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**Tweeting God:
A practical theological analysis of the
communication of Christian motifs on Twitter**

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Abstract

Social media is considered one of the crucial drivers of a rapidly changing world. The continuing and growing influence of social media as an innovative, but also disruptive power can be observed in various fields, in which traditional practices are already being newly developed and run. Over the past decade, existing research has explored the influence of social media on church and religious practices. The relevance of this research, however, is further accentuated by the growing expressions of 'lived religion', which describes the contemporary articulation and communication of belief.

In this research, the collage of existing descriptions is further developed by investigating the possible role and meaning of the social media platform Twitter in the formulation and communication of Christian motifs. The character of the investigation is formed in the creative tension between the traditional formulation of theological language and the possibility of creating new contemporary Christian expressions that are accessible to all people.

The seven articles presented in this thesis are directly linked to the central theme of the research. In the thesis, the articles are logically and congruently grouped by making use of the key metaphor of 'networked religion', which is structurally backed by seven related perspectives. A detailed introductory chapter and a summary conclusion chapter provide orientation and reflection, respectively.

The articles are based on a practical theological orientation. In choosing this orientation for the research, I recognised the close, yet complex reflexive relationship between practice and theory. Methodologically, the experimental research project is anchored to a standard supposition for a practical theological description and reflection in formulating the praxis. In order to state the practical theological orientation, all the articles present a clear, but not exclusive qualitative, character. A narrative accent, with strong autobiographical emphases, which is also inherently part of the character of Twitter, stands central to the deployment, management, administration and documentation of the research. On the basis of an extensive literature study and an analysis of comprehensive empirical data, four levels of description and analysis are indicated and presented in the included articles. As expression of a classical, practical theological orientation, the continuous circular interaction between empirical data and theoretical perspectives is presented on the

following four levels.

Firstly, a descriptive-empirical explanation of the origin and character of social media, with specific reference to Twitter as a microblogging platform, is provided. This description is complemented by perspectives from an initial pilot study, which serves as the design for the later empirical research.

Secondly, a specific hermeneutic for the interpretation of the social media phenomenon, with specific emphasis on the meaning of social media, in particular Twitter, is investigated. With direct reference to related empirical data, further theoretical perspectives are used to reflect on further elucidation and interpretation.

Thirdly, a normative dimension, with strong emphasis on the possible value and meaning of Christian motifs on Twitter, is provided. On the basis of a variety of detailed analyses, specific Twitter data sets associated with important periods on the Christian calendar are presented, analysed and described.

Lastly, the strategic or pragmatic meaning of the research is investigated on the basis of a reflective movement. Specific relevant sets of empirical data from Twitter are presented, analysed and described, in order to illustrate their potential value in the formulation of theological expressions and Christian motifs.

The four levels of research are reflected in the content and nature of the seven articles in the thesis, in view of the key metaphor of 'networked theology'. The contribution of the research rests in the new formation of theory that could lead to creative, positive and relevant informing and construction of the praxis of theological articulation and communication.

Declaration by author

This thesis is composed of my original work, and contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference has been made in the text. I have clearly stated the contribution by others to jointly-authored works that I have included in my thesis.

I have clearly stated the contribution of others to my thesis as a whole, including statistical assistance, survey design, data analysis, significant technical procedures, professional editorial advice, financial support and any other original research work used or reported in my thesis. The content of my thesis is the result of work I have carried out since the commencement of my higher degree by research candidature and does not include a substantial part of work that has been submitted to qualify for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution. I have clearly stated which parts of my thesis, if any, have been submitted to qualify for another award.

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Publications during candidature

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Chapter 1

Networked theology: A hypertext¹ to orientation and outline

1.1 Introduction



Figure 1.1: Pope Francis' Twitter message, Lent 2015 (@catholicnewssvc 2015:n.p.).

This Twitter message opens a window to the multiple vistas of meaning associated with this research project. In sending out this message on 15 March 2015, the Catholic News Service (@CatholicNewsSvc 2015:n.p.) has seamlessly embedded the age-long religious tradition of the Catholic Church within the current digital age and culture. I provide some of the eye-catching aspects of this message. Pope Francis' name is coupled with probably one of the most well-known and iconic symbols of popular culture, namely the hashtag ('#').² The composer of the tweet was well aware that the application of this technique would escalate the impact of the message on the social media world. Typical of Twitter culture, the minimum words are used with maximum meaning. In this instance, a mere 16 words summarise gospel message, which is usually associated with voluminous books.

The above tweet is simply a peephole into even deeper and more complex underlying dynamics to be further explored in this research project. Against this rich background, I offer an extensive practical theological analysis, in order to map the possible occurrence,

¹ Hypertext refers to the digital functionality whereby various texts and graphics are linked to one another and immediately available as the user clicks on the link, usually indicated in another colour (Crystal 2011:28). The metaphor of a hypertext is chiefly used to illustrate the structure and connectivity of the various parts of the research project. This introductory chapter aims to link the various articles documented in the thesis to a central argument.

² In social media, the hashtag sign(#) is used to semantically group posts on platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. See the elaborate discussion on the meaning and importance of the hashtag sign in Chapter 3.

meaning and communication of Christian motifs as understood, in the broadest possible sense, on Twitter.

In order to further develop the anthologising of the related research presented in the seven articles in this thesis, the following remarks on methodology and structuring are important. I continually use leading metaphors in documenting the research, not only to express the experimental character of the research project, but also from aspects associated with creativity and innovation. The use of metaphors is strongly associated with the narrative tone of the research as well as the associated qualitative character thereof. The associative meanings of metaphors (Müller & Maritz 1998:64) express a sensitivity for a dynamic, systemic³ association.

The concept of 'network religion' was initially introduced, defined and developed by Campbell in 2012 in a seminal article titled, '*Understanding the relationship between religion online and offline in a networked society*', published in the '*Journal of the American Academy of Religion*' (Campbell 2012:64-93). In this important article, the author initially not only coined, but also described the concept 'networked religion' on the basis of five key markers, namely 'networked community, storied identity, shifting authority, convergent practice and multisite reality'. These characteristics are 'informed by a dynamic and integrated relationship between the sacred and the mundane online' (Campbell 2012:65). In the development and use of the various metaphors, I employ 'networked religion' as the key metaphor (Campbell 2012:65; Campbell & Garner 2016:n.p.). This consists of the following five sub-elements: networked community, storied identities, convergent practices, shifting authority, and a multisite reality. In order to accommodate and anthologise the two chapters that supplement the seven articles within this structure, I add two markers, namely 'autobiography' and 'trending conversation'. The ensuing discussion justifies my choice for using the key metaphor with the associated seven sub-elements. Throughout the study, these seven elements not only structure the various chapters, but also develop the structure of the research. I am indeed sensitive to the fact that, in using this metaphorical network, I am testing the boundaries of the original use thereof by Campbell

³ In the ensuing chapters, I will continually indicate the way in which the human being is systemically associated, on the one hand, and the way in which social media contributes to this systemic association, on the other. The recognition and meaning of the human being's multi-systemic association is especially significant for the practical theologian.

(2012). I am, however, of the opinion that the creative value of its application validly serves the structuring of the research.

The presentation of the various metaphors is embedded in a narrative idiom that is centrally, but subliminally, present throughout the research. In this regard, I was strongly inspired by Campbell and Garner's (2016:n.p.) use of 'storied identity', which confirms the freedom of an individual to construe a spiritual identity from various online sources. This style is also strongly linked to the prominent narrative character of Twitter. I concur with Georgakopoulous' (2016:278) 'Small Stories Research', which confirms the value of small narrative fragments.

In the introductory chapter, the development of the research revolves around two central themes, namely Orientation and Outline. In the Orientation section, I sketch the context of the research as an introduction from a practical theological viewpoint. The motivation comprises central theoretical perspectives in terms of motivating and supporting the seven related academic articles. In the last section of this first chapter, I present structural considerations as part of the Outline component, with extensive footnotes in support of these perspectives for additional reference purposes.

In delineating the subsections of this introductory chapter, I chose the metaphor of a hypertext, because it embodies the character in which perspectives of Orientation and Outline are linked. The introductory chapter also presents the link(s) to the development of the rest of the research in the ensuing chapters. My autobiographical realisations and experiences during the research journey give a personal character to the integrity of the research. This personal experience has led to a link to the key moments in the first important movement of Chapter 1, namely Orientation.

Orientation

To chart an orientation⁴ to the documented research, I make use of an autobiographical fragment that narrates my research story. This is followed by theoretical perspectives that

⁴ The term 'orientation' conjures up associations with a compass and navigation. This metaphor is expanded further in the chapter in terms of affinity with the concept of 'tracing' (Ganzevoort 2009:n.p.).

lead to a description of a practical theology of 'digital lived religion'⁵ and direct the empirical research.

1.2 A personal narrative to the documented research

An autobiographical history with intimate ties to the documented research is implicit throughout the thesis and is occasionally explicitly perceptible in each of the articles. I confirm the importance of the dynamic implication of a subjective involvement as part of the research process.

As a result of this orientation, it was a given that, at the time of my application for PhD studies at The University of Queensland, and as professional theologian, academic and minister of religion, I actively sought new horizons of meaning. Sensitive to the new possibilities offered by social media, I sought new meanings of relevance and innovation within specific contexts. At the start of this research project, I endeavoured to edit the required actuality and relevance with enquiries as to how the digital era⁶ influenced decision-making.⁷ Recognition of the influence of digitality on people and how this influences their daily way of life⁸ was central to the research. In seeking a focused practice(s) from which the empirical research would be administered, I have concentrated on the meaning of the social media platform Twitter. By means of exploratory empirical strategies and backed by a literature study, the project was published in relevant, peer-reviewed articles.⁹ As I was exploring a new field in practical theology, which as praxis

⁵ 'In recent decades, scholars of religion have paid increasing attention to how public practice and understanding of religion often goes beyond adherence to traditional religious rituals and institutions to incorporate the performance of religious belief outside traditional structures. This tendency has been described as "lived religion", meaning many religious symbols and narratives become freed from their traditional structures and dogmas and so become tools for reconstructing spiritual meaning in daily life ...this tendency toward lived religion, where traditional rituals and meanings become malleable and adaptable, is clearly mirrored within forms of religious engagement online' (Campbell 2012:66-67).

⁶ Van den Berg, J.A., 2012, 'An anthropology of singularity? Pastoral perspectives for an embodied spirituality in the *annus virtualis* and beyond', in A. López-Varela (ed.), *Social Sciences and Cultural Studies, Issues of language, public opinion, education and welfare*, pp. 429-440, InTech Publishers, Rijeka.

⁷ See Van den Berg, J.A., 2012, 'Theoretical signposts for tracing spirituality within the fluid decision-making of a mobile virtual reality', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 68(2), Art. #1290, 6 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v68i2.1290>.

⁸ See Van den Berg, J.A., 2014, 'Fast, faster, poorest decisions?: A practical theological exploration of the role of a speedy mobinomic world in decision-making', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 70(1), Art. #2615, 5 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i1.2615>

⁹ See Chapters 2 to 8 of this thesis.

gave expression to my own search for relevance, actuality and contextuality, I examined new empirical research methods and vistas in an interdisciplinary manner.

Directing my research was the conviction of the importance of informal or everyday expressions of theology. That is, theological language does not exclusively belong to the domain of formal academy, but everyday life provides a rich canvas for incorporating various forms of 'ordinary theology', 'espoused theology', 'implicit religion', 'operant theology', 'everyday theology', and 'lived religion'.¹⁰ The articles in this thesis indicate my search for these perspectives. Christian motifs are thus understood in the broadest possible context. Similar conclusions are identified in some of the latest developments in practical theology. These accommodate, in particular, the domain of 'lived religion'. These developments address not only practices of faith within the church walls, but also expressions of faith outside the church.

1.3 Setting the context for the research

I now present theoretical perspectives for further orientation of the study. Firstly, I provide a brief overview of the character and meaning of the digital era. Secondly, I briefly point out the potential challenges to the character, formulation and communicative use of theological language in a digital environment. Thirdly, I formulate exploratory perspectives for a practical theological description of a 'digital lived religion'. As part of the orientation, I fourthly also motivate my choice of the Twitter platform as digital space within which the use of theology language is described.

1.3.i Networked theology in the *annus virtualis*

The *annus virtualis*, or the era of virtuality (Joubert 2010:48), conveys the sense that we currently find ourselves in a world characterised by 'the new social structure of the Information Age'. This has resulted in 'a culture of virtuality in the global flows that transcend time and space' (Castells 2006:381). An evolving understanding of virtuality and thinking ahead into the future has eliminated the traditional lines of demarcation (Barna

¹⁰ The emphasis on 'ordinary theology', 'espoused theology', 'implicit religion', and 'lived religion' echoes the concern of Astley in taking 'seriously the beliefs of "non-theologically educated" churchgoers and other Christian believers, and of those outside the churches', as documented in his seminal work '*Ordinary Theology*' (2002:viii). In addition Pete Ward (2017:57) has indicated that 'Lived religion has developed as a way of speaking about religion that is not primarily cognitive or doctrinal in orientation.'

2011:n.p.), as 'technological advance is reshaping what it means to be human' (Graham 2003:32).¹¹

In his well-known book *'Flat world: A brief history of the twenty-first century'*, Friedman (2006:8) points out that, as a result of significant developments in communication technology, increasingly more people are now able to come into contact with other people across the world. Niemandt (2009:625) refers to this as the 'Globalization 3.0' phenomenon, in terms of which individuals and groups can be linked, integrated and empowered in networks from the basis of a 'flat-world platform'. However, Sweet (2012:n.p.), among others,¹² recently made some observations that further inform the understanding of a 'flat world':

Forget 'the earth is flat'. This world is fluid. To flatten the complexity of a situation is to endanger the future. The world today is a dangerous place. Some cheer that it is 'dangerously flat'. Others sneer that it is 'dangerously curved'. I claim it is dangerously fluid.

In taking the emerging landscape of change and fluidity as research background, the formulation of the question central to this research project has a direct bearing on the greater movement and changes in the world. In mapping the research question(s), I reflect on the influence of a changing, but connected world on doing theology. The connection culture established through social media is pointing beyond even greater global movements of connectivity. Some of the tendencies that can be traced from the study of practices of 'religion online' also relate to substantial developments in the digital sphere, referred to by sociologists such as Manuel Castells and others as the rise of a network-based society consisting of a decentralized but interconnected culture and supported by a social-technical infrastructure (Campbell 2012:68).

¹¹ The contours of these perspectives are, however, not only to be found within the meaning of the present age of virtuality, but also map the considerable scholarly discussion regarding the movement toward a state of posthumanism (Lunceford 2009). The use of the term 'posthuman' brings to mind the condition referred to by writers and intellectuals, 'who envision a day when humans will virtually merge with their technology, thereby creating a new and superior posthuman species' (Waters 2006:x). Within this broad domain of interest, questions relating to forms of embodiment play an important role in the quest for relevance, especially taking into account that '[t]o enter virtual reality is to cross a threshold where physical and temporal limits are suspended' (Waters 2006:52).

¹² For example, Baumann (2007).

In his recent book *'Connectography: Mapping the global network revolution'* (2016), Khanna, a leading global strategist, indicates that

[c]onnectivity is a major driver of the deep shift toward a more complex global system. Economies are more integrated, populations are more mobile, the cyber domains merging with physical reality ... is forcing seismic adjustments on our way of life (Khanna 2016:n.p.).

Tapping into the radical manifestations of the geology metaphor of an earthquake, the American theologian, Philip Clayton, confirmed a few years ago that changes experienced by the world at present are like the movement of tectonic plates, resulting in earthquakes and tsunamis (Clayton 2010:9). Al Gore, former Vice President of the United States of America and Nobel Laureate, emphasised that the size and extent of these changes, caused by various big drivers, have never been experienced (Gore 2013:n.p.). Never before was a measurement captured on the Richter scale.

Scholars differ on naming this time of change in human existence. From the digital revolution (Anderson 2015:n.p.), the second machine age (Brynjolfsson & McAfee 2015:n.p.), or the evolution to the fourth industrial revolution (Schwab 2016:n.p.), the role of digital technologies is present in all the equations configuring our time. According to Brynjolfsson and McAfee (2015:n.p.), 'we're living in a time of astonishing progress with digital technologies - those that have computer hardware, software, and networks at their core.' This digital revolution is responsible for increasingly incorporating different and divergent aspects of human existence within a digital domain. Goldin and Kutarna (2016:30) rightly point out that the 'advent of digital' is a second Gutenberg moment, providing 'a new medium for capturing, communicating and exchanging data ...'

Anderson (2015:n.p.) recently indicated that the 'triple revolution' of '...the internet, mobile devices and digital social media is revolutionizing the way we lead our lives and live out our faith'. In calculating the meaning of these far-reaching developments for practices of faith, it is important to remember that '[p]aradigms have shifted and are shifting. People interpret their worlds differently than previously and consequently use different languages than previous generations' (Müller 2011:n.p.). Illustrating the art of reading and interpreting changing maps, Khanna points out that maps were initially oriented around holy sites and

were as much about ‘theology as geography’ (Khanna 2016:n.p.).¹³ Taking the movement of tectonic plates and seismic adjustments seriously, one can rightly question the mapping of theology and faith in a digital geography of change. Since practical theology, in particular, values local and concrete manifestations of reality, it would be a high priority to map coordinates for the research project in a digital world of change that abounds in possibilities.

As background to the interpretation of the reality of a digital world, three factors currently facilitate further development (Hassan 2008:ix): the continuing development and evolution of the Internet; the connectivity and mobility brought about by the Internet, cellular phones and tablets; as well as the influence and magnitude of the social media. These three factors have led to a growing digital world, in which social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter play a significant role.

This research project addresses one particular aspect of the bigger issue of how to live like a Christian in a world dominated by social media.¹⁴ By focusing on the use of theological meaning-making in a digital era, it provides perspectives by analysing the use of Christian motifs, and understanding them, in the broadest possible sense, on Twitter. It makes use of the following implicit suppositions, as indicated by Campbell and Garner (2016:n.p.):

- Theology is an active pursuit of making meaning of the world through the eyes of faith.
- This process is a constant negotiation between what we inherit from sources such as tradition and Scripture and from our own experiences in the world.
- We must learn to express our understanding of the Christian faith in a language that is intelligible and credible in the contemporary context.

Since we are living in a world where ‘the spirit of technology pervades the whole of culture’ (Schoorman 2003:13), the project implicitly supposes the relationship between technology

¹³ The reference to geography corresponds strongly with the previous references to orientation, cartography and ‘tracing’.

¹⁴ Various prominent and well-known researchers such as, among others, Díez Bosch (2015), Hess (2015), Horsfield (2015; 2018), Hutchings (2017), Lewis (2014), Mitchell (2012), Soukup (2014), Spadaro (2016) and Tan (2016), have already made important contributions towards a scientific description of, among others, the influence of the digital media on theology and the church. Although important contributions are presented in those works, and in other research, this specific research project is focussed in particular on the communication of Christian motifs on Twitter. For this purpose close attention is continuously paid to the work of Campbell (2011; 2012; 2013) as well as Campbell and Garner (2016).

and theology.¹⁵ In acknowledging the role of theology, there is, on the one hand, a recognition of new potential ways of forming and facilitating theological content. On the other hand, I am also sensitive to the social constructionist nature of the dynamic process, wherein a variety of dynamic factors play a role. To express this orientation and with reference to Lundby's (2013) contribution, for the purposes of this study, the fourth and fifth theories that underpin the seven articles are evident and have further implications for the development of a 'networked theology' and a 'digital lived religion'. Within this understanding so-called 'online practices' are often associated with the values and systems of an 'offline context', in that what is evident from research about 'religion online' is also directly linked to the general practice and concepts of religion, especially in the Western culture. In this regard Campbell (2012:68) has indicated that:

The idea of networked religion suggests that religion, especially that which is found online, is informed by the technological structures and characteristics of the internet such as flattening of traditional hierarchies, encouraging instantaneous communication and response, and widening access to sacred or once-private communication.

1.3.ii The tracing¹⁶ of 'God-talk'

In acknowledging my own subjective understanding, I position myself, from the outset, within certain latitudes and longitudes regarding the research project. On the basis of my own observation that theological language¹⁷ has lost its impact in many respects and that

¹⁵ In his contribution, Lundby (2013:227) points out that there are at least five approaches in describing the relationship between technology and theology. In an approach of technological determinism, as described in the seminal work of Marshall McLuhan, the influence of communication technology is indicated by a 'medium' theory. A second possibility is the mediatisation of religion, of which Stig Hjarvard was an exponent. In this theory, the media is indicated as an important exponent, on the one hand, but as part of other institutions such as, for example, religious institutions, on the other. Thirdly, in Stewart M. Hoover's approach, the 'Mediation of Meaning' plays an important role. This theory describes the role played by media in the mediation of meaning. Fourthly, the 'Mediation of Sacred Forms' theory, developed by Gordon Lynch, elaborates on this. According to this theory, the sacred is mediated by media, and it is acknowledged 'how the new digital media, such as blogs and net news, interfere in the representation and reception of the religious sacred as well as the secular sacred in the main news media' (Lundby 2013:232). Lastly, the theory of Heidi Campbell acknowledges the 'social shaping of technology'. In this theory, there are enquiries about the interaction between technology and social patterns, leading to exploring the influence of religious systems on technology.

¹⁶ The 'tracing' metaphor is used constantly throughout the research and implies the tracking and mapping of signs, traces and/or evidence of certain practices to be used, in order to reconstruct or develop strategic knowledge (Ganzevoort 2009:n.p.). The metaphor also articulates the character of an evolving hermeneutical practical theology, with a strong emphasis on contextual meaning.

¹⁷ By theological language I mean all possible ways to express the embodiment of Anselmus' classical definition of theology, namely 'fides quaerens intellectum' (Migliore 1991:2). For further

many people have turned a deaf ear to the articulation of these truths, questions can be raised regarding possible alternatives and existing practices for the translation of theological concepts into a more understandable and relevant language.¹⁸

Could social media¹⁹ and Twitter, in particular, provide an easily accessible space for a new formulation and presentation of traditional theological truths?²⁰ If so, how are theological motifs used on Twitter? In analysing the possible prevalence and use of these motifs on Twitter, would it be significant to articulate and communicate relevant 'God-talk'²¹ in a changing world?

In investigating these questions, I assume that the character, dynamics, influence and meaning of the social media can illustrate the diverse factors underlying and associated with the changing, but connected technological world.²² From a practical theology perspective,²³ the research traces the occurrence and dynamic use of Christian motifs on Twitter. In so doing, it documents dividends regarding the meaning, relevance, and impact of 'God-talk' in a digital age.

In emphasising the meaning of the contemporary context for the formulation of a relevant and theological language, I refer to the important work of Jeff Astley, *'Ordinary theology'* (2002). In the development and motivation of ordinary theology as extension to academic theology, Astley (2002:68-69) writes:

explanation of this in the description of a 'lived religion' (Ganzevoort 2006:151), see the embodiment of a 'fides quaerens societatem' (faith in search of social embodiment) (Cilliers 2009:634).

¹⁸ See Chapters 2 and 8 of this thesis.

¹⁹ It is difficult to define the concept 'social media', as there are various meanings attached to it. It is dynamic and is still developing; it is conceptually linked to other terms, and it can even be viewed as context specific (McCay-Peet & Quan-Haase 2016:13-15).

²⁰ Recent publications such as *'The social church: A theology of digital communication'* (Wise 2014); *'The social media Gospel: Sharing the Good News in new ways'* (Gould 2015); *'The digital cathedral: Networked ministry in a wireless world'* (Anderson 2015), and *'Networked theology: Negotiating faith in digital culture'* (Campbell & Garner 2016) confirm incisive research into the meaning of the digital revolution for church practice and theology.

²¹ The concept 'God-talk' resonates with aspects of how everyday language gives insight 'into how people receive religious meaning and come to experience God' (Willhauck 2013:91). 'God-talk' also provides an intrinsic link with the first part of the thesis, namely 'Tweeting God'.

²² McCay-Peet and Quan-Haase (2016:13) point out that, over the past ten years, social media has become an integral part of daily life, with huge implications for economic, political and social spheres of life.

²³ A practical theological engagement refers not only to fitting within a specific academic field, but also to valuing specific epistemological choices for promoting 'embedded research'.

Ordinary theology has significance for people in so far as it is 'meaningful' to them. The notion of meaning being employed here is not to be understood in a semantic or linguistic sense, as a conceptual skill relating to the meaning of language, but with reference to the meaning of events, experiences and situations, and of life itself. This wider understanding designates the perceived value, purposes and significance of elements within our life, and of our life taken as a whole.

In recognising the meaning of ordinary theology, I do not initially focus on traditional academic expressions of theology. On the basis of my own search for relevant theological language, I am more interested in how people without formal theological training use and interpret theological concepts. In this instance, I find a strong affinity with Astley (2002:149): 'Academic theologians should be more curious about what ordinary believers have come up with'. In order to contextually anchor the research, I focus on Twitter as a platform for facilitating and accommodating expressions of ordinary theology.

Taking the character and scope of the research project into account, the question is: What is the suitable approach to use in this research? Due to epistemological²⁴ and methodological considerations, a practical theological orientation best serves my approach to the research project. Providing contours of understanding might help not only define my positioning within the field, but also describe some of the characteristics of contemporary practical theology.

1.3.iii A practical theology for a digital lived religion

In the field of practical theology, numerous and even contrasting discourses are accommodated, to the degree that '[it] would not overstate the case to say that this is a contested area where one encounters a wide variety of interpretations and views' (Reader 2008:4). Practical theology can even be regarded as a messy field, in which Jones (2008:196) envisions a practical theology construction as a construction work zone.

²⁴ Epistemology refers to the philosophy concerned with theories of knowledge construction (Swinton & Mowat 2006:32).

However, on the basis of recent influential publications in practical theology,²⁵ practical theologians globally currently agree on three aspects regarding the character of practical theology. First, practical theology is concerned with the theological study of practices (Ganzevoort 2009:n.p.). While other theological disciplines focus on the textual sources of a religious tradition or on systematic conceptual structures, practical theology deals primarily with practices. This is the reason why there is a strong overlap with social sciences: systematic theology overlaps with philosophy, and biblical theology overlaps with the study of languages (Van den Berg & Ganzevoort 2014:181). This reflection has recently been acknowledged in further developments in practical theology, and specifically the development and description of a 'lived religion' or 'lived spirituality' (Ganzevoort 2009:n.p.). The terms 'lived religion' and/or 'lived spirituality' imply that expressions of faith extend 'beyond the Church, including social practices where the divine may also be encountered in everyday living and considering how this may have an influence in theology and how people experience the divine' (Apostolides 2014:12). This approach entails an innovative interpretation of practical theology.²⁶ The latter has developed from a discipline, initially only concerned with clerical and congregational ministry (Osmer 2008:x), into a discipline focused on the 'radical transformation of modern religion into postmodern spiritualities' (Graham 1996:38). I highlight this focus on practices in this research, with the emphasis on the practice of social media and, in particular, Twitter. However, the focus on the practice of tweeting is further defined when adding a specific theological emphasis, namely the occurrence and use of Christian motifs on Twitter.²⁷

²⁵ See, for example, the following compendium editions in practical theology: Miller-McLemore, B.J., 2012a, *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford; Cahalan, K.A. & Mikoski, G.S., 2014, *Opening the field of practical theology, an introduction*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham; Mecer J.A. & B.J. Miller-McLemore, 2016, *Conundrums in practical theology*, Brill, Boston.

²⁶ In mapping the development of practical theology, I am able to document my own autobiographical narrative. During my professional theological training, practical theology was characterised chiefly by the administration of application possibilities of theological truths for church practices. In the course of further postgraduate study and in light of the hermeneutical and narrative development in the pastorate, I gradually started grasping the meaning and importance of empirical research. This aspect reached full maturity only in the course of my own interdisciplinary study in psychology and in the field of future study. This emphasises the meaning of context, particularly as concerns the meaning of the world – not only inside, but also outside the church walls. During this time, new developments in practical theology, such as a 'post-foundational practical theology', helped me shift from an application model to an orientation where I was able to find myself at home in the description of a *locus theologicus*.

²⁷ Campbell and Garner (2016:n.p.) specifically point to this orientation when they identify the aim of their research as the unpacking and revealing of the values of digital culture 'in which our faith has become situated'.

Secondly, this focus on practices is especially relevant, as practical theology focuses mainly on contemporary practices. As Miller-McLemore (2012b:14) rightly indicates, practical theology focuses on 'the tangible, the local, the concrete and the embodied ... it remains grounded in practice and stays close to life'. Practical theology is 'theology in active mode, grappling with the contemporary culture. It does not pretend to rise above culture but recognizes that it is deeply implicated in it' (Cameron, Bhatti, Duce, Sweeney & Watkins 2010:13).

To contextualise these meanings of 'lived religion' in a digital environment, Heidi Campbell, in her book '*Digital religion: Understanding religious practice in new media worlds*' (2013), rightly points out some important dimensions of a digital lived religion:

... when lived religious practice and digital culture meet, a 'third space' emerges, a hybridized and fluid context requiring new logics and evoking unique forms of meaning-making. Digital religion as a concept acknowledges not only how the unique character of digital technology and culture shapes religious practice and beliefs, but also how religions seek to culture new media contexts with established ways of being and convictions about the nature of reality and the larger world (Campbell 2013:4).

Over the past few years, the growing interdisciplinary study of religion and the Internet has highlighted the understanding that the new media have become embedded in our daily lives, and are commonly used as a platform for spiritual engagement (Campbell 2011:10). From a practical theology viewpoint, a relevant focus would be on tracing and describing ways or modes in which spirituality and theology are expressed. I envisage that this focus should lead to a revalidation of the human condition, considering the influence of the virtual era on the human spirit (read spirituality) on both the individual and the collective levels. An orientation within this hybrid and flexible space is embodied in the analysis of the possible use of Christian motifs on Twitter. This search creates possibilities for a new language, logic and meaning. Digital religion is a significant expression of contemporary lived religion. To negotiate the use and meaning of Christian motifs used on Twitter implies a sensitivity to the culture informing daily life. A good example of reading the text of

everyday theology would be to enquire about the possible (practical) theological meaning of the use of the hashtag ('#')²⁸ symbol.

Thirdly, practical theology has an action-oriented dimension (Heitink 1993:105): it informs the pragmatic task of this discipline (Osmer 2008:n.p.) and leads to a positive contribution in the development of practice. More than other disciplines in theology and mainstream social sciences, practical theology aims to develop and even transform practices rather than merely describe or understand them. Osmer (2008:n.p.) calls this the pragmatic task of practical theology. Reader (2008:7) even points to the outcome of this strategic endeavour: 'Practical theology is transformational in that it aims to make a difference not just to people, but also to understandings and situations in the contemporary world.' I accommodate this strategic and transformational orientation in this research project by not only describing and documenting the use of Christian motifs on Twitter, but also focusing on the possible meaning of articulating alternative expressions of faith on Twitter.

Research in practical theology is often associated with a strong designing-creative component, with an emphasis on creating the preferable or desirable (Hermans 2014:124-125). Considering the proposed research project, and taking the characteristics described earlier into account, one can indeed talk about creating a practical theology for digital lived religion. It provides an affinity for the digital world, associated with connectivity, constant liquidity, and flux of meaning. In conjunction with existing research and in the same manner in which a hypertext offers a link to a specific in-depth focus, the meaning of Twitter as social media platform is subsequently noted.

1.3.iv Twitter as platform of choice

The social media platform Twitter – with its microblog trait – was the first choice for this research. Twitter became known as the 'sms' of the internet by its use of only 140 characters (Wagner 2012:120; Murthy 2013:n.p.); it has approximately 316 million monthly users who send approximately 500 million tweets daily (Smith 2015:n.p.). In light of the above, Twitter was chosen as the practice terrain for mapping and describing important aspects associated with a new digitalised world and way of life. There are four factors motivating my choice for Twitter.

²⁸ For a description of the story and meaning of the hashtag symbol, see for example, Chapter 3.

Firstly, the character of Twitter as a social media platform is a particularly apt expression of a 'mobinomic' reality. Van Dijk (2012:35) rightly points out that '... Twitter users are most likely to access the service through wireless Internet on mobile devices. From the very onset, the platform's intention was to be an open, mobile channel primarily for textual communication'. Users are given an opportunity to contribute – regardless of location and time – to the development of a moment-by-moment transmission of news; hence, the emphasis on mobility in the character of Twitter.

The second factor is the significant growth of the Twitter platform. White (2012:121) rightly points out: 'Twitter is growing in unprecedented popularity and usage. One only needs to watch the news to hear about Twitter and its present use with the news media ...'.

Thirdly, until recently, the Twitter platform had a 140-character limit per tweet or message, which facilitates the empirical analysis of the limited text format.

Fourthly, the use of the Twitter platform has unlocked significant sociopolitical dynamics worldwide, as can be noted during the 'Arab-spring' and 'Occupy-Wall-Street movement' (Fuchs 2014:196). McCay-Peet and Quan-Haase (2016:17) point out that Twitter's transforming character facilitates information, news and opinions in communities. Zimmer & Proferes (2014:250) write: 'Twitter has emerged as a valuable resource for tapping into the zeitgeist of the internet, its users, and often beyond'.

1.4 Central thesis in the published research

All of the seven articles acknowledge an awareness of the meaning of digitality for all levels of human existence. They point out the evolutionary development of the Internet, with particular emphasis on the recent influence of social media. For a practical theologian, the broad and spontaneous question arising from this admission addresses the meaning of digitality for faith. In order to focus the research, the particular emphasis on Twitter was further enhanced by the quest for theological motifs understood in the broadest possible sense, in order to include not only academic theological expressions, but also 'ordinary theology' - in other words, theological expressions embedded in 'street language'. Some of the articles support descriptions of newer manifestations of practical theology, generally referred to as 'lived religion'. All of the articles are directly associated with theology-related expressions used to describe a 'lived religion' offered on Twitter. These expressions also

reflect a clear autobiographical aspect. The documentation of these personal perspectives emphasises my quest for relevant and actual perspectives that have a direct influence on the underlying methodology. Theological language is not the exclusive domain of formal academy. As much, if not more attention should be paid to alternative expressions of the language of faith as embodied in different forms of 'ordinary theology', 'espoused theology', 'implicit religion', and 'lived religion'. Christian motifs are understood in the broadest possible context and similar conclusions are identified in some of the latest developments in practical theology, which accommodate the domain of 'lived religion'. With this specific focus, the title of this thesis refers to 'Christian motifs' rather than to 'theological concepts'. Using the concept 'Christian motifs' leads to a better understanding of the content and communication of the language of faith, whereas 'theological concepts' implies a more exclusive academic use. These developments and descriptions address not only practices of faith within the church walls, but also expressions of faith outside the church. The inclusion of motifs in the title therefore plays an important role in expressing the premise that practical theology represents specific discourses that accommodate a strong emphasis on hermeneutic recognitions. The emphasis on 'Christian motifs' in the title does not function, in the first instance, as a search for linear and exact links between specific concepts. This interpretation of motifs points to a move away from understanding the concept in terms of natural and computer sciences, to accommodating a freer association between specific prominent topics. The emphasis thus shifts from a quantitative linguistic account of, for instance, the repetition of words or phrases to a hermeneutic interpretation of specific topics that are clearly and fundamentally emphasized. The emphasis on 'motifs' in the title of the study also corresponds with new developments in practical theology that investigate the hidden meanings embedded in the developing concept of 'lived religion'. In this investigation, mapping the search for 'motifs' represents dynamic movements between the religious, spiritual, online and contemporary world. In this regard Campbell (2012:67) summarized this dynamic interplay as follow:

The language and the images of the sacred thus become definitional tools to redefine contemporary life. This tendency toward lived religion, where traditional rituals and meanings become malleable and adaptable, is clearly mirrored within many forms of religious engagement online.

These theoretical perspectives provide a transition to the description of the outline of the study, including the underlying research question and the methodology.

#Outline

On the basis of the orientating background perspectives, certain structural markers are provided for mapping the research project. Firstly, I attend to both the primary research question and the supporting secondary questions. Secondly, I explain and support the chosen methodology for the empirical research. Thirdly, I provide a rationale for the logical placing and structuring of the various articles in chapters. This section concludes by indicating the management of possible limitations, in order to strengthen the focus of this project.

1.5 The topic and structure of the thesis

1.5.i The research focus and question(s)

It is assumed that the analysis of tweets articulating aspects of the Christian faith on Twitter can contribute to an alternative and relevant formulation of Christian motifs in changing times. This assumption highlights the research focus, as '[an] important function of social media is sharing experience of the everyday within this real-time paradigm' (Zappavigna 2012:5). In analysing the Twitter discourse, one would expect not only to have access to the language of ordinary people and professional theologians, but also that this language would be informed by practical wisdom arising from the daily context in which people live and work.

The meaning of the concept 'Christian motifs' warrants further remarks. Initially, the research was undertaken with the aim of investigating the use of Christian motifs on Twitter. The choice of key concepts, in view of which the empirical Big Data was developed, testifies to this more traditional theological perspective. There is an inherent tension between the key concepts, on the basis of which the initial empirical research on Twitter was conducted, and the final formulation of Christian motifs. As the research progressed and developed, I found in a critical-reflective manner that, except for the initial concepts, specific other meanings are implied in the tweets. I chose to refer to Christian motifs in order to point out a wider significance than simply theological concepts and topics linked to, and underlying the Christian faith.

These can, therefore, be clearly emphasised Christian concepts and/or topics, or more hidden concepts and/or topics associated with the Christian faith and presented in a unique context.

The research question is thus formulated as follows:

- What are the strengths/weaknesses of Twitter in communicating Christian motifs?

I acknowledge that the research problem implicitly represents a specific orientation to the complex relationship between theology and technology.²⁹ The research problem shows signs of a positive orientation to the role and function of communication technology. Although this orientation is calibrated within specific degrees of meaning, the research question assumes specific normative starting points that acknowledge the role of communication technology in communicating specific theological concepts.

Four secondary research questions related to aspects associated with a practical theological enquiry³⁰ support the primary research question:

- In tracing the prevalence of Christian motifs on Twitter, what are the main themes, issues, or ideas in the messages of the tweeters? (Descriptive-empirical dimension).
- What explanatory framework can be offered in the analysis of Christian motifs used on Twitter? (Interpretive dimension).
- How adequately do the tweets in the data set communicate Christian motifs? (Normative dimension).
- What are the opportunities offered by Twitter in articulating Christian motifs? (The strategic-pragmatic aspect).

In addressing the above questions, the thesis is presented in article format, in order to document the research conducted throughout my candidature. These articles were

²⁹ Various aspects of the complex relationship between theology and technology can be mentioned; for example, the ethical as well as the aesthetical dimensions. Reflecting on the aesthetical dimension Brooke (2017:178) argues: 'These aesthetical dimensions remind us that humans need not to be objectified by technologies if, in the practice that produce them and in their appreciation, there is something of the divine spark of creativity.'

³⁰ See the four questions to be used in a practical theological description as proposed by the well-known American practical theologian Rick Osmer in his book '*Practical theology: An introduction*' (2008).

published in reputable, peer-reviewed journals and as chapters in edited publications. I discuss the underlying methodology of this research under the following headings: methodological orientation, empirical research, literature study, and methodological structuring.³¹

- **Methodological orientation**

I have purposely chosen to first reflect methodologically on the empirical component of the research, as an expression of a specific practical theological orientation that embodies the classical and continual spiral movement between practice-theory-practice.

- **Empirical research**

By way of introduction, it is noted that the empirical research, documented as part of the project in the various articles, was gathered and documented on the basis of a mixed-methods methodology.³² The opinion and perspectives of Twitter users were documented on the basis of a qualitative methodological orientation. The character and method of ethnographic research³³ is evident in nearly all the contributions, with a strong emphasis on autobiographical³⁴ and narrative perspectives.³⁵ Quantitatively, Big Data sets³⁶ for specific periods were drawn from Twitter. In the quest to develop approaches to interdisciplinary enquiry, which are adequate for the specific situation and central to the character of practical theology, various rounds of empirical research procedures were developed to ensure the formation of a rich text.

The following movements of empirical research in the articles can be distinguished:

³¹ In the outline of the methodology, I will attempt to demonstrate the classical spiral movement of practical theology between practice and theory, as motivated by Browning (1991:41).

³² Murthy (2016:562) refers to the fact that using mixed approaches in analysing Twitter data opens up new possibilities with the aim of creating openness towards the meaning of data.

³³ As a method, ethnography aims to describe practices associated with members of a specific culture. In this regard, Stewart (2016:252) refers to research such as 'virtual ethnography' and 'netnography', with the focus on online practices. The research provides the opportunity for 'networked scholarship' (Stewart 2016:252).

³⁴ This links up with a particular understanding of auto-ethnography, in which the researcher's subjective participation in the research group, with concomitant biographical moments, is acknowledged (Packer 2011:238-239).

³⁵ Recognising that Twitter constitutes a complex sociotechnical space, 'the presentation of the self is often a highly nuanced case particularly complicated with uses of humor, a frequent theme on Twitter' (Murthy 2016:569).

