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Even Satan Gets Likes on Facebook

The Dynamic Interplay of Religion and Technology in Online Social Networks

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Abstract

The rise of online social networking appears to represent a new challenge to religious individuals and institutions. It is wrong to assume, however, that the interaction between religion and technology is always adversarial. Generally technology can enhance religious practices through the expansion and creation of religious communities. This is primarily the case in online social networks. Through a combination of identifying and persuasive actions religious individuals can harness online social networks in a way that upholds religious communities, although abuse of online social networks can also lead to the destruction of religious communities, both physical and digital.

Introduction

Omnipresent technology is an inescapable fact of modernity. While technology in some form has been present in all historical circumstances, this new age is marked by the fact that technology defines nearly all aspects of life. Modern technology is both quantitatively and qualitatively superior to the technology present in any previous era. While modern technology is seen by some as a panacea, others are less eager to abandon so called "traditional" institutions and values that in many instances predated wide-spread technology. These debates over the apparent degradation of religion by technology are closely linked to the view that religious beliefs are fundamentally incompatible with scientific beliefs. At the same time, however, the interplay between religion and technology is not always adversarial. There are many ways in which technology actually enhances religious practices, mainly

through the expansion and creation of religious communities. Technology degrades religious practices when it breaks communal bonds. While this dual natured relationship to religion can be seen in many technologies, one of the clearest examples of how technology can both support and erode religious techniques is internet social networking. Through a careful examination of this technological phenomenon it can be easily seen that the relationship between religion and technology is much more complicated then it initially might seem.[1]

Religion and Technology: Incommensurate or Not?

In order to understand the interplay between religion and technology it is important to first discuss the dichotomy in general terms surrounding the apparent incompatibility between theology and science. The narrative of science usurping religion is very powerful due to the fact that the vast majority of individuals still define themselves as religious, even in a world that has become increasingly secularized.[2] As John Caiazza writes, "The present state of affairs in Western culture is that religion as part of civil discourse is in retreat . . . while science and utilitarian ethics have seemingly captured the field" (12). Religion, due to its emphasis on "belief" and "faith" appears to be in danger of being phased out in a world that is increasingly rationally organized. Caiazza states, "The triumph of the secular in our culture is largely the result of the triumph of empirical science, and considering the formidable arsenal of scientistic arguments it seems as if scientific secularism may have finally carried the day among Western intellectuals" (13). Others, however, dispute this assertion. Individuals can point to a variety of evidence, including the fact that many individuals still define themselves as religious, to argue that religion still holds sway in modern life. Even in the technology that Caiazza sees as profoundly secularizing it is possible to see religious roots. Bronislaw Szerszynski, for instance, in a response to Caiazza's paper, sees the secular emphasis on technology as growing out of the religious distinction between sacred and profane, rather than a tension between revelation and reason. "Rather than understanding religion as a distinctive cultural phenomenon within a fundamentally secular world . . . it is the *secular* we should problematize – by understanding it as a specifically modern cultural development whereby the profane, always a space within a sacral cosmos, became seen as a self-grounding, independent reality" (816). This argument over the relative decline of religion versus science will inevitably be debated *ad nauseum*. It does not have a clear answer. More important for understanding the interplay between religion and technology is the clear recognition that the two concepts are not mutually exclusive.

Despite the fact that religion and science rely for a large part on different modes of legitimating argumentation, belief or revelation versus rationalization and experimentation, they are only incompatible when an individual adopts one as an all encompassing worldview at the expense of the other. As Rustum Roy notes, however, even setting up a dichotomy between religion and science is incorrect because the two are incommensurable (667).

[1] The statistics cited in this paper reflect the state of affairs as of January 15, 2012, when the research for this paper was completed.

[2] Comprehensive global statistics on the predominance of religious belief are difficult to extrapolate based on small surveys. In the U.S., generally considered a fairly religious nation, only 17% of individuals consider themselves "unaffiliated" or "don't know" based on a 2008 poll (Pew Research Center).

