COMMUNICATING FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE THROUGH THE SOCIAL MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of social media has continued to redefine the direction of things in the society which religion is no doubt inclusive. It is on this basis that this paper explored communication for the advancement of religious knowledge via the various social media platforms. The paper argued that the social media platforms have continued to influence people’s understanding of religion in many parts of the world. This is based on the fact that several religious leaders and organisations have come to recognise the platforms as potent avenues to reach out to people and influence their knowledge of religion. On the other hand, seekers of religious messages are deploying the platforms to enrich their religious knowledge. Today, people learn a lot from the religious messages they receive through the social media platforms.

INTRODUCTION

In a bid to reach out, win new converts and sustain old members, various religious leaders and groups in many parts of the world are now harnessing the enormous potentials of the social media to spread their religious messages. In this regard, Dawson and Cowan (2004, p.12) assert that “sequel to the growth of the internet, many religious believers and institutions have adopted the social media platforms for expressing their faith, reaching out to non-believers, and building stronger ties among believers.” 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. Users of religious programmes on the internet are now confronted with a wide variety of social networking opportunities online. Christians, for instance, can go to Hisholyspace.com, holypal.com, or Xianz (ReligionLink). There is even a Christian alternative to YouTube, called UltimateTube, which is categorized as Christian Videos, Music Videos, and End times Videos among others. It exhorts its visitors to “broadcast HIM [God] alone” (Ultimate Tube.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 (Verschoor-Kirss, 2014).

While many of these networks aspire to be general meeting places for adherents of their faiths, other social networking sites aspire to much more specific audiences.

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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 Pagan Space.

While there are religious social networks that aspire to be somewhat nondenominational, such as Belief Net’s “Community” (http://community.beliefnet.com) and Peace Next.org, there are just as many, if not more, networks that are more narrowly focused. It is also, however, inclusive, because there is little or no bar that is set for acceptance into the social network. One needs to only set up a profile to join (Verschoor-Kirss, 2014).

Religious seekers and believers today are avidly developing microblogging content and symbols to spur sharing, replicating, and searching of faith related content online. Faithful microbloggers, or in this case, the “Twitness,” have emerged to shape the blogosphere, thereby creating new faith connections and flows (Cheong, 2012). Twitter, with its short microblogging interface, is allowing the evangelical Christian to reach out with short bursts of inspiration. Facebook updates about Qur’anic verses also have taken on new meaning for those who hold Islam central to their lives. Western monotheistic traditions and their people have evolved within this new online environment. For the faithful, there is an emphasis and understanding of internet social media and how it is changing the concept of what religion is today (Nathan, 2012).

THE PROLIFERATION OF RELIGIOUS SOCIAL MEDIA PAGES/ACCOUNTS

With the rapid rise and tremendous success of Facebook, Twitter and other social media applications, congregations are swiftly adopting these tools for their ministry. Over 60% of American congregations use Facebook. This is a staggering rate of adoption since the general public use of Facebook was only 4 years old in 2010. In part, the dramatic embrace of Facebook by congregations might provide an explanation for the drop in the percentage of congregational websites Faith Communities Today found in 2010. Seven percent of congregations are on Facebook but do not have a web presence. This may well signal a shift and even a positive trend in the use of technology by religious groups. Currently, few congregational websites are interactive or updated regularly. On the other hand, Facebook pages have a dynamic interactive quality; they are easily updated and offer timely, relevant information to a faith community’s “friends.” One distinct drawback of this strategy, however, is that few congregational Facebook pages contain relevant contact information in case outsiders come knocking. Facebook is great for congregational insiders, but may well be less functional as a yellow-pages ad for those shopping for a new faith community home (Thumma, 2012).

All through 2011, the “Jesus Daily” Facebook page out-ranked soccer giants and celebrities like Lady Gaga and Justin Bieber as the ‘most engaging’ site on Facebook. Other pages are The “Dios EsBueno” (God is Good), “The Bible,” and “Joyce Meyer Ministries”. Consequently, more than half of the top 20 most engaging pages are those that transcend mere broadcast messaging to sharing content that inspires their audience to interact with one another are religious (Tola, 2013, p.10). “On Twitter, which
is quite trickier to track, hashtags like #prayer, #spirituality, #bible, #Jesus, #Buddha, #Allah, and so on, are consistently robust. Event-related hashtags like #haroldcamping, #rapture, mark twitter as no less significant a site for religious communication, study and engagement than Facebook” (Tola, 2013, p.11).

