

PRAYER AND SOCIAL MEDIA



New Media Project

at Christian Theological Seminary
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PRAYER AND SOCIAL MEDIA

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PRAYER AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Series introduction

By Verity A. Jones

"I have a friend who stopped posting Facebook statuses and reads them as her prayer journal instead ... like that's her prayer time as she reads X number of statuses," says Susie Shaefer, a young Episcopal clergy woman. "I have another friend who starts all of her Facebook statuses with her prayer list, like 'Elaine is praying for blah, blah, blah, period,' and then her status update, 'great morning at church. I can't wait for the picnic'" (from "Webs of interconnectivity: Inhabiting the world of The Young Clergy Women Project" (<http://cpx.cts.edu/newmedia/findings/case-studies/the-young-clergy-women-project/article>), New Media Project case study, 2012).

Christian prayer practices and beliefs vary widely from tradition to tradition, region to region, and, of course, person to person. From communal prayer in local worship to public prayer in the public square, from individual prayer before bedtime to family prayer before a meal, 'prayer' is defined differently in various contexts, and through many theological lenses. Harry Emerson Fosdick described prayer as, "neither chiefly begging for things, nor is it merely self-communion; it is that loftiest experience within the reach of any soul, communion with God" (The Meaning of Prayer, Fosdick, Association Press, 1920).

One's beliefs about God do begin to come into focus as one thinks about what prayer is—Is God one who delivers requests? Is prayer meant to change us or does it impact God? What does it mean for God to answer prayers? What kind of God doesn't relieve the suffering of a struggling soul on her knees in prayer? How do the promises of God in scripture engage the supplicant?

What then happens when we introduce entirely new communication media like social media into these questions? Is the range of Christian prayer discipline and belief wide enough to include those that occur mostly or solely online? Are social media the kind of media that can aide prayer, or do they hinder prayer? Even if we just considered Fosdick's definition of prayer as communion with God, can it happen online? Can we commune with God in a digital format?

This blog series on Prayer and Social Media will consider some of these questions as the writers address the topic from their own various theological and ecclesiological perspectives. For example, next week Jim Rice will write from a Mennonite/Anabaptist perspective, and he will undoubtedly raise new questions for the following writers as he engages these questions.

Probably what you won't find in this series is a list of websites that offer prayer resources. That's a bit too much like taking an old resources and repackaging them for a new day, and that's easy enough to search on your own. We want to get at something deeper—does prayer happen differently in a world shaped by social media? We may offer a list of websites and platforms that can help us think creatively about the intersection of prayer and social media. And maybe some good ideas about how to be prayerful while using social media. Susie Shaefer said she and her younger clergy colleagues want to know what to do to make their use of technology prayerful. That's a great question.

I'll close with another story from a New Media Project case study for our ponderings on prayer:

Nadia Bolz-Weber, pastor of House for All Sinners and Saints in Denver, told about "the church starting a Google prayer group, so that members can log on and tell their ill companion she's being prayed for. That way one can watch as a prayer chain forms visibly before her eyes.

Bolz-Weber [reflected] that pastoral care is communal, not simply individual, and can come in short increments—in precisely the sort of attention-span-deprived bursts in which newer generations specialize. ... The beneficiary of the Google thread laying out the community's prayer commented this way: 'Thanks for all your prayers and support. It's my first experience with the support of a Christian community (well, any community for that matter) and its pretty ... amazing'" (from "Case study report on House for All Sinners and Saints" (<http://cpx.cts.edu/newmedia/findings/case-studies/house-for-all-sinners-and-saints/full-report>), New Media Project, 2011).



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An Anabaptist perspective

By Jim Rice

Last week, a Mennonite pastor reported (in a face-to-face conversation, I might add) that she had recently gone off email, and presumably other social media, for three days, because “I was burned out.” After the break, she said, “I felt so much better going back to work after have three days off email.”

The season of Lent brings to stark relief a divide among Christians regarding social media. Many believers, from various branches of the church, “fast” from social media as one of their Lenten disciplines. (Examples abound; a few can be found here (<http://tribune-democrat.com/x1633481219/Pittsburgh-pastor-wants-social-media-fast-for-Lent>) and here (<http://castingoutnines.wordpress.com/2011/04/27/four-lessons-from-my-lenten-social-media-fast/>) and here (<http://www.peacebang.com/2013/02/13/on-social-media-fasting-for-lent/>) and here (<http://www.revelife.com/771701964/sacrificing-social-media-my-lenten-fast/>). There’s even a definition of “digital fast” in the Dictionary of Christianese (<http://www.dictionaryofchristianese.com/2013/02/23/facebook-fast-media-fast-digital-fast/>).

