Faith tweets: Ambient religious communication and microblogging rituals

Pauline Hope Cheong

There's no reason to think that Jesus wouldn't have Faceboocked or twitted if he came into the world now. Can you imagine his killer status updates?
Reverend Schenck, New York, All Saints Episcopal Church (Mapes)

The fundamental problem of religious communication is how best to represent and mediate the sacred. (O'Leary 787)

What would Jesus twit? Historically, the use of the drum to mediate the Divine, to the use of the mechanical clock to mark time is referred to as "ambient" or "ambient" communication. Today, religious communication practices increasingly implicate Web 2.0, or interactive, user-generated content like blogs (Cheong, Halavis & Kwon), and microblogs like "tweets" of no more than 140 characters sent via Web-based applications like text messaging, instant messaging, e-mail, or on the Web. According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project's latest report in October 2009, 19% of online adults said that they used a microblogging service to send messages from a computer or mobile device to family and friends (Fox, Zickuhr & Smith). The ascendency of microblogging leads to interesting questions of how new media use alters the spatio-temporal dynamics in peoples' everyday consciousness, including ways in which tweeting facilitates ambient religious intimacy.

The notion of ambient strike a particularly resonant chord for religious communication: many faith traditions advocate the practice of sacred mindfulness, and a consistent piey in light of holy devotion to an omnipresent and omniscient Divine being.

This paper examines how faith believers appropriate the emergent microblogging practices to create an encompassing cultural surround to include microblogging rituals which promote regular, heightened prayer awareness. Faith tweets help constitute a co-presence amongst church members free to tweet at any time and at any worship service (Rochman). At Woodlands Church in Houston, a new microblogging service was started in 2009 which encourages parishioners to tweet their thoughts, reflections and questions throughout the church worship service. The interactive use of Twitter also differs from the forms of personal silent meditation and private spatio-temporal dynamics in peoples' everyday consciousness, including ways in which tweeting facilitates ambient religious intimacy.

The ascendency of microblogging leads to interesting questions of how new media use alters the spatio-temporal dynamics in peoples' everyday consciousness, including ways in which tweeting facilitates ambient religious intimacy.

Faith tweeters stimulate mobile mediated prayers help build a sense of closeness and "religious connected presence" amongst the distributed family of faith believers, to recreate and reaffirm Divine and corporeal bonds.

Consider the Calvin Institute of Worship's set up of six different Twitter feeds to "pray the hours". Praying the hours is an ancient practice of daily prayer in Christian churches today, inspired by the Holy Scriptures' injunction to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). This weekday Twitter grid was "prayer centre" set up to receive hourly personal or intercessory prayers sent in brief verses or view a Tweetgrid with prayer feeds, to prompt continuous prayer or help those who are unsure of what words to pray. In this way, contemporary believers may reinvent the ancient practice of constant prayer into their church practice.

Christian tradition. Inspired by the Holy Scripture's injunction to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17), users can sign up to receive hourly personal or intercessory prayers sent in brief verses or view a Tweetgrid with prayer feeds, to prompt continuous prayer or help those who are unsure of what words to pray. In this way, contemporary believers may reinvent the ancient practice of constant prayer into their church practice.

Popular faith related hashtags include #twurch (Twitter + church), #prayer, #JIL (Jesus is Lord) and #pray4 (as in, #pray4 my mother). Just as mobile telephony assists familial bonds to "build connected presence" (Christensen), I suggest that faith tweets stimulate mobile mediated prayers help build a sense of closeness and "religious connected presence" amongst the distributed family of faith believers, to recreate and reaffirm Divine and corporeal bonds.

Furthermore, while the above "praying the hours" performance promotes a specific integration of scripture or prayer into individuals’ daily rhythms, other faith tweets are more focused on evangelism: to reach others through recurrent prayers or random inspirational messages. For example, the site reports that over 500 members of JesusTweters, each with an average of 500 followers, have signed up to help "spread the Word" worldwide through Twitter. This is an interesting emergent form of Twitter action, as it translates to more than 2.5 million faith tweets being circulated online daily.