Rather, he proposes the twin dichotomies of Religion/Technology and Science/Theology. Roy is correct to point out that both religion and technology are the physical manifestations of a deeply held worldview, either theology or science. It is these worldviews, when held as the absolute truth at the expense of other views (what might be termed theologism or scientism) that are incompatible. It is impossible, however, to assert that religion and technology are incompatible.[3]

Religious Technology and Community Formation

Definitions of religion vary in their emphasis on belief, faith, or the supernatural nature of religion, although what they nearly all have in common is a focus on the communal aspect of religious practice. Emile Durkheim, for instance, writes that "religious representations are collective representations which express collective realities" (10). Clifford Geertz's famous definition of religion states, among other characteristics, that religions "establish powerful, pervasive, and long lasting moods and motivations in men" (90). Here Geertz refers to "men" rather than "man" indicating how religion must be a communal activity rather than an individual one. If technology is beneficial to the practice of religion, therefore, it only follows that it will do so through facilitating this key aspect of religion.

The uses to which technology have been applied in a religious context are numerous, ranging from the integral and important to the absurd. A Finnish company, for instance, in 2004 shut down a service that "promised to answer people's prayers with a text message from Jesus" (Bell). How Jesus got a cell phone was never clearly explained. Other technological applications, however, represent much more essential aspects of religious faith. An electronic application called Sun Dial, for instance, can be loaded on a mobile phone to help Muslims remember to pray five times a day (Wyche et al.). While these examples, and the countless others that exist in modern society, represent the most current form of religious technology, it is important to keep in mind that historically organized religion has oftentimes been an enthusiastic adopter and promoter of new technology. Rebecca Grinter, for instance, notes, "Historians have shown that American evangelical Protestants were early enthusiastic adopters of communications technologies such as the printing press and telegraph because they saw those systems as opportunities to grow their faith by spreading the word broadly" (Grinter et al.: 450). Certainly organized religion latched onto methods that they could use to help spread their word. These include books and other materials that could be easily shared. Other technologies that serve this role of promoting a religious message include electronic amplification equipment to project a speaker's voice to a larger audience, television screens to project hymn lyrics or provide audience members with a better view during a religious service, or websites.[4] In the early 1950s the Roman Catholic

[3] The two are means, rather than ends. A mean can be better or worse in achieving a specific end, or incompatible with the end itself, but it is problematic to say that one mean is incompatible with another. The only form this argument could take is that it is impossible to combine religion with technology which, as the following examples clearly show, is incorrect.

[4] Grinter et. al. cites a 2005 survey by the Barna group that reports that 60% of Protestant churches have websites, while 62% have some form of projection system for their services. (451).

Church quickly seized upon television as a medium to promote a religious message through sponsoring weekly sermons by Reverend Fulton J. Sheen (Time Magazine).

Certainly the better dissemination of a message is one form that religious technology can take, but it is not the only form. An equally important role is played by technology that helps reinforce the communal aspects of religion observed by, among others, Durkheim. Some might argue that this focus on community building technology only represents a subsection of the larger role that message disseminating technology plays. Certainly technology that promotes a religious message has a tendency to draw individuals to organized religion, thus enhancing and enlarging the community. There are, however, also other ways in which religious technology forms communities. Charles Hirschkind, for instance, through an in depth analysis of the prevalence of cassette-tape sermons in Egypt, noted that the technology created the "ethical conditions for a domain of public deliberation and argumentation" (4). This in turn caused more open discussion of religious issues and topics. This new space, which Hirschkind terms a "counter-public," is emblematic of the ways in which religious technology can positively serve in religious community formation. Hirschkind notes:

> Cassette-recorded sermons of popular Islamic preachers, or khutaba' (sing. khatib), have become a ubiquitous part of the contemporary social landscape. The recorded voices of these orators can be heard to echo from within cafes, butcher shops, private homes, and most forms of public transportation throughout the city. Beyond its use as a form of pious entertainment, taped-sermon audition in Egypt has become a popular technique for the cultivation of Islamic virtues and, thus, for the creation of the modes of public sociability these virtues uphold (4).

