



Swipe Left to Pray

Analyzing Authority and Transcendence in Prayer Apps

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ABSTRACT This paper centers on a fairly new phenomenon in digital religion: prayer apps. After an overview of their typical features, the paper will present a number of analytical perspectives on such apps, arguing that investing in theoretical work is needed, particularly in a young research field. Starting points are provided by Heidi Campbell’s four-layer model of religious authority, Michel Foucault’s concept of “technologies of the self,” Birgit Meyer’s understanding of religion as a practice of mediation, and by the conceptualization of the transcendence/immanence distinction developed at the Käte Hamburger Kolleg *Dynamics of the History of Religions Between Asia and Europe* at the Center for Religious Studies, Ruhr-Universität Bochum. With regards to authority, it will be pointed out that prayer apps employ highly different strategies of authorization. These include the evocation of traditional authority, building trust through the use of familiar design language (often borrowed from outside the religious field), and self-imposed strategies aimed at the ‘improvement’ of the individual believer. As for the transcendence/immanence-distinction, it will be argued that it is important to differentiate between prayer apps that have a more auxiliary character, helping users to prepare their offline praying practice, and those apps that allow users to pray directly on their phone—which has significant implications for the understanding of transcendence.

KEYWORDS religion, media, digital, apps, prayer, authority, mediation, transcendence

Introduction

The year 2017 saw the tenth anniversary of the introduction of the first iPhone. Since 2007, [1] not only have smartphones become ubiquitous in contemporary societies, but the little applications, or apps, that really shape the highly individualized smartphone experience have grown in number from a couple of thousand in 2008 to more than 2.5 million in 2020.¹ Not surprisingly, at least not for scholars of media and religion, many of these apps are designed

1 Statista. “Number of apps available in leading app stores as of 1st quarter 2020” (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/276623/number-of-apps-available-in-leading-app-stores/>, last accessed August 19, 2020).

to cater for various religious purposes across religious traditions and denominations. According to a survey from 2014, there were more than 30,000 religious apps across app stores of the different existing platforms back then (Tkach 2014), and it can be safely assumed that this number has grown substantially since.

However, the number of studies devoted to such apps remains small and, quite understandably, the first studies that appeared were for the most part general surveys of this new phenomenon and attempts at a categorization of religious apps (e.g. Campbell et al. 2014). While a number of in-depth studies on individual apps or sub-genres does exist (e.g. Bellar 2017; Scott 2016; Hutchings 2014), our knowledge of phenomena such as ritual apps, meditation apps, religious games apps and, indeed, prayer apps remains limited. Moreover, as Bellar, Cho and Campbell (2018, 6167) correctly claim, “more refined theoretical understandings” are much needed, and scholars are called upon to apply appropriate theoretical concepts to their material from both media studies and religious studies, in order to better understand how digital media shape, and possibly change, the religious field. [2]

Taking this assessment as my starting point, I propose in this article to look at prayer apps from theoretical perspectives developed in the religious studies field and, to a lesser extent, the media studies field. This is a deliberately eclectic approach with the aim to open up possible paths for future research, rather than presenting results of a comprehensive study. I will thus not attempt a complete survey of all prayer apps that are available and also make no claim that the apps I will mention are the most important in terms of user numbers or download numbers. This is not to suggest that such numbers are not important. Rather, in order to gain a better understanding of which apps are most influential for the largest number of believers, further research will have to give a thorough assessment of such data—all the while taking into account the fast changes which can be expected in a new and competitive market. However, since my aim here is to present theoretical ideas, rather than quantitative data, I take the liberty of focusing on apps that best help me make my theoretical point, with some apps appearing to be marginal in terms of user numbers and some even taken off the app stores entirely. This is based on the assumption that, much as studies of small and/or historical religious communities can produce insights which also become relevant for research on the dominant denominations, the aspects I will discuss here are of analytical value for all prayer apps, independent of market share, and will, I hope, prove useful for future, more extensive research in the field.² [3]

As the framework of this Special Issue suggests, I will first turn to prayer apps and the question of religious authority. How is religious authority produced in and through prayer apps? To discuss this question, I will bring into conversation Heidi Campbell’s four-layer-model of religious authority with my own reading of Michel Foucault’s concept of “technologies of the self.” I will argue that with Foucault, we are able to see the subtle ways in which prayer apps become authoritative even if (or precisely because) they are perceived by users as tools to free themselves from traditional offline authority. The app *Prayer Notebook*,³ which allows users to keep a record of intended prayers, will be my main point of reference. [4]

Second, I will examine prayer apps in light of conceptual thinking on the transcendence/immanence distinction, an often-discussed topic at the Käte Hamburger Kolleg *Dynamics in the History of Religions* at the Center for Religious Studies at Ruhr-Universität Bochum [5]

2 All apps mentioned in the following are available in the German AppStore (iOS), unless otherwise noted, and are expected to be available in other countries as well.

