Sacred Sites for Global Publics:
New Media Strategies for the Re-Enchantment of the Holy Land

OREN GOLAN[1]
University of Haifa, Israel

MICHELE MARTINI
Cambridge University, UK

In recent years, online audiovisual communication has become a key medium to circulate religious content. Videos have become an emergent platform for religious movements to connect far-flung publics with foundational tenets of the faith. Given religious videos' growing popularity, we focus on the centrality of holy places and ask, how do religious video makers construct the legitimacy and centrality of devotional sites via online videos? Investigating the entire production of a religious channel on Holy Land pilgrimage, and drawing on Umberto Eco's theory of indexicality, the study uncovered how the online mediation of holy sites is constructed as legitimate through four interlocking facets: scriptural, experiential, journalistic, and ritual. Findings shed light on contemporary Catholic discourse regarding the biblical landscape and highlight the emergent practice of religious videos to not only supplement the religious experience but also to reengage users to historically well-established foundations, in an ongoing struggle for religious prominence.

Keywords: digital religion, online videos, Christian media, semiotics, networked publics

In recent years, audiovisual communication has become a key medium for circulating religious content (Campbell, 2010; Eisenlohr, 2017; Evolvi, 2019; Golan & Martini, 2019). The proliferation of smart devices and broadband connections has propelled the production and consumption of online videos to the extent that audiovisual formats are playing a major role in reshaping the discourse and collective imagination of believers.

Oren Golan: ongolan@gmail.com
Michele Martini: martinimichele86@yahoo.it

Despite their often traditionalist inclinations, religious movements have taken notice of the potential of online videos for communicating with their far-flung publics and for endowing virtual spaces with holy attributes. From publishing online sermons to livestreaming ceremonies, religious and fundamentalist movements are frequently turning to video as a medium through which they communicate their religious, political, and cultural worldviews (Chouliaraki & Kissas, 2018; Pihlaja, 2020). However, despite their widespread use and profound impact on social movements, religious videos remain largely understudied as a subject of scholarly investigation.

Numerous scholars of digital religion have underscored the translation of religious activities to online settings (Grieve, 2015; Helland, 2005; Tsuria, 2016; Wagner, 2012), thus highlighting an alternative form of religious expression (also framed as "the third space"; see Hoover & Echchaibi, 2014). Given the ongoing struggle for believers' attention in the religious market, as well as the rise of a fluid approach toward religious affiliation and high rates of conversion (Pew Research Center, 2014), we suggest that there is also much to be learned from observing how religious institutions use the Internet to attract and retain believers. In this context, we posit that examining religious outreach efforts that highlight sites of veneration can shed light on the ways in which religious institutions use well-established holy sites, and the ubiquity of online devices, to strengthen religious belief and affirm their roles as power brokers in the information age. Accordingly, this study asks the following:

RQ1:   How do institutional Web-agents (webmasters) (re-)construct the legitimacy and centrality of religious sites via online videos?

To this end, the study focuses on ongoing Catholic media efforts in the Holy Land. More specifically, it investigates the ways in which holy sites are mediatized by digital videos and how such mediatization is constructed as a legitimate form of knowledge that is transmitted online within the religious community. We assert that the semiotic composition (of indexicality, as will be explained below) anchors the legitimacy of holy sites that are at the foci of distributed videos; these in turn affirm the legitimacy of clerics, monastic movements, and the Catholic gaze. Thus, displaying a connection between semiotic structure and the construction of leadership through the mediation of the emergent religious class of webmasters. In addition, through the analysis of visual and textual depictions of sacred landscapes, we aim to shed light on the nature of contemporary Catholic discourse about the biblical landscape. Furthermore, the study shows that videos yield explicit reference to contemporary realities, alongside their monastic authors' use of image-based allegorical interpretations, metaphorical comparisons, and biblical imagery when describing the Holy Land. Our study thus addresses a lacuna in recent studies on contemporary pilgrimage and the anthropology of the Holy Land.

The Holy Land and Holy Site Narration

Holy sites can be seen as spaces that are awarded significance by a given group, and are often marked as such in a specific locale. This significance involves ideas, rituals, and a belief system, all of which foster the social construction and maintenance of communal boundaries and identity.

Set as a pivotal religious landscape of the Middle East, the veneration and devotional portrayal of the Holy Land has been a constant of Christian religious history (Ron, 2009). Indeed, the Christian religious imagination of the Holy Land was consistently nurtured through depictions in church frescos, icons, homilies, religious ritual reenactments, and popular ("vulgare") theatrical expression. Believers were encouraged to engage in personal pilgrimage as well as to support political and economic action that sought to gain a footing in the Holy Land.

Nevertheless, while the image of Jerusalem and the Holy Land persisted in religious discourse, competing sites of veneration emerged that drew public attention. Rome and Constantinople became the epicenters of Christianity, alongside a decentralized and ever diversifying faith. All of which led to the emergence of multiple centers of faith and sacred spaces. Examples include such sites as the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico or Our Lady of Lourdes, both of which began to draw pilgrims from the 19th century onward. This "transfer of holiness" threatened the significance of the Holy Land as the key focal point of the Christian world. Against the backdrop of the growing "market" for religious sites, and the competition among them, various agents (including congregational clergy, states, and corporations) have played a part in highlighting and promoting specific sites. A process that has shaped what Mara Einstein (2008) may refer to as the (semicommercial) branding of each site, highlighting different aspects of religion for each holy site. Accordingly, different sites offer a different form of religious branding: the institutional primacy of Rome, the miraculous intervention of Lourdes or the authenticity of Christian roots for the Holy Land.