Moreover, Twitter encourages "connected presence" whereby the use of microblogging enables online faith believers to enjoy an intimate, "always on" virtual presence with their other congregational members during times of physical absence. In the recently released e-book The Reason Your Church Must Twitter, subtitled Making Your Ministry Contagious, author and proclaimed "technology evangelist" Anthony Coppegde advocates churches to adopt Twitter as part of their overall communication strategy to maintain relational connectedness beyond the boundaries of established institutional practices. In his book, Coppegde argues that Twitter can be used as a "megaphone" for updates and announcements or a "conversation" to spur sharing of ideas and prayer exchanges.

In line with education scholars who promote Twitter as a pedagogical tool to enhance free-flowing interactions outside of the classroom (Dunlap & Lowenthal), Coppegde encourages pastors to tweet "life application points" from their sermons to their congregational members throughout the week, to reinforce the theme of their Sunday lesson. Ministry leaders are also encouraged to use Twitter to "become highly accessible" to members and communicate with their volunteers, in order to build stronger ecumenical relationships. Communication technology scholar Michele Jackson notes that Twitter is a form of "lifeblogging" as interactants self-disclose their lived-in moments (731). In the case of faith tweets, co-presence is constructed when instantaneous Twitter updates announce new happenings on the church campus, shares prayer requests, confirms details of new events and gives public commendations to celebrate vicar's of faith members. In this way, microblogging helps to build a portable church where fellow believers can connect to each-other via the thread of frequent, running commentaries of their everyday lives.

It further develop "connected presence", a significant number of Churches have also begun to incorporate real-time Twitter streams during their Sunday services. For example, to stimulate congregational members’ sharing of their spontaneous reactions to the movement of the Holy Spirit, Westwind Church in Michigan has created a dozen "Twitter Sundays" where members are free to tweet at any time and at any worship service (Rochman). At Woodlands Church in Houston, a new service was started in 2009 which encourages parishioners to tweet their thoughts, reflections and questions throughout the service. The tweets are reviewed by church staff and they are posted as scrolling visual messages on a screen behind the pastor while he preaches (Patel).

It is interesting to note that recurring faith tweets spatially filling the sanctuary screens blurs the visual hierarchies between the pastor as foreground and congregations as background to the degree that tweet voices from the congregation blend into the church worship service. The interactive use of Twitter also differs from the forms of personal silent meditation and private devotional prayer that, traditionally, most liturgical church services encourage. In this way, key to new organisational practices within religious organisations is what some social commentators are now calling "ambient intimacy", an enveloping social...
Microblogging Rituals and Tweeting Tensions

In many ways, faith tweets can be comprehended as microblogging rituals which have an ambient quality in engendering individuals’ spiritual self and group consciousness. The importance of examining emergent cyber-rituals is underscored by Stephen O’Leary in his 1996 seminal article on Cyberspace as Sacred Space. Writing in an earlier era of digital connections, O’Leary discussed e-mail and discussion forum cyber-rituals and what ritual gains in the virtual environment aside from its conventional physiological interactions. Drawing from Walter Ong’s understanding of the “secondary orality” accompanying the shift to electronic media, he argued that cyber-ritual as performative utterances restructure and reintegrate the minds and emotions of their participants, such that they are more aware of their interior self and a sense of communal group membership.

Here, the above illustrative examples show how Twitter functions as the context for contemporary, mediated ritual practices to help believers connect and affirm their religious identities within a virtual setting where the ambient communication is a significant part of everyday life. To draw from Walter Ong’s words, microblogging rituals create a new textual and visual “sensorium” that has insightful implications for communication and media scholars. Faith tweeting by restructuring believers’ consciousness and generating a heightened awareness of relationship between the I, you and the Thou opens up possibilities for community building and revitalised religiosity to counteract claims of secularisation in technologically advanced and developed countries.

