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# ESTABLISHING A “CULTURE OF PRAYER”: HOLISTIC SPIRITUALITY AND THE SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION OF CONTEMPORARY EVANGELICALISM

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## *Abstract*

*Drawing on current ethnographic research in England, Germany, Spain, and Macedonia, the article will introduce a new charismatic-evangelical prayer movement that established a global prayer-chain and local prayer-communities. The so-called 24/7 Prayer-movement can be characterised as part of a broader emerging religious attitude to highlight spiritual practices and to turn towards issues of social justice. This way, particularly evangelicals aim for creating new religious identities and a new public image. Accordingly, the article will examine how prayer can be understood and works as a social form of religious practice in relation to prayer as a form of individual spirituality. As will be demonstrated, prayer in this case is used as a form of social protest as well as a way to popularise a “holistic spirituality” as a form of social action. Thus, the movement intends to establish a “culture of prayer” in order to ground a particular religious attitude into everyday life and thereby to engender social and individual change. The 24/7 Prayer-movement has become one of the best-known brands for prayer in the modern Christian milieu and can count as a case study for observing current transformations of the religious lifestyles at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.*

In the last decade hundreds of different prayer-movements and prayer-networks coming from various religious backgrounds have emerged on a global and local level. Some of them organize prayer-activities across regional institutions and groups. Some became global networks or movements featuring particular topics such as health, spiritual warfare, or civic engagement, sometimes focusing on particular geographical regions or on building transnational religious communities (Schüler 2008). Even though prayer can be considered an ancient religious practice it recently has become a popular religious activity in all sorts of faiths and religious traditions (Giordan 2012). In order to find answers to the question why prayer has become so popular in recent times and how this emphasis on prayer as a spiritual practice transforms religious communities and identities, I will examine a particular Christian prayer-movement called 24-7 Prayer.

The 24-7 Prayer movement was founded in England in 1999 and has since become one of the most popular and perhaps most influential prayer-movements in the evangelical

Christian world. Thanks to its strong focus on prayer as an everyday activity as well as its emphasis on social justice and community-life, the movement can be characterized as part of an emerging post-modern evangelicalism with an interdenominational perspective. These “New Evangelicals” (Pally 2011) search for a more moderate evangelical identity, a fresh “story” (Markham 2010) that no longer identifies evangelicals with the Christian Right or with a conservative religious tradition that fights against the devil materialized in same sex marriage, abortion, or Islam. Rather these emerging “New Evangelicals” turn towards issues such as social engagement, climate-change, interreligious dialogue, and “spiritual holism”. This general tendency towards the political left can be understood as part of a broader transformation within evangelical and charismatic Christianity including diverse but overlapping organizations and movements such as the “Red Letter Christians” or “Sojourners”. Marcia Pally assumes that already about 25 per cent of American evangelicals are part of this new expression (Pally 2011). Certainly, these “New Evangelicals” – to take this as a more general descriptive term – neither represent a homogeneous movement, nor do they all call for prayer as a directing spiritual practice. Yet, for some particular movements among these New Evangelicals, prayer has become a social and spiritual practice to communicate, establish, and incorporate this new identity. Especially in the 24-7 Prayer-movement prayer is seen as a way to holistically integrate spirituality, creativity, social engagement, and missionary efforts into everyday life.

While the term “New Evangelicals” can only be used to indicate a broader transformation in contemporary evangelicalism, I want to focus on the 24/7 Prayer-movement in order to demonstrate how central aspects of a “holistic spirituality” are merged with the practice of prayer in order to create this new identity. The term “holistic spirituality” is more typical in the so-called “esoteric milieus” and among New Agers, but can also be found among evangelical Christians, as this investigation will demonstrate. By drawing on my own fieldwork, I want to discuss how this particular prayer-movement aims for “holistic

spirituality”, what their understanding of holism is, and how they put this concept into practice. I will argue that prayer is conceived as a tool for negotiating religious identities in post-modern societies, which helps believers to simultaneously focus on their own subjective life as well as on their role in society. Hence, prayer in this movement is understood as holistic, because it connects subjective experiences with social actions as well as the spiritual with everyday life.

This article aims for a deeper look into the question of how prayer became so popular as a form of “holistic spirituality” and how it is now used to indicate religious transformations. In this investigation prayer is therefore understood primarily as a social practice that shapes both religious organizations as well as individual spirituality. The exploration of this particular prayer-movement aims to contribute to a better sociological understanding of the transformations and dynamics of religious ritual life and identity at the dawn of the 21st century, and promises new empirical and theoretical insights for the study of prayer and/as “holistic spirituality”.

