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# CELEBRITIZATION OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

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(Received 2 July 2017)

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## Abstract

Celebritization is one of the fundamental processes in contemporary culture with a number of variations. Together with traditional sources of celebrity status, e.g. show business, sports or politics, there are new forms of celebrities emerging. Besides new media means we can also point to the social order or public desire as the most important reasons of this movement. Specific source of celebritization can be localized in the area of religion. In the paper we point to the concept of celebrity religious leader, demonstrate mechanisms of celebrification process in this area and present examples of gaining celebrity status by religious figures. Particular emphasis is placed on the use of digital media by religious leaders.

*Keywords:* celebritization, celebrification, culture, religious leader, social networking

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## 1. Introduction

At the first look the areas of celebrity culture and religion could be considered as unrelated, but in fact there are many connections. Celebrity is a profane phenomenon in perfect accordance with contemporary media consumption. Religion, right in contrary, covers spiritual life of an individual focusing on the intimate experiences on the edge of metaphysic nature of human existence. But is it possible to consider religion leaders as celebrities? Which discourses of religion-celebrity relationship circulate in our culture? And, more concrete in relation with new media forms: what are the connections between the use of social sites by religious leaders and their celebrification? These are also the main questions determining the analytic nature of this study.

A topic of relation between the celebrity culture and religion is nothing new. Studies analysing the historical development of celebrity can't avoid describing some inspirations from worshipping of religious figures and the constructing of the cult of holy idols [1-3]. Probably the most analysed topic on the intersection of celebrity and religion is the celebrification of religious figures. Leslie [4] and others [5] offer several examples of religious figures who achieved status of global celebrity: Dalai Lama, Mother Teresa, Pope John Paul

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II, Pope Benedict XVI, Pope Francis II, underlining the fact, that they all achieved celebrity status as a product of the culture industry. Lanuza [5] particularly analyses Pope Francis celebrification processes during his visit of Philippines. Parker and Watson [6] focus on the analysing of celebrity endorsement of particular religious ideas and concepts. In this perspective, traditional celebrity (e.g. athlete, show business persona, etc.) represents a moral and value framework for common people who are influenced by their opinions, lifestyle, norms, values, ideas and behaviour in their everyday life. Scholars also focus on the role of new media in celebrification of religious personas. This topic was broadly opened by the former pope, Benedict XVI, who used Twitter to communicate with public on daily basis. He also urged representatives of the Christian church to use social media (particularly social media sites) to interact with current but also potential young believers. As Pope Francis seems to be in accordance with his predecessor's approach, a topic of the use of new media for the personalization and celebrification of religion figures is particularly current. Horner [7] focuses on the interaction of Christian leaders with Twitter, picking 30 Twitter users and analysing their communication with public. There is also one current research [8] analysing the concept of digital leadership and use of microblogs to provide the conversation. This study focuses not only at public blogs, but also on Pope's @Pontifex account. However, complex studies on celebrization in religion area are not available up to date.

## **2. Celebrity, celebrization and celebrification**

The concept of celebrity culture plays an important and inseparable role in contemporary society. It is usually connected with popular figures who gained the fame through media presentation. According to Danesi [9], the basic term of celebrity is linked with personalities who gained their fame primarily through their extensive media exposure (television celebrities, actors, actresses, musicians, etc.). Rojek looks at celebrity solely as at something provided by mechanisms of our culture: "celebrities are cultural fabrications" [1, p. 10]. According to Boorstin [2] the term of celebrity refers to state of famousness and notoriety. The author notes that celebrity could not have existed before graphic revolution and defines the celebrity as „a person who is known for his well-knownness“, or, on the other place more critically as “human pseudo-event”. In general, the term of celebrity refers to „a famous or celebrated person“ [<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/celebrity>]. In this paper we distinguish celebrity from other forms of fame (e.g. icon, figure, personality, star, superstar, VIP, etc.) by Leslie's [4] characteristic of the 20<sup>th</sup> century celebrity, which is as follows: (1) leads a public life; is involved in work or activity in some area of the public sphere, (2) has accomplished means of interest and importance to general public, (3) is well known or famous, usually because of those accomplishments, (4) seeks to become a celebrity by finding ways to be regularly seen and heard, thus maintaining a status of a well-known,

famous individual, (5) is highly visible on or in media, (6) connects with the public on a subconscious level, embodying its dreams and desires.

