

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

Jordi Xifra, University of Girona, Spain
jordi.xifra@udg.edu

Enric Ordeix, Ramon LLull University, Spain
enricor@blanquerna.url.edu

ABSTRACT

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

INTRODUCTION

As Tilson and Venkateswaran (2006) pointed out, Botan (1992) argued that public relations is an age-old concept dating from early Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilization used in different ways by governments and religions. In this sense, pyramids, statues, temples, tombs, paintings are examples of public relations-like practice, because they reflect early efforts at persuasion, and the Epistles written by St. Paul to encourage membership growth and to boost the morale of the early Christian churches were really part of a public relations campaign (Newsom, Turk, & Kruckeberg, 2000).

As Randall (2000) noted, religion and public relations go way back. Moses pioneered the concept of the top 10 list (a staple of press releases and late night TV). Even the Islamic prophet Muhammad's *suras* (verses), which collectively became the Qur'an, could be considered an early example of a public relation best seller (Newsom, Turk, & Kruckeberg, 2000). Such early efforts at communication—whether internally or externally focused—require religious faith communities, according to Tilson and Venkateswaran (2006), to establish good relationships with their public audiences if they are to have the trust that is essential to their well-being and success.

By definition, public relations uses communication to facilitate relationships and understanding between an organization and its many publics (McElreath, 1997), and it is the responsibility of public relations practitioners to establish and maintain goodwill by being sensitive to the needs and concerns of their publics and communicating with them in a timely and effective manner (Seitel, 1987).

Tilson and Venkateswaran (2006) contended that it might be more appropriate for public relations professionals to speak of fostering relationships rather than just merely facilitating them because the word “foster” denotes “promoting the growth or development of” (p. 113) and incorporates elements that are essential to relationships— notions of nurturance, feeding, and growth.

Tilson and Venkateswaran (2006) suggested a covenantal model for public relations based on

(a) practitioner–client trust, (b) dedication to a particular human good or need—in the case of PR, the need for vital relationships (just as medicine devotes itself to health, and the clergy to the client’s spiritual well-being), and (c) a public pledge to serve this need (which does not sacrifice the good of others for the good of the client) to firmly establish the discipline as a profession, much like law, medicine, or the clergy, by virtue of its covenantal base. (p. 124)

In operationalizing a covenantal view of public relations, practitioners would tend to employ the two-way symmetric model of public relations as it values mutual trust and communication.

In so doing, practitioners can not only foster good client relations, but also, more importantly, build good community relations that are essential to an organization’s success, as resource dependency and social exchange theorists argue. They maintain that, because no individual or organization is entirely self-sufficient, each party relies on the goodwill or the resources of others, that there is a need for organizations and their stakeholders to commit the time, energy, and resources necessary to build and maintain relationships (Guth & Marsh, 2005).

This article demonstrates that, in Catalonia, FC Barcelona is a type of national symbol and civil religion, and that the role of public relations is to establish and, above all, uphold this symbolism by using a devotional-promotional communication model.

As Salvador noted (2004), if a group of ethnologists were sent from an alien planet to study Catalan culture and customs, once they had done their observation, read the press, watched the television, strolled through its cities, admired the work of architect Gaudí and artists such as Picasso, Miró and Dalí, listened in on conversations, looked at young people’s idols and games, and identified the primary symbols of identity, they would conclude that it is not Catalonia’s politics, economy, culture, family life, art, or religion that consume most of its people’s mental and physical spaces, but FC Barcelona—popularly known as Barça—that chiefly captures and monopolizes definitions of Catalan identity. This not only enters into every area of the lives of many people, but also into every area of society, and the fact that members, supporters, and fans are aware of this is what gave rise to the maxim that best conveys what Barça is to them: “More than a club.”

Of all sports bodies FC Barcelona has the most members and the highest number of sporting activities in the world. To be precise, it has some 130,000 members (as of January 14, 2005) and 1,638 official Barça supporters clubs (as of September 26, 2005). However, the social masses who would call themselves Barça fans with varying degrees of devotion is incalculable, and an array of indicators and data point to the scale being this large (FC Barcelona, 2007).