### *Researching Prayer and/as Holistic Spirituality*

Although a hundred years ago the famous French sociologist of religion Marcel Mauss described prayer as a social core principle of religion that links thinking with action and rites with myths (Mauss 2003), scholars of religion have neglected prayer as an object in its own right for a long time. For the last several decades, prayer as an object of research was left to psychologists who were basically interested in the efficacy of prayer in relation to healing processes. These questions dominated the field for many years and had a strong impact on the broader understanding of prayer in the public sphere since the 1960s, as American sociologist of religion Wendy Cadge (2009) pointed out. Nowadays, we witness a revival of sociological and other research on prayer. The recent popularity of prayer in many religious movements has also attracted the interest of scholars from various disciplines who now search for new

scientific insights concerning the function and role of prayer in modern societies and as an anthropological condition (Wuthnow 2008; Schjoedt et al. 2009; Giordan 2012). Even though this development can be considered as a prerequisite towards the study of prayer in and of itself, more qualitative research is necessary in order to better understand the current popularity of prayer and its impact on the social transformations of religion and spirituality.

This new interest in prayer also extends the range of research methods. Surveys for instance were used in the sociology of religion for a long time to measure the frequency and quantity of prayers.<sup>1</sup> From today's perspective, ethnographic works on religions have become more and more valuable in order to get a bigger picture of how believers negotiate their subjective experiences and social interactions in specific social and cultural settings. And still more qualitative and ethnographical work is needed in order to gain further insights on how the social and subjective dimensions of prayer are linked. The practice of prayer is therefore a suitable object of research as it consists of subjective as well as social forms of beliefs, and also shapes the way believers interact and communicate with each other. As Mauss further pointed out: „Instead in seeing in individual prayer the principal behind collective prayer, we are making the latter the principle behind the former” (Mauss 2003: 36). He already noticed how deeply the configuration of the social group in which the prayer is taking place and its social context shape the practice itself and its representations. Accordingly, research on prayer needs to take both sides into account: the impact of prayer on the social and on the individual. Similarly, Giuseppe Giordan recently highlighted that praying cannot be observed separately from power, relations and institutions (2012: 83). While the contents of prayers had been the focus of attention of most prior studies, more research is needed that highlights its functions as a cultural symbol, social capital, embodying practice, or identity marker. My own research objective follows this perspective and asks how the idea of prayer-rooms, continual prayer-chains, and the foundation of prayer-communities – as promoted in the 24/7 Prayer-

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<sup>1</sup> National Opinion Research Center, October 2009. Pew Research Center, 2007.

movement – have transformed the identity of the believers, their interactions with each other and non-believers, and their ways of religious organizing and networking.

For my research on prayer I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in various places between 2009 and 2011. This sort of multisited-ethnography is owed to the fact that the 24-7 Prayer-movement is a globally-linked network with small local prayer-communities particularly across Europe and the US. The data were collected during several short-term field expeditions in England, Germany, Macedonia, and the Isle of Ibiza (Spain). The data consists of open-structured, narrative interviews, participatory observation, books published by one of the main founders of the movement, as well as an abundance of online-texts and videos published on the movement's website.<sup>2</sup> This research included observations of small-group prayer meetings, activities of social engagement, and Sunday services with guest speakers, community-meals, and social activities. I was also present at the European and International gathering of the movement. Let me add a brief personal note that I approached this movement as a researcher in the field of religious studies and have no personal affiliation with the movement whatsoever. Members of the movement were fully informed about my research and my role in the field and they were very open to my questions and my attendance at different events.

On-site observation revealed, in particular, that the 24/7 Prayer-movement not only represents a form of popular religious culture but is also part of a broader religious transformation often referred to as “emerging church” or “new evangelicalism”. These “New Evangelicals” search for a third way between conservative evangelicalism and Christian liberalism. They see God’s Kingdom as already present on earth and as materializing through their actions. Accordingly, they emphasize social engagement and care for the poor, the homeless and other issues of social justice; they are further concerned about climate change and the support the purchase of fair trade products. They want to participate in societies and

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<sup>2</sup> See: [www.24-7prayer.com](http://www.24-7prayer.com)

therefore adjust themselves to local cultures. They understand church as “emerging” or “organic”<sup>3</sup> in order to emphasize that church should not be an institution but rather a constantly changing organism. They embrace cultural pluralism and reject religious fundamentalism and yet still see themselves as evangelicals who take the bible as the Word of God. Mission is usually understood as exemplifying their faith to other people through one’s own life and actions. In order to combine all these aspects, they often call for a “balanced” religious attitude, a “holistic” spirituality that is neither too extreme nor too liberal. In the 24/7 Prayer-movement prayer became a tool to achieve this balance between mission and justice, between subjective experiences and social action, and between religious commitment and everyday life.