³⁶ The concept 'Big Data' generally refers to large amounts of data being generated by computing activities such as social media (Paulus, Lester & Dempster 2014:193).

- The underlying principles of a qualitative Delphi method (Gordon & Pease 2006:321-333) were described in the first empirical stage, a pilot study, in which several prominent theologians and users of Twitter were approached³⁷ for their perspectives.³⁸

³⁷ The so-called Delphi-instrument is commonly used within the domain of the economic and management sciences (Gordon & Pease 2006:321; Wilson & Keating 2007:17-18). With a view to the further enhancement and development of a pragmatic model in which '[q]ualitative researchers are creative about method' (Josselson 1999:x), I have made use of descriptions from a narratively informed research methodology, such as ethnography and appreciative inquiry in the process of formulating questions, as well as in the administration thereof (Reed 2007:35-36). The focus falls on the involvement and participation of all the role players in the research project (Strydom 2002:419). The following letter was sent by e-mail to the respective participants in the research: 'Dear Colleague As part of my PhD research at the University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia, with the proposed title of 'Tweeting God: A practical theological analysis of the communication of Christian motifs on Twitter', I am currently engaged in an exploratory investigation into the possible significance of these expressions via Twitter. As part of a pilot study, I have identified six theologians in Australia and South Africa who all have a substantial presence on Twitter, with more than 500 followers. Could I please approach you, as one of the concerned specialists, for your opinions in this regard? Attached, you will find five questions for your attention. I would like to request you to answer these questions as soon as possible, and also as briefly as possible. (If I could have them back by this coming Thursday, 10 July 2014, I would appreciate it very much!) Afterwards, in accordance with the fundamental principles of the so-called Delphi research method (which is more frequently used in the Economic Sciences as an indicator of possible future scenarios), I will firstly consider all the responses to these questions, as provided by specialists such as yourself. Without revealing the identity of participants, I will then process these responses in order to obtain a central answer pertaining to each question. After this, I will resend the questions and answers to all the participants with a view to arriving at a general consensus. Thank you very much in anticipation for your willingness to assist me in this regard. I sincerely appreciate it! I hope that, in facilitating this dialogue, I will possibly be able to make a contribution relating to this important issue. All the best with regard to your work! Kind regards Jan-Albert van den Berg'

Question 1

You have been selected to participate in the pilot study on the basis of your prominent presence on Twitter (with more than 500 followers, amongst other criteria). What role does Twitter play in your use of social media, and why did you specifically choose Twitter as your platform?

Question 2

To what degree would you say that your own personal faith/spirituality and religious convictions are clearly visible on your Twitter page (profile description), as well as in your tweets? How important do you consider this aspect to be?

Question 3

How has Twitter changed your professional world (defined in the broadest sense of the word, and including the role of so-called "citizen journalism"), and how will it do so in the future? In particular, how does this apply to religious matters?

Question 4

How do social media in general, and Twitter in particular, help us to speak and think about God in new and alternative ways? What can the church/other believers learn from this, and what are the possible ways in which it could change existing practices, with a possible contribution to a relevant theology?

Question 5

What possible questions would you like to put to those participating in an investigation of the modus operandi of users on Twitter who focus on religious matters?

³⁸ See Chapter 2.

- This was followed by a presentation and interpretation of the main results of an empirical analysis of Twitter data for specific, indicated and justified periods and themes.³⁹
- A specialist private social media monitoring company, Fuseware (2015:n.p.) was used to present six collected data sets of tweets on Twitter for the following periods and themes: Christmas 2013-2014; Easter 2014-2015;⁴⁰ the Charlie Hebdo attacks in January 2015,⁴¹ and Christian leadership.⁴²
- By means of the qualitative software program NVivo (2015:n.p.), several individual tweets were analysed using various strategies, in order to trace and map the use of Christian motifs on Twitter.

Although the available data used for the empirical research is already made public, due to the nature and accessibility of the Twitter platform, generally accepted ethical guidelines and practices were strictly respected in the analysis, interpretation and documentation of data. The sensitivity to the ethical dimension is respected particularly in the analysis, reflection and documentation of information originating from individuals' personal Twitter accounts (Beninger 2016:58-59).

- **Literature study**

Throughout all the contributions to this thesis, perspectives and insights were acquired from a systematic literature review, in order to inform and reflect on the descriptions arising from the empirical data. Accordingly, various sources, including books, scientific journals and websites, were used to explore, analyse and document related theoretical perspectives. Three key sources are used throughout the research in order to orientate and structure the research within the field of Practical Theology. In this respect, the work of the American practical theologian Richard R. Osmer, entitled *Practical Theology. An Introduction* (2008), plays an important role. It provides not only an important overview of Practical Theology, but also clear markers on the basis of which to structure the research. The starting points of Osmer's work were initially developed within the field of congregation studies and leadership. This does not directly relate to the research focus in this thesis. In this respect, the work of the Dutch practical theologian, Ruud Ganzevoort (2009; 2013),

³⁹ See Chapters 3 and 4.

⁴⁰ See Chapter 6.

⁴¹ See Chapter 5.

⁴² See Chapter 7.

further contributes to, and substantiates the background of the research. Ganzevoort not only describes the most recent developments in practical theology, but also explains and emphasises the developing focus on so-called 'lived religion'. The articulation of these perspectives provides significant spaces for accommodating perspectives on tracing Christian motifs on Twitter. This focus and development, however, further correspond with the American communications expert Heidi A. Campbell's seminal article 'Understanding the relationship between religion online and offline in a networked society' (2012). This similarity lends more weight when perspectives from Campbell and New Zealand's Stephen Garner's most recent book *Networked theology* (2016) are used to provide new perspectives on 'online religion', from an interdisciplinary description of 'networked theology'. In this research, the link between the practical theology perspectives referred to earlier and the interdisciplinary perspectives from the work of Campbell and Garner leads to a new and unique practical theology contribution arising from the focus on tracing Christian motifs on Twitter.

- **Methodological structuring**

The methodological structuring is discussed on two levels: first, the motivation for the structuring of each published article as related chapters for the thesis; and second, the underlying methodological structuring of the research presented in the various articles.

The following methodology applies to the article format of the thesis. The seven articles are framed by a detailed introduction describing the research orientation and by a summary and conclusion indicating the main outcomes of the research. I also critically reflect on the perspectives, limitations and further possibilities for research. The articles are logically and coherently presented. The key metaphor of 'networked religion' is central to, and underlies the presentation of the articles. I use the various elements of the key metaphor as a basis for grouping the articles in the thesis. I discuss this methodology further in detail in each of the chapters. In the concluding chapter, the key metaphor and related aspects provide a structure for the critical reflection.

The methodology in each of the seven articles was based on the implicit and explicit use of the fourfold model for a practical theological enquiry and description developed by Osmer (2008). This model focuses on four questions, which are used to investigate and describe practical theology as embodied in the seven articles.

Firstly, in terms of the question *What is going on?*, Twitter was described as a possible expression of the rise and influence of this relatively new social media phenomenon, creating a third space for reflection, 'requiring new logics and evoking unique forms of meaning-making' (Campbell 2013:4). The sampling and analysis of Twitter messages conveying Christian motifs provide fresh examples of expressions of digital lived religion.

Secondly, I investigated the anatomy of the tweeting, providing new dimensions of faith in the digital age (*Why is this going on?*). I made use of comprehensive explanatory frameworks to elucidate the actions and patterns in the empirical research (Osmer & Schweitzer 2003:3; Osmer 2012:331).

Thirdly, I analysed the articulations and expressions of faith by users on Twitter (*What ought to be going on?*). I investigated and focused on the normative aspect of the research. In order to critically assess, guide, and reform some dimension of contemporary religious praxis,⁴³ I focused on the construction of theological and ethical norms and provided some examples of best practices (Osmer & Schweitzer 2003:3).

Lastly, I sought ways in which the tracing⁴⁴ of faith, on Twitter, could contribute to new and relevant articulations of faith, conducive to a strategic pragmatic practical theological involvement (*How might we respond?*). This provided perspectives and guidance to contemporary Christian practice (Osmer 2012:342).

These theoretical perspectives provide the background to the following structure of the thesis.

⁴³ 'When the term "praxis" is preferred to "practice", the emphasis is on the reflective or meaning content of behaviour, the integral interaction between theory and practice. Praxis usually refers to transformative practice' (Forrester 2000:7).

⁴⁴ The word 'tracing' implies the metaphorical meaning of tracking and mapping signs, traces and/or evidence of certain practices to be used, in order to reconstruct or develop strategic knowledge (Ganzevoort 2009:n.p.).

1.6 Rationale for the metaphor in anthologising the articles and summary of chapters⁴⁵

I indicated earlier the manner in which related and underlying aspects associated with a practical theological orientation occur in tracking theological motifs on Twitter. As further motivation for arranging and anthologising the seven articles, I use the key metaphor 'networked religion' and draw on the following description by Campbell and Garner (2016:n.p.) as motivation:

We introduce the concept of networked religion not only to highlight the ways people practice religion online but also to show how trends within religion reveal cultural changes in popular understandings of religion in broader society. The idea of networked religion suggests that religion, which is found online and offline, is informed by structures, practices, and character of network society. Networked religion is defined by five key traits: networked community, storied identities, convergent practices, shifting authority, and a multisite reality.

The metaphor 'networked religion' is presented as a *leitmotiv* for sequencing and structuring the articles. In order to further explore the metaphor, I make use of five markers, namely networked community, storied identities, convergent practices, shifting authority, and a multisite reality. Besides the fact that these markers are used throughout this thesis for the purpose of structuring the argument concerning the positioning of the articles, they also make an important contribution to the content of the study. Campbell (2012:65) has the following to say about these markers:

Together the five traits of networked religion provide insights into how religious practice is not just altered as it is imported online, but how religion on the internet reflects subtle shifts in religious cultural practice offline that have also been noted within studies of religious cultural in general.

I search for associated aspects in content and meaning of these markers. The specific associated article is placed with this marker.⁴⁶ In order to accommodate and anthologise

⁴⁵ The articles in the thesis were formatted from their original published form to a uniform style and according to the guidelines of The University of Queensland.

⁴⁶ I am sensitive to the possibility of a somewhat forced match between the metaphor of 'networked religion' and the seven articles. There is, inevitably, in the creative match, specific tension between

the two supplementary chapters in this structure, I added the following two markers, namely 'relational' and 'autobiography'. I turn now to a brief discussion of the seven markers to describe the specific related article and each supplementary chapter and the rationale for their associations to match the markers.⁴⁷ Each chapter, as part of an associated network of meaning, is linked to the related metaphor of 'networked theology'.⁴⁸ In conjunction with the creative development of a further two independent markers, the five structural markers that originate from the central metaphor as initially coined in Campbell's 2012 seminal article and also used in Campbell and Garner's (2016) book, form the structural basis of the research. The choice of the metaphor and the associated seven or so markers lies in its strongly corresponding character and content with the documented research of the project. In her seminal article 'Understanding the relationship between religion online and offline in a networked society' (2012), Campbell pointed out that the metaphor of 'networked religion' could indeed act as an interpretive tool. By making use of 'networked religion' as a so called *leitmotiv* in the structuring and documentation of the research, support is offered on the one hand for the deployment of the research problem, and on the other hand alignment is found with a critical practical theological inquiry into lived religion. By utilizing the metaphorical tool of 'networked religion' not only vistas of new meaning, but also coordinates of direction are offered. As Campbell (2012:85) has correctly indicated:

The theoretical concept of networked religion, besides speaking to the form of spirituality that emerges out of online networked negotiations with traditional religion, shows how current religious narratives, practices, and structures are able to become increasingly flexible, transitional, and transnational as they are lived out both online and in an information- and technology-driven society.

1.6.i Chapter 1 - Networked theology: A hypertext introduction

The introductory chapter is expanded on the basis of the key metaphor 'networked religion', in an associated network of meaning. This makes use of the 'hypertext' metaphor, which assumes a 'hyper-connectivity' that is edited by the content of the specific

the original content and meaning of the marker with the research presented in the article. However, for the purpose of structuring the research, the metaphor of 'networked religion', with the respective five markers, enables the logical link of the content and character of the research.

⁴⁷ In order to further strengthen this match, I combine the related marker with the original title of the article in noting the chapter.

⁴⁸ Hereafter, at the start of every chapter's title, I indicate the marker associated with the key metaphor of 'networked theology'.

chapter. This chapter serves as a link that provides structure to the anthologising of the seven articles, revolving around two central themes, namely Orientation and Outline. The central theoretical perspectives can be traced back to the research documented in the articles. In delineating the structural subsections of this chapter, the metaphor of a hypertext embodies the character in which perspectives of Orientation and Outline are linked. Typical of the narrative approach adopted is the recognition of my own autobiographical realisations and experiences during the research journey.

1.6.ii Chapter 2 - Networked community:⁴⁹ A Practical theological tracing of Christian expressions of faith on Twitter

The concept of a 'networked community' points to the meaning of connectivity in an online and offline existence. I emphasise that '... rather than living in a single static religious community, many people in contemporary society live in religious social networks that are emergent, varying in depth, fluid, and highly personalized' (Campbell & Garner 2016:n.p.). The first orientating article, 'Tweeting God: A practical theological tracing of Christian expressions of faith on Twitter' (Chapter 2), describes aspects of a 'connected community'. The chapter finds direct affinity with the meaning facilitated as part of a 'networked community' between 'online' and 'offline' existence. It also embodies an initial practical theological orientation to the empirical research, with a description of the pilot study that was used in orientating the empirical research. The chapter points out that the practical theologian can use various existing and newly developed research methodologies, in order to explore how the digital world can assist in creating new empirical realities, hermeneutic outcomes, and strategic involvement. In an endeavour to track these dynamics, a practical theological tracing of Christian expressions of faith on Twitter provided new content and meaning that are mapped in various categories. I explore the development and meaning of new theological accents and articulations, using specific examples from recent Australian and South African Twitter accounts. In tracing and mapping these expressions of faith, I identify accents of a possible lived religion. The chapter also embodies the dynamic interchange between 'offline' and 'online' communities. This confirms that Twitter, as platform for theological expression, only supplements 'offline church involvement' (Campbell & Garner 2016:n.p.).

⁴⁹ When referring to networked community, I specifically imply the existence of 'online communities'. According to Campbell and Garner (2016:n.p.), online communities show 'dynamic connections between members who share interests and creating a network of relations and commitments that change on the basis of the composition and commitment of the community at a given time.'

1.6.iii Chapter 3 - Storied identity:⁵⁰ A practical theological tracing of the story of the hashtag(#)

The marker 'storied identity' assumes that a construction of identity is negotiated between 'online' and 'offline' reality. Campbell and Garner (2016:n.p.) point out that

[r]eligious identity as a storied identity acknowledges that identity construction is a process lived out online and offline, created in an attempt to bring connection between different spheres of interaction and the Christian narrative of faith.

In order to express the construction of identity, the article 'The story of the hashtag(#): A practical theological tracing of the hashtag(#) symbol on Twitter' (Chapter 3) indicates how the formation and strengthening of narrative meaning occur on a variety of levels and in various ways. This research mainly focuses on a specific manner of expression associated with social media generally and Twitter in particular, namely the hashtag(#) symbol. This symbol has become an important expression in popular culture, and is generally associated with various dimensions of activities in a social media environment. I explore the development and meaning of the hashtag(#) symbol by means of several examples from the recent past. As part of this process, I expound why it is important, for the purposes of a practical theological involvement, as expressed in the dimensions of a lived religion, to take cognisance of the hashtag(#) symbol and the world associated therewith. Arising from this, and in congruence with the strategic character of practical theology, I map perspectives with a view to the further use and meaning of a dynamic reading of the hashtag(#) symbol.

1.6.iv Chapter 4 - Convergent practice:⁵¹ A practical theological tracing of #humanwaste as a trend on Twitter

In using the third marker 'convergent practice', this chapter indicates how these 'convergent practices' have particular implications in terms of the description and realisation of religious practices as well as the manner in which this is expressed in theological language. The incorporated article is entitled 'Tweeting #humanwaste: A

⁵⁰ 'Storied identity' is a spontaneous development from 'networked community' and acknowledges that the internet and social media, in particular, enable individuals and communities to express their identity in unique ways in contemporary society (Campbell & Garner 2016:n.p.).

⁵¹ 'Convergent practices' implies that the Internet and social media encourage convergent practices, whereby individuals from different backgrounds and through their association with each other create activity and narratives and establish what spiritual meaning provides for life (Campbell & Garner 2016:n.p.).

practical theological tracing of #humanwaste⁵² as a trend on Twitter' (Chapter 4). In investigating the topic, I find affinity with the use of the Twitter example of 'Michael Mondays',⁵³ as expression of 'convergent practices' (Campbell & Garner 2016:n.p.). The chapter tracks various dimensions of existence connected to the concept of human waste on the Twitter platform. In a practical theological tracing of the theme of human waste on Twitter, I map new contents and meaning related to this concept into various categories. On the basis of existing and newly developed research methodologies, I explore how the digital world can assist in creating new empirical realities, hermeneutic outcomes, and strategic involvement. Once again, I identify accents of a possible lived religion. On the basis of these descriptions, possibilities unfold for new practical theological orientations for both the present and the future.

1.6.v Chapter 5 - Shifting authority:⁵⁴ A practical theological reflection on Twitter's normative function in tweeting dignity

According to the fourth marker 'shifting authority', social media is responsible for negotiations relating to which theological voice would be authoritative and how control of knowledge would continually occur. According to Campbell and Garner (2016:n.p.).

[s]hifting authority raises important questions not only about how religious authority is now established and maintained in a digital society but also about what factors influence the position and place of religion in broader society.

The chapter expresses the continual process of negotiation and binds normativity as the reverse side of authority. The incorporated article expresses the continuing search for

⁵² 'Human waste' was the topic of a conference of the Society for Practical Theology in South Africa, held in January 2014 in Pretoria, South Africa. The content of 'human waste' is systematically understood and focuses especially on an ecological understanding of human consumption and waste.

⁵³ 'Michael Mondays' originated on Twitter, because supporters of Michael Jackson tweeted, after his death in 2009, memories of him to websites associated with him, such as, michaeljackson.com, thus creating community spaces for individual tributes and social grief (Campbell & Garner 2016:n.p.).

⁵⁴ The concept of 'shifting authority' refers to the internet as space where negotiations occur anew on who and what a legitimate religious leader and 'gatekeeper of knowledge' is. This acknowledges the fact that 'Online experts are able to bypass time-honored religious training or prescribed initiation rites that would traditionally establish their positions offline'. On the other hand, the internet and social media can also confirm religious authority. A description of the dynamic nature of 'online authority' often concerns 'the breadth of one's social network online that elevates one's voice and position online'. The result is that whoever is the legitimate voice for a specific community, is turning into a digital world (Campbell & Garner 2016:n.p.).

normativity and its implication for authority. More specifically, associated with the theme of this contribution, social media also provides an excellent space not only to rethink, but also to re-enact expressions of dignity in society. The research is facilitated from a practical theological orientation, with particular focus on a normative dimension, as embodied in aspects of dignity. Using an interdisciplinary approach and methodology, I discuss some contours of dignity specifically associated with South African politics as well as the Charlie Hebdo attacks in 2015 in Paris expressed on the social media platform Twitter. This empirical analysis and discussion lead to a practical theological reflection, which describes aspects of dignity associated with a normativity function. In conclusion, I formulate and provide some practical theological perspectives contributing to future relevant tweeting on dignity.

1.6.vi Chapter 6 - Multisite reality:⁵⁵ @jesus - A practical theological following of Jesus expressions on Twitter

In presenting the fifth marker 'multisite reality', I recognise that the initial distinction between 'online' and 'offline' reality is fading. Instead, 'multisite reality' confirms that there are strong ties between individuals' online and offline attitudes, behaviors, and practices. Online routines become informed by offline ways of living, and a new cultural space emerges blending old and new values and expectations (Campbell & Garner 2016:n.p.).

To express the meaning of 'multisite reality', this chapter is a concrete expression of the movement and amalgamation between an 'online' and an 'offline' reality. It offers perspectives as to how an 'online' and 'offline' reality would relate with each other in constructing the meaning of the Jesus name. The digital era portrays expressions of Jesus in various ways. With its launch in 2007, the iPhone was, for example, baptised as the Jesus phone.⁵⁶ Negotiating the meaning of the interaction between the digital world, religion and spirituality, one can map various digital expressions on the identity of Jesus. However, focusing on the social media platform Twitter and making use of a practical theological following of the @jesus-handle, one can trace messages and expressions related to Jesus. The analysis of these messages provides a practical theological

⁵⁵ 'Multisite reality' specifically refers to how the internet and social media give new meaning to 'sacred conceptions of time, space, and identity'.

⁵⁶ The reference to 'Jesus' phone originates from the media and refers to iPhone's introduction in 2007, along with a Messianic expectation with which the cellular phone was welcomed.

description of expressions of Jesus as portrayed on Twitter, thus informing a relevant understanding of Jesus in the digital world.

1.6.vii Chapter 7 - Relational:⁵⁷ Redefining future Christian leadership through Twitter?

The last incorporated article suggests an aspect of 'networked religion', in which community is dynamically settled by its relationship character. Relations, particularly those associated with leadership, result in conversation not only within a specific community, but also within the greater understanding of a newly negotiated and realised 'networked religion'. Social media can be described as an ever-growing frontier of various practices associated with the intersection of collective human communication acts, facilitated through information technology. These developments have a great impact on the transformation of religious identity and the articulation of practices of belief. The quest for and dynamics of future religious leadership provide a lens for exploring the connection between the concept 'lived religion' and the multifaceted complexity of a new evolving virtual world. In this regard, I address the need to consider novel research approaches in practical theology, such as analysing Big Data, in order to investigate these emerging digital expressions of future Christian leadership. I explore some of the empirical contours left by the digital activities of several Christian leaders active on Twitter and map perspectives relevant to the question of how future Christian leadership may be redefined through Twitter. The investigation aims, firstly, to provide new research perspectives regarding relevant methodological orientations for tracing expressions of future Christian leadership on Twitter and other social media platforms. Secondly, the analysis and translation of the meaning of these expressions of digital leadership on Twitter provide preliminary stepping stones in redefining future Christian leadership.

1.6.viii Chapter 8 - Autobiography:⁵⁸ An (auto)biographical Twitter theology

In a seventh category and in direct conjunction with the accent on 'storied identity' is the marker 'autobiography'. Autobiographical accents are inherently and explicitly regarded as part of the social media culture. Underpinning the creation of a profile and individual posts, specific biographies have a deeper meaning. The chapter explores and documents some

⁵⁷ At the core of its existence, 'social media' implies social interaction or relationships. This aspect of relationship is conceptualised in a specific way and filled with new content in terms of leadership and discipleship on social media.

⁵⁸ 'Autobiography' creates a circuit, with perspectives in Chapter 3's 'Storied identity', emphasising the importance of articulating personal narratives in a Practical Theology of 'digital lived religion'.

of these perspectives in a personal manner. I trace and map meaningful personal expressions of the Christian faith on Twitter. Facilitated by a practical theological enquiry, and employing a qualitative empirical research methodology,⁵⁹ I trace personal aphorisms of the Christian faith on Twitter and present these as possible examples of a relevant digital autobiographical theology. The contribution of these empirical realities facilitates new hermeneutical outcomes and a strategic involvement. I explore the creation, development and meaning of new theological formulations and articulations through these expressions. In tracing and mapping these new expressions of faith, I continue the process of identifying demarcations of a possible lived spirituality in the digital sphere. The documentation of these new and relevant articulations of the language of faith contributes to a meaningful digital autobiographical theology.

1.6.ix Chapter 9 - Networked theology: A reflective trending conversation towards a summary and conclusion

In the final, reflective chapter, I present critical evaluating remarks concerning the research according to the seven anthologised articles. These remarks find affinity with a practical theological reflection, expressed in the metaphor of 'trending conversation'. This metaphor corresponds with the central *leitmotiv* of 'networked religion', on the one hand, and expresses the character of social media as a praxis terrain for practical theological reflection, on the other. The chapter provides a synthesis of perspectives from the research documented in the previous articles. With reference to the structuring of the first chapter, I use two broad structural markers, namely *mapping* and *direction*, in the final chapter. Under *Mapping*, I present an autobiographical reflection of my own specific practical theological orientation that led to this research. Under *Direction*, I summarise the research perspectives in order to answer the various research questions. I explore the detailed and dynamic character and content of Christian motifs used on Twitter with a view to ascertaining their significance for the further development of a practical theological description of a 'digital lived religion'. I document the significance of charting Christian motifs on Twitter on the basis of the bipolar tension between maintenance, on the one hand, and renewal, on the other. In conclusion, the concept 'reflexivity' is used as an expression of a practical theological orientation and methodology, to critically evaluate and reflect on the seven articles. This reflection leads to the formulation of strategic

⁵⁹ Based on the principles underpinning ethnographical research such as the acknowledgement of autobiographical descriptions and the informed opinions of participants (Reed-Danahay 2008:407), existing published Twitter material of the participants and their opinions is used during the analysis.

perspectives on theological and practical meaning. In so doing, I also point out some limitations of the research and provide further perspectives for future research.

1.7 Contribution of the thesis

The thesis embodies the character of a critical and innovative practical theological enquiry (Swinton & Mowat 2006), with strong indications of experimental undertones (Hermans 2014:124). It contributes in terms of the fresh analysis of tweets and the exploration of the role of spirituality as embodied in the microblogging world of Twitter. A comprehensive literature study established that this documented research is one of only a few studies on the specific relationship between Twitter and theology. The research entails understanding, describing and developing a positive contribution to the tracing, description and analysis of Christian motifs expressed on Twitter. It thus becomes an expression of the role of daily spirituality in the new digital world, portraying a lived religion.

Another important contribution of the study is the methodological design for facilitating empirical research. Although empirical research unfolds on the basis of a 'mixed-methods methodology', ethnographic undertones, supported by autobiographical and narrative aspects, provide a unique character to the documented research. Indeed, in this research orientation, the strong, but not exclusive qualitative, character associated with the research provides another important addition to the research. Although various studies on the content on Twitter have used a quantitatively inspired methodology, there are few qualitative studies. To add to this contribution, the study provides, in a novel way, the documentation in theology of analytical empirical research conducted on Big Data. This consists of six Twitter data sets associated with prominent themes in theology. This is not only a new contribution, but it also provides important first perspectives for an empirical practical theological analysis of Twitter data. An additional new contribution is that the research further focuses, in particular, on the description and analysis of theological motifs on Twitter.

In addition to such important perspectives, some strategic-pragmatic insights are offered for the development and use of theological language in a topical and relevant manner and as part of everyday life. In summary, the value and meaning of the documentation of the research lie in Miller-McLemore's (2016:7-8) need for '... more analysis of how theory and

practice function dynamically *in practice* and for fresh appreciation for the complications of the pragmatic relationship’.

In conclusion, it is important to mention that the presentation of the research in article format according to a regulation of The University of Queensland (<https://ppl.app.uq.edu.au/content/4.60.07-alternate-thesis-format-options>) provides for a new contribution. Of the seven articles, six have been published in highly regarded peer-reviewed publications;⁶⁰ with the remaining one already being accepted and currently in the process of publication due for release at the end of March 2018.⁶¹ The published articles thematically indicate a unity and support the central theme in the research: What are the strengths/weaknesses of Twitter in communicating Christian motifs? This is further emphasised by a qualitative research methodology that forms the basis of all the articles. The outcome is the presentation of experimental and new published research that sets unique aims in shorter sections.

1.8 Conclusion

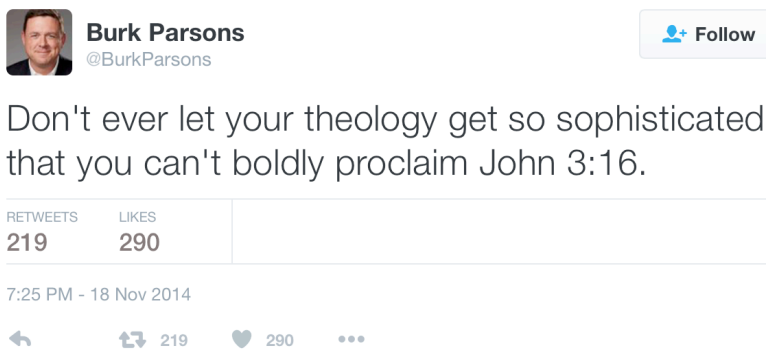


Figure 1.2: Burk Parson’s Twitter message, November 2014 (@burkparsons 2014:n.p.).

In Chapter 1, I provide an exploratory orientation to the research project. My investigation into the primary research question, namely the occurrence, significance and contribution of the communication of Christian motifs on Twitter, underlies these introductory principles. Backed by descriptive-empirical, interpretative, normative and strategic foci, my perspectives on this issue are subsequently presented in seven articles.

⁶⁰ All the articles were peer-reviewed before being accepted for publication. Three of the articles were published in a Web of Science (formerly ISI Citation Indexes) indexed Journal (Hervormde Teologiese/Theological Studies). The other contributions were published in edited volumes by well-known international publishing houses.

⁶¹ Details of publication are indicated in the chapters.

Drawn from the empirical Twitter data in this study, the above Twitter message from an American preacher, Buck Parsons (@burkparsons 20154:n.p.), expresses one of the key aspects of this research. The fact that Burk Parsons is not an internationally well-known theologian, but that his message can be read and heard globally via Twitter, serves as an apt point of departure for this last reflective⁶² chapter. Although this message shows signs of academic theology and is most likely directed to a church audience, it is formulated in such a way that it is also accessible, intelligible and meaningful to other users of Twitter. From the introductory chapter, and directly linked to nuances in my own autobiographical narrative, I focused on the analysis of the communication of Christian motifs on Twitter. In addition, this tweet also expresses specific Christian motifs such as those embodied in the terms 'theology' and 'preaching', but refers directly to the well-known biblical text John 3:16.

In addressing the research question regarding the possible prevalence and use of Christian motifs on Twitter, the first chapter provided an introduction to, and overview of the research project as documented in the seven articles. In the introductory chapter, I described the topics that occur throughout all the chapters. In describing the underlying importance and dynamics of social media, I justified my choice of Twitter as a platform for the research. I also provided perspectives on practical theology in tracing possible Christian motifs on Twitter. I also described initial orientating methodological perspectives for the administration of the empirical research, as well as introducing and motivating the key metaphor that anchors the seven articles.

On the basis of the perspectives derived from the research, the project is placed within the bigger movements and changes in the world as a highly relevant endeavour. These descriptions are also relevant at a time when practical theology emphasises the importance of various forms of lived religion. As mentioned earlier, the research project also stands central in my own personal realisations and search for the discovery of possible new theological meaning and relevance. In this respect, the reflection on the practice of theological Twitter has also newly informed the praxis of my own identity as practical theologian and researcher.

⁶² The reference in this chapter to 'reflection' is presented in sensitivity with regards to the many nuances of 'theological reflection' and 'reflexivity' (Reader 2008:14).

Chapter 2

Networked community:⁶³

A practical theological tracing of Christian expressions of faith on Twitter.

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Abstract

Different and divergent facets of human existence are increasingly becoming embodied within a digital domain. The phenomenon relating to the popularity and impact of social media, as an important expression of this new digital world, is already widely known and well-documented. Various existing and newly developed research methodologies can be used by the practical theologian in order to conduct an exploration on how the digital world can assist in the creation of new empirical realities, hermeneutic outcomes and strategic involvement. More specifically, the highly popular social media platform, Twitter, provides for a relevant and important praxis terrain illustrating the revealing dynamics of the digital world, social media and popular culture. In an endeavour of tracking these dynamics, a practical theological tracing of Christian expressions of faith on Twitter, provided for new content and meaning which are mapped out in a variety of categories. Through the use of specific examples from specific Australian and South African Twitter accounts, deriving from the recent past, the development and meaning of new theological accents and articulations are explored and described. In the tracing and mapping of these expressions of faith, accents of a possible lived spirituality are sounded out and verbalised. The research is therefore making a contribution in terms of new and relevant articulations of the language of faith. On the basis of these descriptions various possibilities unfold for new

⁶³ This chapter is strongly associated with the metaphor of 'networked community' in which a lens is provided on the meaning of connectivity in an online and offline existence (Campbell 2012: 68-71; Campbell & Garner 2016:n.p.).

⁶⁴ Published with the permission of Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

practical theological orientations and engagement in amongst other, theological education, both for the present and the future.

2.1 Introduction

A plenary presentation in an academic conference has the purpose of identifying an underlying theme(s). In the creation of such a possible theme at a conference dealing with theological teaching during a technological era, I would like to discuss some preliminary perspectives regarding the tracing of possible new and relevant expressions of faith on the Twitter platform.

As an introduction – and in an attempt to demonstrate my integrity – I would like to say something about my own ‘dipping of the toes in the water’, or, perhaps, toes in the ocean of the digital world! Bearing this metaphor in mind I acknowledge my modest digital presence, amongst others on Twitter, with a following of just over 130 (@javdberg 2014). With a view to the future⁶⁵, I am, however, sensitive to the evolutionary nature and meaning of the growing tide of the digital ocean. In an effort to pursue this exercise of the ‘dipping of toes’ in an accountable manner, the following orientation is important: firstly, I, at most a co-researcher, am, with others, interested in this new digital domain; secondly, digitalisation is interactive and I will, therefore, try to make this presentation in a creative and answerable manner⁶⁶; and, lastly, this exercise should contribute to the exciting times⁶⁷ referred to by Steve Jobs (Isaacson 2011:n.p.) when he said: ‘I like living at the intersection of the humanities and technology’.

Against this background I would like to discuss the purpose of my presentation. I am sensitive to the avoidance of the so-called Mitroff M3 problem⁶⁸, and, therefore, initially

⁶⁵ Sherry Turkle, world-famous Internet psychologist and philosopher, pointed out in her book *‘Alone together’* (2011), that what is becoming visible in a growing digital world is nothing other than vistas on ‘the future unfolding’ (Turkle 2011 n.p.).

⁶⁶ Except for a limited text reading from the distributed manuscript (for further reading please see the footnotes as well as the included reference list), a *Powerpoint* presentation with some video clips will be used in order to facilitate discussion.

⁶⁷ For example the media hype this past week regarding the unveiling of Apple’s new *Smartwatch* as well as the *iPhone 6* (*The Telegraph* 09 September 2014).

⁶⁸ ‘E3 is the error of ‘solving’ the ‘wrong’ problem precisely when one should have solved the ‘right’ problem’ (Mitroff 1998:16).

formulate my question⁶⁹ (and belief) that a new, fresh, and relevant 'language of belief' should be traced and mapped when dealing with the growing digital life-style.⁷⁰

By making use of Osmer's (2008:4) four-question practical theological enquiry⁷¹ as a grid for mapping this envisaged contribution, my presentation will focus on the following four main aspects: Firstly, by asking *What is going on?*; Twitter will be described as a possible expression of the rise and influence of the new social media phenomenon, creating a so called third space for reflection '...requiring new logics and evoking unique forms of meaning-making' (Campbell 2013:4). Secondly, the anatomy of faith in the digital age will be investigated (*Why is this going on?*). Thirdly, an exploration of the art of hermeneutics will be conducted in tracing the expressions of faith on Twitter (*What ought to be going on?*). Fourthly and lastly, the quest for ways in which the tracing of faith as a trend and the contribution towards possible new and relevant articulations of a pragmatic practical theological involvement will be addressed (*How might we respond?*).

2.2 What is going on?

On Tuesday morning, 10 June 2014, an enormous hot air balloon in the form of the famous statue of Jesus in Rio de Janeiro, soared over Melbourne, Australia (*ABC News Radio* 2014). This giant balloon was released on the eve of the 2014 World Cup soccer tournament in Brazil as an initiative of a lottery company, and bore the words, *#keepthefaitth*. Various churches immediately lodged objections against the balloon. In the midst of this controversy, the renowned Australian clergyman, Father Bob, known as the 'people's priest', tweeted the following: 'The offended churches could send up a competing inflated balloon with "CHRIST SAVES" emblazoned on it' (*@fatherbob* 2014).

Father Bob, with approximately 103 000 followers on Twitter (*@fatherbob* 2014), reached many more persons through his message than a minister or pastor at a traditional Sunday morning church service. As a demonstration of the manner in which Father Bob actively

⁶⁹ 'A Nobel laureate in physics was asked to whom he ascribed his success. Without hesitation he answered, "My mother". His answer was a surprise, because he was the son of East European Jewish immigrants who were simple people without any formal education. He went on to explain that after returning home from school his mother would regularly ask if he has asked a good question? (Sher 2009:70).

⁷⁰ In this regard it is also important to point out that the aim of this research project is not so much to seek solutions to so-called problematic questions, but rather to foster 'meaning questions' (i.e., questions that focus on meaning), in order to inform a certain habitus (Graham 2013:153-154).

⁷¹ What is going on?; Why is this going on?; What ought to be going on? and How might we respond?

uses Twitter he later that same day, as part of the discussion that followed these events, retweeted the following message that had been sent by a woman called Sandy: 'My six year old saw it on the news and said "That doesn't look like Jesus Mummy, he lives at my school"' (@fatherbob 2014).

In the investigation and description of these events, important questions that are related to the research project are brought to the fore: for example, how popular culture influences the interpretation and exercise of traditional religious practices, as well as the question how the so-called social media can be employed in the formulation of new kinds of expressions of faith. As part of a descriptive and empirical movement of reflection in the present research process, an endeavour is made to theoretically describe the dynamics of the involvement with the indicated praxis.

In answering the *'what is going on'*-question, Twitter⁷² will be described as a possible expression of the rise and influence of the new social media phenomenon, creating a so called third space for reflection '... requiring new logics and evoking unique forms of meaning-making' (Campbell 2013:4).

Twitter, developed in 2006 (Zappavigna 2012), is generally known as a microblog as it offers the user an opportunity to send a message within the scope of 140 characters (Van Dijk 2011:333; Wagner 2012:120):

These messages, known as 'tweets', can be sent through the internet, mobile devices such as Internet-enabled phones and iPads, and text messages. But unlike status updates, their strict limit of 140 characters produces at best eloquently terse responses and at worst heavily truncated speech (Murthy 2013:n.p).

⁷² Twitter, as a well-known social media platform, is indicated as the chosen praxis terrain for the execution of the project. The motivation for this can be found on a variety of levels. Firstly, Twitter is currently one of the most rapidly-growing social media platforms. At the end of April 2014, Twitter had 255 million monthly active users out of a total of a billion registered users with a Twitter account (Smith 2014). With these statistics in mind, Twitter indeed is a good expression of a digital world with the accentuation of aspects such as mobility and fluidity of information. Secondly, by means of its character and dynamics, Twitter offers access to nationally and internationally available empirical data for analysis.

Twitter has been called the ‘SMS of the Internet’⁷³, with the difference that, unlike an ordinary SMS, a Twitter message is normally visible to every user of the Twitter platform.⁷⁴ In the use of Twitter an important communication medium had been discovered, which, especially as far as the distribution of news⁷⁵ is concerned, would change the world on a variety of levels.⁷⁶ The transmission of messages or ‘tweets’ is conducted from an individual’s Twitter account where the user has the option to create their own profile through the use of a Twitter address or a ‘handle’ and a biographical description with a photograph and some personal background information (Murthy 2012:1059; Qiu, Lin, Ramsay & Yang 2012:710). Naturally, all these variable factors provide the constituents for an exceptionally dynamic interaction leading to the following possibility:

Twitter has the potential to increase our awareness of others and to augment our spheres of knowledge, tapping us into a global network of individuals who are passionately giving us instant updates on topics and areas in which they are knowledgeable or participating in real-time (Murthy 2013:n.p.).

2.3 Why is this going on?

As background to the interpretation of the reality of a digital world, various scholars (Hassan 2008; Flew 2008; Campbell 2011; Wagner 2012; Campbell 2013) point to at least three driving factors currently leading towards further development and demarcation of the digital landscape:

⁷³ Twitter is a typical embodiment of the so-called ‘mobinomic world’ (Knott-Craig 2012:n.p.) demarcating the formation of a virtual ecosystem of connections across various spheres and layers of life. Accessing the service most likely through wireless Internet mobile devices, Twitter provides a platform for users to make use of this microblogging site ‘to present themselves through ongoing ‘tweets’, revealing a self that is both fluid and emergent’ (Wagner 2012:120).

⁷⁴ Twitter has the potential to increase our awareness of others and to augment our spheres of knowledge, tapping us into a global network of individuals who are passionately giving us instant updates on topics and areas in which they are knowledgeable or participating in real-time (Murthy 2013 n.p.).

⁷⁵ ‘Twitter has been prominently associated with journalism, both in terms of shifts in journalistic practice as well as its facilitating of citizen journalism’ (Murthy 2013:n.p.).

⁷⁶ For example, this platform played an influential role in political events, such as the Arab Spring (Emiroglu 2013), as well as the two most recent American presidential elections (*The European Business Review* 2013). Social media are also increasingly changing the dynamics of the existing work environment. A good example of this can be found in journalism as a career, with news being conveyed much faster by means of so-called citizen journalism. As an illustration of this, the tweet that was sent 10 hours before the first news reports appeared by Sohaib Athar (@ReallyVirtual) regarding the secret operation during which Osama bin Laden was killed by American special forces, can be mentioned (*Mashable* 2013).