Hirschkind does not go so far as to argue that the public space that has been created through the playing and discussion of cassette sermons replaces traditional religious communities and spaces. He sets up the relationship between informal and formal types of communities as mutually reinforcing despite their different form. Indeed, it is the informal nature of the cassette sermons that allowed for their influence to spread quickly and widely throughout the Islamic community in Egypt. "By allowing the sermon to move outside the more rigid framework of the mosque, the cassette medium enabled this oratorical form to become a key instrument of da'wa [a broad religious movement]" (6). While Hirschkind's article, and subsequent book, give a good indicator of some of the ways in which technology can enhance the communal aspects of religion through the expansion and creation of religious communities, his focus on cassette tapes is already outdated, despite its publication a scant decade ago. While his analysis is still revealing and important, the technology that is the focus of his work has been definitively replaced in the Western world, and the majority of the developing world as well.

One nascent technology that had yet to reach its full potential at the time of Hirschkind's writing was the online social network. From its creation the internet has existed as a way to share information and ideas across virtual channels between distinct users. These links form the bonds of online social networks. While these networks have existed since the mid 1990s, the launch of Facebook in 2004 from humble beginnings at Harvard University,

would lead to the creation of a new ubiquitous industry. The genius behind Facebook and other social networks is that it allows users to create a simple, digital extension of one's personal relationships and friendships. Indeed Facebook describes itself as "a social utility that helps people communicate more efficiently with their friends, family and coworkers. The company develops technologies that facilitate the sharing of information through the social graph, the digital mapping of people's real-world social connections" ("Peering"). From simple beginnings Facebook has grown into the largest online social network and is a daily staple of high school and college students as well as a growing number of older adults.

Religious groups have confronted this new technology in two main ways: creating their own versions of social network sites that are religion-centric and somewhat exclusive, and using the functions of larger social networks such as Facebook to their advantage. Religious internet users are now confronted with a wide variety of social networking opportunities online. Christians, for instance, can go to Hisholyspace.com, holypal.com, or Xianz (Religion Link). There is even a Christian alternative to YouTube, called UltimateTube, which has categories for Christian Videos, Music Videos, and Endtimes Videos among others. It exhorts its visitors to "broadcast HIM [God] alone" (UltimateTube.com). There are other options that are available for other faiths. For Muslims there is muslimsocial.com, muxlim.com, and Nasseb. There is Schmooze, a social network for Jews, and even a network, PaganSpace.net, for Wiccans, Druids, and other earth-based religions. While many of these networks aspire to be general meeting places for adherents of their faith, other social networking sites aspire to much more specific audiences. The website LiberalEvangelical.org, for instance, created by two pastors from the Boston area, proclaims on its website banner, "Empowerment for intentionally moderate Christians. Resources for creatively inclusive congregations." This approach to religious social networking is at the same time inclusive and exclusive. It is exclusive in the sense that it defines membership in the community of the social network based on a religious identity. It is very difficult to imagine for instance, a Muslim joining Schmooze, or a Christian joining PaganSpace. While there are religious social networks that aspire to be somewhat nondenominational, such as BeliefNet's "Community" (http://community.beliefnet.com) and PeaceNext.org, there are just as many, if not more, networks that are more narrowly focused.[5] It is also, however, inclusive, because there is little to no bar that is set for acceptance into the social network. One need only set up a profile to join.

