and all interviewees mentioned learning from others as a source of often surprising inspiration.

CONCLUSION

The main aim of this study has been to assess the distinct relationship between bottom-up and top-down forms of authority within the confines of a Polish Catholic forum. This analysis, coupled with more personal interview material, leads us to conclude that both forms of top-down and bottom-up authority exist in parallel throughout online forum discussions. Moreover, these two sources of authority cannot be assumed to operate in opposition to one another. Despite the fact that it is possible to speak of instances where a confrontation between the two does arise, it is inaccurate to assume that this split forms a defining feature of the structural relationship between informal and formal types of authority throughout such emergent platforms of religious engagement.

Instead, the parallel function of these forms of authority is found to rest on a supplementary dynamic. For instance, this co-existence allows users to raise questions in public that they may be unable or indeed unwilling to bring up more directly in front of traditional forms of Church authority, due for instance to the sensitive nature of their question or to their preference to remain anonymous. The main function of informal experts, in this regard, ought to be identified more in terms of an advisory and supportive role than one that openly seeks to challenge, undermine, or effectively replace the traditional authority of the Church.

It must therefore be noted that these findings challenge some earlier concepts addressed in the introduction (Turner 2007; Herring 2004). The coalescence of top-down and bottom-up authority, in these instances, disproves claims that using the internet for religious purposes leads predominantly to the proliferation of pseudo-experts whose influence lacks depth and significance, and whose main motivation is to compete with traditional forms of religious

authority. Lack of institutional oversight does not necessarily result in the promotion of eclectic forms of religiosity, nor in the rejection of institutionalized religion per se.

One of the key mechanisms underlying this power relationship rests on the ethos of instant verification throughout online discussions. The forum thus represents a space for the exchange and dissemination of knowledge that entails a significant level of accessibility and democratization of specialized knowledge, as well as empowering personal acquisition and interpretation of religious forms of knowledge. These findings consequently correspond more closely with Campbell's observations regarding the empowering potential of religious online communication. Moreover, acquiring knowledge online also allows users to compare their findings with more traditional sources, enabling them to openly compare religious arguments with non-religious perspectives on any given issue. Throughout these exchanges, the dominant ethos being pursued is one of independent thinking and critical interpretation, whereby the intended outcome of the discussions is less to coerce others into accepting a claim, or convert them to a particular point of view, than to encourage a consciously informed and reflexive religious, or indeed non-religious, orientation.

In the final analysis, despite the fact that this study is based on one of the most popular online religious forums in Poland, any conclusion regarding its implications on the overall landscape of Polish Catholicism needs to proceed with caution. After all, the online faithful remain a niche cohort whose operations clearly lack any explicit calls for a more unified, stand-alone community or indeed any organized challenge to the traditional authority of the Church. Instead, its overall dynamics of exchange serve to further bolster existing claims towards increasing individualization and privatization in religious belief and practice.

Nevertheless, a closer look into the specific balance of power at play between these two sources of authority has highlighted important insights that may well prove to signify profound transformations in the future development of religious activity. While remaining highly conducive to existing parameters of subjective religious and spiritual engagement, the evolution of authority within such fields of practice has not been found to signal greater conflict and opposition between the personal and the institutional. Instead, it has been shown that these two forms of authority now operate via a novel form of coalescence. More strikingly, perhaps, this highlights novel developments taking place in terms of how a primacy on religious knowledge – a domain traditionally associated with 'old' religion – is being refashioned in the hands of informal virtuosos. Instead of disrupting or competing with the established Church, these new purveyors of tradition thus point to a unique and arguably counterintuitive evolution of power and authority within more established religious settings.

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