The pilgrim experience is not a mandatory practice of the Catholic faith, yet served as a virtuoso activity for the deeply committed or as a rite of passage for select elites (Bowman, 1991). However, despite its voluntary nature and exclusivist history, the practice is viewed as strengthening believers' commitment and has been popularized. On the one hand, the growth of pilgrimage has been boosted by the development of mass-tourism infrastructures around holy sites. On the other hand, various religious institutions have begun to regularly organize and actively promote visits to far-flung holy sites as a spiritual and educational experience.

In recent decades, it has become common for regional churches to invite community members to participate in shared pilgrimages they organize, which also involve a preparatory period of religious study over several months (Fleischer, 2000; Ron, 2009). In this way, pilgrimage becomes a platform for communal engagement, combining leisure, religious learning, and a devotional experience. Though in the past the shaping of these community members' religious imagery of the holy sites was largely derived from the instructional efforts of their local clerics (Midgam Consulting and Research Ltd, 1998), nowadays, religious institutions augment these efforts by promoting pilgrimage through a globalized and centralized online media strategy, thus becoming a means of countering outreach by competing faiths, as conversion movements threaten these institutions' predominance. In response, the development of religious media platforms, the systematic mediatization of holy sites, and engagement on social media become pivotal tools for attracting believers and maintaining engagement with them.

Online Proselytization: Affordances and Challenges

Since the emergence of new media platforms, there has been a notable growth in organized outreach efforts toward transnational publics. In the past, the media outreach efforts of religious leaders were studied in the context of such outlets as radio programming (Lehmann & Siebzehner, 2006), cassette distribution (Hirschkind, 2006), and televangelism (Eisenlohr, 2017). In these studies, such media efforts were often found to be used to subvert competing forms of religious leadership by direct appeal.

Recently, however, numerous small, marginalized, and decentralized religious groups have turned to the Internet to expand their influence in the religious market. Wicca, Satanism, Sufi groups, and others have developed websites to participate in the public sphere (Cawan, 2016; Petersen, 2005; Piraino, 2016). By contrast, some studies have examined the digital efforts of more mainstream religious groups that operate textual websites. Golan (2015) showed how religious websites serve as forms of outreach to Jewish communities while also transmitting teachings and religious ideals to believers who live within enclaved communities. In a similar vein, scholars have noted the ways in which the Holy See, as the central governing body of the Roman Catholic Church, has legitimized and encouraged the use of media as a means of religious learning and to inspire devotion, going back to as early as the 1920s (Campbell, 2010; Lynch, 2018; Ortiz, 2003). Scholars have noted how various social institutions, including the corporate sector, have embraced the symbolic rhetoric of the church via a negotiative process, and thus (for example) religious imagery has featured in contemporary advertisements (Nardella, 2012).

Recently, the Catholic Church has been embracing new media tools to enhance its outreach. Social networking sites, such as Twitter, have been employed by the Pope to affirm his leadership and communicate directly with contemporary publics (Lynch, 2018; Narbona, 2016). Thus, the Internet is used not only to offer a gateway to political figures or institutions but also as a conduit for religious leadership. The motivations of religious groups for Internet use have been discussed in previous studies, but the format of their representation and meaning-making processes have been understudied, particularly as Web activity shifts from a more textual representation to that of image- and video-based formats. One exception is Golan and Martini's (2019) study of Pope Francis' Instagram account, which underscores the visual markers that are used to strategically enhance the Holy See's charismatic appeal, in Weberian terms.

In the information age, we can identify an intensification of the religious market that sharpens tensions between different perspectives. Given the growing competition between different forms of knowledge (religious, aesthetic, academic), it is contended that pious groups seek legitimation to affirm their identity by creating a coherent narrative in a fragmented mosaic of knowledge, which individuals and communities rely on to create a coherent worldview (Giddens, 1991). A worldview constituted by heterogeneous pieces of information tied by the legitimation of a specific scheme of knowledge.

The process of legitimation is one where something is made acceptable or normative to a given population. Legitimacy can be seen as a perception that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, and appropriate within a social construction of norms, values, and beliefs (Golan, 2015). Furthermore, these concepts need to correspond to an overall understanding of justice, universal values, or particularistic interest of a public (Kahane, 1982, p. 4; Suchman, 1995, p. 574). Within the sociological legacy, Weber's

(1954) famous assertions of its sources (traditional, charismatic, or legal-rational) anchored its discussion as a way to achieve a right to rule. Legitimacy is viewed, in a macroscopic framework, as an integral part of holding authority and power (Ferrero, 1942/1972).

More recent studies have drawn the concept of legitimation from a macroscopic discussion of power and institutions in society, to a midrange organizational level (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990). In organizational studies, Sturdy, Clark, Fincham, and Handley (2009) discuss the ways that management consultants operate as unidirectional brokers of knowledge between the organization and its clients. Findings indicate that consultants legitimize knowledge to both parties and facilitate its flow. Their positions are viewed as conducive to facilitate the exchange and breach of organizational (and clients') knowledge boundaries, yet are often underplayed as almost covert innovators that facilitate change, yet are not recognized as the organizations' leaders. Among religious communities, Golan (2015) discusses how different Jewish communities in the U.S. legitimate the use of new media. Through the agency of religious webmasters, the study unveils different strategies (dualist, purposeful, and adoption) that allow the use of an Internet practice that exposes believers to external knowledge and secondary sources of knowledge leadership.

