

Developing the #1 religion app in the world with Bryan Enriquez

Narrator ([00:01](#)):

Yale Podcast Network Network. Welcome to the podcast, a Yale Divinity School podcast series focusing on issues related to religion, culture, and politics. In this episode, YDS alum, Emily Judd interviews Brian Enriquez, an alum of the Yale School of Management, and a founding team member of the Hallow App, a meditation and prayer app that has quickly climbed to the number one spot on the app store. Brian argues that technology and artificial intelligence are good for religion. Helping people encounter faith through a new lens

Enriquez ([00:34](#)):

Technology is really a way to meet people where they are and help them deepen their relationship with God.

Narrator ([00:40](#)):

He reflects on the impact of the Hallow app over the past six years and shares personal testimonies,

Enriquez ([00:45](#)):

And she said, I just want you to know that you saved my life. I'm not a first responder, I'm not a doctor. I've never heard anybody say that to me.

Narrator ([00:57](#)):

And Brian responds to critics who say that the marketing and advertising of Hallow Commercializes Faith,

Enriquez ([01:03](#)):

If someone were to create a really impactful book, wouldn't you want to spread that to as many people as possible? And so I think the answer comes down to we are committed to trying to spread the gospel.

Judd ([01:19](#)):

You helped launch the Hallow Prayer app seven years ago, and you've witnessed and helped the app get to the number one spot on the app store to reaching over 22 million downloads. Tell us how it all got started. What was the motivation behind it, the inspiration behind it, and how did you actually get involved?

Enriquez ([01:38](#)):

It actually started at Notre Dame, the story I should say. So we were all graduates of the University of Notre Dame, and that's where we all met. I personally was a very status quo Catholic, and I didn't really know a lot of the tenets of the faith, and I was aware of it. I grew up being Catholic, but I grew up in Mississippi, so there weren't very many Catholics. My roommate is Alex, or at the time was Alex Jones, not the one from Infowars. He got to Notre Dame and he was at that time an atheist agnostic, so he didn't really know what he believed. So really the founding of Hallow is our own faith journey because we wrestled with these faith questions. So we had these debates that were multifaceted and we kind of struggled at Notre Dame. And then after we graduated, Alex found an app that was called Headspace.

Enriquez ([02:32](#)):

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It's a Buddhist mindfulness meditation app. And it was through this experience actually that he began creating silence throughout his day. And then during those moments of silence, he actually encountered the person of Jesus Christ, which is really shocking because there's no mention of Jesus in that app at all. And so he called one of our priests spec at the university and was like, Hey, is there a way to combine meditation and prayer? And he was like, yeah, Alex, we've been doing it for hundreds if not thousands of years. Let to Dina the examiner, there's all these techniques that none of us had ever heard of. So basically Alex goes through these techniques and has this reconversion comes back to the faith. I get inspired by his journey. And so I start taking my faith more seriously and start asking questions. And really my own practice really blossomed because of that. And it was through that process in 2018 that he was like, Hey man, I know what we're going to do with the rest of our lives. Let's make a prayer app. Let's create something that helps people experience what we've been experiencing and the beauty of this faith. So that's kind of where it all began.

Judd ([03:40](#)):

So to my knowledge, hallow is the first Christian meditation app. Did you know that when you were launching Hallow that it was going to be the first Christian app in this space? And did you create it intentionally Christian because of this gap in the market?

Enriquez ([03:57](#)):

Initially we were sort of debating this question fiercely. We were like, okay, well do we make it non-denominational Christian to try to open up the aperture and have more people come or do we make it explicitly Catholic, but then are we going to be scaring away people who otherwise would come to a more broadly Christian app? So I think we had a lot of those questions early on, and I think where we landed is to say right now there's nothing at all that is even remotely closed to a Catholic meditation app. And so we said, okay, well there are some things out there that do that nothing here that's serving the Catholic market, which depending on the numbers you look at, it could be anywhere between one and 1.3 billion people around the world. And so we said, okay, well, from a market perspective it's very interesting.