3 The app is produced by a company called Kalon Creative, an app development agency not specialized in religious apps.

(see Stünkel 2017). The transcendence/immanence distinction can be understood as the mode in which religions operate, always needing to establish a relationship, in both their doctrinal thinking and ritual practice, between the immanent sphere of everyday life and the transcendent sphere of divine beings and salvation. Following Birgit Meyer, I suggest that religious media are to be defined as the material means needed to bridge the immanent and transcendent spheres (see Meyer 2013, 8, 2020 in this Special Issue). The differing ways in which this “bridging” is explicitly or implicitly conceptualized in the case of digital religious media thus become a concern for research: How do specific prayer apps differ in their relation to the transcendence/immanence distinction? How are they conceptualized to bridge the gap between transcendence and immanence? Are prayer apps merely tools to help believers facilitate their religious practice or do they claim to generate the transcendent in the app itself, thus claiming to directly perform (rather than assist with) the religious practice? To discuss these questions, I will mainly refer to prayer apps offering users the possibility to post prayer requests and responses to these. *Prayer Wall* and *Pray With Me (aka Instapray)*⁴ will serve as my main examples, because these apps, as I will demonstrate, differ quite significantly in this very aspect.

While religious authority is an often-discussed topic in the literature on religious apps, allowing me to position this paper more easily in the field at large, there is as yet no study discussing religious apps, or an element thereof, with regards to the transcendence/immanence distinction. As I will argue in the following, the latter is problematic, as the ways in which apps deal with (or rather: constitute) that distinction differ quite fundamentally and should be considered as informing categorizations of religious apps and indeed the very question of what constitutes a religious medium. [6]

Religious Apps: The State of Research

In a highly useful overview article on the state of the field, Bellar, Cho and Campbell (2018, 6162) have identified key themes within the research on what they call the “intersection of religion and mobile technology”: (1) “religious communities’ and individual engagement with mobile technology,” (2) “the design, development, and use of religious mobile apps,” and (3) “the commodification of religion related to mobile technology.” While there will be overtones from the first and third theme in the following, I will almost exclusively focus on the second one, i.e. on religious apps. Research on religious apps is, again according to these authors, best sub-categorized as research on a) app production, b) app usage, c) app structure and content. In addition to these three, Tim Hutchings has suggested to consider d) discourses revolving around the app (see Hutchings 2014, 145). Hutchings’ own work on the Bible-app *YouVersion*, an app allowing users to read, annotate and share their thoughts on a huge number of Bible translations, was the first study to include data falling into the first category. This is to say that Hutchings is the only scholar from the field who conducted interviews with app developers directly (see Bellar, Cho, and Campbell 2018, 6164). Similarly, studies analyzing discourses revolving around an app remain the exception. In other words, as has also been pointed out [7]

4 The app was published by Salem Communications, one of the leading evangelical media corporations in the United States. While the company continues to host dozens of religious apps, support for *Pray With Me* has ceased since early 2017 (see <https://sensortower.com/ios/US/salem-communications/app/praywithme-get-prayers-love-and-support/616597801/overview>, last accessed August 4, 2020).

elsewhere (*ibid.*), the vast majority of studies does not look into app development, but either into app structure and content or app usage, or a combination of the two.

Studies focusing on app usage typically employ user interviews and/or surveys. In these cases, researchers are typically interested in how individuals or groups make use of their apps and why they are using them. Findings show that, not surprisingly, convenience is considered a major benefit of usage (e.g. Hutchings 2014; Richardson and Pardun 2015; Rinker et al. 2016). Users take their smartphones wherever they want and thus make use of religious apps without restraints to a particular physical space or a particular occasion. This convenience, in turn, is often considered to be not only a means to facilitate an existing religious lifestyle, but to make it possible in the first place: “[The users] mentioned the ease at which these apps help them lead the religious life that they want” (Rinker et al. 2016, 4).

When it comes to the contents of religious apps, some studies have suggested ways of categorizing apps based on their features. Wagner (2013) mentions six categories: prayer apps, ritual apps, sacred text apps, religious social media apps, self-expression apps, and focus/meditation apps. Building upon this, Campbell et al. identified a somewhat refined 11 categories grouped into two major categories: (1) apps which help facilitate traditional religious practices and (2) apps that provide religious information or materials (2014, 163; see Bellar, Cho, and Campbell 2018, 6164). Other studies have looked more deeply into app design, pointing out the ways in which apps feature certain affordances that prompt users to use the app in very specific ways (e.g. Torma and Teusner 2011; Wagner and Accardo 2014; Bellar 2017). Most notably, Hutchings (2014) has shown how the *YouVersion* Bible app is very deliberately designed to enhance user engagement with it by making use of strategies such as social interaction with other users, gamification, and personalization (Hutchings 2014, 153). Hutchings also rightfully hints at the fact that app content analysis should take into account findings and conceptual frameworks from consumer psychology (*ibid.*).