- Firstly, the continuing development and evolution of the Internet.⁷⁷
- Secondly, the connectivity⁷⁸ and mobility brought about by the Internet and specific apparatuses such as cellular telephones and tablets.
- Thirdly, the influence and magnitude of so-called social media.

All three of these factors are addressed in the focus on the use of the social media platform, Twitter. To describe the theoretical orientation of the praxis further, I will use the following preliminary perspectives on social media:

Social media is embedded against the background of the broader development of the World Wide Web⁷⁹, which has officially been in use for 25 years by 2014 (*Social Times* 2013). However, for many people, the Internet only became a 'searchable reality after the arrival of Google in 1999' (Crystal 2011:12). In the age of the so-called new media⁸⁰, globalisation, the availability of information and new forms of social expressions are embodied (Athique 2013:14). Defining the concept and characteristics of new media, Flew has indicated 'that it involved the combination of the three C's – computing and information

⁷⁷ Grieve (2013:115) speculates on the four major features of digital practice in the new future: 'First, the web will be smarter, knowing not just what users say, but what they mean. We will see more semantic content, and the applications that support it ... Second, new media will be mobile and we will see an increase in augmented reality (AR) in which digital media are laid over physical real-world environments ... Third the web will grow more interactive ... Lastly, more and more applications will be outsourced to the cloud, with users accessing information stored on the web remotely from netbooks, tablet computers, smart phones, or other devices ... What combination of these features of new media will win out we cannot tell'.

⁷⁸ Various authors and researchers have indicated that as citizens of a new digital world, connectedness has become the new passport. In his well-known book, '*The world is flat: A brief history of the twenty-first century*', Friedman (2006:8) writes that the pathways of the world have changed in the wake of, *inter alia*, the significant developments brought about by various kinds of communication technology, as a result of which more and more people are now able to come into contact with other people across the world. Castells (2006:381) sums up the situation by referring to: 'the new social structure of the Information Age, which I call the network society because it is made up of networks of production, power, and experience, which construct a culture of virtuality in the global flows that transcend time and space'.

⁷⁹ The development of the so-called 'World Wide Web', arose from the initial proposal of the British software programmer, Tim Berners-Lee, in 1989, for a comprehensive technological information management system (Carr 2010:9), as expressed in his development of a so-called 'hypertext transfer protocol' (Athique 2013:13). Berners-Lee's contribution was to use hypertext to link texts that could be located on any computer on the internet. This meant that texts could be connected to other texts, forming a complex series of relationships that Berners-Lee visualised as a web-like structure, hence the name 'web' (Hinton and Hjorth (2013:10).

⁸⁰ In this regard, the development of the character and presence of the Internet facilitated a confluence of the use and benefits of different forms of information communication technology, such as the telephone, fax and television, in which connections 'across a vast network made up of anything from physical copper wires to wireless satellite connections' (Hinton & Hjorth 2014:9) were effectuated.

technology (IT), communications networks, and digitised media and information content – arising out of another process beginning with a “C”, that of convergence’ (Flew 2008:2).

Early in the 21st century a further development from the initial so-called static Web 1.0 usage mode to the so-called Web 2.0 technology occurred.⁸¹ The development and popularity of Web 2.0 technology⁸², with particular reference to computer software and user experience (Hinton & Hjorth 2013:16), has led to the creation and establishment of social media.⁸³

Social media platforms, and specifically Twitter, are, however, dynamic in character, and display continual evolutionary developments. In 2009, for example, Twitter changed the phrase by means of which users were encouraged to tweet news, from the original ‘What are you doing?’ to ‘What’s happening?’ (Crystal 2011:11). Through the use of this altered question format, users are now encouraged to formulate tweets that are focused more in an outward direction, on events in the environment, rather than on more personal aspects.

⁸¹ In their description of the new dimensions of the Internet, Koch and Lockwood (2010:94) point out that these dimensions consist of *inter alia*: ‘Storage technology (memory); display technology (xml, HTML), search technology (Google), publishing technology (wikis, blogging and Twitter) and organizing technology (social networks such as Facebook)’. Arising from this development, the emphasis falls on the opportunity that is available to ‘Internet users to directly engage with and construct by easily pulling together the sorts of people and information that they are interested in’ (Lesame, Sindane & Potgieter 2012:6).

⁸² Currently, the further reinforcement of the popularity and ongoing development of social media is facilitated by the availability of increased mobile Internet accessibility, as effectuated by cellphones and tablet computers. In their book, *Understanding Social Media* (2013), Sam Hinton and Larissa Hjorth write that social media, as a collective term, influence all levels of society: they comprise an integral part of the lives of a significant number of people worldwide; and that dynamic and constant meaning is created through the use of different forms of social media (Hinton and Hjorth 2013:2). In this regard Zappavigna (2012:193) is correct in her assumption that, ‘most forms of social media, such as Facebook and other general social networking services, incorporate significant multimedia content, with images and video playing a significant role in meaning making.’

⁸³ Flew has summarized and indicated a two-fold rationale for the growing popularity of Web 2.0: ‘...the concept of Web 2.0 has caught on for two particular reasons. First, it has embedded within it a range of the features that have long been seen as central to the Web as a communications infrastructure, such as the scope for participation, interactivity, collaborative learning, and social networking (social networking media is a commonly used alternative term to Web 2.0), as well as positive networking effects from harnessing collective intelligence; in other words, the quality of participation increases as the numbers participating increase, and this in turn attracts more new users to the sites. Second, some of the fastest growing websites of the 2000s have been based on Web 2.0 principles. These include sites such as the photography site *Flickr*, the online encyclopedia *Wikipedia*, the online user-generated video site *YouTube*, aggregated Web log (blog) sites such as *Blogger*, *Livejournal* and *Technoratti*, and the various personalized Web space sites such as *MySpace*, *Facebook*, *Friendster* and *Bebo*’ (Flew 2008:17).

Another significant development that would permanently change the social media landscape, was the evolution and use of the so-called *hashtag*(#) symbol.⁸⁴

2.4 What ought to be going on? - Social media, Twitter and popular culture and theology

The interpretation of written texts, as presented in the documents associated with the Christian tradition, as well as of ‘the living text of human action’ (Brown 2012:112), comprises part of the dynamics of the task of theological hermeneutics (Stiver 2003:178). The interest of practical theology in such practices is confirmed by newer developments that bear the accent of an interest in practically driven events that are contextually and concretely placed within everyday life. In exploring the art of hermeneutics with a view to tracing the expressions of faith on Twitter, I proceed from the assumption that ‘Theology is not for Sundays only ... Theology is an everyday affair ... Theology not only articulates beliefs but suggests “designs for living”’ (Vanhoozer 2007:7). Underlying this acknowledgement is the conviction that practical theology encapsulates a hermeneutics of the lived religion, in which preference is given to the praxis itself and to the knowledge concerning God that is being developed, found and lived within this praxis (Ganzevoort 2008:11–12). Underscoring the perception that the culture in which we live-especially referring to social media⁸⁵ - is shaping us (Sweet 2012:n.p.) is the belief that the hermeneutics of popular culture⁸⁶ holds the promise of pointing beyond.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Currently, the use of the hashtag is a common phenomenon, and the symbol is used for a variety of purposes. Zappavigna (2012:1) describes the hashtag as ‘an emergent convention for labeling the topic of a micropost and a form of metadata incorporated into posts.’ She further explains that the hashtag is ‘a convention for marking an annotation of the topic of a tweet’ and appended to the tweet, ‘when more than one word, is assigned, it will usually be represented without spaces’ (Zappavigna 2012:36). In various advertising campaigns, the core of the commercial message is linked to the hashtag. For example, the South African cellphone company, Cell C, launched a striking advertising campaign under the key word, *#CellCBelieve* (2013). Even the Dutch Reformed Church adopted the use of the hashtag symbol by linking it to a youth rally that was being launched on a countrywide basis, namely *#Imagine* (2014). A further example of the sheer scope that is facilitated by the use of the hashtag, is the prominence enjoyed by *#OscarPistorius* as a search phrase worldwide on Google (2014) during the court case in which the Paralympic athlete, Oscar Pistorius, was tried for the murder of his girlfriend, the model Reeva Steenkamp. The hashtag *#Bahrian* used on Twitter during the civil protests of the Arab Spring currently still remains one of the most used hashtags of all time (*Socialmedia Today* 2014).

⁸⁵ One of the most striking expressions and examples of the influence of social media is undoubtedly the social media platform, *Facebook*, which was developed in 2004 from a college hostel room at Harvard University in the United States of America (Koch & Lockwood 2010:102). Since the initial development of *Facebook* and its subsequent growth – which, in metaphorical terms, would make it the third largest country in the world, after China and India, as far as user numbers are concerned (*The Economist* 2010) – various other social media platforms, such as *LinkedIn*, *Pininterest*, *Instagram*, *Google+*, *MySpace* and various personal blogging services, have

A good example of this possibility is found in a contribution by Neels Jackson (2013), which he had written for the South African newspaper *Beeld*.⁸⁸

Would Jesus also have tweeted?

Supposing that Jesus lived on earth as a human being in this day and age: would he have tweeted?

This question recently came to my mind while I was reading yet another tweet from a theologian. I had realised that an ongoing theological discussion is being conducted in the Twitter world.

Something within me immediately wanted to say 'No'. After all, one cannot cram great theological truths into the 140 characters that are allotted to one on Twitter.

But then I remembered that Jesus himself did not preach lengthy and ponderous sermons. After all, did he not tell people stories? Was he not, precisely, a master of the aphorism, the short, powerful maxim?

Maybe this is one of the things that went wrong with the church over the centuries. We have subjected the gospel to long and weighty arguments, whereas Jesus uttered truths that were briefly stated and easily understood.

developed (Hinton & Hjorth 2013:35). O'Reilly, a renowned technological software entrepreneur and specialist, has, with regard to the popularity of social media platforms associated with Web 2.0, pointed out that 'Web 2.0 is not a technology, it is an attitude' (O'Reilly 2005:electronic source).

⁸⁶ 'popular culture is therefore the shared environment, practices, and resources of everyday life for ordinary people within a particular society' (Lynch 2005:14).

⁸⁷ 'Theology of culture depends upon this kind of trust that our cultural expressions can testify to a reality that transcends them – a reality that is really there, that matters, and in which providence is at work. Theology offers a language to speak about this reality, and can help articulate what is going on in the depths of popular culture... it is wise to remain open to the more discerning markers of culture. Even of popular culture' (Cobb 2005:294).

⁸⁸ *Beeld*, 6 June 2013 [translation from the original Afrikaans].

Think of the following, for example: ‘Do not lay aside treasures for yourselves on earth, where moths and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. Instead, lay aside treasures for yourselves in heaven, where neither moth nor rust can destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. Where your treasure is, there shall your heart be also.’ This can fit easily into a tweet: Don’t collect treasures on earth where they can be destroyed or stolen. Collect treasures in heaven. Where your treasure is, your heart will be.

It is, precisely, brief and powerful truths of this type that are shared by theologians in tweets nowadays. They are usually conveyed in English, since the conversations extend over geographical boundaries. Furthermore, these are discussions between equals, in which students and professors chat together. There is no place for titles on Twitter.

Sometimes a person attending a conference may send a tweet reporting what the speaker has said. During the past week, for example, I was able to establish, via a tweet from Nelus Niemandt, that the general secretary of the All African Conference of Churches in Kampala, Uganda, had stated that the shift in African theology is a movement from Exodus to Nehemiah – from liberation to building up.

On other occasions, people express their own opinions: for example, Pope Francis, who tweeted that the world says that we must pursue success, power and money, whereas God asks us to strive for humility, service and love. Here are a handful of tweets that I have received over the past few days, which I have freely translated:⁸⁹

Tom Smith: ‘Such as I have give I thee: stand up and walk,’ said Peter. Later, the clergy said: ‘We have gold and silver, but nothing to give.’

Stephan Joubert: Safety is not an address where you should stay for too long.

⁸⁹ Translated from the original English into Afrikaans, and retranslated into English.

Henning Venter: Do you want to defend the Bible? Maybe the best way is to live the story and tell it, and then the Bible will defend itself.

Len Sweet: Sometimes, in speaking of the Holy Trinity, I need to be careful to avoid making it sound like the three musketeers: 'One for all and all for one.'

Reggie Nel: A core question for missionary churches is that of how to get past mere charity and to become an inclusive, safe, empowering community.

Jaco Strydom: I would rather go to God with my brokenness than with my promises.

De la Harpe le Roux: My motto for today: Spirit of God, help me not to judge any person before I have walked half a mile in his shoes.

Rick Warren: 'Small' people belittle other people. Wonderful people make other people feel wonderful.

Dries Lombaard: Why do we love? Because He started it. He loved us first (1 Jn 4:19).

Skillie Botha: If you ever feel that you are not good enough, remember that Jesus uses broken people in order to bring hope to broken people.

Sometimes the tweets form part of larger discourses, and sometimes they contain links to blogs or other sites. When they are singly conveyed in this way, however, I perceive them as little morsels of wisdom that help one to reflect on life.

It seems to me that Jesus is already at home in the Twitter world.

Engaging with popular culture⁹⁰ in the expectation that it will reveal 'signals of the transcendent, the presence of grace, rumors of angels' (Vanhoozer 2007:33), I envisage that by means of a hermeneutical practical theology of lived religion, focussing on the praxis of everyday living, tweets regarding the expression of new and dynamic articulation of the Christian faith can be traced⁹¹ and described.

2.5 How might we respond? Perspectives for a Twitter theology

Arising from and in congruence with the strategic character of practical theology (Heitink 1993:174; Osmer 2008:175-176), context specific examples⁹² and perspectives regarding

⁹⁰ At the beginning of 2014, the destructive effect of the so-called *#NekNominate* challenge on the social media platforms Facebook and Twitter, caused a sensation (Finn 2014). By way of background information, the following explanation pertaining to this craze can be cited: 'Known as 'NekNomination', the game involves filming someone finishing a whole bottle of hard liquor in one sitting, and sharing the feat on social media with the hashtag *#NekNominate* challenging others to do the same' (Mintz 2014). Initially, the *#NekNominate* challenge was merely aimed at daring people to consume as much alcohol as possible and to film the event, and then place it on the social media along with a challenge to others to do the same. However, after this challenge led to the tragic death of two persons in Ireland (*Daily Mail* 2014), a South African captured the world's imagination with his reformulation of the dare with a view to a positive outcome. Through the use of social media Bret Lindeque, after having received a similar dare from a friend via Facebook, transformed this destructive challenge by reformulating it in a positive manner. Lindeque responded to the challenge by giving food to a poor man, filming this event, and posting the video clip on the social media platform, *YouTube* (News.Com.au 2014). In his introduction to the video clip on YouTube, viewed early March 2014 by approximately 192 000 people, Lindeque wrote: 'Downing a can of Castle Light is easy ... Imagine if we all harnessed the power of social media to make a real difference in people's lives' (Mintz 2014; *The Telegraph* 2004). After the placement of this video on YouTube and through the creation of the hashtag *#ChangeOneThing* (2014) on Twitter, the number of Lindeque's followers on the Twitter platform not only increased dramatically, but an initially destructive challenge was imbued with new content through the use of the hashtag symbol, *#ChangeOneThing*.

⁹¹ 'When I use the word "tracing", that is not only because it sounds so well in combination with sacred. It is especially because of the more than adequate meanings it carries. The first is the archaic meaning of traversing or travelling over a certain area. The second involves meanings like following or tracking the footprints of someone or something, like when on a hunt. Metaphorically, it can be transposed to studying something in detail, like the history of an idea, the whereabouts of money moving around the world, or one's ancestry. It may also refer to the search for traces, signs, evidence, or remains of something that indicate a certain activity or presence. Tracing then has to do with reconstructing and developing knowledge. The last type of meaning has to do with drawing or sketching. It may be the careful forming of letters or figures or even certain kinds of decoration, but usually it is a form of copying by hand through a transparent sheet. Here tracing has to do with constructing, modeled after an external reality' (Ganzevoort 2009:5).

⁹² A report concerning a Kenyan village chief informing his community on important social issues, was broadcast worldwide. According to *The Telegraph* of 20 February 2012 ('Help, sheep missing' 2012), 'tech-savvy' Francis Kariuki (47), the administrative chief of Lanet Umoja, is not only using Twitter as a crime-fighting tool, but also to send messages of hope and peace. Kariuki has managed to overcome the divide between cell phone and Internet usage, as discussed above, providing access to 'tweets' by making use of a third-party mobile phone application. Although Kariuki's official *Twitter* page shows 300 followers, it is estimated that a high percentage of the 28 000 residents in the area receive messages that are directly and indirectly sent out by him. A

a pragmatic and dynamic interaction with Twitter can be provided with the aim of developing future practices.⁹³

In the development of pragmatic and sustainable future practices⁹⁴, especially with a view on theological education, co-researchers⁹⁵ participating in a research project provided

further alternative example is the dynamic use of Twitter by Williamson to facilitate the orientation of readers to interpret the Bible: 'Just as Twitter can be used to invite real-time comments on a lecture, so it can capture users' real-time responses to a text as it is read aloud. In the exercise, participants (either students or invited guests) listen to the text of Mark and tweet their responses and reactions to the text as they occur. My students observe these responses in real time, experiencing how the same textual moments evoke different responses in diverse hearers of the text. As a homework assignment, they then analyze the entire body of tweets of one of the participants, looking for patterns in the responses and asking how that participant tends to fill textual gaps, make connections to their own life experience, and so on. This writing assignment then lays the groundwork for a class discussion about reader-response criticism, the ways readers participate in the production of meaning, the problems and possibilities of constraining a reader's interpretations, and the question of the differences between encountering texts aurally and in written form' (Williamson 2013:275).

⁹³ 'There is one important cautionary note that should be mentioned regarding the connection between memory and future consciousness. Although memory (and ideas of the past) may serve as a foundation for anticipating the future, future consciousness often extends beyond memory and the past. In fact, to believe that the future will be like the past is to remain stuck in the past. Experiences from the past, such as traumas and frustrations, can inhibit any new thinking about the future. Yet, one thing we learn from history is that there is always novelty and change; history does not entirely repeat itself. The future will not be the same as the past... individuals at times will abandon, reject, or ignore the past in attempting to create a new and different reality for themselves in the future' (Lombardo 2008: 29).

⁹⁴ Current designs, which are at risk of falling away and being relegated to the so-called 'zombie categories' (Reader 2008:1), need to be considered anew, in order to fulfil the well-known architectonic principle which stipulates that 'form follows function' (Sebestyen 2003:87).

⁹⁵ Father Bob (@fatherbob): On his Twitter profile, Father Bob describes himself as 'The Larrikin Priest, patron of the unloved and unlovely...' (@fatherbob 2014). This clergyman's active and legendary role in the public domain has led, to the establishment of the 'In Bob we trust-movement in Australia' (Fr Bob Maquire Foundation 2014). Having been part of the Twitter community since 2007, Father Bob has sent some 34 000 tweets: and he has built up a following of approximately 103 000 persons. According to the influential analytical instrument of the Twitter platform, *Twtrland* (2014), Father Bob is regarded as a 'super active' user with about 138 tweets per day and an amazing 612 retweets for each 100 sent. Assuming that a retweet by other users and followers indicate the importance of a message, I therefore also supply the tweet from each of those who retweeted the most. For Father Bob the most popular re-tweet (838 times) on 22 March 2014 was the following: 'Why, in God's/Good's name, does the biggest, richest, emptiest place in the region beg, bribe, bully the poorest to "take" our refugees?' (@fatherbob 2014; Twtrland 2014).

Stephan Joubert (@stephanjoubert): Stephan Joubert has been part of *Twitter* since April 2009. With approximately 4 600 tweets and 4 600 followers, he is one of the leading theologians in South Africa. He also has a public voice on Twitter, and introduces himself on his profile as follows: 'Jesus follower. Catalyst. Author. Part of the amazing echurch/ekerk & Joubert tribes'. Joubert, who is involved with various national and international universities, is a professor in New Testament studies, and is also the founder of the e-church in South Africa, which focuses, *inter alia*, on an internet ministry. With an average of 2.3 tweets per day he has an impressive 295 retweets per 100 sent (Twtrland 2014). His most popular retweet (61) was the following on 8 July 2013: '90% of all prayers are requests. The sad result: God is judged on his response time & people's faith on the number of answers they get' (@stephanjoubert 2012; Twtrland 2014).

important perspectives on digital presence and authority⁹⁶, the formation of a digitalised spirituality⁹⁷, the role of the need for an aphoristic theology⁹⁸ as well as new informed practices⁹⁹ and fresh expressions of being church in the world.¹⁰⁰

With this preliminary description a contribution is made to the orientation and understanding that 'practice itself enacts and names theology' (Campbell-Reed & Scharen 2013:241), leading to the formulation of an ordinary theology articulating a 'faith and a spirituality, and incorporates beliefs and ways of believing (Astley 2013:n.p.). In this mapping of expressions of faith in the digital world cognizance is given to the understanding that 'faith is something to be practised and not just believed; and [that] one of the tasks of practical theological research is to investigate and interpret the lived experience of people of faith' (Graham 2013:159). The popular theologian, Leonard Sweet has for example already encapsulated some of the aspects of this challenge in his article, *'Twitter theology: 5 Ways Twitter has changed my life and helped me be a better disciple*

Neels Jackson (@neelsjackson): As the editor of *Kerkbode* (Church Messenger), a well-known newspaper of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa, Neels Jackson is involved in church-related and religious reporting on a daily basis. Having been on the Twitter platform since 2009, he introduces himself as a 'Christian, husband, father, reporter, birder, photographer'. He currently has 1 053 followers and has sent 377 tweets. Twtrland indicates Jackson's Twitter activity as a low average 0.2 tweets per day with a good 69 retweets per 100 sent. His tweet which was retweeted most was the following on 6 October 2013: 'Welfare theology says that to receive one must give. The gospel says you have received to be able to give'⁹⁵ (@neelsjackson 2013, Twtrland 2014).

⁹⁶ 'Twitter plays a significant role in my own use of social media. I chose Twitter as my primary means of social interaction in cyberspace because of its simplicity and the 140 character limitation. On Twitter people are forced to tweet their information, opinions, truths and ideas briefly, yet with great clarity and relevance. Twitter forces those using this form of social communication to reflect about their content beforehand. Endless ramblings of egotists, attention seekers, melancholic personalities, etc, stand no chance here of attracting or keeping attention here on the long run. It's all about social connectivity and belonging here' (Co-researcher 2014).

⁹⁷ 'My faith is extended to and reflected in my daily interactions on social media. My Twitter profile and daily tweets hopefully reflect this as well. On the other hand, I think my own presence should constantly be informed in terms of my own sensitivity to the nature of this particular social medium' (Co-researcher 2014).

⁹⁸ 'Social media uses the same method as Jesus and the prophets i.e. parables. Having to be short, sharp and to the point, a sort of speaking in tongues, requires a theology built on personal experience of the Other, not others' experience' (Co-researcher 2014).

⁹⁹ 'Marshall McLuhan taught us the medium is the message. Twitter forces us to rethink our faith on the cyber squares amongst non-religious people and non-professional followers of Jesus. It could even force that age-old institution called the church out of the 'safe' space of irrelevant meetings to encounters with present-day issues and questions. Hopefully, a new generation of young marketplace theologians will also rise up to become our mentors, coaches and teachers in this fascinating new digitally connected world' (Co-researcher 2014).

¹⁰⁰ 'To be relevant and to also think, hear, listen and look through the lens of the digital world. Monologues in cyberspace; long sermons; naming and shaming of others in the name of God, etc, just won't survive here. Neither will long discussions about theological dogmas and local church matters fly here. It's all about relevant connectivity now, not only about more religious information' (Co-researcher 2014).

of Jesus’, indicating that ‘Twitter makes me a better Jesus disciple, partly because Twitter is my laboratory for future ministry’ (Sweet 2014). Therefore, in a unique way, the use of Twitter serves to illustrate Marshall McLuhan’s observation that ‘... media aren’t just channels of information. They supply the stuff of thought, but they also shape the process of thought’ (Carr 2010:6).

2.6 Conclusion

Tracing the trajectory of the new fluid dynamics of faith as articulated on Twitter, emphasis is placed on a so-called ‘ordinary theology’ with a distinct pragmatic emphasis, in which, ‘Academic theologians should be more curious about what ordinary believers have come up with’ (Astley 2002:149). Thinking in a pragmatic way about engaging with ‘ordinary believers’, one could hardly find a better praxis terrain than that of popular culture as expressed on Twitter. It is envisaged that, within the contours of Twitter as a praxis terrain, and as an expression of the digital world, a form of practical wisdom which values the stories of people and communities, will then be developed. It is to the cultivation of this practical wisdom that Sweet refers in his reflection on the *habitus*¹⁰¹ of tweeting:

When I look for something to tweet about, I find myself paying attention to life in heightened ways. With Twitter every day is an awakening to things that never would have registered before. Twitter gives me openings through which I can dive into newly discovered depths (Sweet 2012:n.p.).

¹⁰¹ ‘In theology this process is known as a *habitus*, a disposition of the mind and heart from which action flows naturally, in an unselfconscious way’ (Forrester 2000:5).

Chapter 3

Storied identity:¹⁰²

A practical theological tracing of the story of the hashtag(#) on Twitter

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Abstract

The phenomenon relating to the popularity and impact of social media, as an important expression of a new digital world, is already widely known and well-documented. In this research, the main focus will fall on a specific manner of expression associated with social media and, in particular, with the Twitter platform, namely the so-called hashtag(#) symbol. This symbol has come to comprise an important expression in popular culture, and is generally associated with various dimensions of activities in a social-media environment. Through the use of several examples from the recent past, the development and meaning of the hashtag(#) symbol will be explored and described. As part of this description, a motivation will be put forward as to why it is important, for the purposes of a practical theological involvement, as expressed in the dimensions of a lived spirituality, to take cognisance of the hashtag(#) symbol and the world that is associated with it. Arising from this motivation, and in congruence with the strategic character of practical theology, perspectives will be mapped out with a view to the further use and meaning of a dynamic reading of the hashtag(#) symbol.

3.1 Introduction

At the beginning of 2014, the destructive effect of the so-called *#NekNominate* challenge on the social media platforms, *Facebook* and *Twitter*, caused a sensation (Finn 2014). By way of background information, the following explanation pertaining to this craze can be cited:

¹⁰² This chapter is strongly associated with the metaphor of 'storied identity' with the supposition that a construction of identity is negotiated between 'online' and 'offline' realities (Campbell 2012:71-74; Campbell & Garner 2016:n.p.).

Known as 'NekNomination', the game involves filming someone finishing a whole bottle of hard liquor in one sitting, and sharing the feat on social media with the hashtag #NekNominate challenging others to do the same (Mintz 2014).

Initially, the *#NekNominate* challenge was merely aimed at daring people to consume as much alcohol as possible and to film the event, and then place it on the social media, along with a challenge to others to do the same thing. However, after this challenge led to the tragic death of two persons in Ireland (Daily Mail 2014), a South African captured the world's imagination with his reformulation of the dare, with a view to a positive outcome. Through the use of social media, Bret Lindeque transformed this destructive challenge, after having received a similar dare from a friend via Facebook, by reformulating it in a positive manner. Lindeque responded to the challenge by giving food to a poor man, filming this event, and posting the video clip on the social media platform, Youtube (News.Com.au 2014). In his introduction to the video clip on Youtube, viewed by approximately 192 000 people, Lindeque wrote: 'Downing a can of Castle Light is easy... Imagine if we all harnessed the power of social media to make a real difference in people's lives' (Mintz 2014; The Telegraph 2004). After the placement of this video, and through the creation of the hashtag, *#ChangeOneThing*, the number of Bret Lindeque's followers on the Twitter platform not only increased dramatically; but an initially destructive challenge was imbued with new content through the use of the hashtag(#) symbol (*#ChangeOneThing* 2014).

The continually growing popularity and use of social media, along with the influence of these media on numerous aspects of life, is illustrated in the foregoing example. These events illustrate how an apparently small act of an individual in a local context can acquire international significance through the use of social media. The act of taking cognisance of these events, in itself, should serve to emphasise the topicality and relevance thereof for a practical theological investigation. This orientation is embedded in the assumption that theology is part of everyday life (Vanhoozer 2007:7). Underlying this acknowledgement, Campbell-Reed and Scharen (2013:236) indeed correctly refers to this sensitivity and orientation in remembering the late Don Browning's initial claim for 'framing research within a "theological horizon" and acknowledging the normative claims present within

situations to be described'. This orientation is even more explicitly described by the well-known Dutch practical theologian, Ruard Ganzevoort, indicating 'dat de praxis self wordt beschouwd als geladen met theologiese materiaal' (Ganzevoort 2006:155).

Engaging therefore with expressions of popular culture-for example on the Twitter platform and even more specific within domains created by the hashtag(#) symbol-is therefore in the expectation that it will reveal 'signals of the transcendent, the presence of grace, rumors of angels' (Vanhoozer 2007:33). It is therefore in the actions and contours of the search for the story of the hashtag(#) symbol and its meaning, that some of the coordinates of a lived spirituality can be traced and mapped out as an expression of life in a digital world. With this envisaged description a contribution is made to the orientation and understanding that 'practice itself enacts and names theology' (Campbell-Reed & Scharen 2013:241), leading to the formulation of an ordinary theology articulating a 'faith and a spirituality, and incorporates beliefs and ways of believing' (Astley 2013:n.p.). In this mapping of expressions of faith in the digital world cognizance is given to the understanding that 'faith is something to be practised and not just believed; and [that] one of the tasks of practical theological research is to investigate and interpret the lived experience of people of faith' (Graham 2013:159).

Therefore, in the following paragraphs; by taking into account the documented example provided in the *Introduction*, illustrating the dynamics associated with the digital world; an exploratory investigation will be launched into the development and growth of social media, but with particular reference to the hashtag(#) symbol, as used on the Twitter platform. The article not only portrays my own search for the story of the hashtag(#) symbol and its meaning; but in the documentation of the research, and as an expression of the creative character associated with the investigation, I will also make use of the hashtag(#) symbol as a structuring device in order to indicate the respective rubrics of the article. This indicative use of the hashtag(#) symbol in the development of the various rubrics will comprise an expression of the creation of new domains of knowledge. The domains of meaning will be filled in with the contents derived from the ongoing practical theological movement between practice and theory, and will be embodied as a so called 'thick description of social situation' (Campbell-Reed & Scharen 2013:236) in various examples of the use of the hashtag(#) symbol on Twitter, accompanied by a theoretical

reflection in order to arrive at the formulation of further theory with pragmatic and strategic implications for practice.

3.2 Social media

The tracing of the hashtag(#) symbol is embedded against the background of the broader development of the Internet, which had officially been in use for 25 years by 2014 (Social Times 2013). The development of the Internet, or the 'World Wide Web', arose from the initial proposal of the British software programmer, Tim Berners-Lee, in 1989, for a comprehensive technological information management system (Carr 2010:9), as expressed in his development of a so-called 'hypertext transfer protocol' (Athique 2013:13). Hinton and Hjorth (2013:10) point out that:

For Tim Berners-Lee – the inventor of the World Wide Web – hypertext was crucial in the designing of the web as part of a networked environment. Berners-Lee's contribution was to use hypertext to link texts that could be located on any computer on the internet. This meant that texts could be connected to other texts, forming a complex series of relationships that Berners-Lee visualised as a web-like structure, hence the name 'web'.

On 6 August 1991, for the first time, Berners-Lee placed a publicly accessible link of the Internet project on the so-called World Wide Web (Athique 2013:14; Crystal 2011:12; Dewdney & Ride 2006:208). From the original development of the Internet within academic and research environments, it went on to obtain initial public exposure through static but connected web pages, as well as via the use of the email facility. However, for many people, the Internet only became a 'searchable reality after the arrival of Google in 1999' (Crystal 2011:12). In this regard, the development of the character and presence of the Internet facilitated a confluence of the use and benefits of different forms of information communication technology, such as the telephone, fax and television,¹⁰³ in which connections 'across a vast network made up of anything from physical copper wires to wireless satellite connections' (Hinton & Hjorth 2014:9) were effectuated. As a further expression of the influence of the advent of the Internet, reference has been made to the dawn of the so-called age of the new media, in which globalisation, the availability of

¹⁰³ 'The advent of the digital revolution in late-twentieth and early-twenty-first-century media culture apparently confirms both Jean-Luc Godard's belief in the "end of cinema" and other media critics' claims that we have even entered a post-television age' (Everett & Caldwell 2003:xi).

information and new forms of social expressions are embodied (Athique 2013:14). Defining the concept and characteristics of new media Flew (2008:2) has indicated 'that it involved the combination of the three C's – computing and information technology (IT), communications networks, and digitised media and information content – arising out of another process beginning with a "C", that of convergence' (Flew 2008:2).

Early in the twenty-first century, however, the Internet entered into a further development from the initial so-called static Web 1.0 usage mode to the so-called Web 2.0 technology. In their description of the new dimensions of the Internet, Koch and Lockwood (2010:94) point out that these dimensions consist of, *inter alia*: 'Storage technology (memory); display technology (xml, HTML), search technology (Google), publishing technology (wikis, blogging and Twitter) and organizing technology (social networks such as Facebook)'. Arising from this development, the accent falls on the opportunity that is available to 'Internet users to directly engage with and construct by easily pulling together the sorts of people and information that they are interested in' (Lesame, Sindane & Potgieter 2012:6). The development and popularity of so-called Web 2.0 technology, with particular reference to computer software and user experience (Hinton and Hjorth 2013:16), has led to the creation and establishment of so-called social media. Flew (2008:17) has summarized and indicated a twofold rationale for the growing popularity of Web 2.0:

...the concept of Web 2.0 has caught on for two particular reasons. First, it has embedded within it a range of the features that have long been seen as central to the Web as a communications infrastructure, such as the scope for participation, interactivity, collaborative learning, and social networking (social networking media is a commonly used alternative term to Web 2.0), as well as positive networking effects from harnessing collective intelligence; in other words, the quality of participation increases as the numbers participating increase, and this in turn attracts more new users to the sites. Second, some of the fastest growing websites of the 2000s have been based on Web 2.0 principles. These include sites such as the photography site *Flickr*, the online encyclopedia *Wikipedia*, the online user-generated video site *YouTube*, aggregated Web log (blog) sites such as *Blogger*, *Livejournal* and *Technoratti*, and the various personalized Web space sites such as *MySpace*, *Facebook*, *Friendster* and *Bebo*.

Currently, the further reinforcement of the popularity and ongoing development of social media is facilitated by the availability of increased mobile Internet accessibility, as effectuated by cellphones and tablet computers. In their book, “Understanding social media” (2013), Sam Linton and Larissa Hjorth write that social media, as a collective term, influence all levels of society; that they comprise an integral part of the lives of a significant number of people worldwide; and that dynamic and constant meaning is created through the use of different forms of social media (Hinton and Hjorth 2013:2). In this regard Zappavigna (2012:193) is correct in her assumption that ‘Most forms of social media, such as *Facebook* and other general social networking services, incorporate significant multimedia content, with images and video playing a significant role in meaning making’.

One of the most striking expressions and examples of the development of social media is undoubtedly the social media platform, Facebook, which was developed in 2004 from a college hostel room at Harvard University in the United States of America (Koch & Lockwood 2010:102). Since the initial development of Facebook and its subsequent growth – which, in metaphorical terms, would make it the third largest country in the world, after China and India, as far as user numbers are concerned (*The Economist* 2010:electronic source) – various other social media platforms, such as LinkedIn, Pinterest, Instagram, Google+, MySpace and various personal blogging services, have developed (Hinton & Hjorth 2013:35). O’Reilly, a renowned technological software entrepreneur and specialist, has indeed pointed out, with regard to the popularity of social media platforms associated with Web 2.0, that ‘Web 2.0 is not a technology, it is an attitude’ (O’Reilly 2005:electronic source). Some of the characteristics of this attitude can be seen in the dynamics of the Twitter-platform.

3.3 Twitter

Since 2006, the social media platform, Twitter, known as a so-called micro-blogging site (Zappavigna 2012:1), has displayed dramatic growth (White 2012:121). Through the use of only 140 characters, users have the opportunity to send short ‘tweets’ out into the world (Van Dijk 2011:333). In the use of Twitter, an important communication medium had been discovered, which – especially as far as the distribution of news is concerned – would change the world on a variety of levels. For example, this platform played an influential role in political events, such as the Arab Spring (Emiroglu 2013), as well as the two most recent American presidential elections (*The European Business Review* 2013). Social

media are also increasingly changing the dynamics of the existing work environment. A good example of this can be found in journalism as a career, which has been changed by the advent of the social media, with news being conveyed much faster by means of so-called public journalism. As an illustration of this, the 'tweet' that was sent ten hours before the first news reports appeared by Sohaib Athar (@ReallyVirtual) regarding the secret operation during which Osama bin Laden was killed by American special forces, can be mentioned (Mashable 2013).

However, social media platforms, and specifically Twitter, are dynamic in character, and display continual evolutionary developments. Thus, in 2009, for example, Twitter changed the phrase by means of which users were encouraged to 'tweet' news, from the original 'What are you doing?' to 'What's happening?' (Crystal 2011:11). Through the use of this altered question format, users are now encouraged to formulate 'tweets' that are focused more in an outward direction, on events in the environment, rather than on more personal aspects. Another significant development that would permanently change the social media landscape, was the evolution and use of the so-called hashtag(#) symbol. The documented research in this article will now focus in more detail on tracing the origin, use and meaning of the hashtag(#) symbol in the social media environment, with particular reference to the Twitter platform.

3.4 The story of the hashtag(#) symbol

Currently, the use of the hashtag(#) symbol is a common phenomenon, and the symbol is used for a variety of purposes. Zappavigna (2012:1) describes the hashtag(#) symbol as "an emergent convention for labeling the topic of a micropost and a form of metadata incorporated into posts." She further explains that the hashtag *symbol* 'are a convention for marking an annotation of the topic of a tweet' and appended to the tweet ('when more than one word, is assigned, it will usually be represented without spaces') (Zappavigna 2012:36).

In various advertising campaigns, the core of the commercial message is linked to the hashtag(#) symbol. Thus, for example, the South African cellphone company, Cell C, launched a striking advertising campaign under the key word, #CellCBelieve (Cell C 2013). Even the Dutch Reformed Church adopted the use of the hashtag(#) symbol by linking it to a youth rally that was being launched on a countrywide basis, namely #Imagine (Imagine

2014). A further example of the sheer scope that is facilitated by the use of the hashtag(#) symbol, is the prominence enjoyed by #oscarpistorius as a search phrase worldwide on Google (Google, 2014) during the court case in which the paralympic athlete, Oscar Pistorius, was tried for the murder of his girlfriend, the model Reeva Steenkamp. However, the hashtag #Bahrian used on Twitter during the civil protests of the Arab Spring currently still remains one of the most used hashtags of all time (Socialmedia, 2014).

In tracing the history of the hashtag(#) symbol, the following interesting facts come to light in connection with the development of the symbol as it is currently used: Initially, the hashtag(#) symbol was used within Internet chat rooms. The first person to use the hashtag(#) symbol within a different context, Chris Messina, suggested on 23 August 2007 that the symbol should also be used, in particular, on Twitter. Murthy (2013:n.p.) relates the history of this event as follows:

The first hashtag on Twitter, which he used as an example of the concept, was #barcamp – a loosely organized series of technology conferences that he helped to create. Messina later elaborated on the idea in a blog post, even drawing up designs of what the feature could look like on Twitter. He called them ‘channels.’ Writer Stowe Boyd proposed the name ‘hash tags’.

Not everybody, including the executive officers of Twitter, initially thought that this idea was feasible. However, the use and popularity of the hashtag(#) symbol was manifested for the first time in “tweets” that used the key word, #sandiegofire, in order to distribute news regarding forest fires that occurred during October 2007. Currently, the hashtag(#) symbol is commonly used to refer to a variety of matters, ranging from news events to jokes. The use of the hashtag(#) symbol was officially put into effect in July 2009 by the Twitter platform, to be followed in 2011 by Google+ and Instagram, while Facebook began to make use of this idea in June 2013 (Socialmedia Today, 2014).

The general popularity enjoyed by the hashtag(#) symbol obviously lies in the functional usage thereof. The functionality of this symbol is found in the common practice of sorting and selecting thematically related information from a torrent of messages within the context of social media platforms. Murthy (2013:n.p.) sums up the use of the hashtag(#) symbol as follows:

Any word(s) preceded by a hash sign '#' are used in Twitter to note a subject, event, or association. Hashtags are an integral part of Twitter's ability to link the conversations of strangers together.

A good example of the selection of information occurs when a well-known news event is taking place, and everyone is making use of the hashtag(#) symbol in order to contribute their own comments to the general commentary in this regard. With a view to the further development of perspectives entertained in this research, the remark of Zappavinga (2012:36) is therefore important to take note of: 'Hashtags are a form of conversational tagging...a form of metadata that emerged through community use on Twitter.' Thus, in a unique way, the use of the hashtag(#) symbol serves to illustrate Marshall McLuhan's observation that '...media aren't just channels of information. They supply the stuff of thought, but they also shape the process of thought' (Carr 2010:6).

