

# GLOBAL CORPORATE PUBLIC RELATIONS AND SPORT'S CULTURE: A CIVIL RELIGION APPROACH TO NATION-BUILDING

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this chapter is to present a civil religion perspective on the cultural nation-building through a study of soccer's dynamics in Catalonia, and specifically of Barcelona Football Club (BFC) national reality and its public relations efforts. We believe that BFC can be seen as a form of national culture that uses a communication model which sets forth, upholds and reinforces relations with supporters.

## I. INTRODUCTION

This article aims to demonstrate that, in Catalonia, BFC can be seen as a type of national symbol and civil religion, and the role of public relations in establishing and above all upholding this symbology by using a devotional-promotional communication model.

The term "civil religion" was coined by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in chapter 8, book 4 of *The Social Contract*, to describe what he regarded as the moral and spiritual foundation essential for any modern society. For Rousseau, civil religion was intended simply as a form of social cement, helping to unify the state by providing it with sacred authority. In the sociology of religion, civil religion is the folk religion of a nation or a political culture. Civil religion stands somewhat above folk religion in its social and political status, since by definition it suffuses an entire society or at least a segment of a society; and is often practiced by leaders within that society.

One of the most widely quoted texts as the basis of contemporary interest in the issue first addressed by Rousseau is Bellah's essay *Civil Religion in America* (1967). Bellah highlighted the repeated presence of solemn pronouncements and public documents on God, supernatural future life and other matters also present in Rousseau's work. As Giner (1993) pointed out, the American people's religion is not static. It has developed throughout history, though it is reincarnated in identical or similar rituals: funerals at the national cemetery, federal festivals, the annual presidential address, the taking up of public posts, military parades, and public cults. It is, then, a religion that cannot be identified itself with any one religious Church.

Notwithstanding, Bellah's work (1967) failed to resolve several issues that were significant for the sociology of religions until Giner (1993) took up the matter and defined it as:

"a process comprising an array of popular devotions, political liturgies and public rituals geared towards defining and uniting a community by making

certain mundane features of its life sacred and by classing some of its historical events as epic” (p. 37).

Civil religion manifests itself as a series of myths, civil pieties and public exorcisms that uphold the political but are also upheld by politicians and politics. What is most common is that the political or parapolitical agents themselves (e.g.: the representatives of a soccer club) strive to make the political order to which they belong, and from which they benefit through civil religion, sacred. The mass media play a key role in this process since they echo the actions of specialists in promoting mythogenic efforts; iconographically glorifying heroes and events; devising strategies to consolidate rituals and ceremonies; producing the ideology and biased interpretations of social reality, and in the clerical administration of symbolic content (Rothenbuhler, 1998). Such specialists are politicians, media agents, ideologists, secular and ecclesiastical clerics, and their occasional allies.

Civil religion in our time cannot be understood outside the framework of mass communication processes. We should not consider the nature of civil religion without placing it at the very heart of the technical methods of producing symbols, myths, moral values and charisma (Giner, 1993). Civil religion entails participation and cannot be boiled down to passive reception of televised images of mega-events. For this reason, pilgrimages to fairground temples, soccer stadiums, pavilions where atmosphere is created using technical means and audiovisual broadcasts of a mythical history are also essential and constitute the primary task for the inventors of a wholly media-fuelled civil religion. Thus, civil religion is the product of mediated communication and “media democracy” (Giner, 1993, p. 47): like electoral campaigns, soccer matches must be given live or reported coverage in the mass media, particularly on television.

Media production of the transcendent – which also affects supernatural religion - has entered into the field of civil cults. The Olympic Games, which Giner (1993) consider a transnational and specialized civil religion, are essentially, rather than incidentally, a media event. The role of public relations is clear because “public relations work is inextricably linked to the notion of events in popular culture” (L’Etang, 2006, p. 389). However, the public relations approach to civil religion surpasses the role of the mass media in building macro-events. It is intrinsic to civil religion, at least from a symbolic interactionist perspective. From this standpoint, Zhang (2006) concludes that “public relations and symbolic politics are both a meaning-construction process through use of symbols, interactions and interpretations” (p. 27).