The Diversity of Prayer Apps

Whilst prayer apps are almost always mentioned in overviews on religious apps and are sometimes considered their own subcategory (Wagner 2013; Campbell et al. 2014), there is as yet only one larger study centering on prayer apps exclusively (Bellar 2017). When prayer apps are considered a subcategory of religious apps, this could falsely suggest that prayer apps are a homogenous phenomenon, with all apps falling under that category exhibiting the same or a very similar set of agendas and features. However, in reality, prayer apps differ tremendously from each other.

Prayer apps may or may not be affiliated with a particular religious tradition. For example, the app *ClickToPray*, developed under the auspices of the Pope’s Worldwide Prayer Network, is aimed at users from the Catholic faith (though the actual religious affiliations of its users are unknown to research). However, what seems to be a majority of apps does not explicitly name a specific target group. A presumed Christian usage is implicit with most of the apps mentioned in this article (e.g. through references to Bible verses), but no denominational preference is discernible. Other apps, such as *Pray*,⁵ make their alleged religious neutrality

⁵ Since several prayer apps use the name *Pray*, it is important to note that I am referring here to the app that is using a stylized heart-symbol as its logo and that was published by a company called Religion America Inc. Unfortunately, as is the case with many religious apps, there is very limited information about the producers of these apps available, which makes it impossible to guess at possible agendas. Further research on these developers, as mentioned above, is thus much needed.

more explicit by offering users the chance to select a religious affiliation for their user profile, with options ranging from Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism via Jainism, Caodaism, and Bahai to Wicca, Messianity, and, quite interestingly for a prayer app, Atheism. An initial survey shows, however, that most users of that particular app choose not to pick a religion at all, but rather post their prayers without explicit reference to a religious tradition. In other words, prayer apps are a multireligious and sometimes transreligious phenomenon, making the apps a possible site for religious contact.

While I will focus mostly on apps that are, in varying degrees of explicitness, Christian, that does not mean that these apps are in any way homogenous. It should not be forgotten that prayer itself is a highly diverse phenomenon, not only across religious traditions, but also within the Christian tradition. A Christian prayer can be standardized or spontaneous, it can be held communally or alone, in private or in public, aloud or silent. It can contain forms of praise, petitions or thanksgiving. Someone taking a minute to thank God for his smooth commute to work while on the subway is as much saying a prayer as someone taking part in a communal reading from the Common Book of Prayers in an Anglican church service. Prayer is a surprisingly open form. Thus, while it is often said that mobile devices create, for the first time, spaces free from traditional authority, it should be noted that through prayer, individual Christians have long been entitled to their own, unmediated channel to God.⁶ [12]

In accordance with this traditional diversity, prayer apps do come with a diverse set of features. To give just a few examples: [13]

Some apps quite simply remind users to pray. While there are Christian apps with this functionality, this particular feature is especially popular in the Islamic context, accommodating the traditional Islamic doctrine of *Salah*, i.e. the need to pray five times per day. An app such as *Muslim Pro*⁷ would retrieve a user's location from his or her GPS data, calculate sunset and sunrise from that and then send push notifications for all obligatory prayers of the day. As a bonus, the app comes with a compass helping users find the direction of Mecca.⁸ [14]

In the (Christian-centered) app *Prayer Mate*,⁹ the reminder to pray can come with a suggestion what to pray; a traditional prayer or Bible verse which believers are supposed to read from the device. For those unwilling or unable to read, there is always the possibility of audio books, or audio prayers in this case, meaning apps that feature audio files of prayers (e.g. *Pray As You Go*¹⁰). [15]

A number of prayer apps center on the idea that people always forget who and what they were supposed to or promised to pray for. With *Prayer Notebook*, for example, users can quickly take a note whenever they decide to pray for someone or something. The list of intended [16]

6 It should also be mentioned that making use of material devices such as smartphones in the practice of prayer is by no means a novel phenomenon. See Blanton (2015) for an overview on how prayer has always been “intimately intertwined with material objects that actively organize performative techniques and embodied experiences within the practice of prayer” (2015, 162).

7 The app is published by a company called Bitsmedia and the app is marketed as the most popular Muslim app available. According to SensorTower, a service offering estimates of app downloads, the app is downloaded 900,000 times per month (<https://sensortower.com/android/id/muslim-pro-limited/app/muslim-pro-indonesia-waktu-sholat-adzan-quran/com.bitsmedia.android.muslimpro/overview>, last accessed August 4, 2020).

8 See Bunt (2018) for a thorough review of Islamic practices in the digital field, including those related to Islamic prayer apps.

9 The app is published by a company called Discipleship Tech whose mission statement reads “Using technology to help people grow in their relationship with Jesus” (<https://discipleship.tech>, last accessed August 4, 2020).