3.5 A practical theology of hashtags(#)

The influence and significance of the digital age has already been investigated by various theorists on a variety of interdisciplinary levels. Initially, the work of Marshall McLuhan, coining the famous '*the medium is the message*'-expression (McLuhan 1964:11); followed, at a later stage, by the contribution of Neil Postman in his work '*Technopoly: The surrender of culture to technology*' (1993), set the standard for the interpretation of the dawn of the digital era. In addition to prominent intellectual figures, such as Lanier, Jenkins, Miller and Slater, in the interpretation of the digital age and coming from a broad interdisciplinary background; the most influential voice in this regard is currently that of the macro-philosopher, Manuel Castells (Flew 2008:60). In a variety of works, he offers perspectives on the impact of the digital world indicating amongst other that the 'information age' represents 'a culture of virtuality in the global flows that transcend time and space' (Castells 2006:381). In her turn, Sherry Turkle, a world-famous internet psychologist and philosopher focusing on the interaction between computer and human being, pointed out in her book, '*Alone together*' (2011), that what is becoming visible in a growing digital world is nothing other than vistas on 'the future unfolding' (Turkle 2011:n.p).

However, for the purpose of the concerned research, it is also of importance, in view of the accent of the broad research problem on the influence of the digital world on the religious and spiritual dimensions of being human, to seek for possible methods of enquiry. Except

for addressing and embarking on this research endeavour, due cognisance is given to a relevant challenge for a relevant and topical practical theology as indicated by Garner (2013:262):

[T]heologizing about the Internet needs to engage with all aspects of it, from 'older technologies' such as email and the World Wide Web, through to contemporary social media developments, while also keeping an eye firmly on any emerging trends.

Heidi A. Campbell of the United States of America has won renown as the world's leading researcher in this regard. In her two latest books, *'When religion meets new media'* (2010) and *'Digital religion'* (2013), she joins her colleagues in pointing out the comprehensive manner in which the digital age has influenced all religions.

All of the indicated theoretical points of departure attest to an earnest quest to discern the meaning of the media in general, and the social media in particular, for the day-to-day existence of the individual, as well as that of communities. Currently, the hashtag(#) symbol has become an important expression of a multi-dimensional existence in digital reality. Taking account of the impact of social media, as embodied, *inter alia*, in the use of the hashtag(#) symbol, it is self-evident that practical theology, which is interested in the praxis of every day, would not only take cognisance of this reality, but would also be involved in it in a particular way.

In the tracing of the story of the hashtag(#), as it is dynamically created and used every second on Twitter and other social media platforms, important markers are offered for the development of a practical theology of hashtags(#). On the basis of the documented research, the following perspectives, to name a few, would appear to be important in the creation and further development of a practical theology of hashtags(#):

Firstly, the character of the hashtag(#) carries strong nuances of relevance and topicality. In this regard research on the use of the hashtag(#) by newspapers provides for good examples on relevant and strategic use of these symbols. In research done by the PewResearch Journalism Project (2014) it was found that within the news context the hashtag(#) symbol were used in the following ways: Within the news context the hashtag(#) symbol signal that a tweet (and by extension the linked story) are related to a

particular ongoing news story or topic. In this regard the hashtag(#) symbol also serves the function of linking content into a larger conversation about a specific topic on Twitter. Except for these functions it is also found that the hashtag(#) symbol is used in promotional ways. In this regard the challenge would be indeed for practical theology, taking cognizance of not only the broader impact of social media, but also the dynamics associated with the hashtag(#) symbol, to “makes public and thus available for wider reflection, the coherence and wisdom of complex practices” (Campbell-Reed & Scharen 2013:241). A practical theology of the hashtag(#) would therefore not only see an opportunity in engaging with the hashtag(#) world, but would also see in it a guarantee of relevance and topicality.

Secondly, this relevance and topicality is confirmed by the fact that any individual can avail him- or herself of the opportunity to create a hashtag(#) and, in this way, render a contribution to the establishment of a specific domain and accent of meaning-making. The documented story of Brett Lindeque at the start of the paper illustrated how the creation of the hashtag *#ChangeOneThing* (*#ChangeOneThing* 2014), has led to the establishment of a new movement influencing people in a positive way. As such a practical theology of hashtags(#) needs to ask herself constantly in what way an own contribution is offered in the creation of (new) hashtags(#), possibly contributing to an existing conversation or alternatively articulate avenues for a new conversation and meaning-making?

Thirdly, the hashtag(#)’s function of adding the opinion of an individual to the confluence of opinions contributed by others, confirms the possibility of not only grouping information thematically, but also of opening up movements in this regard, with exponential dynamics. Zappavigna (2012:36) points to possibilities in this regard by referring to so-called “social tagging [by which] searching for the tag via the search interface that Twitter provides [users] ‘may elect to subscribe to a feed of tweets containing this tag: a process known as following the tag’ (Zappavigna 2012:36). This social aspect associated with the use of the hashtag(#) symbol has indeed implications for practical theology emphasizing the movement from only a ‘living human document’-orientation towards acknowledging being part of the ‘living human web’, underscoring “a matrix which is not only relational, but which highlights the very ‘interconnectivity of selfhood” (Campbell-Reed & Scharen 2013:242). In this regard a practical theology of hashtags(#) would indeed be sensitive for ‘the need to extract relevant information from the continuous stream of data originating

from such online sources' (Aiello, Petkos, Martin, Corney, Papadopoulus, Skraba, Göker, Kompatsiaris & Jaimes 2013:1268). Taking notice of the creation and use of so-called 'trends' through the use of hashtag(#) symbols as an expression of what themes are to be relevant and topical in a digital living human web. In this regard Murty (2013) described the importance and meaning of trending topics on Twitter as an expression of the so-called society of experience which is event-based. For a practical theological agenda interested in describing a lived spirituality, taking note of these accents, would indeed be of importance.

A practical theology of hashtags(#) therefore also indeed requires, in the fourth place, a many-faceted multidisciplinary exploration and investigation of the empirical reality that is created and facilitated through the use of the hashtag(#) symbol. Entering and describing this reality pose the challenge of 'theological knowing in a lived research practice' (Campbell-Reed & Scharen 2013:241-2), contributing to the 'gathering [of] stories that are empirical and descriptive' (Campbell-Reed & Scharen 2013:258). Addressing these challenges, a practical theology of hashtags(#) need to be aware of factors 'such as the fragmentation and noise of the user generated content, the *real*-time requirement, the burstiness of events and their time resolution' (Aiello *et al*, 2013:1268). Discerning the technical requirements for such a research endeavour it is taken as given that any enquiry associated with the development of a so-called practical theology of hashtags(#) need to be informed through a strong interdisciplinary accentuated mode of research.

Against the background of these four possible future research avenues, and in a subsequent description in the tracing of the story of the hashtag(#) symbol, a formulation of a possible practical theology of hashtags(#) can be articulated. A practical theology of hashtags(#) is not implying a formal structured volume of theology, rather than a sensitivity, orientation and articulation of dynamic movements in the digital world and its implications for a lived spirituality.

3.6 Keep the conversation going

Through the use of several examples from the recent past, the development and meaning of the hashtag(#) symbol was explored and described. In the introduction to this article, an indication was given of possibilities in which the hashtag(#) symbol renders a contribution in the facilitation of specific new dynamics in a digital environment. By making use of

#ChangeOneThing an initially destructive challenge was imbued with new content through the use and the dynamics associated with the hashtag(#) symbol (*#ChangeOneThing* 2014).

As part of this description, a motivation was put forward as to why it is important, for the purposes of a practical theological involvement, as expressed in the dimensions of a lived spirituality, to take cognisance of the hashtag(#) symbol and the world that is associated with it. Arising from this motivation, and in congruence with the strategic character of practical theology (Heitink 1993:174; Osmer 2008:175-176), perspectives regarding a dynamic reading of the hashtag(#) symbol were provided with the aim of developing future practices. The popular theologian, Leonard Sweet has for example already encapsulating some of the aspects of this challenge in his article, *'Twitter Theology: 5 Ways Twitter Has Changed My Life and helped me be a better Disciple of Jesus'*, indicating that 'Twitter makes me a better Jesus disciple, partly because Titter is my laboratory for future ministry' (Sweet 2014).

A prominent sports channel in South Africa, in the marketing of the interactive use of the Twitter platform amongst viewers, uses the phrase: 'Keep the conversation going!' (@SupersportTV, 2014). In the continuation of the quest to articulate and trace the meaning of a possible practical theology of the hashtag(#), the character of the research is also reflected in this exhortation: 'Keep the conversation going!'. For practical theology becoming part of and even by keeping the hashtag(#) conversation going, a strategic contribution is rendered to an era in which popular and digital culture have become important channels for religion and spirituality (Ganzevoort 2013:29). The challenge would indeed be for practical theology to not only take notice of this described environment, but also to engage with the so-called hashtag(#) symbol in such a way in order to contribute to new accentuations of a lived spirituality.

Chapter 4

Convergent practice:¹⁰⁴

A practical theological tracing of #humanwaste as a trend on Twitter

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Abstract

Different and divergent facets of human existence are increasingly becoming embodied within a digital domain. The social media platform, Twitter, comprises an important expression of the digital world and social media, but also of popular culture. In a practical theological tracing of the theme of human waste on the social platform, Twitter, new contents and meaning related to this concept are mapped out in a variety of categories. On the basis of existing and newly developed research methodologies, an exploration is conducted in order to indicate how the digital world can assist in the creation of new empirical realities, hermeneutic outcomes and strategic involvement. In this tracing of human waste as a theme on Twitter, accents of a possible lived spirituality are sounded out and verbalised. It is on the basis of these descriptions that possibilities unfold for new practical theological orientations, both for the present and the future.

4.1 Introduction

In the highly-acclaimed science fiction film, *Gravity* (2013a:electronic source), the impact and danger of space litter was recently demonstrated to viewers in a gripping manner by means of 3D technology. In the movie, portraying a space-adventure, the brilliant medical engineer on her first shuttle mission, Dr. Ryan Stone (Sandra Bullock), says to veteran

¹⁰⁴ This chapter is strongly associated with the metaphor of 'convergent practice' with implications for the realisation of everyday practices and the manner in which this is expressed in theological language (Campbell 2012:76-80; Campbell & Garner 2016:n.p.).

astronaut Matt Kowalsky (George Clooney): 'Clear skies with a chance of satellite debris' (Gravity 2013b:electronic source).

This striking film leads the viewer to the important realisation that the problem and impact of human waste¹⁰⁵ should be understood on multiple levels and within various different contexts. Arising from this important perspective, and in conjunction with the theme of the conference, namely human waste, I will use this contribution to explore and discuss the occurrence and meaning of human waste within the space of the social media platform, Twitter. In this regard utterance is given to a practical theological reflection which is concrete and contextual: 'This way of thinking is always concrete, local, and contextual, but at the same time reaches beyond local contexts to transdisciplinary concerns' (Müller 2009:205). In this specific research process, a search is conducted for associated thematic markers such as, *inter alia*, the meaning of human waste within the context of communication technology and the role of popular culture, as embodied on a social media platform such as Twitter. An exploration of, and involvement in this reality confirms a relevant and pragmatic practical theological contribution.

The structuring of the presentation is backed up by the generally accepted ongoing circular and spiral movement practical theological movement between practice and theory (Browning 1991:84), and systematised on the basis of descriptive-empirical, normative and pragmatic perspectives. By making use of Osmer's (2008:4) four-question practical theological enquiry¹⁰⁶ as a grid for mapping this envisaged contribution, my presentation will focus on the following four main aspects. Firstly, by asking *What is going on?*; Twitter will be described as a possible expression of the rise and influence of the new social media phenomenon, creating a so called third space for reflection '...requiring new logics and evoking unique forms of meaning-making' (Campbell 2013:4). Secondly, the anatomy of human waste in the digital age will be investigated (*Why is this going on?*). Thirdly, an exploration of the art of hermeneutics will be conducted in tracing the expressions of human waste as a trend (#humanwaste) on Twitter (*What ought to be going on?*). Fourthly and lastly, the quest for ways in which the tracing of human waste as a trend and the contribution towards possible new and relevant articulations of a pragmatic practical

¹⁰⁵ 'Rules governing defecation, hygiene and pollution exist in every culture at every period in history' (George 2008:n.p.).

¹⁰⁶ What is going on?; Why is this going on?; What ought to be going on? and How might we respond?

theological involvement will be addressed (*How might we respond?*). The addressing of this fourth question will be supported by a 7-step methodology associated with an investigation in transversal rationality, as accommodated within a postfoundational practical theology (Müller 2004:300).

4.2 What is going on? - Twitter and a digital world

As background to the interpretation of the reality of a digital world, various scholars (Hassan 2008; Flew 2008; Campbell 2011; Wagner 2012; Campbell 2013) point to at least three driving factors currently¹⁰⁷ leading towards further development and demarcation of the digital landscape: Firstly, the continuing development and evolution of the internet; secondly, the connectivity and mobility brought about by the internet and specific apparatuses such as cellphones and tablets; and thirdly, the influence and magnitude of so-called social media. All three of these factors are addressed in the focus on the use of the social media platform, Twitter.

Twitter, as a well-known social media platform, is indicated as the chosen praxis terrain for the execution of the project. The motivation for this can be found on a variety of levels: Firstly, Twitter is currently one of the most rapidly-growing social media platforms. Early in 2014 Twitter had 241 active users with an average of 500 million tweets send per day (Smith 2014: electronic source). A recent report by Worldwideworx [2013] on the social media landscape in South Africa has indicated that the user base of Twitter had grown to 2,2 million by the end of June [2012], or 100 000 new users a month since August 2011). With this statistics in mind, Twitter, indeed offers a good expression of a digital world, with the accentuation of aspects such as, *inter alia*, mobility and fluidity of information. Secondly, by means of its character and dynamics, Twitter offers access to nationally and internationally available empirical data for analysis, which can be used without any ethical restrictions.

¹⁰⁷ Also see Grieve (2013:115) speculating on the four major features of digital practice in the new future: 'First, the web will be smarter, knowing not just what users say, but what they mean. We will see more semantic content, and the applications that support it... Second, new media will be mobile and we will see an increase in augmented reality (AR) in which digital media are laid over physical real-world environments... Third the web will grow more interactive... Lastly, more and more applications will be outsourced to the cloud, with users accessing information stored on the web remotely from netbooks, tablet computers, smart phones, or other devices... What combination of these features of new media will win out we cannot tell.'

As part of a descriptive-empirical moment of reflection, an endeavour is made to preliminarily describe the dynamics of the praxis of involvement further. Twitter, developed in 2006 (Zappavigna 2012:Kindle edition), is generally known as a microblog, since it offers the user an opportunity to send a message, within the scope of 140 characters (Van Dijk 2011:333; Wagner 2012:120).

These messages, known as 'tweets', can be sent through the internet, mobile devices such as Internet-enabled phones and iPads, and text messages. But unlike status updates, their strict limit of 140 characters produces at best eloquently terse responses and at worst heavily truncated speech" (Murthy 2013:n.p.).

This service has been called the 'SMS of the internet', with the difference that, unlike an ordinary SMS, a Twitter message is visible to everyone. The transmission of messages or 'tweets' is conducted from an own Twitter account, where the user has the option of creating an own profile, *inter alia* through the use of a Twitter address, or 'handle', and a biographical description, with a photograph and personal background (Murthy 2012:1059; Qiu, Lin, Ramsay, Yang 2012:710). Naturally, all these variable factors provide the constituents for an exceptionally dynamic interaction leading to the following exiting possibility:

...Twitter has the potential to increase our awareness of others and to augment our spheres of knowledge, tapping us into a global network of individuals who are passionately giving us instant updates on topics and areas in which they are knowledgeable or participating in real-time (Murthy 2013:n.p.).

4.3 Why is this going on? - Thinking before tweeting....

Various authors and researchers have already indicated that as citizens of a new digital world, connectedness has become the new passport. In his well-known book, '*Flat world: A brief history of the twenty-first century*', Friedman (2006:8) writes for example that the pathways of the world has changed in the wake of, *inter alia*, the significant developments brought about by various kinds of communication technology, as a result of which more and more people are now able to come into contact with other people across the world. Castells (2006:381) sums up the situation by referring to

the new social structure of the Information Age, which I call the network society because it is made up of networks of production, power, and experience, which construct a culture of virtuality in the global flows that transcend time and space.

This passport of connectedness is opening up doorways to new worlds where the connectedness and acceleration of life (Rushkoff 2013:n.p.) is mediated through the transformational mobile device (Sweet 2012:n.p.), a growing and evolutionary internet availability and the development of associated social media platforms (Campbell 2011:1-18). In their recent study Aiello, Petkos, Martin, Corney, Papadopoulus, Skraba, Göker, Kompatsiaris, Jaimes (2013:1268) rightly indicated:

As social networking services progressively diffuse in more geographical areas of the world and penetrate increasingly diverse segments of the population, the value of information that is collectively generated on such online platforms increases dramatically. In fact, interactions and communication in social media often reflect real-world events and dynamics as the user base of social networks get wider and more active in producing content about real-world events almost in real-time, social media streams become accurate *sensors* of real-world events.

In this regard, the social media platform, Twitter, has been selected as a typical embodiment¹⁰⁸ of this so called 'mubinomic world' (Knott-Craig 2012:n.p.), demarcating the formation of a virtual ecosystem of connections across various spheres and layers of life. Accessing the service most likely through wireless internet mobile devices, Twitter provides the platform for users to make use of this microblogging site '...to present themselves through ongoing 'tweets', revealing a self that is both fluid and emergent' (Wagner 2012:120).

4.4 What ought to be going on? – A practical theological tweeting?

The interpretation of written texts, as presented, for example, in the documents associated with the Christian tradition, as well as of 'the living text of human action' (Brown 2012:112),

¹⁰⁸ 'With the rising popularity of social networking software, questions continue to emerge regarding new forms of technologically mediated community. Issues being explored include how the blogosphere reshapes our notions of community and how Twitter followers can cultivate a sense of community through creating interlinked personal networks' (Campbell 2013:67).

comprises part of the dynamics of the task of theological hermeneutics (Stiver 2003:178). The interest of practical theology in practices is confirmed by newer developments that bear the accents of an interest in practically driven events that are contextually and concretely placed within everyday life. In exploring the art of hermeneutics with a view to tracing the expressions of human waste on Twitter, I proceed from the assumption that ‘Theology is not for Sundays only... Theology is an everyday affair... Theology not only articulates beliefs but suggests “designs for living”’ (Vanhoozer 2007:7). Underlying this acknowledgement is the conviction that practical theology encapsulates a hermeneutics of the lived religion, in which preference is given to the praxis itself and to the knowledge concerning God that is being developed, found and lived within this praxis (Ganzevoort 2008:11-12).

Underscoring the perception that the culture in which we live is shaping us (Sweet 2012:N.p.), is the belief that the hermeneutics of popular culture¹⁰⁹ holds the promise of pointing beyond, as Cobb (2005:294) aptly indicates:

Theology of culture depends upon this kind of trust that our cultural expressions can testify to a reality that transcends them – a reality that is really there, that matters, and in which providence is at work. Theology offers a language to speak about this reality, and can help articulate what is going on in the depths of popular culture... it is wise to remain open to the more discerning markers of culture. Even of popular culture.

Engaging with popular culture in the expectation that it will reveal ‘...signals of the transcendent, the presence of grace, rumors of angels’ (Vanhoozer 2007:33), I envisage that by means of a hermeneutical practical theology of lived religion, focusing on the praxis of everyday living, tweets regarding human waste can be traced¹¹⁰ and described.

¹⁰⁹ ‘...popular culture is therefore the shared environment, practices, and resources of everyday life for ordinary people within a particular society’ (Lynch 2005:14).

¹¹⁰ ‘When I use the word “tracing”, that is not only because it sounds so well in combination with sacred. It is especially because of the more than adequate meanings it carries. The first is the archaic meaning of traversing or travelling over a certain area. The second involves meanings like following or tracking the footprints of someone or something, like when on a hunt. Metaphorically, it can be transposed to studying something in detail, like the history of an idea, the whereabouts of money moving around the world, or one’s ancestry. It may also refer to the search for traces, signs, evidence, or remains of something that indicate a certain activity or presence. Tracing then has to do with reconstructing and developing knowledge. The last type of meaning has to do with drawing or sketching. It may be the careful forming of letters or figures or even certain kinds of decoration, but usually it is a form of copying by hand through a transparent sheet. Here tracing has to do with constructing, modeled after an external reality’ (Ganzevoort 2009:5).

Within the practice of the commonplace, which implies actuality and relevance, amongst other aspects, a quest is conducted for the embodiment of a lived religion and the transcription thereof in possible new, normative categories as expressed, *inter alia*, in a so-called ordinary theology¹¹¹. Possibilities, such as the development of a postfoundational practical theology, within which an orientation of transversal reality is sustained, comprise a further enlargement of existing hermeneutical orientations in practical theology, which confirm the importance of empirical descriptions on a multitude of levels. A possible embodiment hereof can be found in a pragmatic theological exploration of the occurrence of the key word, *#humanwaste* (linking up with the theme of the conference) as a theme or trend on the social media platform, Twitter.

4.5 How might we respond? – Trending en tweeting #humanwaste

The phrase *#humanwaste* is an indication of a so called trend on Twitter. With trending reference is made to the process of monitoring, detection and extraction in real time of relevant thematically sorted information from the continuous stream of data originating from online sources (Aiello, Petkos, Martin, Corney, Papadopoulus, Skraba, Göker, Kompatsiaris, Jaimes 2013:1268). Although the process of topic detection is a complex process (Aiello, Petkos, Martin, Corney, Papadopoulus, Skraba, Göker, Kompatsiaris, Jaimes 2013:1279); I have made use of the 7-step methodology (Müller 2004:300) associated with an investigation in transversal rationality, as accommodated within a postfoundational practical theology (Müller 2004) in the exploration and description of the occurrence of the search phrase, *#humanwaste*, on the Twitter platform:

4.5.i Description of the specific context

The broader context has already been indicated as the popular and constantly-growing social media platform, Twitter, arising from millions of users and thousands of tweets that are sent per minute on a worldwide basis. The focus of the conference however falls specifically on “human waste”, Through the use of the @ and # symbols, specific search domains on Twitter are explored by making use of the built-in search facility on this particular platform. The @ symbol is used specifically in the search for individuals, since

¹¹¹ ‘...ordinary theology in some sense “works” for those who own it. It fits their life experience and gives meaning to, and express the meaning they find within, their own lives. It is highly significant *for them* because it articulates a faith and a spirituality, and incorporates beliefs and ways of believing, that they find to be salvific - healing, saving, making them whole. Ordinary theology helps people spiritually and religiously’ (Astley 2013:n.p.).

this symbol is used to indicate a so-called personal name/address, generally known as a 'Twitter handle': 'The dialogue between Twitter users occurs through the at-sign (e.g. user can direct tweets to another user by prefixing a post with an at-sign before the target user's name)' (Murthy 2013:n.p.).

By means of the # symbol, a search is conducted within the flow of 'tweets' selected in terms of a specific focus and thematically grouped under the concerned 'hashtag'¹¹², in this case #humanwaste. In this way, the focus falls on a certain thematic selection from a stream of information, with a particular focus on a specific theme. Murthy (2013:n.p.) therefore indicates:

Any word(s) preceded by a hash sign “#” are used in Twitter to note a subject, event, or association. Hashtags are an integral part of Twitter's ability to link the conversations of strangers together.

4.5.ii Describing and listening to in-context experiences

After the broad description of the extent and nature of the context – in this case the social media platform, Twitter (<https://www.twitter.com>) – the next important step is to obtain greater clarity, by means of empirical research, regarding the nature and contents of tweets that are associated with the theme of 'human waste'. In a preliminary investigation (during November 2013), it became clear that @humanwaste and associated Twitter-handles is linked to, *inter alia*, individuals who chooses the concerned name(s) as a Twitter handle, and whose tweets mostly bear themes of trivial nature (@humanwaste, Twitter 2013:n.p.). In the search conducted under the hashtag(#) symbol, a stream of tweets with a strong environmental focus are also found, thematically seeking answers for, *inter alia*, the question as to how the impact and costs of human waste can be positively addressed and counteracted.

4.5.iii Interpretation of experience in collaboration with co-researchers

Not only is the description of the experience important, but the interpretation that the narrator himself attributes to the experience is also significant. In the third movement, Müller (2004:302) the focus thus falls on the meaning / interpretation attributed to the experience by co-researchers. In this regard, the Twitter platform provides an opportunity to work with exceptionally authentic data, since the concerned tweet is not formulated by

¹¹² 'Hashtags are an emergent convention for labelling the topic of a micropost and a form of metadata incorporated into posts' (Zappavigna 2012:n.p.).

its author with the idea that it is going to be used for research (and there are also no ethical objections, since the data are already in the public domain). Moreover, the different reactions to the initial tweet are also available on Twitter, thus representing an interactive discussion on the theme. There is also the possibility to make use of the interactive character and nature of Twitter, using various actions to engage with characters. In this regard Murthy (2013:n.p.) rightly indicates:

Anyone can post a tweet directed to @BarackObama or @CharlieSheen, and many do. Additionally, anyone can instantly see a tweet and respond to it. One does not even need to 'know' the other user or have their permission to direct a tweet at them.

4.5.iv Description of the experience in terms of different traditions of interpretations

Every community displays certain perceptions and behaviour that are shaped by specific traditions and discourses (Müller 2004:302). It is important to identify these perceptions and discourses, in order to develop a greater understanding thereof. Events and experiences are also interpreted differently by different communities. The ultimate goal is an optimal understanding of the different experiences. In the tracing of the meaning of the various tweets, but also of the discussions that arise from the tweets, a new way of approaching practical theological hermeneutics can be established. In this way, the so-called 'theatre of the text' expressing 'the living text of human action' (Brown 2012:112) is given concrete shape within the context of a new practical theological hermeneutics.

4.5.v Religious reflection and spiritual aspects with the focus on God's presence as experienced in a specific situation

Regarding the theme of #humanwaste, George (2008:n.p.) makes the following remark:

I say that all the world's great faith instruct their followers how best to manage their excrement, because hygiene is holy. I explain that taking an interest in the culture of sanitation puts them in good company. Mohandas K. Gandhi, though he spent his life trying to rid India of its colonial rulers, nonetheless declared that sanitation was more important than independence.

Taking this observation seriously is to seek God's presence in specific experiences, portraying a practical theology that renders a unique contribution. This is not a forced

process, however, but rather an honest endeavour to arrive at an understanding of the co-researcher's religious and spiritual interpretation and experience of God's presence or possibly the lack of such an experience (Müller 2004:302). The researcher's own understanding of God's presence in a given situation renders a valuable contribution to the process of interpretation. In this regard, my own Twitter account (@javdberg) also comprises part of the research and discourse; and I need to ask myself how I will respond to the theme of #humanwaste in my own tweets.

4.5.vi In-depth description of the experiences through interdisciplinary investigation

In his description of this sixth movement Müller (2004:303) not only indicates that interdisciplinary discourse comprises an integral part of practical theology, but also sketch the character of this dialogue: Such discourse may sometimes be difficult and complicated, because terms, argumentative strategies, context and the explanation of human behaviour differ from one another in the different disciplines. Through interdisciplinary discourse, patterns and actions are identified within the greater framework, leading to a clearer picture, so that greater understanding can be achieved. Interdisciplinary discourse not only includes dialogues between the various theological disciplines, but also dialogues with other scientific disciplines, traditionally including anthropology, sociology and psychology, amongst others. With regard to the new domain of research, an interdisciplinary discourse with experts from the information technology and media studies environment is a prerequisite for further development. However, it remains important to incorporate the different interpretations in a greater overall picture, by means of integration. The creating of a new language and meaning is already acknowledged within the media studies field:

New media studies, as much as old media studies, accepts that the communication and representation of human knowledge and experience necessarily involves language and technological systems... requires us to rethink the intercession of media technologies in human experience (Dewdney & Ride 2006:58).

Currently, and in my opinion rightfully so, many classical theological concepts have lost their meaning (Ganzevoort, 2013:5-6) within a new digital world described by some as the 'iPod, Youtube and Wii Play'-culture (Laytham 2012:1). In search of new and fresh

expressions of faith, the possibility exists of articulating a public practical theology, providing a space for negotiating new meanings between old and new sources and readers (Ganzevoort 2013:19). Being sensitive towards the process of compiling a future research agenda for practical theology, I would definitely agree that in a evolving digital world, the intersection between new media technologies (for example Twitter) and human experience provide for a relevant and contextual research domain only accessible through interdisciplinary conversation.

4.5.vii Development of an alternative interpretation

The ultimate goal is not merely to describe and interpret the experience or events, but also to interpret them in such a manner that new meaning will be associated with them. Thus, the focus does not fall on generalisations, but rather on deconstruction and emancipation, so that greater possibilities of application will ultimately result. As Müller (2004:304) rightfully indicates: 'It rather happens on the basis of a holistic understanding and as a social-constructionist process in which all the co-researchers are invited and engaged in the creation of new meaning.' An endeavour is thus made to obtain a new angle of incidence on the acquired knowledge and understanding by means of the foregoing process and interdisciplinary discourse, in order to arrive at new interpretations and meaning. Such new interpretations and meaning are found, and also further developed, in tracing and contribute to #humanwaste on the Twitter platform. As a practical means of involvement, and arising from the project in the development of alternative meaning¹¹³, for example, one could consider the possibility of requesting conference delegates to provide comments, by means of own tweets, and with the inclusion of the hashtag marker, #humanwaste, as part of the contributions made during a conference such as this one emphasising that '... social media could be used to manipulate the course of online and offline human dynamics' (Aiello, Petkos, Martin, Corney, Papadopoulus, Skraba, Göker, Kompatsiaris, Jaimes 2013:1268).

4.6 Conclusion

Ironically enough, in reading the contents of some of the tweets on the Twitter-platform, one may rightfully wonder whether these particular tweets have not themselves become part of the problem of #humanwaste? In fact, the problem of space-litter referred to in the

¹¹³ George (2008:n.p.) is articulating an alternative meaning to the theme of human waste with the following remark: 'How a society disposes of its human excrement is an indication of how it treats its humans too.'

introduction may well comprise a problem of cyberspace. A practical-theological research agenda with a sensitivity towards the future could thus indeed accord priority to the occurrence, influence and meaning of cyber-litter as a new expression of human waste. Except for charting this new possible and challenging research avenue, the aim of this practical theological contribution was to explore and trace the possible role of a social media platform like Twitter in addressing the theme of #humanwaste. In this regard the engagement with the Twitter-context in this paper portrayed a practical theological engagement and strategic involvement with new empirical realities and hermeneutic outcomes.

Chapter 5
Shifting authority:¹¹⁴
A practical theological reflection
on Twitter's normative function in tweeting dignity

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Abstract

Social media makes an important contribution to a rapidly changing world in which various domains of meaning are described anew. The evolving nature and dynamic character of social media therefore provides for a rich praxis terrain with which to interact from a practical theological orientation. More specifically associated with the theme of this contribution, the social media sphere also provides an excellent space not only to rethink but also to re-enact expressions of dignity in society. The research is facilitated from a practical theological orientation, with particular focus on a normative dimension as embodied in aspects of dignity. Through the use of an interdisciplinary approach and methodology, some contours of dignity specifically associated with South African politics as well as the so-called Charlie Hebdo attacks in 2015 in Paris expressed on the social media platform, Twitter, are described and discussed. From this empirical analysis, description and discussion, a practical theological reflection is offered in which aspects of dignity associated with a normativity function are described. Some practical theological perspectives contributing to future relevant tweeting on dignity are also formulated and provided in conclusion.

¹¹⁴ This chapter strongly links with the metaphor of 'shifting authority' (Campbell 2012:74-76; Campbell & Garner 2016:n.p.). According to this, social media is, amongst others, responsible for negotiations as to which theological voice would be authoritative and how control of knowledge would continually occur. The chapter, which expresses the continual process of negotiation, binds normativity as reverse side to the concept of authority.

5.1 Introduction

In presenting a contribution to the Festschrift of colleague Yolanda Dreyer, I acknowledge her as a colleague and friend whose life and message carry an exceptional influence. Not only as one of the first female ministers in South Africa, but also as a rated and recognised international academic, she makes a unique contribution to the expansion of practical theology. The uniqueness of Yolanda's contribution is underlined by the fact that, as a scholar with doctorate degrees in Practical Theology and New Testament, she personifies the establishment of a multidisciplinary scientific methodology that gives scope to persons marginalised in various ways. This has led to Yolanda's research having a strong relevance-contextual character with topical themes related to the embodiment of dignity being emphasised.

In the light of and in line with Yolanda's sensitivity towards topical research themes, I note in my contribution the influence and meaning of social media on the formulation of theological content in which a dynamic interpretation of dignity functions strongly. In the acknowledgement of the meaning of context, I note especially the growing meaning and importance of social media, and in particular the micro-blogging platform, Twitter. The research is guided by a practical theological enquiry as to how the theme of dignity is formulated in a dynamic way on Twitter leading to the construction of a new relevant understanding of normativity.

In the outline of the research, an attempt will be made to demonstrate the classical spiral movement of practical theology between practice and theory, as motivated by Browning (1991:41). The overall outline of the article will thus consist of two broader movements, namely (i) a movement from practice to theory, and secondly (ii) a movement from theory to practice. I will firstly start by presenting a practical theological description of a Twitter polemic between two prominent South Africans showcasing aspects of a contextual understanding of dignity. By referring to the Steve Hofmeyer and Conrad Koch/Chester Missing incident a local and contextual case study will be offered (News24 2015:n.p.). This is followed secondly by a short introduction in which social media, and in particular Twitter as an important platform, is described as a prominent driver of a changing world. Thirdly, these theoretical perspectives are followed by empirical research in which the so-called Charlie Hebdo attacks in 2015 in Paris (BBC 2015:n.p.) are presented, analysed and discussed. In the last section of the article a critical practical theological reflection is

offered, with specific strategic perspectives, as interpretation and elucidation of the normativity associated with Twitter messages on dignity.

5.2 Tweeting dignity?

5.2.i A South African Twitter polemic – A case in time

The polemic on Twitter in South Africa between the singer, Steve Hofmeyr, and Konrad Koch through his puppet and alias, 'Chester Missing', has been reported widely in the South African media. The following report from eNCA (2014a:n.p.) conveys the background to this well-commented event:

JOHANNESBURG – It's off to court for a bout in the ring between Steve Hofmeyr and Chester Missing. Comedian and ventriloquist Conrad Koch – the personality behind the puppet – will be opposing the Afrikaans singer's interim protection order against him, in the Randburg Magistrates Court on Thursday. Hofmeyr secured the order on November 5, in which it stated that the respondent was, among others, barred from harassing or threatening the applicant or making defamatory remarks against him. Koch, tweeting under the user-name of his puppet @chestermissing, immediately defied the gag order with this response via Twitter: 'Haha. Stevo, I am gonna burn u for this one'. Hofmeyr and Koch/Missing have repeatedly come to blows. In October last year, a lively Twitter exchange between them led to Hofmeyr blocking tweets by @chestermissing. The latest fracas reportedly stemmed from an opinion piece by Koch in *The Times*, in the role of political commentator. Koch placed Pick n Pay and Land Rover under scrutiny by questioning their sponsorship of the *Afrikaans is Groot* (AIG) music concerts in Pretoria, at which Hofmeyr performed this month. This was in response to Hofmeyr's earlier tweet about apartheid in October, 'Sorry to offend but in my books Blacks were the architects of Apartheid. Go figure.' The tweet caused a stir on social media and Hofmeyr was accused of being racist, stupid, and a peddler of ignorance. One company, Williams Hunt in Port Elizabeth, then withdrew a sponsored bakkie which was meant to be used by Hofmeyr during his PE gigs. The ANC Youth League (ANCYL) reacted to the tweet by saying while they fully respected the right of all national groups to practice their cultures in peace, they wholeheartedly condemned the statements made

by Hofmeyr. As such, they had planned to march against Hofmeyr at Moreleta Church between November 14 and 22, when the AIG festival was taking place, but their application to protest was declined by the Tshwane municipality. Hofmeyr remains active on social media and has put out a request asking to be informed if Koch mentions him or his sponsors, saying this would form the basis of an additional subpoena against the puppeteer. He has also stated that until Koch explained the 'hate speech' in court on November 27, the ventriloquist was not allowed to contact him, his sponsors or his business partners directly or indirectly. Koch, meanwhile, has said his tweets against Hofmeyr could not amount to hate speech, as he'd never said anything hateful about the singer, according to a report by *Beeld* newspaper.

From this report it is clear that the interplay of various multifaceted perspectives as reflected on social media, and in particular in this case, on the Twitter platform, provides for an important praxis terrain for practical theological reflections regarding dignity.

5.2.ii Perspectives of the Steve Hofmeyer and Conrad Koch/Chester Missing incident

The two main characters in the above described debate are Steve Hofmeyer and Conrad Koch who participates through his hand puppet, Chester Missing. Hofmeyer is a well-known Afrikaans actor and a prominent singer. He is also a writer and politically active, in particular with aspects associated with Afrikaans and the promotion of its culture (Hofmeyr 2015:n.p.). Koch grew up in a primarily English environment and obtained a degree in social anthropology at the University of Cape Town. He became well known through the use of Chester Missing, who delivers satirical political comment (Koch 2015:n.p.).

The core of the debate concerns provocative political remarks, in particular by Hofmeyer on Twitter, which resulted in challenging tweets by Koch/Chester Missing. This resulted in wide media coverage and a court challenge by Hofmeyer requesting a restraining order against Koch/Chester Missing. This was denied with cost on 27 November 2014 in the Randburg Magistrate's Court, with Magistrate Budlender significantly commenting that:

... a society that takes itself seriously risks bottling up its tensions and treating every example of irreverence as a threat to its existence. Humor is

one of the solvents of democracy (eNCA 2014b:n.p.).

The underlying layers of this incident pose the question to practical theology if social media, and more specifically Twitter, provide an easy accessible space with a large audience, for example, a new formulation and presentation of normative aspects of dignity?¹¹⁵ This research endeavour aligns well with Osmer's (2008:n.p.) third task of practical theological enquiry, namely the normative, in which the focus is placed on the construction of theological and ethical norms as well as providing some examples of the so-called best practices (Osmer & Schweitzer 2003:3). In the following subsection a brief overview of social media, especially Twitter, and aligning with newer developments in practical theological, will be provided.

5.3 Practical theology and Twitter?

In this section of the article the development in the practical theology, on the one hand, is described as orientation point for the research. On the other hand, a motivation is presented as to why Twitter presents an important space for practical theological involvement and research.

5.3.i Theology in practice

Practical theology has a rich history of development. Initially, practical theology was seen as a so-called application science in which future ministers are prepared for church practice. The focus for practical training was primarily on activities taking place within the church walls. Practical training was then also strongly characterised by a deductive methodology with the acknowledgement of normative sources such as Scripture and tradition, to which high authoritative value was awarded. Through this understanding the normative perspectives developed by way of other theological disciplines, such as biblical and dogmatic sciences, are applied in practice through the facilitation of practical theology. In this regard Ganzevoort (2014:20) wrote the following:

In the history of our discipline, there has been a strong current of understanding practical theology as applied theology. That is, practical theology was understood as the discipline where theology was applied to

¹¹⁵ When we translate a theological concept of human dignity into concrete rights language, we might state that human dignity implies respect for the equal autonomy of each person and the right not to be devalued or treated in a degrading or unjust manner. Human dignity does not reside within the individual, but expresses a normative status that is imparted to every human being, regardless of origin, capability, success, gender or race (Vorster 2012:n.p.).

practice, especially to the professional practice of ministers and priests. Practical theology added the layout and presentation so to speak to the texts that other theologians had written.

The practical application of these normative principles was mainly focused on the congregational context. The facilitation of the fixed normative principles has the character of a linear model of communication within which specific truths are conveyed.

Because of the development in the practical theological science and directly influenced by factors linked to postmodernity, more and more attention was given from the end of the previous century to the description and interpretation of activities outside of the church walls as part of everyday life. Being strongly practice orientated (Hermans 2014:1210), '[a]ttending to the empirical is an important element of contemporary practical theology' (Osmer 2014:61). The defined meaning of context has become increasingly important. In the discussion regarding context the dynamic interpretation of the Scriptures and tradition is emphasised. As a result normativity was described in terms of a strong contextual connectedness.¹¹⁶

This development is further supported through a movement which does not only focus on clergy functions (clerical paradigm) and church functions (ecclesiocentric models of practical theology). A growing awareness has developed with the acknowledgement of primary non-church-orientated practices in which 'religious praxis within the context of public life in its various dimensions is recognized' (Osmer & Schweitzer 2003:5). The awakening in the study of spirituality, the development of the so-called 'ordinary theology'¹¹⁷ and 'lived religion' has contributed towards the empirical exploration of the

¹¹⁶ Practical theologians know and take responsibility for the fact that each phase of our work operates by explicit and implicit theological commitments ... Practical theologians reflect on the contours of lived human experience in relation to a wide range of theological issues including the transcendence and immanence of God, the problem of evil and human suffering, human knowing, means of change and transformation, and the relationship between divine and human action... Some even make the bold case that new theological insight can come about through empirically based investigations of human experience in particular contexts (Cahalan & Mikoski 2014:5).