On the basis of the findings that I have sketched out briefly thus far, I asked myself how we should understand “holistic spirituality” and why we find it in an evangelical movement? How did prayer become such a core spiritual practice for many emerging evangelical movements? Certainly spirituality has become a widespread term and practice among religious believers as well as a concept in the sociology of religion (Tacey 2004; Flanagan and Jupp 2007). Interestingly enough, it is sometimes not clear whether “spirituality” is to be treated as a term used by believers or as a scientific concept; more clarification on this would be helpful (Wood 2009). However, many believers prefer to call themselves spiritual rather than religious (Fuller 2001). This tendency usually expresses a critique of institutionalized forms of religion and at the same time highlights the role of feelings and experiences in expressing subjective forms of religiosity, as sociologist Linda Woodhead (2007: 116) pointed out:

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<sup>3</sup> During my fieldworks many members of the 24/7 Prayer-movement referred to Neil Cole’s book „Organic Church“; see: (Cole 2005)

It is this general subjective turn, we suggest, which can help explain the more particular shift within the sphere of the sacred which has seen forms of religion which appeal to the higher authority of a transcendent God decline relative to forms of spirituality which offer to put people in touch with the spiritual dimension of their own unique lives. Thus we view the growth of holistic spirituality since the 1960s as the sacralisation of the wider cultural turn to subjective life.

Accordingly, Woodhead speaks of a “holistic milieu” that has become dominant since the 1960s and which now represents a very popular version of spirituality. Typically, in this holistic milieu we can find individuals who practice Yoga, Reiki, forms of spiritual healing, astrology, or shamanism and who usually reject the term religious but embrace terms like holism and spirituality. “Holistic spirituality” is often characterized as a practice or worldview that aims to integrate culturally determined dichotomous concepts such as the opposition between body and mind, nature and culture, or the rational and irrational. These felt dichotomies are then thought to be overcome through holistic practices in order to ‘heal’ or ‘balance’ the inner-selves of the practitioners (Heelas 2008). In addition, members of the diffuse holistic milieu search for an authentic personality and higher consciousness (Höllinger and Tripold 2012: 26). In order to achieve these goals, believers make use of bodily and experiential practices such as meditation, prayer, yoga, the laying on of hands, and therapeutic exercises or massage.

Furthermore, “holistic spirituality” is often considered as ‘happening’ outside of churches and traditional religions. Paul Heelas even states “spiritualities of life can readily be distinguished from spiritualities associated with the God of transcendent theism” (Heelas 2008: 27). Taking the emerging “New Evangelicals” into account, we get a different picture of a transforming religious landscape in which “holistic spiritualities” cannot be reduced to the New Age phenomenon anymore. Gordon Lynch, for instance, speaks of a broader



emerging phenomenon that he calls “progressive spirituality” (2007). He sees this progressive spirituality represented in a “progressive milieu” to which he refers

as a diffuse collection of individuals, organizations and networks across and beyond a range of religious traditions that are defined by a liberal or radical approach to religious belief and/or a green or left-of-centre set of political attitudes and commitments (2007: 10).

According to Lynch, “progressive or holistic spirituality” is a “cluster of related ideas and values (...) which should not be seen as a monolithic world view to which all those sympathetic to this spirituality necessarily subscribe in every detail” (2007: 41). Those values and ideas can contain different ideologies such as the sacralisation of the self, or of nature, the immanent divine or forms of mysticism but also the goal of social change. However, members of the 24/7 Prayer movement should not be confused with Christians who are sympathetic to esotericism. The 24/7 Prayer movement can indeed be called an charismatic-evangelical Christian movement that at the same time incorporated some aspects of so-called “holistic spirituality”.