Typology of celebrity by Leslie [4] leads us to the broad category of popular and famous people (see Table 1, which is updated by deceased celebrities and microcelebrities following our previous research [10]). Despite the fact that the concept of celebrity is primarily linked with the entertaining industry, Leslie points out the fact that nowadays, it is necessary to understand it in a broader context and link it with other areas and professions. He assumes that under certain circumstances also religious leaders can become celebrities and thus the concept of celebrity is not in defiance of their pastoral service. Neil Postman even don't think a professional background of celebrity is important anymore, as "Politics, religion, news, sport, education and business have been transformed to a nice attachment to the show business" [11].

**Table1.** Celebrity typology (inspired by Leslie [4]).

<b>Category</b>	<b>Specific examples</b>
Politics, authorities	Emperors, leaders, soldiers, politicians
Art	Writers, artists, musicians
Science, Medicine	Scientists, physicists
Entertainment industry	Film and TV stars
Sport	Sportsmen, coaches
Business	Entrepreneurs, industrials
Religion	The Pope, preachers, priests
Public	Reality show participants, news producers
Deceased celebrities	Non-living celebrities – delebrities
Microcelebrities	Youtubers, bloggers

General process leading to achievement of celebrity status is referred to as *celebrification*. It is connected to media representation of person, which purposefully leads to the fabrication of fame. The essence of *celebrification* lies in the manufacturing of the subject of public desire, represented by concrete celebrity. It is a transformation of ordinary people and public figures into celebrities [5]. Lanuza highlights the parallels between this creation of stardom and the critical theory of Frankfurt School concept of "products of modern industrial capitalism, which manufactures images and sell them to the large number of consumers while promising pseudo-individuality" [5, p. 3]. *Celebritization* has several manifestations: from the creation of *celetoids* or *instant celebrities* [12] to the more or less natural ways of achieving celebrity status by extraordinary individuals (e.g. athletes, billionaires, actors) [13].

Besides *celebrification*, there is one more important process related to celebrity presence in culture, which is the *celebritization*. It is usually defined as "meta-process that grasps the changing nature, as well as the societal and cultural embedding of celebrity, which can be observed through its democratization, diversification and migration" [13]. Driessens further argues that there are three separate but interacting forces of *celebritization*:

medialization, personalization and commodification [13]. Thompson et al. [14] determines celebrityization as the homologizing process of legitimization of celebrity meaning. Celebrityization has number of manifestations: celebrity magazines, celebrity variations of television shows (compare Big Brother to its celebrity version Celebrity Big Brother, similarly The Apprentice to The Celebrity Apprentice and many others), rising value of celebrity memorabilia [1], celebrity worship syndrome and stalking, celebrity tourism (visiting of places like Elvis Presley's Graceland, Beatles' Abbey Road) in certain sense similar to religious tourism [15], celebrity dark tourism or gravesite tourism (graves of celebrities as sightseeing, e.g. Jim Morrison grave in Père-Lachaise cemetery in Paris, which is the fourth most visited attraction in Paris [<http://www.francetravelguide.com/jim-morrison-grave.html>; 16], etc.

### **3. Celebrity culture and religion**

Penfold states that „today we live in a celebrity culture“ which is characterized by daily circulation of images of stars and people „being famous for being famous“ [17]. The author connects this cult of celebrity with a process of globalization and commodification. Celebrity culture has been enforced by the rise of electronic media that established the society of spectacle, commodity signs and representations.

Media evolution offered the unique opportunity to individuals to become famous, respected and influential. According to Nayar “From P3Ps to endorsements, from movie stars to television personalities, from comic book celebrities to notorious scamsters. Celebrities, one might say, are everywhere.” [18] Also according to Cashmore the celebrity culture surrounds us and also invades us, because it impacts our thought, conduct and manner and “it affects and is affected by not just hardcore fans but by entire populations” [19].