Other people of faith, however, make a clear case for “Why I’m not giving up Facebook for Lent” (<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/christandpopculture/2013/02/why-im-not-giving-up-facebook-for-lent/>), arguing, as author Helen Lee does, “The whole purpose of Lent is to draw closer to God and to a deeper understanding of [God’s] purposes. Using Facebook is one key way that I see [God’s] hand at work in the world and in the lives of people I know.” For Lee, social media is a base, and a milieu, for her prayer life.

Many Mennonites who didn’t grow up with Lent—one of those “Catholic” things that Protestants often either ignored, misunderstood, disdained, or all of the above—now engage with the season as an opportunity to deepen their spiritual lives. “Laying down and taking up for Lent” (<http://www.femonite.com/2013/02/13/laying-down-and-taking-up-for-lent/>), by Hannah Heinzekehr, whose Femonite blog “blends interests in Mennonite theology and faith and feminism,” is an insightful Mennonite reflection on the deeper meaning of Lenten fasts. The purpose of such fasts (I would add “of course” for Catholics and others for whom this is old news) isn’t just penitence, personal mortification, or certainly “proving our self control,” as Heinzekehr puts it. For her, the challenge is to take up a spiritual practice that helps her “just be”—with her daughter, with nature, with a work of art—and to be attentive to God’s word in that moment. In a word, to practice mindfulness.

“Discipline” and “presence” are two key themes in Christian spirituality. Often they are set up as conflicting values, as if our choice is either to be structured and disciplined in our prayer practices and our spiritual life in general, or simply to be “mindful” to God’s presence in the moment. At heart, though, spiritual disciplines—such as Lenten fasts, and a whole lot more—can provide a framework that nurtures a spirituality of presence.

Early Anabaptists—the 16th century reformers who are the forebears of Mennonites and other contemporary Christians—rejected structures and techniques as the primary basis for prayer. Instead, they offered their daily life as their prayer, in the place of particular methods or disciplines.

Miriam Frey, a Mennonite spiritual director in Waterloo, Ont., says (<http://sacredlisteningministries.com/my-writings/15-mennonite-prayer-an-attitude-or-technique.html>) that her Old Order Mennonite relatives have “an attitude that permeates their lifestyle, their worship, and their prayers.” Frey describes this attitude using the German mystical term “gelassenheit,” which means letting loose of oneself and indicates “a way of total dependence, humility, and trust before God,” according to the Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms.

That attitude of dependence on God is one of the lessons about prayer that come from the Mennonite tradition. Such an attitude requires humility, Freys says, and letting go of the need to control events and people—a vulnerability before God. Another key to genuine prayer and worship is to live with integrity, ensuring that all of life is “honest and healthy.” For centuries, she writes, “Mennonites have made their lifestyle their prayer.” Finally, Frey emphasizes the importance of attending to our relationship with God. For some, gardening will draw our attention to God; for others, it might be reading scripture or communing with nature. For all of us, paying regular attention is key: “As with any relationship, if we are committed to regular communication, eventually we become comfortable in our conversation,” Frey says. “If we approach God with humility, trust, integrity, and our full attention, we can expect God to abide in us.”

Of course, there is nothing uniquely Mennonite in that approach to prayer. From Catholic mystics such as Teresa of Avila and Thomas Merton to Taoist Chuang Tzu and Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh, spiritual writers in many traditions have pointed to the understanding that God (in the various ways God is understood) is present in the here and now, and thus when we are present to the moment, we are present to God.

What that says about social media, about digital fasting or not, is worth discussing. We should indeed ask ourselves serious questions about the Internet and our spiritual lives, about online connections and electronic distractions, about tools we use and the arenas in which we live our lives. But through it all, we should keep in mind that God is present in every part of it.



Jim Rice, a research fellow for the New Media Project, is editor of Sojourners magazine in Washington, D.C.

