



Pergamon

Public Relations Review 28 (2002) 347–360

Public
Relations
Review

The good organization speaking well: a paradigm case for religious institutional crisis management[☆]

Jeffrey L. Courtright^{a,1}, Keith Michael Hearit^{b,*}

^a Department of Communication, Illinois State University, Normal, IL 61790-4480, USA

^b Department of Communication, Western Michigan University, 1903 W. Michigan Ave., Kalamazoo, MI 49008, USA

Received 27 November 2001; accepted 14 June 2002

Abstract

Arguing that too much organizational *apologia* research focuses on the mistakes of big, for-profit corporations, this study examines the discourse of a religious institution that faced allegations of wrongdoing and cover-up. Specifically, this essay analyzes the discourse that surrounded the disclosure by the Christian and Missionary Alliance (C&MA) that a number of students at Mamou Alliance Academy in Guinea, West Africa, had been abused over a period of time (1950–1971) while their parents served as missionaries. The authors argue that the C&MA is engaged in ethical crisis management and is paradigmatic of what George Cheney has called “the good organization speaking well.”¹

© 2002 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

In May 1995, allegations of abuse began to surface within the 328,000 member Christian and Missionary Alliance (C&MA) denomination. The accusations originated from children who were boarded at the C&MA Mamou Alliance Academy in Guinea while their parents served as missionaries in Africa.² The charges alleged that from 1950 to 1971 over 30 children had suffered abuse in all its forms at the hands of the Mamou staff—physical, psychological and even sexual.³

[☆] An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the National Communication Association, Seattle, WA, November 2000.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1-269-387-3142.

E-mail addresses: keith.hearit@wmich.edu, jlcourt@ilstu.edu (K.M. Hearit).

¹ Tel.: +1-309-438-3671.

At first the C&MA showed a great deal of institutional resistance in responding to the grass-roots efforts of the five-person Mamou Steering Committee, led by spokesperson Richard Darr, which had attempted to get the C&MA to resolve the matter privately.⁴ But confronted with the growing number of stories of abuse as well as the threat of more public exposure, the C&MA created a panel later in 1995 to investigate the allegations. The denomination in 1998 released the panel report, which admitted the truth of the allegations and also detailed the abuse that occurred at the hands of nine individuals. In addition to identifying those who committed the abuse, the report faulted the denomination for negligence in oversight of the school.⁵ During a retreat at the Simpsonwood Conference and Retreat Center in suburban Atlanta, C&MA President Peter Nanfelt (among others) apologized to the 80 adults present who had suffered the abuse as children.⁶

The response of the C&MA constitutes what scholars of rhetoric have typically described as an *apologia*—a speech of defense that has as a motive the clearing of one’s name.⁷ In this case, the C&MA used what Kruse has described as a non-denial form of *apologia*.⁸ An elastic form of discourse, the study of the genre of *apologia* increasingly has been applied to the study of organizations engaged in crisis management, using the strategies first articulated by Ware and Linkugel to repair their damaged images and reputations.⁹

It is our position that there is undue tendency on the part of many (the current authors included) to focus on the crisis management of large, for-profit corporations and their all too common behavioral and communication mistakes. Conversely, we assert that the C&MA Mamou case presents a unique opportunity to focus on an organization that comes to grips with the problem of its institutional guilt. In so doing, we take a Burkean perspective that views religious rhetoric as a paradigmatic of all language use,¹⁰ and use it to argue that the C&MA offers a model of how an institution can respond ethically and creatively in a crisis situation.

To support this thesis, we first situate this paper within the study of organizational and institutional *apologiae*; second, we discuss the details of the tragic case at the Mamou school; third, we analyze the communication efforts of the C&MA in coming to grips with this problem; and finally, we offer a number of conclusions as to the nature of institutional *apologiae*, recommending the example of C&MA as particularly instructive in situations of corporate guilt.

2. *Apologia* and institutional guilt: the need for public reconciliation

The need to “clear one’s name” or reputation is one of the oldest compulsions in human history,¹¹ whether it be the archetypal Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, Augustine in his *Confessions*, or the Vatican when it apologized for excesses committed in the name of God.¹² Yet the study of religious *apologia*, despite its clear emphasis on themes of guilt, confession and reconciliation, remains relatively undeveloped.

At root the term *apologia* means one of “defense.” The Greek term, *apologia* (Lit. Gk. *apo*, away off, absolve; *logia*, speech) means “defense” or “speech in defense.”¹³ The verb *apologeomai*, correspondingly, means to “speak so as to absolve one’s self.”¹⁴ Indeed, much of early religious discourse is informed by the use of this term, for many writers defined their theological and philosophical defenses of Christianity as *apologiae*. In its contemporary form,

متن کامل مقاله

دریافت فوری ←

ISIArticles

مرجع مقالات تخصصی ایران

- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
- ✓ پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
- ✓ امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
- ✓ امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
- ✓ امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
- ✓ دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
- ✓ پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات