SCANDALS, MEDIA AND RELIGION

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The idea of the news media’s reporting religious scandal carries more than a hint of irony. Scandal sells the news, attracting viewers and follow-up stories, but runs counter to a religious response to it. In popular usage, “scandal” typically refers to some, probably moral, wrong that causes a strong public reaction. In the words of Ingebretsen (2004, 30), “Scandal is, above all, a machinery of outrage.” And so, even attaching the term “scandal” to some behavior will most likely attract added attention and prompt the very reaction predicted by the reporting. And, since religion by definition upholds the moral order, it provides—depending on one’s perspective—either a tragic or a rich target for accusations of scandal.

This review will begin with some general comments on the contrasting religious and media approaches to scandal and the frequency and impact of religious scandal in the news, before examining some themes identified by communication scholars as they have understood and evaluated key religious scandals in published studies over the last 25 years, illustrating the themes with examples from scandals cited in the scholarly writing. In brief, these researchers have noted that reporting religious scandals: does not have a lasting effect, follows predictable narrative structures, demands a particular rhetorical response from the religious groups, often misinterprets religion, and attracts news attention.

Religious and media understanding of scandal

In the Judeo-Christian perspective where the term originates, “scandal” describes more than a moral failing. Miller (1999, 226) traces its history to the Hebrew Bible, which uses the term to describe the difficulties that people will have in accepting the promised Messiah:

The Greek word skandalon or the Hebrew term mikshol, is frequently used to refer to Jesus through prophecy and narrative as a “stumbling block,” an “offense, or a “snare.” The force of both the Hebrew and Greek terms is that there is the intention to present an obstacle of some sort that prevents one from continuing in the same fashion.

In the original religious use of the term, as applied to Jesus, a “scandal” prompted religious reflection or a change of ways. But the New Testament also uses the term to describe blocking the way of others to the messiah (Matthew 18:6), usually through conduct that causes others to
stumble. This seems the immediate antecedent meaning of the contemporary use of “scandal” as it refers to public evil or moral wrong that offends sensibilities. Thomas Aquinas had defined the sin of scandal as “an unrighteous word or deed that occasions the ruin of another. The idea is that sinful activity, if known to others, begets more sin” (Silk 1998, 5). And that justifies religion’s prohibiting the spread of scandal.

But the news media’s use of “scandal” takes the idea in an almost opposite direction: News wants to make known the sin of others. And, when it comes to scandal, the news industry has developed its own generic conventions, narrative style, and ritual presentation (Ingebretsen 2004). The genre of the news media’s religious scandal requires a religious figure acting against the dictates of religion or violating the moral expectations that the religious figure personally espouses. The generic quality of religious scandals emerges from the fact that much of this material is not new. Ingebretsen points out that the idea of a sexually active priest, for example, has been a trope in English literature at least from the time of Chaucer. Similar things apply to religious individuals (especially clergy) who might be greedy, drink too much, or do anything else that seems to violate an imagined ideal of religious behavior. These tropes have moved from literature and entertainment to news accounts.

Types, frequency, and impact of religious scandals

In general two classes of scandal appear. The first, which we can call local scandal, generates interest mostly in small areas or regions. These include such things as a church secretary embezzling funds, a choir leader accused of sexual harassment, a rabbi arrested for driving while intoxicated, or a mosque operating without a proper building permit. Such things might make the local news but typically do not get much traction beyond that. While sad realities, they deeply trouble few people. On the other hand are the undeniably great scandals, those things which attract national or even international reporting. This chapter will concentrate on the latter. Very few researchers or scholars have considered the patterns of local scandals, with the exception of Buddenbaum (2009) who offers a fairly comprehensive overview of religious scandal as reported in the U.S. news media.