10 The app is produced by the Jesuit Media Initiatives.

prayers will then be available to them when and wherever they actually take a moment to do the praying. As a bonus, the app keeps track of which of the prayers have been answered.

The most interesting apps to discuss in this article, however, are those that allow users to post a prayer or a request for prayer. In *Prayer Wall*,¹¹ for example, users can either compose a prayer themselves or read prayers composed by other users. By way of reaction to another person's prayer, users click on a button in the top-right corner saying "I will pray." In so doing, they essentially promise to pray for the other person at another time. Postings accordingly often take the form of prayer requests, rather than actual prayers. For example, in a posting from September 29, 2014, 02:20, someone published the following request: [17]

Please pray for my daughter and I...we were so close and she has changed... I understand we all go through changes ... But, i m (sic!) not sure what's going on. Thank you! [18]

Another example for an app that features prayer requests is *Pray With Me*¹² (earlier marketed as *Instapray*). While requests for prayer read similarly to those in *Prayer Wall*, the two apps differ a lot in terms of aesthetics, with *Prayer Wall* featuring an 'antique' look mimicking sheets of parchment and *Pray With Me* seemingly copying the modern look and feel of Twitter. I will get back to this and its implications for authority construction in the following. Another difference between the two apps may seem minor, but comes, as I will also argue later in this article, with rather fundamental implications for the transcendence/immanence distinction: Whereas in *Prayer Wall*, users click on "I Will Pray" to react to another user's prayer request, in *Pray With Me*, they simply click on "Pray." [19]

Prayer Apps and Religious Authority

As mentioned above, religious authority is an often-discussed concept in the research on religious apps and the research on religion and the internet more generally. However, as Campbell pointed out (2007), the concept is employed rather differently across studies, creating possible misunderstandings. Campbell has thus suggested to take into account the multi-layered nature of authority and distinguish between authority related to [20]

religious hierarchy (roles or perceptions of recognized religious or community leaders), *religious structures* (community structures, patterns of practice, or official organizations), *religious ideology* (commonly held beliefs, ideas of faith, or shared identity) or *religious texts* (recognized teachings or official religious books such as the Koran, Torah, or Bible). (Campbell 2007, 1048, emphasis in original) [21]

In the following, I will present some observations concerning religious authority and prayer apps and, wherever appropriate, link those back to Campbell's four layers. [22]

To begin, it should be noted that prayer apps are a case that, as could be expected on the [23]

11 The app was published by a company called 43rd Element, LLC. According to SensorTower, this company published over 20 religious apps between 2009 and 2012, all of which, including *Prayer Wall*, are unfortunately now inactive (see <https://sensortower.com/ios/publisher/43rd-element-llc/306421826>, last accessed August 4, 2020).

12 The app was published by Salem Communications, one of the leading evangelical media corporations in the United States. While the company continues to host dozens of religious apps, support for *Pray With Me* has ceased since early 2017 (see <https://sensortower.com/ios/US/salem-communications/app/praywithme-get-prayers-love-and-support/616597801/overview>, last accessed August 4, 2020).

grounds of recent scholarship, does not move away entirely from traditional religious authority, but also refers back to traditional authority while at the same time creating new forms of authority (see Cheong 2012 for a useful overview of the general literature). As Bellar (2017, 329–33) has pointed out, prayer apps hold on to traditional religious authority on the one hand, while also making use of what she calls “algorithmic authority”, such as user ratings. The former can be seen, for example, in the fact that many prayer apps feature traditional, authoritative texts (Campbell’s fourth layer) that invite users to pray. Besides, as Rinker et al. (2016, 8) have pointed out, a number of users of religious apps state in interviews that these apps have been recommended to them by their local priests, suggesting a wish for the sanctioning of their novel practice by traditional religious hierarchy (Campbell’s first layer). Also, it should be mentioned that some prayer apps have been developed by religious organizations (Campbell’s second layer), e.g. the abovementioned *ClickToPray*, an app developed under the auspices of the Vatican which invites users to pray in communion with the Pope. Interestingly, traditional authorities are not only found in individuals, groups, or institutions, but can also be formed by material objects. Specifically, the app *Instaprayer*¹³ is centered on the traditional authority of the Western Wall in Jerusalem. In the app, users compose a prayer and then pay a fee so that their message is printed and then put in the real Western Wall.