In due course, this does not mean that spirituality is also replacing traditional religion. Rather, we can suppose that these “new spiritualities” are making an impact on traditional religions. Some sociologists of religion such as Linda Woodhead, Paul Heelas, or Hubert Knoblauch already assumed that certain forms of “holistic spirituality” could be found in the Christian milieu, particularly in the evangelical context (Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Knoblauch 2009). And I will argue that this is particularly true for the European context where evangelical Christianity is increasing while traditional churches loose members.

At the same time, these “New Evangelicals” undergo a dramatic institutional change and new networks and loose movements emerge. The 24/7 Prayer-movement can be

understood as a case study for this broader transformation. Members and affiliates of this movement often remain in their church or congregation while taking over some core principals promoted by the movement such as prayer, hospitality, or social engagement. Those who find a new spiritual home at 24/7 Prayer may not stay forever or cooperate with other local Christian parishes and charities.

This field certainly needs more empirical research in order to show what kind of “holistic spirituality” we can find there, how it is understood, and why it became so attractive to Christian believers.<sup>4</sup> It is likely – as I will suggest here – that “holistic spirituality” particularly can be found in the emerging new evangelical context and that it is closely tied to the practice of prayer and the idea of social activism. Not only do we find a shift from institutionalized religion to more subjective spirituality in the 24/7 Prayer-movement but also the use of prayer as a resource for taking up personal responsibility for the needy and the environment in order to experience one's self in the here and now and to structure one's everyday life. Prayer in this movement is therefore treated and referred to as a “holistic” practice. In order to demonstrate the role and understanding of prayer in this particular movement and how prayer is used to transform everyday life, I will now turn to a more detailed description of the movement itself.

### *Prayer as Spiritual Practice and Popular Culture:*

#### *Introducing the 24/7 Prayer-Movement as a Case Study*

Shortly after Pete Greig, one of the founders of the 24/7 Prayer-movement, launched the first prayer-room in 1999 where young people could experiment with prayer, a new movement was born. The initial idea was to set up a prayer-room in a local church in Chichester in order to make young Christians pray inside the room and express their prayers creatively. The goal was to keep up a prayer-chain that runs 24 hours a day and seven days a week for two month.

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<sup>4</sup> For an investigation on holistic spirituality in the Catholic Church see: (Giordan 2009).

The idea was so successful that other churches adopted the concept in order to carry on the chain and in this way they formed a network of prayer-rooms. The network grew into an international organisation in no time connecting thousands of local prayer-rooms in dozens of nations via the Internet. This way the network also formed an imagined global prayer-community, as we can read from the international website:

At this very moment someone, somewhere is praying; maybe through word, thought, flowing through a pen or painted on a wall, they're speaking to their creator. In 24-7 Prayer Rooms in any number of countries, from different streams of the Church, Christians are learning to pray by praying.<sup>5</sup>

The movement sees itself as a catalyst or prayer-hub, a platform that connects like-minded Christians regardless of their denominational background who have a passion for prayer. In addition, 24/7 Prayer became itself a brand for prayer in the Christian milieu and is now shaping and promoting a “culture of prayer” through establishing local prayer communities, prayer events, international 24/7 gatherings, and just recently also prayer and discipleship courses. This way the movement aims to promote prayer as an all-purpose tool and an easy-to-access practice that can change personal lives as well as whole societies.

Particularly the aspect of expressing prayers creatively takes on a key role in popularizing the concept of prayer-rooms and prayer as a spiritual practice. Prayer-rooms are usually designed in a way that allows people to get creative in their prayers. The so-called “Center for Spiritual Life Development” organized by the Salvation Army offers in cooperation with 24/7 Prayer an online manual on how to make up a prayer-room, in which several prerequisites are listed. The manual tells that it is essential

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.24-7prayer.com/prayer> 25/5/2012.

that a room be set aside for prayer throughout the week in order to keep the momentum moving forward. The prayer room needs to be large enough to have about ten people in there at any given time. People will need plenty of room to move around and to be creative.<sup>6</sup>

Besides the bible, other essential items listed on the manual that need to be in a prayer-room are daily newspapers, a prayer-room journal, cosy seating, a music-player and instruments, symbolic items such as a cross or a candle, and a prayer-wall which is a wall covered in paper in order to write down prayers, poems, verses from the bible, prayer topics, answered prayers, and so forth. This way, believers actively create the prayer-rooms with their paintings and drawings and leave traces for others to catch up on their prayers. By promoting prayer as creativity all senses are addressed and the practice of praying becomes extended beyond the aspect of communication to the aspect of performing spirituality. Engaging one's own spirituality through creative performance simultaneously makes the believer part of a whole prayer-movement. The believer can cultivate subjective experiences without belonging to a certain denomination and even without belonging to the 24/7 Prayer-movement. The movement promotes prayer as a practice everyone is capable of without any religious knowledge required. They popularize prayer as a starting point from where unexpected and impossible things could become real. Everyone is thought to be able to start something big from praying. This way, the movement makes the individual person center stage and at the same time the individual creates and drives the movement's dynamic.

