

Book Review

Peter Klimczak / Christer Petersen (eds.), Popestar. Der Papst und die Medien

Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos 2017, 312 pages,
ISBN: 978-3-86599-254-3

This soft-cover book with its eye-catching, colorful cover photo of the pope's famous red shoes points immediately to a highly symbolic accessory that represents a recurrent element in the analyses brought together in the text. The German-language anthology is structured in five sections, organized by subject area, reaching from history/art history and theology/philosophy to sociology/psychology, literary/film studies, and journalism, with five contributions in each section. The volume opens with a short but interesting introduction by the two editors in which they report with humor the complicated, even dramatic origins of the volume: Originally, Leo Fischer, the editor of the satirical magazine *Titanic*, was to be one of the contributors.¹ This led a number of ecclesial representatives to withdraw their contributions to the anthology and one of the editors even resigned. Unfortunately, in the end Fischer was not able to deliver his contribution on the adequacy of the satirical critique of pope and church. Nevertheless, the list of contributors is impressive, with a number of renowned names in church, theology and society, such as the former Polish president Lech Wałęsa, the theologian Hans Küng and Cardinal Stanisław Dziwisz, long-term secretary of Pope John Paul II. The book addresses the figure of the pope as media object and media subject and aims to bring together various interdisciplinary reflections on the relations of these two poles (10). This goal is clearly achieved in the volume. The authors with their different professional, disciplinary and national (Austria, Germany and Poland) backgrounds provide a multifaceted view on the topic. Furthermore, they offer their thoughts, experiences and analyses in different genres – some contributions are written in a scholarly style, others in a narrative or even personal style – which makes the book readable for a non-specialist audience as well.

1 During his tenure as chief editor, in 2012, the magazine had attracted broad attention with a harsh critique of Pope Benedict XVI.

One of the topics which appears several times throughout the contributions is authenticity. At a time marked by the significant “presence” of a second, *virtual reality* (or, even better, virtual realities), people long for institutions and leaders with “authenticity”, understood as unambiguous coherence and continuity in speech and action.

Peter Szyszka addresses this issue directly in his article. He frames “authenticity” in opposition to “identity”, locating identity on the side of the subject (or, as he would say with a systemic approach, a system) and authenticity on the side of the surroundings, meaning the *images* which others have of the system. These images always contain suppositions concerning the expected behavior of the particular system. Whereas identity remains the same, expectations bound to a conception of authenticity vary according to the concrete circumstances of the particular group or person. In Szyszka’s conception, authenticity is less about coherence in speech and action (as proposed above) than about the coherence of speech and action with the ideas of a particular group. In conclusion he therefore proposes that “authenticity” as such, as an evident quality, does not exist. Such differing expectations of the pope’s office and its representative have always been a fact. What has changed is the role of mass media in producing formative images of authenticity. Szyszka considers whether the Vatican consciously controls this production of images to be a secondary question, since “it is not facts but opinion about facts which influences our thoughts and deeds” (288).² Nevertheless, at the end he illustrates the images associated with the programmatic name chosen by Pope Francis as strategically directed by Radio Vatican. Through it related Pope Francis’s first public acts to the historical features of Saint Francis of Assisi, Radio Vatican consciously shaped “reality” (in the sense of “opinion about facts”) and concentrated the audience’s attention and expectations about the pope’s authenticity on the problem of poverty. However, in line with his concept of authenticity, Szyszka concludes that “no pope can be Francis” (293), since not only the images associated with “Francis” but also the question of how to deal with poverty (as well as what is meant by “poverty”) evokes a considerable number of different expectations.

Insight into how our images and expectations concerning authenticity are generated is deepened by the contribution by Petia Genkova. Picking up Hans Mummendey’s theory of impression management, she provides analytical tools by differentiating between assertive and defensive techniques used by public persons (such as the pope) to convey or nurture an intended impression via mass media. Whereas with assertive techniques the subject tries to produce or effect a particular impression in the public’s mind, defensive techniques are

2 All translations from German are mine.

applied to restore an already damaged image. These techniques can further be characterized as either *strategies*, meaning institutionalized actions aimed at the production of long-term impressions, or *tactics*, which designates spontaneous actions and gestures. In any case, a prototypical figure of representation like the pope bundles the impressions we have of a complex institution like the Roman Catholic Church, fostering recognition, but also supports the temptation to simplify reality and ignore divergent information. Nevertheless, despite all efforts at impression *management*, our concrete opinions are shaped by many other conditions as well, such as individual personality or even our current mood. Such analysis confirms Szyszka's thesis that "the pope" does not exist, echoing the statement from the introduction of the book that "only the pope knows the pope" (9). This might also be the reason for the wide range of images of different popes, above all of the three most recent popes (John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis), which the contributions in this anthology provide. One might not immediately recognize that Hans Küng and Stanisław Dziwisz are both writing about Pope John Paul II. While Dziwisz presents him as a man deeply devoted to prayer, with a high esteem for women and especially well able to attract youth, Hans Küng draws parallels between John Paul II and his contemporary President Ronald Reagan and points out the conservative and politically problematic sides to the religious leader.