While Campbell’s four-layered model is highly useful for an initial mapping of the material, there are some aspects worth mentioning which are outside the focus of that categorization. For instance, a very subtle way in which prayer apps can refer back to traditional authority is through their design and aesthetics. This is best exemplified by the app *Prayer Wall*. As mentioned above, *Prayer Wall* features an antique look with the background images mimicking sheets of parchment and the fonts looking like they were handwritten rather than printed. This design choice could somewhat ostentatiously be called a “skeuomorphic simulacrum.” A skeuomorphism is defined as a device or medium that mimics the design of something that came before it. There are very many examples for this in the digital world, where apps and other devices often mimic analogue predecessors (e.g. a calendar app looking like a physical calendar or a digital audio tool reminiscent of an analogue amplifier). The expectation in the case of *Prayer Wall* seems to be that users in the digital world are more likely to trust a new religious app if its look and feel reminds them of traditional religion and the dignity that comes with old materials or media. However, in the case of *Prayer Wall*, the old medium which is being borrowed from actually never existed. While parchment manuscripts of prayers do exist, the specific form they take in the app is a product of the imagination. Hence, we are dealing with a copy without an original (sometimes called a simulacrum in postmodern media theory). [24]

As Stewart Hoover has pointed out, when dealing with new media and religion, there is a “persistent concern about the ‘authentic,’ and about what of the ‘authentic’ [...] might be traded away as technologies interpose themselves in social relations, identity practices, community, ritual practices, and framings of ‘the sacred’ ” (Hoover 2012, X). I would suggest that “skeuomorphic simulacra” are precisely a way through which “senses of ‘the authentic’ are formed, stabilized, circulated, and enforced” (ibid.) in new media. By doing so, the new medium will gain acceptance among users precisely by cloaking itself in the looks of an old one. To put it differently, the new, immaterial medium borrows authority from the materiality of the traditional medium. A similar effect, it can be presumed, should be observable not only [25]

13 The app is produced by the Western Wall Foundation, which is not to be confused with the Western Wall Heritage Foundation, which offer a similar service through their website (and for free).

in the present case of digital vs. analogue media, but also between different analogue media throughout religious history.¹⁴

A majority of prayer apps, however, follows a different strategy. Rather than mimicking old media, they seem to be guided by the look and feel of other apps from outside the religious field. Many apps have the same slim and flat design that is currently in fashion across platforms. This makes them look professional and therefore—trustworthy. A striking example is the abovementioned *Pray With Me*, aka *Instapray*, which not only takes its name from the popular platform Instagram, but works and looks almost exactly like Twitter. The only difference seems to be that rather than tweet, you pray, and rather than re-tweet, you re-pray. Users familiar with Twitter can thus use *Pray With Me* without further explanation. At the same time, their whole praying practice is “twitterized.” I will get back to this last aspect later in this article. [26]

To put it more generally, what seems to be outside the scope of Campbell’s categorization are the ways in which apps become authoritative through their design, rather than their content or their connection to offline authorities. At the risk of oversimplifying, I would argue that this omission resonates with the research field at large, which is, as has been pointed out, characterized by studies on app usage, on the one hand, and app design, on the other hand. Studies focusing on app users have a tendency to emphasize the liberating effects that app users claim to have when giving preference to practicing religion on their phones, rather than in more traditional circumstances often perceived as restrictive. This idea, I would argue, is at times accepted quite uncritically by researchers, who fail to see that while traditional authorities may indeed grow less important through app usage, new forms of power do emerge. [27]

It is precisely these that have been revealed in studies focusing on app design and structure to emphasize the way the apps themselves channel how they are used through particular affordances, in turn reducing rather than enhancing individual freedom. Hutchings’ study on the Bible app *YouVersion* (Hutchings 2014) is a good example since it shows both the liberation of users from traditional authority figures (albeit, quite obviously, not from authoritative texts), while at the same time pointing out the way the app steers users quite powerfully through its design and features, for example by sending notifications to users who failed to finish their assigned readings or by awarding badges to those who did (see Hutchings 2014, 153). [28]

This could be summed up as follows: While religious apps allow users a liberation from traditional authority, the apps themselves in turn limit that liberty through their design and structure. However, I would go beyond that to argue in the following that not only is liberty limited through app design, but liberty itself forms part of much more complex forms of power. [29]

Liberation from Authority vs. Technologies of the Self

When we talk about authority, related terms such as power, command, and domination come to mind, all with different overtones and a whole string of scholarly debates surrounding them. In many such debates, the work of Michel Foucault ranks high, with its dismissal of simplified understandings and, in turn, novel conceptualizations of power as a principle rather [30]

14 I am indebted to my colleague Licia Di Giacinto, who pointed out to me that the newly emergent Daoist movement mimicked spoken language in their texts, thus referring back to the then authoritative medium of speech in their writings.

than a substance, which is at work in many, often complex and subtle ways which need to be disentangled in careful analyses. Foucault's work has influenced many researchers, including those who work on matters related to religion. Saba Mahmood's impressive work on *The Politics of Piety* (Mahmood 2005) comes to mind, but more notably for the context of this article, Charles Hirschkind, in his 2006 book *The Ethical Soundscape*, combines an interest in religion with an interest in new media technology and employs Foucauldian ideas in a similar way as is suggested here. Hirschkind discusses Foucault's "technologies of the self" in the context of Islamic sermons, which he understands as "a set of procedures by means of which individuals can work on their souls and bodies to achieve a distinct ethical or aesthetic form" (Hirschkind 2006, 39). In light of this, the availability of sermons on cassette since the 1970s has had a profound effect not only on the circulation of (dissenting) ideas but also on "the human sensorium, on the affects, sensibilities, and perceptual habits of its vast audience" (2006, 2).

