Religion and the Internet

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Introduction[1]

Emergent scholarship on the most radical technological invention of our time confirms what most of us know from first-hand experience – that the internet has fundamentally altered our perceptions and our knowledge, as well as our sense of subjectivity, community and agency (see for example Vries, 2002: 19). The American scholar of religion and communications, Stephen O'Leary, one of the first scholars to analyze the role of the new media for religious communities, claims that the advent of the internet has been as revolutionary for religious growth and dissemination as was the invention of the printing press (O'Leary, 1996).

In the present essay, I consider the transformations of both religion, and by extension scholarship on religion, occasioned by computer-mediated communication (CMC) and information. I lay out a basic framework for analyzing the multifunctionality of the internet with regard to religion. I also briefly address the multidisciplinarity required to comprehend this multi-dimensional technological revolution. My primary focus is religious uses (Lawrence, 2000), but some reference is also made to religious perceptions of this new medium. In my broader research, I am particularly interested in some of the latest forms of internet applications by religious individuals and organizations, and their consequence for inter-religious conflict or harmony in what sociologist Manuel Castells calls our 'global network society' (Castells, 1997; Hackett, 2003, 2005).[2] The information technology revolution and the restructuring of late capitalist economies have generated this new form of society. But as to whether the internet is predominantly utopian or dystopian is hard to discern, and conclusions may be determined by one's own interests and vantage-point.

Multi-dimensionality

From the outset, we need to recognize the ambiguous, fluid, almost volatile, nature of the internet, as well as its composite character. The combination of static and

moving images and text, as well as aural and tactile forms of communication, lends it an aura of mystery. The endless possibilities of interactivity and connectivity are both awesome and empowering, while many view the enabling capacities of computer-mediated communication (CMC) as emancipatory, even salvific (Wertheim, 1999; Zaleski, 1997). Mark C. Taylor has written of the internet's labyrinthine complexity as conceivably divine (Taylor, 2001). There is even now a Roman Catholic patron saint of the internet, Saint Isidore of Seville, who might intervene to deal with hackers, abusers, and malfunctions.[3] The Orthodox Church is following suit.[4]

In their 2004 book on *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, editors Lorne Dawson and Douglas Cowan provide some helpful conceptual distinctions to make sense of the complexity of the internet as it pertains to religion. One of the most important is that between 'religion online' (information about religion on the internet) and 'online religion' (religious experience or practice through the internet) (see Dawson and Cowan, 2004; Young, 2004; drawing on Helland, 2000). Many of the chapters in this valuable work also explore the interconnections between 'online' and 'offline' religion, in other words, what impact internet religion has on more conventional forms of religious practice and expression.

Multi-functionality

Even preliminary investigations of the internet's various applications pertaining to religion reveal a plethora of uses. A number of researchers are now engaged in empirical studies of individuals and communities to ascertain how these new electronic forms of mediation actually influence religious practice (see, especially, Dawson and Cowan, 2004). Some excellent research has also been conducted by anthropologists who study the Muslim world (see, e.g., Armbrust, 2000; Eickelman and Anderson, 2003).[5] The present context is not the place to develop this framework below in detail, but, at the very least, it serves to challenge and expand the prevailing notion that the internet is mainly about communication and information.

Communicating

The internet is perhaps most associated with its capacity to allow people to communicate, and to connect in ever-widening, or perhaps ever-more focused, networks of mutual interest. Interestingly, non-conventional, even persecuted groups, such as Wiccans and neo-Pagans in the United States, were among the early groups to avail themselves of the internet (Arthur, 2002).[6] Some members would describe connecting through cyberspace as akin to connecting through the energy of 'nature' – at the heart of Pagan traditions. Recent research by Heidi Campbell on select Christian organizations reveals that people join online communities for fellowship, to realize 'the body of Christ', rather than just for information (Campbell, 2003). For the millions who enter chat rooms and belong to discussion groups, has Yahoo not become for many a new instantiation of Yahweh?