With regards to the Islamic religion and social media, Almobarraz (2014) asserts thus:

Islam as a religion plays a central role in lives of people. It has been said that Islam is more than a religion; it is a way of life. Therefore, reading and learning religious information is a habit that adherents practice to increase their understanding of Islamic rules. In the past, most people used to learn about the religion from traditional resources such as books, journals, and TV programs. The advent of social media on the Internet has changed information seeking behavior of people when searching for religious information (p.1).

Several religious pages have become popular on Twitter recently, including Huffington Post Religion (@HuffPostRelig), Twitter Religion (@twitterreligion) and Pope Francis (@Pintifex). The first two of these offer news and comments relating to a variety of faiths in a reasonably light and impartial tone. They have 110,000 and 313,000 followers respectively and are obviously branches of larger user accounts (Tallant, 2013). Pope Francis has almost 2.5 million followers, which may not seem many when considering that Catholicism has 1.2 billion members worldwide, but is impressive upon seeing that he only follows 8 other users. And they are all multi-lingual versions of himself. The 9 versions of Pope Francis have over 6 million followers, which is the same as Ed Sheeran, Jessie J and Tom Hanks. And he has only been Pope for 2 months (Tallant, 2013). Hemsworth (2014) asserts that:

The club, one of about 80 created and founded by Mosaic, a non-denominational Christian church in Pasadena-Calif, didn’t offer much for the members, save for some discussion on the previous week’s service and the occasional get together at a picnic or church function. It was all standard and by-the-book. That was until Hemsworth and other group members flocked to Twitter and began dropping their hash tags and tweets. They snapped photos and sent them instantly via the new-age telegram. Soon enough, what was once a weekly gathering transformed into a daily discussion.”People just began to connect”. “People are finding ways of connecting and getting together. And social media is really helping that.” More believers, like Hemsworth, are beginning to use social media in their religious practice. In some cases, social media have become an extension of existing religious practice as churchgoers connect with their pastors and fellow worshippers outside of the pews and away from the organs. But for others, social media have become a substitute as online users have found new ways to get in tune with religion. Social media are changing the face of religion. Social media have become important ways to connect and make your religious experience a 24/7 experience rather than something you do on the weekends (p.1).

Creating a web site is perhaps the most basic way to use the internet for evangelism. The newer social networking sites offer more opportunities for outreach because they could better enable conversation than a static page. People of faith can use such social media as Twitter, YouTube, blogs, etc. to reach out both to ‘seekers’ (those looking for more information about religious faith) and believers alike to share the tenets of their faith, encourage deepening one’s religious faith, answering questions of doubt, and much more (Rosen-Molina, 2009).

The global availability of Christian resources via Internet sermons, blog discourse, pastoral training, and networking, holds exciting...
promise for an increased unity among the worldwide church. Technologies like Skype and iChat have revolutionized the way missionaries abroad can communicate with family and lay faithful back home. Twitter, Facebook, and other social networking sites allow for more regular communication, updates and community-building between church leaders and their flocks, and a broader sense of connectedness between previously localized communities of believers (McCracken, 2010). With new media tools in their hands, Saudi clerics are now communicating with the Saudi public and wider Muslim world on an unprecedented scale. Social media outlets like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, other technology such as Apple iPhone, iPad, and iPod touch applications are popular among the Saudi clerics. This phenomenon contradicts the religious establishment’s historical opposition to “corrupting” modern technology. Indeed, the clerics understand that these are powerful tools through which they can spread their messages (Schanzer and Miller, 2012).