The frequency of reporting religious scandal has changed in the United States. Lichter, Lichter, and Amundson’s (2000) report on media coverage of religion in America from 1969 to 1998 provides an in-depth analysis of the coverage of religion in major newspapers, news magazines, and television. They report about 5 percent of news coverage of religion in that period dealt with crime and wrongdoing—potentially scandalous material. However, the situation dramatically shifted after 2000. Since then a number of high-profile religious scandals emerged into the public view, most notably child abuse by Catholic priests. Mancini and Shields, describing the media coverage between 2000 and 2010, write, concerning reports of child abuse by Catholic priests:

Recent accounts lend credence to the notion that it constituted “big news” across the country throughout the 2000s. For example, one study identified 172 relevant articles about the scandal published in four popular news magazines (U.S. News and World Report, Time, People, and Newsweek) from 1992 until 2004 (Cheit et al. 2010). Findings from a recent content analysis conducted by the Pew Research Center (2010) illustrate the continued salience of the scandal. These results indicate that the “Catholic priest abuse scandal” ranked 8th as “Top Stories in the U.S. in Spring 2010” . . . The same study identified nearly 13,000 news stories published in major national and world newspapers (e.g., New York Times, Washington Post, USA Today) that in some way discussed the clergy abuse scandal between January 2002 and April 2010.

(2014, 224)
While significant and extremely serious, the child abuse scandal represents only one of many scandals touching on religion that occurred in the last 25 years.

Almost every study of religion in the news or the media coverage of religion has included at least a chapter on potentially scandalous material. Silk (1998) presents a chapter on hypocrisy; under that heading he discusses some of the scandals touching the television evangelists in the United States in the 1990s, which we will discuss below. Buddenbaum (2009, xi) provides much more detailed accounts of religious scandals in the United States and their press coverage. She divides her discussion into two overarching sections, the first dealing with “conventional scandals: violations of sacred and secular custom and law” and “scandals of conscience: challenges to secular custom and law.” The first section deals with things that most people would include in a list of religious scandal: sexual transgressions, questionable financial practices, hoaxes, or physical assault. Her second category describes issues that emerge from “people speaking or acting in accord with the dictates of their conscience”: criticism of church beliefs, criticism or protest against the government, religious involvement in politics, lifestyle choices that others may consider manipulative (the Branch Davidian group, for example). The first grouping fits easily into the media narrative of scandal, the kinds of material reviewed here. Claussen (2002) presents an edited series of essays on “sex, media, and religion.” Only two of the chapters deal with things considered as scandal, at least as reported in the news media. One of these deals with pedophilia within a Catholic community and the other with the Jewish media’s failure to report on sexual abuse within a Jewish community.

The impact of reporting religious scandal

Given the widespread notoriety of religious scandals, does the reporting have an impact? Some clearly led to criminal prosecution (though on many occasions the reporting followed the legal actions). Fan, Wyatt, and Keltner (2001, 826) report that the General Social Survey showed that measures of confidence in “organized religion underwent a dramatic but temporary decline following scandals associated with televangelists Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart.” Because of their high profile, the scandals touching on television evangelists illustrate the temporary effect of such reporting. Communication research noted a number of these, with Jim Bakker implicated in both sexual and financial difficulties (1987–1988); Jimmy Swaggart, in a sex scandal (1988); Pat Robertson, in lying about his date of marriage and military service in his attempt to move into politics (1987); and Oral Roberts, in questionable fundraising tactics (Smith 1992, 362–363; in fact, Smith lists 12 scandals involving these ministers between 1987 and 1989). Like Fan, Wyatt, and Kelner (2001), Smith traces the impact of these scandals on religious belief and practice in the U.S., as measured by the General Social Survey and other polls, finding at least a short-lived decline (between 1987 and 1992) in levels of trust in religion, in the clergy, in the perceived influence of religion, and even in personal religious activities such as personal prayer, reading the Bible, and attending church (361).

In an attempt to understand the temporary rather than permanent nature of the loss of confidence in religion, Abelman (1988a; 1988b) focuses on the audiences. He examines the impact of the Praise the Lord (PTL) scandal involving Jim and Tammie Bakker on three kinds of viewers (ritualized, instrumental, reactionary). Ritualized viewers consist of heavy media consumers who hold strong religious beliefs; instrumental viewers use television to gain knowledge or entertainment, including religious television; and reactionary viewers dislike non-religious television fare and seek religious devotion from the medium (1988b, 42). Abelman (1989, 62) applies the uses and gratifications theory to the PTL audience, trying
to explain its reactions. He notes that the scandal has not led to decreased viewing for the ritualized group as they appear habitual viewers whose television activity fulfills a religious need; however, he found a drop off among the instrumental group, who most likely found other sources to fulfill their desire for religious information. To his surprise, he notes, “this article offers no evidence of the reactionary viewer of religious television in the post-scandal ‘PTL Club’ audience. It is likely that the PTL scandal has turned away the reactionary users” (63). Abelman (1988a) offers a more nuanced theoretical model of the scandal, more carefully highlighting the different components of the uses and gratification theory and including both minister credibility and financial accountability. Here again he finds a temporary loss of audience, which one can reasonably attribute to the extensive media coverage of the scandal.