When analysing the celebrity discourse in a religious area, we have to consider: (a) the involvement of celebrities and famous people in the promotion of religion (a kind of celebrity endorsement), (b) the glorification of traditional celebrities as a new form of religion, and (c) celebrityization of religious leaders and other respected representatives (priests, monks, believers) mostly through a media coverage or self-promotion using social media platforms.

- a) Celebrities are important elements of media coverage, so they have a number of possibilities to express their opinions and attitudes, e.g. product advertising, social advertising [20], influence on political preferences [21, 22], mono-branding, role modelling for youth [23], etc. Public is quite sensitive on how celebrities live like, what they do, believe, what they think. If covered celebrities express their religion attitudes, they can influence general public, but particularly their fandom.
- b) According to Rojek “Celebrities replaced the monarchy in the way of creating new symbols of worship and... have become immortal... This is the reason why for instance Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, Gandhi and Winston Churchill succeeded in keeping a large aura in a nowadays

cultures. It is why Rudolph Valentino, Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, John Lennon, Jim Morrison, Tupac Shakur and Kurt Cobain remain idols of cult worship.” [1, p.14] Celebrity culture creates a social situation consisting of several individuals such as ‘those being worshiped’, (celebrities) interacting with a large number of ‘worshippers’ (audience, public, fandom). In a certain way, as Rojek ads, celebrity culture has supplied the religion as it has “...stand above the common citizen and achieve veneration and god-like worship” [1, p. 14]. The author connects the celebrity culture phenomenon and celebrity worshiping with the democratization and commodification of the society. According to Boorstin, [2] celebrities can be considered as the worshiped object because they achieve their status via the interest of other ‘common’ people. Rothenbuhler refers to the „... cult of the Church of the individual” [24], while Gillespie understands celebrity worshiping as an authentic application of implicit religion. The implicit religion is typical by the construction of holy symbols from elements used in secular world. In this concept, the public identity of celebrity is considered as a symbol with meaning for their fans [25]. This is followed by deinstitutionalization presented by using of social media (online) as a tool for constructing the celebrity as a symbol of worshiping. According to Gillespie, Herbert and Greenhill in the age of online media, one fundamental question arises: „How do fans’ online actions reconstruct celebrities as religious figures, and how can these be interpreted as a form of implicit religion?” [26] Offered concepts [1, 2, 24] suggest that celebrity worshiping is (at least partially) a substitution of traditional religions. According to Weinstein and Weinstein [3] this new form of faith denies claims of traditional religions and leads to a satisfying of spiritual needs based on weakened concepts of Church. From a different perspective, it should be underlined that celebrity worshiping presents polytheistic model of religion applied in conditions where technology, money, fame, power or consumption are the basic object of human admiration [3].

- c) There is a long list of religious personas we could label as global celebrities, living but also deceased ones. Let’s mentioned at least Pope Francis, Dalai Lama, Mother Theresa and Pope John Paul II. In the Church, just like in some other areas of social life we can observe an emphasis on personalization. This tendency is particularly evident in the field of political communication, where the importance of a political subject as an institution is gradually decreasing as it is substituted by the personalization of official or unofficial leaders [27, 28]. Among the reasons for personalization can be included, in particular, the crisis of the institutions, the phlegmatic approach of the public towards participation in public topics, but above all the better anchoring of the para-social relationship between the communicator and the recipient. Personalization dimensions are as follows: individualization, personification, privatization, intimatization, and finally celebritization [13]. We are witnessing a situation where the institutions’ representatives

are more popular than the institutions themselves. E.g. Pope Francis is ranked as an extremely well-known personality whose knowledge and popularity overcame even the Catholic Church. Results of research report PRRI/RNS Survey has shown that in 2015 all American percent with a favourable view on Pope has been 67%, while only 56% Americans have presented favourable view on the Catholics Church. The difference has been even more evident among former American Catholics: 64% to 43%.