Another of the features of civil religion is that it is usually national or nationalist. The community in which a civil religion takes root is usually the national community, though this phenomenon cannot be limited to nations alone since we also find regional and local variations. Local varieties may acquire highly distinctive characteristics without jeopardizing the overall fabric of the civil religion, as is the case in Spain with the cult to Saint James (Santiago), “a supernatural candidate to becoming part of a Hispanic civil religion promoted by some traditional political groups” (Giner, 1993, p. 40). With regard to the very cult of Saint James, Tilson (2006) has analyzed devotional-promotional communication as a form of promotional communication used by individuals and political or religious organizations in order to attract loyal and faithful followers; and has demonstrated the presence of this type of communication in public relations campaign of the Catholic Church and the government of Spain “to establish

and sustain the identity of and allegiance to Saint James... domestically and internationally” (Tilson, 2006, p. 167).

Additionally, Tilson (2006) has demonstrated the linkages between devotional-promotional communication and the nation-building process, and has noted that “the nation-building process is similar to the approach taken to establish corporate identity” (Tilson, 2006, p. 177). On the other hand, various studies have focused on the public relations approach to nation building (the most recent: Taylor & Kent, 2006). “A public relations approach to nation building utilizes a more elaborate model of communication that focuses on how meanings such as national identity, national unity, and the nation state are socially constructed” (Taylor & Kent, 2006, p. 342).

Neither gods nor nations are natural realities. They are social constructs that can be classed as religious in the sense that they bind people, bringing one and all together and immersing them in a cosmivision that explains and helps to make sense of a given means of social organization, of the many that are possible, and of their relation with the individual (Salvador, 2004). One of the etymological senses of the word ‘religion’ comes from the Latin verb ‘*religare*’ which means ‘to bind’, ‘to unite’, ‘to group’; in short, to relate. The public relations approach to nation-building and devotional-promotional communication reveal the symbolic dimension of these processes and the significant role of public relations in the communicative construction of entities like the nation-state (Tilson, 2006) and civil religion.

## II. SOCCER’S NATIONAL AND RELIGIOUS DIMENSION IN CATALONIA

When, on November 29, 1899, Hans Gamper founded BFC, along with eleven other enthusiasts of ‘foot-ball’, a game that was still largely unknown in this part of the world, nobody could have imagined the magnitude of what that initiative would eventually develop into. Over more than one hundred years of history, BFC has grown spectacularly and is now so much more than a mere sports club.

Salvador (2004) has shown how the dictatorships of Primo de Rivera and Franco are two key periods for any historical explanation of the growth of the *Barça* phenomenon and its emergence as a symbol of and metonym for Catalonia. The Spanish suppression of all Catalonia’s official symbols during both of these regimes gave rise to a symbolic substitution. Thus, while Franco was in power the BFC stadium was one of the few public places where people could express themselves freely and the club became the greatest ambassador for Catalonia outside its borders. It was at this time that *Barça* was said to be “more than a club” by virtue of its symbolism (Santacana, 2005).

As a result of this complex historical process *Barça* become the symbol of the defeated Catalonia and for many Catalans membership of the club is a form of Catalan nationalism. *Barça* is “the only elliptical means of expressing a sentimentality... [and] the epic sublimation of Catalonia” (Artells, 1972, p. 8).

*Barça* has therefore evolved into a symbolic and ritual system by which it contributes to constructing, upholding, reproducing and expressing Catalan national or ethnic identity (Salvador, 2004). Seen in this light, ethnic or national symbols and rituals are vital for the members of a given human group to be able to affirm their

awareness of belonging and self-identification in a way that is clear to others (Prats, 1996). And for this, loyalty to a given identity is required. Catalonia is no exception. Like any other nation it has a need for self-presentation that is expressed in an entire symbolic repertoire similar to that of other ethnic groups or states (Bourdieu, 1995). In any symbol the association between the reference point and the content is random, merely being the product of a historical and human construct (Manis & Meltzer, 1978). In these terms, the symbolic value attached to BFC today is extremely high and at least on a par with the Catalan flag or the National Day of Catalonia.