To conclude, past research has underscored religious institutions' efforts to legitimize and appropriate the Internet to advance their outreach objectives, which are at the heart of today's religious struggle for prominence within a global-religious market. Though scholars have examined some of the direct addresses of the Holy See on accepting media use (Campbell, 2010; Ortiz, 2003), online religious text itself has been largely understudied, and offers an inviting subject for investigation with appropriate conceptual tools, such as semiotic inquiry.

Conceptual Framing: Umberto Eco, Indexicality, and Digitized Holy Sites

To uncover the ways in which the meanings of holy sites are impressed on religious networked publics,[2] we draw on the semiotic foundations provided by Umberto Eco (1976), with an emphasis on indexicality, most notably stated in *A Theory of Semiotics*. For Eco, indexicality is viewed as a mode of sign construction that places a "sentence (or the corresponding proposition) in contact with an actual circumstance by means of an indexical device" (p. 163). In other words, the indexical sign links an object to a narrative. Accordingly, the object (perceptum), which is originally viewed as external and arbitrary, becomes a meaningful trace that is linked to both a narrative and to other traces that allude to the same event. Thus, multiple traces work in concert to substantiate each other's authenticity and, in turn, validate the narrative itself.

Holy site experiences can be seen as being constructed using indexical markers—signs that relate to an imagined past and a miraculous act. An interesting example of this is the Foundation Stone (a.k.a. the Pierced Stone) in Jerusalem, which is a sanctified object residing at the center of the Dome of the Rock mosque. The Stone is viewed as an indexical mark of a miraculous event of engagement with God, albeit

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[2] By "religious networked publics" we mean communal formations that advance an online sense of imagined belonging among users, and that also restructure existing religious groups using sociotechnological affordances (compare with "networked publics"; see boyd, 2010; Papacharissi, 2014).

linking to different narratives. Jews traditionally identity the rock with the biblical story of Isaac's binding, as well as viewing it as a spiritual junction of Heaven and Earth. For Muslims, however, the site signifies Muhammad's ascension to Heaven. Though the space lends itself to a spatial and temporal contiguity (Violi, 2012), religious websites add an additional layer that exposes viewers to this indexically charged environment (Golan & Martini, 2019). This can be deemed as an organizationally managed and "customer-centered" online experience of sacred sites (Rashid, 2012).

Of course, religious meanings are not embedded in the site itself. To acquire their evidential value, holy sites need to be recognized and interpreted as such (Eco, 1976). Thus, traces are identified and organized to fit, substantiate, and ultimately legitimize a specific narrative. For pilgrims, the biblical narrative operates as a lens through which they construe the landscape. That is to say, pilgrims draw on their reservoir of religious images, accounts, and protagonists, which they have often revered since childhood. On engaging with holy sites, pilgrims enter into a process of identification that links physical spaces with narratives. Eco refers to this as constructing "imprints" as subjects enter into a process of sensemaking by means of which they associate newly encountered objects with their corpus of meanings. According to Eco, this constitutes a "pointing" process that views subjects as "clue-seekers." In other words, people are constantly engaged in interpreting reality and seeking indicators to fit their symbolic worlds, nurtured by their semiotic socialization (Zerubavel, 1997, pp. 71–72). Accordingly, in the case of devotional objects, believers ascribe religious meanings from their preexisting repertoire to holy items and places.

Drawing on Eco's conceptual framework, we posit that believers construct a proximity with holy sites by viewing online videos. To explore how online videos act to reconstruct the legitimacy and centrality of holy sites, we offer a semiotic identification of markers (indexical texts) within the content that is produced and disseminated online. It is contended that such an analysis can illuminate the strategic meaning-making design that is employed by the Church and its media agents. Furthermore, it may contribute to understanding the manner in which authority is generated in the digital age. Authority refers to a legitimate form of power that sustains a sense of order (Benoit-Barné & Fox, 2017), and, accordingly, authority figures aim to enhance their legitimacy to rule by creating and managing shared meanings. Thus, understanding the ways that clerics construct these shared meanings on videos can illuminate the ways that authority is formed.

Methodology

The study comprises analysis of videos created by Canção Nova's media activities in Israel. Conceived as a direct outcome of the encyclical Evangelii Nuntiandi, Canção Nova is a monastic Catholic community founded in 1978 in Brazil (Cachoeira Paulista). In 2014, the Catholic Church officially entrusted this community with an evangelical ministry operated through means of social communications. This study focuses on the community's production of online videos and is part of a larger project that includes an ethnographic engagement with its media center and with its monastic and administrative staff. We conducted field research in monasteries and holy sites in Israel. Conversations with staff members helped hone various stages of the study, including the field mapping, video sampling design, discussion of coding, and the overall visual and interpretive phases.

Between 2016 and 2017, we collected a representative corpus of videos (68 videos) from several websites. This included all videos posted on the Franciscan Media Center website (https://cmc-terrasanta.org/en) and on the Terra Sancta blog (terrasanctablog.org) and Facebook page (facebook.com/terrasantacmc) that related to pilgrimage, as tagged by the media outlets. The sampling design was based on informant recommendations and video popularity, as verified by both webmasters (religious Web-operating staff, entrepreneurs, and stakeholders) and Web-traffic-measuring websites (such as alexa.com and similarweb.com. We coded each video according to its digital and semiotic structure. This included tagging its syntactic formats (e.g., word sequence, punctuation), semantic taxonomy (e.g., clerical wording, colloquial phrasing), and visual signifiers (e.g., religious images, videos of lay-believers' accounts).