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PRAYER AND SOCIAL MEDIA

An Catholic perspective

By Kathryn Reklis

I teach the history of Christian thought and practice from the Reformation period to the present at a Jesuit university in New York. Leading my mostly cradle-Catholic students through the early Protestant polemics against Catholicism during the first weeks of Lent raised a host of questions about rituals and sacraments, ordination and scripture, and about prayer. A lot of Protestant vs. Catholic and Protestant vs. Protestant (as the reformation proliferated the options within Christianity) boil down to how you are supposed to pray: Do you read your prayers? Do you sit or kneel or stand? Are there special prayers to be said at special times?

It is almost funny to read some of these debates now, because, as Jim points out (<http://cpx.cts.edu/newmedia/blog/new-media-project/2013/02/26/prayer-and-social-media-an-anabaptist-perspective>) in his post about Anabaptism and prayer, the lines have been blurred in our own age: out of hunger to grow in authentic faith Mennonites practice Lent and Catholics speak in tongues (<http://www.nsc-chariscenter.org/>)! We feel free to borrow from the riches within different Christian traditions, and this is surely a good thing.

Still, it isn't wrong to say that Catholics hold a special place for material devotion and liturgical rhythms in prayer. We like to hold things when we pray—rosaries, crucifixes, saints' cards—and tie our prayers to the concrete acts of lighting candles or meditating on the images of saints. In my own experience, the "stuff" of prayer works in complicated ways to retrain the mind and refocus the spirit.

When I first tried to pray the rosary, my fingers fumbled over the beads while I tried to remember the words to the prayers while also meditating on the mysteries of Jesus' life. It took a lot of practice to realize that this tri-part form—you pray repetitively, while meditating on something that is not explicitly the words of your prayer, while your hands do something else—was the whole point. The normal distractions of my extemporaneous prayer were waylaid by simply trying to hold on to the form. So too my usual concerns over whether I really "meant" the words of a liturgical prayer: the whole point is not to fixate on the words, but to use them to focus the mind on something else, the mystery at hand.

So can you pray the rosary online? Sure! There are many apps for iPhones and Androids that offer aids for praying the rosary. Many of these include lovely iconographic images to mediate on while praying, along with meditative music, and scriptural passages for further contemplation. As our handheld devices become more thoroughly integrated into our lives, tapping a screen may not be so different than shifting a bead in the hand.

Even more than just offering the prayer in a digital form, digital prayer apps and websites offer visual and aural dimensions of contemplative prayer that can help lift us out of the "verbal dominant" assumptions about prayer. There is an affective dimension of prayer—that taps into our emotions, desires, and imaginations, that can be fostered by focusing on an image or an object instead of just an idea in the mind. Or maybe I should say, a dimension that helps move us from ideas in our minds to the more affective part of our spirit (since I don't want to sound like I, or any Catholic, is opposed to good old fashioned ideas!). You can see a couple online Catholic prayer resources that emphasize the visual and aural possibilities of digital technology here (<http://www.loyolapress.com/3-minute-retreats-daily-online-prayer.htm>) and here (<http://www.sacredspace.ie/>).

These affective and aesthetic dimensions of prayer—the beads, the icons, the chants—are not the exclusive domain of Catholics. And to the degree that they are cultivated and preserved in many forms of Catholic prayer, they are available to non-Catholics too (I once attended a rosary group populated mostly by evangelicals and Buddhists!). I like to imagine that in an earlier age I could have tapped into these prayerful dimensions most strongly by praying in a busy cathedral, eyes cast up to the icon of a saint, fingers working over a well-worn rosary, while the world bustled around me (if you read Luther, late medieval cathedrals were a virtual market-place of busyness). Maybe it is not so different to listen to the daughters of St. Paul chant the Hail Mary (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/rosary-miracle-prayer/id373335581%3Fmt%3D8>) through my earphones, eyes cast down to the icon on my screen, while the world rushes by on my morning commute.



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By Lerone A. Martin

"Amen!" "Yes!" "Say it!" "Come on now!" Such phrases are commonly interjected during worship in America's multi-hued Pentecostal and evangelical traditions. These proclamations are often heard during the preaching moment as well as prayer, offering instant affirmation (and at times rebuke) to the words and prayers that are uttered. Indeed, in such call and response traditions, it is obvious, fairly quickly in fact, whether or not a sermon or a prayer is received and meeting the needs and expectations of the faithful.

Tim Lehmann founded Prayrlist (<http://www.prayrlist.com/>) as way to use social media to extend this tradition.