Yet a number of scholars have raised important questions regarding the nature of virtual communication: Does it just provide an 'illusion of sociality', or is there evidence of genuine social interactions online which can lead to or enhance human communities in the 'offline' world (Dawson and Cowan, 2004: 4)? Given the centrality of the concept of community to many religious traditions, this constitutes an ongoing topic for debate.

Proselytizing

This may appear to be a subcategory of communicating, but it has assumed such importance in the growth and influence of certain religious formations that it merits separate emphasis. It is worth noting, more generally, that proselytization, or the freedom to disseminate one's religion, is arguably the most controversial aspect of the right to freedom of religion and belief today.[7] This is in part due to the influence of the modern media, not least the internet (Hackett, 1999). The problem is not just that there is a thrust towards making converts in today's competitive religious marketplace, but that this seems to be occurring in increasingly aggressive ways (Cowan, 2004).

My students report to me of fervent Christians, some might call them 'cyber-evangelists', invading Muslim chat rooms to challenge aggressively their beliefs and practices. Since the identities of the participants are disguised through their online names, hate speech is not uncommon. There is also a new phenomenon of a 'bot' – a floating, disembodied, pre-programmed text message (rather like a 'pop-up') that can be sent into chat rooms to deliver biblical verses and statements of faith – like a proselytic missile. This naturally begs the question of how to counter uncivil and unsocial exploitations of CMC within the context of fundamental freedoms of expression, religion and belief, and expectations of privacy. Currently, concerns over pornography, mass suicides and, of course, terrorism, dominate discussions about policing the internet.

Informing

Even reluctant mainstream religious organizations have been forced to realize the burgeoning capacity of CMC to service their own communities and to supply key information for both members and non-members. The previous Pope expressed his support for the internet, and the Vatican now has a comprehensive, multi-lingual, website.[8] It has got to the point where a religious organization seems to lack credibility, even identity, without a web presence. An important new dimension to the reputation of CMC in providing members and non-members, insiders and outsiders, with religiously related information are the 'bloggers' or those who provide electronically mediated religious news and opinions, or 'weblogs'.[9] The appeal of these new personalized commentaries on world events lies in their spontaneity and alternative perspectives. Rapidly growing in popularity are 'podcasts', which are audio programs (such as sermons) downloaded from a website to an MP3 player (such as an 'i-Pod').[10]

Learning

Previously unaffordable or inaccessible sacred texts and secondary materials are now not just in the public domain, but available to those who know where to find and download them – potentially circumventing restrictions of cost or censorship. Websites such as www.beliefnet.com have been successfully developed to provide a panoply of facts, links and resources for the inquisitive religious mind. One can download templates of any number of rituals, through a website such as www.oris-hanet.com, if one wants to engage in Yoruba-derived religions like Santeria or Candomblé. Many view this as the disaggregation of ritual knowledge from hierarchical elites, or the long-awaited democratization of knowledge (Gunther et al., 2000). Others fear the subversion and loss of tradition that easy access to sacred knowledge may engender.

Experiencing

The 'liminal space' of the internet provides new possibilities of spiritual or religious experience (absorption, asceticism, escapism, oneness, *communitas*). It also permits the *customizing* of experience to suit hectic, modern, work-oriented lifestyles, e.g. the 10-minute spiritual exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola propounded by the Jesuits which are so highly appreciated by those confined to office computers.[11] Modern-day Sufis recognize the enhanced relationship between leader and disciple available through the internet, just as Muslims can gain a greater sense of the global *Ummah* or community.[12] Surfing the web and traveling to other realms could easily be described as a shamanistic experience. With the new technological possibilities occasioned by the internet, such as live internet radio, listeners are invited on 'psychonavigation trips' by one particular new age/shamanic site, where the music played is 'designed to induce trance states/higher consciousness states in the listener'.[13]