Drawing on Herring's (2009) methodology for Web content analysis, we constantly monitored and documented these websites over the course of the research. We analyzed the selected corpus of videos to detect common discursive traits and shared representational dynamics (see also Pauwels, 2015). Recursive religious iconography and practices (prayer, pilgrimage, and rituals) were recorded (via Camtasia software) and coded (via Dedoose software).

Data Analysis

After selecting and collecting videos, we conducted an audiovisual analysis. Codes were constructed based on emergent topics from both video content and fieldwork, with specific attention to key issues of authority, religion, outreach, and community. Key categories that constituted the religious-media narrative were detected.

To bolster the study's reliability, three independent researchers reviewed the entire data set (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This led to three sets of categories, obtained from the three different analyses, all of which were compared and discussed (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). Subsequently, we resolved differences and disagreements through dialogue, ultimately leading to a high interrater reliability among the independent researchers (Olesen, Droes, Hatton, Chico, & Schatzman, 1994). Moreover, to augment the findings' fidelity, and enhance our understanding of postings and their interpretations, we applied member checking. This included discussions that were held with media managers from Catholic monastic orders who produce and disseminate visual content for religious devotional and educational purposes and supported the validation of our findings.

Findings

Reviewing this corpus of religious videos uncovered four facets of legitimacy used to highlight the centrality of the Holy Land's religious sites:

1. Scriptural legitimacy—affirming the centrality of holy sites through constant reference to the bible, with special attention granted to sites that are institutionalized and most frequently visited by contemporary pilgrims.

2. Experiential legitimacy—highlighting pilgrims' perspectives of their holy-site visits. In this facet, the centrality and sacredness of holy sites is affirmed by on-site accounts of believers.

3. Journalistic legitimacy—employing the fundamental discursive modes and values that accompany mainstream modern journalistic reporting. This facet highlights the use of journalistic narrative and visual strategies to validate the holy sites and pilgrimage practices.

4. Ritual legitimacy—featuring religious communal practices that are performed in holy sites. By means of this video performance, showing familiar ritual activities being enacted in sites of religious significance, viewers are led to understand the holy sites as spaces that are appropriate and relevant for contemporary believers.

Scriptural Legitimacy

This form of legitimacy stresses the veneration of the Holy Land via a traditional reliance on scripture. In the studied videos, we identified four indexical strategies through which this legitimacy is generated: biblical landscape, textual references, iconography, and performance.

Biblical Landscape

Exploring the videos, the most salient visual theme is that of the landscape of the Holy Land. In addition to these enticing visuals, voiceover narration is employed throughout the broadcast to provide viewers with a connection between the images of a holy site and its theological merit.

For example, on a video titled "The Gospels' Trail" (uploaded on December 6, 2011), the voiceover discusses the presented footage as follows[3]:

> The path starts from Nazareth, where Jesus spent His childhood and adolescence, passing through Magdala, the town of Mary Magdalene, along the shores of the Sea of Galilee and until Capernaum. Here, the Gospels tell us, Jesus made His home, turning this city of fishermen into the center of His ministry.

This voiceover connects the camera's gaze, which scans the various religious sites, with the relevance of these places to the biblical accounts of Jesus' travels. Thus, it offers religious meaning that complements believers' preexisting narratives, and materializes ancient references with a contemporary gaze.

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[3] All analyzed videos in this manuscript have been removed from the Web, and thus time stamps are not available.

Textual References

Many videos use textual biblical reference to augment and embellish their visual text. Though deploying scripture is often viewed as a way to legitimize religious authority (Gifford, 2010), in the observed videos, inserts are visually or narratively integrated to validate the religious meaning of the broadcast. Unlike the previous indexical strategy, in which the media-operator took charge of the narration and actively shaped the commentary on the displayed landscape, in this strategy, holy texts are cited verbatim without third-party mediation. Thus, the video and the scripture overlap, implying a direct connection between the sacred narrative and the displayed locale.

Iconography

The use of icons is a well-established practice, both for instructing believers on mythological narratives and for veneration as sacred objects. Though some faiths object to the visual representation of the sacred, for most Christians, and certainly for Catholics, paintings, carvings, statues, and the like are integral elements of the religious experience. These videos extend the use of iconography, which has already been accepted by the Church and its followers as a legitimate practice. Accordingly, we see a "dual form of communication" in which a picture depicting a holy occurrence (such as the "last supper") is shown in the video, thus maintaining its archaic/traditional value while transmitting it via modern means.

Performance

In many of the videos, pilgrims are shown performing readings of the holy scriptures in a locale where the biblical narrative is believed to have taken place. Over the years, tourist guides, religious clergy, and other stakeholders have invested efforts not only in the cultivation of holy sites, but also in tailoring rites to the specific sites they visit. While a detailed analysis of these performances is beyond the scope of our study, it should be noted that they can be seen as an amalgamation of religious ritual, mnemonic ceremonies, and the pilgrimage experience (discussed below). This combination is represented in the videos. Thus, the video portrayal of pilgrim activity and religious performance in effect affirms the sanctity of the locale.