Data on the scale of the phenomenon not only refers to its presence in the media. The club's budget for 2006 was over €240 million, far surpassing the total budget for Catalonia's second-largest city, Tarragona, which stood at €123 million for the same year, for instance. Celebrations for its biggest victories literally brought the region to a standstill. When Barça won the Champions League on May 17, 2006, more than one and a half million people took to the streets in various cities throughout Catalonia. Barça is the hottest topic of conversation for countless people in bars, offices, family get-togethers, with friends and so on. Supporters are passionate and devote much of their time to preseason matches, league games, championships (for days before and after the event) and to keeping abreast of new signings. The Barça brand means big business for everything it involves and that revolves around it.

This article aims to demonstrate that FC Barcelona can be seen as a type of civil religion and the role of public relations in establishing and above all upholding this symbolism by using a devotional-promotional communication model. According to Mickey (1997), a critical view of the signs and symbols of a culture allow one to see the allocation of power and the dominant ideology. From this standpoint, this essay offers a critical approach to public relations theory and practice.

CIVIL RELIGION, DEVOTIONAL-PROMOTIONAL COMMUNICATION, AND NATION BUILDING

The term "civil religion" was coined by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1968) 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 because, by definition, it suffuses an entire 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 present in Rousseau's work. As Giner (1993) pointed out, the worship of America is not static. It has developed throughout history, although 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. Thus, it is a religion that cannot be identified with any one religious organization.

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.

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 because 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, 2003). 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 the 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): 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, 2006b).

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.

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 because there are also 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). 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 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).

In addition, Tilson (2006) pointed out the linkages between devotional-promotional communication and the nation-building process, and noted that the nation-building process is similar to the approach taken to establish corporate identity. On the other hand, various studies have focused on the public relations approach to nation building, most recently Taylor and 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).

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,” or “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.

THE RELIGIOUS DIMENSION OF FC BARCELONA

When, on November 29, 1899, Hans Gamper founded FC Barcelona, along with 11 other enthusiasts of “foot-ball,” a game that was still largely unknown in this part of the world, nobody could have imagined the magnitude into which that initiative would eventually develop. Over more than 100 years, FC Barcelona has grown spectacularly and is now so much more than a mere sports club.

Salvador (2004) has shown how the dictatorships of Miguel Primo de Rivera and Francisco 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 FC Barcelona 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” because of its symbolism (Santacana, 2005).

Because of this complex historical process, Barça has 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 sentiment and the epic sublimation of Catalonia (Artells, 1972).

Therefore, Barça has 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). In addition, for this belonging, 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 FC Barcelona 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 set up compound sanctuaries, adding 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 itself, Catalan nationalism, its national sentiment, its common past, its shared grievances, its family tradition, and its festive celebrations. Thus, 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), Catalonia. As a metaphor for this imagined nation, FC Barcelona 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, while also helping to make sacred the identification and mythological symbols of the imagined Catalan community and everything it signifies.

The devotion shown by Barça fans fulfils the same social functions as religion in a not too distant past (and present in other cultures) by (a) helping to bring meaning to an ever unfinished society with all its fears and contradictions, building a humanly meaningful world (Berger, 1967); (b) bestowing a social energy upon the group that allows them to create the bonds needed to carry forward collective projects; (c) meeting the need for community belonging that is apparently present in all individuals today; and (d) concurrently, satisfying the minimum demand for emotional unity that all nation-states also need to exist today (Salvador, 2004). These converging interests are found more than anywhere else today in national identity reference points such as FC Barcelona.

Thus, Barça supporters become "believers" in a symbolic system brimming with religious meaning, believers in the sense noted by Salvador (2004), which is that thousands of supporters are not only passionate about Barça, but also see experience as a symbol to which they attribute transcendental meanings and truths. Thus, for a multitude of people, all of the ritual devices that spring up around the club transcend the merely sporting (i.e., it is "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 the historically fragile Catalan community.

GLOBAL BARÇA

To add coherence to an institution to get such messages across, communication departments need certain organization. As the soccer business has expanded, sports organizations have come to function more closely related to the managing business. Corporate communication has become an essential element for clubs to project their identity and reinforce their image into local, national, and global markets. Currently, the international expansion of an organization must be part of the strategy and often a vital element to grow economically (Nieto & Llamazares, 1995). Communication, however, is not applied equally in all Professional Soccer League clubs. Large clubs have structured their organization through a very wide concept of communication that resembles Van Riel's definition. FC Barcelona and Real Madrid are global clubs, and being a global club implies the possibility to expand the image of the organization overseas. Expanding across borders demands high marketing expenses and makes organizations attractive to stellar international players, who may later seek—and gain—individual recognition through their affiliation to these institutions.