“Praying the hours” guided by scripturally inspired faith tweets, for example, help seekers and believers express empathy and practice their faith in a more holistic way as they de-familiarize mundane conditions and redeem a sense of the sacred from their everyday surrounds. Through the intermittent sharing of intercessory prayer tweets, faithful followers enact prayer chains and perceive themselves to be immersed in invariable spiritual battle to ward off evil ideology or atheistic beliefs. Moreover, the erosion of the authority of the church is offset by changed leadership practices within religious organisations which have experimented and actively incorporated Twitter into their daily institutional practices. To the extent that laity are willing to engage, creative practices to encourage congregational members to tweet during and after the service help revivify communal sentiments and a higher moral purpose through identification and solidarity with clergy leaders and other believers.

Yet this ambience has its possible drawbacks as some experience tensions in their perception and use of Twitter as new technology within the church. Microblogging rituals may have negative implications for individual believers and religious organisations as they can weaken or paralyze the existing religious rituals. As Pauline Cheong and Jessie Poon have pointed out, use of the Internet within religious organisations may bring about an alternative form of “pervasive religious social capital building” as some clergy view that online communication detracts from real time relations and physical rituals. Indeed, some religious leaders have strongly concurred about Twitter and new tensions they experience in balancing the need to engage with new media audiences and the need for quiet reflection that spiritual rites such as confession of sins and the Holy Communion entail.

According to the critics of faith tweeting, microblogging is time consuming and contributes to cognitive overload by taking away one’s attention to what is noteworthy at the moment. For Pastor Hayes of California for example, Twitter distracts his congregants’ focus on the sermon and thus he only recommends his members to tweet after the service. In an interview with the Houston Chronicle, he said: “If two people are talking at the same time, somebody’s not listening”, and “You cannot do two things at once and expect you’re not going to miss something” (Patel). Furthermore, similar to prior concerns voiced with new technologies, there are concerns over the tweets that can comprise of crude, grotesque, malevolent and hate messages, which may be especially corrosive to faith communities that strive to model virtues like love, temperance and truth-telling (Vitello).

In turn, some congregational members are also experiencing frustrations as they negotiate church boundaries and other members’ disapproval of their tweeting practices during service and church events. Censure of microblogging has taken the form of official requests for tweeting members to leave the sanctuary, to less formal social critique and the application of peer pressure to halt tweeting during religious proceedings and activities (Mapes).

As a result of these connectivity tensions, varying recommendations have been recently published as fresh efforts to manage religious communication taking place in allegiance. For instance, Coppedge recommends every tweeting church to include Twitter usage in their “church communications policy” to promote accountability within the organisation. The policy should include guidelines against excessive use of Twitter as spam, and for at least one leader to subscribe and monitor every Twitter chain and account used. Furthermore, the Interpreter magazine of the United Methodist Church worldwide featured recommendations by Rev. Saffyah Fosua who listed eight important attributes for pastors wishing to incorporate Twitter during their worship services (Rico). These attributes are: highly evolved; not easily distracted; secure in their presentation style; not easily taken aback when people appear to be focused on something other than listen; into quality rather than volume; not easily rattled by things that are new; secure enough as a preacher to let God work through whatever is tweeted even if it is not the main points of the sermon; and carried on the same current the congregation is travelling on. For the most part, these attributes underscore how successful (read wired) contemporary religious leaders should be tolerant of ambient religious communication and of blurring hierarchies of information control when faced with microblogging and the “inexorable advance of multimodal connectedness” (Schroeder).

To conclude, the rise of faith tweeting opens up a new portal to investigate accretive changes to culture as microblogging rituals nurture pietistic prayer, praise and ecclesial updates. The emergent Twitter sermon-sensorium demonstrates the variety of ways in which religious adherents appropriate new media within the ken and tensions of their daily lives.

References