Practising

The practice of religion has been facilitated by CMC, to the point where cyberspace may even become a significant ritual location, as well as a tool or source of inspiration for offline religious devotions, as in the case of pagan and Wiccan communities (Berger and Ezzy, 2004). Also, for certain (alienated) social categories, as in the case of many women and young people, cyber-spirituality holds more of an attraction and affords less of a stigma than attending a formal place of worship. In fact, some surveys indicate that this is the trend of the future, especially for youth (Clark, 2003). However, some argue that the internet cannot compete with the expressive and emotional power of live, or even broadcast, sermons (Goethals, 2003). The online religious community, as in the case of the new community of Progressive Muslims, can nonetheless be an important 'venue' for debating what constitutes right practice, 'the straight path', in a rapidly changing and diversifying world.[14]

In general terms, cyberspace extends the capacity to transcend the limitations of

time and space. This may be a vital consideration for those with financial constraints or physical disabilities, but who would still like to honor certain ritual prescriptions of their tradition. For instance, one can go on cyber-pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela,[15] or make *puja* at sacred sites in India.[16] At the turn of the millennium, expectant millennialist Christians, using live webcam footage, could watch for Christ's return at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem.[17] Nowadays, via the internet, one can have a note placed in the wall by Jewish students.[18] Sikhs can listen daily to their holy book, the Siri Guru Granth Sahib, being read from the Golden Temple in Amritsar, India.[19] Mark MacWilliams contends that '[p]ilgrimage is as much an act of the mind as an act of the body', and that simulating a pilgrimage online may also have beneficial effects for the supplicant (MacWilliams, 2004: 224).

Seeking

There have always been spiritual seekers but the endless opportunities afforded by CMC make the internet seem like a gateway to paradise or a fast-track to nirvana. Stewart Hoover, one of the leading scholars of the intersections of religion, media and culture, argues that the most important trend in contemporary religion is '"personal autonomy" in matters of faith' (Hoover, 2003: 11). Online religion purportedly trumps online sex, as noted by Brenda Brasher in her 10-year study of religion and the Internet, *Give Me That Online Religion* (Brasher, 2004). The Pew Internet and American Life Project discovered in their 2001 survey that there are now some 28 million 'religious surfers' in the United States (25% of all internet users).[20] The hypertextual structure of the World Wide Web is conducive to seeking, with links that can take you on spiritual quests that condense both time and space. Web aesthetics can erase the line between seduction and addiction.

Commodifying

Marketing the sacred has become big business via the internet. Everything imaginable can be purchased that might correspond to religious and spiritual needs.[21] This includes knowledge. Thus, in some cases, initiation has become contingent upon divulgence of credit card numbers, when in real-world contexts it may have taken many years to acquire divinatory skills, for example.[22] Finding spiritual life-partners can be accomplished in a few easy stages, on religious singles websites.[23]

Advocating

The religious quest for social, religious and cultural transformation, whether in the form of human rights, environmentalism, combating the sex trade, or animal rights,[24] has enjoyed exponential success using CMC. One can join an interfaith group to promote social justice in New York City,[25] for example, or seek to end the production of nuclear weapons.[26] The concept of networking, so central to effective activism, is

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integral to cyberspace. The Free Tibet Campaign has garnered worldwide support through its effective media use (McLagan, 2002).[27] E-petitions on behalf of Muslim women in Nigeria condemned to death by stoning flew around the world several times over (until local women's groups called for a moratorium, declaring them to be counter-productive). While there are still real inequities in access to CMC around the world, there is abundant evidence of (repressed) minority religions and indigenous peoples, for example, mobilizing via the internet.[28] It allows them to circumvent local or national forms of political, cultural or religious exclusion, and benefit from, not always uncritically, the discourses and mechanisms of international human rights.

Healing and problem-solving

Cures for sickness and solutions to problems seem to be flourishing in the CMC environment. One can send in prayer requests to evangelists, counselors, psychics, gurus, commune with fellow sufferers or seek answers to spiritual and/or practical problems.[29] Some religious groups even post these problems and testimonies on their websites, allowing comparison and solidarity, as well as academic investigation.[30] The anonymity is appealing to many, as well as the prospect of one's individual problems being attended to by a powerful organization or spiritual leader. Some religious practitioners even maintain that they can heal more effectively via the internet. Wim van Binsbergen, a Dutch anthropologist who is also a certified traditional healer or *sangoma*, trained in Botswana, writes on this in his excellent website,[31] and his latest book, *Intercultural Encounters* (Van Binsbergen, 2003: ch. 7).