¹¹⁷ For the church's openness to ordinary life should entail and *openness to ordinary theology*, and an acceptance of ordinary theology's openness to change, both with respect to the theology of churchgoers and of those beyond the church's more conspicuous portals. Ordinary theology is truly a warts and all theology, open to the alley (Astley 2002:161).

world outside the doors of the church.¹¹⁸ The focus of an empirical practical theological description should therefore not only encompass church practices, but also, in particular, daily life. In this regard Ganzevoort and Roeland (2014:93) write:

The concepts of praxis and lived religion focus on what people do rather than on 'official' religion, its sacred sources, its institutes, and its doctrines. As such, practical theology has much in common with what in disciplines like anthropology, sociology, and media studies, is known as 'the practical turn': the turn away from institutes and (cultural) texts to the everyday social and cultural practices of ordinary people.

The character of activities taking place on the street, as well as development in scientific methodology, thus presented possibilities for an inductive approach that in turn presents unique challenges to the interpretation of normativity. From an inductive methodology the locus of practical theology shifted to the recognition of the theological load and normativity inherently linked to practices. Currently the developing concept of 'lived religion' is commonly used as an expression of this development in practical theology.

5.3.ii Twitter theology?

The origin, growth and use of mobile cellular phone technology and the Internet over a period of more than two decades have changed the world forever. One of the direct results of the use of the Internet was the origin of the social media revolution. Driven by the initial establishment of the Facebook platform, various other forms of social media, for example Twitter and Instagram, have seen the light over the past decade. In view of the previous description on the development of practical theology, it is thus obvious that the scope of social media suggests an important context for further reflection. Fuchs (2014:6-11) has therefore rightly indicated that:

Social media is a complex term with multi-layered meanings ...
Understanding social media critically means, among other things, to engage with the different forms of sociality on the Internet in the context of society ...

¹¹⁸ The well-known sociologist Nancy Ammerman echoed this in the following words: 'Finding religion in everyday life means looking wherever and however we find people invoking a sacred presence' (Ammerman 2014:191).

For the purpose of the research I focus on the use of the Twitter platform. The use of shorter text messages with usually a limit of 140 characters offers empirically favourable data, especially in the light of the research aim, namely the formulation of popular theological content and to determine the normative value given to it (Holmberg, Bastubacka & Thelwall 2016:340). In order to further focus the empirical question, the prevalence of dynamic expressions of dignity on Twitter is noted.

5.4 Expressions of dignity on Twitter?

5.4.i Empirical overview of Twitter data on the Charlie Hebdo attacks

The Charlie Hebdo attacks during January 2015 in Paris (BBC 2015:n.p.) have been selected as an initial practice terrain investigation for two reasons. Firstly, it presents a good and relevant indication of the general use of Twitter as part of social media comment and, secondly, it indicates how the theme of dignity is associated with a specific multilayered incident on social media. In the presentation of these practice examples, a contribution is made towards a reflection regarding the praxis of dignity within a social media environment.¹¹⁹ The description is further enriched by the presentation of preliminary and relevant theoretical perspectives.

With regard to this specific research the orientation of observation was carried out by a social media consultation company Fuseware (2015) – which has access to the daily Twitter stream of all tweets.¹²⁰ With the assistance of this company a refined search was carried out about the incidence of references to certain events by using sophisticated software. Because of the high incidence of data the search for tweets had to be refined, and certain keywords with a strong Christian-orientated subtheme were identified. The following were some of the most important findings:

- All keywords relating to the Charlie Hebdo attacks and associated hashtags (namely, #charliehebdo and #jesuischarlie) in the context of the identified

¹¹⁹ ‘Social media are not the causes of revolutions and violence, they are rather a mirror of the power structures and structures of exploitation and oppression that we find in contemporary society’ (Fuchs 2014:204).

¹²⁰ ‘Without an over-elaboration of technical details, the Twitter stream Application Programming Interface (API) allows access to “streams” of public data flowing through Twitter. This is done by accessing what Twitter calls “the Public Firehose”... Twitter limited public access to the Firehose stream to the first 1 per cent of the available Tweets at any given moment so making it possible to view and analyze 1 per cent of the public generated Tweets every “streaming second” into a database. This is commonly called “Twitterdata mining” (Lutz & Du Toit 2015:n.p.).

Christian-related keywords were searched for. This, therefore, represents a Christian-biased subset of the Charlie Hebdo conversations.

- In terms of volume, almost all of the conversation happened in early January 2015 after the attacks had taken place. By February 2015, the conversation had sharply declined to a small fraction of the initial spike, indicating how quickly a conversation around topics gets stale on social media.
- The automated sentiment was identified to be mainly negative, as expected, with 48% of the content having negative connotations, while 50% of the content remained neutral. The content originated from a 66% male audience, mainly an older 35+ demographic. Most of this content originated from the USA and Europe, with a small fraction coming from Africa.
- Aside from the main hashtags around the event, the top words used were faith, 'God', 'Christian', 'Pope' and 'Jesus'. In terms of authoritative content from influencers, the top post from the *Washington Post* shared an article on the Pope's remarks on Charlie Hebdo: 'You cannot insult the faith of others'. This resulted in widespread criticism, as it seemed to go against the fundamental tenets of free speech. Other authoritative posters included Associated Press, *Huffington Post*, Time.com and the Wall Street Journal – mostly all postings about the Pope's remarks on the subject.

Looking at some of the most popular individual tweets in terms of a normative accent the following can be noted: The most retweeted post was not related directly to the attacks, but put things into perspective with another previous situation in Norway (see Figures 1).

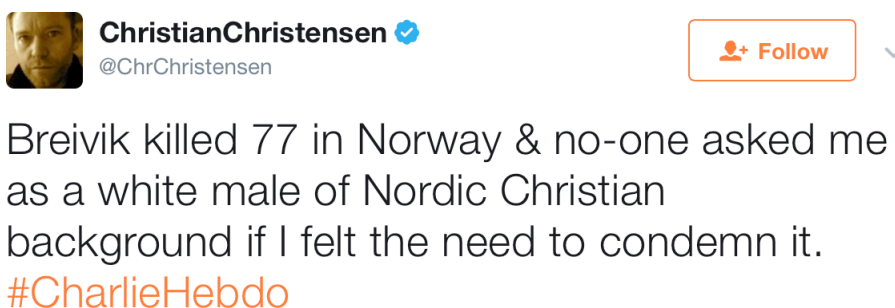


FIGURE 5.1: Most retweeted post regarding the Charlie Hebdo attacks.

Some other popular and important shared tweets with a strong explicit emphasis on the normative character of dignity include the following (see Figure 2 and Figure 3).



Glen Gilmore ✓
@GlenGilmore

Follow

RIP [#AhmedMerabet](#), a Muslim police officer murdered trying to save [#CharlieHebdo](#), who mocked his faith. [#JeSuisAhmed](#)

FIGURE 5.2: Digital transformation.



Islam for Christians
@islam4christian

Follow

[#Murder](#) is prohibited in [#Judaism](#),
[#Christianity](#) & [#Islam](#)

Click bit.ly/1qJALQ7

[#CharlieHebdo](#) [#ParisShooting](#)

FIGURE 5.3: This account intends to be a main informative online source of knowledge about the true message of Prophet Jesus and how Muslims view him.

5.4.ii Tweeting dignity – Twitter’s normative function?

Normativity is a multicoloured concept, which is found across a wide range of disciplines and in various contexts. A good example of this is to be found in the contribution of Stoehr (2016:n.p.) regarding the normativity associated with writing and spelling in social media practices. The focus in this research is however on normativity in theological discourse which is generally associated with ‘divine action’ (Root 2014:12). Henriksen (2006:215) describes the relation between theology and normativity as follows:

[N]ormativity of theology is related to how it, by and through its enterprise, makes it possible to reconstruct and accessible the reasons for what counts as the normative doctrines of the church as well as to suggest proposal for articulations of such normative doctrines.

In negotiating proposals for the articulation of normative doctrines, a strong emphasis is usually placed on the so-called four traditional sources of Christian theology, namely Scripture, tradition, reason and experience (Osmer 2012:338). These sources are used to

negotiate a specific normative position within theological discourse. Cameron et al. (2010:53–56) described this process of negotiation by way of a ‘theology in four voices’. According to this model, the four voices of theology, constantly interacting with each other and singing in the choir of theology, consist of the following:

The first voice is that of *normative theology* strongly associated with Scriptures, the creeds, official church teaching and liturgies. *Formal theology* is responsible for the second voice and consists of the theology of theologians as well as the dialogue with other disciplines. The third voice is that of the so-called *espoused theology*, which is embedded within the articulations, used by a group to express its beliefs. Lastly *operant theology* is expressed within the actual practices of the group.

The growing articulation of especially the last two mentioned voices, namely that of *espoused theology* and *operant theology*, reflects the development of normativity in the Christian theology and, in particular, practical theology. This contextual-sensitive orientation has caused the seizure of a one-sided proclamation model in which the so-called truths are proclaimed in an a-contextual way. Instead a postmodern practical theological orientation would see the Christian tradition as ‘fundamentally open’ and to be constructed by a contextual sensitive ‘faith from below’ (Beaudoin 2014:196). Some postmodern practical theologians would therefore indicate that the formulation of a contextual-driven normativity is at most of preliminary nature and in constant flux (Wigg-Stevenson 2015:3).¹²¹ However, in articulating these aspects of normativity, the emphasis lies more on the creation of a discussion rather than on proclaiming certain unconditional truths. In this regard Wigg-Stevenson (2015:8) has boldly stated the following:

[T]heology can no longer imagine itself as able to boldly proclaim truth from outside the exuberant chaos of daily life. Rather, theology must take the risk of stepping inside the action-or rather, the risk of acknowledging that is where we have always been-to humbly extend the hand of friendship to those we meet therein. It must seek to work with faithful partners beyond those voices codified in authoritative texts, and whose lives still bear the presence of God. Theological normativity in such a

¹²¹ ‘Nevertheless, the messy process of identifying, understanding, and negotiating these normative dimensions remains a conundrum. Acknowledging this messiness and complexity, I suggest, is not a way of escaping the conundrum, but a way of dealing with it in a constructive and responsible way’ (Kaufman 2016:160).

model shifts the goal away from proclamation, which requires hearers of the word, towards conversation.

This orientation has however led to the critique that although practical theology has developed into a discipline that has become fluent in talking about concrete human practice, it has become hesitant in speaking about God's action from the locale of the concrete (Root 2014:13). Taking these perspectives as well as the critique seriously and in discerning the normative task of practical theology, Osmer and Schweitzer (2003:3) provide the following important reference:

The normative task of practical theology focuses on the construction of theological and ethical norms by which to critically assess, guide, and reform some dimension of contemporary religious praxis. It asks the question: What forms ought religious praxis take in this particular social context? Here, practical theology looks in two directions simultaneously. It looks to the resources mediating truth, goodness, and beauty in a particular religious tradition and to the problems and possibilities of contemporary religious praxis in the particular context under investigation. While it is primarily at this point that practical theology will enter into dialogue with other theological and ethical disciplines, the norms of praxis it develops are not merely the application of the normative proposal of these fields. This is because the norms it develops take into account the particularities of the context of praxis it is seeking to address. Norms of praxis in practical theology, thus are context-dependent in a strong sense. They are informed by the outcome of empirical and interpretive work.

The acknowledgement that the focus of practical theology is not only directed towards only the theological world, but encompasses all domains of human existence, has direct implications for the understanding of normativity. As a result of these explorations new demands are set not only regarding the interpretation of contexts, but also how normativity should function within non-traditional surroundings for example social media and more specifically Twitter. In my opinion Osmer (2008:n.p.) presents in his third movement of a practical theological exploration important perspectives to reflect on this challenge. Taking the above explanation seriously leads to the development of a constructive practical

theology in which new theological perspectives and patterns are provided for contemporary Christian living in a postmodern digital connected world.

5.5 Perspectives for a relevant theological involvement

5.5.i Public theology, practical theology and lived religion

The development of public theology has precisely the objective to be a prophetic voice from within an orientation where contextual sensitivity plays a big role. Public theology, therefore, dovetails well with practical theology, which emphasises local and concrete practices, which can be described empirically. During the last few years the concept of lived religion has developed strongly in the humanities, in particular in sociology, anthropology, psychology and also practical theology. The concept creates room for the inclusion of the meaning of public and practical theology and places particular significance in tracing the so-called 'sacred moments' in common events.¹²² In the consideration of dignity and specifically the Twitter references around the Charlie Hebdo attacks, as well as the South African debate about Steve Hofmeyer and Conrad Koch/Chester Missing, as the practical terrain, lived religion material for further reflection is found.

The challenge to facilitate not only an accountable but also relevant normativity in a contemporary contextual practical theology is, according to Osmer, carried and supported through a 'spirituality of prophetic discernment' (Osmer 2008:n.p.). In this regard Osmer (2008:n.p.) writes: 'The normative task of practical theological interpretation is grounded in the spirituality and practices of discernment'.¹²³ Important normative markers in the Christian tradition have already been built into this description. 'Prophetic discernment' concerns both divine revelation and the human interpretation thereof for concrete situations. In the description of specific and concrete contexts as well as in the search for signs of the presence of God, empirical research embodies an important moment in the development of practical theology.

¹²² 'The concepts of praxis and focus on what people do rather than on "official" religion, its sacred sources, its institutes, and its doctrines. As such, practical theology has much in common with what in disciplines like anthropology, sociology, and media studies, is known as "the practical turn": the turn away from institutes and (cultural) texts to the everyday social and cultural practices of ordinary people' (Ganzevoort & Roeland 2014:93).

¹²³ 'In the orientation of a "spirituality of discernment" the following is assumed: Discernment is the activity of seeking God's guidance amid the circumstances, events, and decisions of life. To discern means to sift through and sort out, much as a prospector must sift out the dross to find nuggets of gold. It also means to weigh the evidence before reaching a decision, much as judge listens to alle evidence in a case before reaching a verdict (Osmer 2008:n.p.).

In reflecting on the research I am aware that I, as the researcher, implicitly already have a normative position. I implicitly acknowledge that in the formulation of questions regarding theological concepts, grades of correctness can be used. The underlying orientation in this assumption is that I have at my disposal certain normative criteria to enable me to evaluate the correct use of theological concepts. While acknowledging this position I, however, take note of the warning of Henriksen (2006:209) that, 'Normativity is problematic when it precludes us from seeing what we should be able to see as researchers'. The danger could, therefore, be that a one-sided singular understanding of normativity could prevent me as the researcher to consider other perspectives. Precisely for this reason I am sensitive towards considering other possible perspectives regarding normativity. Taking this position I do not want to foster a relativistic position where '[r]eligion, faith, and theology become only locales of discourse and have no possibility of saying anything about what is true or real' (Root 2014:253). However, in acknowledging my own subjective understanding of normativity, I also open up my horizons of understanding for other possible and alternative perspectives on normativity. The research landscape associated with the project for example implicitly acknowledges that '[p]opular culture is both a resource for theologians and a potential source of new theologies' (Willhauck 2013:95).

Within this, my own conviction that social media, and in particular Twitter, present an actual and relevant medium for expressions plays an important role. Social media, however, also assume the presence of concrete human beings as unique individuals with personal biographies. In my emphatic involvement with the research I am sensitive that in the search for the use of theological expressions on Twitter, humans as users of Twitter play an essential role. The research, therefore, does not describe normativity quantitatively in the weighing and counting of concepts, but also qualitatively in the acknowledgement of the presence and influence of biographical elements.

5.5.ii Preliminary descriptive perspectives for relevant theological tweeting

The following, to name just a few, important overarching markers emerged, amongst others, from within the two practice examples that were reflected on.

Social media and more specifically Twitter, as a possible new public sphere,¹²⁴ succeed in presenting new dimensions of normativity and authority. Tweets, which are re-tweeted, give a new dimension to the initial Twitter expression and render a definitive authority to the relative words. It is naturally systematically coupled to the relative profile, which is, ironically, often defined by the so-called 'followers'. Themes addressed on Twitter are very topical and require quick reaction because debates on social media start quickly, but can then disappear as rapidly. Another interesting marker is the use of the 'hashtag' sign, which emphasises certain key aspects of the discussion under question. The expression of key words often has the result that core truths are highlighted for a wide audience and looked at in a new and refreshing manner. Tracing the sacred (Ganzevoort 2009:5) in these contours, one would for example be touching on shades of identity, power, dignity guilt, shame and even humour, to name a few.

5.6 Summary and conclusion

Social media provide for an important platform in the formulation of new accents of normativity. In acknowledgment of this perspective the contribution focused on the role of Twitter in the dynamic formulation of aspects of dignity. Underlying in the presentation of these perspectives are aspects of normativity. By means of presenting a practical theological reflection on selected Twitter data, it was indicated empirically how dignity can be strategically tweeted with the possibility of the creation of a practical theological strategic involvement.

¹²⁴ 'Twitter revolution claims imply that Twitter constitutes a new public sphere of political communication that has emancipatory potentials' (Fuchs 2014:180).

Chapter 6

Multisite reality:¹²⁵

@jesus - A practical theological following of Jesus-expressions on Twitter

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Abstract

Expressions of Jesus are portrayed through various ways in the digital era. With the launch of the iPhone in 2007, it was for example baptized as the so-called Jesus-phone. Negotiating the meaning of the interaction between the digital world, religion and spirituality, various digital expressions on the identity of Jesus can be mapped out. However, focusing on the social media platform, Twitter, and by making use of a practical theological following of the @jesus-handle, messages and expressions related to Jesus are traced. In the analysis of these messages a practical theological description of expressions of Jesus as portrayed on Twitter is provided, informing a relevant understanding of Jesus in die digital world.

6.1 Introduction

The American summer of 2007 was to be remembered for the long-awaited and much anticipated public release of the Apple iPhone. The iPhone combined the power of an iPod, cell phone and PDA into what Steve Jobs, Apple's president, claimed would be 'your life in your pocket'. Just hours after Jobs' public webcast demonstration, the iPhone was touted and referred to as the 'Jesus phone'. In the days that followed, some tech loggers lauded the Jesus phone as the 'holy grail of all gadgets' and complimented with images communicating the phone's supposed divinity (Campbell 2011:1-2).

¹²⁵ This chapter is strongly associated with the metaphor of 'multisite reality' in which a concrete expression of the movement and amalgamation between an 'online' and an 'offline' reality is provided (Campbell, 2012:80-83; Campbell & Garner 2016:n.p.). The chapter further offers perspectives as to how a so-called 'online' and 'offline' reality would relate with each other in the constructing of the meaning of the Jesus-name.

This serves as an excellent introductory example of the intersection between the evolving field of information communication technology – also called new media – and making sense of Jesus in a digital-lived religion. Observing this, then, also confirms that the Jesus name can be interpreted continually and dynamically at different levels of contextualisation. In my opinion it links dynamically to the confirmation from New Testament studies that '[t]he names of Jesus therefore have a tradition history that should be interpreted on different levels of contextualization' (Dreyer 2012:n.p.).

This contribution follows – resonating the 'following'-metaphor strongly associated with the well-known social media platform Twitter – perspectives on the naming of a so-called digital Jesus. This following is further accentuated by using the @ symbol, normally used to indicate a Twitter handle (username) in the digital sphere, and in connection with the name of Jesus ('@jesus') strongly emphasised in the title of the contribution. Finding a link with the central aim of the research project, namely, to account for interpretative encounters with Jesus from specific historical conditions and which have specific performative consequences, an attempt to make sense of a digital Jesus is provided. By using the following sub-sections, a possible identikit of sorts of the digital Jesus is sketched. Firstly, and by way of providing a background, an attempt to briefly describe the current connected digital age will be offered. Secondly, and actively engaging with available digital palette colours and painting techniques, some empirical research will be offered in order to provide some concrete evidence on constructing the face of the digital Jesus. In conclusion, perspectives on the meaning of a digital Jesus for the description of lived religion will be provided from a critical onlooker's point of view.

6.2 Background – A connected digital age

6.2.i A triple digital revolution?

Scholars differ in naming this time of change in human existence. From the so-called 'digital revolution' (Anderson 2015:n.p.), 'the second machine age' (Brynjolfsson & McAfee 2014:n.p.), or 'the evolution to the fourth industrial revolution' (Schwab 2016:n.p.), one driver is present in all the equations configuring our time, namely that of the role of digital technologies. Brynjolfsson and McAfee (2015:n.p.) have indicated that 'we're living in a time of astonishing progress with digital technologies – those that have computer hardware, software, and networks at their core.' This digital revolution is responsible for the fact that different and divergent facets of human existence are, for example,

increasingly becoming embodied within a digital domain. Goldin and Kutarna (2016:30) have therefore rightfully indicated that the 'advent of digital' is a second Gutenberg moment, providing for 'a new medium for capturing, communicating and exchanging data...'.

Focusing in on the research project, Anderson (2015:n.p.) recently indicated that the "triple revolution" of the internet, mobile devices and digital social media is revolutionizing the way we lead our lives and live out our faith.' In starting to calculate the meaning of these far-reaching developments for practices of faith, it is therefore important to remember that '[p]aradigms have shifted and are shifting. People interpret their worlds differently than previously and consequently use different languages than previous generations' (Müller 2011:n.p.). Illustrating the art of reading and interpreting changing maps, Khanna points to the fact that maps initially oriented around holy sites and that these maps were as much about 'theology as geography' (Khanna 2016:n.p.). Taking the movement of tectonic plates and seismic adjustments seriously, one can rightfully ask about the mapping of theology and faith in a digital geography of change.

6.2.ii A practical theology of digital-lived religion

In spite of the various advantages opened by these digital freeways, it is indeed also this dynamic and growing sphere of digital living that presents multi-dimensional challenges. The specific meaning of this quest for this particular research project can be motivated in terms of Campbell and Garner's (2016:n.p.) argument that '[w]e live in a world where our digital technologies are increasingly intersecting with our spiritual lives.' Taking the character and scope of this research project into account, the question is then what the appropriate approach would be to use in the research. Due to epistemological and methodological considerations, acknowledging the implicit underlying philosophies that are concerned with theories of knowledge construction (Swinton & Mowat 2006:32), a practical theological orientation serves my approach towards the research project best. Providing contours of understanding might be helpful in order to define not only my positioning within the field, but also to describe some of the characteristics of contemporary practical theology. Practical theologians internationally would currently, to my mind, agree on three aspects regarding the character of practical theology:

First of all, practical theology is concerned with the theological study of practices: While other theological disciplines focus on the textual sources of a religious tradition or on the systematic conceptual structures, practical theology deals primarily with practices. This is the reason why there is strong overlap with social sciences, just like systematic theology overlaps with philosophy and biblical theology with the study of languages (Van den Berg & Ganzevoort 2014:181). This orientation is indeed portraying a 'bold case that new theological insight can come about through empirically based investigations of human experiences in particular contexts' (Cahalan & Mikoski 2014:2). The challenge for the practical theologian is to 'read' the praxis hermeneutically by moving between the empirical data and the sources of the Christian tradition (Ganzevoort 2003:77-78). In terms of practices, within which not only primary theologically defined practices are assumed, acknowledgement is accorded to the 'theory-laden importance' of the character of practice. In the empirical description of the practice, recognition is given to the already implicit presence of normative perspectives. Therefore theological normative perspectives do not have to be incorporated into the practice; they already implicitly and in an inductive manner form part of the fibre of all possible practices. Ganzevoort (2004:18) emphasises this understanding, stating that 'the theological and normative dimension of practical theology is not something added to empirical investigations, but present in the material we research.' In describing the tracing of normativity, there is a dynamic movement and interaction between practice and theory descriptions towards further development. In the empirical search it is emphasised that 'practical theology might truly become theology of praxis: building theological theory from the material of human praxis' (Ganzevoort 2004:18). Recently, the above-mentioned reflection has also been acknowledged in particular through further developments in practical theology, and specifically the development and description of a 'lived religion' or 'lived spirituality' (Ganzevoort 2009:n.p.). This approach entails an innovative interpretation of practical theology, which developed from a discipline that was initially only concerned with clerical and congregational ministry (Osmer 2008:n.p.), into a discipline focusing on the 'radical transformation of modern religion into postmodern spiritualities' (Graham 1996:38).

Secondly, this focus on practices is especially relevant in view of the fact that practical theology focuses mostly on contemporary practices. Indeed, as rightfully indicated by Miller-McLemore (2012:14), practical theology has a focus on 'the tangible, the local, the concrete and the embodied... it remains grounded in practice and stays close to life'.

Internationally, practical theology at present demonstrates a further development within which the interest in practices contextually, and in a concrete manner, forms part of everyday life. In this expansion of traditional horizons the gap between the traditional interest in Sunday practices is widened to include the everyday life of all the days of the week. It is, in fact, the discovery of the art of hermeneutics of everyday life which confirms the development that 'theology is not for Sundays only... theology is an everyday affair... theology not only articulates beliefs but suggests "designs for living"' (Vanhoozer 2007:7).

In summary, practical theology is 'theology in active mode, grappling with the contemporary culture. It does not pretend to rise above culture but recognizes that it is deeply implicated in it' (Cameron, Bhatti, Duce, Sweeney & Watkins 2010:13). In her book, *'Digital religion: Understanding religious practice in new media worlds'* (2013), Heidi Campbell therefore rightly points out some important dimensions of a digital lived religion as follows:

Digital religion as a concept acknowledges not only how the unique character of digital technology and culture shapes religious practice and beliefs, but also how religions seek to culture new media contexts with established ways of being and convictions about the nature of reality and the larger world (Campbell 2013:4).

The growing interdisciplinary study of religion and the internet during the past few years has highlighted the understanding that the new media have become embedded in our everyday lives, and are commonly used as a platform for spiritual engagement (Campbell 2011:10). With regard to the theological interpretation of the relative research it is, in my opinion, necessary to initially present a broad framework dealing with the relationship between theology and technology. In this regard the following remark by Garner (2013:252) is important:

Thus theological reflection on technology, and by implication the Internet, is often a kind of contextual theology, which locates itself as a theological endeavour seeking to articulate and critique a practical theology rooted in the experience of the individual or community, through an explicit dialog between the past (represented by scripture and tradition) and the present (represented particularly by personal and community experience).

A relevant focus from a practical theological viewpoint would therefore relate to the tracing and describing of ways or modes in which technology, spirituality and theology are expressed. It is further envisaged and proposed that this focus should lead to a revalidation of the human condition, according consideration to, amongst other aspects, the influence of the virtual era on the human spirit (thus spirituality) on individual but also on collective levels.

Thirdly, practical theology has an action-oriented dimension (Heitink 1993:105) informing the pragmatic task of this discipline (Osmer 2008:n.p.), leading to a positive contribution in the development of practice. More than other disciplines in theology and also more than mainstream social sciences, practical theology often has an action-oriented dimension and aims to develop and sustain practices rather than merely describe or understand them. This is what Rick Osmer (2008:n.p.) calls the pragmatic task of practical theology. Reader (2008:7) even points to the outcome of this strategic endeavour, saying that ‘practical theology is transformational in that it aims to make a difference not just to people, but also to understandings and situations in the contemporary world.’

In taking the complexity of practices seriously, research in practical theology is very often associated with a strong design-creative component, with an emphasis on creating the preferable or desirable (Hermans 2014:124-125). With the current research project in mind, as well as taking the characteristics described above into account, one can indeed start talking about creating a practical theology for digital-lived religion. In a practical theology for digital-lived religion an affinity for the digital world, associated with connectivity, constant liquidity and flux of meaning, is rendered.

6.2.iii Twitter as a background angle on the digital Jesus

With a view to describe a digital Jesus, the social media platform Twitter – with its character as a micro-blog – was chosen as the first choice sphere of research. Serving as background, a short description of Twitter is offered next, while motivational reasons for the choice of this specific social media platform are also presented.

Twitter, which became known as the ‘SMS of the internet’ by its initial use of only 140 characters (Wagner 2012:120; Murthy 2013:n.p.), has about 316 million monthly users who daily participate in the sending of approximately 500 million tweets (Smith 2015:n.p.).

The Twitter message has evolved over the past decade to a rich canvas featuring hashtags, photos, videos and more. Currently, further development is taking place in order to provide users with the opportunity to make even more from a 140-character tweet (Sherman 2016:n.p.). In using the Twitter platform, significant socio-political dynamics have been unlocked worldwide, as can be seen, amongst others, during the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street movement and the recent #feesmustfall campaign by students in South Africa (Fuchs 2014:196; Nicholson 2015:n.p.). Through the use of the @ and # symbols, specific search domains on Twitter are explored by making use of the built-in search facility on this particular platform. The @ symbol is used specifically in the search for individuals, since this symbol is used to indicate a personal username, generally known as a Twitter handle: 'The dialogue between Twitter users occurs through the at-sign (e.g. a user can direct tweets to another user by prefixing a post with an at-sign before the target user's name)' (Murthy 2013:n.p.). By means of the # symbol, a search is conducted within the flow of tweets selected in terms of a specific focus and thematically grouped under the concerned hashtag, such as #feesmustfall. In this way, the focus falls on a certain thematic selection from a stream of information, with a particular focus on a specific theme. Murthy (2013:n.p.) therefore indicates: 'Any word(s) preceded by a hash sign #' are used in Twitter to note a subject, event, or association. Hashtags are an integral part of Twitter's ability to link the conversations of strangers together.' In view of the above, the social media platform Twitter was chosen as the practice terrain for mapping and describing important accents associated with a new digitalised world and way of life. The motivation for this choice lies, firstly, in the character of Twitter as a social media platform, which is a particularly apt expression of a mobinomic phenomenon (Knott-Craig 2012:n.p.) demarcating the formation of a virtual mobile ecosystem of connections across various spheres and layers of life. Van Dijk (2011:35) rightfully points out that the users of Twitter are most likely to access the platform through the use of wireless internet on mobile devices. Users are thereby given an opportunity to contribute – regardless of location and time – to the development of a moment-by-moment transmission of news and personal opinion; hence the emphasis on mobility in the character of Twitter. A second reason that can be put forward in motivation of the choice of Twitter as a possible concrete expression of practices associated with living in a digital world is to be found in the significant growth of this platform. White (2012:121) rightly points out that one only needs to watch the news to hear about Twitter and its popularity and usage with the news media. A third reason is found in the fact that the Twitter platform until recently had a 140-character limit per tweet

or message, which facilitates the empirical analysis of the limited text format. In summary, 'Twitter has emerged as a valuable resource for tapping into the zeitgeist of the internet, its users, and often beyond' (Zimmer & Proferes 2014:250).

6.3 Empirical research

With a view towards a focused and manageable empirical research project, I have made the choice to focus particularly on the analysis of two data sets used for the research, namely, Christmas 2013 and Easter 2014. Only the two indicated sets of data will be used in order to be able to present a realistic and receptive analysis for the specific limited contribution. The fact that two older data sets (Christmas 2013 and Easter 2014) are used is also not viewed as limiting, as the focus is on the use of the Twitter platform, rather than the actuality of the individual tweet. By using these two Twitter data sets deriving from distinctive and important celebrations on the Christian calendar strongly associated with Jesus, engagement with daily life is demonstrated, whilst the implicit normative character of the content is also acknowledged. With the choice of respectively Christmas and Easter as an expression of Jesus' birth as well as his crucifixion, a purposeful choice is made for a specific normative orientation strongly resonating with the Christian faith.

The presentation of the results of the empirical research is conducted on two levels: firstly a general and shorter overview on the analysis of the so-called Big Data¹²⁶ will be provided, specifically focused on the Christmas 2013 data set. Due to the limit in scope of the contribution, it was decided to include only the Big Data analysis for the Christmas 2013 period. This will then secondly be followed up by a more in-depth analysis of individual tweets coming from both of the two indicated periods.

6.3.i A Big Data analysis for Christmas 2013

After using a random sampling technique¹²⁷ of all possible mentions in the original 3 million harvest texts, 8 844 individual messages harvested on 25 December 2013 were selected for further analysis.

By using the NVivo software to further assist in the process of fracturing¹²⁸ the data, the

¹²⁶ The concept 'Big Data' generally refers to large amounts of data being generated by computing activities such as social media (Paulus, Lester & Dempster 2014:193).

¹²⁷ As part of accepted research practice, a random sample technique (Vogt & Williams 2011:467) was used in order to obtain a more manageable amount of tweets from the initial Big Data list consisting of 3 million harvest texts.

principle of 'show and tell'¹²⁹ in empirical research is followed, whereby through the presentation and analysis of data and discerning the meaning, patterns are clearly indicated. The first movement in this regard was to employ the technique of word-counting. The main contribution of a word-counting technique is to produce data condensation or data distillation in order to highlight the essence relevant to the study in an ocean of data (Ryan & Bernard 2003:97). The underlying rationale for doing a word count is indeed to look into the words and topics in people's conversations (Ryan & Bernard 2003:96).

The software program NVivo's capacity to quantify Big Data is used by way of, amongst others, counting the top 100 words from the indicated 8 844 Twitter posts for the purpose of discerning definite patterns. This data are then further fractured by way of using (i) a word cloud-presentation, (ii) a top ten stemmed word analysis and (iii) a word tree analysis.

6.3.i.a Word cloud

By way of a visual representation of the 100 most frequent words coming from the indicated data, a summary is provided enhancing clarity for research findings (Ramlo 2011:101). For this specific visual representation, I have used a word cloud. The contribution of word clouds is to be found in their ability to reveal the frequency of different words used providing viewers with an overview of the main themes or topics (McNaught & Lam 2010:630).

The word cloud method is used to visually indicate the 100 most stemmed¹³⁰ words of the 8 844 messages. The associated word cloud shows a pattern within which the most accentuated occurrence of words according to the score is indicated graphically and visually. Although the word count of the words corresponds with the visual representation of the word cloud, certain words, such as 'Christians', 'Jesus', '#christmaseve', 'family', 'days' are also observed:

¹²⁸ 'Fracturing' refers to the action of systematically drilling down in Big Data sets in order to establish smaller workable units.

¹²⁹ The NVivo-consultant, Dr. Jenine Beekhuizen (Brisbane, Australia), who assisted with technical aspects of the empirical research, introduced me to the concept 'show and tell'. According to this principle in quantitative empirical research, results are first portrayed and then reflected on.

¹³⁰ Words associated with the same stem of the basis word.

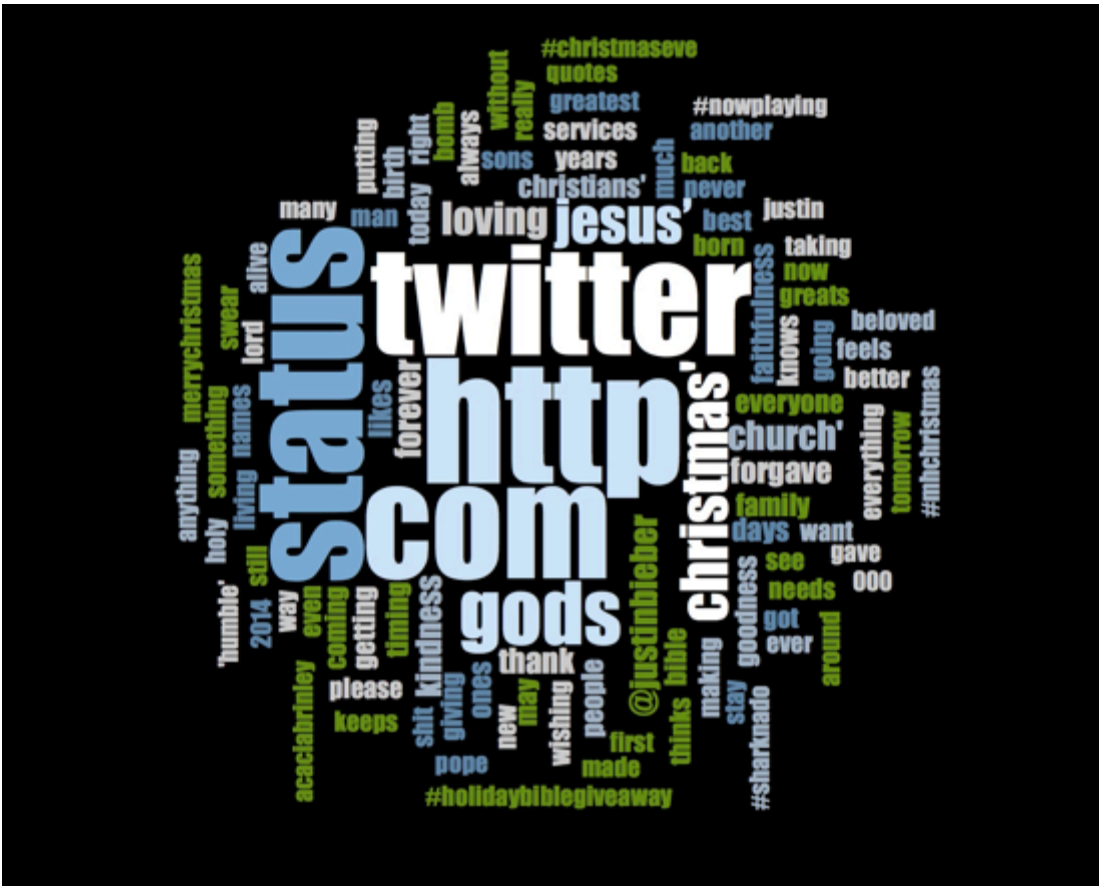


Figure 6.1: World cloud, Christmas 2013 (NVivo 2016:n.p.).

6.3.i.b Top ten stemmed word analysis.

From this clear graphic and visual prescription where the words appearing most often are shown prominently, the next movement in the analysis of the indicated tweets is utilised. In terms of this development, the huge amount of data are further broken up through the fracture principle to make use of even smaller and more detailed units as part of the analysis. A further analysis provides an overview of the ten most stemmed words in the data set of Christmas 2013. The heading of the table indicates, amongst others, the word itself, its length, the number of times it was counted, with a weight percentage of the word against available data as well as similar words in the relative data set. Of specific interest is the reference to the stemmed word 'Jesus' (in bold font) with an indication of various formats of use within the indicated data-set.

Figure 6.2: Top ten stemmed word analysis, Christmas 2013 (NVivo 2016:n.p.).

Word	Length	Count	Weighted Percentage	Similar Words
http	4	10284	7,54%	http
twitter	7	8878	6,51%	twitter
com	3	8849	6,49%	com
status	6	8844	6,49%	status
gods	4	4262	3,13%	#god, “god, @god, @godly, @gods, god, god”, godly, gods
christmas'	10	2732	2,00%	#christmas, #christmas #family #church, christma, christmas, christmas'
jesus'	6	2476	1,82%	#jesus, #jesus', “jesus, @jesus, jesus, jesus”, jesus'
loving	6	1318	0,97%	#love, @love, love, loved, lovee, lovely, loves, loving
church'	7	954	0,70%	#church, church, church', churches
@justinbieber	13	782	0,57%	@justinbieber,

				justinbieber
forever	7	641	0,47%	forever
kindness	8	622	0,46%	kind, kindly, kindness
thank	5	604	0,44%	thank, thanked, thankful, thankfulness, thanking, thanks
forgave	7	603	0,44%	forgave

6.3.i.c Word tree

In a third movement and flowing from the already mentioned dynamics whereby Big Data are evaluated by way of smaller fractured units, use is made of word trees, whereby patterns of data are even more visually indicated. I am sensitive to the fact that the concentrated data provided by word lists and counts do not take the original context of word use into account (Ryan & Bernard 2003:97); I have therefore made use of the technique of word co-occurrence, also known as collocation, from the science of linguistics and semantic network analysis to emphasise that the meaning of a word is related and connected to certain concepts (Ryan & Bernard 2003:97).

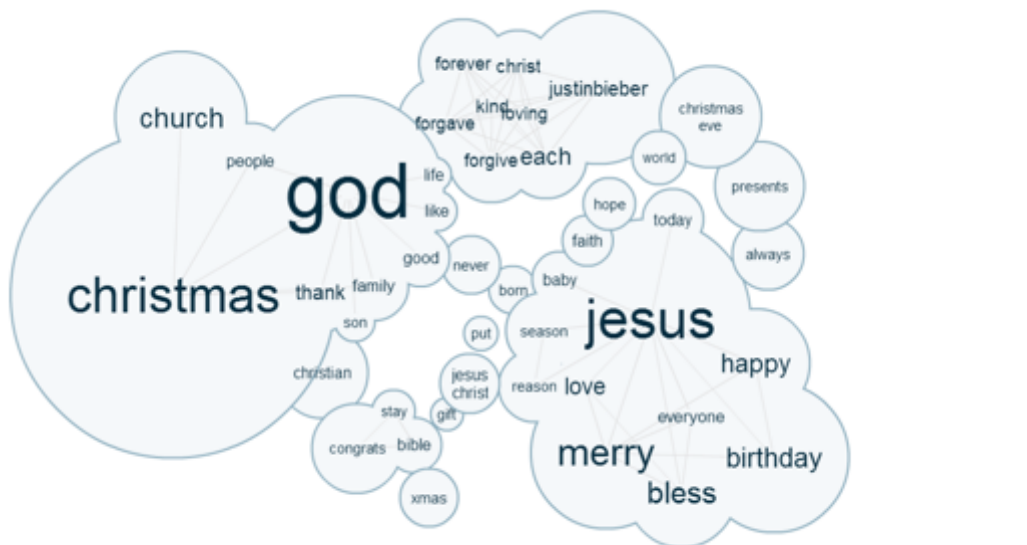


Figure 6.3: Word tree, Christmas 2013 (NVivo 2016:n.p.).