Like many concepts in Foucault's work, his thinking on technologies of the self remains fragmented and was more concerned with the history of Western thought than with contemporary issues. It is not my concern here to enter into Foucault exegesis or to discuss the relationship between technologies of the self and related concepts, such as governmentality. Rather, I suggest to take what I consider the gist of Foucault's thinking on this issue and apply it to what characterizes our digital world. Put in a nutshell, I understand technologies of the self to mean the strategies and practices that aim at an alleged improvement of an individual in relation to whatever he or she considers his or her identity. [31]

Technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (Foucault 1988, 18) [32]

What Foucault has in mind are forms of power that work in a subtle way, i.e. not through coercion or dominance of one person over another, but through addressing the individual as, to use another Foucauldian term, an "entrepreneur of the self." The individual is empowered, but at the same time obliged, through this form of power, to create and constantly improve the self as his only product. Whole industries, such as the fitness and diet industries, are based on this principle. Fitness trackers and smartphones that allow you to count steps or burned calories are major tools in this context. [33]

While fitness trackers allow you to become a healthy and therefore, in the logic of this form of power, a better human being, religious apps are designed to help you become a better believer. For example, if you think of yourself as "a good Muslim," you want to do things that help you to remain one. An app that reminds you of your prayer times does exactly that and allows you to "micro-coordinate" a religious lifestyle.¹⁵ If you think that praying for others is part of being "a good Christian," you are likely to use an app like *Prayer Mate* that helps you remember who or what you promised to pray for. If you ask users about their religious practice in the digital age, as has been done in a couple of studies, they are likely to express [34]

15 Bellar (2017) refers to reminders and alerts as typical features of prayer apps and discusses them in the context of the larger scholarly literature on "micro coordination" (e.g. Ling 2004) through smart phone apps. While the term has a Foucauldian ring to it (bringing to mind his "microphysics of power"), it is not discussed in Bellar's work or elsewhere in the sense presented here.

a feeling of liberation from traditional authority as well as from the restraints of space and time (e.g. Rinker et al. 2016). With all these new apps on my phone, they tend to say, it is now so much easier and more convenient for me to lead a religious life.

The idea here seems to be that, for example, taking notes in *Prayer Mate* is the same thing as taking notes in a physical notebook or taking mental notes. But if we follow Foucault, we come to realize that it is not only faster and more convenient to do this in an app. It is part of a practice of self-improvement and self-tracking, which takes its power precisely from the fact that it is so convenient. If it is easy to be a good Christian or a good Muslim, the responsibility and self-induced pressure to lead a religious life increase. By the very act of making something possible, religious apps demand from users to act accordingly. [35]

I am not suggesting that we as researchers should take it upon ourselves to distress app users who may feel liberated from—possibly quite dominant—traditional authority figures with Foucauldian power theory. I do suggest, however, that we need to take such theories into account in our own analytical work on religious apps. Take this quote from Rinker et al. (2016) as an example of the opposite: [36]

The experiences of our participants show that religious authority does not particularly lie in the hands of prominent figures in the age of technology, such as pastors or Imams, but rather they are taking it upon themselves to answer their questions about faith through the use of apps. (2016, 12) [37]

My point is that while there is no reason to doubt that Rinker et al. have accurately recounted their interviewees expressed feelings, as researchers, we should not stop there. With Foucault in mind, we should realize that an expressed feeling of liberation may be part of a more subtle form of power that is at work here. Precisely by catering to individual desires of improvement and self-empowerment, technologies of the self become powerful, effectively substituting traditional authority through a different form of power. Power is thus at work not only when app design limits individual liberty, but the idea of liberation itself should be considered to be embedded in a form of power. In other words, the very idea of freeing yourself from traditional authority to take control of your religious lifestyle is in itself a way to become an “entrepreneur of the self,” and thus embedded in the dominant form of (as Foucault would say: neoliberal) power. Tobin (2016) has developed a similar argument in her work on the *Everyday Piety* of Muslims in Amman, Jordan. Speaking of “neoliberal piety,” she discerns a similar logic in neoliberal capitalism, on the one hand, and individualized piety, on the other: [38]

This relentless striving toward profits and blessings and rewards, and the avoidance of punishment and hellfire, is the archetypal reflection of neoliberal piety. [...] The desire to practice ‘the real Islam’ is equivalent to the pursuit of ever-increasing profit: it is a primary motivator and aim for action. (Tobin 2016, 6) [39]

Prayer Apps and the Transcendence/Immanence Distinction

There is clearly more that could and should be said about prayer apps in the context of a discussion on authority, and the implications of Foucault’s “technologies of the self” should be examined more thoroughly. However, for reasons of space, I will rather continue with an examination of prayer apps in the context of a largely unrelated concept, namely the [40]

transcendence/immanence distinction. As I have mentioned, the two have thus far not been discussed in the literature together, so I rely here almost entirely on the discussions on the transcendence/immanence distinction in the context of the Käte Hamburger Kolleg, which were guided by an introductory paper written by Knut Martin Stünkel (2017) and relate these to the more general literature in religion and media, more specifically to the concept of mediation developed by Birgit Meyer.