The essence of the existence of religious social media sites is for the audience to use the platforms for various religious purposes with the aim of shaping or improving their religious knowledge. In recognition of this, religious leaders and groups are creating various social media accounts and pages to reach the audience with relevant religious information that will help to improve the audience knowledge of religion. This has no doubt led to the proliferation of social media pages and accounts in various parts of the world.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE PROMOTION OF RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE

Using social media as a medium of religious knowledge has been widely practiced by various religions such as Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. These religions have continued to utilise cyberspace as a means of religious propagation and communication. In other words, cyber space becomes positive and effective tool to improve the quality of religious knowledge in the global community. In the West, the use of social media as a medium of promoting religious knowledge has been very beneficial since 1996 (Campbell, 2006; Helland, 2005) cited in (Adam, Anuar, and Ali, 2014).

To ensure social media achieve the aim of enhancing knowledge of a given religion, quality of contents is very important. Quality contents enhance audience’s knowledge, strengthen their faith, stimulate conversation, and build community. There is the need to create and curate content in the joyful hope of sharing the Gospel, ministering to others, developing community and increasing knowledge (Gateway, 2014). There have been multiple ways in which churches have incorporated the use of Twitter and other micro-blogging practices into their daily institutional practices to create “ambient religious communication” and a sense of connected presence among members for the overall aim of achieving enhanced religious knowledge. For example, in some cases, the creation of “Twitter Sundays” encouraged members to tweet their reflections and questions throughout the service and their knowledge is well improved based on the insightful responses given to their questions (Cheong, 2010 and 2013).

The 21st century brings forth a new phenomenon: the creation of ‘Sheikh Google’. It is a quip on how common it is now for individual members of the Islamic faithful to enhance their religious knowledge by accessing the social media- the ‘Google Search Engine’ is the equivalent, for many, of going to the Sheikh or the imam and asking for guidance on religious questions. Social media has now become yet another frontier in that regard. Increasingly, young Arab Muslims are asking questions from people they identify as religious
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authors through Facebook, Twitter and other internet social media apparatuses for the purpose of enriching their religious knowledge. As a result of that, traditional religious establishments are calling on religious preachers to become more and more involved in those arenas-partly to reach the faithful, but also to ensure that their religious authority is not diluted by preachers that they see as unqualified or ill-equipped to guiding the faithful. After all, when anyone can get a Twitter account or Facebook page, without having to go through some sort of accreditation process, the possibilities are endless. Sometimes, the results may be very liberal and progressive individuals pontificating about religion-other times, the messages promoted can be dangerous and radical (Hellyer, 2013).

In Malaysia, the da’ehas filled up this popular medium (blog) with comprehensive religious knowledge and takes this opportunity to perform Islamic da’wah. The Malaysian government has given its full support in this effort by establishing many official websites to facilitate community access for religious information and teaching for the overall promotion of the Islamic religious knowledge. In other words, the contents of religious teaching in blog have extensively been prepared by da’eas if it is aimed to answer many religious issue and questions. So, today’s youth need to understand that ‘world of mind’ can be uploaded and transferred into computers which indicate that the knowledge of religion does not exist in real life only but can be transformed into different forms of virtual reality (Adam, Anuar, and Ali, 2014).

Usage of social media can enhance one’s understanding of Islamic religion. If one joins a social media group founded by a well-known Islamic scholar, one may learn about Islam from the scholar. One may also share the Islamic teachings posted by the scholar with other friends. Accordingly, religious information shared by friends can help increase understanding of the Islamic faith (Mustafa, Ghani, Zumrah, Ramly, Azdi, and Ahmad, 2013).

CONCLUSION

The social media platforms have continued to influence people’s understanding of religion in many parts of the world. This is based on the fact that several religious leaders and organisations have come to recognise the platforms as potent avenues to reach out to people and influence their knowledge of religion. On the other hand, seekers of religious messages are deploying the platforms to enrich their knowledge of religion. Today, people learn a lot from the religious messages they receive through the social media platforms.

With the emergence of the social media, religious messages are now more massively transmitted. Virtually on a daily basis, Facebook, Twitter, Blog, etc, are filled with different religious messages which have helped immensely in shaping people’s understanding of religions. For instance, the Pope deploys these platforms to transmit relevant Christian messages particularly to members of the Catholic Church worldwide. Other religious bodies/organisations as well use the platforms to improve the knowledge of the audience regarding their religion.

REFERENCES