Soon after this self-accelerating network started, some local prayer-communities were founded where people organize their daily lives around prayer. Today about a dozen of these so-called "Boiler-Rooms" exist in total primarily in Europe and the USA. These prayer-communities are similar to house-churches with a small leadership-team but no full-time

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<sup>6</sup> Online document „Why 24/7Prayer“ p.1. See also: <http://saglobal247.org/>

pastor. In their book “PunkMonk: New Monasticism and the Ancient Art of Breathing” Andy Freeman and Pete Greig (2007), two of the founding members of the movement, not only try to attach the idea of the “Boiler-Rooms” to historic predecessors such as the Celtic monastic tradition but also unfold certain spiritual and practical principles for such post-modern communities. Meetings are to be held mostly during the week in private houses in small groups or pairs to share meals and to pray. Rather than identifying with a certain religious congregation or parish, prayer becomes a vehicle that escorts and navigates the believer through the everyday. To do so, “Boiler-Rooms” share a set of values and practices such as prayer, mission, hospitality, creativity, learning, and justice. In addition, pilgrimage receives new attention as a possible way to experience spirituality. Besides prayer, justice and mission play a major role for creating a religious identity. The communities strive to adapt themselves to local needs in order to become part of the local culture. To them, prayer became an applicatory spiritual practice, a cornerstone in everyday life from which every activity starts and every decision is made or, as one member of a community in Germany fittingly said, “At 24/7 Prayer we say: ‘become the answer to your own prayers’”.<sup>7</sup> This statement already characteristically indicates how prayers are used to organise everyday activities. Accordingly, a basic axiom of the movement is that prayer shall not be restricted to talk to God but always result in social actions whether missional or charitable. Subsequently, the movement’s full name is “24/7 Prayer: Prayer, Mission and Justice”. Prayer as a spiritual practice thus functions as a way to bridge the subjective experience and the social dimension. “Boiler-Rooms” therefore strive for cultivating a daily “rhythm of prayer” (2007: 117-136) and thereby to sustain personal relationships between members of the prayer-communities.

In order to fit the practice of prayer with local culture prayer gets promoted as a way of *doing* culture. Early in the 2000s one of the first 24/7 Prayer missionary activities was organized on the Isle of Ibiza (Campbell 2004; Lau 2006). The island is famous for its club

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<sup>7</sup> Interview No. 7, 27/9/2010 (translation mine).

culture particularly among British tourists but also for tourists from all around Europe. This way Ibiza represented a perfect spot to meet a lot of different people in a holiday environment where most people speak enough English to start a conversation. Ibiza also represented a fitting place for missionary activities because of the lively club culture, which turned out to be a way to approach people. Mission teams sent out by 24/7 Prayer went to nightclubs in order to meet clubbers and converse with them about spiritual experiences on the dance floor. During these encounters, the spiritual experience of praying was equated with the spiritual experience of dancing and clubbing. Moreover, members of the mission-teams were themselves enthusiastic clubbers who took clubbing and dancing as a way to pray. Whether they were praising God through dancing or praying for people on the dance floor while dancing themselves, or talking to clubbers afterwards, the practice of prayer was turned into a part of this specific sub-culture. Prayer is therefore seen as a core spiritual practice to stay in the presence of God and to act in the world simultaneously regardless of the action or location.

### *Prayer as Socially-Engaged Spirituality*

Most religions have always had close ties with social issues and social engagement often referred to as the ethical dimension of religion. Taking the aspects of the changing role of religion in modern societies, the public discourses on religious fundamentalism, as well as the dynamics of social diffusion into account, there seems to be – as a reaction to these processes – a broader shift in many religions today towards social engagement; at least more scholars have of late highlighted this aspect of religions in the modern world (Safi 2003; Miller and Yamamori 2007; King 2009; Ebaugh 2010; Davis and Robinson 2012). However, social engagement seems to offer believers a way to actively engage in changing the world as well as changing their religious identity and thereby to subjectively experience their religiosity. It remains difficult to state whether or not this development can be seen as a broader

transformation of religion on a global scale but at least we can assume that some forms of post-modern religiosity seem to undergo a shift not only towards subjectivity but also towards the social at the very same time.