The unfavourable situation with the Catholic Church was reflected in the announcement of the Pope Benedict XVI in 2013 [[http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_mes\\_20130124\\_47th-world-communications-day.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20130124_47th-world-communications-day.html)]. He recommended Catholic priests to use new forms of media, such as blogs [29], vlogs or web sites to announce the Gospel to public, particularly to young people. This is a time when Church leaders were called to use social networking services like Facebook, Twitter to spread the Catholic faith to new generations. Pope Francis was appointed in 2013 and he fulfils the Benedict's call very well. From February 2012 until April 2017 his profile achieved 10.6 million followers and produced 1,171 Tweets [<https://twitter.com/Pontifex>]. The Pope uses Twitter to interact with young generation. In fact he reaches also traditional media, as Twitter is widely popular not only for public relations, but for media relations, too [28, p. 360]. That way, his messages can spread around the world in number of traditional media, global, but also national ones.

It is remarkable that the leadership of the Church represented by two recent Popes has decided to use Twitter only. Popes Francis official Twitter account [@PopeFrancis@Pontifex](https://twitter.com/PopeFrancis) belongs to the most significant communication media of Catholic Church with a huge number of followers (10.6 millions). For a comparison, official Vatican Twitter account [@Vatican – news@news\\_va\\_en](https://twitter.com/VaticanNews) has only 242.000 followers.

According to our long-term research, religious celebrities are of three types: (1) Top Church representatives, (2) A force from bottom and (3) Black sheeps.

1. Top Catholic Church representatives are prone to become celebrities, as their fame is given by the exceptionally prestigious status of the head representatives of one of the largest institutions in the world. Their positions of extraordinary personalities are undisputed. However, their celebrification depends on the global mass media system which requires their own activities to produce them as celebrities. According to current guidelines, these activities focus mainly on the use of social media. Popes follow their recommendations not only by themselves, but they also address them to other representatives of Church. However, putting the popularity of the current Pope in a clear connection with internet social activities is inadequate. His popularity and massive celebrification is also supported by other factors such as his charisma, lacklustre predecessor, expression the empathy with the poor, informal adherence to official protocols, etc. [5].

2. The Pope's recommendations to personalize self-presentation of Church figures through the internet social media is partly reflected also by the Catholic Church's general believers. Nowadays, the presence of the priests and other general believers in social media (bloggers, vloggers) is not very common, however, it is in a progress [30].
3. As it is common in various areas of urban spheres, there are 'black sheep' representatives even in Catholic Church. Reasons for their emergence are various: from accusations of criminal offenses to losing the sympathy of senior representatives of Church. These individuals have quite a big chance to become famous and even celebrities. It also should be mentioned, that the concept of celebrity is not limited to positive heroes. Right contrary, a 'black sheep' framework is in perfect accordance with mass media need for different, scandalous, shocking and bizarre stories, sometimes even led by anti-establishment direction.

#### **4. Findings and conclusions**

The development of the media and modern societies has exactly extended opportunities to gain success and fame. As Turner [31] notes, the expansion of new media offered even more possibilities for fame seekers, as they established new form of freedom. New media caused the loss of power of privileged social classes, as a greater access to media representation eased accessibility of democracy principles to ordinary people and public figures.

As evident from previous text, personalization and subsequent celebrification of religious figures is nowadays more or less based on digital media. This new form of celebrification is mostly impacted by the evolution of the new media sphere offering the possibility of DIY citizenship, which Hartley [32] connects with the multiplicity of choices to construct own identities. (This term refers to a practice of constructing the identity based on the choices, patterns and opportunities offered by the semiosphere and the mediasphere. People can change the given identity, because the 'citizenship' is no longer a matter of a social contact between state and subject and it represents a choice that can people make for themselves.) Furthermore, he specified this process as semiotic self-determination. Subsequently, the idea of social media influencers [33] should be highlighted, together with the integration of the Senft's concept of microcelebrity [34].

Celebrity culture has gone through a few more or less invasive transformations. Part of these changes is determined by the media progress and others are supported by the processes of celebritization and celebrification in particular areas. These processes are very often directly connected. Celebrification in a field of online communicators, microcelebrities and social media influencers can be supported by media progress. Very same result we have achieved by analysing the religious field.