Enriquez ([04:44](#)):

And then from our own personal perspectives, we were Catholic. And so we said, well, we don't want to lie. We want to be who we are, but we felt really strongly that we didn't want to exclude people, so we wanted to intentionally make the decision to welcome people of all different denominations of the Christian tradition. And really anyone, it's just people who use the app who are Jewish, and there's some users who have let us know that they're Muslim. It's difficult, it's tough to know because we don't ask users religious preferences. We've heard 30 to 40% of our users are not Catholic, and so they feel comfortable being in the community, which for us is a win.

Judd ([05:25](#)):

Hello is an app that's at the crux of religion and technology. Before Hallow launched an MIT survey in 2014 found that internet use actually increased the likelihood of being religiously unaffiliated. But after hello's launch in 2023, after Hallow had achieved a significant following, a Pew Research Center survey found that 40% of Americans have used an app or a website that reminds them or helps them to pray. In your opinion, how does technology affect religion? Is it a threat or is it an asset to religious practice today?

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Enriquez ([06:06](#)):

I think in my mind, it is really a matter of access to information. It's sort of an enabler to get more data. And so I think in that sense it is either positive or neutral, and depending in the context could be slightly negative. I mean, I think for example, the dangers of pornography or illicit activity on the dark web, for example, are certainly not helping people experience their faith. But I do think it has this tremendous power to connect people. And I think it is really the question is how do we meet people where they are and people are on their phones, there are on their iPads, on their laptops and their computers, especially from the work from home movement after Covid. And so I feel strongly that technology is really a way to meet people where they are and help them deepen their relationship with God. There's certainly risks, but I think the benefits outweigh the risks.

Judd ([07:10](#)):

What has been an inspiring story or a touching story that you've heard from someone who has used Hallow?

Enriquez ([07:16](#)):

The one that really comes to mind was in 2023, I was on a call on a Zoom call like this, and we were talking about the Hallow Herald program. So this is a program for our power users building community. And I had given a presentation about the community and I was answering questions, and then there was this woman who was just very intently listening, and at the end when I said, Hey everyone, does anyone else have any other questions? All hanging around here for a little bit longer? She stuck around and she looked at me through the Zoom and she said, I just want you to know that you saved my life.

Enriquez ([08:04](#)):

I'm not a first responder, I'm not a doctor. I've never heard anybody say that to me, which is pretty jarring. I was like, wow, what do you mean? Could you please say more? And she said, well, I'm the mom of three little girls and married to this amazing guy. She works in finance in a big city. And she was like, yeah, I was stressed out. I developed an addiction to stimulants. I engaged in quite a lengthy affair, extramarital affair with somebody who was not her husband. And she said that her husband found out and was furious, kicked her out of the house. She said that she basically, she had lost everything. And she said in that moment I was broken. And for whatever reason, this app, there was this prayer and the surrender, no Venus specifically that she found on the app that she started praying and just surrendered that all to God, all that pain. And he picked up the pieces and put her back together. She got sober. Her husband separately had a miraculous, a moment in and his spiritual journey and forgave her, the families back together. And she's like, I don't know if I would be here. I found the app because it gave her the privacy to grieve what she had lost and to help process what to do moving forward, which is it really began with God, with her relationship with God, and then God used that to really heal her.

Judd ([09:55](#)):

Wow. Well, I'm sure you have tons of stories like that, but it's amazing that she was able to tell you how Hallow transformed her life directly. Hallow has gained its huge following, partly through mainstream media like commercials during the Super Bowl or celebrity partnerships like with Mark Wahlberg, but I've seen some critics on social media that say, using faith in this way, marketing faith, let's say that it's wrong. How do you respond to that?

Enriquez ([10:24](#)):

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The first thing is I would make a distinction between faith and what we're doing in a certain sense. We're not the church, we're not the institution of the church. Certainly we are part of the broader body of Christ, but the way I think about it is almost like if someone were to create a really impactful book, Purpose-Driven Life or something like that, which really can move people, wouldn't you want to spread that to as many people as possible? So I think the answer comes down to we are committed to trying to spread the gospel and because it transformed our lives, certainly we had tried all these other things from the world and there's something that only God can bring. And we have this conviction that, hey, we want to try to spread the gospel, and we think that we're called to do so and we think it's going to help make the world a much better place.

