

Prayer 2.0: *online prayer and the transformation of religion in a media age*

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Spirituality and social media

The theme of this session is *The Digital Spirit? Spirituality and the New Social Media*. This title implies, two things. First, that digital technology is somehow connected to our spiritual lives. Second, that the social media that we currently experience are new. They are radically different from the way people used to communicate. I believe that media do change the way religion functions. The internet is a medium that changes ways in which religious institutions interact with their communities, and the ways in which religious people communicate with each other. Religious websites and social networks deserve our attention because they show us that people are experiencing religion in new ways. Prayer is one of the core religious practices and has moved online in different ways. The tangle.com Prayer Wall is a fascinating example of this.

Media and modernity

Why do people pray online? That is one of the essential questions in my research on the prayer application of the tangle.com website. Praying is probably one of the most existential acts; trying to communicate with the divine, something greater than one's own existence. In times of distress, people often pray, even if they are not particularly religious, or even doubt if a God exists at all! Charles Taylor elaborates in his book *A Secular Age* on how our society has become very secularized in many ways. Especially religious institutions have lost much of their power. However, spiritual and religious needs have not disappeared. Our age has in some ways become more secure. Especially in Western Europe, education, welfare, and a public health system, prevent people from extreme poverty or suffering. But these days, our world is climbing slowly out of an economic depression, and we find ourselves in a situation where global terrorism and global climate changes determine much of our daily lives – and, as result, stress and anxiety have far from disappeared. Global developments determine our lives. Media enable us to become aware of what is happening far away, and thus have a profound effect on how we experience the world.

The mediatization of religion

The Danish media professor Stig Hjarvard argues that modern media change the ideas and authority of religious institutions. Moreover, they alter the way in which people interact with each other when dealing with religious issues' (Hjarvard, 2008: 11). He states that

media work as agents of religious change. Media have become so powerful that they operate as very powerful institutions. Media take over many roles that traditional religion used to fulfill. We can frame the emergence of the media as part of secularization, where more and more functions that used to be held by religious institutions have been taken over. Stig Hjarvard uses the term 'mediatization' to explain this phenomenon. I quote:

The media have developed into an independent institution in society and as a consequence, other institutions become increasingly dependent on the media and have to accommodate the logic of the media in order to be able to communicate with other institutions and society as a whole. Through the process of mediatization, religion is increasingly being subsumed under the logic of the media, both in terms of institutional regulation, symbolic content and individual practices. (Hjarvard, 2008: 11)

The tangle.com Prayer Wall

For this paper, I will use the tangle.com Prayer Wall as an illustration of mediatization, and show how the religious practice of prayer has changed through the logic of the media.

The last few years have seen a number of studies on the phenomenon of online prayer. Christopher Helland (2005) notes that religious organizations and institutions are very conscious about the way their websites function. Ideally, online communication is many-to-many communication, unlike the traditional religious systems where communication is more top-down and one-to-many communication. Helland shows how many religious websites do not allow for interaction between the users, but expects that, as the internet continues to develop as a social space, religious institutions will begin to develop environments for online religion. Helland wrote about these developments in 2005, at a time when the term 'web 2.0' was becoming commonplace (I will explain the term 'Web 2.0' a little later). The problem with his writings, and with many others, is that the technological developments have gone faster than the research that is describing it. This also applies to the tangle.com prayer wall because, as we will see, it has changed radically in the last two years.

Especially in the USA – as you are sure to know – the evangelical subculture has from an early stage been very open to the use of audiovisual media. Televangelists, Christian movies, and the large Christian contemporary music scene provide many ways in which religion can be both experienced and shared. Tangle.com, a very large evangelical Christian website, is no exception.

In addition to providing a large online community and access to videos, one of the most fascinating features of the tangle.com website is its Prayer Wall. This is a multi media application which by now hosts more than one hundred thousand prayers online. The tangle.com banner is displayed along the top of the page, with links to the different sections of the website. The Prayer Wall itself uses tabs, displays in the background a photo of what appears to be the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, and functions in a manner that is similar to an online forum. Everyone can read the prayer online, although you have to log in to see all the prayers. Similarly, only tangle.com members can actually post prayers. Users fill in a form to provide title, prayer, and topic (love, suffering, etc.), and can add a verse, video, or photo.

Prayers appear on the prayer page, where users have several display options. As such, it contains a prayer database that makes it among the largest on the internet.

But religious experience is also combined with community in a most dynamic way. Whereas on other sites prayers can only be sent, tangle.com makes it possible for others not only to read but also to comment on posted prayers. Unless they are posted anonymously, all prayers can be traced to the members of the social network. In fact, such features as the 'Top Prayer List' encourage users to comment and respond to prayers. Users can also see the 'Top Praying Members' and the 'Top Prayer Responders.' Tangle.com thus can function as a Christian alternative to such websites as both YouTube as well as Facebook.

However, as I mentioned, the tangle.com prayer wall has changed a lot since my first research on it in 2008. When I first started my study on the Prayer Wall in 2008, the Prayer Wall had a look that was very different from the current design. The old Prayer Wall (still accessible through <http://www.tangle.com/prayerwall>) is a Flash application, highly graphical, with animations and sound. It used to start with an animation – now entirely absent¹ – where the screen showed a large wall that zoomed into view.² In spite of its overall attraction, however, the old Prayer Wall animation is slow and rather difficult to navigate. Moreover, in order to connect with the social network opportunities the user must leave the Prayer Wall.