For global, high-revenue clubs such as FC Barcelona, the management of communication is at the same level of sports management, financial management, and marketing management. FC Barcelona's director of communication, Jordi Badia, and the general director, Anna Xicoy, are highly needed at corporate meetings. As social affairs vice president Alfons Godall states, "Xicoy needs to be there in order to know the lines of work, and Badia needs to be there to know the situation of the club in order to manage it the best way possible (interview with Alfons Godall)." For soccer clubs, marketing is also on the top of the list. Large Spanish soccer clubs such as Real Madrid, FC Barcelona, or Sevilla FC, can afford exclusive marketing departments because their financial possibilities allow it.

FC Barcelona is the third, top, European sports club in terms of revenues; it accounted for 290 million euros during the 2006-2007 season. Barça's Vice president Marc Ingla said, "Barça has around 160 million followers all over the world" (FC Barcelona, 2007). This data reflects the way FC Barcelona is positioned internationally as one of the most respected—and better paid—clubs in the world. To conduct institutional relations with fans, administration, and commercial and sports organizations better, FC Barcelona has created its own media, allowing for the organization to speak "the voice of the club" directly to the public. Since Joan Laporta became president in 2003, TV and the Internet could play an essential role in the process of diffusion, in generating new resources, and in transmitting the Barça feeling (Murillo & Murillo, 2005) all over the world. As Murillo and Murillo (2005) stated, managing FC Barcelona's own media relies not only on the communications department, but also on an interdepartmental strategy that helps consolidate one of President Joan Laporta's most ambitious projects, the creation of a multimedia club that positions FC Barcelona as "more than just a club" all over the world (Joan Laporta's speech, July 18, 2004). Both the marketing department, led by Marc Ingla, and the communications department expand and promote the product (the team) locally and globally.

Online communications have also become a vital tool to project the club's image. The club's Web site (www.fcbarcelona.cat), inaugurated in September 2003, is meant to become the main information source for a majority of teenage fans who demand fresh information (Murillo & Murillo, 2005) and for professionals who continuously seek updated information. About the Web, Eduard Pujol stated it "should be a communication source for the rest of the media" (Eduard Pujol [Barça TV director] personal conversation, November 12 2006). It is the most successful way to expand globally, as its content is available in Catalan, Spanish, English, Japanese, and Chinese. The club's members can also get online monthly bulletins, and children; the Júnior FC Bulletin. Barça's Web site has also become an indicator of the club's development: overall, the number of visits to the Web site varies depending on the success of sport events. In June 2007, the Web site was visited 38,000,000 times (FC Barcelona, 2007) and, according to the latest memory of the club, the average usage time on the Web site has increased 20% since 2006 (FC Barcelona, 2007). Of the visitors, 40% use the Spanish version, 40% use the English version, and 20% use the Catalan version.

The integration of TV and online communications wouldn't take place until April 2007 with the launch of Barça TV online, an exclusive subscription product of Servecast. Offered in Catalan, Spanish, and English, it has subscribers in more than 50 countries (FC Barcelona, 2007). The Web site (<http://www.fcbonline.tv/default.aspx?uil=ca>) contains a wide range of sections from press conferences to historical matches and products such as live interviews. For this purpose, Barça TV Online has added an independent editorial newsroom made of audiovisual and online services. Barça TV Director Eduard Pujol defines it as a "content factory both for the TV and the Website." FC Barcelona's timeliness in responding to today's

global sports media complex is also reflected through its linkage with one of the hot spots of online services. Youtube is home to one of FC Barcelona's own portals of audiovisual content since 2007. The site has already received more than 200,000 visits (FC Barcelona, 2007), and the international versions of the Web site in Japan, China, and the Middle East were introduced last season, as a joint venture between the leading portals of each market (Rakuten, SportsCN and LinkDotNet; FC Barcelona, 2007). A new service, Ràdio Barça, was launched in August 2007 with the purpose of retransmitting full matches online in Catalan, Spanish, and English.