Prayrlist allows for a resounding social media experience of call and response. Prayrlist seeks to cultivate the spiritual practice of prayer by automatically generating a daily prayer lists from a user's Facebook friend list. Users can input their own specific prayer requests as well as view the prayer request/focus of others. Moreover, in the fashion of an altar call, users can issue urgent prayer requests. These pressing requests are immediately displayed as a special alert on the user's entire Prayrlist network. One's request almost instantaneously pops up on countless mobile phones, tablet computers, laptops, and desktops. If a Prayrlist user is plugged in, she or he will automatically be attuned to any and all urgent prayer request. Users can assure their Prayrlist community that they have indeed been prayed for and/or that their prayers have been heard, received, and affirmed. Posted interjections of "Amen!" "Yes!" and "Thank you" bombard one's Facebook wall. Call and response, perhaps, at its best.

The research of the New Media Project ("How media changes American culture and religion" (<http://cpx.cts.edu/newmedia/findings/essays/how-media-changes-american-culture-and-religion>)) has chronicled the various ways emerging forms of media have historically altered religious proclamation.

Moreover, in a previous blog, "Text and Confess" (<http://cpx.cts.edu/newmedia/blog/new-media-project/2012/09/25/text-and-confess>), I chronicled a reformed Rosh Hashanah worship service in which congregants, instead of traditional prayer and confession, anonymously texted their prayers and penitence onto a scrolling screen for all to see. Prayrlist is yet another example of how social media tools are shifting the parameters of our religious proclamations and practices. Yes even prayer.

The effect of Prayrlist and other social media on the tenor and nature of our prayers and spiritual practices is a hotly debated topic. Nevertheless, Prayrlist does remind me of an old adage often repeated in the faith community of my youth: "Prayer knows no distance!" Prayer allows people, no matter the proximity, time, and space that separate them; to come together in unity to advocate for a certain cause. Prayrlist, possibly like never before, fulfills this proverb before our very eyes.



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PRAYER AND SOCIAL MEDIA

A liberation perspective

By Monica A. Coleman

Communal prayer is a tactile experience for me. In my denominational tradition, African Methodism (<http://www.ame-church.com/>), we come to a wooden altar at the front of the church, kneel, and pray. In my favorite worship experiences, the "Altar Prayer" portion of the Sunday liturgy takes twenty or thirty minutes. We come to the altar individually or with loved ones, holding each other or holding ourselves together, politely kneeling, sometimes collapsing, adhering to the words of a minister, or mumbling to oneself.

The congregation sings a hymn, or a spiritual, or a chant over and over, moving on to another song. Until. Until the praying is done, until the tears have been wiped, until the last person has risen and moved back to her or his seat.

This is how I think of prayer in church.

I cannot imagine how new media can hold this feeling. How would new media convey the sense that your community cares about you? That they understand your problems as their problems, that they will wait with you, until. Until something changes, until you are free.

This comes from a deep belief that prayer changes things. When I heard this expression as a child, I assumed it meant that my prayers went vertically upward into the clouds where heaven and God are, and then God heard the prayers and did something about what God heard.

As an adult, I heard an amendment to that expression. "Yes prayer changes things. Prayer changes people. People change things."

I don't think this means that God has no role in changing our lives and our circumstances, but God is not the sole agent of change as I imagined as a child. The second expression suggests that our faith motivates us to be active in the changes that we wish to see in the world. We are following God's call as we embody God's values and principles in the world. Often, this is a call out of our individualism into the concerns of others.

There is a quotation from the Aboriginal activists group in Queensland, Australia (1970), that expresses this sentiment well:

"If you have come here to help me, you are wasting our time. If you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."

I think I've understood prayer through this liberation framework (even if the theology of the church didn't say it this way). We stayed, lingered, waited, sang, kneeled, and held hands because we understood that we are linked together. None of us were free until all of us are free.

I've seen creative ways to pray together like this in new media. Recently, an associate sent an email through Facebook to a number of close and not-as-close friends. She shared that

she was having difficulties paying an important bill as she tried to juggle school, work, and parenting young children. As hard as it was, she was asking for help. She had set up a page on gofund.me (<http://www.gofundme.com/>) that allowed us to give to her, paying this bill. Many of us gave. The page not only revealed the money donated, but had space for comments. I saw encouraging notes about how some friends managed through similar periods in their lives. Other people said they were glad that she asked for help when she needed it. Others said they wouldn't want her to struggle alone.