Central to the interpretation of the word trees of prominent words associated with Christmas 2013 is the following Twitter message from world-renowned pop sensation Justin Bieber (@justinbieber 2013:n.p.):



Figure 6.4: Justin Bieber’s Twitter message, Christmas 2013 (@justinbieber 2013:n.p.).

On Christmas Day the message was retweeted 162 582 times by supporters of Bieber – generally known as ‘beliebers’ - by using the retweet function on the Twitter platform (@justinbieber 2013:n.p.). This specific tweet was also liked by 1 391 028 followers of the Justin Bieber account on Twitter (@justinbieber 2013:n.p.). However, it is indeed ironic, as pointed out by the social media monitoring company Fuseware (2015:n.p.), that the official @justinbieber account (@justinbieber 2013:n.p.) received more mentions on Christmas Day 2013 than the semi-official @jesus account (@jesus 2013n.p.).

Bearing this dynamic interaction in mind, the question could critically be asked whether, in the formulation of the initial message and its subsequent retweets, the message concerns believers or, rather, perhaps beliebers (the supporters of Justin Bieber). The dynamics of the relationship becomes discernible in the search of the influence of the sender (Justin Bieber) and the content of the relative tweet, as well as the dynamics involved in the sending and further distribution of this message in the Twittersphere. In reflection it should once again be borne in mind that the prominence and status of the person who had formulated the initial tweet, as well as the number of supporters had, indeed, contributed to the spread and influence on Twitter. Supported by the dynamics and use of the retweet function on Twitter, as well as the manner in which, as a mechanism, it contributes to the strengthening of the distribution of a single message, is naturally of particular significance (Murthy 2013:n.p.).

In line with the strong theme in the data set of Christmas 2013 a fragment of the word tree of the Twitter handle @justinbieber is next indicated. Thereafter I will also in comparison

present a fragment of the word tree of the Twitter handle @jesus. I will also briefly discuss the two different word trees.

@justinbieber

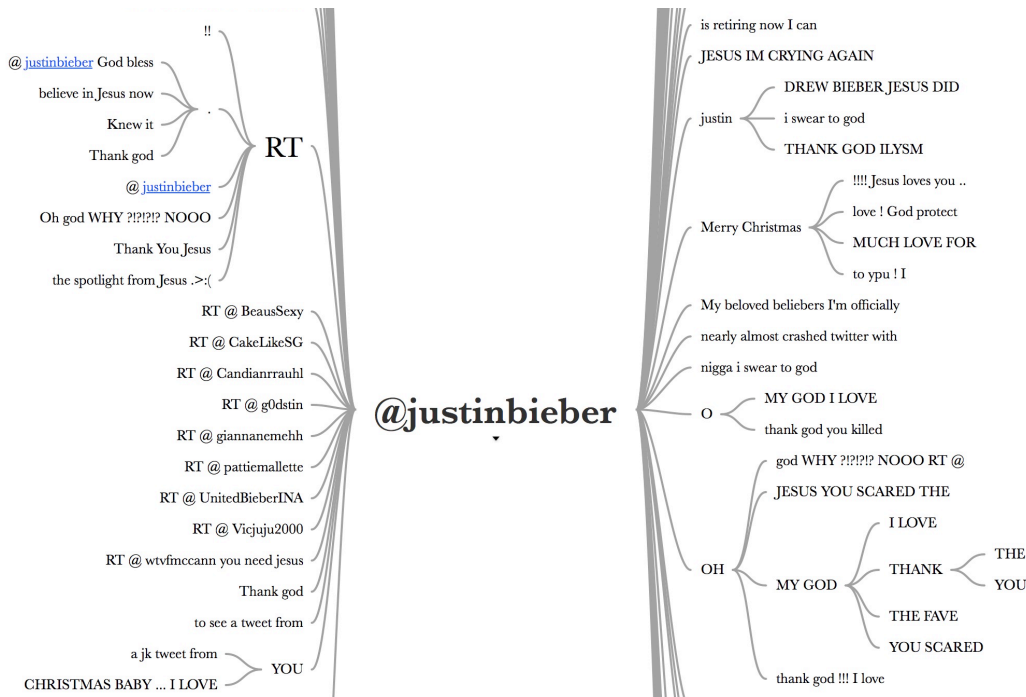


Figure 6.5: Word tree of the Justin Bieber Twitter handle '@justinbieber' (NVivo 2016:n.p.)

The word tree of the Twitter handle @justinbieber corresponds directly with the Twitter message which the pop icon sent on Christmas Day 2013, in which the words 'be kind loving to each' are emphasised. Various positive and negative reactions followed the sending of the message, which confirm the pop star's influence. The word tree is dominated by a strong religious content presented mainly by way of a positive sentiment. The message carries, amongst others, the meaning that a blessed Christmas confirms the meaning of God's presence amongst us.

@jesus

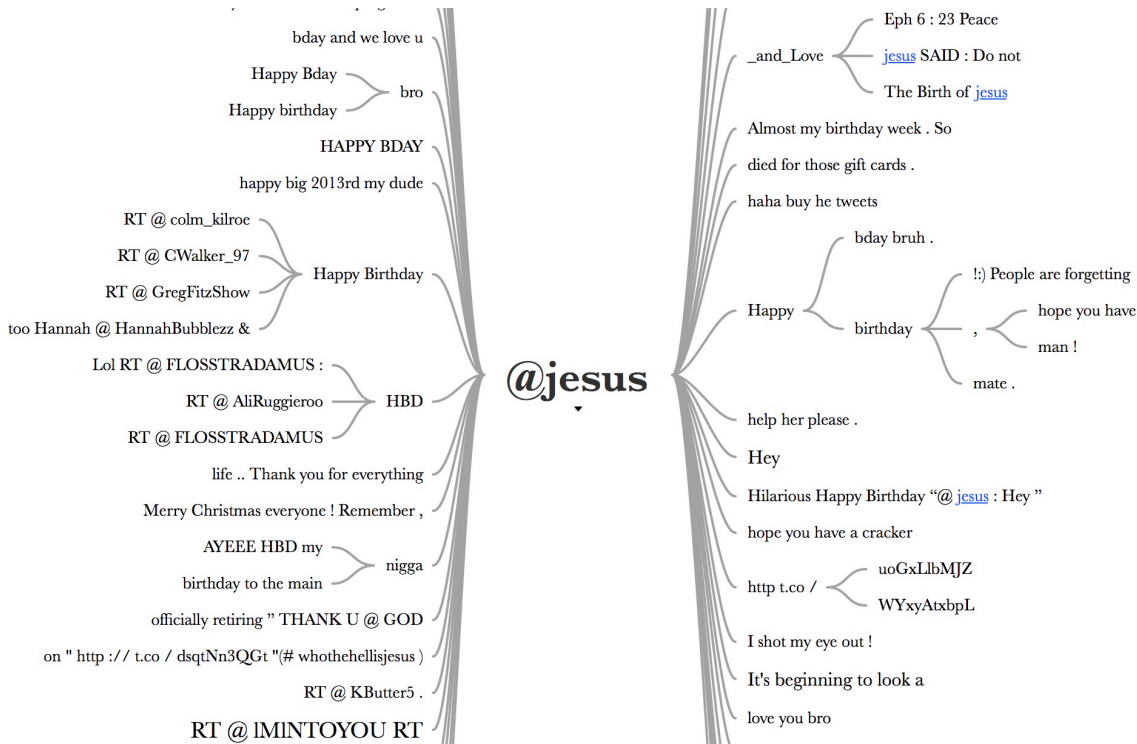


Figure 6.6: Word tree of the Twitter handle '@jesus' (NVivo 2016:n.p.).

The word tree of @jesus comprises mainly expressions which are directly related to the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. Various expressions, some filled with humour, are used to refer to the celebration of the birth of Christ. In confirmation of this observation, Holmberg, Bastubacka & Thelwall (2016:353) indicate in their 2016 article “‘@God please open your fridge!’ A content analysis of Twitter messages to @God: Hopes, humor, spirituality, and profanities’ that ‘religion and religiosity are communicated on Twitter in a manner that creates a sphere in which praise and profanities coexist.’

6.3.ii A detailed analysis of Christmas 2013 and Easter 2014

In the presentation of the existing possible good practices of normativity on Twitter, the following two examples from the collection of Twitter messages were used, which were retweeted the most during Christmas 2013 and Easter 2014 respectively. The criteria used to choose a specific message from the different data sets were as follows:

Firstly, the message must have formed part of the ten most retweeted messages for the various periods. Secondly, I chose messages consisting of words only and which contained no links towards a webpage or any hashtag symbols. Thirdly, it was

endeavoured to strike a balance in the selection of messages; on the one hand those of well-known Christian individuals and, on the other hand, those of popular personalities.

After selection of the two messages, the following methodology was used in analysing the two selected tweets. Initially a short, general overview was given of the message, reflecting especially on the profile of the sender. This was followed by an in-depth analysis of the message itself, typically drilling into the message looking at some of the words.

For this part of the analysis, principles underlying the qualitative discourse analytical research method were used. While being sensitive to the fact of not arriving at a set of normative rules, however, the end of this exercise did provide some pointers regarding the facilitation of discussion on normative aspects associated with the formation of best practices.

The detailed analysis of the two identified Twitter messages was conducted with the acknowledgement of the role of the researcher's subjectivity in reading and interpreting the content. Aspects such as the nature of the personality involved, the choice of the used profile picture as well as the profile description all play an important role in informing a subjective understanding.

6.3.ii.a Christmas 2013



Figure 6.7: Joyce Meyer's Twitter message, Christmas 2013 (@joycemeyer 2013:n.p.).

In the message of popular American Christian writer and speaker Joyce Meyer, a theological interpretation of the Christmas events is presented. She also manages to convey the general meaning of Christmas as an appeal on a personal level. The message was retweeted more than 3 200 times and received more than 2 500 likes. It is interesting

how the sender composed the message creating tension between 'Jesus' and 'religion'. This tension is heightened as Christmas is usually associated with the Christian religion. However, for the composer of this message, it is all about Jesus and not as much on the meaning of his birth on a collective level with regard to religion; it places more emphasis on the personal aspect.

6.3.ii.b Easter 2014



Figure 6.8: Joel Osteen's Twitter message, Easter 2014 (@joelosteen 2014:n.p.).

Popular Christian writer and preacher Joel Osteen expresses, just as in the message of Meyer, the view that Christmas is not in the first instance about religion, but about a personal relationship with God. The emphasis of both the Christian writer's and the preacher's messages during Christmas 2013 and 2014 respectively – that Jesus' service is not primarily related to the church – is noteworthy. Except for the emphasis on a personal relationship with Jesus, the author of the message expanded the implication of the message by including aspects of purpose and destiny as outcomes of this relationship and discipleship.

In offering some general remarks sprouting from the detailed analyses of the two selected messages, the hermeneutical skill of interpreting how contemporaries make spiritual sense of their lives is exercised (Beaudion 2014:198). Following important perspectives regarding 'God-talk in street language' (Willhauck 2013:88), the analysis of these tweets focused on how digital media enables individuals to integrate religious aspects of their identity into other spheres of everyday life. With this exercise the aim is not to create a movement from the text to the field, but rather from the field to the text.

6.4 Popular culture, Twitter and the search for a digital Jesus

An aspect for further research which can be identified in this initial scan of specific Twitter messages associated with Jesus, is the important embedded relationship between popular culture and theology (Cobb 2005:294; Lynch 2005:14; Sweet 2012:n.p.). This in itself is further evidence of the influential manner in which popular culture is impacting of all facets of life, even of the Christian faith.

In line with this theoretical orientation, Willhauck, in her important article, '*The urban dictionary, street wisdom and God: An intersection of linguistics and theology*' (2013), demonstrates clearly the importance of 'street language' in the facilitation of faith. By using the metaphor of the street, reference is made to all possible contexts – including the world of social media and Twitter – and how the profane 'language of the street gives insight into how people receive religious meaning and come to experience God' (Willhauck 2013:98).

Language is the medium through which expression of the normative dimension is provided. In the distinction between first-order and second-order language, an important perspective for the research project is to be found. In first-order language the emphasis is on the language of ordinary people, while second-order language pertains to an academic theological discourse (Ganzevoort 2004:20). In the research project the emphasis is obviously on the ordinary, lived expressions of first-order language users.

While the emphasis was in the past placed on the second-order theological language as associated with academic theology, the emphasis in the project is on the first-order theological language as used generally by people. This orientation ties in with the emphasis that a singular and linear use of authoritative sources cannot on its own be responsible for normative interpretation. 'This means that not only are the kinds of normative claims a theologian might make always in a state of flux, but so too are the normative sources that contribute to how we make those claims' (Wigg-Stevenson 2015:3). Other factors, which also have an influence in the construction of normativity, are, amongst others, how identity and a community are established in the social media world. As a practical theologian I am challenged with attending to the meaning of these world(s) which is 'no less important and no less demanding than the ability to interpret the texts of revelation and tradition' (Beaudion 2014:198).

Therefore, in the normative search for a practically orientated theological model the expectation is that new ways of expression on Twitter can, in fact, play a meaningful role in the manner in which Jesus is talked about and in the formulation of Christian theology. Willhauck (2013:96) rightly comments 'that new ways of speaking have power in the formation of faith, that some popular street language can and does reveal God and can be useful in doing Christian theology and ministry.'

In this respect, the investigation into the use of the name Jesus on Twitter specifically embodies a relevant and contemporary expression of the research project, namely 'making sense of Jesus'. The documented Twitter messages assign new meaning to the use of the Jesus name in the dynamic intersection between the holy and the everyday. Making sense of Jesus is then to be found in the intersecting and vague boundaries of the sacred and profane as religion is lived out in everyday life (Lövheim 2013:49).

6.5 Conclusion

In facilitating this conversation on the portrait of a digital Jesus as portrayed in the Twittersphere, the following markers for orientation seem to be noteworthy:

The recognition of authority on Twitter is important in negotiating a position of normativity. Cheong (2014:13) indicated that religious authority is communicatively constituted and emergent 'through the construction of new sacred texts and norms of credibility in social media sites.' However, this authority arises from and is further supported by an already high offline presence. This acquired authority coming from an offline world is endorsed through the number of followers as well as through messages being retweeted and liked. Especially the retweet function serves as an important component in establishing and building authority on Twitter (boyd¹³¹, Golder & Lotan 2010:n.p.). The retweet and like functions on Twitter provide for a creative way in further enforcing the impact of a specific message, contributing to the creation of a specific normativity within an online community. It is also through the character of social media, in which connectivity is emphasised, that community is created. Within this online community, aspects of normativity are negotiated by, amongst others, traditional sources

¹³¹ The author prefers her name and surname not to be capitalised.

of Christianity. This perspective concurs with the following important reflection by Campbell and Garner (2016:n.p.):

We argue that careful attention to how religion is seen online can teach us about how people's faith is manifested and informed by the structures and culture of network society in general. It also reveals the specific way new media technologies may shape the practices of people of faith and reflect changing assumptions about the nature of our spiritual lives.

In further investigating the way in which 'making sense of Jesus' is expressed on Twitter, it would appear that a strong emphasis on individuality and an intimate personal understanding are associated with the name Jesus. Except for the emphasis on a personal relationship with Jesus, authors also elaborated on the implication of the message by including aspects of purpose and destiny as outcomes of this relationship and discipleship.

This aspect is further emphasized when focusing on the fact that this concerns specifically a relationship with Jesus and not so much a religious affiliation. This communicates a definite 'espoused theology' (Cameron et al. 2010:54) that voices specific theological presuppositions. The latter appear to be particularly popular in conservative-evangelical and Pentecostal traditions, but also read and spread by Christians from other traditions.

Chapter 7

Relational:¹³²

Redefining future Christian leadership through Twitter?

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Abstract

Social media, for example Facebook and Twitter, can be described as an ever-growing frontier of various practices associated with the intersection of collective human communication acts, facilitated through information technology. The influence of these developments has a great impact on the transformation of religious identity and the articulation of practices of belief. The quest for, and dynamics of future religious leadership provide a lens for exploring the connection between the concept of lived religion and the multifaceted complexity of a new evolving virtual world. As focus point, Twitter, the well-known and popular microblog platform, provides an interesting terrain to trace practices of future Christian leadership as expressed in the digital world. In this regard, the need for considering novel research approaches in practical theology, for example, analysing so-called Big Data in order to investigate these emerging digital expressions of future Christian leadership, is recognised and addressed. After exploring some of the empirical outlines left by the digital activities of a number of Christian leaders active on Twitter, perspectives relevant to the question of how future Christian leadership may be redefined through Twitter are mapped out. Therefore, the aim of this investigation is twofold: to provide new research perspectives in terms of relevant methodological orientations for tracing expressions of future Christian leadership on Twitter and other social media platforms and, in the analysis and through the translation of the meaning of these

¹³² This chapter is strongly associated with the metaphor of the 'relational' in which community is dynamically settled by its relationship character. Relations, particularly those associated with leadership, result in conversation within a specific community but also within the greater understanding of a 'networked religion' being newly negotiated and realised.

expressions of digital leadership on Twitter, to attempt to provide preliminary stepping stones in redefining future Christian leadership.

7.1 Introduction

The well-known entrepreneur and futurist, Sir Richard Branson (Branson 2014a:n.p.), recently sent a message – better known as a tweet – on the social-media platform Twitter, in which he shared his 10 most popular quotes on leadership with his followers. This is remarkable in itself. As a well-known and influential leader with approximately 6 million followers on Twitter (@richardbranson 2015:n.p.), he used this platform – with 140 characters – to share aspects of leadership with a potential audience of 302 million users.

One of the wisdoms used by Branson in his list is the following quote by the late Steve Jobs from Apple: ‘Innovation distinguishes between a leader and a follower’ (Branson 2014:n.p.). These words of Jobs – who became known through computer innovations – appeal to Branson who, as an entrepreneur, has a strong focus on the future, *inter alia*, with regard to the development of a programme dealing with tourism in space.

In itself, the example from the Twitter world elicits important questions such as, among others, how the use of social media can influence and change leadership perspectives. It also questions the relevance and meaning of current and traditional leadership practices, as well as the way in which these should be adapted in a dynamic social-media environment and world.

The relevance of this question for leadership practices is further emphasised through the evolutionary, dynamic and even disruptive character of a growing virtual world, and its impact on communities. In this regard, the world-famous internet psychologist and philosopher, Sherry Turkle, pointed out in her book, *‘Alone together’* (2011), that what is becoming visible in the growing virtual environment is none other ‘than the future unfolding’ (Turkle 2011:n.p.).

In exploring these perspectives, I have a strong affinity with some of the metatheoretical perspectives referred to in the Foreword to this issue. With reference to sensitivity for the future (Van den Berg & Ganzevoort 2014:166), I have an affinity with a visionary leadership paradigm. It is, therefore, assumed that, in seeking innovation and leadership

in the digital age, note should not only be taken of what is presently happening in a specific domain. One should also venture to seek possible and tentative perspectives for a future unfolding. In previously published research, it was argued, specifically within a practical theological enquiry, that there should be sensitivity for a research agenda for the future (Van den Berg & Ganzevoort 2014:181). This research endeavour to explore, embedded in a dimension of being geared towards the future, is characterised by the metaphor of tracing, in which meanings of traversing, tracking and sketching are articulated (Ganzevoort 2009:5). In this regard, the aim of this contribution lies in a critical-evaluative description of practices associated with Christian leadership on Twitter. A deconstruction of these existing practices of Christian leadership on Twitter provides building material for possible future development. The study of these practices conveys and emphasises the threefold structural orientation of the issue, namely the emphasis on different contexts, lived religion and engaged scholarship.

By tracing the outlines of Christian leadership on Twitter, an effort is made to further contribute to the movement from 'a practical orientated theology towards a practice orientated theology' (Hermans 2014:126). This practice-oriented theology is, therefore, sensitive not only to official institutionalised religion, but also to 'the turn away from institutes and (cultural) texts to the everyday social and cultural practices of ordinary people' (Ganzevoort & Roeland 2014:93). This orientation implies that leadership is, therefore, to be understood in the broadest possible terms. Within this reading, it is assumed, among others, not only that the pastor of the congregation is to be regarded as the leader, but also that leadership is rather to be understood as a relationship- and community-oriented concept.

This understanding is also emphasised in a world increasingly defined through the use of social media. The question is then not only how do these new forms of expression influence the experience and description of, among others, religion, but also, for the purpose of this contribution, in which manner are they used by leaders (for the sake of this research, especially those leaders known for their Christian orientation) and how will these activities possibly inform future leadership practices. In this instance, I acknowledge and find an affinity with, as correctly stated in the Foreword, topics such as authority, identity and social cohesion that are implicitly associated with leadership. Therefore, embedded in the search for expressions of lived religion, the aim of this research is to explore and map

out innovation, with specific reference to Christian leadership in the Twitter world. These exploratory perspectives provide a framework for further research on, and development of existing practices.

7.2 Traversing the Twitter landscape: An orientation

With a view to defining the research in this article, the focus is on the social-media platform Twitter, with special reference to the tweet messages of Christian leaders. Currently, Twitter is one of the most rapidly growing social-media platforms. At the end of October 2015, Twitter had 320 million monthly active users out of a total of 1,3 billion registered users with a Twitter account (Smith 2015:n.p.). Twitter is generally known as a microblog, as it provides the user an opportunity to send a message within the scope of 140 characters (Van Dijk 2012:333; Wagner 2012:120) providing ‘... at best eloquently terse responses and at worst heavily truncated speech’ (Murthy 2013:n.p.).

The use of Twitter revealed an important communication medium that would change the world on numerous levels. For example, this platform played an influential role in political events such as the Arab Spring (Emiroglu 2013:n.p.), the Occupy-Wall-Street movement (Fuchs 2014:196) as well as in the two past American presidential elections (The European Business Review 2013). An even more recent and contextual example of the use and impact of Twitter, and specifically the use of the so-called hashtag symbol, in mobilising socio-political change was the so-called ‘#feesmustfall’ campaign by students in South Africa (Nicholson 2015). Conventions, among others the hashtag, which are strongly associated with the Twitter platform, are an indication of the multidimensional influence of innovated symbol and language use within this new sphere of human existence (Van den Berg 2014:n.p.). Naturally, all these factors provide the elements, with an exceptionally dynamic interaction, leading to the following possibility:

Twitter has the potential to increase our awareness of others and to augment our spheres of knowledge, tapping us into a global network of individuals who are passionately giving us instant updates on topics and areas in which they are knowledgeable or participating in real-time (Murthy 2013:n.p.).

The functioning and effectiveness of traditional leadership practices are being questioned and disrupted by the acknowledgment of the capacity of social media to connect, inform,

empower and transform (Phillips 2014:76-80). This observation serves as motivation for exploratory and experimental research, tracing down possible new articulations of practices of Christian leadership within social media. The search for Twitter messages, specifically those associated with Christian leaders, is not meant to emphasise exclusivity, but rather to provide a specific focus for the research. The rationale for choosing Twitter is motivated by the association of the platform with the actuality of news. Due to the 140 characters allowed by Twitter per message, the messages are concise and can be used easily for evaluation. In the evaluation of possible new expressions of the Christian faith on Twitter posted by Christian leadership, and for the structuring of the article, the American practical theologian, Rick Osmer's use of four so-called spiritualities of congregational leadership as an expression of a practical theological investigation, resonates with me. In his book *'Practical theology: An introduction'* (2008), Osmer indicates that the four spiritualities, namely attendance, thoughtfulness, discernment and strategy, are directly related and relevant to the four tasks associated with practical theological research (Osmer 2008:4).

The use of these four spiritualities as guiding metaphors, supported by the above four questions, provide a practical theological orientation towards the tracing and description of lived religion as expressed in life's practices. Associating the four spiritualities of congregational leadership, as indicated by Osmer, with each of the four tasks is not only a description for a practical theological enquiry, but also a methodological structure for investigating expressions of Christian leadership on Twitter. Embedded within this structure of enquiry, the interplay between empirical data and theory would provide for classical practical theological movements.

7.3 'A spirituality of presence' and the task of attending

In his first task in a practical theological enquiry, Osmer distinguishes a leadership position, which can be described as a 'spirituality of presence'. In conceptualising the relationship between a spirituality of presence and the descriptive-empirical task of practical theological interpretation, emphasis is placed on a continuum of 'attending' (Osmer 2008:37). Being attentive to the character and dynamics of the Twitter platform, the words of Leonard Sweet, a well-known popular theologian and leader, active on Twitter, are appropriate:

When I look for something to tweet about, I find myself paying attention to life in heightened ways. With Twitter every day is an awakening to things that never would have registered before. Twitter gives me openings through which I can dive into newly discovered depths (Sweet 2012:n.p.).

Using attending as part of the leading metaphor of tracing described earlier, I will map out initial descriptions regarding expressions of Christian leadership on Twitter. As in the art of tracking, where the terrain is scanned for various clues and possibilities, the same critical-evaluative *modus operandi* applies in a spirituality of attending, scanning for expressions of Christian leadership on Twitter.

As background, in their book *'Understanding social media'* (2013), Sam Hinton and Larissa Hjorth write that social media, as a collective term, influence all levels of society. They form an integral part of the lives of a significant number of people worldwide; a dynamic and constant meaning is created through the use of different forms of social media (Hinton & Hjorth 2013:2). In this regard, Michele Zappavigna (2012:193) correctly assumes that, 'most forms of social media, such as Facebook and other general social networking services, incorporate significant multimedia content, with images and video playing a significant role in meaning making'. However, for the purpose of this research, the emphasis is on the expression of Christian leadership on Twitter. In a process of 'informal attending', basic investigative research – using the search engine Google – confirms that several Christian leaders already have a presence on Twitter by way of profile accounts. This search can be identified, among others, by creating a search phrase 'Christian leaders with the most supporters on Twitter'. Well-known names such as Rick Warren, Bill Hybels and Max Lucado count under the top 25 Christian leaders with the largest following on Twitter (Orme 2013:n.p.). Although this may be true and acknowledge the fact that numbers indeed play an important role in aspects of influence and networking, this is not the only measurement to map out Christian leadership on Twitter.

In this regard, Osmer assumes a quality of attention, which originates from sensitivity for the meaning of everyday events and patterns (Osmer 2008:37-38). In the quest for deeper expressions of Christian leadership, the hashtag '#ChristianLeadership' could, for example, be used to search on the Twitter platform. This presents the immediate possibility to trace relevant tweets, which have a bearing on the theme of Christian

leadership associated with expressions on Twitter. The specific question could even be refined further by investigating, among others, how many times the original tweet was 'retweeted' by other users and/or indicated as a 'favourite' tweet. Specifically, the use of the hashtag symbol and retweet function could later be used in a more formal and structured way as part of the movement of spiritualities of discernment and strategy.

A formal empirical enquiry and description are used to attend formally to expressions of Christian leadership. With regard to this specific research, the formal empirical observation was carried out with the assistance of a specialist social-media consultation company Fuseware (2015:n.p.), using sophisticated software computer programs, which enable access to the daily Twitter stream of all tweets as an expression of so-called Big Data.¹³³ The search words 'Christian leadership' initiated an enquiry into all tweets sent over a specific period (2013-09-01–2015-05-28), but specifically including important times associated with the Christian religion, namely Easter and Christmas. Through the use of what is commonly known as 'Twitterdata mining', access was gained to 100% of the so-called Twitter 'Firehose', enabling the viewing and analysis of public-generated tweets every 'streaming second' for the indicated period (Lutz & Du Toit 2014:n.p.). In order to map out the relevance of Christian leadership in everyday life, descriptive of the notion of lived religion referred to earlier, a further search was carried out regarding Christian leadership and its relevance towards the so-called Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris, France, earlier in 2015, which resulted in substantial media attention internationally. The following summary of the research report by Fuseware (2015:n.p.), after conducting the harvest of Twitter data, provides an overview of the empirical research data specifically obtained on Christian leadership:

- Across all tweets, specifically those containing the search phrase 'Christian leadership', observed for the period 1 September 2013 to 18 May 2015, a total of 9 976 individual posts or tweets were collected on Twitter.¹³⁴
- The majority of the posts were made from the USA, with Sundays as the top days for posting content, thus reflecting the religious bias of this day of the week. Mondays were the second most popular day for posting religious content,

¹³³ The concept 'Big Data' generally refers to large amounts of data being generated by computing activities such as social media (Paulus, Lester & Dempster 2014:193).

¹³⁴ As part of accepted research practice, a random sample technique (Vogt & Williams 2011:467) was used to obtain a more manageable amount of tweets from the initial Big Data list consisting of 3 million harvest texts.

indicating a follow-through trend from the previous day that becomes linearly smaller as the week progresses.

- Analysed content trends throughout each year tended to spike in fairly predictable areas around Christian holidays, the most predominant being Christmas and Easter, with a nearly double average volume over those periods.
- Twitter users often use hashtags as keywords to tag content in their tweets. The top tags used are #jesus, #god, #faith, #bible, #christian and #leadership, indicating a clear intent to express specific messages in terms of Christianity and leadership.

Preliminary empirical descriptions that embodied different levels of observation documented a 'spirituality of presence' in the search for expressions of Christian leadership on Twitter. From an initial informal scanning of Christian leadership, using Google, to more specialised big-data analysis, the focus was on innovation in experimental methods of observation. Examples of a preliminary tracing of expressions of Christian leadership were provided in the first movement of a practical theological enquiry. It is, however, also important to acknowledge that, in merely seeking the possible expression of Christian leadership on Twitter, I subjectively presuppose and express a specific image of innovative Christian leadership. This presumption may not be entirely positive since, by merely tracing tweets containing the search phrase 'Christian leadership', there is no guarantee of innovative, meaningful and sustainable practices contributing to quality interaction between individuals and communities.

The content of the various tweets, therefore, needs to be analysed in more detail. Building on this first task, Osmer's model leads to a practical theological search for a deeper interpretative task, making enquiries into the meaning of greater and underlying movements in tweets. This is addressed and embodied through leadership of 'sagely wisdom', encapsulating a spirituality of thoughtfulness, providing an orientation for the next research movement.

7.4 'A spirituality of sagely wisdom' and thoughtfulness on Twitter

Osmer (2008:82) rightfully describes a spirituality of sagely wisdom and thoughtfulness, as follows:

They want leaders whose wise guidance helps them make sense of the circumstances of their lives and world. The spirituality of such leaders is

characterized by three qualities: thoughtfulness, theoretical interpretation, and wise judgment, which may be viewed along the lines of a continuum.

With regard to the research in tracing expressions of Christian leadership on Twitter, an orientation of 'thoughtfulness' does, in fact, suggest an acknowledgement of the underlying dynamics and implications of the digital era. The implications of the digital era assume, among others, that the identity, mobility and speed whereby information is facilitated should be re-defined. As background to the interpretation of the reality of a digital world, various scholars (Hassan 2008; Flew 2008; Campbell 2011; Wagner 2012; Campbell 2013; Campbell & Garner 2016) point to at least three driving factors currently leading to further development and demarcation of the digital landscape:

- First, the continuing development and evolution of the Internet.
- Secondly, the connectivity and mobility brought about by the Internet and specific apparatuses such as cellular telephones and tablets.
- Thirdly, the dynamics, influence, magnitude and disruptive effect of social media.

All three of these factors are addressed in the focus on the use of the social media platform Twitter. An orientation of 'thoughtfulness' means that cognisance is not only taken of the greater movements underlying expressions of Christian leadership on Twitter, but should also be described further in greater detail. This takes place in the next movement on the continuum of 'sagely wisdom', namely 'theoretical interpretation'. Daniel Gruber, Ryan Smerek, Melissa Thomas-Hunt and Erika James (2015:164) have pointed to the relevance of this quest, due to the need of 'organizations [who are struggling] to make sense of how to manage and lead in this new ecosystem'. This observation is indeed also true for religious communities and the challenge would be how to respond to these issues. Sensitive for not being naïve to think that the tracing of existing expressions of Christian leaders on Twitter would provide all the answers to these complex challenges, mapping out some of the signs of a possible articulation of Christian leadership on social media would indeed be useful for future paths.

Assuming that the current scientific world would have the sensitivity for not being able to simply explain complex issues, a great premium is placed on interdisciplinary research in the investigation of issues underlying the expression and meaning of Christian leadership on Twitter, accommodating, among others, economic, philosophical and psychological issues as well as information and communication sciences. Theories by international

theorists such as, among others, Manuel Castells (2006), Sherry Turkle (2011) and Heidi Campbell (2011; 2013; 2016) could provide a lens for interpreting expressions of Christian leadership on Twitter. However, central to this exploration is the orientation of not being fixated on a singular linear description, since '[t]here are many definitions of leadership ... However, leadership in the world of social media is a bit different. Leadership in social media includes all of the ideas' (Ingerson & Bruce 2013:74).

Acknowledging the opinion and perspective that social media is a disruptive force impacting on traditional theories on leadership as well as the fact that religious leadership theory is still a relevant young and developing discipline (Jenkins 2012:308), theory development based on empirical data and evidence seems to be an imperative and important. In this regard, using the analysed data provided by the specialist social-media monitoring company Fuseware (2015:n.p.) not only provides for a good example of interdisciplinary collaboration, but also facilitates further discussion on the analysis of the dynamics of Christian leadership following the Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris, France, early in January 2015. All keywords relating to the Charlie Hebdo attacks and associated hashtags, namely '#charliehebdo' and '#jesuischarlie', were searched in the context of the previously identified Christian-related keywords of Christian leadership. This, therefore, represents a Christian-biased subset of the Charlie Hebdo conversations. The Fuseware (2015:n.p.) report provided the following research summary for this inquiry:

- In terms of volume, 9 998 individual posts or tweets were collected for the period January-February 2015. Nearly all of the conversations occurred in early January 2015 after the attacks. By February, conversations had sharply declined to a small fraction of the initial spike, indicating how quickly conversations on topics get stale on social media.
- The automated sentiment was, as expected, identified to be mainly negative, with 48% of the content having negative connotations, and 50% of the content remaining neutral. The content originated from a 66% male audience, mainly an older 35+ demographic. Most of this content originated from the USA and Europe, with a small fraction from Africa. Besides the main hashtags on the event, the top words used were 'faith', 'God', 'Christian', 'Pope' and 'Jesus'.
- In terms of authoritative content from influencers, the top post from the *Washington Post* shared an article on the Pope's remarks on Charlie Hebdo: '[Y]ou cannot insult the faith of others'. This received widespread criticism, as it seemed to go against

the fundamental tenets of free speech. Other authoritative posters included AP, *Huffington Post*, Time.com and WSJ – mostly all posting about the Pope’s remarks on the subject.

The last remark is especially interesting since, on the one hand, it emphasises the authority and influence of specific leaders on Twitter, which very often also equals their influence in the off-line world (Campbell & Garner 2016:n.p.). On the other hand, it illustrates the democratic character of Twitter and social media, providing the opportunity for even the most influential leader to be immediately and directly repudiated. Osmer points out that an orientation of ‘wise judgement’ is central to good leadership. I would like to argue that it is, in fact, from a position of ‘wise judgement’ that the essential leadership skill of steering into the future is facilitated. The development of a memory for the creation of alternative futures (Adam 2004:300) by leaders thus calls for a creative, innovative, but also sustainable approach to various possible future scenarios. Wise judgement, therefore, fosters an approach seeking alternative routes into the future, steering away from previous tracks of thought and action that have proven inapt for meeting present or future challenges (Reader 2008). In considering the possible opportunities provided for leaders in a digital era by a platform such as Twitter, a possible alternative route towards redefining leadership is mapped out, thoughtfully contributing to a sagely wisdom of creating alternative futures.

It is, however, in the deconstruction and interpretation of existing practices that coordinates are mapped out for future actions. With this emphasis, the ability for wise decision-making is overtly addressed, as well as the capacity to develop inherently in contributing towards future practices. This implies that existing expressions of Christian leadership on Twitter can be investigated theoretically, but that the research also maps out future perspectives for additional use and development. The relevance and importance of this research quest has already been indicated in the economic and management environment, with Katharyn Ingerson and Jaclyn Bruce (2013:76) indicating that:

[t]he need to understand what leaders are posting is great because it will allow researchers to understand how people are being influenced by what business leaders are tweeting. This will also lead to a deeper understanding of leadership in the social media world, which is important

because of the numerous amounts of people influenced by social media today.

The third research movement is supported by a spirituality of discernment, seeking normative and accountable perspectives to engage with available perspectives.

7.5 'A spirituality of prophetic discernment' on Twitter

Sending and reading tweets could be described as part of the dynamics of the endeavour of theological and, specifically, practical theological hermeneutics (Stiver 2003:178). First, as indicated earlier, we need to interpret our daily world in order to compose a tweet and then we need to have the ability to interpret tweets that were sent. In this understanding, tweets are part of the interpretation of written texts, as presented, for example, in the documents associated with the Christian tradition, as well as that of 'the living text of human action' (Brown 2012:112).

This aligns well with practical theology's interest in practices confirmed by newer developments that bear the emphasis of an interest in practically driven events that are contextually and concretely placed within everyday life, referred to as expressions of lived religion. In exploring the art of hermeneutics with a view to tracing new expressions of Christian leadership on Twitter, I proceed, therefore, from the assumption that '[t]heology is not for Sundays only ... Theology is an everyday affair ... Theology not only articulates beliefs but suggests "designs for living"' (Vanhoozer 2007:7).

Underlying this acknowledgement is the conviction that practical theology encapsulates a hermeneutics of the lived religion, in which preference is given to the praxis itself and to the knowledge concerning God that is being developed, found and live within this praxis (Ganzevoort 2008:11-12). Osmer indicates that, in this specific task, the 'spirituality of prophetic discernment' should be distinguished (Osmer 2008:136). Therefore, and as a third task of a practical theological enquiry, emphasis is placed on the normative, with the objective to describe what should be happening ethically. In this movement, the focus comes from a practical theological orientation, in particular on the interpretation of events as understood from a theological and ethical perspective.

Underscoring the perception that the culture in which we live is shaping us (Sweet 2012:n.p.) is the belief that the hermeneutics of popular culture hold the promise of pointing beyond, as Kelton Cobb (2005:294) aptly indicates:

Theology of culture depends upon this kind of trust that our cultural expressions can testify to a reality that transcends them – a reality that is really there, that matters, and in which providence is at work. Theology offers a language to speak about this reality, and can help articulate what is going on in the depths of popular culture ... it is wise to remain open to the more discerning markers of culture. Even of popular culture.

Twitter provides an excellent opportunity and platform to do just that within the scope of 140 characters. With this as background, attention was paid to in what way this aspect of normativity regarding theological and ethical interpretation was portrayed in the analysed tweets of the Christian leaders as well as regarding the Charlie Hebdo attacks. The hashtag symbol was used as a window to examine the most prominent themes. Zappavigna (2012:1) describes the Hashtag symbol as ‘an emergent convention for labeling the topic of a micropost and a form of metadata incorporated into posts’. The functionality of this symbol is found in the common practice of sorting and selecting thematically related information from a torrent of messages within the context of social media platforms (Murty 2013:n.p.).

Dominant themes were critically evaluated, as well as the background and motivation for the presentation of the relative subjects. In the research, two tracks of analysis regarding normativity were used. In terms of content trends, the most popular Christian-related content regarding Christian leadership, as indicated by the use of the hashtag symbol, typically (and except for the keywords ‘Christian’ and ‘leadership’) included words such as ‘relationship’, ‘kingdom’, ‘apostolic’, ‘Bible’ and ‘Jesus’ (Fuseware 2015:n.p.). A similar analysis was done regarding the Charlie Hebdo data and, besides the main hashtags on the event, the top words used were ‘God’, ‘faith’, ‘Christian’, ‘Pope’ and ‘Jesus’ (Fuseware 2015:n.p.). These key hashtag words serve as a summary of the dominant themes of the conversation.

By evaluating the hashtags used most often in a specific period, an overview of the main themes of the conversation(s) can, therefore, be provided. These markers can, in turn,

provide direction to an own strategic positioning towards, and participation in the conversation. Once again, the opportunity is provided in an ongoing and future conversation that anyone can contribute to the conversation by, for example, not only formulating a tweet, but also creating an own hashtag, emphasising a key aspect(s) of the specific message.