To conclude, reviewing these videos, we found several modes by means of which users are invited to connect to the sacred (see Figure 1). These indexical strategies represent a four-layered meaning-making process. While the camera acts as an indexical pointer that directs the viewer's attention toward the holy sites ("biblical landscape"), the sacred narrative is embedded in the videos through voiceover narration, textual quotes ("textual references"), iconography, and pilgrim performance. Put together, these strategies construct a connection between the locale and the holy scriptures.
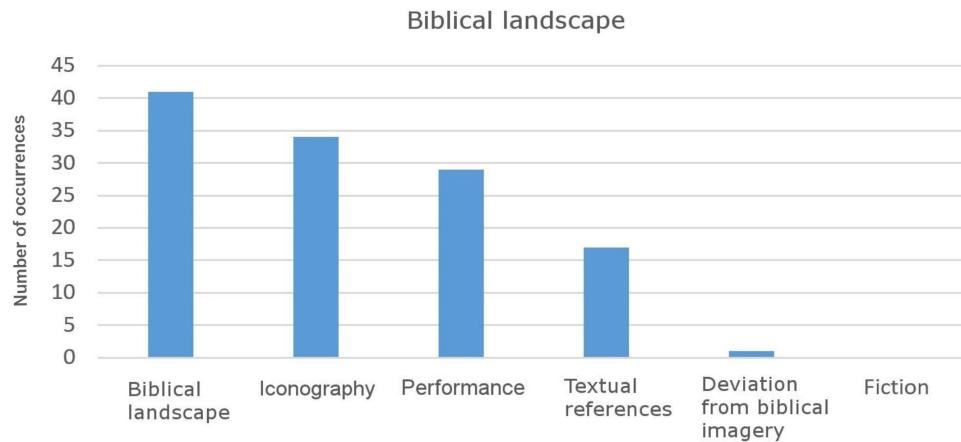
Biblical landscape

Figure 1. Indexical strategies of scriptural legitimacy, by frequency.

Experiential Legitimacy

Another salient form of legitimacy was identified in the recurrent videos that present peer testimonials (see Figure 2). In these videos, lay-pilgrims relay their sentiments as they recount their visit to the Holy Land. Reviewing the videos, we identified four key themes that are most frequently presented by the webmaster staff: (a) the pilgrimage as a life-changing experience, (b) personal motivations for making the pilgrimage, (c) a call to pilgrimage, and (d) testimonies of pilgrims and their religious experience.
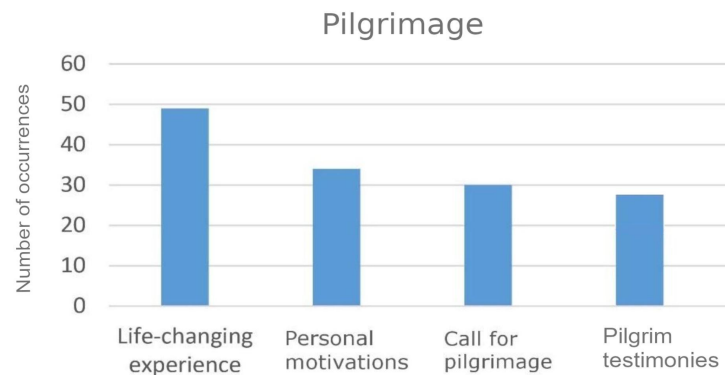
Pilgrimage

Figure 2. Main themes from pilgrims' videos, by frequency.

Life-Changing Event

Many of the videos highlight the deep impact of the pilgrimage on pilgrims' lives. Though international travel is a common practice in recent decades, the visit to the holy sites is idealized as a pinnacle event. In one video, a couple state,

> Today I felt the birth of Jesus in my heart . . . and I could not stop "feeling" His love, "feeling" Him. It is indescribable.
>
> S** and A** (USA)
> March 9, 2016—*The Pilgrimage to the Holy Land: A Life Experience*

Similarly, in another video, a pilgrim from Peru describes the impact of his experiences on his future religious practice.

> It was a life-changing experience, from the first moment we arrived: from now on, every time we will hear the Gospels, our mind will come back here . . . this is important to strengthen our faith and at the same time to pass it on to others.
>
> June 21, 2016—A Life-Changing Experience: A Pilgrimage From Peru to the Holy Land

Thus, these believers' proclamations add credence to the meaningful and positive significance of the holy sites from a bottom-up perspective, rather than from the angle of its scriptural and traditional legitimacy.

Personal Motivations

Another form of bottom-up legitimacy can be seen in videos that discuss users' motivations for embarking on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Through these testimonials, Catholic viewers are informed about the spiritual benefits that draw pilgrims to the Holy Land.

In one example, a pilgrim from the U.S. describes her impetus for participating in the pilgrimage, seeking a more direct connection to the divine:

> I wanted to have intimacy with the Lord and walk where he walked.
>
> A**, California (USA)
> May 27, 2015—*Pilgrims From the United States to the Holy Land*

In a separate video, a young couple explain that they hoped to bless their matrimony through a visit to the Holy Land:

> We decided to make this particular wedding trip to the Holy Land because we want to entrust our marriage to the Lord, and what better place than here?
>
> May 31, 2017—A Luminous Moment in Everyone's Life

Thus, by presenting laypersons' motivations for visiting the Holy Land, the authority of the Holy Land is reinforced from a grassroots perspective, and alternate incentives ("intimacy with the Lord," blessing a marriage, and so on) are suggested for viewers to join this special journey, either by signing up themselves for a trip or by further viewership.

Call to Pilgrimage

Numerous videos portray clerics' direct appeals to viewers to participate in a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. The appeal of the voyage is manifest in their online invitations; for example:

Come to renew your faith, for here is the source of our experience of faith.

Fr. Francesco Patton, OFM Custos of the Holy Land
May 31, 2017—*A Luminous Moment in Everyone's Life*

Furthermore, the clerics' appeals seek to counter common concerns that are raised by believers.

Many people, before we came, told me, "Father I cannot go there; it is dangerous," and I said, "It is not any more dangerous than going to Los Angeles or New York!" Now that I put the photos on Facebook every day, "We are here"; "We are doing this"; "Having fun" . . . [They say:] "I should've gone on this trip!"