Judd ([11:20](#)):

So for someone who's never used hallow, can you talk about some of the features that it has? How does the app change the experience of prayer?

Enriquez ([11:29](#)):

So if you've never used it, it's audio right now we have a few pieces of content that's video. So really what is being stimulated is your heart through listening. And we try to create a space where you're not really being preached at so much as we're giving you an experience that you can just sit and accept and kind of meditate through it. Another element that's really nice is the time. So you can select like, I want to do a 10 minute session because you may be driving to get coffee or you might be coming from church. And so that helps people say, okay, I'm devoting this amount of time. So it helps them become more present in prayer, which is really important.

Judd ([12:09](#)):

The variety of prayer practices on Hallow is really diverse, and it actually reminded me of something that I heard when I took a course at Yale called Meditation East and West, which was actually taught by a nun sister Janet Ruffing, and she said That is important for religious practice to keep things engaging, to try new things. You don't have to keep doing the same prayers every day. And I feel like the app really encourages that. And when I use it, I'm reminded of that lesson from my Yale experience from that class. How did your time at Yale shape you help you with what you're doing now at Hallow?

Enriquez ([12:50](#)):

I think I had some really great professors. Kyle Jensen comes to mind, Alex Burn Barry Uff on negotiations. So it was just that being challenged and stimulated intellectually, that really helped the growth of Hallow because at the time we started in 2018, the idea launched it in December of 2018, and then I ended up going to Yale in the fall of 2019 for the School of Management. So I started in the School of Management to get my MBA primarily because I was working in the government before and not too many people in the government are trying to start a startup or a business. So I felt like I needed to be surrounded by people who were intellectually ambitious and who were trying to challenge the status quo in one way or the other. And I think I found that at Yale there were other people who were starting businesses or who had already done some pretty successful startups.

Enriquez ([13:52](#)):

There's a place called The Bunker in Evans Hall, which is like, it's the basement, but you can still see the sun, but it's meant for entrepreneurs, people to go down there and just kind of crank on their idea. And yeah, it was just a really cool experience because I got to code a clone of Eventbrite I'd never coded

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before in my life. And in Kyle's class you actually break out the code. We use Google's language, go and just got on an AWS simulation of a computer and used their development environment to create something. And it was really cool. I had never done that before.

Judd ([14:37](#)):

I would like to end on this forward thinking question. What are your predictions for the future of religious practice as it relates to technology?

Enriquez ([14:47](#)):

I think things like AI will really change the world, hopefully in a way that's better. I don't know that when it comes to religion, I mean for me it's like I'm thinking magisterium ai. So Magisterium AI is built to use AI and it's informed by the teachings of the church. So we have just been really blown away by what they've built. You can go to the website, magister ai.com, and you can ask questions like, is the Pope infallible? What is pope papal infallibility? What is apostolic succession? What does the church teach on contraception? And it will pull from the catechism of the Catholic church, the Baltimore catechism, epistles, things that the Pope has written. It'll reference ecumenical councils and writings of saints, and it'll actually document the sources, which I think is really important. So I think as technology continues to develop, in particular, in my mind, I think the primary mode of disruption innovation will be through AI over the next, call it five to 10 years. I do think that there will be opportunities like using things magisterium, ai or other things that will make our work easier. I want to say that I'm a realist in general. I think there are a lot of risks with ai, but again, the benefits outweigh the risks, and I think AI can help people really just encounter faith in a new lens.

Judd ([16:29](#)):

Well, thank you so much, Brian, for speaking with us today about Hallow. Lent is coming up, so I'm sure it's going to be a busy season for you all. We will be following.

Enriquez ([16:39](#)):

Thank you, Emily. Stay prayed up.

Speaker 1 ([16:42](#)):

Thanks for listening today. We hope you'll tune in again for the next episode of the YDS Quad Cast.