Multi-disciplinarity

As already noted, the present context does not permit any lengthy discussion of methodological questions, as challenging and as interesting as these are to all those who seek to comprehend the internet and its users.[32] However, as prominent scholars have persuasively demonstrated, studies of the intersections of religion and the internet not only call for a variety of disciplinary perspectives, but especially need to be situated within the emergent field of religion and media studies (Dawson, 2000; Hoover, 2003). This type of research gives greater prominence to audience/viewer use and practice, rather than institutional and content analysis.

In an article on the high-tech religious movement, Heaven's Gate, that led to the apparent suicide of 39 of its leaders and members, historian of religion Hugh Urban (2000) questions the Enlightenment approach to scholarship on our media-saturated world. He calls for new forms of interpretation of what he terms the 'simulational culture' of late capitalist consumerism, with the flux of real and imaginary, order and instability, original and copy. He considers that we must develop 'even more acute critical skills in the scrutinization, analysis, and questioning' of this mass of information and images. New religious movements, such as Heaven's Gate, 'provide us with a striking insight into some of the deepest contradictions of religion in the age

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of cyberspace', and raise pressing questions about community, rationality, identity, reality, and consumption.

Implications and concluding reflections

As a new interface for *mediating* religious belief, ritual and ethical practice, and for *constituting* community and selfhood, the internet not only *subverts* and recasts these categories, but also others such as 'world religion', and 'minority religious group'. In other words, you don't have to be a large operation now to reach out (or be reached) globally. One rabbi told a journalist that, 'For the first time in 2000 years, because of the Internet, Jewish ideas and values are playing on a level playing field with other religions . . . There is a democratization of religion.'[33]

Similarly, the distinctions between *public* and *private, orthodox* and *heterodox,* and *religious* and *secular* are also open to question. Surprisingly, a landmark text, Jose Casanova's *Public Religions in the Modern World* (1994), does not address the mediated dimension of the purported desecularization of religion. In condensing time and space, CMC reconfigure our sense of location, in terms of what is *local* and what is *global,* or what is *central* and what is *marginal.* Significantly, *diasporic* religious communities, often composed of migrant, young professionals, with their new 'techie' knowledge, have become a force to be reckoned with – questioning more 'traditional' forms of authority. This is especially the case for Islam (see, e.g., Anderson, 2003; Blank, 2001; Bunt, 2003).

Also problematized are issues of *representation*, *authenticity* and *deception*. As professors we are supposed to warn our students of the trivial, if not duplicitous, content of many websites. In the shifting world of virtuality and hypertextuality, the parameters of the *real/unreal/hyperreal/surreal* are indeterminate. *Identities* can be assumed and manipulated in all sorts of creative and destructive ways.[34] Must we also not re-examine conceptions of '*power*' – already central to the analysis of religious expression? Here is where I find myself turning to non-Western understandings of power such as *mana*, or *ashe* (in Yoruba) which capture more appositely the indivisibility and complexity of this new modality.

As suggested above, scholars of religion are still grappling with whether the internet is utopian or dystopian, hegemonic or heteroglossic, transcendent or just transnational. Does dialogue trump demonism? Is online religion displacing, transforming or enhancing offline religion? Is the 'niche' or 'enclave' effect of many cyberreligious communities dissociating people from essential social processes? Or are they discovering new forms of agency and creativity which can empower them as individuals in a complex and rapidly changing world? Perhaps studies of e-religion just confirm, in accentuated ways, the ambivalence of the phenomenon of religion more generally? The New Information Age, as it has been called, is just as exigent in terms of contestation and negotiation, as is any promise of a New World Order.