Fr. Donald Calloway, Congregation of the Immaculate Conception (USA)
May 27, 2015—*Pilgrims From the United States to the Holy Land*

In this online appeal, the priest "breaks the fourth wall" as he acknowledges the presence of an online audience and explicitly addresses viewers, inviting them to prayer while underscoring the positive experience that pilgrims enjoyed. This and other examples reflect the efforts of clerics to employ different rhetorical approaches in their presentation of pilgrimage—not only as a means for strengthening faith but also as a social event that is affirmed by peer believers via social media.

Pilgrim Testimonies

Finally, many videos meet the pilgrims in the midst of their pilgrimage and portray their impressions of the voyage itself and the places they have encountered. For example, a nun is shown saying,

My experience here is different than I expected . . . there is a serenity in the places where Christ was present, and that serenity is in the stones, and it is in the ground.

Sister Jeanne d'Arc, Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist
May 30, 2016—*At the Source of Faith: Pilgrims in the Holy Land*

Serenity, which is popularly associated with religious practice and its agents (monks, clerics), is affirmed as a positive experience that is connected to the holy sites. Another clergyman emphasizes other forms of experience:

> Of course, the great journey of the Exodus that the liturgy offers . . . the opportunity to live . . . go back and relive during these few hours, the 40 years in the desert of the Israelites, and it certainly becomes a more concrete experience.
>
> Fr. Emanuele Corti, Diocese of Como
> February 21, 2013—*The Lenten Desert*

Here, the clerics' testimonies suggest an opportunity to revisit, imagine, and possibly experience biblical events. Thus, the pilgrimage experience is portrayed as a pathway to the divine, either by connecting it to holy texts or by highlighting sentiments (such as "serenity") that are identified with the pilgrimage of religious virtuosos.

To conclude, through their videos, webmasters seek to present pilgrimage to the Holy Land as a meaningful experience. They engage and motivate their target audiences by using trustworthy mediators: local or regional clerics or lay-pilgrims. These mediators may resemble viewers' community peers and local leaders rather than high-level clerical figures or professional commentators. This strategy affords a sense of familiarity, identification, and (ultimately) trust. Moreover, the testimonies themselves offer a mediation of meaning through personal experience, which corresponds with both the *nominus* referred to by Otto (1958) and with the pleasures of tourism. Thus, through these trustful testimonials about content that is highly familiar to the Christian believer, an authentic experience is transmitted that evokes a sense of participation and direct engagement, even though this engagement occurs online.

Journalistic Legitimacy

To ensure greater public acceptance of the videos and their content, a journalistic discursive style is widely employed. This discursive style refers to a mode of knowledge transfer that has been well established by modern journalism to convey a sense of trust, and thus bestows validity on both the agency and its content (see Marrone, 1998). Furthermore, it follows Evolvi's (2019) discussion of the fluid relationship between the secular and the postsecular as she views religious discourses' continuous intersection with nonreligious narratives.

In the case at hand, the videos' media production uses a typical newscast format and is characterized by the consistent use of standardized journalistic aesthetics and practice. Videos are mostly delivered as short news reports focused on specific occurrences and include voiceovers, interviews, overlaid titles, distinctive digital layout, opening graphics, music track, closing credits, and a recurring logo of the organization. This journalistic aesthetic is very much apparent at the studio developed by the Christian Media Center in Jerusalem (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Simulating Western journalist studios: Media Center in Jerusalem, 2017.

It should be noted that this practice is not exclusive to the Franciscan/Canção Nova operation, and can be observed among other denominations and faiths. For example, the main Pentecostal movement in South Korea operates a similar studio for broadcasting sermons from the grand Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul (see Figure 4).

***Figure 4. Using the broadcast aesthetic: Religious Christian broadcast studio at the Yoido Full
Gospel Church in Seoul, 2016.***

The journalistic style includes engagement with controversy and issues of public concern. In these videos, we identified extensive reference to conflict-based issues that relate to Christian communities.

For example, following the Israeli Defense Forces' 2012 "Pillar of Defense" operation, a video posted by the Christian Media Center described the situation as follows:

> The truce has been signed. The ceasefire started on Wednesday, November 21st at 8
> p.m., and a cautiously optimistic peace has descended on God's Land. Pilgrims keep
> strolling through the ancient streets of the Holy City.
>
> November 22, 2012—*Pilgrims' Serenity*

Here, recent violence within the Holy Land is acknowledged, and a return to stability is emphasized, implying the restoration of safe pilgrimage activity. In another video addressing the tumultuous conflicts of the Middle East, a transcendental intervention is invoked:

> In this procession, we will pray for peace in the Middle East, as Pope Francis has asked,
> to pray especially for Syria and all the other countries that are experiencing hardship. We
> want to pray for all Christians . . . who were attacked and killed, and for all those who are

working toward peace in the Middle East. We want to pray for Palestine and Israel that
they may find a peaceful and lasting solution.

December 23, 2013—Indians Marching for Christmas

In this video, the mention of Syria (and other countries) reminds users of the threatened Christian
communities in the Middle East. It also underscores their agency as promoting Christian values. In this
instance, not only is the Holy Land highlighted, but also the practice of prayer and connection to God, as
well as the authority and guidance of the Holy See, are given prominence. This serves to create a sense of
participation and solidarity among global Catholic users, and affords local residents visibility and recognition
in a wider Catholic unity.