The impact of news coverage and theoretical explanations for shifting public opinion in matters touching religion show up in a number of other published studies about the various religious scandals. Mancini and Shields look at the impact of the Catholic child abuse scandal on public opinion in the U.S.:

Contrasting with prior research, we uncovered a positive impact of media exposure. Catholics with greater media consumption about the scandal were significantly more confident in the Church’s ability to prevent sexual abuse. In addition, indicating a “boomerang” effect of coverage, Catholics who felt the media coverage unfairly targeted the Church held more optimistic views. Supporting the substitution thesis, religiosity mediated these effects among this group. This positive impact was not just limited to Catholics, however. Non-Catholics who perceived the media coverage to be biased felt more positively about the Church’s ability to address sex crime in the future.

(2014, 221)

The same phenomenon appears in relation to Islam. Press treatment of Islam seldom applies the term “scandal” to the religion, though the reality of the coverage implies it. Some of this results from the nature of the interaction between Islam and the West. Up until the attacks of September 11, 2001, much of the Western press reported very little about Islam except for political news or war reporting from Afghanistan or the Middle East. However, after the 2001 attacks, the Western press focused more and more on Islam, strongly implying the scandalous nature of a religious group that could condone the concepts of jihad or terrorism. Additionally, the U.S. reporting on Islam largely originated in foreign reporting, with stories about it referencing terrorist attacks in other countries.

Ogan et al. (2014) explore the origins of anti-Muslim prejudice in the West, identifying anti-Muslim news coverage, political conservatism, and age as factors. However, as with some of the coverage of the other scandals, Bowe, Fahmy, and Wanta (2013) found no agenda-setting effect in the negative coverage of Islam in the U.S., something that Müller, van Zoonen, and Hirzalla (2014) attribute to a kind of inoculation effect of exposure to anti-Islam propaganda. And, again like some of the studies of scandal within the Christian groups, Heeren and Zick (2014), examining the impact of the scandal frame on Islam, noted that some Muslims developed a stronger group identity after consuming the negative coverage. Others criticize the unbalanced coverage itself (Pearson 2017) as failing to follow the norms of good journalism.

The overall pattern appears as a temporary loss of faith in religion after a reported scandal and then a recovery, with church members less likely to turn away than the general public.
Predictable framing and narrative structure

In comparing how journalists reported religious scandal, communication researchers identified common elements in the ways they approached even complex stories. Given the extent of coverage, these commonalities appear first in the big scandals. As indicated above, the largest religion scandal reported by the news media in the last 25 years (with over 13,000 articles) addressed child abuse by Catholic priests. Right around the time that coverage increased, Jenkins (2001) offered a general history of clergy sex abuse, looking at cases from the 1990s. Jenkins also includes chapters describing the changing media response in its coverage and the use of different language as the media narrative of scandal developed. The scandal itself included not just the actions of abusers but the inactions of church authorities.

Communication researchers have devoted a great deal of attention to the scandal: to the media framing, to the descriptions of the issues, and to various church responses. Maier (2005, 220) lists some of the issues that appear in the narrative frame:

Though the uncertainty, the sense of betrayal, and the embarrassment may have been similar to other public relations crises, the clergy sex scandal was no average crisis. The gravity of the crimes, the depth of the mismanagement, and the outrage often left one speechless. The scandal was also incredibly complex. As Philip Jenkins (2001) has observed, sexual misconduct in the Catholic priesthood is a sociological, psychological, legal, theological, and ethical issue framed as much by anti-Catholicism and ideological disagreements with Catholic doctrine as by legitimate concerns over the safety of children.