Allow me to end on a personal note. Speaking as a longtime scholar of religion, the internet dimension of my daily existence – in other words, my life as a netizen – affords me varying senses of exhilaration, omniscience and empowerment. These are forever contrasted with feelings of humiliation, exasperation, even powerlessness. I

must also contend with the humbling, yet exciting, reality that my students are more savvy about this new medium than I am. I suspect that these experiences are not too different from the experiences of my colleagues from other fields and other lands. In closing, I would like to commend the newfound relevance of the great German scholar of religion Rudolf Otto's characterization of the sense of the holy as a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. I hope he would forgive me in applying this notion to such an ambiguous and ambivalent behemoth as the internet, and also support those of us seeking to investigate its ramifications for human existence in the 21st century.

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Notes

1. Special thanks are due to the (mainly undergraduate) students in my Religion, Media, and Culture class at the University of Tennessee in spring 2005 for their comments, corrections, and imaginative suggestions regarding this essay. It all made for a rich pedagogical experience!
2. For example, recent studies point to the flourishing of 'cult wars' on the internet (Hadden and Cowan, 2000).
3. http://www.scborromeo.org/saints/isidores.htm (accessed 5 February 2005).
4. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/4088611.stm (accessed 5 February 2005).
5. See the very helpful website hosted by Gary Bunt http://www.virtuallyislamic.com/ (accessed 13 March 2005).
6. See, also, in this connection, the writings on 'Technopaganism' and 'TechGnosis' by Erik Davis (Davis, 1998), and on Goddess worship (Griffin, 2004).
7. See http://www.proselytism.info/ (accessed 30 January 2005).
8. http://www.vatican.va.
9. See http://www.blogsearchengine.com/religious_blogs.html (accessed 30 January 2005).
10. See Kathleen Murphy, 'Finding God on your iPod', *The State* http://www.thestate.com/mld/thestate/entertainment/11042977.htm (accessed 16 March 2005).
11. http://www.sacredspace.ie/ (accessed 5 February 2005).
12. http://www.haqq.com.au/~salam/sufilinks/, http://www.uga.edu/islam/Sufism.html (accessed 5 February 2005).
13. http://www.live365.com/stations/shamanism (accessed 5 February 2005).
14. http://www.progressivemuslims.org/, http://muslimwakeup.com/ (accessed 30 January 2005).
15. http://www.pilgrimsprogress.org.uk (accessed 5 February 2005).
16. http://www.cyberastro.com/ceremonies (accessed 5 February 2005).
17. http://www.aish.com/wallcam/Window_on_the_Wall.asp (accessed 13 March 2005).
18. http://www.aish.com/wallcam/Place_a_Note_in_the_Wall.asp (accessed 5 February 2005).
19. http://www.sikhnet.com/hukam (accessed 5 February 2005).
20. http://www.pewinternet.org.
21. http://www.godfirststore.com/ (accessed 31 January 2005).
22. http://www.paralumun.com/divination.htm, http://www.shamanism.org (accessed 31 January 2005).
23. http://www.e-christian-dating.com/ (accessed 31 January 2005).
24. http://www.all-creatures.org/index.html (accessed 31 January 2005).
25. http://www.interfaithvoices.net (accessed 31 January 2005).
26. http://www.korrnet.org/fgs/orepa/ (accessed 31 January 2005).

27. http://www.freetibet.org/ (accessed 5 February 2005).
28. http://www.treatycouncil.org/ (accessed 31 January 2005).
29. See, e.g., http://www.cbn.org/spirituallife/PrayerAndCounseling/index.asp, http://onlineprayerchain.com/ (accessed 31 January 2005).
30. For example, http://angelscribe.com/atiraresults.html (accessed 31 January 2005).
31. http://www.shikanda.net/african_religion/standard.htm ((accessed 31 January 2005).
32. Especially recommended for this purpose is (Stolow, 2005).
33. Gene J. Koprowski, 'Logging On to Find God' http://www.insightmag.com/news/2004/06/11/Features/Logging.On.To.Find.God-689158.shtml (accessed 5 February 2005).
34. On the issue of 'multiple selves', facilitated through the anonymity of the internet, see Dawson (2000).

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