This turn towards social engagement and subjective forms of spirituality can also be found in contemporary evangelicalism and can be considered as a new effort to produce alternative identities and public images of evangelicals (Markham 2010: 8). Topics concerning social issues such as hunger, homelessness, human trafficking, sustainability, or engaged neighbourhoods have become new markers of identity whereas homosexuality, abortion, or health and wealth have fallen back into the second row. This does not mean that “New Evangelicals” do not take these things seriously anymore, but they seem to look for another way to deal with them. Taking the increasing influence of the Evangelical Right in the USA on politics and social life since the 1980s, this development certainly marks a new era for evangelicals in recent years. One turning point for this can be seen in the so-called “Evangelical Manifesto: A Declaration of Evangelical Identity and Public Commitment” set up in 2008 and signed by dozens of evangelical leaders in America and hundreds of sympathizers with this approach from around the world.<sup>8</sup> This manifesto sets out a new direction for evangelicals not to save souls through political agendas, which too often have lead into culture wars, but to save souls by personal and civic engagement, by transforming society through direct participation.

Yet, this focus on social engagement is not restricted to traditional religious groups but also plays a major role in the realm of spirituality. Gregory Stanczak, for instance, speaks of “engaged spirituality” and points out that spirituality rather than being restricted to subjectivity plays an important social role (2006). While demonstrating how believers cultivate social activism through spiritual practices Stanczak calls into question if the sociological divide between religion as a social phenomenon and spirituality in terms of a

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.anevangelicalmanifesto.com/>

more subjective religious attitude is still valid. Without going into deeper theoretical discussions here it is important to emphasize that to better understand our case study we have to focus on how spiritual practices get combined with social activism and why this “engaged” spirituality arises.

In the 24/7 Prayer-movement prayer provides a foundation for social engagement and activism. Many evangelicals believe that the more people are praying the more God will bring about change in the world through those who pray. Accordingly, evangelicals aim for social transformation not only through praying, but social engagement itself is often seen as a way of praying. This is why in the 24/7 Prayer-movement prayer is understood as closely linked to justice and mission; they are treated as inseparable as they “holistically” form a way of living the Christian faith in everyday-life. Brian Heasley, one of the leaders of “24-7 Prayer Ibiza” stresses:

We at 24-7 Prayer whether it be in Ibiza, a justice project, a council estate in England, a university campus in America, or some small church in Finland, believe that we will only see true transformation of the world through prayer. All our efforts in mission and justice will be futile unless they are born out of prayer and sustained by prayer.<sup>9</sup>

Justice and mission therefore look differently depending on the social and cultural environment and on the decisions made by believers through praying. The small community on Ibiza for instance has extended its focus over the years from mainly approaching club culture to taking care of drunken tourists. The movement runs a prayer-room in downtown San Antonio next to one of the most famous bar-areas. During the summer several long-term and short-term mission-teams support the 24/7 Prayer community. Four to five nights a week

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<sup>9</sup> See: Heasley, Brian: Living on a Prayer, published online June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2011. Online resource: <http://24-7prayer.com/features/1539>



they walk around the bar-area and watch out for tourists who had too much to drink and probably are left alone somewhere sitting or laying in the street. Each night, the 24/7-team usually separates into two groups, one staying at the prayer-room praying for the other group members who walk the streets in pairs of two's. After one hour they change and those who prayed now enter the street. Usually they start their tour at about 11 p.m. and continue until 4 or 5 o'clock in the morning. Once they find someone who appears to be in need of help, they approach the person and ask how he or she is doing, offering water and handkerchiefs. If it turns out that the person is unable to find a way home alone, they offer a free ride with the “vomit van”, a mini-bus specially purchased for this purpose. If no one needs to be taken care of, team-members walk around the bars, get into contact with tourists and bar-workers, and sometimes give out free bibles or ask for prayer requests. Those prayer-requests then get written down on prepared prayer-cards and brought back to the prayer-room where they then pray for the person and the person's request.