In seriously considering and interpreting events, 'discernment' is indeed orientated towards drawing a conclusion that the will and presence of God is actively sought. Together with the previous two orientation points, namely spiritualities of attending and thoughtfulness, a deep awareness is set that focuses on the use of Twitter in the expression of Christian leadership. Consideration is then, among others, given to the development of a spirituality of discernment from the leadership of tweeting. Ingerson and Bruce (2013:82) correctly indicate that, due to the power of Twitter's instant connection, positive and negative experiences are indeed possible. They describe various possible outcomes as follows:

Leaders have the chance to improve the world by tweeting encouraging words or discussing positive activities they are taking part in, but the polar opposite could happen as well. One negative tweet from a leader could have devastating effects on the person, organization, or action they are tweeting about. Precautions must be taken when powerful leaders have access to so many constitutions. Conversely, because these business leaders CEOs are so influential and have such a high amount of followers, the chance for them to improve the world is great.

In the orientation of discernment, investigative perspectives are mapped out for possible use during the last pragmatic task of a practical theological enquiry. Taking into account '... the real-time power of Twitter: the ability to listen and learn as decisions are made, by monitoring reactions and directing the appropriate course of action' (Gruber et al. 2015:164) can then be taken. In the following and last movement of this practical theological research endeavour, the plotting of some coordinates for a pragmatic spirituality is mapped out.

7.6 'A pragmatic spirituality': Christian leadership defined through Twitter?

In the last movement of Osmer's practical theological research, the specific trajectory of the search focuses on what could possibly be done and supported by a pragmatic or

strategic spirituality. This is indicated by Osmer as an orientation of spirituality of serving leadership (Osmer 2008:193). The research does, however, not only acknowledge the concept of serving leadership, but is also interested in the pragmatic possibilities and contributions of Christian leadership on Twitter. Within this understanding, a broader understanding of leadership is emphasised; however the description of this does resonate with Osmer's continuum of movement within which the following three poles can be differentiated.

In the first movement, establishing a pragmatic spirituality, 'task competence' is assumed. Gruber et al. (2015:164) indicated the following:

The microblogging site Twitter has become one of the most powerful platforms through which organizations communicate with stakeholders. Therefore, it is critical that scholars and practitioners understand the real-time power of Twitter and its implications for crisis management and leadership.

The question remains, however, in what way Christian leadership on Twitter can make a pragmatic and strategic contribution towards facilitating deep change. By using existing examples of Twitter messages from Christian leaders, it is shown how the process of deep change is facilitated, demonstrating strategic advantages flowing from it. To illustrate this, the empirical data from the Fuseware (2015:n.p.) research report serves to illustrate how original tweets of Christian leaders on Twitter for the indicated period were retweeted, reaching and influencing a large audience. In this regard, Ingerson and Bruce (2013:75) correctly indicate as follows:

Because of the high dissemination rate, Twitter has been thought of by many as electronic word of mouth ... Because word of mouth is a powerful influencer tool, Twitter therefore could be viewed as a powerful electronic influencer tool.

Specifically, if a tweet is retweeted often enough or by the right person(s), it gathers momentum that can emulate a snowball effect (Murty 2013:n.p.). Thinking beyond the formal use of, for example, hashtags and retweets, Pearson rightly indicates that '[h]ow a tweet is heard and received points to what lies beyond that which is online' (Pearson 2015:192).

In future research, the underlying dynamics associated with the action of retweeting should further be investigated asking, among others, about the reasons for messages being retweeted and the impact of retweeted messages. This could indeed link up well with a second movement on the continuum of a pragmatic spirituality, namely the dynamics of 'deep change'. Part of the last movement on the continuum of pragmatic spirituality is the search for the possible future meaning of existing practices of Christian expressions on Twitter. The research, although with a focus on existing practices, is simultaneously sensitive to the dynamic development of future practices.

Providing examples of pragmatic Christian leadership practices already present on Twitter for the indicated period, the 10 most retweeted messages were analysed from the data sets for 'Christian leadership' as well as for the Charlie Hebdo attacks. From the indicated tweets, I have omitted all the messages that included any web references and have focused only on the typical ordinary 140-character messages. Following these criteria, the following message by @amalphurs, on 12 January 2014, regarding 'Christian leadership' was retweeted more than a 100 times: 'Christian leadership is servant leadership, and any definition of a Christian must include the concept of servanthood'. Using the same criteria regarding the Charlie Hebdo attacks, the following message by @chrchristensen, on 7 January 2015, was retweeted nearly 10 000 times: 'Breivik killed 77 in Norway & no-one asked me as a white male of Nordic Christian background if I felt the need to condemn it. #charliehebdo'. Although this most retweeted post was unrelated to the Charlie Hebdo attacks, it put things into perspective with another situation earlier in Norway.

7.7 Summary – new vistas opening up ...

Changes currently experienced by the world are like the movement of tectonic plates, resulting in earthquakes and tsunamis (Clayton 2010:9), the size and extent of which was never experienced by previous generations (Gore 2013:n.p.). In order to steer through these challenging times, the words of Ingerson and Bruce (2013:74) serve as further motivation for this quest regarding future Christian leadership: 'The use of social media via social networking sites has played a key role in leadership in the 21st century'. In the preceding movements of a practical theological spirituality, a preliminarily tracing of Christian leadership on Twitter was mapped out. It was shown how expressions by Christian leaders on Twitter not only could contribute positively to existing practices, but can also map out important perspectives for development and use in the future.

In terms of research, the phenomenon of 'tweeting' was sketched and possibilities pointed out of how this specific form of social media can be put into use for Christian leadership practices. This orientation can accordingly lead to sketching perspectives for the development of future research possibilities. To be able to lead in new spaces of a digital existence, it seems that the following coordinates of degrees of longitude and latitude are required.

As far as longitude is concerned, thought should be given again to the type of theological discourse. The articulation of public theology, where acknowledgement is accorded to, among others, dialogic, practical, integrated, specialised and culturally oriented theological emphasis of, among others, empirical truths, seems important in order to be able to create a new and fresh style of inspiring theology (Ganzevoort 2014:20-30). In order to develop a vocabulary for a fresh theological discourse, the focus of a public practical empirical description should not only encompass church practices, but also daily life, in particular. In this regard, Ganzevoort and Roeland (2014:93) write:

The concepts of praxis and lived religion focus on what people do rather than on 'official' religion, its sacred sources, its institutes, and its doctrines. As such, practical theology has much in common with what in disciplines like anthropology, sociology, and media studies, is known as 'the practical turn': the turn away from institutes and (cultural) texts to the everyday social and cultural practices of ordinary people.

As far as latitude is concerned, it seems that the following markers could assist in establishing coordinates for future leadership. In mapping out the coordinates, I dovetail with the contributions of Philip Clayton (2010:n.p.) and Len Sweet (2014:n.p.). First, the theological audience has changed. This has specific results for the formulation and method of work of Christian leadership. Secondly, theology is not experienced in a centralised manner, but rather created in a cooperative way in which emphasis of context, relevance and actuality, as well as a dynamically changing character and connectivity are definitive. Thirdly, theology, created after Google, is not authoritative, but rather personal, biographical and autobiographical. By implication, theological truths are thus not presented in a linear fashion, but spaces are facilitated towards the creative articulation of a variety of perspectives.

A continuing sensitivity for these perspectives and growing developments may, in fact, lead to the strategic use of new, unexplored possibilities in the creation of innovative leadership practices, opening up new future vistas on Christian leadership and communities.

Chapter 8

Autobiography:¹³⁵

An autobiographical Twitter-theology

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Abstract

There is a possibility for traditional expressions of the Christian faith of becoming irrelevant due to the increasing challenges a fast-paced life created by an evolving digital world. Facilitated through a practical theological enquiry, employing a qualitative empirical research methodology, personal expressions of the Christian faith on Twitter are traced down and presented as possible examples of a relevant digital autobiographical theology. Through the contribution of these empirical realities, new hermeneutical outcomes and a strategic involvement are facilitated. With the documentation of these new and relevant articulations of the language of faith, a contribution is made to a meaningful digital autobiographical theology.

8.1 An autobiographical mapping of the research

A narrative hermeneutical interpretation made me suspicious regarding the so-called notion of objectivity with the result of viewing generally valid truths with greater scepticism. In the place of these I developed a sensitivity towards the meaning of individual, subjective and contextualised descriptions. This also fitted in well with the acknowledgement of biographical and autobiographical descriptions in qualitative research. With this orientation as background, I can offer the following autobiographical mapping of my research: After eight years of congregational service and 10 years in a professional academic career I started re-evaluating the relevance, dynamics and influence of theology. Personally I had the feeling that traditional Church practices and stereotypical theological formulations were

¹³⁵ In this chapter the metaphor of 'autobiography', in direct conjunction with a previous accent on 'storied identity', is used to provide accents which are inherently but also in an explicit manner part of 'lived religion' as expressed in social media culture in general and more specifically on Twitter.

increasingly coming under pressure, as well as slowly losing its influence and meaning. It also occurred to me that a substantial part of the world does not even pay attention to these words, and I started asking myself critically whether anyone would in fact take note if these voices and words become completely quiet. Apparently, so it appeared at times, not many people (including theologians and ministers) paid much attention to this. At times I gained the impression that the formulations in, for instance, church services became longer and more ponderous with fewer people understanding them. This made me think and read about the future look of theology and the Church. This was during the period that the phenomenon of social media, by way of example Facebook and Twitter, grew hand in hand. In the course of time I started wondering about the possible meaning of social media as context for the actualization of theology. Questions that came to my mind were: Would the distinguishable characteristics and dynamics of the social media world have any implications and meaning for theology? Would the medium and dynamics of social media offer traditional theological language the opportunity to sound more clear and relevant?

8.2 Searching for a new (relevant) theological space and language....

Changes experienced by the world today are like the movement of tectonic plates resulting in earthquakes and tsunamis (Clayton 2010:9), the size and extent of which was never experienced by previous generations (Gore 2013:n.p.). The result and implication of this is rightly summarized as follows by Clayton (2010:9): 'But what church means in practice has always been deeply affected by its age and culture'.

As far as my own tension in this changing world is concerned I often wonder whether the language that I know and use has not become for the world around me at times unclear and unintelligible. In this regard, sounding and resonating my exact fear, is the Dutch practical theologian, Ruard Ganzevoort, who writes as follows:

The hermeneutic chasm is not only between the theologian as reader and the old text, but more so between the theologian as speaker and the modern public ... What is to be done if the words that we use have no more relevance with life's reality for many people? ... In daily practice the complication in dealing with this theological change is experienced (Ganzevoort 2014:20-21).

Based on the observation and personal orientation that theological language has become mute in many (not *all*, to avoid a gross abstraction!) respects and that many people have become deaf regarding the articulation of these truths, questions can be asked regarding possible alternatives and already existing practices for the translation of faith and theology towards a more understandable language. To facilitate this, I will, firstly, through this article debate spheres of theological existence, with special reference regarding the facilitation thereof through technology and the social media. Secondly, in the investigation of the Twitter space in particular, I will empirically seek pathways, tracing down some prominent individual users, which could lead to new possible vistas in the formulation of faith and theology. From these perspectives I will thirdly, in the end, demonstrate Twitter messages for consideration in the re-formulation of faith and theology. As an introduction, as well as serving as an ongoing reflection on each of these three perspectives, an autobiographical account and description indicated in italic indented form, will be offered, embodying the classical circular practical theological movement between practice and theory.

8.3 Theological spheres of existence – New spaces require a fresh language

David Tracy's (1981) classical expression of the so-called three 'audiences' of 'publics' for the theologian, namely, the church, academia and the society is well-known in theological thought. Although the expression of different audiences is helpful for the creation and practice of theology, I suspect that it is strongly based on the encyclopaedic understanding of theology. Within an encyclopaedic understanding of theology a three-way distinction is normally made between the study of texts (for example in biblical sciences), the formulation of ideas or concepts (for example in systematic theology) and, lastly, a direct involvement with the empirical practice as, for example, in practical theology (Ganzevoort 2009:n.p.).

The existing hermeneutic lens is, in my opinion, challenged by the understanding of human existence as an integrated 'living human web of life' (Osmer 2008:16). To my opinion, an integrated, systemic, networked and holistic way of human existence (Louw 2014:10-11) is conceptualized in an exceptional manner by Tim Bernes-Lee's 'World Wide Web', which was 25 years old in 2014 (Hinton & Hjorth 2013:10). The evolving internet, connecting individuals and their worlds in the most intimate but also in the most global sense of being with each other, therefore serves as metaphor for an integrated living human web of life.

Taking into account the history of the World Wide Web, the so-called Web 1.0 technology initially directed the user of the internet towards linear and one-way web pages, but this developed early in the 21st century towards the so-called Web 2.0 technology, which was the basis for the interactive use of the internet as embodied by the creation of social media (Flew 2008:17). Expressions of social media like, amongst others, Facebook, Twitter and Whatsapp put in place a landscape within which new vistas of meaning are unlocked. A new demography of existence and meaning is constantly being formed by a growing membership of the social media landscape. For example, Facebook-‘country’ is currently regarded as the largest country in the world based on the number of its ‘inhabitants’:

If Facebook were a country, it would be the most populous nation on earth. The huge social network said Wednesday that 1.39 billion people log in to Facebook each month to scroll their News Feeds, communicate with friends and look at photos. That’s more than the entire population of China, the world’s most populous country... (Stenovec 2015:n.p.).

Despite the various advantages opening up through these digital gateways of existence, it is, in fact, the dynamic and growing sphere of communication through information technology which presents the following multifaceted challenges for theology:

Mastering the new communication technologies is not enough, though it’s essential; it’s also crucial to understand what it means to be religious, and Christian, in a technology-dominated age (Clayton 2010:9).

In an attempt to document some of the ways in which these challenges may be addressed and as a possible expression of a relevant articulation of the Christian faith, Twitter was chosen as the social media platform for investigation. As a primary exponent of social media in this technology-dominated age, Twitter is a so-called micro-blog platform and which became known as the so-called ‘sms’ of the internet by its use of only 140 characters (Wagner 2012:120; Murty 2013:n.p.). The abbreviated character of Twitter, forms part of the rationale and motivation in making the research choice for this platform as the terrain of practice. Twitter has about 320 million monthly users who daily participate in the sending of approximately 500 million tweets (Smith 2015:n.p.). Through the use of this platform meaningful social and political dynamics such as the so-called ‘Arab-spring’, ‘Occupy Wall Street-movement’ and the recent ‘#feesmustfall’ campaign by students in South Africa, are, amongst others, unlocked (Fuchs 2014:196; Nicholson 2015:n.p.).

Conventions, which are associated with the platform, amongst others the hashtag, is an indication of the popular cultural influence of innovated language and symbol use within the new sphere of human existence (Van den Berg 2014:n.p.).

With this orientation as background, the challenge of articulating a relevant theology in a new theological sphere of existence, facilitated through the development of social media, and in particular on the Twitter-platform, is expressed by Neels Jackson, the editor of *Kerkbode* (the newspaper of the Dutch Reformed Church in Southern Africa), in a column which he had written for the South African newspaper *Beeld* (2013)¹³⁶, with the title '*Would Jesus also have tweeted?*':

Supposing that Jesus lived on earth as a human being in this day and age: would he have tweeted? This question recently came to my mind while I was reading yet another tweet from a theologian. I had realised that an ongoing theological discussion is being conducted in the Twitter world. Something within me immediately wanted to say 'No'. After all, one cannot cram great theological truths into the 140 characters that are allotted to one on Twitter. But then I remembered that Jesus himself did not preach lengthy and ponderous sermons. After all, did he not tell people stories? Was he not, precisely, a master of the aphorism, the short, powerful maxim? Maybe this is one of the things that went wrong with the church over the centuries. We have subjected the gospel to long and weighty arguments, whereas Jesus uttered truths that were briefly stated and easily understood.

It is, therefore, in a theological discussion, negotiating the meaning of this space important to not only be sensitive about the dynamic character of social media, and more specifically the Twitter-platform, but also to rethink the possibilities provided by these new spaces of theological discourse. Pearson writes as follows in this regard:

In terms of a public theology what might be the implications of Facebook, Twitter, and whatever emerges next is nevertheless an unexamined script. The standard pattern of the discipline is to comment on a range of

¹³⁶ *Beeld*, 6 June 2013 [translation from the original Afrikaans].

occasional issues and seek to be bilingual in discourse and audience (Pearson 2015:188).

It is precisely the aim of this contribution to seek theological articulations, which are relevant, benefiting the facilitation and embodiment of a contextual sensitive discourse and audience. Although I am sensitive regarding the over-optimistic understanding of the influence and role of social media, it seems that this new space already presents an important orientation for the translation of newer accentuations of theology and faith. In order to trace and map some of these new articulations, especially those with a strong autobiographical emphasis, the following results of some qualitative empirical research that was done, can be presented.

8.4 Autobiographies portrayed on Twitter

I only have the proverbial toe in the ocean of the digital world as far as my own participation in social media is concerned. Although I've a Twitter profile (@javdberg with the following profile description: Practical theologian / Tracing lived spirituality in the digital world / University of the Free State (@UFSweb) / Mentions and retweets are not endorsements), my activity regarding the sending of tweets are low. My low profile on Twitter is also visible in a relatively small follower-base. However, I'm very much interested in the presence and activity of other users on the Twitter platform. I've opted to start with an enquiry regarding theologians as well as users associated with religion actively involved on Twitter and with a prominent presence quantified by more than 500 followers, which is 300 users above the average number of followers on Twitter (Smith 2015:n.p.). For the sake of this article, and focusing strongly on the autobiographical orientation of the research as well as the personal stories of participants, I'm going to introduce only three of the autobiographical portraits of these conversational partners. As part of this introduction to each participant, I've opted to portray their own biographical descriptions as indicated on their personal Twitter profiles, unmistakable linking life, theology and faith with each other. One participant is an Australian, giving an international voice and flavour to the research (although the world of social media doesn't know demographic borders), while the other two users are from South Africa, with one of them not a formal theologian, but actively involved with religious affairs:

8.4.i Father Bob - a prophetic voice from Australia

Father Bob (@fatherbob): On his Twitter profile, Father Bob describes himself as ‘The Larrikin Priest, patron of the unloved and unlovely...’ (@fatherbob 2014). This clergyman’s active and legendary role in the public domain has led, to the establishment of the ‘In Bob we trust-movement in Australia’ (Fr Bob Maquire Foundation 2014). Having been part of the Twitter community since 2007, Father Bob has sent some 34 000 tweets: and he has built up a following of approximately 103 000 persons. According to the influential analytical instrument of the Twitter platform, Twtrland¹³⁷ (2014), Father Bob is regarded as a ‘super active’ user with about 138 tweets per day and an amazing 612 retweets for each 100 sent. Assuming that a retweet by other users and followers indicate the importance of a message, I therefore also supply the tweet from each of those who retweeted the most. For Father Bob the most popular re-tweet (838 times) on 22 March 2014 was the following: ‘Why, in God's/Good's name, does the biggest, richest, emptiest place in the region beg, bribe, bully the poorest to "take" our refugees?’ (@fatherbob 2014; Twtrland 2014).

8.4.ii Neels Jackson - reporting on the actuality of religion

Neels Jackson (@neelsjackson): As the editor of Kerkbode (Church Messenger), a well-known newspaper of the Dutch Reformed Church in Southern Africa, Neels Jackson is involved in church-related and religious reporting on a daily basis. Having been on the Twitter platform since 2009, he introduces himself as a ‘Christian, husband, father, reporter, birder, photographer’. He currently has 1 053 followers and has sent 377 tweets. Twtrland indicates Jackson’s Twitter activity as a low average 0.2 tweets per day with a good 69 retweets per 100 sent. His tweet which was retweeted most was the following on 6 October 2013: ‘Welfare theology says that to receive one must give. The gospel says you have received to be able to give’¹³⁸ (@neelsjackson 2013, Twtrland 2014).

8.4.iii Stephan Joubert – actively tweeting difference-making theology

Stephan Joubert (@stephanjoubert): Stephan Joubert has been part of Twitter since April 2009. With approximately 4 600 tweets and 4 600 followers, he is one of the leading theologians in South Africa. He also has a public voice on Twitter, and introduces himself on his profile as follows: ‘Jesus follower. Catalyst. Author. Part of the amazing echurch/ekerk & Joubert tribes’. Joubert, who is involved with various national and

¹³⁷ During the initial research the online analytical social media-measuring instrument, Twtrland, was used. In the meantime the name of this instrument was changed to Klear (Klear 2016:n.p.).

¹³⁸ Translation from the original Afrikaans

international universities, is a professor in New Testament studies, and is also the founder of the e-church in South Africa, which focuses, inter alia, on an internet ministry. With an average of 2.3 tweets per day he has an impressive 295 retweets per 100 sent (Twtrland 2014). His most popular retweet (61) was the following on 8 July 2013: '90% of all prayers are requests. The sad result: God is judged on his response time & people's faith on the number of answers they get' (@stephanjoubert 2012; Twtrland 2014).

8.5 Autobiographical theology articulated on Twitter

As part of the focus of this article and in considering the meaning and relevance of theology for today, the following described trajectory by Ford is helpful in providing a text to reflect on:

Christian theology is thinking about questions raised by and about Christian faith and practice. That thinking is almost unavoidable in some form by anyone who tries to live a Christian life or who for some other reason is interested in Christianity. Theology by this broad definition is open to all and is part of ordinary life whenever any of a vast range of questions is raised... That is why the key word for the goal of theology is wisdom, which unites understanding with practice and is concerned to engage with the whole of life (Ford 2011:1).

Tracing the link between (auto)biography and theology (Müller 2011:2) and in search of '... the question that all Christians ask and the kind of answers that ordinary people give, no matter how hesitating and uncertain' (Clayton 2010:12), I've engaged with my three conversational partners in order to map down their own autobiographical understanding of their presence on Twitter. In mapping down their words, insights and wisdom, deriving from email conversations that I've had with them over a period of time, I concur with Ford that theological wisdom, born out of the understanding of practices, emanating the whole of life, contributes to a relevant Christian faith and practice. In the following three autobiographical accounts each of them reflected on their personal presence on and use of Twitter:

8.5.i Father Bob – '... using the same method as Jesus and the prophets'

Father Bob has described and motivated his presence on Twitter by firstly indicated that he once personally ran a blog, but that it eventually took up to much of his time and

attention. Twitter offered a more dynamic and quicker alternative. This alternative, coupled with the fact that he regards his function as serving within a ministry without borders, made Twitter his ideal and primary choice for his presence in the social media. Father Bob has motivated his presence and use of Twitter further with the following rationale:

Twitter uses the same method as Jesus and the prophets namely parables. Having to be short, sharp and to the point, a sort of speaking in tongues, requires a theology built on personal experience of the Other, not others' experience (Maquire 2014:n.p.).

8.5.ii Neels Jackson – ‘... Twitter is all about following’

Neels Jackson has indicated that he did not tweet a lot, but that he actively uses Twitter to follow other individuals and organisations in which he has an interest. By following individuals like the Pope, or organisations like the World Council of Churches, the important most current news or information can therefore be obtained to be used on other platforms. Twitter can also be a source of information regarding personal interests like sports. Neels has also indicated that his faith is extended to and reflected in his daily interactions on social media (Jackson 2014:n.p.).

8.5.iii Stephan Joubert – ‘... all about social connectivity and belonging here’

Stephan Joubert has indicated Twitter as his primary means of social interaction in cyberspace because of its simplicity and the 140 character limitation. With the following personal explanation Stephan is motivating his use of Twitter in tweeting a relevant and meaningful theology:

On Twitter people are forced to tweet their information, opinions, truths and ideas briefly, yet with great clarity and relevance. Twitter forces those using this form of social communication to reflect about their content beforehand. Endless ramblings of egotists, attention seekers, melancholic personalities, etc, stand no chance here of attracting or keeping attention here on the long run. It's all about social connectivity and belonging here. Marshall McLuhan taught us the medium is the message. Twitter forces us to rethink our faith on the cyber squares amongst non-religious people and non-professional followers of Jesus. It could even force that age-old institution called the church out of the 'safe' space of irrelevant meetings to encounters with present-day issues and questions. Hopefully, a new

generation of young marketplace theologians will also rise up to become our mentors, coaches and teachers in this fascinating new digitally connected world. Monologues in cyberspace; long sermons; naming and shaming of others in the name of God, etc, just won't survive here. Neither will long discussions about theological dogmas and local church matters fly here. It's all about relevant connectivity now, not only about more religious information (Joubert 2014:n.p.).

8.5.iv A connected life-theology

In his article '(Auto)biography as theology', Julian Müller not only provided a description of, but also emphasized the importance of context, connectivity and tradition as important characters in the documentation of autobiographical theology (Müller 2011:n.p.). As were seen from the autobiographical commentary and accents coming from the three conversational partners, the hermeneutical correlation between context and text is of extreme importance. It would then seem by word of the three conversational partners-and many more others-that Twitter provides for the opportunity in 140 characters to sound out theological meaning for contextual issues and by doing that, have meaning for the whole of life in a networked society. A good practical embodiment of this and serving as an example of the interplay between the (auto)biographical stories of connected individuals and societies, is probably the following story regarding Father Bob's public theological involvement:

On Tuesday morning, 10 June 2014, an enormous hot air balloon in the form of the famous statue of Jesus in Rio de Janeiro, soared over Melbourne, Australia (*ABC News Radio* 2014). This giant balloon was released on the eve of the 2014 World Cup soccer tournament in Brazil as an initiative of a lottery company, and bore the words, *#keepthefaitth*. Various churches immediately lodged objections against the balloon. In the midst of this controversy, Father Bob, tweeted the following: 'The offended churches could send up a competing inflated balloon with "CHRIST SAVES" emblazoned on it' (@fatherbob 2014).

Father Bob reached many more persons through his message than a minister or pastor at a traditional Sunday morning church service. As a demonstration of the manner in which Father Bob actively uses Twitter he later that same day, as part of the discussion that

followed these events, retweeted the following message that had been sent by a woman called Sandy: ‘My six year old saw it on the news and said “That doesn't look like Jesus Mummy, he lives at my school”’ (@fatherbob 2014).

8.6 Expressions of God-talk on Twitter

To be able to travel and talk theologically in new spaces it seems that the following coordinates of degrees of longitude and latitude are required. I think that as far as longitude is concerned, thought should be given again regarding the type of theological formulation. The articulation of public theology where acknowledgement is accorded to, amongst others, dialogic, practical, integrated, specialized and culturally orientated theological emphasis of, amongst others, empirical truths, seems to me important to be able to create a new and fresh style of inspiring theology (Ganzevoort 2014:20-30). In order to develop a vocabulary for fresh theological formulations, the focus of a public practical empirical description should not only encompass church practices, but also, in particular, daily life. In this regard Ganzevoort and Roeland write:

The concepts of praxis and lived religion focus on what people do rather than on ‘official’ religion, its sacred sources, its institutes, and its doctrines. As such, practical theology has much in common with what in disciplines like anthropology, sociology, and media studies, is known as ‘the practical turn’: the turn away from institutes and (cultural) texts to the everyday social and cultural practices of ordinary people (Ganzevoort & Roeland 2014:93).

On the basis of my awareness of, and quest for, ‘convictions about the nature of reality and the larger world’ (Campbell 2013:n.p.), I am of the opinion that it has become a matter of priority to reflect on the creation and existence of a digital autobiographical theology. In the development and description of aspects of a digital autobiographical theology, I am convinced that ‘life on the screen’ cannot take place without acknowledging important autobiographical accents of meaning making. Heidi Campbell, in her book *Digital religion. Understanding religious practice in new media worlds*’ (2013), has already pointed to the challenge of meaning making within this screen-context:

... when lived religious practice and digital culture meet, a “third space” emerges, a hybridized and fluid context requiring new logics and evoking unique forms of meaning-making. Digital religion as a concept

acknowledges not only how the unique character of digital technology and culture shapes religious practice and beliefs, but also how religions seek to culture new media contexts with established ways of being and convictions about the nature of reality and the larger world (Campbell 2013:4)

As far as latitude orientations are concerned, it seems that the following markers could assist in establishing coordinates. In my article, I dovetail with the contributions of Clayton (2010) and Sweet (2014). Firstly, the theological audience has changed. This has specific results for the formulation, method of work and the application of a curriculum for theology, so that the character of theology is not only understood as a noun, but also, in particular, as a verb; it is not only talked about but actively acted upon. Secondly, theology is not experienced in a centralized manner, but rather created in a cooperative way in which emphasis of context, relevance and actuality, as well as a dynamically changing character and connectivity is definitive. Thirdly, theology, after Google was created, is not authoritative, but rather personal, biographical and autobiographical. By implication this has the result that theological truths are not presented in a linear fashion, but that spaces are facilitated towards the creative articulation of a variety of perspectives. In this regard Pearson justly said, 'How a tweet is heard and received points to what lies beyond that which is online' (Pearson 2015:192).

Finally, these few perspectives lead to further reflection and orientation in the formulation and articulation of an (auto)biographical theology on Twitter. As seen clearly in every tweet above, it is my plea that theologians desist from focusing one-sidedly on the reading of tradition, while not heeding the hermeneutical communication with popular culture. This may result in the overlooking of 'signals of the transcendent, the presence of grace, rumors of angels' (Vanhoozer 2007:33). In this orientation there is not an alienation of tradition, rather a search for the possibility towards new and relevant expressions of old truths. Clayton expresses this sentiment when he writes:

To pursue 'theology after google' does not mean to gleefully destroy all traditional Christian beliefs, to abandon the church, or to advocate a post-Christian worldview. On the contrary, it does, however, mean entering in good conscience into a new kind of open and exploratory discourse - a discourse in which one's conversation partners are not committed in

advance to landing where past theologians have landed. Many of them do end up with a vibrant Christian identity, but that's no longer a pre-condition for theological dialogue (Clayton 2010:20).

8.7 Tweeting theology in autobiographical mode...

The search for a relevant expression of the Christian faith can in fact be embodied in the 140 characters of Twitter. The concise expressions are so dynamic of nature that they can, in the new era of digital connectivity, be adjusted, strengthened and applied contextually. In addition, these expressions also present scope for the expression and description of God's presence. My expectation is that, in the ongoing search for expressions on Twitter associated with the Christian faith, new, relevant, compact and meaningful articulations of God's presence in our world will be found. In order to do so, and as part of my own autobiographical theological tweeting, I'll be remembering Len Sweet's words when busy formulating my next tweet:

When I look for something to tweet about, I find myself paying attention to life in heightened ways. With Twitter every day is an awakening to things that never would have registered before. Twitter gives me openings through which I can dive into newly discovered depths Sweet (2012:n.p.).

Chapter 9

Networked theology:¹³⁹

Trending conversation



Figure 9.1: Adam Powell's Twitter message, Lent 2015 (@realadampowell 2015:n.p.)

9.1 Introduction

The above Twitter message from Adam Powell reveals a concrete and practical example of Christian motifs embedded in the interpretation and translation of theological meaning in a contemporary idiom. Although Adam Powell is not a professional theologian or celebrity, he succeeded in formulating a complex theological truth in an easy, accessible and understandable manner. This example of the communication of Christian motifs on Twitter opens another window on the essence of the research project.

In the previous chapters, I traced and analysed the prevalence, use and communication of Christian motifs on Twitter, with the aim of depicting descriptions of 'aspects of everyday life that have hitherto not been readily made public' (Zappavigna 2012:37). The study thus embodies a wider focus for me than simply the traditional domain of the professional theologian, since I am particularly interested in investigating the communication of Christian motifs on all levels of the Twitter domain. In the process of negotiating the possible meaning of this research endeavour, I concur with Ganzevoort (2014:4) that the new theologian is called to be not so much a representative of tradition, but rather an interpreter, translator or guide who, in conjunction with others, seeks links to greater meaning. Within this orientation, one of my earliest research concerns for a relevant contextual theology is addressed (cf. Chapter 1).

¹³⁹ In this last reflective chapter, I use the metaphor of 'trending conversation', strongly associated not only with the nature of dialogue on social media, but also with the central notion of reflexivity in practical theology. This chapter is linked to the central *leitmotiv* of 'networked religion' that is used in the study.

With the aim of summarising perspectives on the basis of the research and in answer to the various research questions, this chapter provides a critical-reflective synthesis of the research findings. The critical-evaluative summary in this last chapter of the research is therefore directed by the central concept of theological reflection in a practical theology orientation (Lyall 2000:53; Swinton & Mowat 2006:59; Reader 2008:14-17; Ballard 2012:169). Writing from an autobiographical perspective, the use of guiding metaphors played an important role in the documentation of my research in the thesis so far, as well as in this concluding chapter. I justify the essential and important role of the use of metaphors in documenting my work with the following three underlying assumptions: (i) they are a fundamental part of human thought; (ii) they colour ideas and direct understanding; and (iii) they confirm underlying values that direct life (Supovitz & Reinkordt 2017:21). The associative network of meanings (Müller & Maritz 1998:64) created by the use of metaphors therefore not only makes structural development possible, but also supports the argument.

Arising out of this orientation and directing the structure of this chapter, the following metaphors are employed as structural markers in leading my argumentation. The alignment with the central *leitmotiv* of 'networked religion' is implied in the subtitle of this final chapter, namely 'Trending conversation', which emphasises the dynamic continuing conversational character of social media.

The structure of Chapter 9 corresponds with the initial structure of Chapter 1. The introductory and final chapters delineate the documented research in Chapters 2 to 8 in a specific way, i.e. structurally and content-wise. In Chapter 1, I use the rubrics 'Orientation' and 'Outline', respectively, as structural markers to corroborate the findings of the research. In terms of 'Orientation', the planned researches are oriented to specific theoretical starting points with these coordinates that are subsequently used for further developing the research. 'Outline' refers to the concrete structuring and scheduling of the research.

With the completion of the research embodied in the previous chapters and corresponding with the structural markers of 'Orientation' and 'Outline', Chapter 9 specifically summarizes and concludes the research project. Two main rubrics form the basis of this chapter. In correspondence with the 'Orientation' marker of Chapter 1, but to express the completion

of the research journey, I now use 'Mapping' to mark the achievement of a specific position. In support of this, the second main rubric 'Directions', in affinity with 'Outline' in Chapter 1, now points to the achievement of a specific position in the research journey. The rubric 'Mapping' summarizes the preceding research that strongly agrees with the central metaphor of 'networked theology' and the associated markers that are linked to each of the previous chapters. Upon completion of this charting, the second main rubric of Chapter 9, 'Directions', presents specific concrete and strategic perspectives emerging from the completed research. The provided coordinates of 'Mapping' and 'Directions' also fit easily into the bigger plan of a 'trending conversation', as it confirms the dynamic character of the social media.¹⁴⁰

Mapping

9.2.i A mapping of stories

In the first section, entitled #mapping,¹⁴¹ I have chosen to present a mode of description by way of using autobiography and biographies as part of a critical self-reflection, representing one of the key moments in a practical theology methodology. Due to the strong autobiographical and biographical focus throughout all of the chapters of the thesis as well as in the recognition of my own subjectivity in the research project, it is essential to acknowledge these perspectives, as these had and still have a direct effect on the way in which I do research.

Although the concept of reflexivity is directly related to theological reflection, it also strongly encapsulates an autobiographical notion of discernment trying to comprehend the self in a networked society (Reader 2008:14; Moschella 2012:225). Acknowledging that autobiographical perspectives form part of the process of critical reflection, Graham (2017:70) has therefore rightly pointed out that:

It is not about reducing practical theology to autobiography but seeing how our standpoints and concerns have informed our intellectual and academic interests, and *vice versa*. In the interests of integrity and transparency, the self as researcher as one who brings particular presuppositions, questions and interests, must be prepared to write themselves into the text of their research.

¹⁴⁰ Also see the reference to 'trending conversation' in Chapter 3.

¹⁴¹ Associations with agency, transmission and communication are embodied in the metaphor of 'mapping'.

Following through on my endeavour to write myself into the text of the research from the start of the first chapter throughout the seven articles, I continue with a short autobiographical fragment of reflection on the research process:

During traditional theological and Church discussions where I tell people what the research is about, I have often experienced an initial sceptical reaction to the dangers of social media such as, among others, the threat to maintain meaningful communication.¹⁴² As mentioned in the previous

¹⁴² The following autobiographical narration by the well-known Afrikaans writer, Dana Snyman, addresses my sensitivity for the positive but also the negative influence of mobile technology, in particular for the over-simplified assumption that this type of technology provides the answer to all questions:

We have just been seated at the table in the Blue Whale when Hennie's cellphone rang. It is an SMS from someone.

'I am just going to reply', he says. 'Sorry.'

His thumb moves over the cellphone keys.

We were good friends at school, but these days we don't see much of each other, Hennie and I. Since he was promoted at the IT company where he works, he travels a lot abroad, in particular to China.

He puts his cellphone down again.

'I see you are still using your paraffin model.' He points to my old Blackberry next to me on the table.

'I bought this one recently in Hong Kong. Samsung Galaxy. State of the art. It is amazing what this little thing can do.' He presses a few keys, and holds the cellphone near his mouth, saying loudly, "Hallo Galaxy." He turns the cellphone in my direction. 'Ask it anything. In English.'

'Anything?'

'Anything,' answers Hennie.

'What is the purpose of life?', I ask with my mouth near the Galaxy.

'You still are the joker, hey?' Hennie lowers the phone without laughing. 'Ask him a proper question, man. Ask him who is the American president.' He holds the phone near my mouth again.

'Who is the American president?' I ask.

We wait a while till a tin-like voice comes from the small body of the Galaxy: 'Barack Obama is the president of the United States of America.'

Hennie smiles and puts the phone next to his small plate.

'How are things with you?' I ask.

'No, fine,' he says. 'Fine. Just busy. And you.'

'Fine, fine.'

'I am glad. I am glad.'

A waiter puts a menu in front of each of us.

'Do you still hear from the others?' I ask.

'No, not really.'

'I discovered the other day a team photo of our fourth rugby team.'

'You must put it on Facebook. I like the things that are put on Facebook.' His cellphone gave a little chirp again. 'Sorry man.'

He looked at the phone's small screen. 'It is a WeChat from my girl.'

'WeChat? What is that?'

'Don't you know WeChat?' He presses a few keys and the voice of his daughter – who is at university – comes over the Galaxy: 'Hallo Dad. Thanks for the money. Hope things are going well, bye-bye.'

He puts the phone down again next to him. 'I feel so sorry for the poor child,' he says.

chapters, I am sensitive to the existential meaning and impact of the digital era. There are many possibilities for alternative descriptions embedded in the use of mobile technology and social media platforms, but also specific and unique challenges. In my search for relevance and meaning, it struck me that previous research was often directly or indirectly associated with Church-like practices. During my initial research for possible Christian motifs on Twitter, I often experienced that individuals were surprised by the research. On learning about the theme, they often reacted with surprise, commenting that they had not thought of the social media as a space for dealing with God and theology. This perception is further strengthened by the specific use of Twitter. Although Twitter is well-known, it is not the first media platform of choice for many people. It is often associated with people in specific professional surroundings, or with those who focus on the digital media. However, in terms of this specific research, I was of the view that reflecting on the use of God's words in the social media and on the Twitter platform, in particular, was a new experience. People are also excited to consider the new alternative possibilities, to which they had not given a thought previously. My experience was that the project in itself embodied these values and that persons involved therewith often spontaneously expected an alternative new meaning.

As background to the further development of this reflection, there are various isolated moments of reflection to which other readers and thinkers have already contributed constructively and dynamically with their perspectives on the published research. I was also privileged to present my research as papers at various conferences where I received critical, but helpful feedback from participants.¹⁴³ In addition, I presented the documented research in Chapters 1 to 8 of this thesis to an interdisciplinary colloquium of academic

'Why?', I ask.

'Haven't you heard?'

'No. What?'

'Her mother and I are going to get a divorce.' He looks at me briefly. 'The last two years have been a nightmare. We talk past each other all the time.'

'He pulls the menu towards him. 'We probably have to order, hey?' He opens it. 'I wonder what their fish is like?' (Snyman 2015:n.p.).

¹⁴³ Various phases of the research were presented at the following conferences: Society for Practical Theology in South Africa (2013; 2014; 2016; 2017); International Academy for Practical Theology (2013; 2015); Conference on Teaching Theology in a Technological Age (2014).

colleagues at the Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa.¹⁴⁴ The colleagues raised various remarks and questions, the most prominent being: What labels the research ‘theological’? What do the perspectives mean for practice? Clearly, these and other questions also challenged me on a personal and deeper level.

9.2.ii Mapping reflections on the seven articles¹⁴⁵

The seven articles in this dissertation represent the documentation of research investigating Christian motifs on Twitter. Like a travel diary, the articles map the initial planning of the journey, the development of the voyage, the specific challenges experienced, and the description of perspectives experienced along the way. A strong autobiographical accent throughout all the articles interprets my personal involvement in the research.

In the first article¹⁴⁶, resonating the associated marker of ‘networked community’¹⁴⁷ within networked religion (Campbell 2012:68-71), I give a broad overview of the project and a general orientation to the research. I emphasise the reality and importance of research on social media; I personally link these to four prominent Twitter users, whose activities on Twitter are associated specifically with faith and technology. The tone of the article confirms the narrative and autobiographical emphasis of the research and introduces the presentation of the research. This first orientating contribution represents the descriptive-empirical description in Osmer’s practical theological interpretation. This is followed by the second movement of Osmer’s practical theological interpretation, with a strong moment of declaration in the second and third contributions, respectively.