To conclude, we find that webmasters attempt to convey a sense of trustworthiness to online
viewers by drawing on journalistic-media conventions in their videos. These include both the use of a
particular journalistic aesthetic and format, and the practice of addressing contemporary issues. However,
while the format may borrow on journalistic formats and jargon, the content and its epistemic essence is
clearly of a religious orientation. This is to say that even current events are interpreted through a Catholic
religious lens, albeit presented in a modern and secular-like format.

Ritual Legitimacy

We found that many videos portray the performance of prayers and rituals at holy sites. These
portrayals link to a praxis that is familiar to believers around the world, and show standardized texts and
practices being performed in the Holy Land. The rituals shown present, and in effect reinforce, the relevance
and significance of venerated sites to the believers' spiritual worldview.

This phenomenon was seen in many videos. In one example, a voiceover from an invisible narrator
describes a ritualistic event:

On Saturday night, in Nazareth, some lights still illuminate the city where Jesus grew up.
Near the Basilica where the angel's Annunciation to Mary took place, the faithful recite the
Rosary in a torchlight procession. Presided by the warden of the basilica and with the
presence of the local Franciscans, the procession carries the image of Our Lady of
Nazareth. While carrying the candles, each mystery of the rosary is recited by the faithful
in a different language, such as Arabic, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese.
                                                                    February 4, 2016

In this account, the narrator ties a well-known prayer and ritual to its historic roots in a physical
location in the Holy Land, thus romanticizing a common religious practice and amplifying its experiential
meaning. Additionally, the narrator emphasizes the distinction of the ritual in its multicultural mode, a note
that is repeated in other videos as well.

In a more localized example, referencing Middle-Eastern politics, a video was posted in late 2018 titled *The Christmas Celebrations in Gaza*. In this clip, a perhaps unexpected ritual is documented in which a procession and ceremony is led by the Apostolic Administrator of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem and takes place at the Church of the Holy Family in Gaza City. In his homily, in front of a full church, the cleric underscores the importance of the community and that they "are not forgotten." This video repeatedly refers to a well-versed ritual, yet through its voiceover narrative and its choice of texts, it underlines the Vatican's outreach efforts toward this afflicted community at the epicenter of conflict.

To conclude, through a focus on rituals, the prominence of the Holy Land itself is affirmed and reconstituted. In this process, the tension between the familiar and the foreign come into play. The standardized liturgy and common modes of congregational participation are well-established components of Catholic believers' religious experience. However, seeing these highly familiar practices being enacted in unfamiliar settings in the Holy Land, in locations rich with scriptural and historical significance, enhances the allure of the videos and augments the meanings attached to the practices shown.

Moreover, these videos debunk a potential notion of the stagnancy of the Holy Land and its framing as an archaeological relic or "museum" to historical Christianity. Instead, they portray the holy sites as vibrant spaces in which religious activities are carried out both by local communities and by pilgrims. Indeed, videos, TV/radio broadcasts, and podcasts are often used to give believers the opportunity to experience a religious event (such as Christmas mass) from a grand or famous church. In this sense, videos of Holy Land rituals offer a mediatized spectacle for users.

Finally, ritual events not only enhance the Holy Land itself, they also underscore the boundaries of the Franciscan mission by highlighting to the viewer locales that are considered part of a larger Franciscan Province of the Holy Land. These are places outside the Israeli state, such as Gaza and other parts of the Middle East, which are affiliated to the Holy See and their Franciscan representatives.

Conclusion

Legitimation is a process by which something is made acceptable or normative, creating the perception that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, and appropriate within a set of socially constructed norms, values, and beliefs. In this study, we have sought to uncover meaning-making processes in the videos of a Catholic Monastic group, and understand how these texts reflectively construct their own legitimacy for online users.

Through scriptural, experiential, journalistic, and ritual processes of legitimation, the prominence of holy sites is reconstituted in the digital realm. Thus, a cyclical dialectic interaction is initiated, in which the content and the medium legitimize each other within a religious frame. This is an aggregated dynamic, which was charted in this study via a categorization of its identified component facets:

(a) Scriptural legitimacy (encompassing biblical landscapes, textual references, iconography, and biblical performance) draws on central and well-established religious texts to reaffirm the relevance of the featured holy sites and simultaneously presents the medium as a

"mere" conduit of the divine message. This legitimacy is reinforced as the medium is accorded status as the online representative of well-established religious institutions.

(b) In concert, experiential legitimacy (encompassing life-changing experiences, personal motivations, call to pilgrimage, and pilgrimage testimonies) functions as a reaffirmation of the centrality and sacredness of holy sites via the on-site accounts of believers who take charge of the religious discourse. Accordingly, the medium presents itself as a conduit that allows believer-to-believer communication. In terms of its mode of legitimacy, it follows a documentary trope in which the performance that is played out on the videos recursively verify its content as authentic, as it is untainted by its (video) mediation. Accordingly, voices of witnesses that are presented as noninterested parties in the event, affirm the grand narrative and the truthfulness of the mediated experience. A technique which may involve traditional forms of legitimation, but is arguably a modern discursive strategy of mediatized truth making.

(c) In a similar vein, journalistic legitimacy uses fundamental discursive modes and values that characterize modern journalistic reporting to create a similarity between religious media productions and well-known and trusted newscasts. In this way, values that stem from the journalistic ethos and practice are implied to religious viewers by means of stylistic contiguity.

(d) Finally, ritual legitimacy is centered on the interaction between a religious ritual that is familiar to believers, a clergy that is trusted, and a holy site that is venerated. In delivering this meaningful on-site devotional performance, the medium is implicitly constructed as a purveyor of ritual meaning that allows believers to witness the religious event from remote places.