As Stünkel emphasizes, religious transcendence should be understood not as the only, but as a specific form of transcendence. He distinguishes between a basic form of transcendence, which denotes the simple “establishing [of] an interrelation of ‘here’, ‘there’ and a common ‘world’” (2017, 2), a formal transcendence, which denotes a formalization of the basic transcendence in the form of “stepping back and looking beyond” (Schwartz 1975), and finally a specific transcendence. This, in turn, can take the form of religious transcendence if and when it is based on the distinction between ‘here’ and ‘there’ in some variation of the worldly and the divine sphere. [41]

What I take from this for my developing argument is that not everything that “transcends” is necessarily religious in nature. The best examples are media. Media, by their very nature, transcend time and/or space. Reading an inscription on an ancient building, in a formal sense, transcends time. Talking to someone on the phone transcends space. Listening to a recorded message on an answering machine transcends time and space. Media, it could be said, are in essence transcending machines. It is precisely for this reason that media can be considered, in Stünkel’s words (ibid., borrowing from Georg Simmel), a “religioid space,” i.e. a site that bears the potential to be “religiosified.” This means that their capacity to transcend between ‘here’ and ‘there’ or ‘then’ and ‘now’ *can* (but does not have to) be imagined as a means to bridge the gap between the immanent sphere and religious transcendence. This brings me to the following quote from Birgit Meyer: [42]

I understand religion as a practice of mediation between humans and the professed transcendent that necessarily requires specific material media, that is, authorized forms through which the transcendent is being generated and becomes somehow tangible. (Meyer 2013, 8, see also Meyer’s more extensive take on mediation in this Special Issue: 2020) [43]

What I take from Stünkel’s and Meyer’s approaches together is this: 1) religion requires media, but 2) media do not require religion, they merely bear the potential to be religiosified through their transcending powers. A more general point that follows from this is that we need to be careful in our choice of words when we speak of a religious medium. Are we speaking about a medium that transcends time and/or space (like any medium) in the *context* of a religious practice? Or are we speaking of a medium that actually *generates* the transcendent in the religious practice? This clearly has implications far beyond the case of prayer apps, but they do make for good examples: [44]

- An app like *Prayer Notebook*, which lets you take notes of who or what you intend to pray for, does transcend time and space, but it does not generate the religious transcendent. It is a medium that is being used in a religious practice, but it is not, by Meyer’s above definition, a religious medium. [45]
- An app like *Instaplayer*, which lets you commission someone to print out your prayer [46]

and put it into the Western Wall in Jerusalem, is not itself a religious medium in Meyer's sense. The Western Wall is.

- An App like *Prayer Wall*, which gives users the option to click “I will pray” by way of reacting to a prayer request, does not suggest bridging the gap to transcendence itself. Users are going to have to do that, as it were, on their own (i.e. when they actually do pray). On the other hand, an app like *Pray With Me*, which gives users the option to click “Pray” rather than “I will pray” is a different story. In this case, I would argue, the app itself claims that it can bridge that gap between the immanent and the transcendent. Click me, the button seems to suggest, and you have bridged the gap to the transcendent sphere right here in this app. In that sense, it is a religious medium by Meyer's definition. [47]

To me, this is important not only in terms of a precise choice of words and definitions. Rather, if we were to call both *Prayer Wall* and *Pray With Me* religious media (as, admittedly, I have done throughout this article by calling them religious apps), we might just miss the crucial difference between them, which is that in one case, your phone helps you to pray, whereas in the other, your phone prays. This point is related to Bellar's (2017) distinction between apps that use a “translating design approach” and apps designed for a “mobile prayer environment.” While in the former case, apps are designed to be used outside the actual prayer practice (e.g. through providing access to religious texts), in the latter case the app forms part of the practice of praying itself through “incorporating interactive affordances such as audio podcasts, videos, and graphics that are listened to, watched, or touched during prayer” (Bellar 2017, 342). However, I would maintain that the more fundamental difference, from a religious studies viewpoint, lies not so much in the question *if* an app is used in a religious practice, but *how* it is used and with what implications for the transcendence/immanence distinction. This, I think, is a crucial point beyond this particular example and insisting on it should allow for more precise diachronic and transcultural comparisons in the broader field of media and religion. [48]