While specifically religious social networking websites are interesting in and of themselves, the fact of the matter is that in terms of members and influence these networks lag far behind other, more general networks such as Facebook. Compare for instance the videos posted on UltimateTube, none of which have been viewed more than 35,000 times,

[5] The purpose of this paper is not to deeply investigate the phenomenon of religious online social networks, which deserves analysis in its own right, but rather to focus on how online social networks in general, through the creation and destruction of communities both upholds and degrades religious practices. Still, there are many interesting questions that religious online social networks pose. For instance, are some religions more open to social networking than others? Inside individual religions are liberal or more conservative believers more likely to join social networks? These questions, while fascinating, will require more research to adequately answer.

and popular videos on YouTube that have millions of views.[6] Facebook has over 800 million active users ("Key Facts"), whereas a purely religious oriented site such as PeaceNext will only have a couple thousand. There are a myriad number of ways in which religious individuals or organizations can utilize sites such as Facebook. This helps to show that the benefits that religion can draw from a technology such as online social networks is not purely "religious." It is the community building aspect of social networks that is appealing to religious individuals and institutions.

Identifying and Persuasive Actions in Online Social Networks

The countless ways in which religious individuals or organizations can utilize Facebook can be generally split into two categories: identifying actions and persuasive actions. The former are those actions that help a person let others in the social network know that they are religious individuals. They have little other purpose than to define the individual as a member of a group. Persuasive actions differ from identifying actions in that these actions seek to convince others to join a group rather than solely defining an individual as a member of the group. It might be more proper to say that persuasive actions are a subset of identifying actions in that all persuasive actions also serve as identifying actions. Still, they perform a unique function that simple identifying actions do not by actively seeking to expand a community. Perhaps it might be most correct to say that social networking actions on Facebook represent a spectrum that has identifying actions at one end and persuasive actions at the other. While these extremes might not exist, they prove useful for delineating the limits of a scale on which all other actions fall.

In regards to identifying actions, the easiest way for an individual to self-identify as religious on Facebook is for them to include their chosen religious beliefs on their homepage or "profile." Each Facebook user has a profile page that lists information about them, including a spot for "religious views." This information can then be displayed prominently for all those who view their profile.[7] Another way for individuals to identify as religious is through the process of "liking" an item or concept. By clicking a "like" button next to the profile of a group, figure, or concept, a link will be posted to that person's profile. The homepage for "Christian (religion)," for instance, has been "liked" over 700,000 times, while the homepage for the organization "I'm a CHRISTIAN & I'm PROUD" has been "liked" over 1.3 million times. Oftentimes different religions have multiple pages, all run by different individuals, and with varying content or messages displayed. For instance the page "Im a Muslim & Im Proud [sic]" has been "liked" 6.6 million times, while the page for "Muslim (religion)" has only 500,000 "likes." Another page, "Muslim (community)" has only been

[6] The most viewed video on UltimateTube is "Dead Birds Falling Out of the Sky – End Time sign?" which has been watched 34,465 times, as compared to the music video for Justin Beiber's song "Baby" which has been watched 670,882,392 times.

[7] Interestingly, Facebook places this information under a more general heading called "Philosophy," which includes a similar space for "Political views." Also, individuals can type in what ever they want into the box marked "Religious Views," meaning that individuals can profess that their religious views are anything ranging from sports teams to individuals to "nothing at all," in addition to identifying with an actual organized religion.

"liked" 11,069 times.[8] These groups clearly are an example of community formation within the online social network. By self-identifying as a religious individual, or part of a particular religious group, an individual can more easily meet other religious individuals. By "liking" an item or page an individual can see other individuals who have also "liked" that page. They can also post comments or updates to the mini-feed, a constantly updated discussion board on the page that others can read. Individuals can also join "groups," which are oftentimes more selective than simply "liking" a page, where there are discussion forums and other opportunities to interact.