Maier and Crist extend this analysis as they describe the very difficulty of grasping this kind of scandal, since, as with all scandals (from the religious perspective), it deals with a web of evil with no simple solution. The sexual abuse formed only the first part of the scandal. They describe some of its other aspects:

It arises from numerous causal factors, each of which individually can constitute a crisis in its own right: gross pastoral incompetence and insensitivity, yes, but also vast cultural shifts that left Catholic institutions feeling embattled, increasing theological and ideological polarization following Vatican II, a shrinking priesthood suffering from crushingly low morale, disastrously deficient and even abusive seminary formation, a frightening information deficit, and a weak institutional structure that continues to leave ill-informed and unprepared bishops to their own devices . . . And we should be even less surprised at the anger, frustration, and cynicism of ordinary Catholics and non-Catholics at every level of American society—all of whom, unable to fathom the entire crisis in its complexity, grasp at the part that conveniently matches their ideological preferences.

Maier and Crist also provide a thorough bibliography of the coverage and of the debate within and outside of Catholicism on how best to respond.

Dixon contextualizes her look at the church responses in terms of the media frames. In setting out her analysis, Dixon (2004, 70–71) reviews the scripts through which the media reported the scandal in Boston (accusations, local press accounts, legal filings, outraged church members, Cardinal Law’s responses, etc.) and then the break from this routine as evidence of more abusers emerged through the reporting of the Boston Globe. Ingebretsen (2004, 21–22)
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analyzes the news media’s “scandal narrative frame” in more detail, noting that the coverage uses a “conventional Gothic mode” that follows an almost predictable ritual of outrage over innocent victims and manipulative individuals or institutions. The coverage need not address complexity or even coherence in the narrative, so well known is the frame. Ingebretsen traces the development of the scandal narrative frame both to literary convention and to its adaptation from the Enron financial scandal that occurred shortly before the Catholic Church scandal.

The same framing and narrative structure appeared in reporting of child abuse scandals in the Jewish community, with news items appearing in the *New York Times*, *New York* magazine, ABC’s *Nightline*, and in the Jewish Telegraphic Agency reports (Neustein 2009). The framing shaped the reporting: Reporters interviewed victims, tracked cover-ups, and described the religious communities’ attempts to resolve the issue internally through rabbinic courts. Neustein’s edited volume describes the press coverage, provides a more detailed account of accusations, examines community response, and offers suggested remedies—all fitted to the narrative developed in the Catholic scandal, with input from mental health professionals, legal advocates, rabbis, and pastoral counselors. Lesher’s (2014) investigation goes into more detail about the cases themselves within the Orthodox Jewish community, again situating the child abuse reporting in terms similar to those used in the Catholic community: abuse by trusted ministers, reporting, backlash against the victims, cover-up, and finally public recognition. Lesher offers additional cultural information that may have contributed to the problem.

News reports dealing with Islam follow the narrative conventions and frames for scandals among other religious groups, but with one difference: Most stories about Islam treat the religion itself as scandalous, since some of its adherents and leaders accept violence. Mahoney’s (2010) comparison of Western reporting with that of a predominantly Muslim nation shows that the Australian reporting relied on stereotypes, associating Islam with terrorism, while the Indonesian press, reporting on events there, sought explanations within Indonesian politics rather than religion. Yusha’u (2012) found that the British press played up scandal and religion in reporting on the Boko Haram movement in Nigeria where it did not do so in similar stories about Christianity or Judaism. Similarly, Douai and Lauricella (2014) saw a greater likelihood of North American newspapers using a scandal frame when reporting on Islam and the war on terror.

The narrative frame simplifies the reporting—religious figures acting badly, failed institutional responses, institutional cover-ups or defense of wrong doers, courageous victims and their advocates, and legal resolutions. Reporters need only to fill in names and details.

**Rhetorical responses to scandal**

If the media coverage of religious scandal follows a narrative frame, so too do church responses. Here communication scholars turn to rhetoric to understand better successful and unsuccessful church communication strategies.