For Turner (1970), groups rally around symbols, celebrate their cults before them, perform other symbolic acts near them and, frequently, to set up compound sanctuaries, add other symbolic objects to them. Therefore, Salvador (2004) suggests that *Barça* is in itself a dominant symbol, that it acts as one of Catalonia's main metonyms and as the benchmark for Catalan national reality in drawing together complex notions and vital experiences such as Catalonia, Catalan nationalism, national sentiment, a common past, shared grievances, family tradition, festive celebrations, and so on. In other words, it synthesizes a panoply of meanings that have snowballed in the club's century-old history and in the history of the "imagined community" (Anderson, 1991) that is Catalonia. As a metaphor for this imagined nation, BFC has been a defeated club, something of a victim. Hence, those who have led it to sporting glories have become national legends in the region for reinstating collective pride through the communicative and therefore media-related hero worship and deification accorded them.

The array of rituals and devotions generated by *Barça* creates or recreates the national community, strengthens its cohesion and bestows on it a transcendental facet, whilst also helping to make the identification and mythological symbols of Catalan imagined community and everything this signifies sacred.

The devotion shown by *Barça* fans fulfils the same social functions as religion in a not too distant past (and present in other cultures): 1) helping to bring meaning to an ever unfinished society with all its fears and contradictions, building a humanly meaningful world (Berger, 1981); 2) bestowing a social energy upon the group that allows them to create the bonds needed to carry forward collective projects; 3) meeting the need for community belonging that is apparently present in all individuals today; 4) and, at the same time, satisfying the minimum demand for emotional unity that all nation-states also need to exist today (Salvador, 2004). These converging interests are found today in national identity reference points such as BFC more so than anywhere else.

Thus, *Barça* supporters become 'believers' in a symbolic system brimming with religious meaning; believers in the sense noted by Salvador (2004): "the thousands of 'supporters' who are not only passionate about *Barça* but who also see *Barça* as a symbol to which they attribute transcendental meanings and truths" (p. 380). This is why for a multitude of people all of the ritual devices that spring up around the club transcend the merely sporting ("*More than a club*") to become both a show of sport and a wealth of ethnic-national ritual devices geared towards creating and binding together a national community that is crying out for social cohesion by virtue of its 'historical' fragility, as the Catalan community.

### III. CONCLUSIONS

This article shows how BFC constitutes and constructs a new form of religiousness by means of various communicative tactics with the aim of creating and upholding long-term relationships with its publics. Thus, *Barça* provides a unity that is sought after by extremely heterogeneous publics. It is in this environment that each of the powerful myths, rituals and symbolic devices that revolve around BFC give rise to concepts pertaining to the semantic and expressive field of religion.

Traditionally, myths and rituals have shaped religiousness and built what we consider to be sacred. Unarguably, therefore, *Barça* is highly similar in form to other religious social events where, for Llobera (1996), “the key lies not so much in the presence or absence of supernatural beings as the compulsory nature of beliefs for all members of the group” (p. 246). The notion of ‘civil religion’ allows us to observe if this relationship goes beyond the evident analogy. From this perspective, in Catalonia, “*Barça* has a symbolic representation function that in many cultures and eras we would not hesitate to class as...civil religion” (Salvador, 2004, p. 376). Taking this concept of civil religion, BFC engenders a host of rituals and devotions that create or recreate the national community, strengthen its cohesion and bestow a transcendental facet upon it, whilst also helping to make the identity and mythological symbols of the imagined Catalan community and their meanings sacred.

Whereas before the French and Industrial Revolutions the loyalties that drew society together were aroused in particular by a belief in God via the church or in the King, the changes brought about by the new era – especially the process of secularization – meant that the loyalties that bound and structured societies and individuals were chiefly aroused by the national community (nation), either directly or through related identity references as is the case with BFC. We can observe this phenomenon from a devotional-promotional communication of soccer actors, as BFC. This communicational process involves a covenantal relationship building between the faithful (supporters and fans) and their God (*Barça* as institution, and, ultimately, Catalonia as a nation) through the intercession of their clergy (*Barça*, as a soccer team).

Finally, from a theory building perspective, because public relations focuses on how communication efforts are used to build, maintain, or change relationships between organizations and publics —“primarily mass publics” (Taylor & Kent, 2006, p. 347)—, public relations is an approach to the study of civil religion.

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