The second form of religious activity on Facebook is persuasive actions, which attempt to sway individuals one way or the other regarding religious affiliation. Persuasive actions are identifying actions that are directed primarily at expanding the religious community. They can take the form of active proselytizing but also more subtle ways of bringing religious issues to the forefront of the otherwise religiously ambivalent social network. Common persuasive actions on Facebook include "status updates," which are short articles composed usually of no more than a few sentences that are broadcast to an individual's "friends" and appear on their "news feed" when they log onto the site. Other individuals can then "like" individual statuses or comment on them. Individuals can post pictures or videos as their statuses, link to other web pages, or just make a written statement. Individuals can also write longer statements or "notes" that they can publish to other people's news feeds, which will be stored on their personal profile page. Individuals can further create groups that they can ask others to join, or "events" that function as electronic invitations to physical events. In many ways persuasive actions are an electronic or virtual manifestation of actions or statements that otherwise would have to be made in public.

It should be quite clear that the combination of identifying and persuasive actions on online social networks provide for the enhancement of preexisting religious communities, and also the creation of new religious communities. These virtual communities, however, all bear some relation to actual physical communities. The religious communities on online social networks cannot exist without some connection to a physical religion or religious community. The tendency has been to read these online connections as being in some way less valuable than physical connections. Malcolm Gladwell, for instance, notes in his analysis of social media and the ongoing revolutions in the Arab world that "the platforms of social media are built around weak ties." He goes on to say, "Social Networks are effective in increasing *participation* – by lessening the level of motivation that participation requires." At the same time, however, Gladwell himself undercuts this argument by citing the sociologist Mark Granovetter. Granovetter instead notes that these so-called weak ties can be very strong:

> The personal experience of individuals is closely bound up with larger-scale aspects of social structure, well beyond the purview or control of particular individuals. Linkage of micro and macro levels is thus no luxury but of central importance to the development of sociological theory. Such linkage

[8] This page is mostly in Arabic, although it displays a graphic as its profile picture that states "Muslim and pround [sic] to be ♥"

> generates paradoxes: weak ties, often denounced as generative of alienation are here seen as indispensible to individuals' opportunities and to their integration into communities (1377-78).

While Granovetter's essay was written well before the creation of the Internet, or the advent of online social networks, the strength that he sees between the micro and macro level fundamentally exists in these new online communities. Individual actions on social networks such as Facebook allow individuals to form groups and attachments to other individuals on a micro level that translate to their macro level connection to a religious organization, church, or faith in general. That the connections and communities formed through Facebook and other online networks is virtual may mean that they are classified as "weak," but this does not make them any less important. Gladwell is certainly correct in his assertion that social media often "lessens the motivation that participation requires." Simply "liking" something on Facebook does not require the same commitment as, for instance, attending a church. On average each individual is connected to 80 community pages, groups, or events on Facebook, indicating that the amount of time they spend on each one is likely negligible. It is also true, for instance, that "liking" an item on Facebook, even a religious item, cannot be seen as a heavily symbolic or calculated action. Over 15 times the number Facebook users, for instance, "liked" the pop singer Lady Gaga as opposed to the page for "Jesus Christ" (over 45 million vs. 3 million). Even "Satan" manages to collect over 60,000 likes on Facebook.

Online Social Networks and Community Destruction

At the same time, however, as online social networks can positively contribute to religious practices through enhancing community formation, there are also possible negative effects. For instance, the time spent on social networking sites takes away from time that might be otherwise spent on other activities, among them religious activities. A 2010 Nielsen study showed that individuals spend more time per month on Facebook then on any other website, growing from an average of 4 hours and 39 minutes per month in June 2009 (9.3 minutes per day) to more than 7 hours per month (14 minutes per day) in January 2010 (Parr 2010). By August 2011 this number had increased even further to 7 hours and 46 minutes per month (15.5 minutes per day) (Parr 2011). The average U.S. internet user spends 30 hours online per month (Parr 2011). While this lost time might have been spent in a wide array of activities, organized religious activities do make up some proportion of the time. Also potentially detrimental to religion is the way in which online social networks such as Facebook might provide a medium for being exposed to detrimental communities or ideas. As Ankita Rao writes, "In the right hands, Facebook can be a powerful social networking hub to keep tabs on far-flung friends, find a job or push a cause. In the wrong hands, it can reveal a treasure trove of dark secrets – photos of drunken coworkers, confessions of stoned preteens, and clues to an unfaithful spouse." Rao goes on to chronicle the numerous ways in which aspects of Facebook, such as the posting of images, challenge, for example, Islamic notions of modesty.