As a main important finding of the paper, we identified three frameworks of the celebrification of religion figures: top Church representatives, a force from bottom, and 'black sheep'. Celebrity status of top Church representatives is ascribed, put by Rojek [1] to the contrast of two other types of its gaining: achieving and attribution. Ascribing is particularly typical for situations when the individual is granted social excellence on the basis of his social function, which he holds, respectively which was given to him. Ideal examples of this are monarchs who become celebrities more or less without their own activity. In connection with top religious leaders, this process is undoubtedly more complicated. It requires the extraordinary quality of the candidate associated with the choice of cardinals, in which the aspect of transcendental force is also emancipated. In connection with the negative processes affecting the Church that we describe above, the last two Popes acknowledged that the involvement of the media in their communication is essential. Moreover, an emphasis was placed on personalized forms of social media. The potential of personalized communication has, in fact, been in contrast with the impersonal forms of mass media communication, which are less addressable and apparently far less effective. The accompanying and indispensable feature of such an innovated communication is becoming a personalization, often leading to the celebration of some religious leaders. In connection with Pope Francis, we point out that he actively uses only one social medium, which is Twitter. At the same time, it is remarkable to look at his informal presence also in other internet social sites, at least Facebook. While Pope Francis uses Twitter, he refuses to use Facebook. As Sharkey explains, the Pope doesn't have a Facebook account because Vatican cardinals worry about the level of abuse he could receive on the world's largest social network [<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/the-reason-why-the-pope-has-a-twitter-and-not-a-facebook-account-9426746.html>].

Although official Pope's Facebook account doesn't exist, there are seven Facebook pages dedicated to him. Three pages are categorized as 'famous person', one page combines 'famous person' and 'religious organization', last three ones are categorized as 'personal web', 'community' and 'business'. The number of unofficial fan pages dedicated to Pope and also the amount of people liking and following content of this pages reflect three basic facts: (a) the importance of the Pope Francis in global culture, (b) the improvement of Christian Church promotion using digital technologies, (c) celebrification of Pope Francis as religious leader, spread through massive number of media forms.

Second identified framework of celebritization in religion area is labelled as a force from bottom. According to Rojek [1] these can be categorized as achieved celebrities. While focusing on Slovak environment, we can mention few Church representatives who have their own blogs. According to Vasiľová [<http://www.katolickenoviny.sk/3-2015-knazom-a-reholnikom-sa-dari-vo-svete-bloggerov/>] one of the most popular catholic bloggers is Juraj Drobný, a priest working for Christian television channel Lux [<https://jurajdrobny.blog.sme.sk/>]. Other example of blogging priest presents Miroslav Lettrich, who is very often a

guest of media discussions [<https://dennikn.sk/17842/17842>]. However, there are also general believers who are active promoters of Church. One of them is Františka [<http://www.mojakomunita.sk/web/frantiska/profile>] who is blogging from 2011. Third, a frame of 'black sheep' is connected to attributed celebrity status [1]. There is a good example of this framework in Slovakia presented by emeritus bishop Róbert Bezák. As he is only 57 now, he is obviously not emeritus because of his age, but for his acting as an archbishop of Trnava, Slovakia. In 2012, he was degraded by Rome for bizarre reasons. However, his popularity is extreme and media even speculate, he can become next Slovak president.

Processes of celebritization and celebrification have to be clearly separated. While celebritization is broad process implementing celebrities into the mechanisms of contemporary culture, celebrification reflects the gaining of celebrity status of individuals, more or less rooted in media (re)presentations. While celebrification is inherent for typical areas of pop-culture (especially show business), it is a doubled-edged sword for religious personas. On the one hand, it helps them to promote the values of the religious stream; yet on the other, it also brings a tension between religious values and the commodifying logic of culture industry that manufactures celebrities. However, Church has to face this relatively new challenge, as it can be clearly demonstrated that personalization and celebrification of its representatives is rational way to gain popularity and therefore it is effective for spreading religious ideas in contemporary culture.

## **Acknowledgement**

The paper was supported by a grants for scientific project: VEGA No. 1/0216/15 'Celebrity in social advertising and their preference at adolescents'; UGA No. IV/4/2017 'Celebrity in the era of digital media'.

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