Another Barça-owned type of media is a text messaging service that offers items such as logo's downloads, melodies, tunes, or screen walls (FC Barcelona, 2007). Most short message services (SMS) are targeted to the club's members as a way to reinforce their loyalty. Three years ago, FC Barcelona already offered an SMS service with stories on matches, players' postcards, anthems, or games' schedules. The increasing cost of this practice reflects its growing success; while in 2003 receiving an SMS would cost 0.15 euros, in 2005 it rose to 0.60 per unit. The gains during the 2004–2005 season accounted for 1.785 million euros, while the previous season had accounted for 1.17 million. According to Swedish Senseit AB, the technical partner for this service, 83,000 Barcelona fans were tuned in through mobile phone communication in 2007, and the club sends around a million SMS each month.

BARÇA'S PUBLIC RELATIONS EFFORTS

Relationships create social integration and collective consciousness that leads national integration (Taylor, 2000). Then, from a relationship management view, public relations can be considered a social and identity cohesion function. FC Barcelona is fuelled by this religious and national inheritance, which explains why all things Barça are shrouded in a magnificence that is upheld thanks to its publicity and event management efforts, two areas through which public relations can support elite sports (L'Etang, 2006a). Although this author showed that public relations can offer more to both these areas in practice, we have focused these three areas because they are demonstrative of the central role played by FC Barcelona's public relations function can be split into two main groups: press and international tours (managed by the Press Department), and visits and nonsports events to and using the club's facilities (managed by the PR Department).

PUBLICITY AND PROMOTIONAL TOURS

As a mass phenomenon, FC Barcelona's activity becomes a *sumum* of events given full coverage in the press, making Barça the main news player in Catalonia, more so than its regional government. Barça is the region's primary information subsidy and almost all of its acts are treated as macro-events.

Taking the amount of information about FC Barcelona on Catalonia's four public television channels alone reveals that no other area of news media is covered more than the day-to-day life of FC Barcelona. Of the news items concerning the Catalan community on the Spanish national television channels, Barça takes first place with 21.8% coverage followed by the city of Barcelona (19.7%), and the president of Catalan government and regional government itself (8.4%; Bañeres, 2000).

Between September 13, 2004 and October 7, 2006, the Barça press department managed

2,851 media interviews, not including press conferences (Barça press department, October 5, 2006). This phenomenon, which cannot be viewed in isolation from the Catalan sport media dynamic as a whole—two newspapers (*Sport* and *El Mundo Deportivo*) featuring 23 pages on the club every day and 20 sports programs a day on the radio devoted chiefly to Barça—generates singular source-media relationships, similar to the relationship between the news media and politics, on which both sides are almost entirely dependent (Bourgeois, 1995). In Catalonia, as Jones and Baró (1996) concluded, Catalan sports journalism is highly bound up with the sports event that has helped to create it and that fuels it every day.

Relationship between FC Barcelona and the sports press is the paradigm for this. The sports media breathe life into Barça but increasingly they also feed off it, to the extent that an analysis of the items published each day on FC Barcelona are closer to the criteria for a newsletter rather than a newspaper (Xifra, 2006). This is the upshot of the identity function of Catalan sports journalism. Sports journalists tend to be partisans of a specific team so that supporters can identify with the information (Ortiz, 2005). This situation also illustrates the theory that the media frequently adopt a “priestly” role when it comes to media events (Dayan & Katz, 1992; Wardle & West, 2004).

Apart from its source-media relationships, the club has three of its own news media: the monthly *Revista Barça* newsletter, *Diari del Partit* (*Newspaper of the Match*), distributed to the public at every match, and the satellite television channel Barça TV that has over 50,000 subscribers. *Revista Barça* has a circulation of 130,000 copies and, therefore, has the largest circulation of all press written in Catalan, surpassing all the Catalan daily papers (Barça press department, October 5, 2006).