However, it must be noted that the position media have in the transcending process is not fixed. As I said earlier, all media are transcending machines and hence all media bear the potential to be regarded as generators of the religious transcendent. So it could be that with prayer apps—precisely with the difference between “I will pray” and “Pray”—we are currently witnessing the systematic, and maybe also the historic, point in which a material medium—the phone—is transformed into a religious artefact. [49]

The Twitterization of Prayer

But there is a different way of understanding this “Pray”-Button, which has to do with what could be called the “Twitterization of Prayer.” In media studies, a common way to distinguish between different forms of communication is to consider one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many communication. A phone call is usually a one-to-one communication, a broadcasting arrangement is one-to-many communication. The essence of Twitter communication is that it works in the “many-to-many” framework. With Twitter, everyone is talking to everyone all the time. So, if a religious app that looks and works like Twitter offers a “Pray” button, does this really imply, as suggested above, that the click of a button triggers a one-to-one communication between the believer and God? Or does praying, in this scenario, work like [50]

Twitter, i.e. in the sense that—through clicking—everyone prays for everyone else, and that is the end of it? Is God even a part of this conversation?

To put it differently, it could be argued that since users are used to click a “Like” or “Heart” button to express their affirmation to everyone else reading a posting, it is likely that they click the “Pray” button in a similar fashion. If so, the very act of praying is transformed from a conversation between the believer and God to a conversation between believers. Praying, in turn, is no longer a plea for divine intervention but a form of mutual support. Of course, since communal prayers and prayer circles have always existed, this aspect of communion has always been part of the Christian prayer. However, it is striking to see how despite the highly individualized forms of communication that smartphones make possible, religious prayer apps might just contribute to a new accentuation of communal prayer, while at the same time remaining at least ambiguous about the transcendent quality of this action.¹⁶ [51]

Conclusion

Quite clearly, developing an analytical perspective on religious apps needs much more work than I have—very eclectically—been able to sketch here. Summing up my main points, I have suggested that a discussion on religious authority and religious apps needs to take into account not only the limits of individual freedom of usage that come with app structures and affordances but also the coercive qualities of app aesthetics. In that context, further research should address the question how app developers substitute traditional authorities through strategies of building trust (which include, but are not limited to, aesthetic choices). [52]

Furthermore, I have argued with Foucault that we need to be careful not to take at face value the idea that users liberate themselves from traditional authorities through app use. Instead, we should consider whether we are dealing with a situation where the self-tracking and self-styling that is facilitated in religious apps is itself embedded in a more subtle form of power, rather than with a situation where power is absent. [53]

As Foucault thinks of forms of power as historical, i.e. as emerging and becoming hegemonic at a specific point in time, future research should address the question whether we can observe that through the increased use of digital devices, technologies of the self become a major form of power in the religious field. This also means that we may need to consider avoiding the term authority altogether if we want to make sure not to miss more subtle forms of power that are also at work. [54]

Furthermore, I have suggested that a focus on the transcendence/immanence distinction can help us see more clearly some fundamental differences between religious apps. As my example has shown, while some apps merely offer to facilitate a religious practice, others claim to outright generate religious transcendence. This crucial difference, I have argued, should be taken into account in future attempts to categorize religious apps. Specifically, when Campbell limits her categorization to (1) apps which help facilitate traditional religious practices and (2) apps that provide religious information or materials (2014, 163; cf. Bellar, Cho, and Campbell 2018, 6164), my suggestion is to add (3) apps that allow users to directly perform a religious practice by allegedly bridging the gap between the immanent and the transcendent. [55]

16 Bellar (2017) has demonstrated that both app designers and users typically frame the use of prayer apps as “as a daily practice designed to communicate with God/Allah” (341), hence as a form of one-to-one communication. However, she does point to some undercurrents of a more communal framing of prayer in her data, suggesting that “prayer app use may impact religious mobile app users understanding of their own religious identities in relation to the larger imagined community of religious app users” (335–6).

With this, research should also go beyond categorizing religious apps based on their features. To speak of prayer apps, Bible apps, religious game apps, etc. is a necessary starting point, but we need to find ways to base our categorizations on theoretical considerations in the future.

While my discussion of the transcendence/immanence distinction takes its cues from the religious studies field, even basic concepts from the media studies field, such as “many-to-many”-communication, can offer insights into the workings of religious apps such as *Pray With Me*, which mirrors Twitter so strikingly that, as I have argued, we may assume a twitterization of prayer at work—in the sense of an increased emphasis on communal rather than individual prayer as well as an emphasis on mutual support among believers rather than communication with the Transcendent. It is possible that such a development can flourish all the more easily in a space in which traditional religious affiliations are blurred or downright irrelevant. We may thus be dealing with a case where the very entanglement of religions contributes to an expression of a growing trans- or even post-religious sentiment.

[56]

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