How does the current version of the Prayer Wall compare with its predecessor? The image of the original wall has been replaced, and instead a depiction of what seems to be the Wailing Wall appears. Rather than forming the focal point of the screen, this graphic is set in the background. A number of other significant aesthetical changes have been made as well. The foreground of the Wall page has been integrated into the overall tangle.com design so that it now has a much 'cleaner' look. It presents the prayers in a much more text-based fashion, and is no longer highly graphical. Also the animations and sounds are now absent. On the other hand, the interaction features are now much better arranged, making the new Prayer Wall a typical Web 2.0 application. 'Web 2.0,' as you most likely already know, is a term associated with user-centered design. Important keywords are 'information sharing' and 'corporation.' A Web 2.0 website gives users the choice to interact with each other, and to produce and edit user-generated content. Video sharing and social networking sites are examples of Web 2.0. Since it is now easier to browse, select, and categorize material on the Prayer Wall, the content is more user-centered than experience-centered. It is a way in which tangle.com has adapted to the current logic of how the internet functions.

² The 'old' Prayer Wall, which remains accessible right now, is not exactly the same as the version that I used for my study in 2007; it is not the original animation that is being used in the current 'old' version online.

Prayers and comments

Many prayers on the Prayer Wall are requests for personal help, or help for families and friends. The power of the prayer seems to be the power of the community. One person prays about her loneliness. Another person is looking for a new job. A third prays about the loss of a good friend. Some prayers get a lot of attention. The prayer "Thinking about taking my own life," for example, was commented on more than four hundred times:

"God...I feel so helpless. I can't take it anymore. Life to me feels so meaningless. Everyone I thought was close to me didn't really care. I don't want to keep living anymore. I feel like a burden to everyone. I want to die right now. Please take my life...if you won't than I will."

The members of the community tangle.com reacted deeply to this call for help. A member named Mary tells that she couldn't bear life because of chronic disease, but she keeps hoping in Christ. She recommends the reading of Psalm 25, and adds that she will keep on praying for this person. Another member, Betty, emphasizes that life is so valuable. God knows the pain of this anonymous person. She prays that God will heal this person, and that Satan would not deceive her with his lies. David warns her not to commit suicide, and even gives his e-mail address.

Heidi Campbell shows in her book *We are one in the Network* (2005) how prayer requests are very valuable for the group, and that they also help members to open up about personal problems and challenges. In her overall research on religious communities online, several of the people she interviewed argued that online communities enable people to be more personal than they would be in their local communities. Geographical boundaries become irrelevant for online communities where people develop online friendship, and trust each other with their most intimate private life.

In the case of this particular example, we can wonder how personal prayer really becomes. Though many people do not post their prayers anonymously, the comments on the prayer can become generic. Comments received from others might be reassuring and comforting, but do people really know each other? I also do not know if the person who was thinking of taking his or her own life actually read the comments posted on the prayer. In the case of Campbell's research, it was a small group that exchanged prayer requests. Tangle.com, on the other hand, is a large website with thousands of users.

Why do people use the Prayer Wall?

In the course of my research on tangle.com, I asked several users why they used the prayer wall. These are some of the answers I received.

"The reason I use prayer wall, is just to get prayer actually. My life pretty much depends on other peoples prayers for me. I think online on this site there are very friendly people and it is an excellent way to interact with Christian to Christian from across the globe or states. Its a good way to network and build forces for prayer, and it's a good way to stand together as God's children."

And:

"I am using the Prayer Wall partly because sometimes I have spiritual, emotional, social or financial problems for which I need urgent intercession. I believe that on a Christian website such as Tangle, there are quite many well-intentioned Christian men and women who read and pray for prayer requests. Childish though it may sound, I believe that sometimes fervent intercessors from various churches, fellowships and countries can form a "prayer front," which God can use - when He so chooses - to speed up His answers to prayers.

Occasionally, a fellow Tangle user has e-mailed me, thanking me for praying for him or her. I don't care too much about getting those written replies to my prayers, because God of course hears the prayers, and because the concrete answers to prayers are more important to me than the written responses to them. I am not a very social person, but I do not want to feel totally isolated on the Internet either (especially not on Tangle). That is why I sometimes post prayers on the Prayer Wall - to let at least a few fellow Tangle users know through them that I am still alive, I still want to follow Christ, and I care about also other people's prayer requests.

Conclusion

These answers make it reasonable to assume that the prayer application involves social interaction that is valuable for people's spiritual lives. New media offer a whole new range of opportunities to construct online spirituality. Many of the prayers also witness to the veracity of Heidi Campbell's observation: people do indeed trust each other – every visitor, in fact! – with the most private details of their lives. The prayers on the website and the reactions from the users suggest that the power of the prayer is the power of the community.

Prayer online has changed in the sense that it works with the logics of new media. Situated in a social media environment, people can share their problems and challenges, believing in the power of prayer. The Tangle.com prayer wall has both a social and a transcendent element. The social dimension is very important, but people do believe that God can work more powerfully through online prayer. The last answer I just quoted summarizes nicely how the transcendent and the social dimension connect. This person says he doesn't care too much about responses to his prayers, but at the same time is very concerned about being part of the tangle.com community.

Hjarvard's statement that media work as agents of religious change, and that, through the process of mediatization, religion is increasingly being subsumed under the logic of media, certainly holds for this prayer wall. In order to experience community, physical religious institutions are not necessary. This large evangelical Christian website enables people to live a meaningful part of their spiritual lives online, using the technology of social media. By connecting prayers to users of the community, and by offering titles, bible texts, pictures and videos, prayer becomes an experience that is very different from personal prayer, or prayer in a physical community. If religious institutions want to reach out to current and new generations, they should embrace the social media and build on existing and new social networks.

Note

This is the text without bibliographical notes. The annotated text will be published at the *Journal of technology, theology, and religion*.

The text of Stig Hjarvard about mediatization is:

Hjarvard, Stig. (2008): "The Mediatization of Religion: A Theory of the Media as Agents of Religious Change." In: *Northern Lights* 6, 9-26.

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