Pope Benedict XVI devoted large parts of a speech on World Communications Day in January 2011, entitled "Truth, Proclamation and Authenticity of Life in the Digital Age," to issues surrounding social networking. Benedict writes of "the limits typical of digital

communication: the one-sidedness of the interaction, the tendency to communicate only some parts of one's interior world, the risk of constructing a false image of oneself, which can become a form of self-indulgence" (quoted in Sly). He also weighs in on the debate surrounding the authenticity of the friendships and communities formed online. He ended the address, however, by stating:

> The truth of Christ is the full and authentic response to that human desire for relationship, communion and meaning which is reflected in the immense popularity of social networks. Believers who bear witness to their most profound convictions greatly help prevent the web from becoming an instrument which depersonalizes people, attempts to manipulate them emotionally or allows those who are powerful to monopolize the opinions of others.[9]

Criticisms of online social networks as depersonalizing fall into line with more general criticisms of technology. In part due to the increased role of technology in life, Richard Stivers writes, "Loneliness has become so pervasive in modern society that we almost take it for granted" (1). Stivers links technology to a wide array of maladies, including narcissim, depression, paranoia, and schizophrenia. While online social networking has not been extensively studied as an addictive behavior, this is "perhaps only a function of the relative newness of the technology" (LaRose, Kim, and Peng: 65). The goal of religious organizations as they enter into this era of new technology will be the same one they have dealt with historically: how to exploit those aspects of technology that are beneficial while avoiding, or at the very least limiting, those that are detrimental.

Conclusion

It would appear, therefore, that to unilaterally set up religion and technology as being incompatible fails to take into account the complex ways in which the two both support and erode the other. Technology can be beneficial to religion when it enhances the communal aspects of religion, and detrimental to religion when it degrades these communal aspects. While there are certainly other aspects of religion that technology might impact, it would appear that community represents the most important one. Given the fact that online social networks generally appear to enhance notions of community, it is perhaps inevitable that religious organizations and individuals will turn to them in ever increasing numbers. Whether this turn towards digital communities might inadvertently erode physical communities is unclear, though certainly possible. Similarly the oversaturation of online social networks with religious ideologies and actions might drive other, less-religious individuals away, decreasing their importance. It is difficult to accurately predict what forms technology will take over the upcoming decades, but it is safe to say that religion, as it has in the past and is doing so now, will invariably try to adapt it to its own purposes.

[9] Benedict also rightly notes that the best way to use online social networks is to use them to promote religious values and ideas, what I have termed persuasive actions: "To proclaim the Gospel through the new media means not only to insert expressly religious content into different media platforms, but also to witness consistently, in one's own digital profile and in the way one communicates choices, preferences and judgments that are fully consistent with the Gospel, even when it is not spoken of specifically" (quoted in Sly).

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I'm a Christian & I'm Proud http://www.facebook.com/pages/Im-a-CHRISTIAN-Im-PROUD/78285229798

Im a Muslim & Im Proud [sic] http://www.facebook.com/IamMuslimAndProud

Jesus http://www.facebook.com/JesusChrist.Savior

Key Facts http://newsroom.fb.com/content/default.aspx?NewsAreaId=22

Lady Gaga http://www.facebook.com/ladygaga

Muslim (Community) http://www.facebook.com/Muslim.Peace

Muslim (Religion) http://www.facebook.com/pages/Muslim/108007655887415

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