Who has the Power? Religious Authority Online

Last week, Pope Francis visited the Holy land and my home city, Jerusalem. This (political? religious?) pilgrimage received attention in many forms of media, offline and online. The trip was covered by major news broadcasters in Israel and abroad, online news website, the Vatican website and various social media outlets.

The Pope himself twitted about his journey:

The fact that Pope Francis uses twitter has become a normality nowadays. Pope Francis is known as "the tweeting Pope" and is in fact the top world leader using Twitter (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/07/26/pope-francis-twitter_n_3658807.html). The internet and new media has made religious leaders more accessible to the public than ever before. But one must wonder, what happens to this authority when it is communicated online?

In the early stages of what is now known as "digital religion" research, Helland (2000) distinguished between "religion online", a top-down communication of religious authority, and "online religion", a participatory space where users create religious content without the guiding hand of a traditional

religious authority. However, with the development of web 2.0, social media, and as research of religious phenomena online matured, these neat lines became blurry. For example, when Pope Francis tweets about his journey to Israel, is it still top-down when anybody can replay, retweet, consume or produce related communication?

One of my research projects deals exactly with these blurry lines. I have been exploring the phenomenon of Jewish religious Q&A online, a growing trend within religious Jews in Israel. My case study includes 562 Q&A from the website kipa.co.il, a leading website for the National-Religious community in Israel. Although newly imported to the online sphere, the practice of Q&A has a long tradition in Judaism, known as Responsa (Steinitz, 2011; Dosick, 1995). Traditional Responsa included long answers which took to heart the unique conditions of the person asking and the long legal tradition of Jewish law (Halacha). With the guidance of Dr. Campbell, we have found that in online Responsa the message becomes much shorter in comparison to traditional Responsa, and the rabbis' epistemic authority seems to derive from online sources rather than traditional textual authority. In the majority of the answers, the rabbis did not explicitly rely on Halachic literature, rather framed the answers as "in my own opinion".

By referring to online sources, decreasing Halachic literature references and writing shorter answers, the rabbis are strengthening what can be understood as their online religious authority. This authority depends on technological literacy and the quantity of questions answered. That does not mean that the quality of the answers necessarily decreases, or that online Responsa frames rabbinical authority as a less knowledgeable. However, it can be argued that online Responsa frames religious authority as horizontal (broad) rather than vertical (rooted in tradition), accessible rather than profound.

The study of religious authority online is a topic in need of continued investigation, as it is closely connects to the ever-changing reality of our social and technological world. Further research will help us all understand what it means to have a tweeting Pope.

Work Cited

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