There was no altar, no music, no tissue passed to a weeping eye.

But I'm pretty sure that this was prayer as I know it.



Monica A. Coleman, a research fellow for the New Media Project, serves as Associate Professor of Constructive Theology and African American Religions and Co-Director of the Center for Process Studies at Claremont School of Theology and Associate Professor of Religion at Claremont Graduate University in southern California.

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By Verity A. Jones

To draw this thought-provoking series on prayer and social media to a close, today we offer a summary of resources cited and mentioned in the series, additional resources from our blog archive, and a few new articles on prayer and social media discovered during Lent. We hope this final post might help readers consider how to use the series educationally with groups interested in social media and Christian practices such as prayer.

As I wrote in the series introduction—“What you won’t find in this series is a list of websites that offer prayer resources”—this is not a list to look up prayers, but rather a list of resources to help readers think about how prayer happens in a world shaped by social media, about how we might be prayerful when using technology, and how to make our use of technology prayerful itself. We hope this is helpful.

Series citations and mentions

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- "3-Minute Retreat," Loyola Press. Catholic daily prayer resource that emphasizes visual and aural possibilities of digital technology.
<http://www.loyolapress.com/3-minute-retreats-daily-online-prayer.htm>
- "Sacred Space: Your daily prayer online," Irish Province of the Society of Jesus. Another daily prayer resource that emphasizes visual and aural possibilities of digital technology.
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- PrayrList: Lifting up the world one friend at a time. According to Lerone, the site allows for a "resounding" social media experience of call and response. "Prayrlist seeks to cultivate the spiritual practice of prayer by automatically generating a daily prayer lists from a user's Facebook friend list."
- "From "Prayer and social media: A liberation perspective," Monica A. Coleman, March 19, 2013.
<http://www.prayrlist.com/page/about>
- Gofundme.com. A website Monica mentions as an example of how helping someone in need is like "altar prayer" in the church of her youth. "The page not only revealed the money donated, but had space for comments. I saw encouraging notes about how some friends managed through similar periods in their lives. Other people said they were glad that she asked for help when she needed it. Others said they wouldn't want her to struggle alone."
<http://www.gofundme.com/>

Blog posts from the New Media Project archive

- "'Oversharing:' The new confessional," by Robert Saler, August 24, 2012. Guest blogger Rob reframes "oversharing" on social media as prayers of confession.
<http://www.cpx.cts.edu/newmedia/blog/new-media-project/2012/08/24/oversharing-the-new-confessional>
- "Text and confess," by Lerone A. Martin, September 25, 2012. Lerone chronicles a reformed Rosh Hashanah worship service in which congregants, instead of traditional prayer and confession, anonymously text their prayers and penitence onto a scrolling screen for all to see. <http://www.cpx.cts.edu/newmedia/blog/new-media-project/2012/09/25/text-and-confess>
- "Having cancer in a digital age," by Deanna Thompson, November 9, 2012. Guest blogger Deanna tells how friends were inspired to pray for her through social media. In a subsequent post, "The top ten reasons to use CaringBridge when bad things happen," December 4, 2012, prayer figures prominently.
<http://www.cpx.cts.edu/newmedia/blog/new-media-project/2012/11/09/having-cancer-in-a-digital-age>
<http://www.cpx.cts.edu/newmedia/blog/new-media-project/2012/12/04/the-top-ten-reasons-to-use-caringbridge-when-bad-things-happen>

Other articles we found interesting

- “Praying Between the Lines: The Prayer Practices of ‘Religious Nones,’” Reverberations: New Directions in the Study of Prayer, SSRC Forum, by Elizabeth Drescher. Check out the essays and exchanges on this fascinating subject.
<http://forums.ssrc.org/ndsp/2013/02/26/praying-between-the-lines-the-prayer-practices-of-religious-nones/>
- “The Papal Prayer Machine: Do Twitter devotions change the meaning of prayer,” Religion Dispatches, by Peter Manseau, March 6, 2013. The writer explores the meaning of prayer as the first Pope to tweet retires: “The catechism teaches that Jesus “hears the prayer of faith expressed in words or in silence” – but what becomes of tweeted prayers if God’s account is inactive?”
http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/atheologies/6882/the_papal_prayer_machine/



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