After the initial PTL wrongdoing came to light, a compounding scandal appeared. Another television evangelist, Jerry Falwell (ordained as a fundamentalist Baptist minister and operating his own television ministry) took over the operations of the PTL programs, despite the fact that the Bakkers and the PTL group follow the Pentecostal church—a group that Falwell had criticized on Biblical grounds. Moreover, several weeks after that announcement, Jim Bakker charged that Falwell had “stolen” the PTL ministry (Brown 1991, 9). Brown offers a rhetorical analysis of Falwell’s broadcast defending the take-over of the PTL—a classic instance of a rhetorical apologia in her view. Falwell had to address the various media reports, the publicity, and the issues of denomination and doctrine, while managing at least three audiences: his own
congregation, the Pentecostalist denomination, and the general public put off by the religious scandals. Brown (1991, 16) sees the talk as marking a shift in the strategies of evangelical rhetoric: “In taking on the leadership of PTL, Falwell enlarged his spiritual/evangelical/pastoral role by suggesting that he also possessed expertise in secular matters, i.e., financial and legal concerns and the premise of fairness as it relates to both spiritual and secular governance.”

Dixon examines some of the initial official Catholic responses to child abuse reports—that of Pope John Paul II and of the American cardinals—through the lens of rhetorical analysis, arguing that these church officials emphasized pastoral authority and orthodoxy over a rhetoric of image repair or even of care for victims. Using the work of Foucault and Cheney, she provides some explanation of why and how the Catholic Church leadership did not respond to the heart of the scandal and why the various news organizations could not understand that leadership’s responses.

Catholic leaders merited even more coverage under the rubric of scandal for how they managed their own discourse and lack of accountability. Kaylor (2008) analyzes church leadership response to the Voice of the Faithful, a lay group, excluding them rather than seeing them as allies in a vain attempt to cling to one model of authority. The bishops’ rhetorical strategies actually muddied an already opaque situation. O’Keefe (2015) sketches out the impact that these rhetorical failures had on subsequent patterns of address by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, which chose not to rely on its diminished authority in its teachings but to turn to citations from church history.

The Church of Scientology, a new religious movement, also chose rhetorical strategies in the face of media scandal. It faced criticism in the public press that followed the general pattern of coverage of scandal, with a number of the articles featuring attacks on the church by former members. That church attracted additional media attention due to its many celebrity adherents. Strauss examines one such indirect attack on the church in Andrew Morton’s 2008 unauthorized biography of actor Tom Cruise. Strauss applies Kenneth Burke’s rhetorical analysis model to the church’s statement in response to charges in the biography. He notes how the Church of Scientology moved to defend its legitimacy by discrediting the reporter and by “access[ing] shared cultural symbols by portraying itself as a persecuted religion seeking sanctuary in the American tradition of religious freedom” (Strauss 2017, 39).

Misunderstanding of religion

As noted above, the news media sees a duty in reporting scandal while religions see harm in the reporting, as spreading such stories damages people and religion (Silk 1998, 5), the first of a series of misunderstandings of religion. Other researchers have criticized the media’s shallow understanding of religion in general as something that leads reporters to depend too much on faulty narrative frames. Two scandals involving the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints (LDS or Mormons) provide an initial illustration.

News outlets in the United States reported scandalous events, many of them arising from confusion between the LDS church and a small, break-away and isolated group, the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, which continued to practice polygamy. A 2008 raid on their compound—presumably to protect children—garnered headlines and confusion, with 36 percent of survey respondents thinking that the FLDS and the Mormon church were the same (Boyle & Campbell 2015, 77). A larger scandal, though, arose from the misapplication of the Mormon practice of proxy baptism of ancestors: News emerged that some Mormons had submitted names of Holocaust victims for such baptism. This outraged the Jewish community and a 1995 agreement between the LDS church and the Jewish community ended the practice.
However, new evidence in 2012 showed that the practice continued (ibid., 75–76), resulting in extensive media coverage, coverage which gained national salience because of the presidential campaign of Mitt Romney, a member of the LDS church. Boyle and Campbell compared news coverage among the mainstream media, the Jewish press, and the Mormon press. Noting that “the initial [national] stories were framed from the angle of the Mormon Church apologizing for the unauthorized actions,” some later coverage focused on Helen Radkey, a self-appointed LDS critic (ibid., 79). The news narrative shifted then to a more controversial one featuring a whistleblower. The LDS media took a different approach: it “can be grouped into three different categories—traditional, objective reporting, often focusing on the LDS response to the public, often including clarification of misinformation; and defending the practice by citing both LDS officials and non-Mormon religion scholars” (ibid., 80–81). The Jewish media either ignored the stories or followed the initial national news framing. “While reporting was fairly straightforward and noninflammatory, the Jewish media’s editorials and opinion columns were largely conciliatory after the church issued an apology” (ibid., 82). Boyle and Campbell conclude that the style of the media coverage indicates “that there still remains a large public misunderstanding about the nuances of doctrine” (ibid., 84), something that seems typical of all coverage of religion.