Taylor and Kent (2006) have analyzed the phenomenon of national identity building from a public relations perspective. L’Etang (2006a) included national identity within the tourism domains for discussion and pointed out as teaching and research opportunities the role of public relations in building national identity through success in elite sport. In August 2006, FC Barcelona began a tour of the United States and Mexico during which in addition to playing against various teams in these countries it presented the “Catalunya” brand (“Catalonia” in the Catalan language) to over 250 tour operators and journalists in both countries. The aim of this campaign, a joint venture with the Catalan governmental tourism promotion body, Turisme de Catalunya (Tourism of Catalonia), was to confirm Catalonia’s place as one of America’s chief tourist destinations because more than half of those who choose to vacation in Spain opt for Catalonia (Catalan Ministry for Commerce, Tourism and Consumption, 2004, July 21).

This not only reveals the huge media machine that is FC Barcelona, necessary to create the symbology of a civil religion, but also confirms L’Etang’s public relations and sports media model focused on the importance of construction and interpretation of discourse and rhetoric as a key aspect of mediated sport (L’Etang, 2006a).

EVENT MANAGEMENT

Close observation of Barça’s primary scenarios and ritual celebrations suggests a high degree of similarity with the ways in which civil religion manifests itself. From an event management approach and leaving events of a purely sporting nature such as Barça’s weekly matches to one side, we would like to draw attention to its Open House Day, the Barçamania trade fair and the World Fan Club Meetings.

Open house days are one of the most frequent community relations two-way tactics used by organizations in Spain, particularly public institutions (Xifra, 2006). During the school Christmas holidays FC Barcelona has open house days in which visitors are given a guided tour around all of the club's facilities. This has a special value for supporters because they are allowed to visit, touch, and feel spaces that only the players, coaches, managers, and employees can usually access. For just one day, they can see the changing rooms, the chapel, the pressroom, and other areas and feel the sacredness (Salvador, 2004). Families are the most common visitors on these days. Fathers or parents and children continue a process of socialization in blue and red (the colors of Barça symbols), an education in sentiment that begins at birth and has its rite of passage at this time, which is many children's first visit to the stadium and its sacred places, at all other times closed to the simple devotee.

As Salvador pointed out (2004), the neophytes enter the sanctuary and come into contact with the tribe's sacred objects. Barça worship is passed down to children in the same way as their mother tongue. Usually this learning curve is lifelong, with the exception of possible desertions or "conversions" to the rival team that can often be attributed to the generation gap or the individual's desire to distance themselves from the family group of origin, behavior that is frequently seen during so-called adolescence.

Soccer stadiums are the twentieth century's answer to glorious cathedrals and as such are places of worship and pilgrimage for followers and *aficionados* in general. On any day of the year, the FC Barcelona grounds may be packed with tourists, schoolchildren, and supporters who come to see Barça's facilities and particularly the FC Barcelona Museum (FC Barcelona Museum, 2006), which is also part of the visitor and open house day itinerary. Year after year, the museum has increased its number of visitors and become an ever more important tool for spreading the name of the club far and wide. Not only is it the best soccer museum in the world, it is also the most popular museum of any kind in Catalonia, regularly receiving more than 1,200,000 pilgrims a year, and is a reference point for many other such museums around the world.

The FC Barcelona Museum contains a large collection of works by leading Catalan artists (e.g., Miró, and Dalí) but is chiefly a sacred world (Salvador, 2004) containing pictures of former heroes, cups and trophies, shirts worn by the players, photos, souvenirs of epic events, armbands worn by former captains, "magic" football boots, gifts given by civil society to Barça, and many other items that recreate and evoke the Barcelona FC mythology. It is a desire to take part in and evoke these myths that draws supporters to the museum, in pursuit of direct contact with the images and relics. These are relics that they would like to see in their own homes, but that belong to the club. It is also true that some visitors go merely as tourists, especially fans of other teams, which is comparable, as Salvador (2004) noted, to nonbelievers visiting cathedrals for a host of reasons including the architectural value or simply to say they have been there.

In addition, the museum offers the chance truly to get to know the stadium by taking the Camp Nou Stadium tour through the installations, which takes visitors into the opposition changing rooms, down the tunnel and onto the pitch area. Fans and visitors can see the new dugouts and look out across the magnificent stadium. The chapel, the TV studio, the pressrooms, and the directors' area virtually complete the tour, with the one final surprise of a chance to enjoy a panoramic view of all FC Barcelona facilities.