This brief description shows how prayer is used as an all-sustaining practice and as a way to balance spiritual experiences and social activism. Prayer and social engagement are mutually attuned to each other in order to not let social engagement turn into another church-programme that is run for the sake of religious activity. The overall goal of the 24/7 Prayer-movement is to pragmatically turn to social needs that a single person can accomplish and not to start a social programme or organization in order to solve a global problem. The idea of “holistic spirituality” in this particular movement is thus to act as a whole person and not as a rack-wheel in some organization. They aim for personal spiritual development through taking up personal responsibility and relationships. Accordingly, prayer did not only become popularized by 24/7 Prayer through establishing prayer-rooms but also through cultivating a “culture of prayer” that works as a holistically engaged spiritual practice.

This brief demonstration of how prayer is used as a socially engaged spirituality in the 24/7 Prayer-movement now brings us to the question whether this can be considered as a broader transformation in contemporary evangelicalism.

*Establishing a “Culture of Prayer” as Holistic Spirituality? – Transformations of Contemporary Evangelicalism*

The question why prayer became so popular – and popularized – over the last decade is not an easy one to answer. One reason might be a broader transformation of evangelicalism towards subjective spirituality and a political left-wing attitude that we already termed the “New Evangelicals”. Another reason might be found in a broader tendency to mistrust institutions and organisations whether they are religious, national, or economic. Alongside these, a desire for authenticity and responsibility can also be presumed, as I want to briefly sketch out in the following.

In the last 20 to 30 years many evangelical churches and congregations developed and offered particular programmes to attract non-believers and to motivate believers whose spiritual lives have flagged. In this particular Christian milieu church became an all-round faith-supporting agency with specially developed courses for all life-stages and situations. New forms of worship, music and media-usage designed for a younger audience accompanied this modernization of church. The current evangelical generation of 30-somethings were brought up in churches with special youth programmes and activities for everyone: a religious world that was separated from the mundane world and which allowed believers to navigate through life in a secure religious environment. The establishment of Mega-Churches in the US can be seen as a typical example of this development. Just like the “Christian Yellow Pages” enabled Christians to call a Christian plumber, this religious world completely covered all aspects of life. At the same time, it is this generation that also experiences the fast-changing world, where people do not work at the same company for more than three to five

years anymore and where marriage and starting a family typically takes place in one's thirties rather than in one's twenties. As Robert Wuthnow highlighted, it is also this generation that was missing more specialized church programmes: “Were the congregation to gear its programs to the interests of the majority, it would logically have programs for married people and for young adults with children, rather than for unmarried adults (2007: 68). I want to argue that it is exactly this generation that now critiques at least certain aspects of institutionalized forms of religion and aims for more authentic and experimental ways of living religiously. It is also this generation that seems to feel the urge to break free of a safe Christian environment to experience life with all its contradictions in order to “grow spiritually”. This tendency in evangelicalism also expresses an attempt to overcome the contradictions between conservative and liberal values that have led to so-called ‘culture wars’ as it developed in the last 30 years (Hunter 1992). The currently emerging forms of religiosity inside and outside of evangelicalism can therefore be characterized as post-modern forms of religiosity that put forward a strong scepticism against religious institutions and programmes.

Taking this development as a blueprint for evangelicalism in the last decade, we get to a clearer picture why the “New Evangelicals” aim for an alternative spiritual approach and why we can read the following confession in the “Evangelical Manifesto”:

We confess that we Evangelicals have betrayed our beliefs by our behavior. (...) We have replaced biblical truths with therapeutic techniques, worship with entertainment, discipleship with growth in human potential, church growth with business entrepreneurialism, concern for the church and for the local congregation with expressions of the faith that are churchless and little better than a vapid spirituality, meeting real needs with pandering to felt needs, and mission principles with marketing precepts. In the process we have become known for commercial, diluted, and feel-

good gospels of health, wealth, human potential, and religious happy talk, each of which is indistinguishable from the passing fashions of the surrounding world (2008: 11).

In a similar manner, the 24/7 Prayer-movement offers believers a way to personally engage themselves through the practice of prayer without making confessions for a particular congregation. Prayer rather serves as a spiritual practice to create a certain structure in everyday-life that at the same time allows them to get creative in their actions. This way, the movement helps believers to negotiate their religious biographies between personal needs and social deeds. Prayer thus shapes the awareness of the believers' subjectivity and offers orientation in everyday-life. Giuseppe Giordan highlights a similar aspect when he writes: "Prayer can become a kind of continual process so that even daily activities become transformed and are seen in a different way" (Giordan 2012: 82). At 24/7 Prayer we can therefore find both, a critique against too narrow religious programmes and an emphasis on prayer as a way to structure everyday-life through continuity in prayer, as one 24/7 member from Germany pointed out:

The structure or organization must always serve the goals and not the other way around. We do not want to become slaves of our own structures, or programmes, or organizations, but we reach out for freedom and for structures that truly serve who we are and who we encounter. (...) At the moment we're focusing on sharing our lives with the community, very organically. Most of us work or are parenting and we aim to combine all these things into our daily lives and to integrate other people into it, or to integrate ourselves into the lives of others, so it is less about programmes and more about people, and to live a relationship with God and with people and to see where to

do one's bit.<sup>10</sup>

Other evangelical churches developed similar strategies by making use of prayer. Billy Humphrey for instance, pastor at the International House of Prayer in Atlanta, wrote that “efforts to cultivate prayer through sermon series or special events only inspire for a short time. After a month or two, interest wanes and we return to the place we began, desiring and needing more prayer.”<sup>11</sup> Humphrey is aware of the popularity prayer has received in recent times, even though he explains this phenomenon as due to the Holy Spirit. He then raises the intuitive question: „How then shall we heed the Spirit's call to really engage with God's heart?“ His answer represents not only a pragmatic but also sociologically informative solution: „Perhaps the answer is not adding additional prayer meetings or doing special events for prayer. Perhaps the answer can be found by shifting the culture of our church so that we don't simply have prayer meetings, but rather we develop a prayer-based culture.“ This is a striking statement to which every sociologist of religion or religious studies scholar should pay extra attention. The suggested strategy presented here is not to add another religious programme in order to enhance religiosity in terms of prayer. Rather, prayer should become the centre of all other activities. It should become a form of everyday „culture“. Interestingly enough, the International House of Prayer initiative, which aims also for nonstop-prayer and worship, was founded in the same year as the 24/7 Prayer movement, and also emphasizes a strong emphasis on issues of justice. Accordingly, both movements seem to aim to actively change church and to cultivate prayer in similar ways.

Taking these aspects into account, prayer-movements such as 24/7 Prayer cannot only be explained in terms of charismatic awakenings such as the “Toronto blessing” but as a form of social and religious protest against the institutionalization of religion and as an expression

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<sup>10</sup> Interview No. 7, 27/9/2010, p.15-16 (Interview translation by me).

<sup>11</sup> <http://billyhumphrey.com/2011/03/22/developing-a-culture-of-prayer/>

of a religious *Zeitgeist*. This protest against routinized forms of religions is implemented with the routinization of a spiritual practice, namely the cultivation of prayer. Rather than adding up prayer quantitatively through prayer-events prayer indicates a new religious attitude that shapes a new religious identity.

### *Conclusion*

Summarizing this analysis, the question why prayer has become so popular may be answered at least in part for some recent evangelical and charismatic Christian movements. We have gained initial insights into why religious agents propose to establish what they call a “culture of prayer”. This empirical evidence also indicates a transformation in and of religious organizations. Believers aim for new ways to combine and entangle religious activities, spiritual experiences, everyday culture, social life, and modern media into some form of existential feelings, of a purposeful life, authentic lifestyles, or what some believers call a “holistic spirituality”. Particularly the so-called “New Evangelicals” seem to share the idea that to achieve this goal yet another religious programme will not suffice. Rather they aim for a fundamental transformation of both, religious identities and lifestyles, and religious organizations. Some movements that can be seen as part of these “New Evangelicals” or at least as an expression of this wider emerging transformation turned to prayer in order to achieve these goals.

The aim for “holistic spirituality” can also be understood sociologically as a reaction to public discourses on religious fundamentalism and as an attempt to offer new ways to live a fully committed religious life without coming under the light of religious extremism. The main focus of the 24/7 Prayer movement is thus to indicate a shift away from institutionalized forms of religious practices such as emotionally laden Sunday church services toward a “daily rhythm of prayer”. Prayer in this case serves as a creative expression and embodiment of individual spirituality that simultaneously shapes the social form of religious interaction,

organization, and civic engagement. According to these movements' participants, prayer is not a programme to run churches but a "lifestyle" that changes society through taking up personal responsibility. The establishment of a culture of prayer as a "holistic spirituality" can therefore be understood as an embodied orientation toward the world, a cultural architecture of direction that fundamentally engenders change in one's everyday religious practices and identity. Prayer thus generates distinctive patterns of thought, language, and social orientation and enables evangelicals to adapt themselves to a changing society.

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