Misunderstanding similarly appears in news coverage of other religious scandals. In the child abuse scandal in the Catholic Church, some church leaders, while acknowledging the problems, objected that the news media did not cover Catholic Church attempts to help victims, change policies, and make reporting of accusations easier; or cover the extent of child abuse by other agencies (public schools, youth sports, etc.), more or less charging the news media with unfair treatment (Chaput 2017). This latter charge emerges most strongly in Pierre’s (2011) book length analysis of media coverage.

If the child abuse scandals were not enough, news media reported at least two other Catholic Church scandals, both of which reflected some levels of misunderstanding. De Maioa, Alkazemi, and Wantac (2016) review the communication consequences of the Argentinian Catholic Church’s cooperation with military regimes in their study of the church’s inability to set the agenda in the Argentinian press. They note that church leaders’ support for oppressive governments in exchange for an embrace of traditional values cost them legitimacy after the end of the military regime. While correct, the news coverage ignored historical pressures on church leaders and cultural practices that prevented leaders from imagining other actions. Other stories also failed to take context into account. Pope Benedict XVI generated a good deal of negative news coverage for two events that the media reported as scandalous: his association of Islam with jihad in a talk to academics and his lifting of an excommunication on Bishop Williamson the same day as news emerged of Williamson’s Holocaust denial stance. Stohmeier (2009) analyzes the Vatican responses, arguing that the press reported both events without their context, even ignoring relevant story aspects that did not fit the desired narrative frame.

Much of the coverage’s negative tone in reporting on Islam comes from associating the religion with jihad or struggle, with little attempt to understand religious teachings or practices or to separate political activities by Muslims from their faith. According to a content analysis by Sheikh, Price, and Oshagan (1995), reporting on Muslims featured negative portrayals, but usually linked it to specific events.

Whatever the issue, news attention to scandals in religion indicates a generally skeptical approach to religious groups and a simplified understanding of the nature of religion, leading to a willingness to shift from a more balanced framing to one that emphasizes and exaggerates potential conflict, between religious groups and the larger society, between institutions and individuals, or between whistleblowers and church.
Scandals, media and religion

News attention

Media-defined scandals regularly appear in the news. Boyle and Campbell (2015, 76) note,

In their coverage of religion, larger publications have tended to cover many of the more polarizing issues and events. The top 10 religion stories in 2011 included coverage of radical Islam, anti-Muslim sentiment in America, Westboro Church protests, the Catholic priest abuse scandal, and the burning of the Koran by Terry Jones.

Almost all of the studies of religious scandal by communication researchers simply accept the fact that scandal “sells” papers and drives broadcast ratings. Because news coverage has developed a proven narrative frame, negative reporting has become both easier and less nuanced.

Conclusion

Accustomed to their predictable narrative form, audiences find religious scandals both compelling and easy to provoke outrage, even if not easy to understand. However, people do not remain convinced. Communication researchers have shown that scandals have an immediate but short-lived impact on opinions about religion. The religious scandals that have attracted the most attention are those that have a more complex character, such as the Catholic Church child-abuse scandal, which combined several different issues and stayed longer in the news. Scholars also show that religious figures can successfully respond, usually with some form of apology or apologia. Finally, the researchers have also noted that scandals can trigger a backlash against the media sources when audiences feel that reporters have misunderstood religion or acted unfairly or disproportionately.

Scandals dealing with religion will not go away, given the nature of religion and the nature of the news industry. The narrative frame of scandal remains powerful and successful for journalism even as it risks obscuring by simplification.

References


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