In his study on devotional-promotional approach to public relations campaign for Saint James

in Spain, Tilson (2006) argues that this Catholic Church-type campaigning can be considered “covenantal relationship-building” because the Church calls its various publics into a positive relationship with St. James, the Church, and, ultimately, with God. The analogy with FC Barcelona is clear since its own public relations efforts are also geared towards a broad public (members, supporters, nonmembers, non-supporters, non-football fans and so on) with the aim of striking up a positive relationship with Barça and Catalonia.

This devotional-promotional communication process has been bolstered by the growth of new areas such as sports marketing-public relations and integrated communications. As a global phenomenon of the soccer economy, Barça sits amidst a huge merchandising enterprise of which the team colors and the club shield are the core theme. To this end, every year FC Barcelona stages a macro-event: Barçamania, the Barça trade fair where hundreds of club merchandise retailers exhibit and sell to thousands of visitor/buyers. All of the products on offer carry the Barça colors or shield: liqueur, encyclopedias, watches, pens, figurines, underpants, wine, key rings, aprons, blankets, potato chips, candy, lighters, mattresses, umbrellas, whistles and so on. Indeed, the market for Barça cult objects is vast. Any good supporter has a little shrine at home for their collection of newspaper clippings, photos, scarves, flags, etc., and the weirdest and most wonderful objects one can imagine (Salvador, 2004).

However, this is a more organized form of pilgrimage. Regarding Manchester United, Boyle and Haynes (2006) pointed out that global clubs view innovations such as the recently set up Manchester’s Fans Forum as relationships building fields. FC Barcelona has been a pioneer in such event management efforts having run a World Fan Club Congress every year since 1977. This daylong event enables an array of activities to be carried out, making them important arenas allowing them to build long-term relationships and enabling fans to give feedback to the club (Boyle & Haynes, 2006).

CONCLUSIONS

This study shows how FC Barcelona 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 FC Barcelona 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 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. The notion of civil religion allows us to observe whether 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). Taking this concept of civil religion, FC Barcelona engenders a host of rituals and devotions that create or recreate the national community, strengthen its cohesion and bestow a transcendental facet upon it, while also helping to make the identity and mythological symbols of the imagined Catalan community and their meanings sacred.

Whereas, before the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution, the loyalties that drew

society together were aroused in particular by a belief in God through the Church or a belief in the king, the changes brought about by the new era—especially the process of secularization—has meant that the loyalties that bound and structured societies and individuals are now chiefly aroused by the national community (nation), either directly or through related identity references, as is the case of FC Barcelona. This phenomenon can be observed as a devotional-promotional communication of soccer actors, such as FC Barcelona. This communicational process involves a covenantal relationship building between the “faithful” (supporters and fans) and their god (Barça as an institution and, ultimately, Catalonia as a nation) through the “intercession” of their “clergy” (i.e., Barça, as a soccer team and a group of celebrities).

FC Barcelona takes on the role of national ambassador for Catalonia, more influential in the creation of identity and reputation than the Catalan government and its regional diplomacy efforts. L’Etang (2006a) included national identity within the tourism domains for discussion and pointed out as teaching and research opportunities the role of public relations in building national identity through success in elite sport. Taylor and Kent (2006) have also underlined the public diplomacy efforts among the different public relations strategies in the processes of identity and nation building. The efforts made by the government of Catalonia through Barça confirm these assertions.

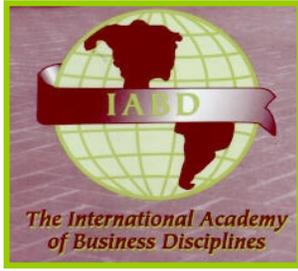
From a relationship building perspective, because public relations focuses on how communication efforts are used to build, maintain, or change relationships between organizations and publics—primarily mass publics (Taylor & Kent, 2006)—public relations is an approach to the study of civil religion.

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*JOURNAL OF
INTERNATIONAL
BUSINESS DISCIPLINES*



University of Maryland University College

Volume 2, Number 3

Summer 2008



Published By:

International Academy of Business Disciplines, Frostburg State University, and University of Maryland University College

ISBN 1-889754-95-1

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ISSN 1934-1822

WWW.JIBD.ORG