In the second contribution,¹⁴⁸ I develop the initial research further steered by the marker of ‘storied identity’¹⁴⁹, associated with networked religion. By way of a narrative orientation, I

¹⁴⁴ Presented at the Faculty Academic Discussion (FAD) on 20 September 2017.

¹⁴⁵ This specific movement of reflection finds affinity with the second movement of Osmer’s (2008) practical theological research. The emphasis is on a descriptive-explanatory description. This description finds direct affinity with the second secondary research question, namely: What explanatory framework can be offered in the analysis of theological concepts used on Twitter? (Interpretive dimension)’. An overview of the seven published articles serves, among others, as a presentation of this specific moment of reflection.

¹⁴⁶ Chapter 2.

¹⁴⁷ Central to the idea of networked religion is the understanding that ‘religious practice emerges within a distinctive social sphere constructed of networked interactions’ (Campbell 2012:68).

¹⁴⁸ Chapter 3.

investigate the origin, appearance and use of the hashtag sign that is specifically associated with the use of social media and popular culture. On the basis of actual examples, I contextualize the meaning of the sign and develop a practical theology from the use of the hashtag sign.

In the third contribution,¹⁵⁰ I emphasise the comprehensive nature of the language of Christian motifs by investigating the topic of human waste and its occurrence on Twitter. Finding a connection with the marker of ‘convergent practice’¹⁵¹ the autonomy of practice as described in the research as ‘lived religion’ is emphasised (Campbell 2012:79). By using basic empirical strategies, I investigate comprehensive aspects associated with the topic of human waste – from spatial debris to human dignity. However, in the ensuing contributions, I elaborate significantly on the scope and depth of the empirical development of the research.

In the fourth article,¹⁵² I analyse aspects of normativity on several levels associated with human dignity and on the basis of specific Twitter messages. I also highlight the character, dynamics and functioning of normativity from different perspectives in order to illustrate the contested nature of normativity as associated with the marker of ‘shifting authority’¹⁵³ as part of the description of networked theology.

This description leads to a fifth contribution,¹⁵⁴ in which I describe and analyse the usage and meaning of the Jesus name on Twitter. With this contribution a connection is made with the fifth marker of ‘networked theology’, namely ‘multisite reality’,¹⁵⁵ providing for a

¹⁴⁹ With the concept of ‘storied identity’ the individual’s ability to plot a narrative ‘in ways that are less structured than traditional norms or avenues’ (Campbell 2012:73), for example by the use of the hashtag sign, is confirmed and described.

¹⁵⁰ Chapter 4.

¹⁵¹ With the concept of convergent practice the dynamic interplay of the Internet-era that ‘removes many traditional entry barriers, allowing religious users new levels of freedom to create and access information’, is acknowledged (Campbell 2012:77).

¹⁵² Chapter 5.

¹⁵³ With the marker of ‘shifting authority’ the focus is on the description of the Internet and in particular, Twitter, as ‘a sphere for the renegotiation of and canonization of accepted sources of authority’ (Campbell 2012:74). This renegotiation is translated and illustrated in this chapter with a focus on normativity.

¹⁵⁴ Chapter 6.

¹⁵⁵ ‘Multisite reality highlights the fact that there are strong ties between individuals’ online and offline attitudes, behaviors, and practices. Online routines are often informed by offline ways of being, and involve a free flow of ideas and practice between these different spheres of reality construction’ (Campbell 2012:83).

'growing recognition of the interconnection between online and offline contexts' (Campbell 2012:80). In the fourth and fifth articles, I address the normative aspect of Osmer's practical theological description.

In the penultimate contribution,¹⁵⁶ I focus on how Twitter impacts on leadership practices. I once again anchored these perspectives on another marker directly associated with networked theology, namely 'relational'. In accordance with this metaphor I present, analyse and discuss several examples of the relationship between leadership and Twitter and provide some strategic perspectives for Twitter-leadership.

In a final, intensely autobiographical contribution,¹⁵⁷ I come full circle and reflect on the perspectives expressed in the first contribution. Embedded within the strong narrative character of the research, I made use of the marker of 'autobiography' in linking this last contribution to the central metaphor of networked theology. My analysis of the profiles of four prominent users of Twitter and their motivation for using that platform leads me to elucidate, in practical theological terms, how specific tweets express Christian motifs. These two final contributions also represent strong strategic and pragmatic perspectives and thus correspond with the fourth task of Osmer's practical theological description.

9.2.iii Mapping the structure for providing direction

In presenting summary remarks and critical-reflexive perspectives, I make use of specific markers to structure the last part of the final chapter. In Chapter 6, I referred to the description of the digital era as a Gutenberg moment (Goldin & Kutarna 2016:30). Newby (2008:57) describes the meaning thereof for the character and dynamics of religious texts as follows:

The electronic revolution seems to be having the same impact on sacred texts as the Gutenberg technology did: more texts available to more people with a greater loss of control over the texts by the established authorities ... the electronic revolution in the use of sacred texts will negotiate between the two poles of stasis and resistance on the one hand and proliferation and chaos on the other.

¹⁵⁶ Chapter 7.

¹⁵⁷ Chapter 8.

The composition of a message on Twitter can serve as an example to illustrate this bipolar tension between stasis, on the one hand, and change, on the other. The Twitter's icon that is used as a button to guide the formulation of a tweet is the classic quill, used primarily as a writing tool from the 6th to the 19th centuries. Composing a newly formulated message on Twitter is thus associated with the meaning of a classical writing implement that is no longer used. This image succeeds in indicating the tension between stasis and change. According to Newby, the use of holy texts in the digital revolution will be negotiated between two poles, namely 'stasis/resistance', and 'proliferation' and 'chaos'. These broad markers provide a structure for this final reflective chapter to present a synthesis of the research findings from the previous chapters.

I shall therefore use both these two broad coordinates, namely the bipolar tension between stasis and change, on the one hand, and the issue of the functioning and connection between theological and practical knowledge, on the other, to present the following synthesis of, and critical-evaluative reflection on the research.

Consequently to the previous described '#mapping' orientation, I shall use the structural marker '#direction' to analyse the strategic and pragmatic perspective. This will indicate perspectives for the strategic formulation and communication of 'God talk' on Twitter by presenting central themes derived from the articles as important outcomes of, and perspectives from the research. Initially I shall use the seven articles, from which I draw themes, to reflect, on the basis of the bipolar tension, on the dimensions of stasis and potential alternatives. In the ensuing stage, I shall extrapolate the major themes in a final synthesis and comment on these from theological and practical points of view. The primary and secondary research questions guide this description, which is then further supported by a synthesis of the research perspectives.

Direction

9.3. A synthesis of research perspectives: Navigating between poles of stasis and change

Based on the premise that the analysis of specific tweets could provide access to a potentially new and alternative articulation of Christian motifs by various users of different backgrounds, the following primary question guided the research:

➤ **What are the strengths/weaknesses of Twitter in communicating Christian motifs?**

To explore the primary research question thoroughly, four secondary research questions supported the investigation. In summarizing the documented research, I shall now provide elucidating perspectives on these four secondary research questions.¹⁵⁸

➤ **In tracing the prevalence of Christian motifs on Twitter, what are the main themes, issues, or ideas in the theology of the tweeters?
(Descriptive-empirical dimension)**

Various articles in the thesis directly address this research question, as they document important descriptive-empirical explanations of the research.¹⁵⁹ The following synopsis (Fuseware 2015:n.p) summarises the quantitative empirical research, which is directly and pertinently associated with the Twitter platform. Across all 35¹⁶⁰ keywords¹⁶¹ observed in the period from 2013-09-01 to 2015-05-18, a total of 1.1 billion global posts were collected on Twitter, with a daily average of 1.7 million posts. The majority of the posts were from the US, with the top time-zone being 02:00 South African time, or fairly late at night across the US (20:00 in Washington, for example). Sundays were the top days for posting content, reflecting the religious bias of this day of the week. Mondays were the second most popular days for posting religious content, indicating a follow-through trend from the previous day that becomes linearly smaller as the week progresses. Analysed content trends throughout each year tended to spike in fairly predictable periods around Christian

¹⁵⁸ See the four questions to be used in a Practical Theology description proposed by the well-known American practical theologian Rick Osmer in his book *Practical theology, an introduction* (2008).

¹⁵⁹ In the first article (cf. Chapter 2), I gave a broad overview of the project and a general orientation to the research. I emphasise the reality and importance of research on social media; I personally link these to four prominent Twitter users, whose activities on Twitter are associated specifically with faith and technology. The tone of the article confirms the narrative and autobiographical emphasis of the research and introduces the presentation of the research. This first orientating contribution represents the descriptive-empirical description in Osmer's practical theological interpretation.

¹⁶⁰ God, Father, Jesus, Son, Holy Spirit, Trinity, Triune-God, Christian, Christianity, Cross, Resurrection, Ascension, Repentance, Sacrament, Baptism, Eucharist, Credo, Confession, Pentecost, Roman Catholic, Protestantism, Reformed, Charismatic, Bible, Church, Congregation, Faith, Believe, Theology, Spirituality, Commandments, Psalms, Proverbs, Beatitudes, Sermon on the Mount, Parable, Paul, Reconcile and Reconciliation.

¹⁶¹ I acknowledge that the character of keywords can be found in the traditional formulation of Christian tradition. In the search for authentic expressions of faith, the initial choice of keywords representing the traditional Christian tradition could suppress the exploration and discovery of future new expressions. This important aspect could be addressed in further research.

holidays, the most predominant being Christmas and Easter, with a nearly double average volume over those periods.

Of all the content, 41% had a positive bias, and only 19% had negative sentiments, according to automated sentiment classification. This may be due to a slight critical bias towards religion and religious views on social media, but most of the content regarding Christianity is distinctly positive.

As far as demographic distribution is concerned, Christian-related content is posted by males (57%), with 35+ being the most prolific age demographic. This is contrary to general social media trends, as most of the content on social media tends to be posted by 18-35-year-olds. The US and the UK predictably accounted for most of the social media mentions. In Africa, Nigeria had the most posts, followed by South Africa and Kenya. Other hotspots for Christian content included Indonesia, India, and Brazil. While the UK posted a large amount of Christian content, the rest of Europe posted significantly less, possibly due to the steady rise in atheism in those regions.

When studying the affinities (predisposition to and interest in types of content) of Twitter audiences posting about Christianity, compared to the rest of Twitter worldwide, it was found that people who post about topics such as soccer, science and technology, astrology, fashion and basketball tend to have far less interest in general Christian content.

In terms of content trends, the most popular Christian-related content is typically worship, thanks or praise to God originating from a celebrity account. Since celebrity culture is highly ingrained on social media in the Western world, this content gains the most traction, with key influencers such as Justin Bieber, Rihanna, Harry Styles, and Kanye West. Besides their positive use, the words 'Jesus' and 'God' are often employed as expressions of frustration to set the tone of the tweet.

An analysis of the words used in the 1.1 billion tweets shows that the most popular words are 'God', 'church', 'Jesus', and 'faith'. These words are often used in conjunction with positive words such as 'life', 'thank you', 'please', 'Lord', 'always', and 'believe'. However, these words are also used in conjunction with negative words such as 'damn' to convey frustration online.

Twitter users often use hashtags (Twitter keywords) to tag content in their tweets. The top tags used are #jesus, #god, #faith, #bible, and #christian. This indicates a clear intent to express specific messages regarding Christianity. Tags also make it easier to search and find content related to these keywords.

In all these tweets, @youtube is mentioned the most. This indicates that people are sharing Christian-related videos on Youtube (a share on Twitter auto-tags @youtube at the end of it). The rich and diverse content on Youtube is a key source of information and inspiration for Christians, who then turn to Twitter to share the content with their audiences and engage in further dialogue and conversation. Among the most mentioned users are celebrities such as @justinbeiber and @harry_styles, but also inspirational Christian-focused accounts such as @god, @jesus and @biblegateway. Both groups tend to post inspiring quotes and interesting facts about Christianity. On Twitter, inspirational quotes tend to have a high amount of engagement, as people tend to share inspirational content with their own communities.

The following broad Christian motifs from the empirical research can be inferred from the documented research in the various chapters of the thesis. In general, the nature of Twitter messages points to a strong autobiographical element that contributes to the integrity and authentic nature of the content. In terms of the content, there are strong links between the commemoration of prominent Christian festive days and the Christian interpretation of actual events that occur against the background of a contemporary culture. Although well-known and conventional words and concepts within the Christian tradition are used, the various Twitter messages often include elements of creative and innovative humour, critical comment and motivating accents.

On the basis of the descriptive-empirical account, I found, unlike my initial expectation, that the various Twitter data sets did not provide new formulations of faith or theology. On the contrary, the use of traditional words associated with the Christian faith dominated the various data sets. In this regard, the data and the analysis thereof show a specific 'stasis' or even 'resistance', in that the words associated with the classical Christian faith and theology still prevail in the various data sets. In the majority of instances, the message remains the same; the only difference is the way in which the message is conveyed. In this respect, the opposite pole of 'proliferation' and 'chaos' is obvious. The use of the hashtag

sign, which makes different words distinguishable, creates new meaning that usually shows a unique connection with a specific real event, creating a special contextual accent. It is interesting to note how the traditional meaning of words and concepts, especially those associated with expressions of and events in popular culture, acquires new characteristics within this new contextual setting.

➤ **What explanatory framework can be offered in the analysis of Christian motifs used on Twitter? (Interpretive dimension)¹⁶²**

With a sensitivity to the functioning of 'lived religion' as a concept, the second category of Osmer's practical theology model elucidates the descriptive explanations further. As a direct result of more recent developments in the fields of sociology and practical theology, the concept 'lived religion' plays an important role in my orientation towards practical theological research (Ward 2017:55). In the description of a 'lived religion' (Ganzevoort 2006:151), pre-eminence is accorded to a tentative practical theological reconstruction which is encountered at grassroots level, in order to embody a 'fides quaerens societatem' (faith in search of social embodiment) (Cilliers 2009:634). In accordance with the current tendency in practical theology, the foundations for this construction are found on the street, in the methodological crossing of traditional boundaries, in terms of which the emphasis is placed on the discourse within an interdisciplinary domain of study (Immink 2005:266; Osmer 2008:163; Müller 2009:199-228) in order to facilitate 'plausible forms of interdisciplinary dialogue' (Demasure & Müller 2006:418). In this regard Ganzevoort and Roeland (2014:93) write that with an emphasis on lived religion the focus is not only on institutionalised religion, but also on all possible cultural and social daily activities and practices of ordinary people. This general framework of daily-lived religion was used as hermeneutic and ethnographic background against which the performative dimensions of the communication of Christian motifs on Twitter were analysed (Sremac & Ganzevoort 2017:5-6). In order to gain access to the vocabulary of the communication of Christian

¹⁶² The second movement of interpretation in Osmer's practical theological approach is described in the third and fourth contributions, respectively (cf. Chapter 3 and 4). In the second contribution, and by way of a narrative orientation, I investigate the origin, appearance and use of the hashtag sign that is specifically associated with the use of social media and popular culture. On the basis of actual examples, I contextualize the meaning of the sign and develop a practical theology from the use of the hashtag sign. In the third contribution, I emphasise the comprehensive nature of the language of Christian motifs by investigating the topic of human waste and its occurrence on Twitter. Using basic empirical strategies, I investigate comprehensive aspects associated with the topic of human waste – from spatial debris to human dignity.

motifs on Twitter, this study has engaged with the meaning of lived religion¹⁶³ as expressed in concepts such as ‘ordinary theology’, ‘espoused theology’, and ‘street language’.¹⁶⁴ This growing commitment ‘... to what matters in lived experiences of individualized human persons in the context of webs of relationships’ (Sharp 2012:426) constitutes one of the strengths of practical theology. In terms of the perspectives on the second research question, the two poles of stasis and change are also prominent. The relatively recent usage of social media and Twitter, in particular, is linked to many previous revolutions in the history of the world.¹⁶⁵ The difference is that the digital revolution not only challenges specific conventions, but also offers continuous alternatives thereto. A good example of this is how the usage of the so-called ‘retweet’ and ‘hashtag’ functions on Twitter ensures that a specific message is spread more rapidly and widely as previously known. Ironically, the message is often transmitted to a reasonably homogeneous group of followers.

➤ **How adequately do the tweets in the data set communicate Christian motifs? (Normative dimension)¹⁶⁶**

Normativity is inherently part of both the theology tradition and the practices of individuals, as described by practical theology (Kaufman 2016:145). In acknowledging this, I address the third task - the normative one - associated with Osmer’s practical theological orientation. In describing the normative aspect of the research it was taken as a given that theological normative perspectives do not have to be incorporated into the practice, as they are already inductively part of the fibre of all possible practices. Ganzevoort (2004:18) emphasises this understanding when stating that ‘... the theological and normative dimension of practical theology is not something added to empirical investigations, but present in the material we research.’ Underlying this orientation is the acknowledgement of the belief that practical theology embodies a hermeneutical lived religion which gives preference to ‘... the praxis itself and to the knowledge concerning God that is being

¹⁶³ ‘Lived religion is much more likely to be characterized by complexity, apparent inconsistency, heterogeneity, and a basic untidiness around the range of practices and ideas that people find helpful in their daily lives’ (Ward 2017:58).

¹⁶⁴ See for example the perspectives provided on these concepts in Chapter 5 and 6 of the thesis.

¹⁶⁵ Cf. Chapter 6.

¹⁶⁶ In the fourth article (cf. Chapter 5), I analyse aspects of normativity on several levels associated with human dignity and on the basis of specific Twitter messages. I also highlight the character, dynamics and functioning of normativity from different perspectives in order to illustrate the contested nature of normativity. This description leads to a fifth contribution (cf. Chapter 6), in which I analyse the usage and meaning of the Jesus name on Twitter. In the fourth and fifth articles, I address the normative aspect of Osmer’s Practical Theology description.

developed, found and lived within this praxis' (Ganzevoort 2008:11-12). In the empirical description of the practice, recognition is therefore given to the already implicit presence of normative perspectives. It is therefore taken that both the field of study and the research process itself are loaded with inherent normative dimensions (Kaufman 2016:146).

I am, however, sensitive to the fact that the challenge of the primary research question, namely an enquiry into the effective communication of Christian motifs on Twitter, already presumes an implicit normative evaluation, with an implied scale of less and more influential communication. In documenting the research in the various chapters, I was nevertheless sensitive to maintain a fluid understanding of normativity in which a nuanced description of normativity in various contexts was provided.¹⁶⁷

Authority is one of the most obvious examples that point to this issue in the research. Authority within traditional environments is commonly construed by a specific individual's influence, calculated on the basis of how many followers form part of that specific person's sphere of influence. The initial authority is established along totally different pathways from the traditional one. According to this, for instance, formal theological training, ordination by a church denomination or the so-called correctness of the theology conveyed in the tweet no longer serve as a guarantee for authority. Rather, considerations such as the popularity of the profile of the author are directly responsible for conferring authority. This aspect of the communication of Christian motifs on Twitter is once again in line with a bipolar tension between stasis and change. On the one hand authority directly linked to normativity, remains an important aspect in the communication of Christian motifs. However, this form of authority is constructed in a totally different way than the traditional.

¹⁶⁷ Cf. Chapter 5.

➤ **What opportunities does Twitter present in articulating Christian motifs? (The strategic-pragmatic aspect)¹⁶⁸**

The strategic or pragmatic dimension inherently forms part of the nature of practical theology. This dimension of the research addresses the fourth question of Osmer's practical theology orientation, as it continuously begs the question as to the pragmatic contribution to practice. Twitter offers a platform on which individuals and communities can personally and socially express various aspects of being human in terms of Christian motifs. Although specific formulated tweets are emphasised, the significance of potential interaction with other users must also be taken into account. For this reason, my orientation to the research is directed by the question of how the communication of Christian motifs on Twitter can contribute to a relevant articulation of faith. Chapter 7 regarding the meaning of the use of Twitter for Christian leadership practices provides for an excellent example of the pragmatic value of the research. In this respect, Codone (2014:27) points to the important image and fact that, even if a leader could use Twitter like a megaphone to communicate a message to the world, tweets are also a stethoscope that can reflect the pulse rate of other users. The question is raised as to the ability for a fine analytical and hermeneutical reading of tweets in order to enable one to distinguish between larger topics of interest. In presenting new perspectives of leadership in different contexts, there is room for experimental ways of developing leadership, which can then be tested on a larger audience for the further development of the practice under discussion.¹⁶⁹

In terms of the strategic-pragmatic perspective, it appears that traditional Christian motifs still persist, and correspond uniquely to daily life. New meanings do emerge from this link of Christian motifs to real events, and often to expressions of popular culture. This is emphasised by the fact that the holy and the profane often coexist and function within the space of 140 characters.¹⁷⁰ This fact begs a critical, evaluative theological reflection on

¹⁶⁸ In the penultimate contribution (cf. Chapter 7), I focus on how Twitter impacts on leadership practices. I analyse several examples of the relationship between leadership on Twitter and provide some strategic perspectives for Twitter-leadership. The final autobiographical contribution (cf. Chapter 8) reflects on the perspectives expressed in the first contribution. My analysis of the profiles of four prominent users of Twitter and their motivation for using that platform leads me to elucidate, in practical theological terms, how specific tweets express Christian motifs. These two contributions also represent strong strategic and pragmatic perspectives and thus correspond with the fourth task of Osmer's practical theological description.

¹⁶⁹ Cf. Chapter 7.

¹⁷⁰ At the time of writing this chapter, Twitter announced that up to 280 characters can be used for Twitter messages (Newton 2017:n.p.). This number of characters further challenges the search for an aphoristic theology described in the research. However, 280 characters is still much less than the extensive theological arguments often used in professional articles and books.

numerous levels. In the apparent paradoxical moments of life, '[t]he ambiguities, inconsistencies, and open-endedness of Christian practice are, however, the very things that establish an essential place for theological reflection in everyday Christian lives' (Tanner 2002:232). The article on Christian leadership explains practically how specific leadership traits are still important, but the era of social media also enquires as to the totally new expressions thereof. The analysis of several examples of the relationship between leadership on Twitter provides some strategic perspectives for Twitter leadership.

In summary the following important themes can be gleaned from the research, as indicated in the documented perspectives of the seven articles and in answer to the specific research questions:

- The digital era is further confirmed by a growing connectivity, mobility and the use of social media.
- There is an important relationship between social media and popular culture, as emphasised by the use of the hashtag sign.
- Social media and Twitter, in particular, have important application possibilities and uses within diverse environments.
- As a social media platform, Twitter offers important possibilities for articulating and facilitating normativity on various levels.
- The articulation and facilitation of faith, especially in association with Christian motifs, obtains a new dynamic with the use of Twitter.
- Twitter offers new possibilities for exercising leadership within various contexts.
- Twitter offers a platform on which individuals and communities can personally and socially express various aspects of being human in terms of Christian motifs.

9.4 A practical theology of tweeting God¹⁷¹

It is evident from the research in the seven articles that Christian motifs are portrayed in a dynamic way on the Twitter platform. The nuances in the variously used Christian motifs cover a wide spectrum of a public practical theology that describes several aspects of being human. In support of this perception is the belief that lived popular culture impacts on the moulding of an individual's life (Sweet 2012:n.p.). This leads to the understanding of the hermeneutics of popular culture as '... the shared environment, practices, and resources of everyday life for ordinary people within a particular society' (Lynch 2005:14).

¹⁷¹ A reflection on the strategic value of the research addressing the fourth research question.

Although the classical and traditional language of faith still forms part of Twitter formulations, it is used in such a way that it conveys fresh and new meaning. This implies new possibilities for church, theology and faith.

The articulation and facilitation of faith, especially in association with Christian motifs, obtains a new dynamic with the use of Twitter. The research shows how messages on Twitter make a unique contribution to the description of Christian themes. Interesting new meaning possibilities are revealed in tracing the meaning of the use of humour on Twitter, and the way in which Christian motifs are accentuated in this regard. The research also found that Twitter, in particular, provides not only a space for confirming traditional truths of faith, but also a space for expressing perspectives associated with lived religion, in which Christian motifs can be traced and distinguished. Various emotions such as humour and aggression associated with human traits are associated with the expressions of specific Christian motifs. Indeed, the creative and relevant expression of Christian themes associated with human emotions further emphasises the real and relevant role and significance of Twitter.

Throughout the research, a number of prominent aspects emerged. Firstly, there are, indeed, resemblances, but also big differences between a so-called 'on-line' and off-line' identity or presence. Secondly observation is that there are indeed possibilities writing meaningful about theological ideas with the limited characters available. The use of concise observations can potentially influence many more people because of the extent of Twitter's reach as well as the dynamics associated with the social media platform. This preliminary description contributes to the understanding that 'practice itself enacts and names theology' (Campbell-Reed & Scharen 2013:241), leading to the formulation of an ordinary theology articulating a 'faith and a spirituality, and incorporates beliefs and ways of believing' (Astley 2013:n.p.). In mapping the expression of Christian motifs on Twitter, cognizance is given to the understanding that 'faith is something to be practised and not just believed; and [that] one of the tasks of practical theological research is to investigate and interpret the lived experience of people of faith' (Graham 2013:159). The popular theologian Leonard Sweet has encapsulated some of the aspects of this challenge in his article, '*Twitter theology: 5 Ways Twitter has changed my life and helped me be a better disciple of Jesus*', indicating that 'Twitter makes me a better Jesus disciple, partly because Twitter is my laboratory for future ministry' (Sweet 2014). Therefore, in a unique way, the

use of Twitter serves to illustrate Marshall McLuhan's observation that '... media aren't just channels of information. They supply the stuff of thought, but they also shape the process of thought' (Carr 2010:6). Arising from and in congruence with the strategic character of practical theology (Osmer 2008:175-176), perspectives and context-specific examples regarding a pragmatic and dynamic interaction with Twitter can be provided with the aim of developing a practical theology of tweeting God.¹⁷² These perspectives could lead to newly informed practices and fresh expressions of being church in the world.

Sprouting from the documented research I have identified the particularly significant themes of (i) normativity and authority and (ii) aphoristic theology, which warrant further reflection in a further development of a practical theology of tweeting.

9.4.i Normativity and authority

Normativity is a multi-coloured concept, found across a wide range of disciplines and in various contexts.¹⁷³ Central to the construction of normativity within the Christian tradition is the acknowledgement of sources of authority. Traditionally, sources such as Scripture and religious tradition would stand central to the constitution of normativity. What is clear from the research is that social media has established new fluid forms of normativity and authority.¹⁷⁴

As opposed to the traditional sources of authority, which are often interpreted in an apparently objective and linear manner, it would seem that

the key challenge the Internet poses to traditional structures of religious authority is the democratisation of knowledge online. The Internet not only increases access to alternative sources of religious information, but empowers people to contribute information, opinions, and experiences to public debates and conversations (Campbell & Teusner 2011:67).

This observation suggests that the basis for the interpretation of the sources of authority responsible for normativity is shifting by means of the use of social media. The result of this is that a significant number of believers apparently take more heed of the

¹⁷² Also see the examples provided by Cheong (2014) and Bull (2016).

¹⁷³ A good example of this is to be found in the contribution of Stoehr (2016:n.p.) regarding the fluid normativity associated with writing and spelling in social media practices.

¹⁷⁴ Cf. Chapter 5.

interpretation of the traditional sources of authority by well-known, popular Christian writers and speakers, rather than of the sources themselves. The foundation of this is the comment of Byers (2013:106) that 'words can be used for asserting authority ('Gutenbergers') or for relating to others ('Googlers') (Byers 2013:106). To confirm this observation is interesting research which has shown well-known Christian speakers and writers such as Osteen and Meyer might possibly have fewer followers on Twitter than someone like Justin Bieber, but that the interaction they create with their tweets is indeed more than that of the pop sensation (Horner 2014:59).¹⁷⁵

In facilitating this conversation on normativity as portrayed in the Twitter sphere, the following markers for orientation are noteworthy: The recognition of authority on Twitter is very important in negotiating a position of normativity. This acquired authority coming from an offline world is endorsed through the number of followers as well as through messages being 'retweeted' and 'liked'. In particular, the 'retweet' function serves as an important component in establishing and building authority on Twitter (byod¹⁷⁶, Golder & Lotan 2010:n.p.).

As a social media platform, Twitter offers important possibilities for articulating and facilitating normativity on various levels.¹⁷⁷ This not only extends the understanding and meaning of normativity, but also creates unique meaning, interpretation and association that bear real and relevant meaning. The meaning of normativity is thus dynamic and is negotiated anew within every context. Underlying this acknowledgement and challenge is the conviction that practical theology encapsulates a hermeneutics of the lived religion, in which preference is given to the praxis itself and to the knowledge concerning God that is being developed, found and live within this praxis (Ganzevoort 2004:n.p.). On social media platforms, authority is construed in ways that differ from the traditional. With regard to this construction of authority in a digital era, Turner (2012:132) points out that the following factors are responsible for the dynamic negotiation and legitimisation of authority. First, mass communication, supported by the use of social media, has led to a democratisation of knowledge that challenges traditional forms of authority. Secondly, free access to Christian sources and tradition (also in the case of other religious traditions) that are

¹⁷⁵ See for example the discussion on tweets by Bieber, Osteen and Meyer in Chapter 6.

¹⁷⁶ The author prefers her name and surname not to be in capital letters.

¹⁷⁷ The 'like' function on Twitter provides for a creative way in further enforcing the impact of a specific message, contributing to the creation of a specific normativity within an online community.

digitally facilitated increases the number of interpretations and interpreters of texts and the new expressions thereof. On the basis of this, it can be confirmed that '[c]laims to authority tend, therefore, to be inflationary' (Turner 2012:132). In further support of this dynamic construction and facilitation of authority, the following strategic considerations can be mentioned. The authority of the profile of the author of a specific message is determined, largely, by the number of followers. Consequently, a popstar acquires specific authority by the number of followers and that her message, which contains specific Christian motifs, can have much more influence than that of a respected theologian writing on the same topic. Therefore, in communicating Christian motifs on Twitter, authority is not primarily determined on the basis of the legitimisation of the content of the message according to a specific theological tradition, but rather on the basis of other contributing factors.¹⁷⁸

9.4.ii Aphoristic theology

An aphorism is a short statement that conveys a specific truth, giving colour and meaning to life in a specific way (Grant 2016:5). The word 'aphorism', derived from the Greek *apo* ('apart') and *horos* ('border', and from which the word 'horizon' is derived) was initially coined by Hippocrates; it has a rich religious and literary history (Snowden 2012:81; Grant 2016:8). There are various forms of aphorisms and Twitter messages are an excellent example of so-called aphoristic literature. Grant (2016:132) rightly states:

Twitter is exemplary of this... Twitter is, of course, an ideal forum for the advertising slogan and the news update, but it is also an environment in which a huge range of other short forms, old and new, have flourished: from running commentaries to Twitter plays, poems, and stories, citations to travel narratives, pithy synopses to witty ripostes, it pushes the boundaries of what is possible in aphoristic writing... Twitter alone swamps the aphoristic tradition.

A defining characteristic of aphoristic literature is the brevity of the message. This implies speed, intensity and condensation and is inevitably emphasized in Twitter messages in a specific way. Snowden (2012:92) summarises the advantage thereof as follows: 'Brevity of language has the advantage of being able to travel well and quickly, as there is less detail

¹⁷⁸ In the edited volume, '*Authority and leadership: Values, Religion, Media*' (2017) by Míriam Díez Bosch, Paul Soukup, Josep Lluís Micó Sanz and Daniella Zsupan-Jerome (eds.), it is confirmed that authority and leadership within an internet-driven culture are dynamically created and facilitated in a participating and interpretive manner.

to lose'. In aphoristic speech, aspects of singularity and plurality are often linked to each other to create new meaning in a paradoxical way:

When we read clever, pithy language in the form of an SMS, Tweet or email it is the result of technology enabling the use of language for commentary and communication in a way that is appealing and accessible within specific technically defined boundaries (Snowden 2012:92).

Throughout the research, I have pointed out the distinctive characteristic of Twitter messages, namely the limited number of characters. For purposes of the research, I focused only on Twitter messages that consist of words. I did not consider other possible content such as the use of photographs. This restriction on the use of characters inevitably influences the formulation and scope of the content of Twitter messages. This specific form of tweets has emphasized the use of aphorisms in the research.

Aphoristic theology implies that the author of the Twitter message has the ability to render specific Scriptural and/or theological truths in a concise and impressive manner. For a theoretical description of the character and occurrence of aphoristic theology, the following possibilities can be mentioned. Verses can be quoted *verbatim* within the text limit of Twitter. Texts or parts of biblical texts can also be presented graphically to be used in a so-called 'remix' format. The text section or theological truth can also be mixed to form a new independent expression. The theological aphorism further emphasises the author's authority, in that some letters and/or words are emphasised by means of stylistic usage (for example, the use of a capital letter or italics). Inevitably, messages can, without the direct use of Biblical texts, also refer to a theological or spiritual truth. In summary, I refer to Cheong's (2014:12) research findings regarding the possible value in the use of aphorisms: Tweets have been crafted in staccato style to quote, extract, remix and recontextualize Scripture, with implications for the role of pastoral authority in strategically shaping the (re)presentation and interpretation of Scripture via microblogging on social media.

The use and effect of the message is usually associated with the specific identity and authority of the author of the message. In identifying both the occurrence and the meaning of the aphoristic traits of tweets, the question must be raised as to the advantages and disadvantages of aphorisms in communicating Christian motifs on Twitter. The obvious

restriction of the number of characters available in Twitter is far more significant than the brief aphoristic speech itself. Without commenting on the content of a specific tweet, the brief, pithy, but striking way of formulating contributes to a rapid and effective spreading of the message. In this digital era, the content of the aphoristic expression is further strengthened by underlying mechanisms such as, for example, the 'retweet', 'like' and 'hashtag' functions.

If one acknowledges a life defined by the meaning of a digital landscape, one accepts the strategic value and significance of the aphorism in communicating Christian motifs. This research reveals that conventional words associated with the Christian tradition are used in many of the tweets. However, in order to adapt to the medium of usage, they are formulated and structured in a new way. This embodies the polarity of stasis, on the one hand, and specific renewing development, on the other.

9.5 Limitations and possibilities

The field of study regarding social media and, more specifically, Twitter is extensive and dynamic (Quan-Haase & Sloan 2016:4-5; Murthy 2016:559). There are many aspects to consider when exploring the Twitter space: Perspectives ranging from the composition of followers, to the views expressed in the messages, to the range and impact of the medium beg for specialised research.¹⁷⁹

The following limitations were identified and accommodated in the research:

Firstly, the research was limited to motifs with a primarily Christian character, with my own religious orientation as motivation, in order to direct the scope of the data in an attainable and responsible manner. Mindful of the fact that the research represents a new experimental contribution in practical theology research, one could consider developing and elaborating on this research in future to include interesting and important perspectives from Twitter representations of Muslim and Jewish motifs. A comparative study could be set up involving religious motifs in the Christian, Jewish, and Muslim Twitter domains.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁹ See for example the important contribution on 'Sentiment Analysis' in which Twitter is indicated as a convenient data source for gaining insight into offline emotional states (Thelwall 2016:550).

¹⁸⁰ In Chapter 5 of the thesis, in which I describe the Twitter reaction to the Charlie Hebdo attacks as part of a normative orientation, I provide some underlying interreligious perspectives.

Secondly, the research focused only on the Twitter platform, in order to analyse and describe, in a controlled manner, the character and dynamics of this platform as well as the volume of the data. Throughout, I was sensitive to the fact that this would be but one version of everyday Christian expressions and theology in the online environment. This suggests that there is a need for more comprehensive studies. However, the title of this research intentionally focuses sharply on the Twitter platform and on specific periods and themes.

Thirdly, specific times and themes were set for obtaining data from the Twitter platform. Festive times, primarily associated with the Christian calendar (Christmas and Easter), were identified over a period of several years. For the sake of the public and contextual character of the Christian religion and to emphasise the evolutionary concept of 'lived religion', I carried out complementary analysis on available data associated with the Charlie Hebdo attacks in January 2015 in Paris as well as the concept of Christian leadership. The articles incorporated in this thesis validate the use of these different lenses as a further focus on the data. However, the result of this purposeful focus is that other unique and important related contributions on Twitter, beyond these periods, are not included as part of the empirical data.

Fourthly, it is clear that the research theme abounds in nuanced conceptual meaning. It presents specific possibilities for a meaningful research journey. However, there is also the danger that not all expectations elicited by the concepts were addressed, for example, the use of the concept 'communication'. An independent science and several theories are combined in this specific theory, but it would be impossible to incorporate this meaningfully in the study. The concept 'communication' is used to indicate the articulation and, in the widest possible sense, the understanding of theological motifs.

Although the articles are a direct result of the research project and logically and dynamically embody the development of the research theme, some perspectives in terms of core themes in the articles may have been repeated. Since the chapters were initially published as individual articles, some of the related aspects of the research, while repeated, are formulated differently in the various articles, thus serving the specific

research objective presented in the article concerned.¹⁸¹ As part of the requirements set by The University of Queensland, the content of the thesis is subject to a so-called 'Similarity Index' review in order to prevent plagiarism. The outcome of the 'Similarity Index' was higher than the generally accepted percentage, but the reason for this high value is the recognition of the previously published articles as part of the thesis.

Lastly, the above remarks would not be complete, without my focusing on my own professional limitations. At an early stage of the research, I realised that specific specialist knowledge of other sciences would be required to gain access to and to analyse the available data. Although I did involve an interdisciplinary panel with the research, this orientation to interdisciplinary strategies should be even greater in future in order to achieve more incisive results.

The research has, however, also provided the following new contributions and future possibilities for research:

The research presented in the seven articles makes a new contribution to a practical theological description. According to my knowledge, this is the first time that research from a practical theological perspective focuses on the theme of the communication of Christian motifs on Twitter, thereby making a new and innovative contribution to the field. In addition, the use of empirical research, using so-called Big Data, represents a new and relevant contribution to practical theological research. The scope of the research project restricts my further exploring the finer nuances in the empirical research. This limitation offers new possibilities for future research.

I did, however, experience another positive development as part of the research process. The empirical data confirmed the presence of various configurations of Christian motifs in a substantial number of Twitter messages. This confirms not only the occurrence, but also the relevance of expressions and nuances of Christian faith in daily life. The messages on Twitter also communicate a rich variety of Christian motifs.

¹⁸¹ From the outset, the development of the research project was documented, presented at professional congresses, and published in peer-reviewed journals. The topics of congresses often required that the research had to align with the topics, but at the same time, the topics concerned were also related to my own interest in 'lived religion' on the Twitter platform. A good example of this is the topic of 'human waste' that provides perspectives on a dynamic understanding of theology that is concretised in 'lived religion'.

This description may, on the basis thereof, provide room for future research. There is for example a need to describe Christian motifs specifically and in more detail on both Twitter and other social media platforms. Another interesting further and future aspect for research would be the comparison of the development in the use and influence of Twitter by political and religious leaders since the start of the project. In this regard, the use of Twitter by the president of the United States of America would, for example, provide for insightful material and perspectives on the utilisation of Twitter by a prominent leader.¹⁸² In this respect and in light of the title of this chapter, this research functions as a 'trending conversation' that not only proffers that the discussion is over, but also facilitates further discussion on the research.

9.6 Summary and conclusion



Figure 9.2: Pope Francis' Twitter message, Easter 2014 (@pontifex 2014:n.p.).

On 9 April 2014, the Saturday between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, known in ecclesiastical tradition as 'Holy Saturday', Pope Francis broke the silence by forwarding the following Twitter message to his over 4 million followers: 'Please join me in praying for the victims of the ferry disaster in Korea and their families' (@pontifex 2014:n.p.).

This specific message completes this thesis. The first chapter began with a Twitter message from the Pope and this final chapter ends with a Twitter message from the Pope. These messages are noteworthy for various reasons, as they articulate a particular, inherent set of dynamics on various levels.

¹⁸² See for example the following article on the use of Twitter by the president of the USA: Ott, B.L., 2017, 'The age of Twitter: Donald J. Trump and the politics of debasement', *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 34(1), 59-68, DOI: 10.1080/15295036.2016.1266686

Firstly, it serves to illustrate how even the Church, which is characterised by its adherence to many centuries of tradition, is influenced by the existence and usage of the latest communication technology. Secondly, the Twitter message also confirms a contextual and public pastoral awareness and involvement, on the part of the Church, with the people of Korea who were affected by the ferry disaster. It also confirms that the use of social media platforms offers a powerful channel for this purpose. Thirdly, other dynamic and hidden moments, which have been traced in the thesis, are also embedded in the Twitter message. The aim of this research was to discern the possible practical theological and strategic meaning in these dynamic moments.

Some of these perspectives and dynamics have been explored in this thesis, in an attempt to provide a glimpse of this growing reality. This research is not an all-encompassing documentation of this reality. Rather, it contributes to a relevant description with new perspectives. I must find the meaning of this on a personal level, and it is hoped that a wider readership will also discover that meaning.

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