While we will do well to bear these thoughts on perspectivity in writing in mind, we can still enjoy the other contributions, such as those concerning the popes' contrasting styles of relating to mass media. Hubert Knoblauch, for instance, analyzes how the broadcasting of religious mass events has changed by comparing the video record of the visit of John Paul II to Vienna in 1998 with that of the visit of Benedict XVI to Berlin in 2011. His thesis that the religious performances of these two events diverge significantly does not concern only their liturgical styles, with the integration or exclusion of popular elements such as clapping or popular chants, for he also notes a fundamental transformation of religious acting itself through the phenomenon of mediatization. With mediatization he means not simply "the substitution of corporeal action through a process of [digital] media" but rather the "transformation of the structure of actions through the integration of technical media" (190) – more an intensification of communication than its dissolution. He illustrates this thesis with an analysis of the roles of the audiences who appear in the broadcasts. In 1998, the camera focuses on the liturgical celebration in order to deliver it a TV audience and there is very little space for shots of the audience. By contrast, in 2011, the audience and individuals receive much more attention, and members of the audience also record themselves and the event. These phenomena change behavior and, as Knoblauch states, lead to new forms of spirituality. One can recognize behaviors similar to those observed at non-religious mass entertainment

events or in response to meeting a celebrity. Knoblauch argues that mass media support the development of forms of “popular religion” (184).

The pope as popstar is a notion which appears in several contributions. Peter Fuchs writes explicitly on the phenomenon of pop, which has become a frequently deployed frame for contemporary thinking and perceptions. He characterizes this “execution and symbol of modernity” (145) as impressive in producing novelties and trends in all cultural spheres while at the same time functioning as “machinery” (144) to deal with the world’s transiency by pointing hedonistically at the body and its ability for emotional and aesthetical experience and enjoyment. In its mere immanence, pop works with techniques of exaltation to create glamour and singularity. However, its most significant feature is its fundamental homogenization in the sense of exchangeability: the popstar is not an absolute celebrity – he or she can be uninteresting tomorrow. The exaltation of a person is random and certainly not eternal. Such homogenization and the recurrence of total immanence are problematic for the church’s mediation of the absolute truth, yet Fuchs discovers a perhaps surprising number of connections between pop and church. Without going into great detail, he states that the church is already adapting features of pop culture that seem beneficial to it. I would say that one can see this happening in the Pentecostal and charismatic movements, for instance, in which emotion and popular aesthetics play a significant role while their members continue to cling to strong identificatory references (e.g. the concrete community). Fuchs proposes that in the institution of the pope, the Catholic Church already has “preadaptive advances” (145)³ at its disposal that could probably be elaborated through their convergence with the phenomenon of pop.

It is helpful to consider how the pope has already gained the status of a star – even if only fictitiously. Marcus Stiglegger examines the role of the papacy in entertainment media and analyzes the iconic presence of the pope in film. In addition to legends concerning the female Pope Joan and discussion of Pius XII’s relationship with Nazi Germany, the most prominent motif in this medium is of the Holy Father as a tragic figure who can only fail in his task of representing Christ on earth. The discrepancy between the personal worldly existence and the task of holding a highly symbolic, not to say mythological, office predisposes the pope to serve as a perfect central figure for tragicomical narrative material. Which brings us back to the question of authenticity.

This volume can shed only limited light on this wide-ranging complex of themes. The contributions make evident the many different perspectives from which one can approach the combination of the terms “pope” and “media”. Nevertheless, it would be interesting to hear – in addition to personal expe-

3 English original.

riences with the papacy of John Paul II by authors from Poland – voices from other continents, especially from Latin America, to better understand how the papacy of Pope Francis is perceived and mediated on his home continent. Additionally, one has to wonder why there are only two women among the 25 authors. Moreover, the contributions focus largely on TV broadcasts, films and newspaper articles. For the pope to be adequately addressed as the *subject* of media, examination of his online presence would have been enriching. For instance, what is the effect of the video messages from Pope Francis shared on Facebook or of the other channels of communication that the Vatican uses for reaching young people nowadays? Nevertheless, the book provides a diverse view of a topical subject and is of interest not just to theologians, for it intertwines media theory, psychology, theories of power, linguistics, aesthetics and many more approaches. The personal and essayist articles of renowned authors and public figures make the anthology a very pleasant read. I can therefore recommend this book to a broad readership beyond the scholarly community.