In tandem, these facets all deploy semiotic devices to construct the meaning of the Holy Land for online users. Complementing Eco's theory of indexicality, each facet can be duly seen as presenting legitimation markers—signs and symbols that are strategically selected to highlight and validate a social, political, or (as in this case) religious worldview. For example, while pilgrimage is certainly an ancient practice among devout believers, its activity (particularly to distant locales) was traditionally the domain of religious virtuosos or the "religious aristocracy" (in Weber's terms; see Silber, 1995, p. 25)—clerics, monks, and devout believers who demonstrated their dedication and elevated their social status by strenuous efforts to travel to sites of worship commonly perceived as "distant," "mysterious," and "exotic." Though the past century has certainly made the journey easier and more affordable, thus expanding the tourist scope to include religious sites, the digital experience has now added a further dimension. Livestreaming, social media, and other forms have approximated the religious experience to the masses. However, to gain a sizable audience, these new formats needed not only to remind believers of the importance of these holy sites but also to convince them of their relevance to the viewers' own lives, and to maintain an alignment with the viewers' media sensibilities.

Thus, through a combination of journalistic reporting, traditional devotional praxis, firsthand accounts, and established religious narratives, viewers are invited to approximate the religious journey. This approximation is made possible by validating the proposed indexical correspondences, in Eco's terms. Accordingly, believers are invited to accept and internalize the connection between the locale and the holy scriptures. In the video, this connection is constructed through a strategic interplay between the camera (indexical pointer) and the four facets described above. Thus, a reenchantment of the Holy Land is enabled, as old churches, stones, and travelers are respectively elevated into holy sites, authentic altars, and pilgrims.

Moreover, findings pertain to the ways that the legitimation of religious videos affirm the creed and authority of Rome through soft modes of power and authority construction. Reflecting on the findings, we find a continuous use of modern and traditional orientations. A duality that can be seen as adding zeal, and draws on contemporary populations' acceptance of both orientations. We summate the ways that the identified types of legitimacy are put into effect in Table 1. This is to say, it reflects how videos operate to gain legitimacy through various strategies.

Table 1. Operationalization of Traditional and Modern Modes of Legitimacy in Religious Online Videos.

Type of legitimacy	Orientation	Operationalization
Scriptural	Traditional	Continues and plays on old themes and sacred narratives
Experiential	Modern	Affirms the authenticity of the mediatized experience
Journalistic	Modern	Leans on a positive orientation toward modern formats for dispensing information
Ritual	Traditional	Vicariously performing (and continuing) a well-known praxis through viewership

Thus, these strategies enable videos to approach the masses that are both inclined toward new media and televised experiences while embracing traditional facets of the faith—facets that bear a longstanding charismatic appeal that enables believers to access the transcendental and the religious experience.

Given the ways that religious videos' legitimation affirms power relations and the soft power of the Catholic Church, we consider its benefits and consequences for the Holy See's authority. Overall, in its active promotion of video production and distribution, the Church continuously proselytizes its ideals and ratifies its prominence in the religious markets (compare with discussions of complex theory, see Eyal, 2009). Nevertheless, it inadvertently delegates some of its power to the agency of webmasters and relatively young movements—namely, that of the Canção Nova to mediatize its belief system. Thus, enhancing the distributive power structure of the Church to its media presence.

Videos offer religious movements new tools, but perhaps they also suggest a new "language" of religiosity that takes into account not only cinematic affordances but also users' schemes of media consumption, which encompass broadcast television, movies, and a variety of online formats, such as YouTube. However, while televangelists have used screen appearances to recreate and broadcast the charisma of the leader (Eisenlohr, 2017), in these videos, it is the religious site and related activities (rituals, pilgrimage, processions) that are at the forefront. In this study, we have shown how religious activities that are performed in the Holy Land are not only animated and dramatized for the benefit of online viewers but are also used to reappropriate these spaces as epicenters of belief—thus not only bolstering the Catholic creed, but also serving the interests of key stakeholders who are invested in these sites.

Future research may investigate both the macro and micro implications of these new media strategies. On a macroscopic scale, it would be useful to explore how media-constructed centers of faith influence religious communities around the world, possibly aiming toward new forms of ecumenism and interfaith (or interdenominational) encounters from which new religious praxis and authorities can emerge.

In terms of educational practice, at a meso level, videos can be seen as a new form of religious instruction that speaks to viewers' experiences while also offering a view on religious experience itself. While it is common practice nowadays to screen religious videos in various churches before and during services, the use of video is also being expanded to more informal educational venues—for instance, via Internet-based learning, which can be seen as enabling "self-educating communities" (Burbules, 2006). Thus, the use of videos in communal activities invites further investigation at a regional level.

Finally, on a more microscopic level, individual believers, and their worldview in relation to videos, also invite further analysis. This perspective could explore how these videos fit into users' media landscape, and the role they play in religious learners' knowledge sourcing and media-information practices. Accordingly, it can shed light on how online believers select, navigate, and validate videos from this broad universe of religious visual texts. In this study, we focused on webmasters' efforts to create online constructs that add layers of validation and legitimacy for their imagined set of believers. Through this lens, the utility and impact of these efforts at the individual level can be further explored. Moreover, this semiotic approach to legitimizing spaces may be used by other faiths and by nonreligious stakeholders who aim to legitimize and augment the allure of specific locales. This avenue of inquiry could thus support the analysis of online video strategies that are aimed at promoting tourism, mobilizing migrating populations, and so on.

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